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# Maternal Criticism: Reading Two Middle Eastern Women Writers as Nonviolent Peace Activism

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Maternal Criticism:  
Reading Two Middle Eastern Women Writers as Nonviolent Peace Activism

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation advocates for reading the literatures of two Middle Eastern women writers through a Maternal Critical lens that recognizes the demands of universal vulnerability in characters who resist violence, and responds in Maternal communities of Readers that connect readers to characters, readers to writers, and readers to other readers, carrying the struggle for equity forward. My unfolding argument, centered on Maternal Critical activity in the novels of Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh and Israeli writer Ronit Matalon, demonstrates how literature by these Middle Eastern women is part of a narrative context of women's peacemaking and resistance to violence, a part that has been largely overlooked until now. I argue these literatures are nonviolent resistance and that reading these works through a Maternal Critical lens constitutes a participatory response in the demands for equity from which the literatures emerge. Maternal Criticism draws on philosopher Sara Ruddick's work, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* for its primary vocabulary that frames the work of mothering as responding to the demands of vulnerability for preservation, nurture, and social acceptance. This dissertation, Maternal Criticism, contributes to existing literary and critical readings of literature by Khalifeh and Matalon, and is the first writing to consider them in juxtaposition. The analysis advanced from these Maternal Critical readings of texts recognizes mothering practices that underpin mothers' nonviolent resistance, activism that has shifted both practices of mothering and perceptions of mother-work in the societies from which the texts have emerged, suggesting a premise upon which to construct inclusive discourses that build peaceful communities.

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## Introduction

An exchange on Facebook between former students caught my attention; here's an excerpt:

JF (male): "I find this issue impossible to tackle from a legislative standpoint . . . Mass shootings are a cultural problem that I think stems from the extreme patriarchy . . . [in] the US."

CJW (female): "here's my proposal: a complete cultural transition to a matriarchy where people of all genders are free to exist without being harassed, express emotion in a healthy way, and live in a far more safe society." [. . .]

JF (male): "It seems to me . . . the way ahead is probably going to be a seismic cultural shift for a society that is fractured by fragile masculinity and patriarchal norms." (20 May 2018)

This conversation reflects the tone of others in my classes recently; young people know the violence they're witnessing points to deeply embedded systems of exclusion. My students and I are not the first to suggest we live in political cultures that do not meet our basic needs. This dissertation enters these conversations to suggest an alternative way of reading and acting in the communities in which we live. I suggest we adopt a Maternal Critical lens, a lens through which we can see how violence results from exclusion, and how exclusion defines the system referred to as 'patriarchy.' Patriarchy means authoritarian systems that depend upon exclusion in order to construct vertical hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> Both women and men may subscribe to patriarchal systems. Patriarchy constructs fear-based systems, and what it fears is vulnerability, falsely conflating victimization with vulnerability—a fallacy that has important implications: philosopher Martha Nussbaum identifies the recognition of universal human vulnerability as the connective strand between a person and his or her world; and, a recognition of one's own vulnerability as

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<sup>1</sup> Many students express discomfort with the term 'patriarchy,' and indeed, the term 'authoritarianism' might be substituted; still, we must confront the fact that, throughout history, most political authoritarians have been men. These students have also spoken frankly about their discomfort with the term 'feminist,' asserting it is not relevant to them. I have suggested the term 'equalist' might be substituted, though here, too, integrity requires confronting the fact that in all cultural contexts, most women have struggled for basic equality.

necessary for seeing others as they really exist. Authoritarian power obscures the reality of universal vulnerability by substituting a narrative of victims and perpetrators, a narrative that underwrites a demand for a ‘strong-man.’ By Nussbaum’s reckoning, a system that denies or rejects vulnerability denies the world in which we live, a world of flesh-and-blood people.

We need a framework for creating communities that both recognize universal vulnerability and respond to the struggle of vulnerability, demands for preservation, nurture, and social acceptance. I, too, advocate for ‘a seismic cultural shift’—a shift toward maternal communities; and, since critical activity in literature has always been vital to effecting revolutionary shifts in cultural perspective, such a movement must be accompanied by literature and criticism. In this dissertation, I advocate for Maternal Criticism, critical activity in literature through which readers recognize the fallacy of systems that associate vulnerability with shame and valorize a wish for power. A Maternal Critical approach reveals maternal characters who recognize vulnerability and respond: preserving, nurturing, and respecting conscience—terms articulated by philosopher Sara Ruddick to denote practices of maternal authority that resist violence. Maternal Criticism offers readers a framework for practicing responses that preserve the ‘connective strand’ between vulnerable readers and characters and the communities from which both have emerged, inclusion that resists violence and premises peacemaking.

In the first section of this dissertation, I discuss the significance the term, ‘maternal,’ though here, I want to suggest a repulsion to the term derives, in no small part, from the way patriarchy has twisted the image of maternal authority—stripping the term of its authority and discounting the thinking that derives from its practices. Why would patriarchal systems do this? Because *authoritarianism*, the assumption/perpetuation of power by force, is opposed to *authority*, which is earned through its attention to vulnerability. A further contrast will be

helpful: authoritarianism seeks to control others, denying others their own agency, while also denying personal responsibility for others. Authority accepts personal responsibility for oneself and for others in community, acknowledging and respecting the uniqueness and autonomy of the other. Authoritarianism depends upon vertical exclusive systems of hierarchy, where some must be exploited to underwrite the privilege of others—this is violence. Maternal authority creates inclusive horizontal systems that recognize imbalances of power and value difference. Finally, authoritarian systems prioritize dogma over the physical body—this, too, is violence. Maternal authority flips this equation, placing care and responsibility for the physical person over abstract dogmatic positions, calling out violence, which is a responsibility of authority.

To recognize the fact of universal human vulnerability, the fact of one's own vulnerability, and to respond with "attentive love" (a term parsed later in this paper to summarize the essential attributes of "maternal thinking," Ruddick *Maternal Thinking* 119-23), I argue, situates one maternally. Universal vulnerability is the base from which maternal systems construct horizontal relationships of shared responsibility that build peaceful communities. Both men and women may participate in building maternal communities. When understood as the clearest model through which to give and receive attentive love, all persons can identify with a maternal self. My students are not alone in their calculation that the violence they see is the effect of authoritarianism that oppresses everyone, though in different ways. I believe all persons have a deep wish for a way of reading the world in a way that connects their own stories to the stories of others, and affirms their authority to care. I invite the reader to join me in this explication of Maternal Criticism.

The first section of this dissertation describes *what* Maternal Criticism is: an approach to literature that draws from reader-response theorist Stanley Fish and feminist critic Patrocínio

Schweickart. This section is followed by a literature review that explicates *how*, and from *where*, Maternal Criticism is derived. The concept of Maternal Criticism is based on Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* and has emerged from a convergence of her work with that of other women philosophers and theorists: Martha Nussbaum, Iris Murdoch, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who advocate for attention to the vulnerable other in literature. In the third section, I demonstrate how Maternal Criticism in the literatures this paper has selected for critique are part of the narrative structure of building peaceful communities from conflict. The fourth section models Maternal Critical readings in texts by two women writers: Palestinian writer, Sahar Khalifeh, and Israeli writer, Ronit Matalon; and, the final section reveals connections between the activism of which these literatures and Maternal Critical activity in them are a part and shifts in the perception of mothering in the contemporary popular cultures from which the literatures have emerged, shifts that suggest a premise for inclusive discourses toward peace.

### **I: Maternal Criticism**

I have devised Maternal Criticism as a way of reading two Middle Eastern women writers, an approach to reading that allows readers to encounter characters who are not like them, who emerge from communities not like theirs. Though Maternal Criticism is first concerned with encountering the other character in literature, I am not the first to think about how readers meaningfully encounter texts. As a critical approach, Maternal Criticism emerges from two familiar theorists, Stanley Fish and Patrocinio Schweickart; I begin, then, with a discussion of Fish and Schweickart as a premise for describing the goals of Maternal Criticism.

Stanley Fish devised “one of the most important early reader-response approaches” to critical activity in texts (Booker 41)—an approach focused on how readers make meaning.

Patrocínio Schweickart asserts, however, “reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism” (“Reading Ourselves” 36) because:

the point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world. We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as praxis. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers. (Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves” 39)

Though Schweickart observes that feminist criticism and reader-response “have yet to engage each other in a sustained . . . way” (“Reading Ourselves” 36), as this section unfolds, I will argue this engagement is **Maternal Criticism**.

***Stanley Fish and Patsy Schweickart: fusing reader-response with feminist criticism***

This discussion of Stanley Fish draws from essays collected under the title *Is There a Text in This Class?* essays that demonstrate the evolution of Fish’s theory of textual interpretation, a process he describes as:

the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles. In a word, these activities are interpretive—rather than being preliminary to questions of value, they are at every moment settling and resettling questions of value. (158-9)

The point not to be missed is an interpretive experience that is in motion. Fish observes that “in formalist readings, meaning is identified with what a reader understands at the *end* of a unit of sense,” in which case “any understandings preliminary to that one are to be disregarded as an unfortunate consequence of the fact that reading proceeds in time” (3, italics original in the text). In contrast, reader-responses that unfold ‘over time,’ analogous to the evolution of relationships, suggests a constancy between methodological practice and feminist maternal values.

“The ability to interpret is not acquired,” writes Fish, “it is constitutive of being human” (172). Fish’s point is that everybody interprets; even refusing to interpret is an act of

interpretation, though he writes, it is “not a position any of us can occupy” (355). Rather, he adds, an interpretive position is “a position that we are all living *out*, as one set of firmly held beliefs gives way to another” (Fish 370, italics original in the text). To be clear, shifts in ‘belief’ are not merely cognitive; here, I suggest the body, itself, is a fundamental locus of formation—the intersection of belief and ritual, and this matters for Maternal Criticism where practices or rituals of maternal attention ‘contain’ a vulnerability-oriented worldview.

Fish notes that interpretive strategies are not solitary or wholly individualist moves; rather, they reflect a relational context:

The conclusion is that while literature is still a category, it is an open category . . . and the conclusion to that conclusion is that it is the reader who ‘makes’ literature. This sounds like the rankest subjectivism, but it is qualified almost immediately when the reader is identified not as a free agent, making literature in any old way, but as a member of a community. (Fish 11)

For Fish, the “central . . . notion of ‘interpretive communities,’” refers to “communities . . . made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties” (14).

“The feminist reader,” observes Patrocínio Schweickart (50):

agrees with Stanley Fish that the production of the meaning of a text is mediated by the interpretive community in which the activity of reading is situated: the meaning of the text depends on the interpretive strategy one applies to it, and the choice of strategy is regulated (explicitly or implicitly) by the canons of acceptability that govern the interpretive community. However, unlike Fish, the feminist reader is also aware that the ruling interpretive communities are androcentric, and that this androcentricity is deeply etched in the strategies and modes of thought that have been introjected by all readers, women as well as men. (50)

Though “feminist criticism is situated in the larger struggle against patriarchy” (52), Schweickart observes an “equally important critical project, namely the articulation of a model of reading that is centered on a female paradigm” (52), the goal of which is a “dialogic” (52) connection:

between the feminist reader and the woman writer . . . [in which] the reader encounters not simply a text, but a “subjectified object”: the “heart and mind” of another woman. She comes into close contact with an interiority—a power, a creativity, a suffering, a vision—that is *not* identical with her own. (Schweickart “Reading Ourselves” 52, italics original in the text)

In other words, where Fish describes an unfolding conceptual understanding, Schweickart describes an unfolding encounter with a presence that occupies a politicized physical space—this is the distinction of a feminist reader-response.

Schweickart writes:

feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need “to connect,” to recuperate, or to formulate—they come to the same thing—the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of women. (“Reading Ourselves” 46)

“Feminist reading and writing alike,” elaborates Schweickart, “are grounded in the interest of producing a community of feminist readers and writers . . . in the hope that ultimately this community will expand to include everyone” (56). What begins as an encounter between a woman reader and a woman writer seeks not containment but ‘expansion:’ to ‘the larger community of women’ until the connections ‘include everyone’—‘dialogic’ connections that must be understood as communities of real people in the world encountering both writers and other readers through texts. Feminist criticism, writes Schweickart, must “identify literature—the activities of reading and writing—as an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it” (“Reading Ourselves” 39).

This dissertation builds from Schweickart’s conception of a feminist reader-response to define Maternal Criticism, an approach I have devised for reading two Middle Eastern women writers whose characters emerge from contexts of conflict, communities in conflict one with the other. A Maternal Critical approach imagines a Maternal Reader whose goal is to encounter ‘the

heart and mind' of the woman writer, to encounter characters who emerge as 'loving witnesses' (Spivak "Afterword" *Imaginary Maps* 201) to the struggle for equity, to hear the demands of vulnerability, and to recognize and to come alongside those who resist violence, which is the work of peace.

### ***This is Maternal Criticism***

Maternal Criticism imagines a reader whose goal is to connect, as Schweickart notes above, whose reading is conceived of as map-making, charting a path from the familiar into the unfamiliar, whose goal is a reciprocal encounter with the other character. Gayatri Spivak uses the term "imaginary maps" to describe the ways in which power and privilege have invented national boundaries and "other kinds of divisions" ("Preface" *Imaginary Maps* xxiii) that work as stigmatic borders of separation between people—imaginary borders that connote imaginary differences that have real effects on real people. I have appropriated the map metaphor (a particularly physical way of framing Fish's description of reader-response) to suggest **Maternal Readers** create maps that chart paths into the unfamiliar world of the text that lead to encounters with characters that will have a real effect on how the reader interprets her or his role(s) in creating equitable societies. The goal is to encounter characters in a space where characters and readers 'see' one another through what philosopher Iris Murdoch calls the "just and loving gaze" (Murdoch 33). What she means is that in order to see the other 'justly,' without prejudice, one's perception must be motivated by love for the other's humanness, a recognition Nussbaum defines as embracing shared, universal, human vulnerability. My use of Spivak, Murdoch, and Nussbaum is elaborated in the Literature Review. This is the first distinction of Maternal Criticism: the goal of the reciprocal encounter with the other character, an encounter premised in a recognition of mutual vulnerability.

**Maternal Critical Readers** identify the moves that precede the reader's response, the mapping (and remapping) of paths that bring the reader alongside the character, paths that bring the reader to a place of encounter with a character who moves, thinks, and responds in a place, in communities, in relationships, in resistance—characters who struggle, who wiggle—feminist critic Sara Ahmed equates these terms when she describes “a body that has to wiggle about just to create room” (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life* 18)—to ‘create room’ within systems bent on restricting, suppressing, the vulnerable body.

What readers take from the narrative arts, writes Nussbaum, is “the ability to imagine well a variety of complex issues affecting the story of a human life as it unfolds . . . in a way informed by an understanding of a wide range of human stories” (*Not for Profit* 26). Nussbaum describes the bridge between the reader's experience in literature and the empirical world, where literature is critical to developing “the capacity for ‘positional thinking,’ the ability to see the world from the other's viewpoint” (*Not for Profit* 36). Nussbaum connects a recognition of universal human vulnerability to a reader's unfolding ability to see her or himself realistically, in a real world.

Maternal Criticism builds on Nussbaum's premise of identifying vulnerability to suggest this gaze is not sustainable without a framework for locating the maternal position that recognizes the struggle of resistance in vulnerability, a recognition premised in Ruddick's description of “maternal thinking.” The response that moves a Maternal Critical Reader into a place of reciprocal encounter with the character is borrowed from French scholar Simone Weil; the reader asks, “what are you going through?” (Weil 51). Recognizing vulnerability in both the text and the self, positions Maternal Readers to locate the maternal position, both in the text and in the reader's own self—a position Ruddick defines by its recognition of the demands of

vulnerability for preservation, nurture, and social acceptance and its resistance to authoritarian systems that demand exclusion and predict violence. This is the second distinction of Maternal Criticism: recognizing resistance in vulnerability, a recognition that locates maternal authority.

To be clear, the maternal position is not ‘other’ from vulnerability, rather it acts from a recognition of vulnerability, participating in and sharing the struggle for preservation, growth, and social acceptance. The maternal position is vulnerable—and this is what distinguishes it from authoritarian posturing that removes itself from vulnerability to valorize deliverance from struggle. In the real, which is to say imperfect world, equity will always require struggle. To develop a maternal self is to develop a connected self that responds to vulnerability with attentive love in encounters that extend beyond the character, to the woman writer, to other readers, and to communities in struggle for human rights from which characters and readers have emerged. This is the third distinctive characteristic of Maternal Criticism: it is situated in feminist discourses that build inclusive communities.

**Maternal communities of Readers:** Fish’s term, ‘interpretive communities,’ refers to an abstraction, a way of referencing an aesthetic or normative standard. In contrast, Maternal communities connote conversations where encounters between readers and characters, and readers and other readers, may profoundly disturb assumptions imposed by a reader’s ‘interpretive communities.’ The concept of Maternal communities of Readers begins with the experience of ‘books as friends.’ Ahmed describes “a companion text” as:

a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden . . . companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going you are not alone. (Ahmed 16)

Thinking of books in this way, writes Ahmed, “is a way of thinking about how books make communities” (17)—reading books, sharing books and one’s experiences in books. Reflecting

upon her own experience of reading communities, she writes, “participating in the group with books made me aware of how feminist community is shaped by passing books around; the sociality of their lives is part of the sociality of ours” (17). Books, she asserts, “are . . . spaces of encounter” (17), where encounters with characters and other readers construct a bridge between critical activity in texts and critical responses in the empirical world of relationships, where ‘living out’ Maternal Critical practices in literature informs the conversations that construct inclusive communities. Maternal communities of Readers are important because they constitute a real and sustained resistance to authoritarian strategies of interpretation in texts and in the world beyond the text.

Maternal Readers share an interpretive frame that recognizes vulnerability, locates maternal authority, and responds to preserve, to nurture, and to respect the conscience of the individual—acts that contribute to building communities that recognize imbalances of power and value difference. It is this distinction of Maternal communities that starkly contrasts trending messages of market-driven societies that valorize the unconnected self, as my analysis of Julie Stephens in the Literature Review will show, and uniquely situates Maternal Criticism in feminist discourses where making peace is defined as building inclusive communities through gender equity.

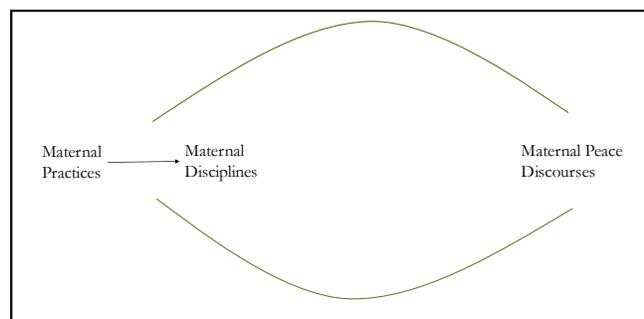
*Placing Maternal Criticism on a map of feminist practices*

My unfolding argument, centered on Maternal Critical activity in the novels of Sahar Khalifeh and Ronit Matalon, demonstrates how literature by these Middle Eastern women is part of a narrative context of women’s peacemaking and resistance to violence, a part that has been largely overlooked until now. I argue these literatures are nonviolent resistance and that reading

these works through a Maternal Critical lens constitutes a participatory response in the demands for equity from which the literatures emerge.

Maternal Criticism is critical activity in literature that receives and responds to representations of human vulnerability, vulnerability that demands preservation, growth and social acceptance, demands that call for a materialist, maternal response. This way of defining vulnerability derives from Ruddick's ground-breaking work, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Writing in 1989, she predicted that when activists "become publicly visible as mothers who are resisting violence and inventing peace" (Ruddick *Maternal Thinking* 241), their activism would "transform the meaning of 'motherhood'" (241) in popular culture. What she imagines is an interface of engagement where maternal practices, and the disciplines that emerge from those practices, inform maternal

activism; where, in turn, activism invigorates maternal practices. But, when Ruddick made her prediction, it was not at all clear that maternal activism *would* inform



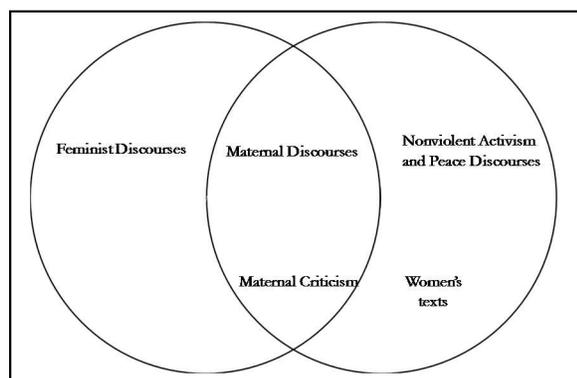
either mothering practices or popular cultural perceptions of mother-work, and Ruddick's prediction has gone mostly unnoticed until now.

Figure 1

How do we know whether cultural perceptions of mother-work shift as an outcome of mothers' activism? I argue such shifts are reflected in, and may be perceived through, the publication and reception of literature by women. Where literature by women is non-violent resistance, Maternal Critical activity in literature recognizes this resistance, and the critic is in a standpoint position to assess cultural shifts.

Maternal Criticism is situated within a framework of what Pam McAllister has called “the vital link between feminism and nonviolence” (McAllister ii), defining feminism with Ahmed as “a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world” (qtd. in Mehra 1). Ahmed’s definition is worth parsing: ‘sensible’ should be understood as rational and not reactionary—differentiating between authority and authoritarianism. Ahmed connotes the agency of authority that takes the opportunity for engagement with those responsible for unjust acts—holding them responsible, and responding alongside those who have been treated unjustly. Because this sort of response preserves, nurtures, and respects conscience and dignity, it is maternal.<sup>2</sup>

I define the middle term between feminism and women’s nonviolent resistance maternally, connoting the interface as attention to the concrete needs of all vulnerable human beings. It is attention to vulnerability that characterizes both the disciplines that emerge from maternal practices and women’s peacemaking. Though popular media has not focused on women’s peacemaking, women’s texts *do* provide this record of nonviolent resistance, and



Maternal Criticism offers readers ways of encountering both individual characters and the collective struggles from which they have emerged.

Figure 2

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed frames feminism as personal life-work that is characterized by resistance to oppression wherever it is encountered; including, notes Nishta J. Mehra, resisting “the pervasive mythology that feminism originated in white culture” (Mehra 4). Ahmed observes how “the assumption that feminism travels from the West to the rest can mean that you just do not notice the transit in the other direction” (qtd. in Mehra 5). Where I use the term ‘feminist’ in this dissertation, I am using it in concert with Ahmed’s definition of “living a feminist life,” which, at this writing, is also the title of her most recent book.

Though beyond the bounded range of this dissertation, colonial and post-colonial discourses and their intersections with feminism must also be acknowledged here as discourses with which Maternal Criticism, in its clear-eyed recognition of vulnerability and resistance to violence, remains aware and conversant. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley writes, “although we might be living in a ‘post-colonial’ age, the imperialist project, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak” (upon whose critical perspective this dissertation relies) “notes, ‘is displaced and dispersed into more modern forms’” (qtd. in Golley 3). In other words, as long as colonialism remains an oppressive reality, critical voices must remain alert to identify those situations as authoritarian, responding to vulnerability and recognizing resistance to violence. Recognizing colonialism as authoritarianism is relevant to the project of Maternal Critical activity in the literatures of Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh and Israeli writer Ronit Matalon, where the juxtaposition of these literatures intends to bring the asymmetry of their characters’ situational realities into clear relief, power imbalances uniquely revealed in characters who are marginalized within their own Israeli society, yet whose material privileges of citizenship contrast sharply with Palestinian characters denied those privileges; contrasts between the sovereign person and the body at risk of violence.

Why should we read maternally? Because it applies a discipline of thought that is uniquely effective for encountering vulnerable, which is to say human, characters. It is in spaces of narrative encounter that preserve, nurture, respect and accept the other that peacemaking begins. And when the text closes, the encounter continues to inform the struggle for equity, both in the reader’s communities and in communities from which the impression of the character has emerged. If critical readers have asked maternal questions before, this critical activity in

literature has not, until now, had a name, nor, until now, a directed focus toward the reception of literary narrative as participation in peacemaking.

### ***Why ‘Maternal’ Criticism?***

The term “maternal” is a uniquely inclusive invitation to participate in woman-oriented critical practices. The experience of mothering is universal, and “that,” suggests Schweickart, acknowledging mothering as the first asymmetrical relationship, “must be theorized” (“Reading Gender”). What she means is that all persons who have survived to adulthood must consider that this is so because they were mothered; all persons, then, have experienced mothering—by someone or a community—and can choose to reflect upon what this means.

Still, since the term ‘maternal’ is so ideologically loaded, why use it to denote a new critical approach to literature by women? Could I not call the critical approach “humanist,” for example? Could we not use the terms “moral” or “virtuous,” terms used by Murdoch and Nussbaum, respectively? Rather, I intend to grapple with push-back to the term “maternal”—where a critique of repulsion to the term is the point. Because a maternal approach to literature is attentive to representations of vulnerable characters and their unique demands for preservation, nurture, and social acceptability, such an approach *must* critique systems of exclusion that require positions of vulnerability, systems defined as patriarchal. Thus, the term “maternal” is a critical counterpoint because it is inclusive, that is, necessarily a multiplicity of narratives; and, it is material, attentive to the physical body. In contrast, terms such as “moral” and “humanist” might be reduced to abstractions that can be co-opted by power in ways that the materialism of maternal perspectives cannot.

While Ruddick uses the term “mother-work” as a non-gendered term, allowing that some men do the work of mothering, she writes that: “Fathers are not, in [her] terms, simply the male

counterpart to mothers,” adding, “the point about—or against—Fathers is that their authority is not earned by care and indeed undermines the maternal authority that is so earned” (42).

Historically, the term ‘Father’ and its associated term patriarchy, connote a culturally bestowed authoritarian power—though to be clear, we are talking about how these terms are culturally defined and not how some people have chosen to practice these roles. In other words, while some fathers mother (verb), it is easy to see how patriarchal power has worked toward different goals than maternal authority, which values the physical body over abstract dogma, advocates for restorative justice over punitive justice, nurtures individual conscience over conformity, and social acceptance over exclusion. Why doesn’t Ruddick simply speak of ‘parents’? She responds: “to speak of ‘parenting’ obscures [the] historical fact [that] . . . through most of history, women have been the mothers” (44). To advocate for ‘mother-work’ as an inclusive term neither subtracts from the fact of women as mothers, nor of women as primary nurturers of vulnerable children; rather, this advocacy is an invitation into mother-work and the disciplines that derive from these woman-associated practices.

Ruddick observes how the term ‘maternal’ has been used derisively because of its womanly associations.<sup>3</sup> In a recent paper, “Reading Gender in the Interstices of Theory,” Schweickart makes two points that underpin the use of a term so intrinsically connected to “femininity,” observing first:

Androcentricity does not just mean the exclusion and denigration of women, but also the exclusion and denigration of themes, qualities, activities and concerns associated with femininity. The latter can persist even after women are no longer excluded. This is especially true of theory. [Second], women and the associated features of life overlooked by theory remain potent in reality—they represent a counter-discourse that has always accompanied the dominant theoretical discourses. (Schweickart 1)

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea O’Reilly and Sara Ruddick, “A Conversation about Maternal Thinking,” in *Maternal Thinking: Philosophy, Politics, Practice* (2009), page 33.

Maternal Criticism, a woman-oriented discourse that has emerged from practices of mother-work and has accompanied the lived experience of every human being, names this ‘counter-discourse.’

A distinctive factor of ‘the maternal’ in Maternal Critical discourses is its recognition of asymmetry, its challenge to presumptions of symmetry that mask inequality. Schweickart observes how, for Jurgen Habermas, “communicative action equals speech: to act, one must speak.” But she observes “a fatal error at the core of Habermas’s theoretical project” (13); she notes:

It is easy to see why he settled on the well-worn path of privileging speech. The equal distribution of free speech rights is an easy theoretical requirement. It also fits with the dominant view that defines ideal human interaction as the symmetrical reciprocity of self and other—and I might add, with a view that privileges the clarity and neatness of ideal man-to-man relations—symbolized by the hand-shake between combatants before the fight. (“Reading Gender” 14)

In ‘civil’ man-to-man discourses, one speaker simply waits for his turn to speak. There is no responsibility to listen. This is what Schweickart identifies as the ‘fatal flaw:’ because the theoretical notion does not represent an actual “interval of communication [that] consists of one person speaking and another listening. The roles—one assertive, the other receptive—are different, and the relationship is asymmetrical” (“Reading Gender” 15).

“The symmetry of speech-centered models—I speak; you speak,” she writes, are “actually built on a more basic asymmetry: I speak, you listen; you speak, I listen” (Schweickart 15). That is, Habermas didn’t go far enough to discover a deeper layer. Schweickart observes, “the symmetrical reciprocity that is the basis of traditional notions of rights and justice are actually achievements that must be built on the asymmetrical relations of an ethic of care” (“Reading Gender” 19). In other words,” she writes, “rights and justice depend on the work of caring people” (19).

Schweickart's discussion is relevant for Maternal Criticism in two ways: the first, I have already alluded to; that is, its observation of the primacy of the asymmetrical caring relation upon which mothering practices are premised. Though Schweickart does not describe the asymmetrical relation as maternal, she comes very close when she borrows:

the model of the caring relation proposed by Nel Noddings, [where], according to Noddings, the caring relation is an asymmetrical relationship involving two people in two different roles—that of 'the one-caring' and that of 'the one-cared for.' ("Reading Gender" 16)

Schweickart adds, "the role 'one-caring' is analogous to that of reading and listening" (16); and this is the second aspect of Schweickart's thinking that is uniquely relevant to Maternal Critical activity in literature. Schweickart calls the work of caretaking an analog to the work of a reader. "Noddings," writes Schweickart:

shows that caring involves [the] work [of] motivational displacement [by which] she means putting one's resources—material, physical, intellectual, emotional and moral—in the service of another. . . . Reading, like caring, involves motivational displacement—the reader works to enable the communicative project of the writer. ("Reading Gender" 17)<sup>4</sup>

Schweickart borrows another feature from Noddings relevant to the asymmetrical relation that describes 'the one-caring' and the reader: "the one-caring must hold a dual perspective; she must put herself at the disposal of the one cared-for, and at the same time, maintain her capacity for independent judgment" (18-19).

I argue the person Schweickart observes as the caring reader/listener is an analog to the Maternal Reader. That the reader is in the subordinated position of the asymmetrical relation is a point not to be missed, though the model is here imagined as reciprocal: at turns, the one listening/the one speaking—compatible with Spivak's description of the encounter between

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<sup>4</sup> Schweickart observes, "motivational displacement—the sort of work a reader or listener must do to understand what another has written—is in my view the most important, and least theorized, aspect of the role of the listener and the reader" (17).

reader and character, elaborated in the Literature Review. This way of reading is best defined as “maternal” because it is both inclusive and characterized by the attributes of attentive love associated with mother-work.<sup>5</sup> Schweickart observes:

Carol Gilligan pointed out that the moral voice of care becomes inaudible when women are excluded from the conversation. This does not mean that women care and men don't. It is obvious men care; we all have to care; the world is impossible if we don't. What happens is that when women's voices are discounted, so too are themes, capacities, and activities associated with femininity. Thus, care is universally necessary, it is an ubiquitous human activity—but it has often been discounted in theory. Under-theorized, even now, in spite of feminist theory. And in this potent but under-theorized form, it is ripe for exploitation. (Schweickart “Reading Gender” 20)

The term “Maternal” is a witness to woman's experience of the world, and to the primary experience of the asymmetrical caring relation. Maternal Criticism names this counter-discourse that has accompanied the lived experience of every human being—a discourse that emerges from mothering practices. All persons have a capacity for the maternal—a particular attentiveness to the universal condition of human fragility that ascribes dignity to vulnerability; or, what Richard Sennett has called “the ‘dignity of dependence’” (qtd. in Stephens 7).

*A response to two critiques of use of the term ‘maternal:’*

Some will read into this discourse the erasure of men or fathers. This is not a necessary conclusion. Hanna Rosin is the author of *The End of Men: and the Rise of Women* in which she tracks economic shifts globally that have resulted in “cultural shifts that are upending male dominance” (Rosin). But, as Rosin asserts, and I concur, the end of the dominance of male-centric norms, or patriarchy, will not be the ‘end of men;’ rather, we might imagine a beginning

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<sup>5</sup> After a presentation of my paper, “Maternal Criticism: Reading Women Writers as Nonviolent Peace Activism,” at the 2017 Reception Study Society Conference, Patsy Schweickart approached me privately to remark that she appreciated my defense of the term “maternal” in response to a question from the audience. In her Plenary Address the following day, she mentioned my name and my paper, which was derived from this dissertation, in the context of her scholarship and her paper, which I have cited here. After her address, I thanked her and she responded, “you see, we are kindred spirits.”

of more equitable societies. In short, dominating others is always an immoral goal, no matter who does it. There is room in the emergence of a woman-oriented critical practice for everyone; to suggest otherwise would be to commit a violence of exclusion, and the fallacy of zero sum thinking. Maternal Critical approaches are defined by an unwavering commitment to equality and cooperation, and a recognition of the violence that results from exclusion. Still, it seems fair to point out that patriarchy has yet to worry about the erasure of women or the disciplines that emerge from woman- or maternal-oriented practices.

Second: After presenting a paper introducing Maternal Criticism at a conference, I was approached by a young woman who said that while she embraced the concept of Maternal Criticism, she was unwilling to invite men into this mode of interpretation because she felt the experience of mothering, connected as it is, for her, to birthing—thus, excluding anyone, whatever their sex or gender, who has not given/will not give birth, must be unique to women; men, she asserted, are spectators to this experience and she simply did not wish to share the term ‘maternal’ with them. I understand how deeply profound the biological experience of giving birth was for her; and, I understand her wanting to contain the experience, as it were. I’m with her for claiming that which has been denigrated by patriarchy, “a tradition that feeds off fear and contempt for female procreative bodies,” writes Ruddick (*Maternal Thinking* 49). But the flaw in her argument is to assume that mothering ‘naturally’ derives from the experience of childbirth. And a further point cannot be overstated: that is, a far greater risk to building equitable communities lies in not including men in Maternal Critical practices, practices of attention that challenge the exclusion and violence of authoritarianism.

## II: Literature Review

Though it may seem a new and strange idea that we should read literature, and hence, our world, through a lens so intimately tied to women's experience, this proposal emerges from a convergence of ideas that have been circulating in philosophical discourses for a few decades. In other words, there is philosophical precedence for this interpretive standpoint I have called Maternal Criticism. This literature review is, in essence, a map of my journey. Maternal Critical approaches draw their primary vocabulary from philosopher Sara Ruddick and the first part of the literature review, *Maternal Discourses*, begins with an overview of Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*. The second part demonstrates the philosophical and literary underpinnings of Maternal Criticism in the work of Martha Nussbaum, Iris Murdoch, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

### *Maternal Discourses*

Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*

*"The work of mothering demands that mothers think; out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges."* (Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* 24)

With *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Ruddick profoundly influenced feminist discourses. Today, more than 25 years later, the text remains a springboard from which a wide range of work in motherhood studies, feminism, anthropology, and popular culture texts, including web-based 'mom blogs,' have launched. Feminist scholar Julie Stephens writes of Ruddick's text:

Her deeply philosophical reasoning about the special cognitive capacities, metaphysical attitudes, and ethical conceptions that arise from mothering continues to have a wide impact. Reading and rereading Sara Ruddick twenty-one years after the publication of her influential book, I was repeatedly struck by the marked originality of her ideas and their significant contemporary resonance. (Stephens xii)

What Stephens observes as ‘the originality’ of *Maternal Thinking* is further explicated in the discussion that follows, where critics observe how Ruddick’s work has premised continuing discourses about mother-work.

Writing nearly 10 years before the publication of her book, Ruddick articulated her goal: “to express and respect maternal thought, one contribution to an ongoing shared, feminist project: the construction of an image of maternal power which is benign, accurate, sturdy, and sane” (“Maternal Thinking” 345), word choices that resist images of the maternal that evoke sentimentality and emotional delicacy. Andrea O’Reilly, whose scholarship in *Motherhood Studies* at York University, Toronto, is widely acknowledged, writes:

Ruddick was the first scholar to examine the experience of mothering, as opposed to the institution of motherhood, and to develop a theoretical framework and vocabulary for this analysis. In defining mothering as a practice, Ruddick enabled future scholars to analyze the experience and work or practice of mothering as distinct from the identity of the mother. (296)

‘Mothering as a practice’ represents a significant shift, notes O’Reilly, from thinking about mothering in terms of “*motherhood*” (Ruddick 29, italics original in the text) as a cultural myth to a focus on people who do mother-*work*. Indeed, those who ‘mother as a practice’ may find themselves at odds with national myths whose motherhood imagery seeks to interpolate women-as-mothers into an ideological role that serves the purposes of authoritarianism, such as bearers-mourners of sons-soldiers.

Ruddick writes that her “conception of mothering as a kind of caring labor undermines the myth that mothers are ‘naturally’ loving” (1995 “Preface” *Maternal Thinking* xi).<sup>6</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>6</sup> Ruddick writes that she “drew on Wittgenstein and Habermas for two ideas” (Preface, 1995, xi) that underpin her concept of “maternal thinking:”

1. there are distinctive, though not sharply bounded, kinds of thinking;
2. these kinds of thinking . . . arise out of distinctive practices. (xi)

Maternal thinking is a way of understanding a distinct “practice-based way of reasoning” (xi).

Ruddick's conception of mothering denies that mothers are 'naturally' anything—that mothering is a discipline defined by attention. O'Reilly observes:

Ruddick, in repositioning the word 'mother' from a noun to a verb, decenters motherwork. More specifically, divesting care of biology, Ruddick enabled scholars to destabilize patriarchal motherhood by dislodging the gender essentialism that grounds and structures it. (O'Reilly, Andrea 297)

In other words, suggests O'Reilly, while 'mother' as noun evokes a static gendered image, 'mother' as verb decenters the image, emphasizing instead the work mothers do. Though Ruddick writes that the work of mothering is not exclusive to women, she emphasizes that "the work of mothering is central to many women's lives" (Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 9); indeed, Ruddick, Stephens, and others are careful to observe the social, legal, and political outcomes unique to gendered care-giving, in particular, unpaid care-giving. Ruddick's thesis, however, is to identify core practices of mothering from which distinctive features of maternal thinking emerge.

Ruddick defines the work of mothering as practice that responds to the demands of children—and here she intends 'demands' as "an artificial term" (17) to mean what a vulnerable child requires, "the responses children deserve" (xvi). All children are vulnerable, though by differing degrees, for different reasons, to different threats: "the fact of biological vulnerability," she writes, "demand[s] care" (18). I interpret the term 'demand' more literally as resistance, the struggle for attentive love, to resist erasure. Ruddick identifies vulnerability in terms of "three demands:"

for preservation, growth, and social acceptability—[these demands] constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training. (Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* 17)

Ruddick's task is to articulate the attributes of maternal *thinking* that derive from the mother-work of preservative love, fostering growth, and training/respect for conscience, outlined briefly here.

*Preservative love*

Mothers think in terms of preservative love, observes Ruddick, borrowing from Murdoch's notion of 'humility' to elaborate. "In a world beyond one's control," writes Ruddick, "to be humble is to have a profound sense of the limits of one's actions and of the unpredictability of the consequences of one's work" (*Maternal Thinking* 72). Preservative love is neither obsessive overprotection—a refusal to embrace unpredictability, nor is it a mere abstract wish. Preservative love acts. Ruddick writes:

Mothers do not relinquish control. Rather, because control is a preoccupying maternal issue, mothers come to think about control in distinctive ways. . . . Often they have to learn to relish reciprocity, to identify as a maternal virtue respect for the independent, uncontrollable will of the other. (*Maternal Thinking* 73)

What Murdoch means when she writes, "humility . . . is a selfless respect for reality" (Murdoch 93) is not self-erasure (often associated with the term 'selfless')—that would make the 'reciprocity' Ruddick describes impossible. Rather, Murdoch describes a willingness to accept a reality upon which one's own self is not imposed; even (especially), a reality that resists an impression of one's own self. 'Respect' for the sovereign self recognizes and preserves the reality that other 'selves' are also sovereign and does not seek control of the other. Ruddick writes, "scrutiny, humility, and cheerfulness mark the minds of those who protect because the holding that these virtues make possible is as sturdy and sane for both protector and protected as nature (human and otherwise) allows" (Ruddick 79). In other words, 'scrutiny, humility, and

cheerfulness,' where the latter term connotes courage,<sup>7</sup> distinguish maternal preservative love from forms of control most often associated with patriarchal systems.

*Fostering growth*

Maternal perspective maintains an unwavering focus on the material world, another way of referencing a mother's "respect for reality." What Ruddick means by 'fostering growth' is "to sponsor or nurture a child's unfolding, expanding material spirit" (83), where "unfolding" connotes change, and the "the work of fostering growth provokes or requires a welcoming response to change" (*Maternal Thinking* 89). 'Welcoming change' in his or her child risks putting mothers at odds with power: "the dominant culture," she writes, "obscures even the existence, and certainly the difficulty, of the maternal task of letting a child grow into her life" (*Maternal Thinking* 89). In other words, to 'let a child grow into her life,' may require a mother to confront an authoritarian system with its own set of expectations for this child.

Ruddick's notion of the "expanding material spirit" may seem paradoxical. Ruddick, however, does not distinguish between mind and body—for her, attention to a child's 'mental life' is a concrete action: "as a mother tries to make sense of her child's actions, she assumes that he is moved by interdependent perceptions, feelings, and fantasies and by multiple, potentially unifying acts of responding and interpreting" (*Maternal Thinking* 92). In other words, mothers think, and they believe children also think, and:

as she practices her understanding of a child's mind, a mother comes to develop a cognitive capacity for 'concrete' thinking, which is called forth by and enables the work of fostering growth. . . . to look and then speak concretely is to relish complexity, to tolerate ambiguity, to multiply options rather than accepting the terms of a problem. (*Maternal Thinking* 93)

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of 'cheerfulness as courage' derives from Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, p.79; but, originates and is developed more fully in the article "Maternal Thinking" that preceded the 1989 publication of her text, where, drawing from Spinoza she writes, "in a daily way, cheerfulness is a matter-of-fact willingness to continue." Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1980), pp. 342-67.

Attention to a mother's cognitive capacity for concrete thinking over abstraction matters to Ruddick because over-emphasizing abstraction precludes imagining alternative solutions to problems, including, the problem of violence. Ruddick writes, "the reflectiveness of concreteness must be developed through disciplined attentiveness and then expanded and tested through critical conversational challenge" (98). In other words, thinking demands conversations that clarify, refine, and negotiate; and, when mothers initiate conversation—with children and with others about children, they 'test' what is real. Importantly, notes Ruddick, the action of initiating conversation concretizes formerly abstract relations between people.

This matters because mothering is not only a private act, and maternal thinking is not only a way of responding to children—though it is that, it is also a set of concrete responses to vulnerability, of initiating a wide range of conversations with and about a sentient world. Ruddick writes that abstract social/political policies that are not tested by conversation are maintained by silence, writing:

In a misogynist society that routinely misdescribes or silences the suppressed and developing voices of women, in a competitive society that adores Motherhood but barely notices maternal thinking, it is not surprising that such maternal conversations are as difficult as they are rare. (*Maternal Thinking* 102)

Maternal conversations are conversations that insist on the priority of physical bodies, individual conscience, and social inclusion. It is not surprising then that in societies where dominant rhetorical modes value dogmatic posturing over materially situated lives, maternal conversations 'are rare.'

*Training: the education of conscience (meeting the demand for social acceptance)*

It is easy to see how mothers may find themselves confronted with definitions of social acceptance they do not believe to be legitimate. On the other hand, Ruddick notes that a "central challenge of mothering lies in training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and

whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate” (104), observing “two struggles within maternal practice: between inauthenticity and conscience and between domination and educative control” (103). She writes:

fear of the gaze of others can be expressed intellectually as ‘inauthenticity,’ a repudiation of one’s own perceptions and values. Inauthentic mothers construct, before the eyes of their children, a world in which maternal values do not count. Although they teach appropriate behavior, the purpose of that behavior is not theirs to determine. Abdicating their authority, they replace for themselves and their children the idea of conscience with that of submission. They identify unquestioning obedience as a virtue and dominant people as the authorities to be obeyed. (*Maternal Thinking* 112)

To be clear, Ruddick adds, “it is not when they submit or are prudent or timid that mothers are inauthentic. It is when they lose sight of the cost of prudence, deny their timidity, and tell their children that unquestioning obedience is actually right” (*Maternal Thinking* 113).

Maternal thinkers define meeting the demand for ‘acceptability’ as “the education of a responsive nature rather than the domination of a hostile one” where “a mother aims to foster and then protect her child’s conscientiousness” (Ruddick *Maternal Thinking* 116-7). The education of conscience has as its goal a child who demonstrates a capacity for independent moral decision-making—a cognitive capacity that is related to the ability to pay attention to the real world, and particularly to the suffering of others. Ruddick notes that “for both Weil and Murdoch, the enemy of attention is ‘fantasy’” (*Maternal Thinking* 120), a refusal to see into the real world of others, thus aborting the impulse for ethical relational encounter.

#### *Attentive love*

Maternal thinking might be summed up in a definition of attentive love that, she notes, “was central to the philosophy of Simone Weil and was later developed by Iris Murdoch. . . . In Weil’s words, ‘the name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love’” (qtd. in *Maternal Thinking* 120). In other words, love is the act of paying attention. “A

mother really looks at her child, tries to see him accurately rather than herself in him,” says Ruddick (*Maternal Thinking* 121). Importantly for Ruddick’s philosophical treatise, “attentive love is a discipline” (122) and: “maternal thinking is a discipline in attentive love. . . . by training herself to ‘really look,’ she learns to trust a child she loves and to love a real, and therefore trustworthy, child” (*Maternal Thinking* 123). While attentive love occurs in the private spaces of mother-work, the habit of ‘really looking’ cannot be limited to those parameters—attentive love must become a way of looking and responding in the world.

Ruddick’s work continues to initiate conversations that expand *Maternal Thinking* in ways she would not have imagined, such as the reading of this dissertation now. *Maternal Criticism* builds on Ruddick’s definition of vulnerability and her description of the goals of mother-work to meet these demands to identify the demands of vulnerability in literature and the goals of Maternal Critical Readers who partner with characters in their struggle for equity.

#### *Critiques of Ruddick in the context of Maternal Criticism*

Jean Keller critiques the charge that Ruddick “exemplifies a latent ethnocentrism characteristic of much white feminist theory” (835), juxtaposing Ruddick’s premises of preservation, nurture, and respect for conscience with the “three goals internal to racial ethnic women’s motherwork” (841), presented by Alison Bailey, who makes use of Patricia Hill Collins’s essay, “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood” (841). It is easy to observe, as Keller does, that “while Ruddick emphasizes sameness, Bailey attends to differences” (Keller 841); and, while Ruddick’s premises are child-focused, Bailey’s goals are mother and community focused. Because Ruddick and Bailey use different terms to construct their arguments, it is difficult to assert their contradiction, though clearly Bailey and Keller add to Ruddick’s child-focused work missing perspectives of a racial ethnic mother-focus

in U.S.-American contexts. In the “Preface” of the 1995 edition of *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick writes, “what I call ‘maternal practice’ is probably not ubiquitous, even though what I call ‘children’ exist everywhere” (*Maternal Thinking* 22); that is, all children are vulnerable for different reasons, in different ways, by different degrees, in different socio-political contexts.

Keller’s analysis manifests another difference she does not discuss: though Bailey and others focus on particular contextual environments of mother-work Ruddick omits, Ruddick’s intentions are not exhaustively descriptive. Rather, *Maternal Thinking* sets out to identify “the aims or goals that define a practice [that] are so central or ‘constitutive’ that in the absence of the goal you would not have that practice” (Ruddick 14). Ruddick’s vulnerability-focused premises demonstrate that mothers *think* in particular life-giving ways, which Keller’s critique also evidences. Indeed, having advocated for a “modified universalism . . . that attends both to similarities and differences among maternal practices” (835), Keller allows “these views are not as incompatible as they at first seem” (Keller 844). Does Ruddick advocate a dominant—white, Western, middle-class—way of thinking? Keller does not think so, pointing out that “some goals are universal; they’re internal to all forms of maternal practice, yet are interpreted in culturally specific ways” (Keller 845).

In her essay, “Mothering and Cultural Variation in Anthropology,” Susan Schalge responds to concerns that Ruddick asserts “claims of universal human beliefs or practices” (246), writing, “Ruddick’s theories consist of *more than* a claim to universal relevance of maternal thinking” (246, emphasis mine), adding Ruddick “provide[s] a useful model” (246) that allows discourses about particular practices to emerge. Schalge writes:

Mothers [do not] exist outside of a system of cultural constraints. They are shaped by the physical, social, economic, and political milieu in which they live. In *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick directs our attention to the complexity of mothering. It is imperative to explore how societies, as well as mothers themselves, construct and evaluate motherhood. (250)

Here, Schalge's analysis is comparable to what Patrice Diquinzio describes in her essay, "Empirical Realities and Normative Conceptualizations of Mothering," as a dialectic movement between 'empirical realities' and 'normative concepts'—or between particular contexts and universal goals.

Diquinzio, too, concerned with whether Ruddick's work is "historically and culturally bound and thus cannot be validly advanced as a universally true account of what mothers do or even of what mothers believe about mothering" (105), critiques Nancy Scheper-Hughes' anthropological monograph as a case-study where she considers the "relationship of [Scheper-Hughes'] empirical research and [Ruddick's] conceptual framework" (108), offering this lengthy but important analysis of tensions between the descriptive and the normative in response to charges of dominant/Western-orientation in Ruddick. She writes:

Instances of mothering at odds with Ruddick's account of maternal practice and thinking are not in and of themselves proof that in the social contexts in which they occur there is no dominant or widely shared view of what mothering could or ought to entail. Nor are they proof that the mothers whose mothering is inconsistent with Ruddick's account do not themselves subscribe to a different conception of what mothering should be. It is undeniably true that many women mother in circumstances that make it impossible for them to achieve the goals and practice the virtues of maternal practice that Ruddick describes. Such circumstances may also make it difficult if not impossible for them to conceive of anything like Ruddick's account of maternal practice and thinking. But these facts do not exclude the possibility that mothers in these circumstances share a conception of what mothering could or ought to entail, a conception that resembles Ruddick's account of mothering more than it resembles their own mothering. The claim that only middle and upper class women, or women in the developed nations, are in a position to achieve these goals and practice these virtues shouldn't be confused with the claim that women not so fortunately located do not share a similar conception of what mothering entails or aren't capable of entertaining such a conception. Anthropology and other social sciences correctly warn us of the risks of ethnocentrism and socio-economic class bias that can deform our accounts of mothering by attributing to all mothers the experiences and beliefs of mothers in the western or industrialized world or middle class or wealthy mothers. But it is equally problematic to suggest that only middle and upper class mothers, well-educated mothers, or mothers in the developed world are capable of envisioning mothering as a coherent practice with characteristic goals and virtues. (110)

In other words, conceptions of universal norms neither emerge from nor belong to privilege, and their recognition critiques both privilege and oppression—positions that all persons may occupy at different times, in different contexts, by different degrees. While it is true, “certainly in the case of mothering, the fear that a universalizing account will be used as an idealizing norm to judge others is well grounded,” DiQuinzio adds, it is “impossible for scholars of mothering to banish normative concepts from their work” (111). Rather, DiQuinzio advocates for recognizing the relationship between conceptual norms and empirical realities. Citing the violence, “the devastating . . . material, social, and political conditions” (112) in which so many do mother-work, the greater fallacy lies in assuming an illicit ‘either/or’ position: either selecting violence “uncritically” (112) as a practice, or blaming mothers for failing to preserve their children—responses that when critiqued through a Maternal Critical lens, ignore mothers’ resistance to violence and fail to hold responsible the systems of power and exclusion that require their suffering. Here, as well, rather than a final comment, Scheper-Hughes observes, Ruddick’s work “provides a touchstone . . . for critical reflections” on mothering (qtd. in DiQuinzio 106), a base from which to “reinvigorate [the] interdisciplinary work of researching, understanding, describing, and interpreting the experience of mothering” (DiQuinzio 108). In other words, mothering discourses that navigate and explore the spaces between conceptual norms and empirical realities are best described as invitational, where Ruddick’s goals of preservation, nurture, and respect for conscience are, as Scheper-Hughes describes them above, ‘a touchstone,’ a starting place from which to continue and to contest these tensions.

Israeli critic Simona Sharoni cites Ruddick to describe the ways in which “images associated with motherhood” (146) have been used for both nationalist agendas and “in conjunction with the philosophy of nonviolent resistance” (146). I have noted *Maternal Thinking*

was published in 1989—a date that places her work two years into the first Palestinian Intifada, and the year scholar-activist Batya Weinbaum went to the conflict “to explore the theoretical perspective that claims women are often in favor of peace and peaceful negotiations to resolve conflicts as a result of their experiences of motherhood” (87). Though Weinbaum cites Ruddick, and her interview agenda may be described as broadly related to Ruddick, she does not explicate Ruddick’s premises of three goals of practice from which distinctive ways of thinking—“maternal thinking”—emerge; and, though she uses this term as a way of describing the opinions of her interviewees, Weinbaum is clearly not using ‘maternal thinking’ in the same conceptual context as Ruddick. It is not clear any of her interviewees has read Ruddick, nor does Weinbaum ask questions that might draw out a comparative critique of goals analogous to Keller’s juxtaposition of Ruddick and Bailey. Weinbaum writes, her conversational approach “included questions about the relationship of motherhood to peace and politics” (88). To be clear, Ruddick does not suggest a ‘women/mothers make peace—men make war’ binary; she does however, as I note earlier, make a distinction between patriarchal motherhood myths that underwrite nationalist dogmas and the mother-work from which maternal disciplines emerge. Though Weinbaum does not make this distinction, it is not clear the women and mothers she interviews would disagree that mothers (do or ought to) respond to the demands of vulnerable children with practices that preserve, nurture, train and respect conscience.

I argue Ruddick’s description of mothering as practice is essential vocabulary for framing Maternal Critical activity in texts by Khalifeh and Matalon, novels that emerge from Palestinian and Israeli communities respectively. What Scheper-Hughes recognizes in Ruddick as an initial ‘touchstone’—that goals of mothering are defined by practices that seek to preserve, nurture, educate and respect conscience—premise a second ‘touchstone:’ that these responses to the

demands of universal vulnerability may contribute to inclusive discourses that build peaceful communities. Therefore, a clear contrast between mother-work from which “maternal thinking” emerges and myths of motherhood that serve the ends of patriarchal militarism (Ruddick 156-7) can hardly be overstated. Mother-work, as articulated by Ruddick is characterized by its focus on the vulnerable person; motherhood as a political construct is focused on the use of the vulnerable person as a means to its own ends, a dogma that co-opts the woman-as-mother, without recognizing her authority.

This distinction matters for the contexts of conflict from which literatures by an Israeli and a Palestinian woman writer emerge because overt pro-natalist dogmas characterize both Israeli and Palestinian societies. Both David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, framed statehood not only in terms of geography—borders, but also in terms of demography—birthrates. Rebecca Ann Otis refers to this as “the demographic race’ between Israel and the Palestinians” (96). In the early years after statehood, Ben Gurion famously declared, “a Jewish woman who does not bring at least four children into the world is defrauding the Jewish mission” (qtd. in Otis 103), and Jewish women who gave birth to ten or more children, he honored with the title of “Heroine Mothers” (Otis 103). Otis cites Arafat’s “famous proclamation that ‘the womb of the Palestinian woman’ was his greatest weapon in winning the war against Israel” (qtd. in Otis 105),<sup>8</sup> though “going as far back as the Arab

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<sup>8</sup> Statistical evidence in Philippe Fargues’s article, “Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change: Palestinians and Israelis in the Twentieth Century,” does not support a suggestion of significant compliance or that these statements were taken as mandates on either side. *Population and Development Review* 26(3): 441-82. Indeed, on the Palestinian side, there was resistance among feminists, including Sahar Khalifeh (see p. 67 of this dissertation). Still, Sharoni observes, “in the 1980s, three decades after Ben-Gurion declared motherhood and childbearing a national priority, this theme was once again invoked to fit the political agenda of the time [as] the newly formed Efrat Committee for the Encouragement of Higher Birth Rates” (150). On the Palestinian side, scholar and activist Rema Hammami cites Umm Khalil who “used to give annual prizes to women who had large numbers of children. [. . .] Ironically,” she writes, “Umm Khalil was the only person to challenge Yasser Arafat for president in the January 1996 Palestinian legislative council elections. She received a respectable total of 22,000 votes” (165).

Rebellion of 1936 – 1939, Palestinian women’s fertility is a celebrated element of the Palestinian national discourse” (97). These discourses are still relevant in both political contexts where the ‘demographic race’ is not only referenced in terms of ‘the other,’ but reflects internal fractious political environments, as well. Weinbaum records an interview with a Jewish Israeli religious conservative mother in an East Jerusalem “apartment complex” in her late twenties with “several children” (90) who “spoke of the importance of gaining votes by having a lot of children” (Weinbaum 90), and Otis observes an analogous competition between Palestinian communities (Otis 98), writing:

In the Islamization of the Palestinian political struggle, the focus of the Islamists rested on forging an uncompromising stance on the link between governable norms of female modesty (through specific interpretations of Islamic law) and national honor, with particular attention paid to the fusing together of the biological, social, and political implications of Palestinian women-as-mothers and motherhood. (Otis 100)

Many political leaders on both sides continue to frame policy in terms of a woman-as-mother’s obligations to the state over terms of a state’s obligation to recognize women’s equal rights of personhood.

Weinbaum concludes her interviewees’ opinions “illustrate Sara Ruddick’s critique that the creation of a mother identification is often tribal—promoting women to position themselves against the Other” (87)—and indeed, her interviews do reveal mothers identifying with the patriarchal construct of motherhood in the service of “militarist thinking” (Ruddick 141). But this is not all her interviews reveal. Ruddick writes: “although mothers are not intrinsically peaceful, maternal practice”—and here she means anyone for whom meeting the demands of vulnerability with preservation, nurture, and respect for the individual conscience is a life-practice—“is a ‘natural resource’ for peace politics” (Ruddick *Maternal Thinking* 157); in other words, Ruddick is distinguishing between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and mothering

as practice. Weinbaum's interviews reveal a point she herself does not recognize, but would have had she made Ruddick's distinction between mothering as practice and patriarchal motherhood: that where mothers in one politicized faction recognized the same capacities for preservation, nurture, education of and respect for conscience in 'the other' mothers, the 'tribal' self-identification with motherhood was indeed interrupted; or, as one of her interviewees observes, "as mothers, Arab women and Jewish women had common experience that ought to bind them as allies" (qtd. in Weinbaum 94).

It is important to note, as Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab do, that during the second intifada, Palestinian women relied on Ruddick's claim that "maternal practices are governed by 'the three interests of preservation, growth, and acceptability of the child'" (Ruddick qtd. in Johnson and Kuttab 37) as a shared universal premise from which to "counter allegations that Palestinian mothers are sending their children to die at the checkpoints" (Johnson and Kuttab 38), and to further underpin and explain how "these interests can be in painful contradiction" (Johnson and Kuttab 37) in the context of the occupation and, especially, the current violence of the intifada:

In a 29 October 2000 'Appeal for the Protection of Palestinian Children,' issued by the women's movement, Palestinian mothers living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza addressed their 'most urgent concern—the protection of our children and their right to live a life free of fear, harm and humiliation. (Women's Affairs Technical Committee, 2000, qtd. in Johnson and Kuttab 38)

This statement clearly echoes goals of "maternal thinking," demonstrating both Ruddick's relevance to the contexts from which the literatures selected in this dissertation for critique through a Maternal Critical lens have emerged, and the relevance of these goals as a useful premise from which to advance inclusive discourses.

This chapter's discussion suggests that when politicized myths of motherhood are distinguished from mothering practices, though mothers will disagree on appropriate and available strategies, particularly in contexts of conflict and duress, women (and men) whose mothering is practice-oriented, do not dispute the goals of responding to the demands of vulnerability with preservation, nurture, and respect for conscience. Though it is difficult to imagine any person would not wish to live in a world characterized by maternal practices, Julie Stephens observes how market-oriented societies defined by materialism work against the materialist vulnerability-orientation of 'maternal thinking.'

*Julie Stephens, Confronting Postmaternal Thinking*

Julie Stephens analyzes the historical/cultural baggage connoted by 'maternalism,' observing "an increasingly widespread cultural unease, if not hostility, toward certain expressions of the maternal and maternalist political perspectives" (ix). She argues "this unease is linked to a much deeper cultural anxiety around nurture, care, and dependency" (ix). Anxieties about dependency, says Stephens, result from cultural myths oriented in economic capitalism that value the untethered, separated self. This anxiety (about dependency) combined with what she calls "cultural forgetting" (xi)—forgetting maternal values as intrinsic to feminism—are the components of what Stephens calls postmaternalism, "a profoundly regressive development with significant political and social effects" (x).

Stephens attempts to recover a feminist maternal ethos that once prioritized "transform[ing] the concerns of mothers and children from a private responsibility into public policy" (88). She writes: "it is as though there has been a cultural forgetting of the nurturing feminist, so much so that even putting the two terms together feels distinctly uncomfortable" (88). What occurred to cause this separation of terms? Stephens identifies political shifting

toward what she refers to as the ‘new capitalism,’ where personal worth is measured in terms of productivity, and the costs of vulnerability, or dependency, are considered in terms of negative value. The result is what Stephens observes as “tension between the fact of human dependency and an ideology that depicts dependence as a ‘failure of subjectivity’” (Patrice DiQuinzio’s term, qtd. in Stephens 7).

Anne Manne has written extensively on the impact of market-driven norms on mother-work and caregiving. In her essay, “Motherhood and the Spirit of the New Capitalism,” she observes how the “new capitalism is profoundly reshaping our tolerance and generosity towards vulnerability:

Across a lifespan of childhood, adulthood, sickness, and old age, every person will be dependent and independent, reliant on others and relied upon, vulnerable and strong. Given that, we should give up our false opposition of independence and dependency, and instead talk of human interdependence. (qtd. in Stephens 7)

Manne connects the reality of a person’s physical lifespan to what she calls the “moral terrain of the connected self” (qtd. in Stephens 70). Assuming the human impulse to form connections and the accountability to and for others that connectedness implies, it is easy to discern another reading in term-compliments: ‘the exploitable terrain of the unconnected self.’

Stephens writes that “Eva Feder Kittay offers perhaps the most thoroughgoing critique of the neoliberal self and, by association, what [Stephens is] calling postmaternal thinking” (63). In Kittay’s essay, “A Feminist Public Ethic of Care,” she writes:

we are connected through our own vulnerability when dependent and our vulnerability when caring for dependents, as well as through the potential of each of us to become dependent and to have the responsibility for a dependent. The bonds that form through relationships of dependency are frequently deep and count among those we most cherish. (qtd. in Stephens 63)

The maternal narrative of all our lives is that “human dependency and vulnerability are imagined as the *primary* connection between people, and not market performance” (Stephens 15, emphasis

mine). In other words, avoiding dependency results in shallow connections between people and Stephens notes, “this illusion of self-sufficiency and the related fantasy of motherlessness is a key feature of postmaternal thinking” (59). For Stephens, a cultural forgetting of mothering:

a shared, collective sigh of relief at having escaped from the ancient ties that a mother culturally represents . . . thereby smooths the transition for a new self—defined by its separateness . . . [an] unfettered self, (60)

or a market-driven society’s “conception of desirable selfhood” (Stephens 41). To be clear, what Stephens describes is not the ethical responsibility of self-construction; rather, she describes what Ruddick refers to as ‘inauthenticity,’ adopting uncritically the values of society—in this case, a market-oriented value system. This dissertation points to the tension between a market-driven “illusion of self-sufficiency” (Stephens 59) that is valued by authoritarian systems and Maternal Criticism, a community-oriented reading of texts that interprets attention to vulnerability as reading the world as it is, that reads the wish for invulnerability as a wish for another kind of world.

### ***A Philosophy of Literature and Criticism***

#### *Martha Nussbaum: Vulnerability in literature*

Martha Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics in the Philosophy Department, Law School, and Divinity School at the University of Chicago. In a 2001 book review published in *The New Republic*, Simon Blackburn writes of Nussbaum, “she is among America’s most prolific and prominent public intellectuals” (34). I draw from essays in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* and excerpts from *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* to explore Nussbaum’s notion of encountering human vulnerability in literature. Nussbaum writes:

We do not automatically see another human being as spacious and deep, having thoughts, spiritual longings, and emotions. It is all too easy to see another person as just a body—which we might then think we can use for our ends, bad or good. It is an achievement to

see a soul in that body, and this achievement is supported by . . . the arts, which ask us to wonder about the inner world of that shape we see—and, too, to wonder about ourselves and our own depths. (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 102)

Literature, she suggests, teaches us to consider both the “clash within” (31) the character and the clash without—to consider how characters are situated within particular social structures.

Nussbaum asks, “what structures are pernicious?” listing three conditions:

First, people behave badly when they are not held personally accountable [. . .]

Second, people behave badly when nobody raises a critical voice. [. . .]

Third, people behave badly when the human beings over whom they have power are dehumanized and de-individualized. (*Not for Profit* 43-4)

Attending to the demands of the vulnerable, leads Maternal Readers to inquire, ‘what social structures permit violence to the individual?’

The narrative arts play a unique role in helping readers imagine themselves as characters in situations that require them to articulate what the virtuous person ought to do; but, they also require readers, and this is critical, to imagine what the virtuous person ought to do from the perspective of the particular character in the particular social context. This is what Nussbaum refers to as “the capacity for ‘positional thinking,’” which, suggests Nussbaum, “is not necessary for sympathy, and it is surely not sufficient . . . it is, however, a great help toward forming sympathetic emotions . . . correlated with helping behavior” (*Not for Profit* 36)—‘correlated with helping,’ but perhaps also related to repulsion or ‘othering.’

Nussbaum observes that: “stigmatizing behavior seems to be a reaction to anxiety about one’s own weakness and vulnerability,” which suggests that “part of the social response [to these behaviors] has to be directed at the sense of helplessness itself, and the pain it causes” (34). In other words, literature and critical activity in literature are a part of a ‘social response,’ conversations that distinguish both the condition of vulnerability and ‘the sense of

helplessness’—the former does not necessarily entail the latter, and it is the latter that is correlated to the infliction of ‘pain.’ Nussbaum, discussing Rousseau, writes “that only cognizance of . . . weakness makes us sociable and turns us to humanity; thus our very inadequacy can become the basis of our hope of a decent community” (*Not for Profit* 34). Recall Kittay’s observation: that our deepest connections with others are “the bonds that form through relationships of dependency” (qtd. in Stephens 63). Entailed in the juxtaposition of Nussbaum and Kittay is the observation that vulnerability is transformed through mutual recognition and human connection, and when there is no transformation through connection, the resulting sense of helplessness may lead one to grasp for control.

While Nussbaum suggests the narrative arts expose controlling characters, contributing to a “recognition that total control is neither possible nor good, that the world is a place in which one is not alone—a place in which other people have their own lives and needs and entitlements to pursue those needs” (Nussbaum *Not for Profit* 97), she also observes how confronting the fragility of human existence, can work as a “moral danger:”

Human beings have a level of physical helplessness unknown elsewhere in the animal kingdom—combined with a very high level of cognitive sophistication . . . Understanding what the ‘clash within’ is all about requires thinking about this strange *sui generis* narrative: about human beings’ strange combination of competence with helplessness; our problematic relationship to helplessness, mortality, and finitude; our persistent desire to transcend conditions that are painful for any intelligent being to accept. [. . .] this desire to transcend the shame of incompleteness leads to much instability and moral danger. (*Not for Profit* 30-1)

Nussbaum imagines a contrast between, on the one hand, the wish ‘to transcend shame,’ which may be understood as a wish to escape, that ‘leads to social instability’ or violence; and, on the other hand, a means of transforming shame, which Nussbaum suggests occurs through a recognition of universal vulnerability as the human condition. But what if this recognition does not occur? I suggest attention to vulnerability will be unsustainable without a framework for

recognizing vulnerability's demands. Maternal Criticism is this framework that locates the maternal position, recognizes the vulnerable demands for preservation, growth, and social acceptance—demands that characterize both readers and characters—and imagines the possibility of producing larger, deeper stories that connect readers, characters, and the communities from which each has emerged.

Maternal Criticism highlights an important component Nussbaum does not discuss: that attention to vulnerability will fall short of the full human picture unless it also recognizes resistance in vulnerability. In failing to see resistance, a reader may reduce vulnerability to what it is not: victimhood, and this where I suggest the 'moral danger' lies. Though Nussbaum concedes readers may respond with violence toward a character (*Not for Profit* 36), I suggest such a response is more likely when readers fail to recognize the demands of vulnerability and the authority of a maternal response. Earlier, I note a related pernicious reaction to reading victimization, one that valorizes the wish for a 'strongman.' The Maternal Critical lens mitigates the potential for both failures, locating the maternal position, recognizing and participating in resistance to violence.

Though "works of art are frequently an invaluable way of beginning to understand the achievements and sufferings of a culture different from one's own" (Nussbaum 108), they are not sufficient. Though art can challenge national mono-narratives, and it is easy to see in cultural myths "the bifurcation of the world into the 'pure' and the 'impure'—the construction of a 'we' who are without flaw and a 'they' who are dirty, evil and contaminating" (Nussbaum 35), there is a risk that readers will not challenge an interpretive reading that reinforces demeaning stereotypes. This is why the aspect of entertainment in the narrative arts is important to the critical moral impact. Nussbaum notes that Ralph Ellison believed works such as his novel

*Invisible Man* help readers “to see the full humanness of the people with whom our encounters in daily life are especially likely to be superficial at best, at worst infected by demeaning stereotypes” (*Not for Profit* 107). The proposition is that readers from culturally privileged communities can begin to ‘see’ members of disenfranchised communities in ways that will begin to challenge ‘othering’ narratives that have been projected by the reader’s environments.

Educator Rabindranath Tagore, notes Nussbaum:

emphasized [that] the arts, by generating pleasure in connection with acts of subversion and cultural reflection, produce an enduring and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than one fraught with fear and defensiveness. (Nussbaum *Not for Profit* 110)

We may substitute the terms ‘subversion’ and ‘cultural reflection,’ with a recognition of ‘resistance’ and ‘communities in conversation’ that offer alternatives to perceptions of threat and their accompanying wish for power. We may advance a further question Nussbaum proposes: “why should the narrative arts play this role?” (“Form and Content” 47) Nussbaum replies, the arts are required because “we have never lived enough” (47)—our everyday lives do not extend broadly enough to facilitate particular encounters across imaginary borders.

*Iris Murdoch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Love and the Secret Encounter*

Dame Iris Murdoch is as widely known for her novels as her essays in philosophy. Indeed, writes George Steiner,<sup>9</sup> “in the compendious *oeuvre* of Iris Murdoch, philosophy and literature have been strictly inseparable” (“Forward” x), though Nussbaum observes that Murdoch, herself, “opposed any effort to connect her two careers” (Nussbaum, “When She Was Good,” 28). Still, Peter Conradi, who edited the essays in *Existentialists* and wrote a biography of Murdoch, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, observes, “Murdoch uses exempla from literature . . . as if they were as valid as exempla from life” (“Preface” xxiii), an observation I understand as an

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<sup>9</sup> In the “Forward” to the collection of her essays on philosophy and literature, *Existentialists and Mystics*

affirmation of literature as a site where systems of belief and practice can be critiqued in and through the unfolding lives of characters. Murdoch was a fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford, where she taught philosophy. This chapter that juxtaposes Murdoch and Gayatri Spivak, draws from three essays by Murdoch published under the title *Sovereignty of Good*.

This chapter draws from two works in literary, cultural, post-colonial theorist, translator, and writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's extensive body of work: essays collected under the title *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, and Spivak's commentary on her translation of "Three Stories" by Mahasweta Devi, titled *Imaginary Maps*—this latter work inspiring my notion of 'map-making' to describe the process of a Maternal Reader's evolving interpretation toward an encounter with a character, outlined in the first section.

"Love," writes Murdoch, "is knowledge of the individual" (27), and what she means is that love is necessary for knowing the other, and not the other way around—withholding love until one 'knows.' One cannot know—or begin to know; the better term might be 'to learn'—another person except through loving attention. Analogously, observes Spivak, the reader can never fully know the other character, making the demand to know illicit, because it reverses the proper order of the approach toward the other, placing one's self and one's demand over recognizing the other as a separate and unique self. Still, writes Murdoch, "we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*" (30, italics original in the text), observing, I believe, with Spivak, an appreciation for the mystery of personhood that is not resolved in the prolonged attentive encounter; rather, the mystery—alongside an awareness of the mystery—deepens. I propose an interface between Murdoch and Spivak where loving attention to the other (Murdoch) and loving attention to the other character (Spivak) suggests

what Murdoch calls “a continuous fabric of being” (Murdoch 29), meaning, a ‘continuous’ or constant way of responding in the world.

Implicit in the demand to attend to the physical is an insistence upon distinguishing between the body and ways the body is socially categorized by difference, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and class. This matters for Maternal Criticism, which is materially focused, attentive to how characters’ bodies occupy the spaces in which they are situated. Spivak observes that real differences between reader and character need not preclude an encounter; imaginary differences, however, can. She describes ‘imaginary difference’ as the constructed narratives of “cultural nationalism” which she describes as “burden[s]” (*Nationalism and Imagination* 48) imposed upon both reader and character, but in particular, a burden imposed by Western readers upon characters situated in non-Western texts.

Spivak asks: “what interest or interests” are served by “keep[ing] up this game of [imaginary] difference?” (Spivak, “Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxiii) The question is rhetorical; Spivak responds: literature “can help us imagine . . . those interests” where readers “can at least be made to see this difference at work” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxiii), and the purpose, she writes, is “not in order to see opposition . . . erased but to see what indicates that each of the terms *must* appear as the *difference* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxiv, italics original in the text). In other words, Spivak insists readers recognize difference, but also structures that demand it. Spivak uses the phrase: “this traffic of same-and-othering” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxiv) such that ‘traffic’ is both noun and verb—the trafficking of the many for the profit of the few; the World Bank’s “division of [our] world into a map that is as fantastic as it is real. This constantly changing map draws economic rather than national boundaries, as fluid as the spectacular

dynamics of international capital” (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 198). In defiance of the “imaginary maps” of capitalist fantasies that erase human lives from their geographies (on this point it is easy to read Stephens in concert with Spivak), “fiction and its pedagogy,” she writes, “can here perform the ideological mobilization of a moral economy” (“A Literary Representation” 256).

How does a reader from one community engage critically in literatures that emerge from other communities? Is it possible to read the literature of the other? We can and we must, insists Spivak, adding:

the position that only the subaltern can know the subaltern, only women can know women, and so on, cannot be held as a theoretical presupposition . . . for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity. Whatever the political necessity for holding the position, and whatever the advisability of attempting to ‘identify’ (with) the other as subject in order to know her, *knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity.* (“A Literary Representation” 254, emphasis mine)

In other words, encountering the other in literature means acknowledging difference without presuming to know ‘the’ difference. Spivak writes she is “convinced” (“Preface” xxiii) literature is a place where readers and characters can meet in “ethical singularity” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxv), a one-to-one engagement, where the intersection of ‘ethical’ and ‘singular’ is crucial because the notion of an ethical encounter cannot be applied in any general way.

Nussbaum describes what she calls the “the priority of the particular” (where ‘the particular’ may be understood as ‘singular’), a notion that challenges the “fixed rules” of traditional interpretive approaches, where the ‘priority of the particular:’

point[s] to the need for fine-tuned *concreteness* in ethical attention and judgment . . . [where] ethical attention [must] take into account, as salient, three things that general principles, fixed in advance of the particular case, omit: (a) new and unanticipated features . . . (b) context-embeddedness of relevant features . . . [and] (c) ethical relevance of particular persons and relationships. (Nussbaum, “Form and Content” 38, italics original in the text)

In other words, one cannot interpret ethically except in the surprising context of the particular relational encounter. The contrast she points to can be framed as the ‘fixed rules’ of an authoritarian approach to literature on the one hand, and the priority of the particular character as encountered by the Maternal Critical Reader on the other. I suggest where authoritarian approaches have severed ‘high’ thinking from the body (of the character and the Reader), Maternal Criticism reconnects ‘the severed head’ (to borrow the title of one of Murdoch’s best known works), making connections between readers and characters, readers and writers, and readers to other readers possible.

Spivak writes, “we all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability” (“Preface” xxv).

Spivak continues:

We also know that in such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides there is always a sense that something has not got across. This we call the ‘secret,’ not something that one wants to conceal, but something that one wants to reveal. In this sense the effort of ‘ethical singularity’ may be called a ‘secret encounter.’ (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxv)

“In this secret singularity,” she writes, “the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxv). Spivak speaks of a small but profound understanding between reader and character that includes private mysteries, things neither the reader nor the character quite grasp, where the object of love is “the ungraspable other” (Spivak, “Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 200). This notion is compatible with Murdoch’s observation that “the central concept of morality is ‘the individual’ thought of as knowable by love” (29)—that is knowable only by love, the practice of attention.

Spivak says, “ethics is the experience of the impossible” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxv)—by which she does not mean “ethics are impossible” (xxv)—rather, that personal attention

to the dilemma of another, attention that achieves a kind of understanding that includes the mutual “secret” of knowing there is that which is unknown, is beyond “the rationalist sense of ‘doing the right thing.’” It is “the experience of the impossible” (Spivak xxv). Murdoch describes the experience this way: “once the historical individual is ‘let in’ a number of things have to be said with a difference. The idea of ‘objective reality’ . . . undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood . . . in relation to the progressing life of a person” (Murdoch 25). To ‘let in’ the ‘progressing life’ other character, observes Murdoch, is “the effort to counteract . . . illusion” (36). Murdoch writes she has borrowed the word ‘attention,’ from Weil, “to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (Murdoch 33). Weil explicitly connects the act of attention to vulnerability writing:

the capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. [. . .] It is a recognition that the sufferer exists . . . this way of looking is first of all attentive. . . . to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. (Weil 51, italics original in the text)

This recognition is the point of encounter with the other. This capacity for attention that is Weil’s ‘miracle,’ and Spivak’s ‘impossibility,’ is the Maternal Critic’s aim. Murdoch observes, “our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends . . . perhaps largely, upon the quality of our *habitual* objects of attention” (Murdoch 55, emphasis mine), where habits of attention developed in critical activity in literature are carried into discourses in communities of readers.

Indeed, writes Spivak, “this understanding” developed through attention to characters “only sharpens the sense of the crucial and continuing need for collective political struggle” (“Preface” *Imaginary Maps* xxv). In the afterword of *Imaginary Maps* she reflects that she has “perhaps foolishly, attempted to open the structure of an impossible social justice glimpsed through remote and secret encounters with singular figures” (Spivak “Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 197). But, Maternal Critics do not think Spivak’s attempt at all ‘foolish;’ rather, that

Maternal communities are mobilized in response to the ‘ethical singular encounter,’ practiced as attentiveness in critical activity. Spivak writes, “we must learn ‘love’ (a simple name for ethical responsibility-in-singularity)” (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 200). Adding, “we must *learn to learn*:

through the slow, attentive, mind-changing (on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the name of ‘love’—to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws, modes of production, systems of education and health care. (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 201, italics original in the text)

I suggest the link between the ‘attentive’ reader and activism, between the ‘singular encounter’ in literature and ‘collective efforts to make change’ in the empirical world is Maternal Criticism, and so a further discussion is needed to explicate how literatures by Sahar Khalifeh and Ronit Matalon may be situated in the larger narratives of nonviolent resistance and how Maternal Critical activity in these literatures partners Maternal communities of Readers in their struggle.

### **III: Narrative Framework of Women’s Non-violent Peace Activism**

The third section of this dissertation reflects the second part of Ruddick’s title, *Maternal Criticism: Toward a Politics of Peace*, where the attentiveness that defines maternal thinking also frames peacemaking. Specifically, this discussion demonstrates how women’s peacemaking is defined by narrative discourses, how literature by women is part of this narrative context, and therefore, how Maternal Criticism is situated in women’s peacemaking discourses.

#### ***Women’s peacemaking is narrative-based discourse***

Women’s peacemaking is defined by its commitment to including the narratives of all groups involved in and affected by conflict, or ‘inclusive narrative discourses.’ The Women Peacemaker Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ) documents the

work of women who resist violence and make peace in the midst of conflict.<sup>10</sup> Its mission statement reads:

The IPJ believes that women’s stories go beyond the headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. [. . .] For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women—those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from devastation—must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted. (Damelin, “About the Women Peacemakers Program” 3)

In other words, in the context of the discussion I have framed so far, women’s narratives of violence in conflict locate both the experience of vulnerability and the authority of care; and it is because they narrate on both of these levels, women’s stories are essential to rebuilding just and peaceful societies. The aspect of resistance, in particular, resistance to exclusion from the dominant narrative about the conflict, must not be overlooked, where narratives (note the plural) of the body, and experiences of grief and trauma in particular, challenge the hegemony of authoritarian dogma that valorizes and perpetuates violence in symbolic terms. This contrast can be imagined as the horizontal design of peace as inclusive narrative discourses, on the one hand; and on the other, the vertical authoritarian model of peace as policy, negotiated by a few and imposed on the rest. A further contrast between these models is also relevant: women’s peacemaking is defined by open-ended conversations that emphasize the ongoing work of building relational communities, where the authoritarian goal is a resolution from which all sides can walk away.

Marie O’Reilly, Director of Research and Analysis at the Institute for Inclusive Security, a research non-profit in Washington DC and Cambridge, analyzes correlations between conflict and gender inequality, specifically “outlining existing data . . . [that] shows how women’s

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<sup>10</sup> University of San Diego

inclusion helps prevent conflict, create peace, and sustain security after war ends” (21-2). She writes:

gender equality is a better indicator of a state’s peacefulness than other factors like democracy, religion, or GDP. Similarly, gender inequality has been revealed as a predictor of armed conflict in a number of empirical studies, whether measuring conflict between states or within states. (O’Reilly, Marie 22)

Her findings reveal the nuanced but pervasive ways in which women’s inclusion in policy discourses in their communities, and internationally, has significant implications for social justice:

Statistical analysis of the largest dataset on the status of women in the world today shows that where women are more empowered in multiple spheres of life, countries are less likely to go to war with their neighbors, to be in bad standing with the international community, or to be rife with crime and violence within their society.

[. . .] statistical analysis of data from most countries in the world during the period 1977-1996 showed that the higher the proportion of women in parliament, the lower the likelihood that the state carried out human rights abuses such as political imprisonments, torture, killings, and disappearances. (O’Reilly, Marie 22)

In other words, studies show how inclusion precludes environments that foster violence in the first place, and how inclusive discourses in the wake of conflict promote peace-building.

O’Reilly describes women’s conversational engagement as “horizontal bridge-building . . . working across ethnic, religious, political, and cultural divides cracked open by conflict” (25); and, she adds, “women also bridge the vertical divide between elites and the grassroots, which may in turn increase the chances that peace will last by promoting buy-in and generating legitimacy” (O’Reilly, Marie 25). Women’s peacemaking through “coalition-building” (25) constructs an inclusive narrative where the story of vulnerability is the profound human equalizer, drawing attention to the body, to the human person. In other words, vulnerability is every person’s story. “Even when female participants initially met with hostility from their male counterparts,” she writes, “they ultimately developed a reputation for building trust, engaging all

sides, and fostering dialogue in otherwise acrimonious settings” (24), characteristics that contributed to why women’s peace negotiations were more likely to be implemented and to endure. Negotiations that included women were less ideological, more practical—that is, story-focused on the material needs of preservation, nurture, and social acceptance, or what Ruddick has identified as the three demands of vulnerability.

Inclusive discourses that are intentionally attentive to the demands of preservation, nurture/growth, and social acceptance are here defined as maternal. The contrast between the maternal standpoint and the patriarchal is defined in the way in which each chooses to respond to vulnerability: the maternal responds with inclusion rather than exclusion; further, as I note earlier, where maternal authority asserts people’s physical bodies take priority over abstract dogma, patriarchy reverses this equation. What the compendium of women’s peacemaking narratives at the IPJ and O’Reilly’s research demonstrates, however, is more than a contrastive analysis between patriarchal and maternal approaches to making peace; *what the record clearly shows is that authoritarian approaches have not worked*. Indeed, authoritarian approaches cannot ultimately work because they launch from vertical systems designed to maintain exclusion and social inequality; and inequality, writes O’Reilly, is the clearest predictor of violence:

Exclusion of identity-based groups—whether religious, ethnic, or cultural—is a significant contributor to war, poverty, and state failure. With their collaborative responses to preventing conflict, making peace, and rebuilding societies, women consistently address this cause of conflict and instability, helping to ensure that peace will last. (29-30)

Before proceeding further with the argument demonstrating how literature by women and Maternal Criticism are part of the narrative discourses through which women and mothers make

peace and resist violence, it is important to note how these discourses are situated in feminist communication theory.

What follows is a brief discussion of “Invitational Rhetoric”—terms, conditions and underpinning feminist values of inclusive narrative approaches of women’s peacemaking. Invitational Rhetoric is what is meant by inclusive discourses. The discussion also reveals how the descriptive and normative values expressed as Invitational Rhetoric within communication theory are congruent with the approach of Maternal Criticism as a reader-reception theory.

***Narrative Discourses: Invitational Rhetoric***

“Invitational rhetoric” is a mode of discursive exchange “designed to generate understanding among individuals with different perspectives” (“Invitational Rhetoric” 569); it is premised on one “key assumption:” that “the effort to change others constitutes an attempt to gain control or power over them and is a devaluation of their lifeworlds” (570). The goal is to invite and to include the narrative of the other. In their 2003 paper introducing invitational rhetoric, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin write that “its purpose is to provide the basis for the creation and maintenance of relationships of equality” (13). Thus, it is easy to see how a relational-discourse model presents an alternative to traditional rhetorical theories that value the speaker’s ability to persuade, and therefore dominate the listener (Foss and Griffin 2). In traditional persuasive modes of rhetoric, “the speaker’s role very often ‘may be best described as paternalistic’” (Scott qtd. in Foss and Griffin 3) in that the speaker’s approach assumes her or his knowledge is superior and that the listener needs to be “enlightened” (Gearhart in Foss and Griffin 3). In contrast, Invitational discourses are premised on the three principles:

1. a commitment to the creation of relationships of equality;
2. a recognition of the immanent value of all living beings; and,
3. [a commitment to] self-determination [that] allows individuals to make their own decisions about how they wish to live their lives. (Foss and Griffin 4)

The speaking aspect of the conversational exchange is framed as an ‘offering,’ or “giving . . . expression to a perspective without advocating its support or seeking its acceptance” (Foss and Griffin 7); the reception aspect of the exchange is framed as “creating external conditions that allow and encourage others to present their perspectives” (“Invitational Rhetoric” 570). In other words, the asymmetrical (Schweickart) and reciprocal (Spivak) form is relational where the authors observe, “an understanding of the participants themselves occurs, an understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and sense of equality” (Foss and Griffin 5). It is easy to see how these discourse parameters facilitate the work of building diverse and equitable communities.

Foss and Griffin note an inherent defensiveness fostered in persuasive rhetorical contexts where “rhetors typically adjust their conduct to the external resistance they expect in the audience or situation” (6). In contrast, they observe:

In Invitational Rhetoric . . . resistance is not anticipated, and rhetors do not adapt their communication to expected resistance in the audience. Instead, they identify possible impediments to the creation of understanding and seek to minimize or neutralize them so they do not remain impediments. [. . .] Rhetors tell what they currently know or understand; they present their vision of the world and show how it looks and works for them. (6-7)

The invitation to intimacy in Foss and Griffin’s theory is revealed in the physical stance of the speaker: a leaning in, a posture that is supple and not rigid. The authors define it as “a willingness to yield:”

Not unlike Buber’s notion of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship, the basic movement of a willingness to yield is a turning toward the other. It involves meeting another’s position ‘in its uniqueness, letting it have its impact.’ (Buber qtd. in Foss and Griffin 7)

Foss and Griffin describe a rhetor who, rather than being focused on making an impression on the receiver, is willing to receive an impression from the receiver! Foss and Griffin write: “to attend to the other as other, the different as different, is also to understand the different *as possible*” (Tracy qtd, in Foss and Griffin 7, italics original in the text), an important concept

compatible with my earlier discussion of Spivak. These practices underpin the first principle of equality and connote an atmosphere of mutual safety.

The second principle of Invitational Rhetoric, immanent worth, is communicated “when rhetors approach audience members as ‘unrepeatable individuals’” (Walker qtd. in Foss and Griffin 11) and audience members reciprocate the value toward the speaker when they “do not interrupt, comfort, or insert anything of their own as others tell of their experiences” (11). This latter point is revealing because it is easy to observe how it:

contrasts with typical ways of listening, in which “we nearly always stop each other from getting very far inside. Our advice, reactions, encouragements, reassurances, and well-intentioned comments actually prevent people from feeling understood.” (Gendlin qtd. in Foss and Griffin 11)

Such interjections may, in fact, indicate an unwillingness to receive the speaker’s offering, instead, diverting the course of the story toward what listeners want to hear.

The third principle of freedom, or ‘allowing individuals to make their own decisions’ means that “rhetors do not place restrictions on an interaction,” rather, “audience members [are free] to develop the options that seem appropriate to them” (12). Foss and Griffin write:

the audience’s lack of acceptance of or adherence to the perspective articulated by the rhetor truly makes no difference to the rhetor. . . . Either outcome—acceptance or rejection—is seen as perfectly acceptable by the Invitational rhetor, who is not offended, disappointed, or angry if audience members choose not to adopt a particular perspective. (Foss and Griffin 12)

What matters is that the offering is received; and, while relational encounters often do create change in and between participants, change is not the rhetor’s objective; rather, the focus is on the long view of creating “relationships of equality and respect” (15).

In discursive encounters where Invitational Rhetoric does not replace traditional persuasive frameworks, its practice *does* displace their privileged status. Traditional rhetorical forms favor use of abstract terms which can be used to privilege abstract forms of power; in

contrast, Invitational Rhetoric values the subject-agent-participant, who is not abstract, destabilizing the privilege of power by disseminating it. Rather, Foss and Griffin describe “the privileging of invention” (16), where, in the free-flow of offerings not previously offered and the reception of stories not previously heard, there is no cap on the intersections, “interpretations, perspectives, courses of actions, and solutions” (16) that might be imagined. “In particular,” they add, “Invitational Rhetoric provides a mode of communication for women and other marginalized groups to use in their efforts to transform systems of domination and oppression” (16). By valuing the uniqueness of the individual, by inviting her or him to tell her or his story, by paying attention to the story of difference, and including those stories in larger community narratives—by including the excluded, Invitational Rhetoric offers a framework from which women peacemakers employ narrative in building coalitions to make, and to maintain, peace. Recognizing and valuing the unique experience, and the narratives of experiences of the other matters because inclusion, of itself, is not equity; it is possible to include others demographically and still ignore imbalances of power and difference from which their narratives emerge.

That women make peace differently than their male counterparts is tethered to the gendered experience of violence. Though not limited to women, sexual assault—the violent manifestation of authoritarian power that depends upon inequality for exploitation, is the knowledge/experience of oppression that informs women’s discourses in resisting violence.

***The gendered experience of violence in texts***

The gendered experience of violence is the gendered experience of authoritarian power. Because women, historically, have occupied different spaces in the social hierarchy than men, their experience of power has been different, a difference that shapes both a woman’s experience

in the world, and her ‘ways of seeing’ through her experience. “Seeing,” writes John Berger, “comes before words.”

but there is . . . another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. (Berger 7)

In his philosophical text on art criticism, *Ways of Seeing*, Berger critiques ways in which visual art stands witness to relationships of power, vulnerability, and resistance between actual people: the spectator (for whom/ by whom the work was commissioned, male) and the objectified person (subordinated, colonized, female) ‘behind’ the image, from whom the image is derived. In other words, the artifact is a witness to the traversed intersections between people in unequal circumstances, which is to say, a witness to conflict and resistance.

Both the artifact and the objectified subject from which it is derived are a witness to the vulnerability of her or his position in the frame, but also, a witness to the fallacy of power: evidence of that which power can and cannot control, evidence of its limits. Indeed, well after its (privileged) commissioner has been forgotten, the artifact persists. Literature, too, is an artifact that presents this witness in characters who reveal woman’s experience of patriarchal power, a historical witness that reveals:

to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman’s self being split into two. . . . She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. (Berger 46)

In other words, writes Berger: a woman “comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity” (46, emphasis original in the text). Though Berger does not discuss how this duality in woman’s way of seeing is intrinsic

to her awareness of vulnerability, he does observe, “men survey women before treating them. Consequently, how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated” (46).

Artifacts that emerge *from* patriarchy tell a different story than those which emerge as a *witness to* patriarchy. Berger writes:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. (Berger 47)

Berger’s critique can be applied to the literary arts; Patrocinio Schweickart, citing Judith Fetterley, observes how “as readers . . . women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (Fetterley in Schweickart “Reading Ourselves” 41-2). Fetterley asserts, “the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the *immascultation* of women by men” where, writes Schweickart:

the process of immascultation does not impart virile power to the woman reader. On the contrary, it doubles her oppression. She suffers “not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal . . . is to be *not female*.” (Fetterley qtd. in Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves” 42, italics original in the text)

Schweickart calls for a critical method, a ‘story of reading’ that is both “concerned with feminist readings of male texts, and . . . with feminist readings of female texts” (“Reading Ourselves” 39). A point not to be missed in the juxtaposition of Berger and Schweickart is that both artifacts constructed within patriarchal constructs and those constructed without speak to a woman’s unique experience of violence, the prior unwittingly and the latter, purposefully.<sup>11</sup> When women

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<sup>11</sup> In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey notes that her work “takes as a starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established [patriarchal] interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (833). Like Berger, Mulvey assumes a male spectator, and this is one of “the criticisms leveled against her work,” writes Rachel Harris—the omission of how to

writing from contexts of conflict create characters whose witness to violence is unique, those literatures are part of the work of resistance; that is, the story, itself, is resistance.

### ***Receiving the story of women's nonviolent resistance***

I have noted how women use narrative discourses in peacemaking; it is through narrative that the story of women's nonviolent resistance is received. When a story is formed, it demands to be attended to. Julia Bacha, filmmaker and creative director at JustVision,<sup>12</sup> describes this imperative as a responsibility to "pay attention to nonviolence" (Bacha, "Pay Attention"), using her documentary film, *Budrus*, to demonstrate her point. In Bacha's film, the people of Budrus, a small town on the West Bank, and in particular, the young women of the town, narrate their story, a 10-month nonviolent protest over placement of a fence by the Israeli Defense Forces that would have resulted in a 40% loss of village land. Their protest and the dissemination of the *story* of their resistance resulted in the army moving the route of the barrier back to the Green Line. The point of Bacha's talk is that this was not a mainstream media story; it was not, she observed, a picture of Palestinian protest that makes the news ("Pay Attention"). So it became another kind of text: a story told by a woman filmmaker.

Though in Bacha's film, the women's attempts at dialogue with the military were initially unsuccessful, I argue inclusive discourses were initiated in Bacha's story of their story, inviting participants into the conversation every time the story is told, including the reader holding this

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"account for the female spectator's enjoyment of cinema even when it appeared to objectify and demean her" (Harris 7). Harris responds to this question citing E. Ann Kaplan who "argues, patriarchal systems have socialized women, teaching them to see their marginalized place in the film's hierarchy and accept it" (Harris 7). In other words, notes Harris, in concert with Schweickart and Fetterley, 'the socialization of women' has had the effect of "creating male viewers even of females" (Harris 8). Unlike Berger, Mulvey does not read resistance in the gaze from the on-screen "to-be-looked-at" (837) female; but, one may wonder how infrequently the on-screen female is given this opportunity to gaze at the spectator.

<sup>12</sup> JustVision, founded by Ronit Avni, documents the work of Palestinians and Israelis trying to end the occupation and build peace by nonviolent means in film. On the organization's website, justvision.org, Avni talks about the power of story to change minds and promote dialogue.

dissertation now. Referring on another occasion to *Budrus* as a case-study, Bacha makes observations relevant to my argument for situating the literatures of Khalifeh and Matalon, and Maternal Critical activity in those literatures, within feminist peace discourses: first, she observes, the clearest predictor of a protest movement adopting nonviolence is the participation of women in leadership; and second, while women are not essentially peaceful, Bacha observes they do experience power differently, and this has resulted in women developing alternatives to direct confrontation (“How Women Wage Conflict”). Texts by women offer stories in their relational contexts, from their sense of place and perception of historical trajectory. These storied offerings invite responses that media soundbites about confrontation never do; mainstream news, observes Bacha, offers neither an analysis of power dynamics, nor a critique of non-monolithic societies (Bacha, “Full Frame”). It is for these reasons, mainstream media becomes another context of oppression which Khalifeh’s and Matalon’s characters, and the communities from which they emerge, resist: their stories push back against the over-simple typecasts of people like them in a 60-second news bite.

Images of violence in media are contested by “narratives of individuals recounting their efforts to reconstruct a human history,” and these narratives, writes critic Barbara Harlow, “form the bases for rescrutiny of the relationships between the ‘literary’ and the ‘political,’ of the place of women in politics, and the role of the academic classroom in that examination” (125). Bacha’s films are recognized as texts that partner in the work of nonviolent resistance; I offer literature as an analogue. For theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, there is a clear relationship between texts she describes as “a witnessing love” and the activism or “collective struggle” they accompany (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 201), writing, the “text (text-ile as the weave of work) is in the

field of activism, e-laborated in labor” (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 201). Critics Therese Saliba and Jeanne Kattan also recognize “literature as a site of women’s resistance” (86).

When we see others as “full complete human beings,” says Bacha, we can see “how our futures are dependent on each other” (Bacha, “Full Frame”). Story fosters dialogic relationships, a move toward awareness of the lateral relationships that create equitable societies, disrupting the isolating vertical structures of authoritarian systems. Through textual “narrative,” writes Harlow, women writers invite readers to “trace the patterns of an active and activist intersection of the cultural and the political” (Harlow 125-6), intersections that emerge as transgressive in the context of “conventional readings of women’s role within the body sociopolitic [that] have tended significantly to emphasize . . . the separation of the personal and the political, the private and the public” (Harlow 126). Rather, women writers (like Khalifeh, to whom she refers specifically) “collapse that distinction:”

internaliz[ing] the public and political debate, and externaliz[ing] the otherwise privatized issues of women’s lives in a compelling argument for the reciprocities of the conversations that build communities and the diplomacies that establish states. (Harlow 126)

This ‘collapse’ constitutes Maternal Critical approaches to literature by women, demonstrating what Ruddick refers to as a maternal politics of peace: that the private spaces of mother-work, so closely associated with women’s lives, occur within, and inform, social communities, the body politic.

***From the maternal private to the maternal public***

Ruddick argued the disciplines that emerge from mother-work cannot be limited to private spheres where the demands of vulnerable children are met; rather, they necessarily extend into public discourses that affect and frame the societies in which children are nurtured and trained. Ruddick asks: “are there . . . ways to transform the *practices* of mothering, and hence the

public conception of mothers? Are there . . . political movements that transform the practice of those mothers who engage in them?” (*Maternal Thinking* 222, italics original in the text) As I note earlier, Ruddick’s answer is peace activism: “insofar as they become publicly visible *as mothers* who are resisting violence and inventing peace, they transform the meaning of ‘motherhood’” (241, italics original in the text) in the public square—in the public consciousness.

Spivak expresses a “conviction that large-scale mind change is hardly ever possible on grounds of reason alone. In order to mobilize for nonviolence . . . one relies . . . on building up a conviction of the ‘sacredness’ of human life” (Afterword *Imaginary Maps* 199), where attention to, and anticipation of, the unfolding story of the character in the literature of the other is part of this ‘building up’ of a habit of mind that recognizes ‘the sacredness of human life.’ Rather than conflating people with characters, such habits recognize the existence of communities ‘behind’ the encounter with the other character, and affirm the conviction that a shift in social consciousness will be accompanied by critical readings in literature that recognize and respond to the demands of vulnerability. “If this [notion of large-scale mind change] seems an impractical dream,” writes Spivak, “we should perhaps learn a lesson from the other side” (199)—that is, what good has come from not engaging critically in literatures of the other? To Spivak’s point: what has come of not attending to literatures that emerge from contexts of conflict in which one’s own community may have a role in the suffering of others? What has been the result of treating imaginary boundaries of exclusion as though they are real? Spivak writes:

The preparation of ‘technical papers’ that . . . extract methods from so-called ‘indigenous knowledge’ will not be accompanied by any change of mind-set in the researchers. By contrast, we draw out from literary and social texts some impossible yet necessary project of changing the minds that innocently support a vicious system; (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 200)

adding, “to be human is to be always and already inserted into a structure of responsibility” (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 201). In other words, it is not a matter of choosing to take responsibility, one is already complicit in some structural system; and, where literature occupies a middle space of traverse between readers and ‘others,’ critical activity in texts offers Maternal Readers a terrain for navigating resistance to ‘vicious systems.’

Though peace discourses are often advanced in contexts of war-discourse, from a maternal standpoint, the contemplation of violence indicates, *a priori*, a failure of attention.

Ruddick observes:

Peace is not sharply distinguished from war. Wars are prepared for in a time of “peace” that includes many violences and is often secured by violence. One of the central tasks of peacemaking is to identify violences wherever they occur—in boardrooms, bedrooms, factories, classrooms, and battlefields. Peacemakers do not turn away from violence but ferret it out. (*Maternal Thinking* 137)

Julie Stephens cites Cynthia Cockburn who asserts: “what marks feminist peace activism as different is its attention to ‘more mundane violence and the individual lives it affects, to pain, care and responsibility’” (cited in Stephens 118). Juxtaposing Ruddick and Cockburn reveals processes of degradation: where violence inflicted upon one is allowed to pass, violence is perpetrated again and again, on others. Ruddick suggests neglecting to ‘ferret out’ violences in closed spaces predicts violences perpetrated beyond them.

Ruddick argues the collective maternal response to violence is public and verbal, a response grounded in a “cognitive capacity for ‘concrete’ thinking” (93), to which she contrasts the abstraction of “military ideologies,” that are most “fragile” in their narratives of death. In other words, the maternal response is the story of the human body’s vulnerability. It is specifically on this point of fragility that “a peacemaker’s hope” (Ruddick 203) hinges. “It is thus a peacemaker’s task,” she writes, “to provide an alternative, nonmystifying account of bodily death” (203-4). It is easy to see how women writing from contexts of conflict offer concrete

‘nonmystifying accounts’ of the body, and, thus, how literature and critical activity in literature share a role in resisting—calling out—violence in all the places it routinely occurs: in boardrooms, in schoolrooms, in bedrooms. What I am describing is the premise that women’s resistance to violence takes the form of clear-eyed conversational engagement that is rooted in an unwavering commitment to freedom and equality—where freedom is understood in terms of preserving, nurturing, and respecting the conscience of each individual; where ‘freedom *from* maternal care-taking’ (emphasis mine)—Julie Stephens’s description of consumer societies that demonstrate “hostility” to “maternalist political perspectives” (ix)—means entering spaces that valorize power.

It is difficult to overstate how fundamentally radical this notion of a maternal discourse in the public-political sphere is. Hannah Arendt observes how the vocabulary for, the conceptual framing of, *home* and the *political body* were mutually exclusive in Greek thought, where “the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family” (25), where the needs of human biological life (24) are on the same level as “other forms of animal life” (24), characterized by unreasoned chaos that must be controlled. Arendt writes:

not only in Greece and the *polis* but throughout the whole of occidental antiquity, it would indeed have been self-evident that even the power of the tyrant was less great, less “perfect” than the power with which the *paterfamilias*, the *dominus*, ruled over his household of slaves and family. (Arendt 27)

In other words, there was no such thing as maternal authority; rather, the biologically-driven barbarism of the home required a strongman/despot. It is for this reason that the home could not be political—because despotism, or “uncontested rule and a political realm properly speaking were mutually exclusive” (Arendt 27). Further, it appears to have gone uncontested that the same person could assume the role of *dominus* in the context of the private sphere and the role of a

democratic rhetor in the public without missing a beat. The point is that residue of this violent binary continues in evidence, where, externally, the *polis* defines itself in opposition to “barbarian empires,” characterized by unreasoned chaos like the home (Arendt 26); and, internally, the domestic/maternal, concerned with the physical body, is excluded from a symbolically-loaded political discourse. Clearly, women’s and maternal peacemaking violates this separation of the biological and the political, politicizing the fragility of the human body.

This then, is the weight of tradition against the exercise of maternal authority in political discourses, and our contemporary experience is a witness to the violences that have resulted from the exclusion of women and disciplines that emerge from woman-oriented practices. But, there is more to be said: this dissertation has documented how inclusion of women and woman-oriented practices have contributed to the emergence of sustainable communities from contexts of conflict, identifying a distinctive attribute of women’s peacemaking: story. I argue the literatures of Sahar Khalifeh and Ronit Matalon are part of this narrative context of peacemaking and resistance; that reading these literatures through a Maternal Critical lens connects readers and characters, and readers to other readers, in the struggle to build equitable maternally-oriented communities.

#### **IV: Models of Maternal Critical Activity in Novels by Middle Eastern Women**

*“I spoke of the novel as an especially useful agent of the moral imagination, as the literary form which most directly reveals to us the complexity, the difficulty, and the interest of life in society, and best instructs us in our human variety and contradiction.”* (Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, qtd. in Nussbaum, “Form and Content” 45)

Murdoch writes, “an intellectual discipline can . . . enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgment” (87), adding:

We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension

of the real. The value concepts are here patently tied on to the world, they are stretched as it were between the truth-seeking mind and the world. (88)

“The greatest art,” observes Murdoch, “shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all” (63). In the context of critical activity, ‘looking at the real world’ means recognizing the fact of the other, a “turning toward the other” (Foss and Griffin 7). Abdul JanMohamed observes, “the relationship between self and other and between literature and society . . . are mediated by ideology, which . . . is not false consciousness but rather a distillation of *lived* relationships” (qtd. in Hesse, “Imagining the Other” 154, emphasis original in text). To enter the world through story, we must be prepared to seek characters—not signposts—moving, hearts beating, within *‘living* relationships;’ thus, do characters emerge as witnesses to flesh-and-blood communities.

The fourth section of this dissertation offers models of Maternal Critical activity in the novels of Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh, “the most celebrated Palestinian novelist” (“Postcolonial Studies”); and, Israeli writer Ronit Matalon, whom critic Tamar Hess has called “one of the most well-read and intellectual authors Hebrew literature has produced since [poet and playwright] Lea Goldberg” (Hess 294).

Khalifeh’s 1976 novel, *Wild Thorns*, emerges within the context of the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank after the 1967 war. While some characters predict the conflict that will erupt in the Intifada (1987-91), her mothering-characters predict the women’s collectives that organized during this time to create an alternative economy and education system. Her 1997 novel, *The Inheritance*, emerges from the economic and political landscape on the West Bank post-Oslo (1993, 1995); and, her 2008 novel, *The End of Spring*, emerges from within the Second Intifada (2000-6). Reading Khalifeh through a Maternal Critical lens reveals mothering characters for

whom meeting the demands of vulnerability is resistance to exclusion from discourses about their own self-determination, whether the authoritarian systems of violence are sourced in tradition, the Palestinian Authority, or the occupation.

Matalon's 1995 novel, *The One Facing Us*, situated in the mid-1970s, reflects upon the immigration of an Egyptian-Jewish family following the expulsion of the Jewish community from Cairo (after 1956). Her 2000 novel, *Bliss*, takes place over the course of two days in November, 1995, and its publication emerges into popular discourses in Israel between two army withdrawals: from Lebanon in 2000, and from Gaza in 2005. The struggle of the single mother-character in her 2008 novel, *The Sound of Our Steps*, primarily situated after the 1967 war, tethers its mother-character to the Single Mothers March on Jerusalem (2 July—19 August 2003). Reading Matalon through a Maternal Critical lens reveals mother-characters for whom meeting the demands of vulnerability is resistance to the violence of cultural alienation, social invisibility and exclusion.

Each set of novels is chronologically parallel to the other: both Khalifeh's *End of Spring* and Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* were published in 2008; both Khalifeh's *The Inheritance* (pub. 1997) and Matalon's *Bliss* (pub. 2000) are situated post Oslo Accords; and, both Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* and Matalon's *The One Facing Us* are situated in the mid-1970s. The geographical proximity of each of these stories to the others is about 50—70 kilometers.<sup>13</sup> These novels also stand in theoretical proximity to the 1989 publication of Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, and it is from the context of this latter relation that Maternal Critics identify emerging cultural shifts in perceptions of mothering that critique the exclusion of mothers from the discourses of peacemaking.

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<sup>13</sup> Estimate, using the "Distance Calculator" at [timeanddate.com](http://timeanddate.com)

I have selected passages—moments of encounter—from these novels to demonstrate Maternal Critical ‘map-making’ that recognizes the vulnerable character’s demands for preservation, nurture, and acceptance, locates the maternal position, and responds to participate in communities that carry the narrative of resistance to violence forward.

*Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh*

Sahar Khalifeh has published essays, short stories, and thirteen novels, a prolific body of work that has been widely translated.<sup>14</sup> She wrote what is perhaps her best known novel, *Wild Thorns*, while still a student at Birzeit University where her advisor was Dr. Hanan Mikhail Ashrawi (Sabbagh, “An Interview” 137). Khalifeh is an outspoken activist for equal rights for women and founder of the Women’s Affairs Center in Nablus. After the publication of her sixth novel, Khalifeh spoke, in a rare interview, with writer and activist Suha Sabbagh:

My primary task is to liberate women from the confines of an image imposed on them by male writers. In political poems and novels written by men, women are a symbol for the land; for procreation; for endless and unconditional loving and giving. The woman is a mother, she is the beacon lighting the darkness for ships in the night and a shoulder for the tired to rest on. Motherhood in our culture is a cult that has its origins in literature. . . . these symbols are gilded frames that help preserve the old female roles while making them seem more acceptable. [. . .]

In my novels, I have sought to portray a new and different woman: a woman who is capable of giving without being exploited. A woman who is aware of her rights to the same degree as she is to her responsibilities. A woman who is self-critical and critical of society. (Khalifeh qtd. in Sabbagh, “An Interview” 139)

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<sup>14</sup> A list of novels by Khalifeh from most recent to earliest:

*Ard Wa Samaa, Earth and Heaven* (Arabic 2014)

*Aslun wa fasl, Of Noble Origins* (Arabic 2009, English 2012)

*Hobi al Awal, First Love* (Arabic 2010)

*Rabi’ harr, The End of Spring* (Arabic 2008, English 2008)

*Surah wa-ayqunah wa-’ahd qadim, The Image, the Icon, and the Covenant* (Arabic 2002, English 2008)

*Cactus, Al Sabbar* (Arabic 1999)

*Al Mirath, The Inheritance* (Arabic 1997, English 2005)

*Bab Al-Saha, Gateway to the City Square/The Courtyard’s Gate* (Arabic 1990)

*Mudhakkirat imra ‘a ghayr waqi’iya, Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (Arabic 1986)

*Abbad al-Shams, Sunflower* (Arabic 1980)

*Al Subbar, Wild Thorns* (Arabic 1976, English 1985)

*Lam Na’ud Jawari Lacoum, We Are No Longer Your Slaves* (Arabic 1974)

*Ba’d al Hazima, After the Defeat* (confiscated by the IDF and, hence, unpublished)

Khalifeh's characters are a witness to women resisting the double bind of occupation and traditional patriarchy, often cautiously, always courageously, recreating the spheres through which they move, lead, and mother.

*Contexts of conflict and women's nonviolent resistance*

Barbara Harlow summarizes the arc of conflict from which Khalifeh's novels emerge, writing:

The decisive partition in 1947-48 of the mandated land of Palestine on the withdrawal of its British overseers resulted in the creation of the Jewish state of Israel and an ensuing multinational contest ever since over those territories that were to have constituted an Arab Palestinian state. The Gaza Strip came under the authority of Egypt in 1949 and the West Bank was annexed by Jordan at the same time; both areas were militarily occupied by Israel following the June War of 1967. (Harlow 115)

Each novel is situated in a proximity to the city of Nablus on the West Bank, post-1967. Harlow notes how the setting of Nablus allows Khalifeh to "review [the] history" of place and "remap the geographical premises that [its history] has entailed" (Harlow 115). Nablus is also unique in its mythology as "a matriarch . . . [who] despite all the years, she remained beautiful and fragrant with history. . . . She was a great love" (Khalifeh *The End of Spring* 180).

"The demography" of the first novel, *Wild Thorns*, features what Harlow describes as "the intersecting itineraries" (118) of its two main characters, cousins Usama and Adil, observing how each character's narrative or 'itinerary' is:

organized along another axis of 'inside' and 'outside,' occupation and exile, an axis . . . whose own fixities have been repeatedly undermined following the June War. . . . "One of the central features of the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip," according to Joost Hilterman, "has been a gradual integration of the economy of the Occupied Territories into Israel's own." (qtd. in Harlow 118)

Harlow describes the rippling social effects of this shift in the economic base as "the proletarianization of the Palestinian peasantry and the dissolution of the family farm and its traditional order" (115). What the juxtaposition of Harlow and Hilterman implies for the novel's

characters and the communities of people from which they have emerged is the fundamental philosophical question: ‘how shall we live?’ where the novel reveals how the moral question is un-separable from the physiological, ‘how shall we feed our families?’

Thus, personal and practical economics are political. The narrative exchanges between Usama and Adil in *Wild Thorns*, writes Harlow, “are implemented to critique the ‘master narratives’” (115), by which she means narratives scripted ‘outside’ Nablus and the West Bank that compete to impose political and economic goals on communities ‘inside:’ narratives that range from “the Zionist dream of settling a ‘greater Israel,’” to “a Western agenda of progress that inexorably enlists peoples and places in the service of its accomplishment” (Harlow 115), to agendas of Palestinian communities living outside the occupied territories—narratives that Harlow notes have “determined and suppressed Palestinian demands for a story of their own” (115)—or, perhaps, more accurately, ‘*stories* of their own,’ plural. Harlow writes, “the invaders are reidentified: the Israeli military occupation” of course, but also “Usama on his way to blow up the worker’s buses” (130), a mission scripted outside the Bank to be implemented inside.

*Wild Thorns* is situated between the June War of 1967 and the October War of 1973; but, the work is published in Arabic in 1976, offering a retrospective context of two wars that “ended in an Israeli military defeat of Arab armies” (Harlow 116). Thus, writes Harlow, “the narrative of *Wild Thorns* is driven by the combined territorial fissures and sociopolitical divisions that characterized the Palestinian struggle at that critical juncture” (Harlow 116). These ‘fissures’ within Palestinian communities and families were particularly fragile in the context of political uncertainty and cultural isolation. Sociologist Salim Tamari “asserts that ‘one of the major consequences of the war of 1967 was the dismemberment of Palestinian society from its “natural” cultural terrain in the neighboring Arab countries:’

Palestinians were suddenly culturally isolated, as Arab “books, newspapers and journals were no longer available in the West Bank and Gaza.” Furthermore, Israeli restrictions on people’s movement made their access to Arab festivals, theatres, universities, and cultural forums extremely limited, and Palestinians no longer had access to Arab films produced in the vibrant cultural centers of Cairo and Beirut. . . . however . . . this cultural isolation was not decidedly a negative thing: it forced Palestinian writers, poets, musicians, and artists to recreate new forms of national culture, forms that emerged in local colleges and municipalities despite Israeli censorship on publications and performances. . . . “Clearly, cultural isolation became an incentive for creativity and independence.” (Tamari qtd. in Saliba and Kattan 99)

These are some of the contexts of conflict and resistance from which Khalifeh’s novel emerges.

A Maternal Critical reading of *Wild Thorns* reveals characters seduced by authoritarian force and mothering characters who act to preserve, nurture, and create conditions of respect and inclusion for members of the community. These characters predict both the violence and the nonviolent resistance that will unfold in the next decade during the Intifada (1987-91). The story is “set in 1972, five years into the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories” (Hesse, “Imagining the Other” 169). This Maternal Critical reading encounters Adil, locating him in the maternal position, responding to the demands of vulnerability as resistance to the disorientation of imposed social change and community fragmentation resulting from the occupation.

### *Khalifeh, Wild Thorns*

The novel’s first point of view is that of Usama, returning to the West Bank after several years of working in the Gulf States,<sup>15</sup> and readers, privy to his thoughts of happy nostalgia, share both his anticipation of his mother’s cooking and his anxiety as his taxi approaches the military checkpoint. After the first quarter of the text, however, the singularity of Usama’s gaze is challenged when juxtaposed with the perspective of his cousin, Adil, upon whom so many in this vulnerable community, reeling from changes imposed by occupation, depend. From a position

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<sup>15</sup> Meeting Usama straightaway, many readers are inclined to see him in a “sympathetic light,” observes Mohja Kahf (451), a prefacing comment that matters for readers because Usama, a “deeply flawed male protagonist” (Kahf 451), resists personal encounters that are not on his terms.

alongside Adil, Maternal Readers begin see what Usama does not see, calling his perception into question. Usama fails to see creativity in women's kitchens where children are somehow fed, even as inflation makes food staples inaccessible; rather, he trivializes the communalism of neighborhoods whose residents share what they have with the others.

Usama's view is filtered through an ideology informed by years in diaspora, a view so preoccupied with "the glories of the resistance" (*Wild Thorns* 65), he is dismissive of people he encounters throughout the day determined to perform normality, to construct meaningful lives and community out of economic/political instability and disruptive army curfews. He does not read the men boarding busses at dawn to go to work in Israel where they are paid less than their Israeli counterparts and subjected to the insults of racism as courageous self-determination, their camaraderie in the café as solidarity, or their perseverance as resistance to despair. Suha Sabbagh notes that the "strong point" of Khalifeh's work is the manner by which she:

depicts the inner struggle of workers who must find a balance between meeting the financial needs of their families by working on building settlements . . . and their desire to assert national and individual rights. (Sabbagh 63)<sup>16</sup>

Adil knows this struggle; it is his struggle. Rather, what Usama sees is "everyone . . . smoking Israeli cigarettes [while] calls to resistance are met with cynical jokes" (Johnson)<sup>17</sup>—calls, it must be noted, that originate from 'outside' the West Bank and constitute the dominant, which is to say, newsworthy, discourse.

But a Maternal Critical reading, recognizes resistance in the daily practices of care, locating the maternal character, Adil. What is he going through? Adil is the eldest son, the de facto head of the al-Karmi family, feeding 9 mouths: his parents, younger brothers and sisters,

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<sup>16</sup> Mona Fayad concurs with this focus, writing, "*Wild Thorns* examines the choices available for the male subject to interpret and react to the Israeli presence in the West Bank" (152).

<sup>17</sup> Penny Johnson adds: "The cynicism comes from the gap between the rhetoric of the Arab states blasting from the radios and the chilling sense of isolation and betrayal felt by people under occupation" (20).

and, evidence of his dry humor, he imagines himself ‘feeding’ (funding, paying the bills, it comes to the same thing) his father’s kidney dialysis machine (28), managing the responsibilities that come with the old landed-family name, and about whom Um Usama,<sup>18</sup> and much of Nablus, says, “He bears everyone’s burdens, Adil does” (31). Adil is oppressed by the traditional family order that places him under his aging and disabled authoritarian father, but also makes him responsible for his father’s care and the preservation and nurture of the family. Complicating these financial responsibilities is the changing economic landscape that has undermined an agrarian society, forcing men across the Green Line to find work.

Adil’s struggle is defined by his immersion in the lives of the people around him, particularly the other men, who, like him, are consumed with providing for their families’ material needs: the demands of vulnerable children for food, shelter, and the social acceptance linked to a good education—Adil knows them all; he knows what keeps each up at night. Clearly, Adil is the story’s maternal character—in other words, Adil’s priority is people over ideological positions. But this doesn’t mean Adil is not engaged in the struggle for justice and this is evidenced in his devotion to his friend and construction crew mate, Abu Sabir. On a job where the crew has been hired ‘under the table,’ Abu Sabir loses three fingers on his right hand in a power-saw accident. Because they’re working without documentation, the Israeli contractor won’t call an ambulance. Adil lifts him into a van, ripping his own shirt into strips to make a tourniquet and bandages, then drives his friend to the hospital in Nablus, about an hour’s drive (49). Throughout Abu Sabir’s recovery, Adil advocates for Abu Sabir, supporting him in the lengthy legal battle over “compensation for unemployment and for the injury [he] had suffered . .

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<sup>18</sup> The mother of Usama

. [arguing] that compensation was a legal right . . . despite the lack of a work permit” (82). In so doing, Adil holds the Israeli court system to its own narrative of social justice.

Adil’s efforts may seem small. Indeed, Usama denigrates them as “insignificant,” justifying himself to himself with smug platitudes: “Che Guevara isn’t dead, Shaikh Imam! He’s still here, in this heart of mine” (*Wild Thorns* 82-3). Usama and Adil occupy positions of contrast between ideology that seeks to exercise its own power, and maternal practices that preserve, nurture, develop and respect the conscience of the individual. But Usama has not always elevated dogma over life—Adil recalls a sweet story of how when they were boys, Usama loved and cared for a little white lamb, and when the lamb was “sacrificed . . . for the feast, Usama had wept and refused to eat” (*Wild Thorns* 78). In spite of teasing, the boy had held to his convictions in an admirable display of conscience. What is Usama’s experience of violence? Certainly, living abroad, he has come untethered from the community and his previously close relationships. Readers are not left to wonder how this isolation has informed his narrative about his community and his role in it when he reveals to Adil his plan to blow up the busses that daily transport the laborers from the village into Israel; then what? asks Adil:

“Who’ll feed their children and clothe their wives? And when the women are widowed, who’ll marry them? If they remarry, their new husbands will throw the children out on the street.” (*Wild Thorns* 64)

Maternal Readers ask, “what will be the effect on the most vulnerable?” Ideological thinking is focused on the righteousness of its position, which is for Usama, “the glories of the resistance” (65). This is the standard by which Usama and patriarchal ideologies take the measure of manhood: “by his deeds of glory,” while Adil’s standard asks: “what about [a man’s] weaknesses? The harshness of his life? The rotten system?” (*Wild Thorns* 65) Material questions are maternal questions—questions of shared vulnerability that create and sustain communities

that critique systems of power and advocate for justice. Usama accuses Adil and the other working men of caring more about wealth than principles. Adil lashes out:

“Who’s going to fight the battle of the stomachs? . . . if you can only convince me that freedom means that people who can’t defend themselves go hungry. And that there’s happiness in hunger. Come on, convince me!” (63)

Usama resists ‘positional thinking,’ refusing to come alongside the position of a man with children who demand preservation—food, shelter, clothes. Usama illicitly conflates vulnerability with victimhood. Still, it is easy to see that he too cares about responding to injustice; that he wishes to do something, to be part of a grand narrative. This too is vertical thinking—where horizontal relationships seem too small.

Both Usama and Adil can see there are some in Nablus making more spending money than they’ve ever had the opportunity to make before as a result of working in Israel: Shahada is one of these. Once considered socially inferior to the al-Karmi family, here in the coffee shop, he flaunts his new wealth “with the superior expression demanded by his high status as a successful business man” (91). But Adil doesn’t pull rank: “Adil spoke gently . . . ‘Shahada, how are you?’” (91) Adil is not thin-skinned, not threatened by Shahada’s desire to show-off by buying a round of coffee and water pipes: “Adil laughed loudly and made a simple gesture of acceptance. ‘Well, since you’ve got plenty of money and insist on throwing it around, I’ve no objection’” (92). Adil cares more about preserving community than his own status, and his “compliment had its desired magical effect” on Shahada, or Abu Ahmad, as Adil respectfully refers to him (*Wild Thorns* 93). Usama reveals his seduction to hierarchy and power when he complains that Adil has “sunk down to the level” of these “ignorant men” (96). Adil responds:

“You and I will never understand each other.”

“Why? Because you’ve become like them?”

“No, Usama. I haven’t become *like* them. I’m *one* of them. I think that makes you more ashamed than angry.” (97, italics original in the text)

Usama, indignant over the men smoking and drinking coffee in the café, a place of mutual affirmation, says to Adil, “you, like everyone else here, have abandoned the revolutionary movement” (98). Where Usama has reduced the frame to an ‘in or out’ narrative of revolt, Adil is able to discern “more than one dimension to the picture” (29). Because his life-practice reflects what Ruddick has identified as a “cognitive capacity for ‘concrete’ thinking” (*Maternal Thinking* 93), by which she means attention to the material body—all material bodies, Adil exemplifies the ability “to multiply options rather than accepting the terms of a problem” (*Maternal Thinking* 93). In contrast, each of Usama’s conversations is an ultimatum; he thinks in abstract terms of heroes and losers, rejecting alternative forms of action other than his own violent plan,<sup>19</sup> indicating his buy-in with systems that perpetuate patriarchal forms of power. Usama’s mission results in his own horrible death and the deaths of others.

How might Maternal Readers respond to carry the struggle of the maternal characters forward? Fadia Faqir, reading Adil as the story’s “central consciousness” (1407), finds him “essentially anti-heroic” and “incapable of heroic deeds” (1407); but this dominant reading, however concurrent with Usama’s, is quite inconsistent with the ways in which the characters who know Adil intimately describe him. Adil preserves and nurtures the vulnerable lives of those in his community for whom he has accepted responsibility; their vulnerable struggle is his. Adil represents the resistance of maternal actors who are over-looked and dismissed by patriarchal societies that valorize heroic death. A Maternal Critical reading sees a life-practice of

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Usama fails to connect the dots when a woman he meets in a taxi has come through an Israeli checkpoint wearing a cast on her arm; but, when he sees her in the city later, the cast is gone (Khalifeh *Wild Thorns* 22-25). Johnson writes, “she is the real guerrilla” (20).

community-building, activism that “articulate[s] non-violent resistance” (Metres’ expository note on Rajah Shehadeh 105), activism that continues to invite Maternal Readers.

Though a Maternal Critical lens reveals characters who risk inclusive maternal practices, Khalifeh’s *Wild Thorns* was initially criticized because “it does not have a woman’s identity” (Saliba and Kattan 89). Indeed, writes Harlow:

whereas women remain critically marginal to the story lines . . . their positioning on thresholds, in doorways, at the outskirts of the novel’s scenes, indicates their emergent role as decisive agents in the recasting of the Palestinian national narrative. (Harlow 116)

This is the discourse from which the novel, *The Inheritance*, emerges: the question of the role of women in the Palestinian narrative of national identity. Harlow writes:

The issues of women and family, seemingly submerged and sidelined in *Wild Thorns*, but still foregrounded in persistent and disputed negotiations of the Palestinian question, are perhaps nonetheless writ all the larger in their very diminishment . . . The conflicting narratives of nationalism and developmentalism . . . must yield ground to the exigencies of that other narrative tension . . . the sexualized and gendered tension between a nation’s honor and its people’s dishonor. (Harlow 123)

The struggle for human rights for women that unfolds between these two works, *Wild Thorns* and *The Inheritance*, has been informed by the work of the women’s committees during the Intifada (1987-91)<sup>20</sup>, as well as the ways in which their contributions to the nationalist movement were systemically submerged by androcentric accounts of confrontation and violence.

*Contexts of conflict and resistance between Wild Thorns and The Inheritance*

In a collection of essays, *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, published in 1998, one year after the publication of *The Inheritance*, sociologist Joost R. Hiltermann reflected upon the activism of women during the Intifada:

women were called upon to participate in popular committees and trade unions, to boycott work on strike days, to confront soldiers and settlers, and to promote a ‘home economy’ of locally produced food and clothing . . . women were prominent in efforts to

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<sup>20</sup> These dates vary slightly, though most sources suggest the first Intifada concluded with the 1991 summit in Madrid.

monitor prices charged by merchants and to ensure compliance during commercial strikes and boycotts of Israeli goods, and especially in providing alternative education to children in homes, churches, and mosques after the closure of schools. Women were particularly active with the popular committees in urban neighborhoods. (Hiltermann 44)

The goal was an independent state in which women would have an equal voice, and to that end, “women engaged for the first time in collective political actions in the streets, occupying a space traditionally reserved, with few exceptions, for men” (Hiltermann 45). Hiltermann continues:

In the only clear effort at totally independent action during the uprising, the women’s committees began to establish women’s productive cooperatives in response to the food shortages caused by army curfews and the boycott of Israeli products. . . . Pamphlets distributed by the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees (UPWC) asserted that the objective of the committee’s production project . . . was “to build the basis for women’s emancipation by constructing economic projects.” (qtd. in Hiltermann 45)

In her “Introduction” to the anthology, writer and editor Suha Sabbagh reflects upon the political consciousness of the women and mothers who organized the communities, writing that:

as women move from the private sphere of the home and into the public sphere of the street, women express their willingness to question traditional values that require their exclusion from the political sphere. (Sabbagh, “Introduction” 22)

There was, however, no intentional agenda on the part of the male leadership to include women in the political structure; political scientist and activist Philippa Strum writes, “most men, viewed the participation of women . . . as an emergency measure that would be unnecessary when independence was achieved and the women returned to their homes” (Strum 63). Still, the women and mothers believed in the value of the discourses they had begun and of which they were a part.

Dr. Eyad El-Sarraj, founder and Director of the Community Mental Health Center and research Program in Gaza reports,

A new Palestinian woman emerged . . . with greater defiance, increased self-esteem, and a newly acquired political consciousness. For traditional women this moment constituted an unprecedented break with their traditional domain in the home and it pushed them into the political sphere of the street. (El-Sarraj 173)

El-Sarraj describes the elevated position of mothers in the eyes of her children, post-intifada: “they saved their children time and again from the clutches of the soldiers, and they found the means to feed their families in times of curfew. They have become the cornerstone of the family. The children of the intifada now look up to their mothers” (El-Sarraj 178). Observations such as these document the exchange between activism, mother-work, and perceptions of mothering.

Yet, “by 1991 membership in the women’s committees had decreased because of family and fundamentalist reaction against female political activity” writes Strum (73), adding other factors that also contributed to interrupt women’s full participation in society:

the inability of the committees to articulate a specific program for women beyond participation in production projects and cooperatives, the lack of progress in the peace process and a concomitant general questioning of the utility of political activism, and the demands made on women’s time by the combination of household responsibilities, child care, and participation in the drive for economic self-sufficiency through creation of home gardens. (Strum 73)

The frustration of women’s full participation in society and political discourses is one context of conflict in which *The Inheritance* is situated and from which the novel emerges. Harlow observes two contexts of violence against women: “the violence of the assault on women’s bodies by the combined forces of the Israeli military occupation and the domestic brutalities of their own men within the family and at home” (127); and, an added ideological insult: “the depredations committed against women’s stories by the rehearsals of the lexicons of love poetry and the rhetorics of nationalism” (Harlow 127)—discourses that position women in the margins of the nation-building narrative.

Still, writes Harlow of Khalifeh’s women characters: “the words, the voices, the stories, of women and their ordinary lives . . . might yet serve to breach that other partition, the traditional and much precedented exclusion of women from the public discourse” (Harlow 127). The literary connects the personal to the political. The emerging political context after Oslo I and

II (1993, 1995) suggested cautious optimism for a new era: infrastructure development and self-governance through the Palestinian Authority—hope that the Accords would mark the beginning of a decolonization process (Hesse 173). The women characters exhibit this fragile boldness—what does it mean to live an authentic life for herself? What, if any, are her obligations to family and society? *The Inheritance* is written in the tone of an anthropological witness to women's lives in an extended family; but, it is not a story of women's collective solidarity—rather, each woman character struggles to frame her own narrative, to act by herself, *for* herself. This Maternal Critical reading encounters Nahleh whose struggle to realize an authentic mothering self is never realized; though as the story unfolds, each character, women and men, will choose to respond to crisis either by constructing her or his maternal self—recognizing vulnerability and acting to preserve, nurture, and accept—or defaulting to an identity defined by a patriarchal system, sacrificing the maternal self to preserve ideological power.

Khalifeh's 1997 novel is situated in the fictional village of Wadi al-Rihan, in the “semi-rural northern part” (*The Inheritance* 105) of the West Bank. The novel's central characters are single women: Zayna and Nahleh, unmarried and without children; Violet, also unmarried, lives with her widowed mother, Umm Grace; and, the pregnant Futna, who, after the death of Zayna's father, is now a widow as is her mother, Sitt Amira. The women, though living in close physical proximity, never connect—that is, the women form no bonds of friendship; and, as the novel closes, it is probable they will never see each other again.

*Khalifeh, The Inheritance*

Mothers in Khalifeh's *The Inheritance* are ostentatious by their absence. The story's narrator/witness is the motherless Zayna Hamdan, born in Brooklyn, raised by her maternal grandmother, and now in her 30s, she's a successful academic (*The Inheritance* 19). She goes to

the West Bank in response to a request from an uncle she's never met, Abu Jaber, informing her of her father's deteriorating health: "come quickly before the thread breaks and you lose your claim to the inheritance" (29). Though Zayna's inheritance consists of several plots of land, she never visits the properties and the notion of her inheritance remains an abstraction. So, why does she go? She describes her quest as connecting herself, "the severed stem" (29) to her father's people—her family (33), and her desire to feel a genuine emotional connection (*The Inheritance* 251).

Zayna is both welcomed and charmed by her extended family's hospitality and their frequent observance of traditional family dinners, though it soon becomes apparent that, while there is no end to talking, there is no attempt at listening: each speaks in the code of his or her own theoretical standpoint, and no one is willing to code-switch. When the table-talk wears thin, there are no maternal actors, no one attentive to preserving community over his or her own agenda, though more than one character will act to preserve him or herself at the others' expense. The novel tells a story of un-mothering, of orphaning—a family of 'severed stems.' Zayna observes another metaphor: "the members of my family were merely detached pieces in a rusty chain. I had gradually discovered that their ties were not as strong as I had thought or as they wanted me to believe. Their relationship . . . was only symbolic" (127).

Nahleh is Zayna's cousin and the first relative she meets on arrival to her uncle's home. Nahleh is in her fifties, "single and unemployed" (31), though before the Gulf War, Nahleh had been a teacher in Kuwait—and this is the professional image others continue to have of her (*The Inheritance* 49, 149). In Kuwait, this is how Nahleh saw herself: she had meaningful work, she was independent, but perhaps even more importantly (to her, personally), she was both confidant and a mother-figure to her brothers (50-1, 158). Now, after having been "expelled" after the Gulf

War (*The Inheritance* 31-2), along with other Palestinians residing and working in Kuwait, she is back in her home village, where she has fallen into the daily routines of a traditional woman: “embroidery, knitting,” cleaning (32), making jam (33), and canning pickles (92)—routines intimately connected to married homemaking. This is the source of Nahleh’s increasingly bitter discontent: the feeling that, having missed her opportunity for motherhood, she has also missed her chance for marriage (*The Inheritance* 90), a feeling now exacerbated in a village that places a high social premium on marriage, where a woman’s worth is measured in terms of wealth, property, and inheritance within the marriage match. This is her struggle: to fit into the traditional narrative of womanly worth.

To be clear, Nahleh does not struggle to resist the traditional narrative of a woman’s worth. Why should she care about this value system? Isn’t she a modern woman? Shouldn’t she and Zayna become close friends? They’re both teachers, though Zayna’s life as a university professor, anthropologist and “well-known writer” (5) is more research-oriented, we can imagine they both enjoy a life of the mind. Nahleh lives in her father’s house, but she owns some properties and she has her own money (88); Zayna has a flat in Washington and another in San Diego (*The Inheritance* 19). Both are independent; both have grown up without their mothers. Nahleh went to live in Kuwait when she was just nineteen—in other words, not long after the 1948 war, returning to the village when she was fifty (159). She recalls, “when I returned to Wadi al-Rihan I felt lost” (159); but now, having been in the village a few years, Nahleh finds Zayna’s life shocking—she’d heard about American women whose lifestyles were like those of men (*The Inheritance* 32).

Violet was Nahleh’s “colleague and best friend” (34) in Kuwait. Now, Nahleh dismisses Violet as beneath her in the social pecking order (49); she is openly contemptuous of Violet’s

hair-dressing salon (49); and, Nahleh considers Violet's romantic relationship with Mazen, Nahleh's younger brother, indiscreet (50). Violet has, of course, noticed Nahleh's attitude and standoffishness, observing to Zayna: "Do you think Nahleh would conduct herself like me? I'll bet she would, though she pretends to be strong and a good girl. She too is guided by her imagination and illusions" (*The Inheritance* 106). Nahleh has, indeed, wrapped herself in a self-righteous aloofness that separates her from the members of her family and her community (47-52, 90), on the one hand, overestimating herself as an educated member of an upper-class landed family, while, on the other, devaluing herself because she is unmarried, demonstrating her unquestioning buy-in to traditional social norms for women. This latter frame of mind is baffling given both her long residence abroad, and the presence of other unmarried women around her: Zayna, Violet, and Futna, who have either refashioned the image of traditional womanhood for themselves, or flouted it with no significant blow-back, suggesting that working in Kuwait may not have been Nahleh's own proactive choice, but rather, a decision made for practical economic expediency. In this case, working in Kuwait may be further evidence of her buy-in all along to traditional norms that suggest as a female, she should make sacrifices for the family, specifically in terms of financial support. Reflecting upon her role, Nahleh recalls that she had:

lived for others, doing good deeds and showering her family with her love and affection. She gave to her family generously and promptly, never expecting anything in return. . . . She gave her homeland what she could, donating significant amounts of money. Once she even donated a bracelet worth two hundred dinars and never regretted it. She wept for the wounded, the orphans, the failed revolution. (*The Inheritance* 91)

Where is this sense of mission now that she is home? Why not use her talents in community-building? Are there children to teach here, as well?

Though no one in the family pressures her to marry or not to marry, Nahleh's focus is marriage; her opportunities for sociality, however, are limited—Violet complains there are "no

club[s] or any way to meet people” (107)—but, Nahleh’s self-isolation has further impeded her opportunities. Still, Nahleh’s isolation must be examined in terms of exclusion as her experience of violence. In this open space where no one pressures her, in fact, no one expects *anything* of her—though her father praises her on her wonderful quince jam (*The Inheritance* 33)—she is utterly bored (92); she is nearly invisible, and becoming more so. She is denied appreciation for her past financial and emotional support of her brothers, and now that she has returned home, she is denied inclusion as a valued equal in family decisions (96). Of her brothers whose educations she helped facilitate, three of whom now live abroad in Germany and the UAE with their wives and families (32), Nahleh reflects:

All my life I raised them, paid their debts, and said amen. I used to say to myself, ‘they’ll be there for me when I need them; after all, no one is safe, I could become ill; I’ll grow old, become senile, and they’ll be there for me in my old age.’ But here I am, with no one who cares about me. (*The Inheritance* 50-1)

Her disclosure, prompted by Zayna, reveals the toll isolation and exclusion have taken on Nahleh, who does not express her feelings openly with either her brothers or with other women who might have supported her; but, she does not cultivate them as friends. What prohibits this healthy vulnerability? Why not express her wish to be desirable, to be loved and valued, a wish both Zayna and Violet share? Perhaps, Nahleh’s isolation is not completely self-imposed, but partly composed of self-preservation: Zayna’s repeated experience of being pulled into confidences that are to be kept secret from the other women belies a social structure that more readily accommodates competition between women than facilitates their authentic coalitions.

Nahleh wants a home of her own. Might she conceivably construct this for herself on a property she owns, or with money from the sale of a property? No. Nahleh wants a home within the traditional/symbolic parameters of marriage and inheritance. What she wants is a villa surrounded by flowering vine-covered walls (88-9). Nahleh wants to be the envy of others (88).

When the smarmy, but wealthy, real estate agent, Abu Salem, flirts with her (89), even though he is “as old as her father” (159), she imagines herself living in this villa, making up for lost time: “she will make up for what she lost in the past and she won’t give up. If his children won’t accept her, let them go to hell. If his wife will be upset, let her be upset. Her father will go crazy, but why? It will be a legal marriage according to God’s commandments” (*The Inheritance* 89). Nahleh has not misunderstood the regional/cultural value-system. Saadu (who, by story’s end will be her step-son) says, “you’re worth what you have . . . and if you have nothing you’re worth nothing” (174). Nahleh accepts this logic uncritically, and by its standard, she doesn’t have enough—of course, by this standard, no one will ever have enough. This value system is recognizable to Maternal Readers in any consumer society where a person’s worth is measured by ownership; and, where ownership is power, the individual is obscured and, thus, exploitable. This value system explains not only Nahleh’s alienation, but the sense of being a motherless orphan expressed by nearly every character in the family. Power constructs vertical systems designed for isolation.

The ultimate power showdown occurs between two families when Nahleh slips away and, in a secret ceremony in Jerusalem, she and the realtor sign the marriage contract (126-9). Events quickly move from bizarre to violent: in the morning that follows the wedding night, the realtor’s sons—infamous thugs, known for “the number of people they had killed with their own hands” (121)—kidnap Nahleh, and her new-old husband runs away to Amman!

Two scenes that follow demonstrate how hierarchical systems predict exclusion, suffering, and conflict. First, there is a meeting of matriarchs, the realtor’s first wife, Umm Salem and Sitt Amira, who is attended by Zayna and the other women. Amira approaches Umm Salem on two common assumptions: that men who are always jockeying for power “complicate

matters,” while women (who are not?) “are more compassionate” (*The Inheritance* 144); and further, that mothers, in particular, pious mothers, do not participate in the suffering of others. Umm Salem is indeed known to be both kind-hearted and pious and, though nervous, in part because of their differences in social class (despite her husband’s wealth, she and her children rank lower than the Hamdans), she welcomes them. Amira states her intention: that Umm Salem’s “children would recover their shares and properties, while the Abu Jabers would get back their daughter” (143). Umm Salem’s pregnant daughter, however, is suspicious. The group learns two things from the “rude” girl (147): that wherever Nahleh is, she has stubbornly refused to “renounce her rights” (145) to her dowry; and, that Nahleh’s marriage has destabilized this girl’s world: “my husband divorced me when my father took a second wife” (*The Inheritance* 147).

Amira considers this new development; Umm Salem’s daughter:

would lose custody of her baby when he reached the age determined by the law. The poor woman would end up . . . without a family . . . and without an inheritance, all because of Nahleh and her marriage. (*The Inheritance* 148)

She is chagrined she had not anticipated this consequence in advance (148-9). Amira had been complicit in arranging Nahleh’s marriage because, like Nahleh, “she believed that the protection of a woman, her marriage, and her reputation were the most important things for a family, a means to safeguard its honor” (149), but now she wonders: “whose honor is at stake here—the honor of Abu Salem’s daughter or that of al-Hamdan’s daughter?” (149) Whose honor, indeed? Did Amira arrange this meeting for Nahleh or to save face?<sup>21</sup> Is Amira prepared to interrogate a system that frames ‘honor’ in terms of exclusion? A system that demands some concede to a position of dishonor? A system that has advantaged her? This is the struggle of each woman

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<sup>21</sup> In his short story, “Shooting an Elephant,” George Orwell’s main character discovers why despots do what they do: it is, he says, to save face.

character: how will she fit herself into the patriarchal narrative of female honor? What other choices does she have?

A second scene reveals the gendered violence of exclusion. Two Hamdan brothers assemble the ‘links in the rusty chain’ long enough to locate Nahleh, imprisoned in an abandoned factory (157). Nahleh, alone in the dark room with Kamal, the brother closest to her in age, says, “sometimes I wish Kuwait had remained what it was and I hadn’t returned here. I wish what has happened hadn’t happened” (*The Inheritance* 160). Kamal assumes she regrets her marriage and asks, “would you like to go to Frankfurt?” Nahleh “felt relief and joy” at his invitation, but the emotion is “a short-lived glimmer of light” (160). She responds that she has a husband “and a wife has to endure hardships” to which Kamal replies, “that’s nonsense” (160). But it isn’t nonsense to her—his solution for her is to divorce and leave with him when he returns to Germany, but she responds:

Do you want me to get a divorce at my age, what would people say? Do you want them to question my reputation? Do you want people to say that I married him for the inheritance? Or do you want them to say that I married him just to have a taste of him?  
(*The Inheritance* 160)

For Kamal, what the town’s people say is irrelevant (especially if you live in Germany); but, Nahleh can’t imagine who she would be living there. When her younger brother Said arrives along with the sons of Abu Salem, Nahleh is excluded from the negotiations *about* her. Three times Said tells her to “shut up” (167) while Kamal insists she divorce: “I want to save you from this rotten place . . . I want you to live with dignity,” to which she asserts, “my dignity is safe, my brother . . . thank God I’m honorable and I did nothing that displeases God” (169). Pointing to Said as proof that her dignity is contingent upon her status as a married woman, Nahleh continues: “if I’m insulted while married, what will [he] do when I’m divorced and single? . . . Each of you is trying to run my life . . . If I were divorced and went back home, you would use

me as a doormat” (169). She will not divorce, nor leave the village: “this is my life, this is where I live and I have no other choice” (170). Among the things she does *not* say: ‘this is my choice,’ ‘this is where I belong,’ ‘this is where I feel preserved, nurtured, loved, and valued.’

What the sons want is her dowry: power of attorney over her husband’s shares in Kamal’s water treatment project; but Nahleh, knowing her worth and dignity depend upon retaining ownership of her dowry, even under threat of physical violence, refuses (*The Inheritance* 171-4). Kamal who has given up the “beautiful idea” (173) of the project, gives all his shares to his sister, who gives her dowry shares to her husband’s sons, so each leaves the negotiation with a piece of paper, a symbolic piece of ownership in something that cannot exist without Kamal’s engineering expertise, and he—“determined to avoid working in an atmosphere of fear”—is returning to Germany (187). The youngest brother, Mazen, is angry: “you’ve exchanged the well-being of the country for that of your sister” (189)—in other words, for nothing. Mazen’s point of view contrasts the very notion of an equitable society, revealing the fallacy of power that suggests a sustainable society can be constructed on the suffering of the vulnerable. If the vulnerable one does not matter, on what grounds are any lives of value? More to the point, and it is troubling that Mazen, a former revolutionary, is not committed to this value, a just state emerges from a commitment to equality and human rights and not the other way round.

In the days that follow, Abu Salem returns (205) to offer Nahleh’s bitterness a new target—she is not living in the lovely villa; and, she will not soon forget he abandoned her (219). The narrative reveals how complicity in patriarchal systems aborts authentic caring relationships—even between members of a family. What prevents each character from making meaningful connections is her or his denial of shared vulnerability, denial of her or his maternal

self, and the pursuit of wealth as symbolic personal power. As Kamal prepares to return to his family in Germany, he reflects upon feeling “like an orphan,” feeling just as he had the day of his mother’s death (188). The entire story is the witness of an orphan, and closes with the question of who will care for a baby boy orphaned on the day of his birth (*The Inheritance* 251). This is a story of vulnerability: demands for preservation, nurture, and acceptance, but there are no mothers to respond. The response must come from within Maternal communities of Readers who are uniquely positioned to critique the exclusionary binds imposed on women from the combined forces of market-driven and patriarchal systems. Indeed, rather than encouraging the formation of a mutually beneficial ‘sisterhood’ between the women in this familial community, both systems in play positioned each woman in competition with the others for a guarantee of financial stability or ‘inheritance.’

*Contexts of conflict associated with Khalifeh, The End of Spring*

In its real-time narration, *The End of Spring* begins in the early summer of 2000 and spans the violent years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which began September/October of that year. The social “climate of disillusionment” (Hesse, “Settlers, Soldiers” 173) at ‘the end of spring’ 2000 could not more sharply contrast the optimism, post Oslo, five years earlier. The higher the hopes, the farther they have to fall. “Edward Said,” writes Isabelle Hesse:

has described this moment as a time when Palestinians realized that “there was no real peace agreement, only an agreement to keep Israeli hegemony over the Palestinian territories safeguarded by hypocritical rhetoric and military power.” (qtd. in Hesse 173)

When this realization clashes with the “belief that the Oslo Accords would mark the beginning of a decolonization process” (Hesse, “Settlers, Soldiers” 173), the result is violent. Both the novel’s title in English, *The End of Spring*, and in Arabic, *Rabi’ Harr, Hot Spring* (Hesse 176), are apt metaphors, on the one hand, connoting the end of the season when one anticipates new life, and on the other, the anticipation of a brutally long, hot summer.

When in July of 2000, the highly anticipated, on both sides, peace talks at Camp David between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat “collapsed” (BBC “Al-Aqsa” 1), Cambridge University’s Yezid Sayigh “lament[ed] . . . a great opportunity had been lost” (qtd. in Shuster 3) and that all sides had become even more entrenched, “unwilling to understand each other” (Sayigh qtd. in Shuster 3). Journalist Mike Schuster describes the stepped-up violence of the second Intifada:

Rioting gave way to guerrilla attacks and then to the apparently endless series of suicide bombings. Escalation on the Israeli side made use of tanks, helicopter gunships, and jet fighters . . .

Ehud Barak’s government collapsed, and Ariel Sharon, possibly the Israeli politician most hated by the Palestinians, was elected prime minister [in February 2001]. In late March, Sharon launched a full-scale invasion of Palestinian territories. (Shuster 3)

Part of the novel’s war-violence occurs in the close streets of Nablus and other parts occur in Ramallah, the Headquarters of the Palestinian Authority; confrontations contrast the exposure of Palestinian bodies to Israeli war machinery and soldiers who “stayed inside their tanks and their armored vehicles, and they dropped bombs from their warplanes and shot rockets into the alleyways from armored cars” (*End of Spring* 184). Hesse observes how the novel frames the imbalance of power, but also the image of Israelis as “machines” (“Settlers, Soldiers” 176), virtually faceless. In Khalifeh’s novel, Palestinian characters do not know Israelis except as soldiers or settlers; in the only interactions Israeli characters have with Palestinians, the Palestinians are perceived as threatening, exclusions that predict the violence of the story’s context. Johnson and Kuttub write that in contrast to the broad grassroots participation of the first Intifada, the second (Al-Aqsa) intifada was characterized by “new modes and mechanisms of participation and exclusion,” including:

a change in the style of Israeli military oppression and the phenomenon of Palestinian militarism . . . [that] created a climate of profound instability and forged a new image of

Palestinian political activism which marginalized much of society and women in particular. (Johnson and Kuttab 26)

In other words, the “forms of participatory democracy” (Johnson and Kuttab 27) from which the first uprising emerged and through which people shared in the struggle, are not engaged in the second, and people who suffer violence are mostly alienated from horizontal networks of resistance and support. In this context of alienation, exclusion, and violence, this Maternal Critical reading locates Fadel in the position of maternal authority, the tireless and solitary voice of advocacy for his small West Bank city, Ayn al-Mirjan, situated in a proximity between a refugee camp and a Jewish settlement, and a no less tireless advocate for his two sons. This reading leans into Fadel’s struggle to preserve and nurture his sons, to instill a resilience that will keep them grounded to the work of justice and national self-determination, a struggle that is contested and overpowered by militarism, the violence of war, and the seduction of power—forces that, ultimately, will take his sons away from him.

*Khalifeh*, The End of Spring

*The End of Spring* begins as a coming of age story of two brothers, the sons of Fadel al-Qassam, who pulled himself up from the Ayn al-Mirjan refugee camp, from selling newspapers to what he is now: a journalist whose op-eds are published in *Al-Quds* and owner of the Galilee Bookshop in the municipality of Ayn al-Mirjan. Though the novel’s protagonist is the youngest son, Ahmad, this Maternal Critical reading encounters his father, who wants to see the kind of “gusto” of self-determination that has characterized his own life, exhibited in his boys, Majid and Ahmad. “To make a living, you’ve got have *gusto*,” he says, “to survive in a difficult and harsh town like this one, you’ve got to have *gusto*” (11, italics original in the text). It is easy, on the surface, to read Fadel as an authoritarian character, as an archetype of machismo; but, Maternal close reading reveals Fadel as a deeply maternal character—attentive to each of his sons’

particular vulnerabilities: Ahmad's extreme shyness and Majid's obsession with his appearance. Fadel acts to preserve, to nurture, and in each of his sons, to develop "a capacity for independent moral decision-making" (Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* 120).

Both boys are a disappointment by Fadel's reckoning, but his response to this admission demonstrates his commitment to maternal authority: his disappointment leads him to interrogate his expectations and restrain his impulses to lash out at them. The story begins, for example, with a description of Ahmad, his only child by his second wife, Latifa: "he was an artist by nature. Everything he saw caught his eye. Every scene was a painting: a woman hanging laundry, a child playing, a cat napping" (2); his teacher reports:

"Your son is . . . the best in his class."

The father blinked and scratched his head . . . "but the boy is always daydreaming."

"Because he is talented," the teacher said. "Because he is a dreamer." (*End of Spring* 2) The teacher adds, "he might graduate one day and get a scholarship to study abroad," and the father thinks, "this boy, really? . . . He was always dreaming, always absentminded. Always half asleep and stuttering" (3). And so, Fadel buys Ahmad a camera—he will be the new photographer for *Al-Quds*. He takes the boy "up into the hills to take a picture of the town dump, because the new dump had become the cause of a new conflict between the municipality and . . . refugee camp" (5).

The boy's slow deliberateness as he peers through the lens drives Fadel crazy. When a dog suddenly appears in the zoom lens, "huge and close" (6), Ahmad "pushe[s] the camera away from his face in alarm" (6). Fadel is exasperated: "the boy had been frightened by a dog. That meant that the boy was very soft, very delicate. He needed to be toughened up and hardened" (6). He pulls Ahmad to him roughly, and turns him toward the panorama he wants him to interpret with the camera, "but when he felt his son's heart pounding under the palm of his hand, he

melted with compassion. . . . ‘look through the camera,’” he said, “taking a picture is like making a drawing. Look and take a picture” (*End of Spring* 7). This narrative excerpt draws a picture of Fadel struggling between his maternal self that wants to develop his son’s talent, to protect him and teach him to take care of himself in a dangerously uncertain world, and the traditional patriarchal-punitive role. The investment in Ahmad’s talent with the digital camera is repaid: “the picture of the dump turned out to be expressive and clear, full of life” (20)—even Fadel is impressed.

Fadel grew up in the camp “where he and his family had taken refuge more than fifty years ago, when he was still a young boy” (6) and he is prone to comparing his boys to particular clearly drawn memories of himself:

[selling] boxes of Chiclets, then the trays of *halawa*, then the newspapers. He would hop from one sidewalk to another, onto the streets, in front of the pedestrians and the cars, shouting tirelessly, “News! News! Fresh and hot off the press! Read all about it!” A few cents here and a few cents there until he was able to afford his first sidewalk stand, then the little kiosk near the mosque, and then the shop. But all through those steps and phases he hungered and thirsted and suffered in the cold and faced the neighborhood dogs and cats, and had it not been for his thick alligator skin he would be like so many others still waiting behind their sidewalk stands. (*End of Spring* 6-7)

Fadel has earned the deep respect of neighbors who agree “our correspondent Fadel al-Qassam [is] a man of principles” (4) who speaks truth to power, whether it is the army, the occupation, the PA, or, later in the story, a mediocre lawyer who comes back home to Nablus *after* the intifada to tell the traumatized survivors what they should have done (*End of Spring* 252-6).

His eldest son Majid, the only child of his late first wife, Shahira, is ‘street,’ not shy and awkward like Ahmad. Majid was a little wild one after the death of his mother, even after being taken under Latifa’s kind wing. Now he’s a student at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, and, like his mother, he is a singer—unlike her, the front-man in a rock band—a smashing waste of time as far as Fadel is concerned. Majid has come home for a visit and to ask his father for a pair of

Italian boots for a talent contest at the university that could launch his band beyond the wedding-singer circuit (57). “What kind of generation was this?” wondered Fadel:

He really wanted to give Majid a stern lecture that would shake him up and remind him that their country was gone . . . that three quarters of the people had sold chewing gum and stood in line in front of the UNRWA. (39)

But, these boys have heard “the tragic story of his childhood” (40) so many times it has become an eye-roller between them. On the *inside*, Fadel thinks, “Brats! Was this the generation . . . of the future? This generation . . . raised on pampering and chocolate. . . . Instead of listening to Umm Kulthoum, they listened to Mimi and Madonna” (40); on the *outside*, Fadel bursts out, “No boots, no nonsense, no idiotic talk!” (40) Fadel “was one of the Nakba generation, raised in poverty and revolution and the Vietnam War . . . What had he fathered?” he wonders (42).

In the end, Fadel will find a way to pay for the boots. Indeed, “his heart was not like his pen. His heart was very, very tender . . . and he loved his home and his family” (*End of Spring* 43). Throughout the story, the boys’ father exerts such an assertive character, it is easy to minimize his experience of struggle, which, as this description of his tenderness corroborates, has been defined by a life’s work of nonviolent resistance. Though Fadel’s assessment of “this yo-yo generation” (46) may be somewhat curmudgeonly, it must be admitted that Majid *is* superficial and self-centered. (Even his band knows they’re just there to make Majid look good, that he’ll do whatever he has to do to get a recording deal for himself, 70.)

Ahmad went to Ramallah with his brother, and during the show he was side-stage taking pictures. Fadel was in the third row with other journalists (68), and when Majid’s band took the stage and the crowd stood, chanting his name, “his father was struck with awe” (*End of Spring* 70). Fadel watched as his son interacted with the cheering crowd, observed the effect of the boy’s movie-star good looks, and felt conflicted, reflecting on a father’s perspective of the gap

between Majid's appearance and the young man's lack of depth, revealing his own commitment to conscience and his struggle to raise authentic sons. Following this high point in the family narrative—Majid a star and his brother, his documentary photographer, the story takes a bizarre turn that takes the boys beyond a physical proximity of Fadel's attentive love.

Nearly every day, Ahmad has gone to the hilltop to take photographs (21); this is where he first saw, and became smitten with "the doll-like girl with the ponytail" (21) who would become, in the following months, his secret friend (and his secret crush). Why a secret? Because Mira lives in the Israeli settlement next to the town with which his father has forbidden contact. He remembers his father's fury "two years ago" when he'd discovered Majid and his cousin Issa were working in the settlement and "he'd threatened to beat [Majid] and disown him" (24). "Working for the Jews on our own land. Isn't that just wonderful!" his father had ranted (*End of Spring* 24); and, Fadel forbade any contact with the settlement and with Issa, whom he considered shiftless.

Not long after his beautiful cat, Amber, whom he loved dearly, had gone missing, Ahmad returned to the hilltop—the first place he saw Mira and the last place he saw Amber—both to mourn Amber's absence in a quiet place where he will not be mocked for his tears (88) and to console himself by taking pictures. This is where he was when Issa called out to him from inside the settlement, from the other side of the fence and barbed wire (23, 25), and in the course of an uncomfortable conversation (he has forgotten neither his father's contempt for Issa nor the prohibition to keep away from him), Ahmad learns that his cat, Amber, is in the settlement—that's his first shock. The second follows immediately when he realizes Mira has taken his cat! (89), betraying his friendship and his love for her. Ahmad is deeply hurt; he's angry; and, he's alone in his contemplations. If only Majid were at home, he would know what to do—"he spoke

Hebrew and English;” perhaps, he could “go speak with them and get her back” (92). In his desperation, Ahmad goes along with Issa’s ill-conceived plot to rescue Amber from the settlement kennel late at night; and, not surprisingly, the plan goes horribly wrong: barking dogs alert the guards; and then, pandemonium—spotlights, sirens, “windows opening, and whistles blowing, and men and women [in pajamas] out in front of their houses armed to the teeth with cannons and machine guns,” and then he sees Mira—“standing in fear, wearing a little short dress with an embroidered hem. He started to cry in sorrow” (100). He is given no opportunity to explain and she does not come forward to say, ‘he is my friend,’ ‘I have his cat.’ In an Israeli jail, under interrogation, presumably he does try to explain, but “cats and dogs and the black and white panther” are assumed to be espionage codes. The official news reported Ahmad and his brother’s cousin “had undertaken a daring military operation and had been caught trying to infiltrate and plant explosives and mines in the settlement of Kiryat Shayba” (*End of Spring* 101). How Fadel’s imagination must haunt him; his ‘soft’ boy in an Israeli prison (101). Because “the long siege had begun” (101)—the Israeli response to the second uprising, Fadel’s credentials as a journalist that usually allow him privileges of access have been revoked, and like everyone else, he has been “prohibited from traveling between cities” (*End of Spring* 101).

I propose a thought-experiment: *what if* these were Maternally-oriented communities? *Imagine*: Ahmad risks his father’s anger and tells him he’s made a friend in the settlement and now she has his cat. Fadel will indeed be angry; but, he loves Ahmad and he will have pity on Ahmad’s distress over the loss of his cat. *What if* Fadel and his son approach the gate of the settlement to ask for the return of Amber the cat? The act constitutes Fadel breaking his own policy of no contact with the settlement, but he loves his child more than his policy. Is conversation out of the question on the part of the settlement? Perhaps not, Ahmad had, after all,

imagined Majid capable of a successful negotiation. *What if* Fadel approaches the settlement to speak with Mira's parents, to tell the story of Ahmad and his cat? As Fadel approaches the gate of the settlement, the guard, possibly young enough to be Fadel's son, will be both suspicious and heavily armed, and Fadel will be unarmed.

The power imbalance would favor the Israeli guard; and, though the guard might dispute the assessment, this recognition matters because discourses that do not make clear-eyed analyses of imbalances of power abort the reception of the narrative of the other, and reject the asymmetrical reciprocal relation. *If* Fadel and Mira's parents had been able meet on terms of Invitational discourses premised in mutual respect between mothers who preserve their children, this problem could have been resolved. *If* such a conversation were a beginning to building larger discourses that preserve, nurture, and respect the conscience of the other, discourses that recognize shared practices of mothering in the other—that recognition would prove itself in actions of redress.

Maternal discourses seek to replace 'othering' labels with names and faces of people who are known by their care, a goal of individuation and humanization that drives attention to how the other is referred to, particularly in contexts of conflict. It is troubling, then, that throughout the text, neither the settlers nor the army are referred to as Israelis, but consistently as "the Jews" (*End of Spring* 14, 18, 24, 29, 79, 127, 142, 160, 177, 181, 182, 184, 187, 200). Hesse writes: Ahmad is not angry with Mira because she is "a Jew but because she has deprived him of his cat" (Hesse 175), suggesting an intentional framing of this part of the story:

Through Ahmad's encounter with Mira, Khalifeh demonstrates that the Palestinians do not hate the Jews as Jews, but as occupiers and oppressors, dispelling the myth of an 'ethnic' and 'deep-seated' animosity between Palestinians and Jews. (Hesse 175)

Hesse cites Virginia Tilley: “Although Arabs are certainly not immune from anti-Semitism,” she writes, “Arab language against ‘the Jews’ reacts primarily to Zionist explicit promotion and privileging of ‘the Jews’ and to Palestinians’ expulsion and dispossession in favor of ‘the Jews’” (Tilley qtd. in Hesse 175), adding:

In her novel, Khalifeh criticizes Israel’s security discourse, which situates the “Arab” as a dangerous enemy to the Jews, even though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not have its roots in “ethnic hatred” but in a struggle over the land and the resulting colonization of the indigenous population. (Hesse 175)

Though Tilley’s parsing of this passage in Hesse is critically important, it is easy to see how the false term equivalence and binary of ‘Arabs and Jews,’ usage that may derive from the Mandate, may subsidize anti-Semitism, further underscoring the urgency of Maternal Critical discourses. This thought-experiment, however, concludes with no encounter between mothers, and in the novel’s unfolding—or unraveling—the missed opportunity for an authentic encounter between mothers predicts other ‘near-misses’ for building authentic communities.

Throughout the siege of Nablus, Ahmad encounters mothers who feed and preserve the vulnerable, who offer attentive love and encourage acts of conscience—ad hoc maternal systems; and, as a Red Crescent medic, he joins the ranks of those who help. In the political maneuvering that both characterizes and follows the siege, however, Maternal Readers witness maternal characters pushed into the story’s margins as discourses that preserve, nurture, and respect the conscience of the other—discourses that build coalitions for peace—are ignored by new structures of patriarchy that prepare for more strong-man violence (*End of Spring* 222-3). In the end, Ahmad returns to Ayn al-Mirjan; and, though he is an EMT, a healer, his isolation and disorientation suggest the extent to which he is, himself, in need of healing. Returning to find his parents packing up their home, which will be demolished for the new security barrier (240), adds to his dislocation and untethering. And then he sees her—Mira! She is among the activists

protesting the construction of the wall. “‘Is it possible?’ he whispered. ‘Maybe. Just maybe’” (239). Maybe what? Is there a chance for reconciliation, for reconnection?

The story’s final day begins with a fragile hope: Ahmad has driven to the familiar hilltop to take pictures (264); and, on this day, his lens is focused on the group of protestors. Not long after recognizing Mira among them, she is on the hill, next to him. “You stole Amber,” he says (266). It is a statement of honest vulnerability: you hurt me; you took what I loved and can never get back. Everything rests on her reception of his narrative. She doesn’t take the charge seriously. Her friend, Rachel, says, “apologize to him.”

“‘I’m very sorry,’ Mira said with a mean laugh.” (*End of Spring* 267)

Does she know he went to prison for trying to rescue his cat? Does she remember the night of his arrest? Does she have any idea what prison would have been like for him? Does she wonder what he’s been through? Mira and Rachel are rebelling against their parents’ dogma, but they, too, miss the real encounter that begins with putting one’s self in the subordinated position to listen, to take responsibility for harm, to respond and redress. The humble beginnings of building community may be too humble: they are less flamboyant than protest, and they call for a deeply personal and sustained vulnerability.

When the women return to the demonstration, he sees “his father through his lens . . . [sitting] cross-legged on the front stoop” of their now vacated house, refusing to move for the dozer; he “watched as the soldier kicked his father and he remembered . . . getting kicked like that is extremely painful, especially in the stomach” (273). Now Ahmad is in his ambulance, flying toward the scene—“like a rocket, toward the soldiers” (275), responding to violence with violence. The vehicle for saving lives has become the instrument for taking them. The last thing he hears his father say is, “Don’t, son!” (275). A resident of the town reports: “the next day we

heard what they said on the news. ‘Terrorism’” (*End of Spring* 276), a final comment that, by evoking the stock image of the ‘Palestinian terrorist,’<sup>22</sup> nearly erases the maternal character who tried to preserve, nurture, train and respect the conscience of his son. In Maternal communities, however, Readers imagine and hold the narratives of grief, the suffering of the mothers from both sides—it is from these discourses of vulnerability peacemakers build sustainable inclusive communities. Concomitantly, Maternal communities resist the violence of authoritarian systems that argue for force, premised in calls to meet violence with violence, while ignoring premises of shared mothering practices.

Anna Bernard offers this important analysis of Khalifeh’s representations of a terrorist in the first and final novels discussed here—Usama, who blows up the busses and Ahmad, who drives his ambulance into the Israeli soldiers. She writes, “the difference between the acts of ‘terror’ in *Wild Thorns* and *End of Spring*:

is that the first is an expression of political belief, while the second is driven only by affect. This divergence attests first of all to the sea change that has taken place in dominant constructions of Palestinian nationalism over the three decades that separate the two novels. Here, I am following Laleh Khalili, whose analysis . . . identifies a discursive transformation from the ‘heroic liberationist narrative’ of the 1960s and 1970s, which is part of the larger body of Third World liberationist thought, to the ‘tragic discourses’ of the post-1982 period, which competes with the prior narrative by emphasizing the

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<sup>22</sup> Melani McAlister writes: “By 1979, hijacking had already become a dominant international concern. Since 1968, a total of twenty-nine hijackings had been staged by Palestinian or pro-Palestinian groups, [and] while other groups . . . had carried out kidnappings or assassinations, for many observers . . . there was a particularly close association between Palestinians and terrorism not only because of Munich but also as a result of a widely reported series of hijackings and airport killings in the early 1970s” (182). Juxtaposed with these images of Palestinian terror was another image that, she writes, in light of the “disastrous final pullout of American troops in Vietnam the year before” (183), riveted the American imagination: the Israeli commando raid in Entebbe, Uganda, rescuing 104 Israelis, “killing all the PFLP-allied hijackers and loading the hostages into planes bound for Israel” (182-3). McAlister writes, “the Israeli action almost immediately entered the realm of popular culture” (184) offering the 1977 movie *Black Sunday*, “built on memories of Munich to suggest a nightmare scenario: pro-Palestinian terrorists plotting to attack another iconic sports event, the Super Bowl, where they aimed to kill more than eighty thousand Americans” (187) and “the Israeli hero” (187) who “saves America and teaches the nation what is necessary to save itself” (192) as an example of these persistent media images. (Note: Sunday afternoon, Jan. 20, 2019, scrolling through television stations looking for the KC Chiefs game, I came across a movie channel, a local CBS affiliate, running *Black Sunday*.) Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Print.

suffering and victimization of Palestinian civilians. [. . .] Khalifeh's change of protagonist mirrors this trajectory, in so far as it engages with the discourse of *heroism* in the 1970s and the discourse of *victimization* in the early 2000s. (Bernard 99, emphasis mine)

Two terms readily manipulated by patriarchal authoritarianism stand out in Bernard's analysis: 'heroism' and 'victimization,' terms that valorize the demand for a 'strong man' without acknowledging the active presence of maternal authority. Bernard observes that:

Khalifeh's change of protagonist simply emphasizes the degree to which the structural dynamics of the occupation have stayed constant, even as local and metropolitan discourses about Palestinian "terror" and resistance have metamorphosed in the post-1982 and post 9/11 periods. (Bernard 99)

What Bernard does not note is that which Maternal Critical activity in Khalifeh's novels reveals: that alongside the 'constant dynamics' of, and dominant discourses about, occupation and violence is another constant that must not be overlooked: the persistence of maternal actors who respond to vulnerability, recognize resistance, and build community.

Representations of maternal characters in Khalifeh's texts invite connections to the communities behind the characters and from which the characters have emerged, communities responsive to vulnerability's demands for preservation, nurture, and social acceptability as basic human rights and the basis upon which to build an inclusive and sustainable society. Harlow writes that, "the spaces of women's political and social organization must become . . . part of the very documentation that grounds the narrative of self-determination and the agenda of state-building" (Harlow 131); adding, that Khalifeh's novels, "begin to set the terms and elaborate the grounds for an alternative analysis and a critical prospectus of Palestinian political geography" (Harlow 131). Khalifeh's novels are part of the struggle for a peaceful and just society, and the paths through these texts that have led Maternal Readers to encounters with maternal characters are a witness to their remapping of 'Palestinian political geography.'

**Israeli writer Ronit Matalon<sup>23</sup>**

Ronit Matalon . . . is one of Israel's foremost writers. Her work has been translated into six languages and honored with the prestigious Bernstein Award; the French publication of *The Sound of Our Steps* won the Prix Alberto-Benveniste. ("About" *Sound of Our Steps* n.p.)

Matalon was the 2016 recipient of the \$1 million Emet Prize for Art, Science and Culture for Hebrew literature (Steinberg), having authored four novels, a novella, two collections of nonfiction, a short story collection, a play, and a children's book.<sup>24</sup> She has also published articles and essays as a journalist for Israel TV, and for the news daily *Ha'Aretz* ("Bliss"), some of which, those drawn from her reporting in Gaza and on the West Bank, are "embedded in [her novel] *Bliss*" (Hess 294),<sup>25</sup> demonstrating an aspect of the 'assemblage' that characterizes

Matalon's novels. Tamar Hess writes:

Her novels and stories continuously challenge the limits of their genres as well as those of language and narrative. She achieves her ends by including photographs and paintings, extracts from other authors . . . even gardening manuals. [. . .]

Matalon often flaunts a fabricated autobiographical voice, and thus conjures the intricacies of autobiographical narration . . . Vivid examples include scenes that appear in her autobiographical essays and repeat themselves in fiction. (Hess 294)

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<sup>23</sup> During the writing of this dissertation, Ronit Matalon died 28 December 2017, "after a battle with cancer" (Steinberg). The *Times of Israel* noted: "she was known as an important feminist and eastern voice in contemporary Hebrew literature, and a liberal social and political activist." Steinberg, Jessica. "Novelist Ronit Matalon, a writer of dreamy, stormy fiction, dead at 58." Obituary. *Times of Israel*. timesofisrael.com. 28 Dec 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Works by Matalon are listed from most recent to earliest:

*Ve-Hakhalah Sagrah et Ha-Delet, And the Bride Closed the Door* (Hebrew 2016)

*Girls Who Walk in Their Sleep* (play) (Hebrew 2015)

*A Romance in Letters*, with Ariel Hershfeld (Hebrew 2012)

*Kol tse'adenu, Sound of Our Steps* (Hebrew 2008, English 2015)

*Galut et pane'ha, Uncover Her Face* (Hebrew 2006)

*Kero u-khetev, Read and Write* (Hebrew 2001) (collection of essays)

*Sarah, Sarah* (Hebrew 2000), published as *Bliss* in English (2003)

*Ze im hapanim eleinu, The One Facing Us* (Hebrew 1995, English 1998)

*Zarim ba-bayit, Strangers at Home* (Hebrew 1992) (short story collection)

*Sipur shemathil be-levaya shel nahash, Story Which Begins with a Snake's Funeral* (Hebrew 1989) (children)

"*Davar, Masa*," "Madam Rachelle" (Hebrew 1979) (short story)

<sup>25</sup> "In 1988-89, the first years of the Intifada," writes Eilat Negev, "every week" Matalon crossed into Gaza and the West Bank, where her fluency in Arabic allowed her to "interview Palestinians for the *Ha'Aretz* daily" (Negev 151).

Matalon's female narrators insert stories recounted from memory between pages that often read like diary entries; other times, inserted pages seem have been salvaged from scrapbooks of old (sometimes missing) photographs and newspaper clippings. The effect of collage reflects her young narrators' processes of self-construction: projects that include grappling with what do with their parents and grandparents' stories of trauma and dislocation—memories of which the children are now the holders and keepers.

Matalon writes:

The fact that I am the daughter of immigrants but not an immigrant myself must not be obscured—that is to say: I am already someone who acts by force of a sense of place and of Hebrew, someone who is already a native inhabitant . . . At this spot—that of a certain ownership vis a` vis the language and the place—the domain of literature, too, occurs: the ability to tell, and in Hebrew, literature, especially prose, *requires a home*. (qtd. in Tsal 305-6) (italics original in the text)

'Home' is represented both as physicality and abstraction—structure, locality, and a sense of belonging—Matalon has experienced all of these differently than her parents. In an interview with Eilat Negev, Matalon says, "I have been preoccupied with my family and with the effort to understand the world through it" (Negev 150). Critic Naama Tsal observes, "Matalon's position in the Israeli literary scene . . . must be examined . . . in terms of a delicate distinction she draws between the category of Identity and . . . that of the *Home*" (Tsal 305, italics original in the text). Gil Hochberg frames this distinction (between identity and home) for Mizrahi immigrants in contrastive terms: on the one hand, that "'which was never a homeland but was a home,'" Egypt; and, on the other, "the new homeland, which was never a home," Israel (Hochberg 229).

*Contexts of conflict and resistance from which Matalon's novels emerge*

Both Matalon's family and her novels' character's stories emerge from the expulsion of the Jewish community from Cairo after 1956 and unfold through their experience in Israel as ethnic Mizrahi—'Easterners' or 'Orientals' in Hebrew: "Jews with origins in the Arab and

Muslim World” (Lavie 1). Anthropologist Smadar Lavie writes, the Mizrahim are both “the 50 percent majority of Israel’s citizens,” and they “constitute the majority of Israel’s disenfranchised” (*Wrapped in the Flag* 1).<sup>26</sup> Matalon asks, “if we are part of the Zionist Mayflower,<sup>27</sup> then in what way?” (“My Father” 2) To explore the question, she navigates between two sources: her father, Felix Matalon, and author and essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff (“My Father” 2); “both,” she writes, “arrived in Israel in the 1950s, were displeased with what they saw, and voiced their displeasure, each in his or her own way” (2).

Kahanoff’s literary works attempted to re-position “the term Levantine—from negative images of lazy Orientals reclining in tents, to a constructive agenda where East and West join into a vibrant culture based on mutually respectful attitudes” (Halevi-Wise 2),<sup>28</sup> an ‘agenda’ reflective of her own experience of cosmopolitan Cairo. Felix Matalon, on the other hand, “moved in entirely different circles . . . at the margins of” what his daughter refers to as “the seething cauldron of neighborhood party politics” (Matalon “My Father” 3). The difference in their two interpretive expressions is linguistic. Critic Yael Halevi-Wise observes, “unlike her parents and grandparents, Kahanoff did not know Arabic” (3); Matalon notes, “my father spoke, read, and wrote Arabic fluently, something that was not at all a given among the educated Jewish-Egyptian class to which they both belonged” (3). Matalon writes: “the relationship of

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<sup>26</sup> “Palestinians comprise about 20 percent of Israel’s citizenry . . . the remaining 30 percent of the state’s citizenry are the *Ashkenazim*, who originated in Central and Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish” (Lavie 2). “Overall, approximately 85 percent of world Jewry is Ashkenazi, but only a small percentage of them live inside the State of Israel. Conversely, only 15 percent of world Jewry is Mizrahim, yet a great majority lives inside the Israeli state” (Lavie 3).

<sup>27</sup> A way in which Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, whose grandparents or parents pioneered in agrarian communities, either *kibbutzim* or *moshavim*, during the Mandate and into early statehood, refer to themselves, borrowing from the American colonial narrative.

<sup>28</sup> The difficulty of this project of ‘repositioning’ the image of the Levant can be grasped when juxtaposed with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, who opined, “we are in duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values as they crystallized in the Diaspora” (qtd. in Hesse, “Black Jews” 101).

both Kahanoff and my father to the question of their own national [Israeli] identity—and especially to the Arab part of it—is treacherous and full of contradictions” (“My Father” 5). She describes them:

as ones who in essence were brought up without a mother-tongue, and who constantly moved from language to language; as ones who were raised within a multi-cultural colonial reality that both blurred and inflated cultural differences; and mostly as ones for whom the question of national identity was discarded in favor of the grand, alluring falsity of universal identity, citizenship of the world. (“My Father” 5)

Though their colonial up-bringing, writes Matalon resulted in a “blind spot regarding nationhood,” it was “precisely what made their critical readings of Israeli politics and culture with respect to the Mizrahim . . . possible” (5); that is, “as ones who originated from a place of mental and cultural heterogeneity, they did not cease to speak for heterogeneity” (“My Father” 5) as a preferred value and not merely an inevitability in a nation of immigrants. Matalon writes they “positioned [heterogeneity] again and again against the monolithic Zionist culture” (“My Father” 5).

The pervasive image connoted by the Zionist mono-narrative was canonized by Israeli writers known as ‘The Palmah’ or ‘1948 Generation,’ whose male protagonists portrayed:

the mythical *Sabra*, the native-born soldier boy.<sup>29</sup> Handsome, upright, honest, bold and hounded by none of the complexes of the Diaspora, he was always ready to die in defense of his home and the life of his “girl.” He was always ready to kill too, but whenever he had to shoot he would cry in self-pity, for of course he hated war more than anything else. Tough on the outside and tender on the inside, his hair was always blowing in the wind as he rode his jeep, part cowboy in a Western movie, part epic hero in a great Soviet novel. (Segev 290)

Behind the glossy macho image historian Tom Segev recounts here, urban historian S. Ilan Troen observes how the ‘sabras,’ “native-born Jewish youth” (157) signified a distinct and unique

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<sup>29</sup> S. Ilan Troen writes, “the term ‘sabra’ [was] applied by the end of the 1930s to native-born Jewish youth. [. . .] Ironically, the cactus, and its fruit, also termed ‘prickly pear,’ was native to America and arrived in Palestine around the seventeenth century, but it has been popularly considered indigenous to Palestine” (157).

cultural identity of Hebrew-speakers utterly “cut off from the European roots of Zionist culture” (158),<sup>30</sup> suggesting how “fundamentally Zionists did not see themselves as foreigners or conquerors. . . . In Eretz Israel [the land of Israel] they expended enormous creative energy to feel quickly and easily at home” (Troen 158-9). The Jewish immigrants from the Diaspora, writes Troen, “had reconstituted themselves as natives by successfully redefining themselves in that land” (159).

This is why, writes Segev, citing Ehud Ben-Ezer:

the War of Independence left a deep trauma in the mind of the generation that fought it. . . . Returning from the front, many of them felt alienated in the face of the profound changes that had taken place in the landscape, both physical and human, with the flight of the Arabs, the mass immigration and the stepped up construction everywhere . . . having returned from the war they were yearning for the land of their childhood. (Ehud Ben-Ezer qtd. in Segev 291)

The ‘alienation’ Ben-Ezer describes included nostalgia for the people who were no longer there—the Arab communities. The point not to be missed is that the sabra veterans of the 1948 war imagined neither multi-culturalism nor a nation of cosmopolitans, even as the national pitch promoted Jewish immigration or ‘aliya.’ Rather, they imagined both themselves and the Arab communities as ‘belonging here,’ as ‘rooted in the land of Palestine’ and they wished for a return to the communities of their childhoods. Anita Shapira writes, “the ‘natives’ [sabras] were hostile toward the new immigrants, who had changed the country’s physical and human landscape; they felt they had lost ‘their’ country” (259).

Enter, then, *la famille Matalon*. Ronit Matalon notes how the “abilities” of both Kahanoff and her father “to erect a Mizrahi perspective that speaks from a place of abundance, not contraction, that offers a global, not only a local vision . . . positioned them . . . against the ethos

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<sup>30</sup> Historian Anita Shapira writes, “the turning point for incorporating Holocaust remembrance into the ethos of the State of Israel came with the Eichmann trial” (265), adding, “after the trial young Israelis raised in the country began moving slowly but steadily back to their Jewish identity” (266).

of victimhood that dominated Israeli society (“My Father” 5-6). What Matalon identifies as an ‘ethos of victimhood,’ which includes a fear of victimhood, a characteristic of patriarchy, alerts Maternal Readers to its accompanying image: valorization of ‘the strong man.’ Felix Matalon recognized vulnerability in both the new Israeli State and its new immigrant populations, but did not equate these positions with victimhood. Expelled from Egypt, he arrived in Israel already excluded from the pioneering sabra narrative, but he also rejected it. He advocated (unpopularly) for “dialogue between Nasserism and Ben-Gurionism,” writing, “given the ethnic makeup of our region, such a declaration of war on Nasserism is a disaster, and what is more, such war is embedded in ethnic hostility” (qtd. in “My Father” 4). These were one-sided conversations on the part of the elder Matalon. The Mizrahi perspective, capable of mapping connections between state colonialism and intra-state inequality was (and continues to be) excluded from mainstream political discourses. It is important to note, writes Matalon, her father focused on:

a politics of systemic discrimination . . . and not a totalizing Ashkenazi plot. Never in his many publications was he ever tempted to reproduce the classic dichotomy between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi—this had seemed to him *a priori* racist. (“My Father” 4)

In other words, Felix Matalon critiqued the vertical *design* of the political system of exclusion. Others, however, such as anthropologist Smadar Lavie, whose analysis is included later in this dissertation, do read the Mizrahi experience through a lens of racism. This, too, is a context of conflict from which Ronit Matalon’s stories emerge.

Upon arrival in Israel, it was not only the sabra-narrative the Matalons were up against, but also, the stereotypical assumptions the sabras held about all North-African Mizrahim: undereducated (Shapira 242), unskilled, backward (Shapira 243), religiously conservative, and unassimilated in their Arab cultures (Shapira 456)—none of which applied to the cosmopolitan

Matalons. Segev writes that frequently Arab-Jewish immigrants to Israel “were met with dismay and hostility” (Segev 156):

they were assigned the worst and least profitable part of the country’s agriculture—in the mountains, in Galilee and Judea. . . . The rich, easily cultivated, soil in the coastal region and the south was given mainly to immigrants from Europe. (Segev 172)

Though Segev notes “there were exceptions” and some North African immigrants were settled in small towns “in the center of the country” (172), for the most part, “the immigration bureaucracy viewed the Mizrahim primarily as laborers and peasants (Segev 173), people most capable of developing the most difficult land. Though such decisions reveal obvious official biases, Segev documents rebuttals to charges of “an Ashkenazi conspiracy” (172), by those who cite instead competition for land tracts between religious and political factions, communities strictly bounded by a common narrative, practice, and language. Thus, the exclusion of people like the immigrant characters in Ronit Matalon’s stories who arrived without such connections or association is reflected on several levels: their placement in substandard outlier housing developments and their day and night struggle to survive effectively marginalized them from the social/political conversations that informed their lives—including discourses with, or about, the Palestinian communities in and outside Israel. Indeed, the military occupation which Khalifeh’s characters cannot avoid is writ large in Matalon’s stories by its absence.

Lavie asserts this exclusion was by design, writing that the Mizrahi immigrants, settled into government housing projects, were “cut off from their customary sources of employment” (16), thus forcing their “reliance on the bureaucratic infrastructure” (16)—reliance that was designed to achieve compliance. “The regime,” she writes:

endeavored to block any possible communication, and thus any possible collaboration, between the Mizrahim and the Palestinians . . . fear[ing] a Mizrahi-Palestinian coalition arising out of a common culture and mother tongue—Arabic. (*Wrapped in the Flag* 16)

The residue of this fear continues to be evidenced in the mutual exclusion of political positions defined by Left and Right that falls largely along ethnic lines and precludes “Israel’s majority citizenry,” the Mizrahim, “located at the crux of the binary Israel-Palestine conflict” (Lavie 72), from inclusion in peace discourses. Indeed, adds Lavie, “this same majority is completely ignored in any international peace talks” (*Wrapped in the Flag* 72).

In their real-time narration, each of Matalon’s young female narrator/protagonists reflects upon her upbringing in “a run-down enclave” of “families [that] came from North Africa” (Negev 147), situating, to some extent, each story in a community in the center of Israel that strongly resembles Ganei Tikvah, where Matalon herself grew up. Ganei Tikvah means ‘Gardens of Hope,’ but Matalon remarks, there were “no gardens and no hope” (qtd. in Negev 147). The single mothers in Matalon’s novels subvert the national marketing image of planned communities designed to receive and welcome immigrants ‘home.’ Matalon’s families experience no such homecoming; their stories revealing, instead, the violence of dislocation from ‘home’ as a disruption of mothering. In other words, in the context of dislocation/relocation, home as a physical place and mothering as physical practices are inseparable. The experience of dislocation, and its resulting social isolation, heighten the demands of vulnerability, while at the same time revealing how maternal authority to respond to those demands is undermined by both the lack of resources and lack of access to resources. It is no wonder Matalon’s immigrant mothers whom this Maternal Critical reading locates are preoccupied with making a home as a site for mothering, for meeting the demands of vulnerability, for erecting (painting, decorating) walls—no matter how flimsy—that offer a respite from the social exclusion and threat of homelessness that lurk on the other side. Recognizing the demands of vulnerability, and locating the maternal position in Matalon’s novels throws into sharp relief an authoritarian system that

rewards conformity, and oppressive bureaucratic structures that fail to support mothering practices, while castigating mothers for failures in practices. Further, the exclusion of Matalon's mothers, working at menial jobs and raising children, is also a study in missed opportunities for the community-building from which peace discourses emerge.

The narration of *The One Facing Us* takes place in the mid-1970s. The context of conflict from which the young female narrator's story emerges is adolescent rebellion combined with her temporary physical dislocation from her home in Israel—she has been sent to her uncle in Cameroon, where her 'otherness' is also dislocated: in Israel, with its "conception of Israeliness as European—and often 'white'" (Hesse, "Black Jews" 101), the narrator, Esther, is a 'Black Jew.' Here, in Cameroon, she is 'white,' inserted into the other side of the colonialist/ power ratio. This Maternal Critical reading locates Ines through her daughter's reflective gaze: Ines, a reluctant immigrant to Israel, uprooted, disoriented, and determined to create a home in which she is mothered and preserved in this alien place, a home from which to mother and from which she cannot be rejected.

*Matalon, The One Facing Us*

Esther, the narrator of Ronit Matalon's first novel, *The One Facing Us*, celebrates her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday in Cameroon, where she has been sent for an extended visit to her Uncle Jacquo Sicourelle, who left Cairo as a young man in 1946 to make his fortune in other, still-colonized, parts of Africa. Esther knows his story from faded family snapshots narrated by her grandmother, Nona Fortuna (7); she knows, too, that within a few years of Jacquo's leaving, that Nona, along with her remaining children and a son-in-law (Esther's mother is a young bride)—they too, will leave Egypt, packing what remained of a once affluent household, and follow Moise, the oldest

of the siblings, to his *kibbutz* in northern Israel. What does Israeli-born Esther, this wild child, care about these stories from the past? “They send me to Africa,” she writes:

to the magnificent uncle, maybe he’ll screw my head on straight, get me to settle down, if not here then there, what does it matter as long as something—if not the beef, at least the broth—the merest smudge of a notion of the patriarchal *famiglia* rubs off on me. (15)

A notion of ‘the patriarchal family’ does not succeed; but, from the distance of Africa, Esther’s mother, Ines, emerges from the pages of Esther’s journals, a project of locating herself in this new place that includes hovering over a handful of black and white photographs. The attention the daughter now pays her mother may be the young woman’s first maternal act—an act of preservative love.<sup>31</sup> That is, the photographs allow Esther to move beyond documenting her experience of being mothered, to imagining the person of her mother, to seeing and preserving her mother as an unrepeatable person.

Esther’s constant journaling makes her aunt, whom she refers to as Madame, quite nervous: “your niece . . . has a great many ideas in her head” (*The One Facing Us* 106) she sniffs to her husband; but, it may have been Uncle Jacquo’s early curiosity about Esther’s journaling (60) that inspired her to cast the net beyond an attempt to make sense of her present disorientation in post-colonial Cameroon to collect far-flung family stories, to construct her mother. It was through Uncle Jacquo that her mother met her father: as young men, her father and her uncle had been close friends. But the last time Jacquo has seen Esther’s father, Robert, was three years before she was born, when Robert, on a tour in Africa with his small entourage

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<sup>31</sup> Gila Ramras-Rauch writes, “the story is one of an Egyptian Jewish family and its decline and disintegration” (387); and, certainly, it is a story about fragmentation, of ‘things falling apart.’ I argue, however, that fragmentation describes the way in which Esther knows her world—in pieces, unable to see the ‘whole.’ From this perspective, Esther might be the agent of ‘things falling together’—writing characters who arrange and rearrange the elements of their experience, adjusting the distance of time and the perspective of changing relationships, creating themselves. It does *not* follow from the fact of fragmentation, that characters must be broken, or their relationships ‘disintegrating.’

of freelance journalists, came to visit Jacquo. This is how Esther describes her parents in these years before they were her parents: her father, she imagines, “vanish[ing] to some European capital and then to Africa, sending back newspaper clippings and little mementos” (65), returning to Ines, “draw[ing] money out of their bank account” (69), then leaving again. Esther writes, “Mother had seven abortions before I was born; she used to get rid of babies like they were kittens” (*The One Facing Us* 65). This is Ines’s profound experience of violence: the violence of repeated abandonment. And Ines’s profound dare: she takes a risk to respond to vulnerability from her own vulnerability, where she is untethered from systems that preserve, nurture, and respect her, in particular, a social system that prioritizes coupled domesticity. This is Ines’s struggle: she shares this idealized vision of coupled domesticity, a picture that also connotes social acceptability; but, her reality is single parenting.

Throughout Esther’s reflective narration, her mother’s desire for a domesticity that includes an attentive husband is contrasted to her father’s propensity to roam, where these competing desires are, each in its own way, a response to the vulnerable demand for social acceptability, which has been complicated by the fact of their immigration to Israel. The politically active father/wanderer is described at one extreme of the continuum where travel is resistance to an offer of social inclusion that demands conformity; and at the other is Ines, not an ideologue, but a pragmatist who has adapted to the reality of work and homemaking; preoccupied, in fact, with home-renovations that promote feelings of belonging and aesthetic beauty. Ines is not situated to imagine participation in the exclusion of others; rather, Esther writes, “she was constantly pulling up and planting, moving things from place to place. Her plans were hatched in the early hours of the morning, over her first cup of coffee” (*The One Facing Us* 144). Esther recalls a story of her parents’ arrival at Moishe’s *kibbutz*, where her father, refusing

to do manual labor, “moved to the city,” writes Esther, “leaving Mother behind. She didn’t hear from him for a year” (171). When he returned, speaking “flawless Hebrew:”

He took them to a *ma’abarah*, a tent camp for immigrants.<sup>32</sup> Within two weeks, theirs was a “model tent.” To Father’s astonishment Mother hung bright curtains, arranged flowerpots, sewed her own lamp shades, and weeded, hoed, and planted, taming the surrounding plot of earth and threatening “the bastards who throw their garbage everywhere.”

“It’s only a tent, Ines,” he said, trying to reason with her. She did not want to hear. “It may be a tent, but for the moment it’s our home.” (*The One Facing Us* 171)

The story of the “model tent” reveals a practical, tactile response of hopeful resistance to victimhood, abandonment, and fear of homelessness. Esther’s line, “leaving Mother behind” (171) points to multiple rejections: she has been expelled from Cairo, marginalized by Israeli society, separated from her brother, and abandoned by her husband. The model tent predicts the model home, or homes, Ines will put her considerable energies into constructing.

Later in her journal, Esther recalls this scene of confrontation between her parents: Ines observes, “You were seen sleeping on a park bench” (*The One Facing Us* 68). He asks to “stay a few days . . . until [he] get[s] settled” and she “brings blankets and sheets from the bedroom” so he can “make up the couch in the living room” (68). Ines has him up the next morning to help her landscape—when he is in her house, he will perform the kind of husband she wants: a practical handy-man! Still, what happens later suggests Ines knows Robert does not fit into the model of the domestic man who works in the yard when he gets home from the office. Esther

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<sup>32</sup> Shapira writes: “the *ma’abarot* [plural] were a world unto themselves, with which only a few veteran Israelis came into contact. They read about what was happening there in the newspapers. The articles described a foreign, frightening country: rubbish and filth, wretchedness, apathy, idleness, and a life of degeneration. Veterans looked at absorption difficulties as part of the suffering required to attain the Land of Israel. ‘When we came to this country’ became a catchphrase veterans used to justify the hardships faced by the new immigrants. The veterans had already endured their own hardships . . . the dramatic descriptions in the press of the camps and *ma’abarot* did not generate sympathy for the immigrants, but rather a sense of alienation and fear, as if the camps posed a danger to the settled country” (229-30).

describes the photograph that has sparked the recollection: “Mother is in the yard, quietly absorbed in the large bush with the broad unyielding leaves, trying up its branches, making it look like a spiky cone, like a bonfire” (69). The photo does not capture what happened next:

she tosses on papers . . . photographs stuck to the black pages of an album . . . Barefoot, she empties a bottle of kerosene onto the pile, then stands transfixed by the grand demonic conflagration. (*The One Facing Us* 69)

The fire, consuming pages ripped from a photo album, may suggest the rarity of the photographs in Esther’s possession, revealing this aspect of Ines’s struggle: to live, mind and body, in the present; to resist, to destroy, what is not in the present reality.

Robert’s comings and goings are *non sequitur*—in this story, he has returned and made a pass at chores around house, duties which he performs poorly. Ines knows he is planning his next move, but she does not know when or how he will leave—he’s the sort that goes out for a pack of cigarettes and doesn’t come back for a couple of years. Esther recalls her mother’s anxiety, revealed in her inability to sit, to share a moment over the cup of coffee Robert offers her.

Instead:

She got up, went over to the armoire, leaned her shoulder against it, and pushed. “What do you need these legs for?” she asked.

Not waiting for an answer, she disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a hammer. She lay down on the floor and began to strike at them. Four heavy blows and the closet landed squarely on the floor, legless.

Father mopped his brow with a handkerchief. “Really, it’s much better like that.” (33)

Unable to knock Robert’s legs out from under him, or to convince him that having ‘no legs’ really is ‘better’—either way, unable to take the suspense, she puts his bags on the porch. This glimpse of Ines captures her experience of abandonment, her struggle to preserve herself, and to preserve the nurturing home she has worked to create.

Esther returns home to Israel after 7 months in Cameroon (15). Years later, she will slip a few stories of her aging mother into the journal, such as the day she took Ines to meet Zuza, the American daughter of Robert's sister, in the lobby of the Tel Aviv Hilton. Zuza is a journalist, researching her 'roots' (*The One Facing Us* 269-70); she smooths a creased photograph on the table in front of Ines. Zuza wants to know everything: "Roots are a very hot topic in America right now" (271) she says; Ines is somewhat overwhelmed by Zuza's enthusiasm:

"Describe the family to me, Tante. The traditions, the holidays . . . everything." [Zuza]

"There wasn't any—I don't know—tradition. We were always eating from morning to night—we never shut our mouths! To this day I don't know where we put it all. Every morning these pushcarts would pass below our window." [Ines]

"I want you to try to remember what you know, what life was like, the people . . . Details are really important if you want to convey a vibrant, realistic picture." [Zuza]

"What was life like?" Mother considers. "It was very happy. We were all very happy in Egypt, much happier than here. We ate a lot, played a lot, did silly things. We laughed over every stupid little thing, Zuza, like children. That's what our life was like."

"That's all?" Zuza asks despairingly. (273) [. . .]

"Are you sorry you left Egypt, Tante?" [Zuza]

"Sorry?" Mother is surprised at the question. "No, I'm not sorry. Sure, I miss it—I miss it like crazy. But I'm not sorry. Our life there was over, Zuza."

"But your roots are there, Tante Ines. What is there for you here?"

"Roots, roots, roots. A person doesn't need roots, Zuza, a person needs a home." (277-8)

In Israel, home is her house; though in Cairo, the notion of home is a more expansive concept—there, reflects Esther, the family had "move[d] twenty times or more—from neighborhood to neighborhood or within the same neighborhood in Cairo" (*The One Facing Us* 21); there, home was a sense of belonging to place, or places, within both the society and the city. That is, because they *belong* in and to the city, not in a particular house, they have mobility within the city just as though they were moving from flat to flat within a large family compound. Ines describes life in

Cairo as effortless in the same context of children living within a house where they are preserved and nurtured—where the city, Cairo, is the mother. This becomes even more obvious when we see Nona, Ines’s mother, in Israel behaving as a motherless child—suffering, like Robert, the insult of rejection, expulsion from the mother’s house, Cairo.<sup>33</sup> This notion of Cairo as a large roomy house is collaborated by Kahanoff who reflects:

although we . . . would be dispersed in all directions [out of Egypt], we were quite unaware of it at the time. Our wanderings were still bounded by the margins of the Levant, and the routes crossing it were like the corridors that connect rooms in a familiar house. (Kahanoff, “Wake of the Waves” 137, qtd. in Feldman 2)

Ines is at a loss to compare life in Egypt to life in Israel because there is no comparison—she moved from one complete reality to another, a move that radically shifts her position within those realities.

Nona’s description of the young Ines in Egypt is light-years from the hardworking Israeli single mother; there, she “was the adored sister who was taken everywhere, a *basbousa*, a favorite confection. She had soft, smooth pinkish flesh like a baby’s, her voice and her gaze were clear, she stood impressively straight” (*The One Facing Us* 178). In Israel, Nona will lament to the child Esther, “*La vraie Ines* [the true Ines], I left her behind in Egypt” (*The One Facing Us* 249). Are those the pictures she burned on the bonfire? The Ines in Egypt? Now, Ines scoffs at the notion of an abandoned true identity; she is all physical motion in the present.

Critic Karen Grumberg hovers over notions of *identity* and *home*. Matalon’s “conception of place,” she writes, “includes a reconfiguration of home that is no less than radical in the Israeli

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<sup>33</sup> Of course, Egyptians call Cairo *Umm al-Dunya*, the Mother of the World. But I allude here to a notion I’ve derived from Richard Sennett’s text, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. To be clear, he does not suggest such a thing as a “maternal design” of a city, but he does suggest that how cities are designed both reflects and evokes particular values and behaviors. In his introduction to the text, the third and last in a series, he writes: “To care about what one sees in the world leads to mobilizing one’s creative powers. In the modern city, these creative powers ought to take on a particular and humane form, turning people outward” (xiv). This assessment seems compatible with a goal of creating Maternal communities. Sennett, Richard. *The Conscience of the Eye*. NY: W.W. Norton, 1990. Print.

context and indeed in any nationalist context” (49). Here’s why—Esther’s stories of Ines and Robert suggest:

that the experience of immigration is not, as the Zionist conception of *aliya* . . . would have it, an ascent from a lesser to a higher state or a means to the end of a decisive home. Rather . . . immigration is a permanent condition, a state of mind so intimately intertwined with one’s own personal temperament that it is not clear which informs which. (Grumberg 49)

Grumberg connects ‘immigration as a state of mind,’ to the migrations that preceded the Jewish exodus from Egypt to Israel (and elsewhere) in the 1950s, observing that “before Egypt” their parents had come “from places like Aleppo, Italy, and Lebanon . . . In the context of their multiple migrations, they find the notion of roots ridiculous and the concept of national identity simplistic” (57). What do these definitions mean for Ines’ own struggle for social acceptability and her struggle to create a place that preserves and nurtures?

Grumberg “proposes that . . . movement itself constitutes the immigrant’s place” (47); for Ines and for Robert, the “conception of the home [is] not . . . an end in and of itself but rather . . . a *means*, the point from which one can reject the dominant one-ness of ‘the rooted Israeli’” (48). From this perspective, Grumberg suggests “the flutter of constant movement becomes home” (52), citing a personal essay from *Read and Write* (published in Hebrew) where Matalon writes:

I grew up in a family in which people moved all the time: from country to country, from city to city, from apartment to apartment, from room to room, from language to language, from one family situation to another. Everything, all the time, stood at the pinnacle of some *process*: if they didn’t literally move from an apartment, or a city, or a country, they would talk ceaselessly about moving. If they didn’t talk about moving, they’d move inside the house—they demolished walls, built corridors, tossed furniture, turned the house on its head at least once a year, no matter in what season. The movement, the enthusiastic kick in life’s behind did not necessitate as might be imagined an effort or mental enlisting, to the contrary, it was stability that was conceived of as an impossible effort. (qtd. in Grumberg 57-8, italics original in the text)

“It is the process,” observes Grumberg, “the movement itself, and not the place, that is the object of these people’s desires . . . they move not in order to arrive but in order not to arrive, to avoid

standing still” (58). Grumberg’s description of Ines in a ‘constant flurry of movement,’ can be read as her determined resistance to self-pity and the pity of others; she evades the arrows of rejection, of dislocation, by her perpetual motion.

Ines’ dismissal of the need for ‘roots,’ however, is not a valorization of vagrancy—and this clear distinction may be at the heart of her obvious annoyance when she says to Robert, “you were seen sleeping on a park bench” (*One Facing Us* 68). Seen by whom? Esther recalls, “Mother made scenes: she wanted him [Robert] to be like everyone else, a person who fits in” (*One Facing Us* 172). Ines has an overarching concept of ‘fitting in’ which, however elusive, remains physical—it is a desire to be seen; to be known and appreciated. It is this physicality of Ines’s story which Maternal communities of Readers carry forward into political spheres where the immigrant person may be replaced by a statistic or worse, a dehumanizing stereotype. Ines’s story of physical disorientation, and her resistance to social exclusion, demands inclusion in discourses that build sustainable communities. Locating the fragile maternal position in the story throws into relief an inadequate social support system, an awareness that exacerbates Ines’s fear of homelessness and victimization, exploitable terrain for violence.

The novel, situated in the 1950s through the 1970s, was published in 1995, received into popular discourses at a time in which Israelis were thinking aloud (again) about immigration—this time, the immigrants were from the former Soviet Union. By the end of the decade of the 1990s, nearly a million Russian-speaking immigrants, “ten percent of the population at the time” (Resnik, Sabar, and Shapira 425, 428) had immigrated to Israel and, perhaps because of their numbers, perhaps because they were white/Ashkenazi, they ‘got away with’ refusing to absorb into Israeli culture as previous immigrant populations had been expected to do. They did not change their names to Hebrew names (432), they “held their Russian culture and Soviet origins

in high esteem” (Resnik, Sabar, and Shapira 427), and, rather than assimilating, formed “Russian cultural enclaves” (425, 439) in the cities:

They rapidly organized political parties that, after the 1996 elections, became part of the coalition government. They created a well-developed Russian subculture by importing Russian newspapers, books, and cable TV, and developed local Russian-language media. (Ben-Rafael, et al. in Resnik, Sabar, and Shapira 439)

Resnik, Sabar, and Shapira note: “this immigrant population [was] mainly secular and urban, with a high percentage of working women . . . and a higher cultural, educational, and occupational status than the average Israeli” (428). The plurality Levantines like Felix Matalon demanded and did not see in the 1950s became unavoidable in the 1990s due to the sheer force of numbers, education, class, and ethnic association of the Russian-speaking immigrants.

*Contexts of conflict associated with Matalon’s Bliss*

The real-time narration and context of conflict of Matalon’s second novel, *Bliss*, unfolds over 2 days in early November 1995, in France, where mother, Ines, and daughter, Ofra, have come from Israel to the home of Ines’s sister, Marcelle, and her husband, Henri. Henri asks his sister-in-law, “How are things in Israel?”

“Same as usual . . . lousy.”

“Do you think it will work, this peace agreement?” (*Bliss* 19)

Ines’s response refers to the angry backlash against the peace talks from the Israeli extreme right, whom Ines describes as “parasites . . . very strange people . . . I can’t explain to you the nature of this people—stupid, full of hate. People full of hate for everything” (*Bliss* 20). Though clearly on the fringe, it was hard to avoid the physical aggressiveness of these activists who, writes Anita Shapira, emerged among:

devotees of Greater Israel from both religious and nonreligious camps, and veterans of settlement in the occupied territories . . . [who] saw the [1973] war as proof of the Arabs’ resolve to destroy Israel and concluded that there should be no concessions or policy that might be construed as submitting to pressure. (Shapira 342)

The groups' "modus operandi" was:

mass mobilization of settlers, yeshiva students, and other students from the national-religious education system; use of the settlements' logistical resources to mobilize and maintain demonstrations; long-term protests; and illegal settlement with the help of supporters or quasi-supporters from the military and political establishments. (Shapira 345)

"What made this effort possible," observes Shapira, "was the religious fervor that . . . endowed . . . its supporters with extraordinary mental fortitude" (344) in response to authoritarian leaders who asserted that "now the time of religious Zionism had come" (Shapira 345). Twenty-four hours after asking, "How are things?" Henri announces, "They've murdered your Rabin" (*Bliss* 262). Journalist Mike Shuster writes:

On November 4, 1995, a young right-wing Israeli zealot shot Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin to death after a peace rally in Tel Aviv. The lone Israeli politician of his generation who seemed capable of making peace had been gunned down. (Shuster 1)

The tensions between the political Right and the Left are one context of conflict from which the novel, *Bliss*, emerges. Troubled occupations in Gaza, the West Bank, and southern Lebanon, where the Israeli army has been since 1982—along with the constant expectation of an eruption of violence, both internally and externally, are other contexts from which this story emerges. But these stories that dominate the news are also stories that Matalon's characters resist in order to tell their own personal stories of struggle—that is, these Israeli characters move to make a space for their own moral agency, resisting the reduction of their lives to the sum of news reports about militarization and politically motivated violence, conflicts that, though apparently avoidable for Israeli characters, are nevertheless present by their absence.

In *Bliss*, as in the previous novel, the mother character is Ines; and, it is Ines this Maternal Critical reading seeks to encounter.<sup>34</sup> She surfaces in the narrative of her grown daughter, Ofra,

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<sup>34</sup> My personal feeling is that the mother character in Matalon's novels, no matter the character's name, is the same character approached from different narrative aspects, though, interestingly, never through the first-person.

as a counter-balance to the girl's tangled friendship with the charismatic, but dangerously careless, Sarah. Ofra only manages to extricate herself from Sarah by unspooling stories tethered to the figure of her mother who, from the perspectives of distance and time, seems like an immovable fortress. A Maternal Critical reading, however, reveals another retrospective view: mothering from a vulnerable position of attentive love, a position from which the outcomes are never guaranteed; a position from which Ines, now distanced from responsibilities of child-rearing, continues to preserve, nurture, and defend the dignity of others. It is from this view that Maternal Critical Readers can imagine the scope of a missed opportunity for peacemaking: Ines, in her later years, acting from the experienced authority of maternal care, crossing forbidden borders, creating inclusive discourses from which communities that seek justice and peace emerge.

*Matalon, Bliss*

Ofra's stories of her mother are nearly disinterested, reverential, compared to the emotionally fraught stories of Sarah. She recalls a story of Ines and Sarah: Ines has been persuaded by Sarah, a free-lance photojournalist, to accompany her to Gaza: "on the way, [Ines] struck up a conversation with the [taxi] driver, Adnan . . . [who] wanted [her] to keep talking, whatever the subject—it had been ages since he'd heard such beautiful Egyptian Arabic" (*Bliss* 68). Ofra writes, "Maman glowed" (68), revealing both pleasure and pride, and suggesting an aspect of carefree expression that Ines does not experience in her daily exchanges in Hebrew. This comment reflects a small, but significant marker of Ines's experience of social exclusion in Israel, where her language of self-expression is not the language of her daily life. When they reach the checkpoint, they answer the usual questions, show the usual papers, then the soldier

looks at Adnan and says, “fifty-shekel fine for you” (68), because Sarah had been smoking in the taxi. Ofra says, “Maman was livid:”

“I want to see your officer,” she demanded. [. . .]

“There’s no officer. I’m the officer,” said the soldier as he tried to pry his sleeve out of her grip. “Calm down, lady.”

She didn’t calm down. She went and sat in the guard’s hut to wait for the “officer” like a person waits for a store manager. Consumer injustice, or what she perceived as injustice, drove her up the wall. (*Bliss* 69)

Sarah “tried three times” to pay the fine so they could “just forget about it and leave:”

“We’re not going to forget about it,” Maman thundered. “Justice is justice. The day they start fining people for smoking in taxis in Tel Aviv, then I’ll pay here too.” (*Bliss* 69)

Even after her children are grown, Ines’ experience as a single mother who worked two or three jobs and was often held accountable for her husband’s debts informs her sensitive perception of extortion. Injustice is a slap at personal dignity. Ines acts to restore the dignity of justice in this situation for the taxi driver, but also, it turns out, for the corrupt soldier, an act that is a social preservative, making space for the development of conscience.

Because this is the kind of maternal act around which Maternal communities rally, I propose a thought experiment: *what if* Ines and Mizrahi mothers were free—that is encouraged, valued, and subsidized—to engage in Invitational discourses that build trust and community with Palestinian mothers? Of course, Israeli feminists have been active in high media-profile protests; however, Lavie has documented how predominantly Ashkenazi feminist peace movements, focused on “the Question of Palestine,” have ignored inter-cultural structures that oppress and exclude both Mizrahi and Arab-Israeli women and mothers. She writes that “while Mizrahim and Palestinian Israelis seek to devote their energies to their own communities, Ashkenazi feminists have made a strategic choice to shift their focus to the Question of Palestine” (“Mizrahi Feminism” 61), a shift that has allowed them “to avoid sharing their power, prestige, and money

with the Mizrahi internal Other of Israeli society. Mizrahi feminists,” she writes, “see great irony in the contrast between Ashkenazi feminists’ emphasis of human rights for the Palestinians and silence on human rights for the Mizrahim” (“Mizrahi Feminism” 65). What would maternal/invitational discourses with Ashkenazi, Mizrahim, and Arab/Palestinian-Israelis look like? Must these internal discourses precede discourses between socio-economically disenfranchised Mizrahi and Palestinian mothers? (To be clear, Lavie defends a charge of class exclusion toward middle/upper-class Palestinian peace feminists, as well, citing how meetings between elite Israeli and Palestinian activists have been held in posh resorts where the conversations are in English—two significant factors of exclusion for women who cannot afford such accommodations, and do not speak English, “Mizrahi Feminism” 62). Let us imagine for a moment a wide tent—inclusive discourses that recognize shared goals of maternal practices in the others: how might such discourses impact the dialogue with militaristic power on both sides of the conflict?

*Imagine* Ines and other Mizrahi-Israeli working mothers like her alongside their Palestinian counterparts. It would be a mistake to characterize these discourses as the early Israeli state imagined them: as a subversive “coalition arising” (Lavie, *Wrapped in the Flag* 16). Though the Mizrahim account for a range of political positions, there are “good reasons,” writes Lavie:

for the lower-class Jewish majority of Israel to keep voting for the political right: . . . it was during the right-wing Israeli regimes that Mizrahi culture, as long as it avoided connecting its own Arabness with that of the Palestinians, embarked on a renaissance. (*Wrapped in the Flag* 58)

Other reasons for Mizrahi support of right-leaning politics include “the foundational role of the Zionist left political parties that established and maintained the intra-Jewish racial formations of

Zionism” (*Wrapped in the Flag* 22). Clearly, political identities are complicated; Lavie observes a strong “Mizrahi sense of belonging to the Zionist state,” adding:

while intra-Jewish racial formations divide Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, the theological binary classification of the world as Jews vs. *Goyim* (non-Jews, Hebrew; enemies, colloquial Hebrew) unites Mizrahim and Ashkenazim as Jewish citizens of Israel—the self-proclaimed homeland of all world Jewry in the midst of the Arab World. (*Wrapped in the Flag* 22)

Given these contexts, what sorts of Maternal discourses might we imagine between these communities? Robust. But, where Maternal communities focus their discourses on the priority of the vulnerable person, those discourses have a potential to deescalate violence to human bodies in particular ways that policy debates and wars of attrition have been unable, and unwilling, to do.

A return to the text reveals Ines has no time for these conversations. Ofra recalls her mother, working multiple jobs as domestic housekeeper and school cook, and herself, a latch-key kid, coming home where “a warm meal was waiting . . . on the stove” (101), bringing Sarah home with her to do homework (or to pretend to do homework). The forethought evidenced by the food on the stove denotes a more watchful eye than a working mother is often given credit for. Ines is not blind to Sarah’s influence; she can see that Sarah is careless in ways privileged children can be, for whom the consequences of carelessness can be diverted by lawyers and money. When Sarah decides she and Ofra should drop out of 10<sup>th</sup> grade and run away to Eilat (a resort city in southern Israel), Ofra sneaks out of the house before dawn with her bag. Ines, still in her nightgown, catches up with her walking to the bus stop: “you’ll wind up with no education . . . for *this* I cleaned toilets for strangers?” (96, italics original in the text). Here, Ines is an archetype of the “humble” position of preservative love described by Ruddick, who writes, “to

be humble is to have a profound sense of the limits of one's actions and of the unpredictability of the consequences of one's work" (*Maternal Thinking* 72). Ruddick elaborates:

Mothers identify humility as a virtue when they recognize in themselves the delusive, compulsive efforts to see everywhere and control everything so that a child will be safe. With "humility," a mother respects the limits of her will and the independent, uncontrollable, and increasingly separate existences she seeks to preserve. (Ruddick *Maternal Thinking* 72)

This moment on the side of the road reveals both the struggle and the humble courage of maternal love, the virtuous mean between control and passivity. Ines's unselfconscious pursuit of her child leaves a profound impression. Without resorting to threats of violence and/or an appeal to law enforcement, can she prevent the child from leaving? Suspense hovers over this moment. This is the work of mothering, where the outcomes are unpredictable.

Ines's younger sister immigrated to France with her husband after the War of Independence. The novel's telling of the present story reveals Ines's habits of maternal attention. Ines and Ofra are in Paris for the funeral of Marcelle and Henri's son, Michel; Ines immediately assumes a caretaking role, bustling about in the kitchen, cooking food for the family, planning for the meal that will follow the memorial service, when food becomes a kind of healing, certainly a venue for healing conversations, as well as a distraction when words become inadequate and conversation fails—eating becomes something to do with the hands and the mouth. Ines and Marcelle decide to walk to the market, a slow "meander" that does not hurry itself once they enter the grocery, as they debate the menu. The cart is full: how will they get all of their purchases home? Ofra describes the scene:

Marcelle pushes the cart outside . . . "where are you taking it?" Maman asks, amazed.  
 "Home," says Marcelle. "I've been wanting one of these for a long time."

They push the cart up the open road from the shopping center. Pudgy, graying hair, matching pearl earrings, and tailored skirts in navy and bottle-green containing large, wobbly behinds. Passing drivers look on with amazement; some of them slow down. . . .

“Henri should see us now,” Maman chokes.

“He’d have a heart attack on the spot,” Marcelle adds and lets out punctuated peals of laughter. (*Bliss* 42-3)

Later, Ines will give Marcelle “a facial with the mud mask she brought from the Dead Sea:”

She drapes a towel over Marcelle’s shoulders, tucks her hair into a bathing cap, and spreads the brown mess over her face, massaging her forehead, cheekbones, and neck in circular motions. Marcelle surrenders, smiling feebly. (*Bliss* 130)

Though Marcelle and Ines share sisterly confidences, their close near-misses are also intriguing. For example, Marcelle’s Henri is the sort of do-it-yourself handyman Ines wishes her husband had been. In the midst of preparations for Michel’s services, Henri announces he is building a shelf to install over the window. Ofra writes, “Maman is impressed. . . . ‘That will be nice, Marcelle, a shelf up there, so you can store all the little dishes’” (82). But Marcelle is not happy: “Yes, that will be wonderful, now we’ll have drilling all day and night” (*Bliss* 82). Maternal Readers locate the grieving in the responses of the mothers: Ines interprets the shelf as evidence of Henri’s thoughtful attention; for her, home-improvements are home-*life* improvements, and the shelf is a gesture of repair to their brokenness. For Marcelle, Henri’s project is a thoughtless intrusion on her grieving the loss of her son, and showing off her copper-ware will not make her feel better. For Henri, the shelf may be a kind of reminder of Michel, looking at it and recalling the day he installed it.

Marcelle asks Ines to help her “go through Michel’s things” so she can take them back to Israel, tapping into two of Ines’s strongest character traits: first, “she loves a good sorting out and tidying up” (243); and second, Ines is keenly aware of the needs of the everyday people around her: “There’s that Russian, the garbage collector. He barely makes ends meet. And then there’s

Fathi, the neighborhood gardener from Nablus. He takes anything—ten kids, he has” (*Bliss* 243). Nablus! An unavoidable intersection with Khalifeh’s characters, and evidence of the perpetual presence of exclusion and conflict, even in its explicit absence. Nablus in 1995, Oslo II: Nablus is in Area A, administered by the Palestinian Authority, will Ines see Fathi again? Ines mothers as a life-practice; given her own problems and unfulfilled wishes, she might have drawn away from the needs of others around her. Though studies in empathy are only beginning to explore this aspect of human behavior, it is clear that the experience of hardship does not always result in empathy toward others who suffer;<sup>35</sup> thus, this capacity in the character of Ines, to recognize the vulnerability around her and to lean in, is all the more remarkable. Further, this Maternal Critical mapping of Ofra’s retrospective narrative highlights the vulnerable suspense of mother-work, the unpredictability of outcomes in the moment, to reveal the tenacity of this mother’s attention.

*Contexts of resistance in the year of the novel’s publication*

Published in Hebrew in 2000, *Bliss* entered public discourses in the same year as the withdrawal of the Israeli army from Lebanon, 24 May 2000—a radical reversal of 18 years of security policy that was credited to the activism of a movement called Four Mothers. This dissertation asserts that the opening of the Israeli literary canon to women’s and minority voices represents a shift in Israeli culture that is a result of the successful activism of Four Mothers. Two years after the publication of *The One Facing Us*, Four Mothers, a women’s nonviolent resistance movement, emerged to demand the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon; three years later, when the last soldiers returned home, the movement was credited as the driving force behind this remarkable change both in public opinion about the occupation and public policy.

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<sup>35</sup> Derived from a personal conversation with psychologist Dr. Callie Gibson, University of Alabama, about her research in attachment and empathy, 30 January 2018.

The founders of Four Mothers lived in northern Israel, and this is one reason for the initial attention they garnered: “because movement leaders were parents of combat soldiers and members of northern communities subjected to Hezbollah rocket attacks” (Lieberfeld 325). The group’s founding members were:

friends, who in several cases had raised their children together, [and] had sons in combat units stationed in the ‘security zone’ in southern Lebanon occupied by Israel since 1982. In February 1997, responding to the fatal crash near their homes of two transport helicopters with 73 Israeli soldiers on board, the women jointly wrote to express their support to a small group of parliament members who had recently called for. . . [an] end [to the] military presence in Lebanon. . . . [further, the women] sought redress for grievances concerning the war, which they believed endangered their sons’ lives in combat while failing to secure their communities from cross-border rocket attacks. (Lieberfeld 319-20)<sup>36</sup>

Following their initial contact with MKs [Members of the Knesset], “the women had also contacted a reporter who had published a ruminative piece on the role of soldiers’ mothers in perpetuating the Lebanon War” (Lieberfeld 320), after which the:

reporter then interviewed four of the women for an article that, due to the Passover holiday taking place around that time, he titled ‘Four Mothers’ (referring to the Biblical matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah). (320)

Dafna Lemish and Inbal Barzel observe the naming of the group became its “most prominent” appropriation of a national/cultural symbol (153), and Daniel Lieberfeld writes:

Maternal identity, particularly maternal relations to soldiers, helped defend activists from attacks on their patriotism. Sociologist and Four Mothers activist Tamar El-Or (2007) assessed that, particularly in Israeli culture, motherhood “is so highly regarded. There’s nothing you can say against mothers, and there’s nothing you can say against mothers of soldiers.” (qtd. in Lieberfeld 331)

It turns out there were some things that could be said, and were, as readers shall see.

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Lieberman adds the women “had no prior experience in politics and were culturally disinclined to call attention to themselves” (320).

Lieberfeld describes Four Mothers' media awareness: "activists anticipated how allies and adversaries were likely to portray them and adjusted their self-presentation accordingly" (331), adding:

movement leaders . . . [knew they] had to counter the stereotype of hysterical mothers whose fears for their sons delegitimized their opinions on national security matters. . . . [hence, they] considered representations of protesters as openly grieving mothers problematic, since such women would reinforce the stereotype of the protest as irrationally or hysterically motivated. (Lieberfeld 332)

"In their media appearances," explains Lieberfeld:

activists also tried to calibrate their emotional intensity and give an impression of poised rationality; as [founding member Rachel] Ben Dor put it, to 'stay reasonable and calm, and knowledgeable, and not get *too* emotional.'"<sup>37</sup> (qtd. in Lieberfeld 333, italics original in the text)

Attitudes of confident reason were challenged "in media encounters [where] the women were pitted against political and military experts who would smile benignly, express sympathy for all mothers worried about their sons, and explain that the women didn't really understand security issues" (Frucht 2).

As Leora Eren Frucht wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*, 8 June 2000: "They were spat upon, called traitors, and dubbed by one army commander 'the four rags'" (1).<sup>38</sup> They were "described in terms of the voice of inexperience and irrelevant emotion . . . some blamed them for betraying the national ethos by demoralizing the military and causing actual damage" (Lemish & Barzel 156). Some opinion-editorials read:

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<sup>37</sup> Lemish and Barzel observe that "motherhood was often anchored as an irrational, highly emotional voice" (154). Ben-Dor expresses "mixed feelings over the choice of this frame" (154):

It's a double edged-sword . . . all along they characterized us as mothers . . . It's true, I am guilty of being a mother, but come on, come listen to what I have to say. Leave that aside! All the time they latched onto the female thing rather than to the problem at hand. It allowed them to cling to the motherhood issues and not go in depth into the problem. It afforded them a way to escape the problem. On the other hand, it was a-political, a mothers' cry . . . it worked . . . it touched people somehow . . . in their own relationships with their mothers, on the private level. (Interview, 21 July 1998, qtd. in Lemish and Barzel 154)

<sup>38</sup> He later apologized.

‘all these calls for withdrawal from Lebanon . . . cause terrorists to think that they can defeat us by putting pressure on us.’ (Rapaport, *Yediot Acharonot*, 7 April 1998)

‘they are dancing over [the spilled] blood,’ ‘they are Hizbollah’s agents,’ accused others. (Ringel-Hoofman, *Ma’ariv*, 27 March 1998, qtd. in Lemish and Barzel 157)

In spite of all this, Gadi Wolfsfeld, a Hebrew University professor of political science and communications noted: “the main contribution of the movement was to legitimize the public debate over Lebanon. Before they came along, debating what we were doing in Lebanon was a taboo subject; it wasn’t patriotic to raise it” (qtd. in Frucht 2). Lieberfeld concurs:

when the movement began in 1997, a large majority of Israelis believed that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) should remain in southern Lebanon as long as there was no peace accord with Lebanon. (320)

Four Mothers, “argu[ed] that the war was a costly policy failure and that ending it was patriotic” (322), drawing media, and thus public attention “to Israeli casualties in Lebanon” (Lieberfeld 322)—what Ruddick writes peacemakers must do: “provide an . . . account of bodily death” (*Maternal Thinking* 216).

“Motherhood was such an overriding meta-perspective attached to the movement and its message,” noted Lemish and Barzel:

it even overrode . . . the common stereotypical treatment of women in the Israeli media: nowhere in the reports was there a reference to the activists’ appearance, beauty or dress code, so typical of women’s portrayals, including those of women politicians. (155)

In a politically fractured environment, mothering emerged as common ground, though media emphasis on mothers of combat soldiers effectively marginalized minority non-Jewish mothers whose sons are not conscripted. Indeed, conscription had its own hierarchal component: the sons of Four Mothers founders and other Ashkenazi families served in elite combat forces, where Smadar Lavie notes the sons of Mizrahi mothers like Ines, particularly those fluent in Arabic, may be more likely to be serving on border patrols or at checkpoints between Israel and the

Palestinian territories (Lavie 71).<sup>39</sup> “Movement leaders,” asserts Lieberfeld, “emphasized their mainstream Israeli identity by deploying national symbols, both secular and religious, in service of their message” (328). They were able to appear knowledgeable because, in fact, they were: their educations, professions, and middle class status gave them access to information and to people who were well-connected to public policy.

Lieberfeld concludes: “scholars and journalists have credited the group with helping to precipitate the decision to end Israel’s military presence in Lebanon in 2000” (317), suggesting the group was ultimately successful in:

shift[ing] antiwar opinion from what political communications scholar Daniel Hallin terms the ‘sphere of deviance’—where it is rejected by the political mainstream as unworthy of respectful attention—into the ‘sphere of legitimate controversy,’ in which the question of the war’s costs and benefits ascend the national political agenda and becomes an acceptable subject of partisan debate. (Hallin qtd. in Lieberfeld 318)

In other words, Four Mothers insisted upon a conversation, what Ruddick observes as an attribute of Maternal Thinking, using public discursive space to transform ‘abstract’ war policy into concrete realities of suffering parents, deaths of sons, and, importantly, government responsibility for those deaths.<sup>40</sup> Lemish and Barzel observe: “motherly love and the . . . desire to protect one’s child are perceived in [Israeli] society as an essential characteristic of femininity” (148), but as men joined Four Mothers, it became clear that not only was the policy message of withdrawal from Lebanon gaining traction among both women and men, but, as I show in the final analysis of this work, mothering values were no longer strictly ‘feminine characteristics,’ but invitational practices.

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<sup>39</sup> Border patrols and checkpoints are associated with both mundane/routine duties, but also unique risks for random violence. Lavie writes, the Mizrahim characterize “the rank-and-file of the military” (*Wrapped in the Flag* 50).

<sup>40</sup> To be clear, Four Mothers did not challenge the abstract notion of ‘just war,’ only the injustice of continuing this war. They did not advocate for pacifism; they advocated non-violently to be heard on this issue and to have a voice in the policy discussions about continuing the war in southern Lebanon.

*Contexts of conflict associated with The Sound of Our Steps*

Matalon's 2008 novel, *The Sound of Our Steps*, is composed in parts memoir, biography, personal journal, and parts scrapbook. It is a story of a single mother written by her daughter, a story that begins with the child's dread at the sound of the mother's steps, steps that precede her angry re-entry into the house after a long day of working at more than one menial job. This Maternal Critical reading, focused on the demands of vulnerability, and locating the maternal position, encounters this particular single mother—*Had horit*, Hebrew, 'single parent, feminine adjective.' Smadar Lavie notes, however, the "term is loaded with meaning beyond the dictionary definition" (25). Rather, the term is used to connote "deviance" (36)—a mother who has not played by the rules, improper, wild. The condescending expression is *Had horit, du raglit*, "single mother, bipedal" (Lavie 35), like a two-legged animal.

Lucette, or 'the mother' as she is most frequently referred to in this intimate story in which she is the undisputed center, may be *Had horit*, but no one in social services calls her *mitbakhyenet*, "a serial complainer" or 'crybaby' (Lavie 111). Because she works two or three jobs to support her children, social services may not even know this mother; because the working mother's story is situated pre-Oslo, when jobs in service industries were available for immigrant Mizrahi mothers like her. Today, a single Mizrahi mother in a small Israeli town could tell a different story about work as the brief excerpt from Lavie that follows demonstrates, connecting Matalon's working single-mother character to working single-mothers anywhere.

Lavie locates points at which the Mizrahi mother's story breaks off from the mainstream Israeli narrative, how the Mizrahi mother's story, post-Oslo, migrates across the Green Line, where it may be juxtaposed to stories of Palestinian mothers who struggle to respond to their

children's demands for preservation, growth, and social acceptance. In this lengthy but important excerpt, Lavie writes, the post-Oslo 'peace clique'—comprised of both Israeli elites and:

the affluent Tunis leadership of the PLO that landed in Ramallah to form the Palestinian Authority . . . made major use of outsourcing. Factories in Israel closed and moved to places like Jordan and Honduras, leaving Mizrahim and '48 Arabs jobless. (8) [ . . . ]

The Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza were hit by unemployment as well. The Palestinian Authority created very few jobs for Palestinians because the PA continued to be a market for Israeli-produced goods. Israeli employers imported guest workers from [all over the world] . . . [who took] over lower-tiered jobs Palestinians used to do before Oslo. The workers were cheaper because they were not subject to Israeli minimum wage regulations. Plus, they were not likely to become involved in anti-Israel guerrilla actions.

The Oslo Accords also failed to halt the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Rather, because of the boomtime, the center of Israel—inside the pre-1967 armistice lines—became a high-priced real estate bubble. Concurrent with the Oslo Accords was a huge influx of Ashkenazi Post-Soviet immigration. Post-Soviets caused housing costs to skyrocket, pushing out Mizrahi families from the ghettos and barrios in the gentrified center. These families needed to remain near the center—near major employers and better schooling. Their best bet was to move a dozen or so kilometers to the east, into the large scale West Bank settlements less than a half-an-hour drive away from the state's economic core. . . . Mizrahim therefore became the main population to fill the large settlement expansions invigorated by the boomtime. (Lavie 9)

Read through a Maternal Critical lens, this particular story of a Mizrahi working single-mother's struggle to provide for her children is also a national story of misappropriation of resources on several levels: the failure to support these mothers, and the failure to recognize in these mothers capacities of community-building *if* given opportunities and resources to do so. The non-linear recollections—each story like a bead on a thread—are the work of the child, her struggle to connect to the mother. This mother's story is the story of *work*. This working immigrant mother's story is, in its telling, its own resistance to the violence of social marginalization.

*Matalon, The Sound of Our Steps*

*The Sound of Our Steps* begins with the sound of **her** steps, late in the evening: the mother returns from a long day's working at more than one job. The child, Toni, describes

listening for the sound of her steps, for the entry of the mother, “starved after long hungry hours of not-home” (2). Long hours of ‘not-home’ are hours of invisibility, of being a problem or a solution to someone else’s problem. The single mother’s struggle to manage multiple low-paying jobs to support her children may appear domestic, which is to say, non-political; but, when close-read through a Maternal Lens, it is clear the single mother’s struggle is not disconnected from bureaucratic systems where single mothers are often seen as ‘problems.’ Receiving the character through this lens challenges the authoritarian problem-solution paradigm by shifting attention to building inclusive conversations and identifying exclusion as predictor of conflict. Maternal Critics ask, “is this single mother part of a community conversation about the demands of vulnerable children?” The question highlights the mother’s social isolation.

The storyteller repeatedly reminds the reader: “she was the house” (3), entering the house was reclaiming herself; when things were out of place, she was in disarray. The children, sprawled on the sofa—books, clothes, or empty dishes on the floor, appear oblivious to the salon’s disarray until they hear the sound of her steps:

Even before she put down her bag, she stood with it in the hallway, her eyes narrowed, jaw clenched, collecting evidence, coming up with evidence of collapse, of breakdown, of the chaos of our home’s disintegration. All the evidence confirmed it. She was the house. (2-3) [. . .]

“This is what she yelled: ‘It’s the end of the world.’” (*Sound of Our Steps* 4)

Maternal Critical readers hear vulnerability in the utterance, acknowledge her long workday as resistance, an insistence to live, and a refusal to be erased. In her approach to the house, she saw “the thirsty lawn, the shriveled rose beds. Their dryness was her parched mouth” (5). The mother struggles against her own exhaustion. There is no one with whom to diffuse the concern of the house’s preservation, or to share in the battle against its disintegration; no one else who feels the risk. Her struggle is a demand for preservation, but also for a nurturing maternal community.

That was the first entrance, writes the child. “Her second entrance, her true arrival” came later when “she sat down on a kitchen stool, took off her shoes, dipped a piece of bread into tea with milk” (*Sound of Our Steps* 6):

She is most a mother when she’s drinking tea with milk, dunking a slice of yesterday’s dry bread in it, fishing out the soggy bits of bread with her fingers. Tea with milk gives her a sense of the true proportions of what she has and, mainly, what she doesn’t have. She admires austere modesty, but as a matter of style, not substance. (7)

Where ‘she is most a mother’ is a moment in which she feels nurtured; and, in this moment, her own sense of self emerges—her sense of sleek minimalist style. Rather than allowing her ‘self’ to be erased, in this moment of self-mothering she emerges to recalibrate, measure, confer value, and resist the violence of systems that devalue her.

The child assesses the mother: “at the heart of her intense panic was her wounded consciousness of the fragility, the flimsiness of the home, the shack: the wood, the thin plywood walls, the materials that could be consumed [by fire] in a second” (*Sound of Our Steps* 31). No agency registers the mother’s demands for basic rights of security, safety, and the dignity of privacy—no notes are taken about the ‘flimsy’ temporary plywood walls that mock her ‘panic.’ ‘The shack’ is both a descriptive observation and a normative assessment of government housing and social support systems, the absence of a supportive community, and not the least, her own body, susceptible to injury and destruction—her skin, these walls, do not suffice.

The mother’s hands are the hands “of a laborer” (*Sound of Our Steps* 17)—for the mother, the physicality of putting one’s hands into a thing signaled the virtue of heart and soul commitment: “she *was* the work” (18). That is, she was the work of her hands, of putting things as they should be—even a few days before her death, in hospital, her grown daughter finds her sorting through the “metal hospital locker” whose hinges needed oiling. She sends Toni to the cafeteria to fetch cooking oil in a cup: “she dipped a tissue in it and oiled the hinges, opening and

closing the locker door: ‘You see?’ she crowed” (*Sound of Our Steps* 118). The mother is all physical work with her hands, digging in up to her elbows. It becomes evident that this is how she both expresses and receives attentive love. Though the child, creating a record of the mother’s work, feels, mostly, the daily monotony: “the sound of her steps every night, night after night, for years” (4)—Maternal Readers grasp the mother’s persistence.

“There were three of us in the shack: my big brother, my big sister, and me. She didn’t count, she was the shack” (*The Sound of Our Steps* 27, 33); elaborated again, with an addendum: “there were three of them in the shack: the big brother, the big sister, and the child. The mother didn’t count, she was the shack; the shack didn’t have a man in it, so she became the man” (94). The child’s narrative nearly erases the person of the mother: she is the work, she is the shack, she is the man; she becomes whatever is demanded for their preservation. The child records how the mother would slip from her bedroom “to the couch:”

in the middle of the night after she had stopped waiting for Sammy or Corinne [the child’s older siblings], and the shack finally sank into its essential silence, which she loved so much . . . then and only then she could hear the beating of its heart, when she was by herself, inside the walls . . . undisturbed. (*Sound of Our Steps* 174)

This image of maternal authority, in its satisfaction—the children accounted for—is nearly sovereignty. There is a paradox here: what she loves so much is the silence of the house after it is full; presumably, the house was also silent when it was empty, but this is not the silence the mother loves. Only in the full silence can she hear her beating heart. From near erasure, from the demands made upon her, this picture of maternal sovereignty emerges: the shack, castle of her own creative energies, at rest.

Still, Maternal Critics must grapple with this question: has mother-work had a prohibitive effect on her own self-actualization? Ruddick writes, “the ideology of motherhood is oppressive to women. It defines maternal work as a consuming identity requiring sacrifices of health,

pleasure, and ambitions unnecessary for the well-being of children” (*Maternal Criticism* 29, italics original in the text). What Ruddick observes is the myth discussed previously, generated by patriarchal societies, that is detrimental not only to mothers but also children who are perceived as a “burden” (de Beauvoir 515)—but more than myth, it is a system that undervalues single mothers and their children, limits their professional and social advancement, undermines their sense of belonging and security, and ignores their demands for basic needs.

This picture of anxiety that resolves in rest, raises questions about mothering and pleasure, ambition, and creativity—do children subtract these qualities from the mother or do they generate these qualities in the mother? Lucette is presented as a creative attentive force, energies that appear fueled by mothering that defies the low expectations the state has for her and her children. Civil rights activist, feminist, and musician Bernice Johnson Reagon asserts, “we can choose to be mothers, nurturing and transforming a new space for new people in a new time” (qtd. in Ruddick 57). This claim as a caption for the physicality of Lucette’s mother-work suggests a further contrast: authority creates—authoritarianism is utterly redundant. The narrator writes:

The room that was the living room seemed to be holding something, guarding the light that was shining on us indirectly, bringing exactly the right warmth of here and now . . . There we sat, close together, in the only space in the shack that was free of the rubble of the building site that was the shack: the mother was renovating, again, again she turned the house upside down to make it even more of a home. (*Sound of Our Steps* 193)

The mother tells her own story in physical work; mothering is not an abstraction. Here is a point not to be missed: the work of preservation and nurture of bodies, of real people requires physical *place*. This mother struggles to transform her vision of beauty and order into a physically tactile reality.

The narrator, “*el bint*, the child, the eternal third person” (27)—parses the mother’s philosophy of work that is also self-construction:

She divided the human race into people who threw things out and people who didn’t, who wallowed. The ones who threw things out were positive, optimistic, industrious, straightforward, clean inside and out, and full of consideration for others, not imposing their ‘mess’ and torment. The non-throwers were the opposite: dreamy, lax, lazy, clinging, ‘sitting on their souls,’ muddy and muddying and missing the most important thing in life, clarity. (*Sound of Our Steps* 114)

The physical acts of sorting, cleaning, organizing, qualifying—these are acts of a ‘clean’ soul:

She never tired or despaired of this work of coordination between her outer and inner selves, of the indefatigable striving for a material reality whose features represented, with the greatest accuracy, the changing landscapes of her mind. (*Sound of Our Steps* 115)

Of course, the “quiet and clarity” (115) that followed the spectacle of “tidying up” (114), was often followed by second thoughts that would find her the next morning “rummaging in the bundles . . . to salvage and retrieve things that had been restored to grace during the conflict of the night” (116)—an experience familiar to anyone who has at turns envied and loathed Marie Kondo.<sup>41</sup>

The work is personal: Lucette’s vision for the home is a vision of herself. But a closer Maternal reading reveals Lucette, herself, alone. The child records no Shabbat dinners, no tea with friends, no community. Lucette is alone. What is it about the house/herself that precludes sociality? Will *this* renovation result in social acceptance? Lucette’s work is both a demand for social acceptance and resistance to her experience of social exclusion, constructing a house where she belongs. The narrator reflects:

perhaps it was not the house itself that she guarded, or the household objects and their arrangement, but the idea of the house that she pored over and over dozens if not hundreds of times, tested again and again the hope, the hope of home. (*Sound of Our Steps* 5)

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<sup>41</sup> Marie Kondo is founder of the KonMari Method for “decluttering” and “tidying,” practices she asserts are essential to cultivating joy. She is author of four books and star of her own 2019 Netflix series, “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo.”

‘The idea of the house’ may be read as ‘the ideal home,’ where the mother’s struggle may be read as a struggle for acceptance for herself and her children; a struggle to embrace beauty in the messiness of real life—of *her* life, in a mediated world that sells an impossible image of the perfect home, created by the perfect mother (or traditional family), from which perfect children emerge.

Smadar Lavie describes how, in the 1950s, a particular Zionist ideal was impressed upon “the Ashkenazi mother to strive to be the ideal mother since she was defined as the *Ha-Em ha’Ivriya*, ‘The Hebrew Mother’” (Lavie 49). This ideal was accompanied by a set of prescriptive rigors: “the Zionist mother was called upon to raise a baby with a lucid mind, tough stomach, and formidable muscles” that would “prepare [the child] for the precision required in the arduous life that lay ahead” (49). The ideal excluded the Mizrahi mother, denoting her as *Em Zara*, ‘Alien Mother,’ an exclusion that was prohibitive not only because of its obvious ethnic bias, but also because adherence to the “Motherhood Rites” (50) were economically unaffordable for Mizrahi mothers. Matalon’s mother-character is a witness to other Mizrahi mothers, working in the homes of others, feeding children who are not her own in daycares her children cannot attend. Lavie elaborates:

Unable to afford the price of professional daycare centers, [Mizrahi] working mothers left [their children] with older kin or close neighbors. This was conceived as retrograde, since the babies were not socialized into the contractual relationships that Zionist educators assumed were entailed in a baby-caregiver relation in a professional day-care center setting. Further, Mizrahi women’s aura of motherhood was doubly taken away from them. First, they had to work as the domestic servants who facilitated the Ashkenazi mothers’ participation in the Motherhood Rites [a prescriptive set of ideals that defined ‘The Hebrew Mother’], including placing their Ashkenazi children into anti-pediarthic kindergartens. At the same time, Mizrahi women worked as maids who cleaned these Ashkenazi kindergartens and cooked the children’s daytime meals. (Lavie 49-50)

This is the context of social exclusion from which the story of Lucette, the single mother, emerges.

But there is another story yet to be told: a story of nonviolent resistance, nearly forgotten, from which the 2008 publication of *The Sound of Our Steps* emerges, the Single Mothers' March that began:

on 2 July 2003 [when] Vicky Knafo, a 43-year-old single mother of three, started her march on Jerusalem wearing a black baseball cap and wrapping herself in the Israeli flag . . . her 205-kilometer pilgrimage ascended to the capital from Mitzpe Ramon, a tiny Mizrahi desert town. (Lavie 1)

Anthropologist Smadar Lavie writes: “the majority of post-divorce single mothers . . . are Mizrahim” (36-7). “In June 2003,” she writes:

Israel’s [National Security Bureau] mailed single mothers notices about slashing their monthly income assurances . . . the notices also informed them about the retroactive debt . . . they had incurred for the period between January, when the . . . amendment entered into law, and June, when enforcement of the law started. Distraught mothers packed the lines at the NSB and at government bureaus for rent assistance, food donations, and job placements. They had no choice, as even those mothers with jobs had little if any hope to pay their monthly expenses with this debt looming over them. (11)

“Vicky’s march started,” writes Lavie, “because she could no longer pay her bills” (11).<sup>42</sup>

Matalon’s single mothers and Vicky Knafo are not outliers. Lavie observes, “throughout the world, single mothers of color and their children share this story of victimhood when the nation-state sacrifices their human dignity to global neo-liberal restructuring” (18).

Lavie writes though “the Single Mothers’ March . . . could be conceived as an act of agency . . . the mothers’ totalistic love for the State of Israel nullified the agency imminent in that act of identity politics” (20). The Mizrahi single mother, she says, “fears that genuine intersectional resistance will weaken her homeland’s stand against the Goyim” (84). Thus, personal and corporate agency were aborted. On 19 August 2003, a “suicide bomber blew himself up in Jerusalem, diverting media and public attention back to the Israel-Palestine

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<sup>42</sup> Lavie notes, “the State of Israel has never had viable mechanisms to collect child support from deadbeat dads. . . . Israeli taxpayers, therefore, must make up the shortfall” (*Wrapped in the Flag* 6-7).

conflict. Shortly thereafter,” writes Lavie, the shantytown of single mothers called “Knafoland dissipated and disappeared” (Lavie 6). The Mizrahi women did not have the social capital or the media access and savvy to carry on—as *Four Mothers* did—and they did not, as Lavie points out, believe their needs were as important as the terror threat, nor were they able to see how their own disenfranchisement was systemic, related to external practices of military force.

I argue, however, that Matalon’s novels are a “loving witness” to the Mizrahi single mothers’ demands; Matalon’s single mother is a witness to single mothers anywhere who are excluded from policy discourses about what they need to preserve, nurture, and raise children who are accepted in society. Where literature is the protest of the excluded, Maternal Critical activity recognizes the struggle for equity and responds, creating Maternal communities of Readers and discourses within those communities that preserve, nurture, practice social acceptance, that resist systems of exclusion, of un-mothering—systems that permit and normalize violence.

As I have noted, Ruddick’s text, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, entered feminist discourses between the publications of Khalifeh’s and Matalon’s first major novels. Though both Khalifeh’s *Wild Thorns* and Matalon’s *The One Facing Us* are situated in the mid-1970s, the stories of mothering: one mother a ‘rootless’ immigrant, the other bound by roots of obligation, could hardly be more different. Both Matalon’s *Bliss*, and Khalifeh’s *The Inheritance* are situated in the mid-1990s, and though the young single women narrators in both novels nearly push mothering to the periphery, these, too, are very different stories. Khalifeh’s *The End of Spring* and Matalon’s *The Sound of Our Steps* are published in the same year, 2008; and, though the stories are situated in small towns less than half a day’s drive from the other, this may be all they have in common. On the surface, it would seem each set of novels is on a trajectory

parallel to the other—and, parallel lines never intersect. But I argue, that when read through a Maternal Lens, the parallel lines bend: they bend to intersect in the Maternal Critical Reader who becomes the site of inclusive peace discourses. Maternal Critics recognize in each novel a ‘witness’ to conflict and resistance to violence, a witness that connects readers to communities ‘behind’ the texts.

### **V: Peace Activism and the Perception of Mother-work in Popular Culture**

The final analysis of this dissertation asks: What does Maternal Critical activity in novels by Khalifeh and Matalon reveal about the relationship between mothers’ activism and practices of mothering, including perceptions of mother-work, in the popular cultures in which their activism has been asserted? Recall Ruddick’s prediction that when activists “become publicly visible *as mothers* who are resisting violence and inventing peace,” that their activism would “transform the meaning of ‘motherhood’” (*Maternal Thinking* 241)—that is, politically active mothers transform both mothering practices and “the public conception of mothers” (*Maternal Thinking* 222). If the narrative arts and critical activity in the arts (reception and interpretation) offer a way of taking the pulse of widely held assumptions in popular culture, where norms and shifts in practices are both reflected and challenged, then, where literature by women is nonviolent resistance, Maternal Critical activity in literature recognizes this struggle, and critics are uniquely positioned to assess cultural shifts in perceptions of mothering in the context of mothers’ activism.

The following analysis considers how mothers’ nonviolent resistance in Israel and on the West Bank has altered perceptions of mother-work in the popular cultures of their respective communities, evidenced in their respective literary canons. But the analysis is not only comparative; this dissertation asserts that a recognition of the shared mothering practices that

underpin mothers' nonviolent resistance suggests a premise upon which to construct inclusive discourses that build peaceful communities.

### ***Four Mothers***

Though Ruddick observes that "peace, like mothering, is sentimentally honored and often secretly despised" (137), what she imagined in 1989 as maternal peace activism defined the Four Mothers' movement in Israel nearly ten years later:

A women's politics of resistance is composed of women who take responsibility for the tasks of caring labor and then find themselves confronted with policies or actions that interfere with their right or capacity to do their work. In the name of womanly duties that they have assumed and that their communities expect of them, they resist. (*Maternal Thinking* 223-4)

Maternal peacemaking, however, is only half Ruddick's theory. To complete it, we must be able to point to perceivable shifts in representations of mothers in popular Israeli culture. Ronit Matalon emerges from the periphery of literary circles into mainstream discourses in the wake of Four Mothers' success in bringing an end to the war in Lebanon. This dissertation asserts a relational connection.

Israeli literary critic and scholar Yael S. Feldman identifies "the arrested autobiography" ("Feminism Under Siege" 494) of female characters by women writers in the early period of Israeli literature (the decade following statehood, and into the 1960s), referred to as the *Palma*, as evidence of the oppressive influence of the masculine collective. This phenomenon is seen in female characters who come close to "introspection and self-analysis but exhibit ambivalence when approaching the 'forbidden zone'" (Feldman, "Feminism" 494); rather, the character will "attempt . . . to rationalize away the justified rage against the social system, which, in the guise of a new ideology, has reinscribed traditional double standards toward women" (Feldman, "Feminism" 509).

The androcentric Israeli canon of the Palmah Generation featured idealized female characters who “in the imagination of the male fighter, [exist] as an incandescent source of hope, a symbol of peace and life” (Fuchs 190), symbolism that situates “national war and heterosexual love . . . as opposite poles,” where a male character’s “world of war and struggle is discontinuous with [a female character’s] world of love and romance,” writes critic Esther Fuchs (190). In a state of protracted war, a ‘woman’s world’ must appear ever more distantly situated in a binary position to a ‘man’s world.’

Fuchs observes how the “themes of love and war” (190) that preoccupied the Palmah writers continued into the New Wave period (late 1960s/early 1970s through the mid-to-late 1990s) without significant changes to the heroic male character; however, the characterization of “heterosexual love becomes in the New Wave an ugly and destructive power struggle [that] leads to atrophy and death,” in which case, writes Fuchs, “war begins to emerge as a kind of refuge. The female character, previously symbolic of peacefulness and security turns here into a pernicious predator” (Fuchs 190). These representations of women in New Wave literature, writes Fuchs, “reveal an androcentric fear of the radical transition which wars in patriarchal societies tend to bring about in the status of women,” where “wars are perceived as likely to empower the ‘weak’ sex, and emasculate the ‘strong’ sex” (Fuchs 191). Fuchs adds, “the frequent presentation of wives as conjugal and national enemies reveals, among other things, a deep seated suspicion of women’s allegedly passive role in war time” (192), a sense that is magnified in “a country continuously on the brink of military conflagration [where] passivity may be feared as treachery, or worse, as a perverse subconscious love for the enemy” (192). These representations in literature exploit “the archetypal association of treachery with female sexuality” (192).

Fuchs suggests the wearying effect of “the constant threat of war . . . is often translated into a nostalgic, and regressive move back to traditional patriarchal patterns of . . . marital relations” (194-5), so that a progression of representations of female characters in the male Israeli canon cannot be clearly defined. In the context of both Feldman and Fuchs who note the various ways Israeli women writers have challenged and subverted the established binary of ‘masculine-collective’ and ‘other,’ I observe that women writers, like Matalon are only able to merge from the margins into a sustained position in critical discourses concurrent with mainstream attention to, and the success of, *Four Mothers*.

In the late 1990s, simultaneous with *Four Mothers* and after the 2000 army withdrawal from Lebanon, significant disruptions occurred in the male-dominated Ashkenazi canon that allowed for the emergence of women writers, minority writers, and minority women writers who challenge single-dimensional representations of gender and ethnicity with complex characters, and contest a national narrative that speaks in only one voice. *Four Mothers* successful resistance contributed to 1) popping the link between the image of the silent grieving mother and a national mono-narrative, and 2) opening the canon to a plurality of national narratives, including Mizrahi writer Ronit Matalon. Critic Naama Tsal argues Matalon’s emergence as a “dominant voice in the field of Israeli literature” cannot be separated from the political landscape in which, “after the 1977 election campaign . . . Israel’s hegemonic centers of power” began to “disintegrate . . . precipitat[ing] the entry of voices from the margins” (Tsal 305). Historian Anna Shapira credits Menachem Begin’s success in the 1977 elections, in part, to his successful courting of the Mizrahi vote (357-65); and, she also notes the ubiquitous influence of postmodernism, “imported into Israel from the United States in the late 1980s” (407), which contributes to a recognition of women and minority writers in the margins and a widening of those margins. Still,

a recognition of voices ‘in the margins,’ important as that is, is not equal to their fully valued inclusion.

In the late 1980s, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, “a major Israeli writer [and] leading feminist” (Feldman, *No Room of Their Own* 6), observed that women writers, no matter how widely read, were still relegated to the “women’s gallery” (qtd. in Feldman, *No Room* 182); in other words, denied inclusion in the male-centric literary canon. Though Feldman notes that in 1997, women writers “topped” the Israeli best-seller lists (*No Room* 1), this dissertation is the first writing to correlate this event to the formation of *Four Mothers* the same year. By 2000, the year *Four Mothers* concluded its successful activism to end the war in Lebanon, women writers—and Feldman writes, “special attention should go to the work of Ronit Matalon” (*No Room* 227)—were no longer an unusual phenomenon. Indeed, women writers were not merely included, they exploded the boundaries of the previously male Ashkenazi canon; in particular, notes Feldman, Matalon’s *The One Facing Us* “successfully import[ed] postcolonial modalities, extending even further the boundaries of contemporary women’s fiction in Israel” (*No Room* 227). Israeli film critic Anat Zanger records shifts in cultural attitudes about gender roles, which read through a Maternal Critical lens contribute to a cultural shift toward more inclusive perceptions of mothering practices in the wake of *Four Mothers*:

point[ing] to a shift in “feminine representations” in the post-Lebanon war films that corresponds to a general change in attitude within Israel toward masculinity, whereby women acquire a more “central and active role than that of the classic ‘Homefront’ woman.” (Zanger “Filming National Identity” qtd. in Harris 60)

The Israeli movie, *Beaufort*, nominated for an Academy Award in 2007 for Best Foreign Film directly cites *Four Mothers*’ influence in shifting representations of mother-work in popular culture to include men in the work of preservative love, fostering growth, and training

conscience. In this scene, a father who is a member of Four Mothers, is being interviewed on television about the death of his son, Ziv, killed in Lebanon:

The news anchor asks, “are you looking for someone to blame?”

“No,” responds the grieving father, “I blame only myself.”

The news anchor cannot grasp the meaning of this statement, and the father (Amos) responds:

“[the] generals aren’t really responsible for my son. They don’t even know him. I am responsible for him. He’s my son. I educated him. Apparently, I didn’t educate him very well.”

Anchor: “What you’re saying surprises me very much. In Israeli society it is usually accepted that a son who volunteers for an elite unit is the result of a good education.”

Amos responds that he didn’t make his sons, and in particular, Ziv, “understand how important their lives are. . . . That’s the job of a parent. I feel I have abandoned my child.”

The anchor, clearly flustered, blurts, “how can you protect a child as you say and also give him the freedom he deserves?”

Amos: “just like you teach a child not to run into the street. You instill an instinct of fear.”

A representation of a father’s public grieving—in a popular culture that emphasizes stoicism; his public articulation of his ‘job’ in terms of preservative love, and his advocacy for ‘instilling an instinct of fear’—in a society that values military valor, would have been unheard of in mainstream Israeli media prior to Four Mothers. Mothering as non-gendered work can be noted as a significant turn in a culture that values hyper-masculinity. When women writers challenge the masculine hegemony of the literary canon they also challenge the collectivist national mono-narrative that rests on a strength/weakness binary validated by perpetual conflict, disrupting the binary and exposing the vulnerability of all bodies in war.

*Palestinian women's organizations and the Intifada*

In 1998, activist and writer Suha Sabbagh edited a collection of reflective assessments on the role of women and mothers who created an alternate economy, including systems of production and distribution, and improvised and implemented an alternate system of children's education during the Intifada.<sup>43</sup> In a letter to the editors of *The Women's Review of Books* (June 1999), she wrote:

The concept on which the book is based is a novel concept in the literature about the relation of feminism and nationalism. The basic concept derived from literature states that if there are changes in the role of women in society, *due to their participation in the struggle etc., these changes are reflected in literature, poetry, folktale/ myths, in the culture's perceptions of the role of women.* (5, emphasis mine)

In Sabbagh's statement, it is easy to see compatibility with Ruddick's theory, that participation in public discourses informs mother-work and alters perceptions of mothering in the society, as well as support for the claim I have made in this paper: that changes in social perception can be assessed by critical activity in literature. Political scientist Philippa Strum observes that as a result of the work of the women's collectives:

political discussion was no longer a male preserve. Women routinely joined in or initiated conversations about politics, demonstrating that the public sphere was as much the sphere of women as of men. (Strum 70)

Indeed, writes Sabbagh, "during the early phase of the intifada, women challenged nearly every symbol of male domination" ("Introduction" 4).

The question for our purposes is, however: how did their activism influence their mothering and the perception of mothering in the popular culture? Sociologist Joost R.

Hiltermann concludes:

An examination of [Unified National Leadership of the Uprising] UNLU communiques reveals not only a striking disregard for women's issues and the role of women in the uprising . . . but also an attitude toward women that is profoundly traditional, patriarchal,

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<sup>43</sup> The title of this anthology is *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, 1998.

and condescending. [. . .] Women are commended for their ‘steadfastness,’ for ‘standing firm,’ and for ‘protecting the uprising,’ not for participating in it. (Hiltermann 47)

Strum also documents the way women’s contributions were either ignored or demeaned in the news accounts published by the UNLU (*bayanat*), writing, “anyone reading them might well conclude that the intifada was essentially male, with women occasionally playing a very peripheral role” (Strum 71).

In a critique of popular poetry, Ilham Abu Ghazaleh concludes, though “women felt very much part of [the uprising] . . . the intifada poets continued to portray women as sad, tortured creatures in need of comfort” (Abu Ghazaleh 98). Sharif Kanaana considers representations of women in Palestinian urban legends that sprang up in the wake of the uprising, finding, “most of the credit given to the female characters comes from their association with male heroes, while males are glorified for their own acts of heroism” (Kanaana 122). Kanaana’s analysis further reveals mothers occupying a troublingly unsustainable position:

Despite the fact that sons and young males appear in the largest number of these narratives and play the role of the heroes . . . young men often need the moral and physical support of their mothers or mother figures . . . The mothers gladly and capably offer such support to their sons and to all the other members of the family but never seem to need help or protection from the others. (Kanaana 133)

In other words, mothers are unsupported from below and invisible to the male leadership above. It would seem that nothing was changed for women and those who do mother-work: their efforts to extend the authority of maternal thinking into public policy discourses were aborted, and the exercise of their maternal authority in public activism and community preservation and nurture was unacknowledged by the narrators of those events.

But in fact, a shift *did* occur in Palestinian culture as a result of women’s and mother’s activism during the Intifada—a change in women’s and mothers’ own perceptions of mother-work as authority that must extend beyond the private to include the public/political spheres as

spaces to be engaged. Though their activism has not been documented in literature by men, it has been documented in literature by women, a genre of literature that has experienced vast growth since the Uprising. In an interview with Sabbagh, Khalifeh recalls her entry into the writer's life, remarking, "very few poems expressed the reality or the hardship of a woman's life" (Khalifeh "An Interview" 137). In the years since the Intifada, representations of women and mothers have shifted in literature by women and in the continued political activity of women of which the literature is a part, where their roles as primary caretakers and mothers is realized as politically relevant, resulting in a revaluing of the work of preservative love, nurture, and the training of conscience. Writer Rita Morgan observes:

I think of the [Palestinian] women and how for them there is no going back. The experts still overlook them, ignoring their deaths as they have ignored their lives. Yet in their oversight resides the real hope for any lasting peace in the region. (168)

The international reception of Khalifeh's novels is evidence of a shift in the Palestinian literary canon, with effects that go far beyond it, and in spring of 2018, concurrent with the composition of this dissertation, a documentary film by director Julia Bacha, commemorating the contributions of the women's collectives during the intifada exactly thirty years ago, *Naila and the Uprising*, is receiving wide acclaim at film festivals all over the world.<sup>44</sup>

Maternal Critical activity in literature by Khalifeh and Matalon recognizes and participates in these popular cultural shifts toward a perception of mothers as peace builders, where literature and critical activity are both change agents and evidence of change in cultural perceptions of mother-work. Recognizing the shared practices of mothering that underpins resistance to violence in the other community suggests a premise for continued inclusive discourses in Maternal communities of Readers.

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<sup>44</sup> The film trailer can be viewed on the Just Vision web page here: <https://www.justvision.org/nailaandtheuprising>

## Conclusion

Literature, writes Spivak, is a partner with activism (“Afterword” *Imaginary Maps* 201). I have applied Spivak’s observation to novels by two Middle Eastern women writers to demonstrate how their works offer a ‘witness’ to conflict and resistance. I have argued that Maternal Critical activity in these literatures, activity that connects readers to characters, readers to authors, and readers to other readers, sustains the activism that is the text, carrying it forward into new communities. This paper imagines Maternal communities of Readers initiating Invitational discourses that receive the stories of vulnerability and resistance, and openly engage patriarchal systems that exclude, creating dialogues that prioritize narratives of the human person over abstract policy.

Habits of locating maternal characters in texts locates maternal authority in Maternal Readers who move between interpretive communities to create new inclusive spaces that recognize imbalances of power and value difference. Maternal Critical Readers recognize the connective strand of vulnerability in all persons, and the capacity to exercise maternal authority in all persons—everyone has a wish to attend to someone or something. Through practices of Maternal Criticism, men and women recognize a shared authority that preserves the other, nurtures the other, and respects the conscience of the other—this is the work that defines building and sustaining peaceful societies. In other words, mothering derives from women’s experience, but is not limited to gendered practices.

This paper has imagined, alongside Ruddick, a reciprocal exchange between the practices from which “maternal thinking” emerges and the public/community activism where Maternal Critical activity is located. This paper has demonstrated the impact of stories of vulnerability and resistance, that when received through a Maternal lens can generate conversations that build

community, including conversations between readers of this dissertation. This dissertation has demonstrated how ‘parallel’ narratives of vulnerability bend to intersect when received by a Maternal Critical Reader, where the Reader becomes a site of inclusive discourses.

Clearly, at this writing, public discursive spaces cannot be characterized as Invitational, and Maternal communities will need to establish the paradigm, critiquing the ways in which fear of vulnerability and dependence warps thinking about how real people live in the real world, distortions Nussbaum says literature can help us recognize, and I suggest Maternal Critical activity can help us recalibrate. Indeed, novels by Khalifeh and Matalon already reflect a discursive shift, therefore contributing to the expansion of Maternal communities and the establishment of a less patriarchal paradigm, and popularizing a more invitational public discourse about Israel and Palestine, within Israel and Palestine, and between Israel and Palestine.

Ruddick’s point is that the discourses of peace that arise from maternal practices carry a particular potential for shaping sustainable outcomes. That is, when mothers engage in public-sphere discourses for “just peace”<sup>45</sup> as an extension of the mother-work of preservative love, nurture, and training of conscience, those discourses retain the characteristics of valuing the physical body of the human person, and of the individual as an entailment of his or her own ends, as evidenced in conversations that are invitational and relational. Such public discourses, argues Ruddick, inform private mothering as well as the ways in which mothering is perceived and defined in the public/civic sphere. I have argued that literature by Khalifeh and Matalon both documents and participates in shifts in the perception of mother-work in the popular cultures

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<sup>45</sup> A term I borrow from Dr. Marco Hofheinz, professor of systematic theology at Leibniz University in Hanover, Germany, and visiting scholar at Drury University, Fall 2016. Hofheinz’s notion of “just peace” is an alternative to traditional “just war” theory.

from which each emerges, and that Maternal Critical activity in these literatures demonstrates a method for creating ‘maps’ of connection between readers and characters, readers and other readers, and readers and writers, goals framed within a feminist perspective.

Maternal Criticism asserts that a full response to the demands of vulnerability calls for discourses where maternal paradigms are sought out and valued as authoritative. When the only voices heard in the public square are those advocating for patriarchal forms of abstract power, those discourses become distorted by exaggerated emphasis. Rather, invitational public discourses diffuse power. Maternal discourses that assert the dignity intrinsic to human vulnerability (“the dignity of dependence,” to borrow, again, Richard Sennett’s expression, qtd. in Stephens 7) subvert the patriarchal notion of honor prefaced on winners and losers. Maternal Critics challenge habits of default that valorize patriarchal heroism while ignoring maternal practices upon which communities depend for healing and sustainability. Maternal communities of Readers invite all persons into discourses that emphasize a shared responsibility and response to the demands of vulnerability and struggle. Maternal Criticism clearly delineates the structures of authority and authoritarianism and the results of each on society where inclusion that recognizes imbalances of power and values difference promote peace, and exclusion always predicts violence. These discourses are timely. Israeli feminist and novelist Shulamith Hareven “expressed her worry—as early as 1974—about the paternalistic norm of contemporary political leaders . . . Their ‘big daddy’ image conditions . . . the sons, she argued, to be dependent and to shirk personal responsibility” (Feldman 161-2). Her concern is at least as globally relevant today as it was then, emphasizing the urgency of a Maternal Critical standpoint. Hareven adds:

Every totalitarian regime knows how to confront our preadult persona with the mythic world, so that we will feel like children with a great savior, a redeeming father: he decides, he is the strong man, we have no responsibility for our actions whatsoever. (qtd. in Feldman 166)

Maternal Criticism, grounded in the earned authority of attentive love, is the alternative to ‘the strong man’ fallacy that infantilizes the many in order to (over)empower the few.

I have suggested that the novels by women writers presented here are works of nonviolent resistance, and that Maternal Critical activity in these literatures partners readers in peace activism. In turn, the activist mothering that emerges from communities of Maternal Critical Readers influences the training of children to think maternally, preparing them to be maternal actors in the world, teaching them to be attentive to the demands of vulnerability, training them in vocabularies of cheerful moral courage. In other words, maternally engaged communities create spheres that foster intergenerational communities equipped to critique systems that undervalue mother-work and mother’s voices in public discourses. Maternal Critical activity in the novels presented here invites reading communities to come alongside Khalifeh’s characters for whom mothering is resistance to occupation and exile, and Matalon’s mothers who resist the exclusions of exile and marginalization, stories of persistence in attention to vulnerability and the struggle to resist violence that continue to resonate. Literature and criticism are a means of participating in emerging discourses in and through communities of readers, and when those conversations are maternal, they shift cultural perceptions of mother-work, extending—offering—an identification of a maternal self, that recognizes the rational political benefit of privileging material reality over destructive dogma, to people everywhere.

I am suggesting that women writers such as Khalifeh and Matalon, the communities of women and mothers from whom their stories are derived, and Maternal communities of Readers who recognize and partner in their resistance can create a paradigmatic shift toward societies that prioritize attentive love and recognize this mothering capacity in others, in effect, setting in motion practices that must ‘change the world’—what Patrocinio Schweickart identifies as the

feminist goal of interpreting literature (“Reading Ourselves” 39). I believe Maternal Criticism is a relevant approach to critical activity in literatures by women produced within communities in conflict, where mapping encounters to characters is a discursive form that creates capacities in readers for realizing a Maternal Self that is responsive to the struggle of others, including others in communities one’s own society may have had a role in marginalizing.

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