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Motherhood and Mother-Daughter Relations
in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *The Ladies' Lending Library*[1]

Abstract
One of the conundrums experienced by women in patriarchal societies is connected with the often made equation between women's social standing and role in such a society and their procreative functions. What this means for women is that their identities are usually perceived only through the aspect of motherhood. "Mothers" are the topic of women's magazines and other media, they are the frequent subject of political and social debates and, finally, they are a recurring literary theme (cf. Woodward 241 and 265-73). The paradox here is that "[w]e know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood" (Rich 11). Referring to Adrienne Rich's observation, Kathryn Woodward recognizes thus our urgent "need to ask whose version of motherhood we have" (241) since it is not mothers who speak to us because in fact "the mother [is] being spoken rather than speaking" (Kaplan in Woodward 243). In her novel *The Ladies' Lending Library* (2007), Janice Kulyk Keefer asks this question and by depicting the silenced realm of mothers, the writer empowers women to speak. The aim of this article is to reveal what secrets of motherhood, and at the same time of daughterhood, are exposed by the voices heard in Kulyk Keefer's fictional community of mothers and daughters.

Résumé
L'une des énigmes rencontrées par les femmes dans les sociétés patriarcales concerne leur statut social – comme procréatrices – et le rôle auxquels les confinerait une telle société. L'angle de la maternité est l'un de ceux qui tend à accaparer la manière dont on déchiffre et interprète l'identité féminine. « Les mères » sont le sujet des magazines féminins et d'autres médias. Elles font l'objet de fréquents débats politiques et sociaux. Enfin, elles sont un thème littéraire récurrent (cf. Woodward 241 et 265-73). Se référant au travail d'Adrienne Rich, Kathryn Woodward insiste sur le « besoin de demander de qui émane notre version de la maternité » et remarque que « la mère est l'objet, et non le sujet ou l'émettrice, d'un discours. » Dans son roman *The Ladies' Lending Library* (2007), Janice Kulyk Keefer propose un traitement fictionnel et littéraire de ce problème, en décrivant le silence de la mère. Le travail de l'écrivain permet aux femmes de parler. La littérature leur donne une voix propre et leur confère une véritable autonomie dans le discours. Le but de cet article est d'explorer les secrets de la maternité et en même temps de la filliarité (« daughterhood »), selon l'angle qui est adopté dans le roman.

1) This article contains a portion of my doctoral thesis "Za Hranetsiu" – "*Beyond the Border*": *Constructions of Identities in Ukrainian-Canadian Literature* (Diss. Greifswald U, 2011).

Although mothers and women in general are reduced to silence in and by patriarchy, the myths of the figure of woman and her motherly function are continuously being told. Not only does the mythos created disseminate the image of the Mother as the epitome of love and morality (cf. Rich 52), referring to motherhood as the woman's natural "calling" (de Beauvoir 484) as well as her "sacred" (Rich 42) vocation, but it also makes "[w]omen [...] taboo to women – not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, coinspiritors" (Rich 255). The myths in question have been created by patriarchy and for its perpetuation because patriarchy could only be sustained when and if motherhood and womanhood are institutionalized (cf. Rich 43 and 61-62; also de Beauvoir 256-61). In this way, the system can exercise, as Rich proves, "male control" (13) over the woman's personal involvement in her motherhood,[2] but also over her social position of the inferior and the dependent, put briefly the position of the Other (cf. de Beauvoir 255-61).

In the following pages, the consequences brought about by the persistence of the two myths will be analysed in relation to their presentation in Janice Kulyk Keefer's ***The Ladies' Lending Library*** (2007). The story in question concerns "the World of the Mothers" (***LLL*** 283), which is very specified because limited to a small community of seven Ukrainian-Canadian women (Sonia, Sasha, Zirka, Annie, Halia, Stefka and Nadia)[3] spending summer at a bay called Kalyna Beach together with their children. By creating a plot that evolves primarily around female protagonists, i.e. mothers and daughters, and by sketching deeply psychological portraits of them, Kulyk Keefer enters into the discussion of motherhood and it is particularly by means of the central character, Sonia, that the problematic of "[i]nstitutionalized motherhood" (Rich 42) is analysed by the author.

The Mother

One of the first statements made by the narrator about Sonia is that she is "a thirty-nine-year-old woman who's had too many children too quickly" (***LLL*** 13). It seems to be quite an ordinary piece of information but it virtually beams at the readers with its explicit message: it reveals to us Sonia's state of mind concerning her identity as a mother. It tells us that mothering four daughters, i.e. Laura, Katia, Bonnie and Alix, is indeed an overwhelming task to her. It articulates Sonia's feelings about her position: a sense of regret, bitterness, entrapment and, finally, enforcement. These are very strong feelings; these are the feelings ***forbidden*** to mothers by "the institution of motherhood" (Rich 275). Exposing them to the readers, Kulyk Keefer shows already in the very first pages of her novel that it is with this story that "[t]he words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through" (Rich 24-25).

In ***The Ladies' Lending Library***, paramount importance is attached to stories. One of the stories that is frequently repeated in the novel is the story retold by Laura to Bonnie; "the

2) In this way, Rich "[distinguishes] between two meanings of motherhood" (13), i.e. a woman's individual "experience of motherhood" (280) vs "the ***institution***" (13) of motherhood created by the patriarchal system.

3) Apart from these women, there are also: Lesia Baziuk, Nettie Shkurka, Pani Durkowska and Mrs. Maximoynko, who do not belong to "the Ladies' Lending Library Society" (***LLL*** 2) established by the seven women.

one about Our Mother" (*LLL* 21). This story is especially important to the daughters because it is the story of their origin; it is the account that relates to Sonia's meeting Max, her future husband and father of her children, "Our Father" (*LLL* 23) to the girls. Clearly, the story is charged with a magical air and the fact that Sonia exists in it as "Our Mother" (*LLL* 21) shows that the girls elevate her status to that of a mythical heroine. We might assume thus that Sonia becomes in this way an incarnation of the "perfect mother" (de Beauvoir 474), demonstrating that "the idea of woman-as-mother has worked to endow all women with respect, even with awe" (Rich 13). But what we learn as the plot develops is that such is not Sonia's case. If Sonia-the Mother cherishes admiration on her daughters' side, it is virtually only in this story. And it is precisely because the story is the account of ***their*** origin that it is so highly important to the girls. Moreover, it is through the character of Sonia that the readers may see how "motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (13), but they may also understand what Adrienne Rich means by stating that the myth of the Mother created by patriarchy is "a dangerous archetype" (52).

In her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich explicates what harm "institutionalized motherhood" may cause to women. Recalling her personal experiences, Rich (21-31) shows in how devastating a condition a woman "imprisoned" in her motherhood may find herself. The most frequent words used by Rich are: "depressions, [...], sense of entrapment" (27), "a tangle of irritations [...], bitterness, disillusion with society and with myself" (27-28), "terrible mental depression and physical exhaustion" (28) and "[a] sense of insufficiency to the moment and to eternity" (30). But the most pervasive term in Rich's accounts is "anger" (23); "[a]nger at a child" (22) confusingly mixed with the growing anger at herself for both her inability to conform to "the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional'" (23) and her feelings of "the futility of any attempt to salvage [herself]" (23). This anger is interwoven with the permanent feelings of guilt which Rich calls "the guilt of Everymother" (223) and explains it as "the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, *Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much*?" (223).

All of the emotions referred to by Rich can also be traced in the portrayal of Sonia's inner, psychological and emotional, state. Consequently, what we observe is that Sonia suffers genuine distress over the sense of meaninglessness that she feels about herself and her life. In fact, Sonia states it very clearly, writing a letter to her friend Olya, and confiding in her that "*[c]hildren keep coming, days keep passing, but I'm not alive any more – my life has stopped*" (*LLL* 9). She regrets having emigrated from Ukraine, her homeland and the only place where she did feel alive, "*[o]h, why did we come here at all, Olya, was it only for this? If I could wish myself back to the Old Place, the way it used to be, I'd go in a minute. I swear it*" (*LLL* 9). A very honest confession, and a brave one, too, because it ends with the words all mothers would be afraid to utter, "*I'd leave it all behind, husband and house and even, God help me, the children*" (*LLL* 9).

The feeling of futility so much present in Sonia's life originates from the dullness of activities she has to perform as a mother of four children. This role burdens her with the duties which make her welcome "[a]nother fine, bright, ***endless*** day" (10; emphasis added):

> Another half-hour's sleep might make all the difference between a good and a bad day, between drifting or dragging herself through the duties required of her [Sonia], but it's so peaceful when she

> is the only one awake, the children cocooned, still, in their dreams. [...] She loves them so much, she could be such a wonderful mother if only her children were always still like this, and lying sleeping. (*LLL* 12-13)

Sonia realises she could be a better mother, but she is also aware of how overpowering motherly tasks can be and how quickly their load can weigh her down. Overwhelmed with her responsibilities, Sonia, like other mothers at Kalyna Beach, feels "so grateful [...] [when] nothing is expected of her" (*LLL* 58). What she feels at most times, however, is helplessness and anger as well as desperation and weariness at having to rear the children entirely by herself.

Despite the personal sacrifice she makes for her family, the only thing she senses is the feeling referred to by Rich, i.e. her own "insufficiency to the moment and to eternity," but most of all, to her children because she realizes that it will always be her husband, Max, who will be loved by their children, "the children he almost never sees and who love him all the more because of it, ***more than they'll ever love her***" (*LLL* 14; emphasis added). The source of her feeling of insufficiency also springs from a demand to give birth to a son, a demand put on women by patriarchy (cf. Rich 192-95 and 222-23). Sonia is constantly reminded of her "failure" by harsh criticism made either by her father-in-law, who complains that "[t]hree chances she's had now and she can't even give [...] [birth to] one son?" (*LLL* 42), or by Marta, her sister-in-law, who tends to "mutter darkly about how Sonia's failed to produce a son: ***Girls are useless. It's the boy that counts***" (44). Sonia's best friend, Sasha, ponders, on the other hand, whether sons "would have cured her [Sonia], once and for all, of her fearfulness, her lack of confidence, her habit of always looking at the wrong side of the cloth" (*LLL* 92). Likewise:

> If only, Max thinks, the next one could be a boy, everything would be all right again. There is still time for a boy. It wouldn't weigh on her so much, then, her mother's death, and she'd stop worrying so much about Alix, thinking it's her fault the child won't speak, is so cold, so closed off to them all. (*LLL* 111)

Sonia's guilt clearly sticks to her so closely as if she could not exist without it; she not only feels remorseful over her youngest daughter, but she also feels guilt-ridden about her oldest child Laura, admitting to her "failure" (*LLL* 43) in rearing the child. The burden of guilt about her motherhood weighs Sonia down so much that what she wishes for is "a place where she will feel, at last, guiltless, requited, ***home***" (*LLL* 45).

Discussing the consequences of "institutionalized motherhood," Rich states (275-76) that it allows us to dwell upon motherhood exclusively in ideal terms and to bear in mind only beautified images, suppressing in this way the grim and very often brutal reality experienced by mothers. In this way, the doctrine of motherhood is enforced upon us; among many others, it forbids us "to think of what infanticide feels like, or fantasies of infanticide" (Rich 276). Yet (and unfortunately), there are women who do know these feelings and fantasies because they do experience both or either of them (cf. Rich 278-79):

> [...] the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies – their daydreams and imaginary experiences – we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive

> desperation, we would see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood. (280)

Because Sonia's inner thoughts are disclosed in the novel, we learn that Sonia also has shocking fantasies. Writing the letter to Olya, Sonia admits that, "***[s]ometimes I catch myself looking at them [children] at the breakfast table, seeing them at the bottom of the lake. All four of them in a row, holding hands and sitting still, so still, the waves lifting their hair, ruffling the frills of their bathing suits***" (***LLL*** 9-10). That this vision is intolerable is a fact clearly understood by Sonia. Having revealed on the paper the forbidden but tangible expression of her anger, the protagonist "crumples it [the letter] in her fist" (***LLL*** 10), but she knows "this isn't good enough" (10) and thus she burns the letter because "Sonia isn't taking any chances" (10). She knows the line she cannot cross despite the degree of her own desperation. She knows that crossing this line would mean for her what she so desperately fears: becoming, but also being accused of becoming, "a monster – an anti-woman"[4] (Rich 22), i.e. "the 'bad' mother" (Woodward 279).

All that the protagonist experiences through her motherhood can be summed up precisely with what Rich calls "the most exquisite suffering" (21) of all, i.e. "the suffering of ambivalence" (21). In fact, Sonia becomes in the novel its incarnation because it is by means of her character that the contrasting figures of "the 'good' and the 'bad' mother" (Woodward 279) are introduced. Referring to Melanie Klein's work, Woodward mentions "the process of 'splitting'" (280) during the formation of the child's identity when the image of the mother is divided by the child into her "good" and "bad" incarnations. "As the child 'splits' its mother in Klein's account," Woodward states, "we can see women as mothers splitting their own perception of the role of mother into these two categories to resolve psychic conflict" (280). Woodward's observation can serve here as the explanation of Sonia's contradictory emotional states; to release her anger and solve her confusion about it, Sonia splits herself into the two binary motherly figures: "the good mother" she indeed is and "the bad mother", her imaginary self. This psychological split allows Sonia to keep her balance, to know the lines she must not cross.

But when Sonia imagines her vile mother-self, she also knows that by doing it she has to subside into silence. Because this is what is required of her, this is what is demanded of mothers by "the religion of Maternity [which] proclaims that all mothers are saintly" (de Beauvoir 513). The omnipresent idealization of motherhood defines the rule that "[l]ove and anger cannot coexist" (46) and silences the fact that, indeed, they can and frequently they do (cf. Rich 52). Thus, any sign of ambivalence, not to mention a direct articulation of anger, has to be suppressed. It is not surprising then that Sonia is reduced to her muteness in the novel. As shown, she fears that her fantasies could be disclosed to anyone, hence she burns the letter which describes them. Other examples include how Sonia is reduced or reduces herself to her muffled voice range, very symbolic descriptions presenting Sonia "[f]lat on her stomach, face pressed into the dough of the pillow, [...] [playing] at suffocation" (***LLL*** 13) or direct examples like the doctor's attempts to deaden Sonia's pain by "[giving] her prescription after prescription [...]: sleeping pills, Valium" (59) which she, in fact, "never fills" (59). All in all, what we are

4) It needs to be noted here that Rich's expression "an anti-woman" was the inspiration for the phrase used in the next section's title, i.e. "The 'Anti-Mother.'"

presented with is the portrayal of a woman who remains always charged with that "stiff silence of hers" (108), the only possible way of her "shouting loud and clear" (108).

The "Anti-Mother"

The paradox that Sonia's exclusive way of expression or rebellion is her silence touches upon another important issue brought about by "institutionalized motherhood," i.e. women living on the verge of insanity. The issue in question is explored by Rich in her work where she states that, in fact, a "physical or mental breakdown" (53) is the most frequent way of women's defiance, or indeed the only way to come out on their "wildcat strikes" (53). Kulyk Keefer introduces this idea into her novel by means of another mother-figure, Nettie Shkurka, the example of a woman who crosses the forbidden line. Her character becomes here the personification of both madness and "the bad mother;" the archetype of Medea, i.e. the mythic "killer-mother" (Rich 116; *cf.* Woodward 251). In this way, she also serves as the foil for Sonia because her deeds are not limited to dreadful mental images but are indeed fulfilled in reality.

A quick glance at the characterization of Nettie Shkurka in the novel reveals that Mrs. Shkurka is known among the mothers at Kalyna Beach as a woman who fulfils her role of a mother flawlessly. She is in fact unrivalled in her function, which makes her famous as "a Mother in a Million" (***LLL*** 179). Additionally, being a teacher, she is a professional woman, but she is also an active member of the Ukrainian-Canadian community and a devout believer who frequents her church regularly. Nonetheless, Nettie's successful professional and social standing become only a cover for the misfortune she experiences in her personal life. What we learn about the woman is that she was left by her husband alone with their infant child, becoming in this way a single mother who has struggled with rearing her daughter, Nastia, on her own ever since. Her adversity notwithstanding, Nettie seems to take her affliction with an air of complacency; "[t]here's something so self-satisfied in Nettie's misfortune, [...] – something so righteous in her feeling herself to be poor and neglected and eternally shining up that crown in heaven she's buying on the instalment plan" (***LLL*** 177). Behaving as such, Nettie is in fact "assuming the role of victim" (de Beauvoir 514). According to de Beauvoir, this kind of behaviour is characteristic for "masochistic devotion" (514), equally noticeable when:

> the mother makes herself the slave of her offspring to compensate for the emptiness of her heart and to punish herself for her unavowed hostility. Such a mother is morbidly anxious, not allowing her child out of her sight; she gives up all diversion, all personal life [...]; and she derives from these sacrifices the right to deny her child all independence. This renunciation on the mother's part is easily reconciled with a tyrannical will to domination; the ***mater dolorosa*** forges from her sufferings a weapon that she uses sadistically [...]. (514)

The psychological portrayal above could serve as the description of Nettie. Although Mrs. Shkurka is considered a perfect mother by other women at Kalyna Beach, she is in fact an overprotective and authoritarian mother. Her ostensible motherly care rises even to her tyranny over Nastia. It is only Laura, Nastia's best friend, who knows Nettie is "a flimsy jailer"

(*LLL* 179) who isolates her own daughter from the outside environment and so deprives the girl of any freedom by coming up with different excuses for her daughter's supposed inability to meet her friend. Nettie's despotism becomes all the more clear to us when we realize that all the reasons are made up by Nettie not only to keep her daughter enslaved, but also to keep secret the fact that she beats her own child.

A "masochistic type of motherliness" (518) can also be assigned to the cases of women who utterly disregard or even despise their female identities (cf. de Beauvoir 518). That Nettie may be described as such a case is thus noticeable in her approach to her femaleness. It is so disagreeable to her that she in fact "disapproves of mirrors, preferring the way she think she looks to what actually confronts her in the glass" (*LLL* 266). De Beauvoir explains that a woman who feels doomed by her femininity longs for "another victim" (518) in whom she could recognize herself and it is usually her daughter who becomes thus her "double" (518). Not surprisingly, Nastia behaves and looks exactly the way her mother expects her to: "[p]ale, quiet, good as gold and far more pliable, Nastia seems to know what her mother wants of her before Mrs. Shkurka says a word or even gestures to her" (*LLL* 179). Because "Nettie's obsession is perfection" (*LLL* 264), the absolute necessity of the perfect mother is to have a perfect "double". Hence, Nastia becomes "the kind of prim, proper, perfect daughter" (*LLL* 180) who not only resembles her mother but ***is*** her mother's duplicate, through which Nettie can keep up her perfect image so that "[w]henever she [Nastia] talks of her mother she sounds as though she's quoting her – not Mrs. Shkurka's exact words [...], but what the lady would like people to believe she's said" (*LLL* 182-83).

However, apart from creating her own immaculate "double", the mother additionally ensures that her daughter's life will not be deprived of the mother's misfortune (cf. de Beauvoir 518). "Sometimes," de Beauvoir continues, "she tries to impose on the child exactly her own fate: 'What was good enough for me is good enough for you; I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot'" (518). We see that this is what Nettie practices upon her daughter. The fact that Nastia is so perfect constitutes part of Nettie's plan, according to which her daughter "[is] not going to run after boys; and she'll continue to do well at school, entering the teaching profession ***just as her mother and grandmother have done before her***" (*LLL* 264; emphasis added). And this plan is to be implemented flawlessly by Nastia because, as the girl learns from her mother, "[p]eople are always watching you [...]. [...] They're always watching and waiting for you to make a mistake, fall flat on your face. ***I never gave them that satisfaction, and neither will you***" (*LLL* 264; emphasis added). Nettie's dogma is imposed by her on Nastia not only by having it continually repeated to the girl, but also by literally beating it into her child. For in Nettie's view, "[t]he only way to achieve perfection [...] is to have it beaten into you, beaten till you're black and blue. ***The way her mother beat her; the way Nettie beats her daughter*** [...]" (*LLL* 264-65; emphasis added).

The victimizing mother's aggression towards the child is justified by her thinking of it as training (cf. de Beauvoir 514); "[v]ery often the mother slaps the child without rhyme and reason: 'That will teach you'" (de Beauvoir 519). Clearly, Nettie attempts to achieve this. Consequently, she keeps wondering "how to keep her [Nastia] as good as she is now – if not good as gold, then as copper: bright, serviceable, but needing to be shined up every so often" (*LLL* 264), which she performs regularly by "taking a hairbrush or a wooden spoon to Nastia. Or

else the peeled birch wand" (265). In any case, Nettie always makes sure that beating Nastia is inescapable and unexpected for her, that it should happen "when the girl has let down her guard, can be taken by surprise by what, after all, she should have suspected was coming" (*LLL* 265). Nevertheless, Nastia does learn that she has to be vigilant: "[s]he knows she must save her energy for running, ducking, deking this way and that" (*LLL* 265) so that the wounds are not so deep, so that the chances of her survival are higher.

The situation takes a sudden and unexpected turn when Nettie's daughter shows to her mother a sign of both her independence and rebellion. It takes the form of "small, immaculate lettering" (*LLL* 266) written by Nastia on a bathroom wall, which reads: "*I hate Nettie S.*" (187). When Nettie discovers the writing, it infuriates her because "a text [is] as deliberate as a message in a bottle" (*LLL* 266). On her discovery, she feels disorientated as she can neither grasp the meaning of the deed nor even imagine who is responsible for it. But soon her anger reaches its peak because it dawns on her that it is Nastia who is the perpetrator of this unpardonable crime. Nettie feels outraged because her daughter rebelled against her; she performed an act by means of which she proved to her mother that she can be independent of her, asserting in this way "the otherness, the alterity, of this ***alter ego***" (de Beauvoir 517) her mother believed she had in her daughter. As de Beauvoir suggests, for the mother such a proclamation is disastrous because "the mother feels herself betrayed" (517). But by portraying this incident, Kulyk Keefer reveals something more than that. The author shows that motherhood may become "a battleground [...], an endless contest of wills" (Rich 31) between the mother and her child, in which each win or loss determines their subjectivity and power (cf. Rich 38):

> The pleasure of feeling absolutely superior – which men feel in regard to women – can be enjoyed by woman only in regard to her children, especially her daughters; she feels frustrated if she has to renounce her privilege, her authority. (de Beauvoir 519)

That is why Nettie burns with rage when she discovers her daughter's message. By its means, Nastia has not only betrayed her mother, but also deprived her mother of the power and authority that Nettie considered to be absolute.

Consequently, "[t]his time [...], the beating isn't the matter of bruises, but of jabs and cuts" (*LLL* 267). This time, Nastia "knows she must think harder, faster, must find some way she hasn't tried before to get away" (*LLL* 267). The girl realizes that this time the punishment will not be a "regular" one because this time the beating will be a matter of life and death for her. The girl feels it with the violent blows, but she also senses it before the beating begins. It dawns on Nastia at the very moment when her mother enters her room, "for the woman by her bed isn't recognizable as her mother, this woman with wet hair swinging across her face and rippling over her shoulders, with half a helmet of rollers stabbed into her head" (*LLL* 267). What Nastia sees at that moment is not her mother but a woman on the verge of insanity. As Nettie desperately realizes that she has lost control over Nastia – the only power she has – she also loses her mind.

Discussing the aspect of child beating, de Beauvoir writes that "[a] mother who whips her child is not beating the child alone; in a sense she is not beating it at all: she is taking her vengeance on a man, on the world, or on herself" (513). That child abuse is an appalling crime

is unquestionable. But its tragedy may also be the tragedy of the mother, the woman who is herself "beaten" by the structures of the patriarchal system. Nonetheless, considering the source of the crime and seeing it also from the perspective of the victimizer, i.e. the mother, is something rarely performed by society (cf. Rich 263). It very easily condemns mothers who abuse their children: "[i]nstead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological" (Rich 263). Kulyk Keefer's novel touches upon this crucial and still very controversial matter by presenting the aftermath of the beating and, more precisely, by depicting the reaction of other women at Kalyna Beach. What we learn is that "the women are still nervous, exhausted really, with the aftershock of what they're calling Nettie's Breakdown" (*LLL* 275) because to them "[f]or a mother to harm her own child – it's unthinkable" (276) just as it is "to lose control like that – to ***let go*** [...]" (276). But the women neither turn a blind eye to the incident nor turn their backs on Nettie, taking good care of her as well as her daughter. What is more, they do this out of their "***loyalty***, not so much to Nettie, as to what Annie Vesiuk calls 'their own kind'. [...] Loyalty not just to Ukrainians, but to women themselves" (*LLL* 276). The women feel loyal because no matter how cruel Nettie's deed is to them, it is also something to which they could relate – not the beating itself, but the circumstances which brought Nettie to this atrocity: "for nearly all of them can confess to moments, with their children, when they have only just kept themselves from lashing out in the old country style" (*LLL* 276) and to their "episodes that gave what their doctors call 'cause for concern'" (275). Therefore, they remain loyal not to Nettie the monster beating her innocent daughter, but to Nettie, "a woman wild with pain and lost power" (*LLL* 286), a victim of "institutionalized motherhood."

Mothers and daughters

The idea of power and its loss as well as the ambivalence of motherhood experienced by women concerns not only the mothers but also the daughters, who tend to rebel against the influence their mothers exert upon them. The relations between Sonia and her oldest daughter Laura presented in the novel are most illustrative of this fact. As we learn, Laura's resistance against Sonia is articulated in terms of a real battle that the daughter believes she and her mother are engaged in. Thus, Laura is determined never "to make excuses for her mother: that's bad strategy; you must never feel sorry for the enemy" (*LLL* 23). Instead, the girl pursues what she takes as good strategy that "will diminish her [Sonia's] power" (*LLL* 54) for good. The revolt against the mothers is also led by other girls like Darka, Olya's daughter, who believes "[t]here's no language between them any more, no shared hopes or plans" (*LLL* 85), but also Katia and Tania, the daughters of Sonia and Sasha respectively, whom both girls consider "the Mean Mothers" (102).

The daughters' feelings clearly amount to what Rich, following Lynn Sukenick, calls "matrophobia" (235), namely "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of ***becoming one's mother***" (235). That is why, when Laura repeats her mother's name to undermine her authority, she also does that to "shrink what Laura calls the World of the Mothers, a world apt to swell up over their children and press down on them at the same time. A world of ***Because***

I Said So, and *I Told You So*; of *What Is It Now?* and *That's Just The Way It Is*" (*LLL* 54-55). The world to which Sonia belongs and from which Laura wants desperately to escape to avoid becoming her mother. Similarly, Katia and Tania are more than determined that "the last thing they would ever do is become their mothers" (*LLL* 166), while Darka equally "wants to escape from the kind of life her mother's led" (85).

When analysing "matrophobia", Rich states that it is "[e]asier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (235). However, what we see in *The Ladies' Lending Library* is that the daughters presented there do understand these forces. They understand them because they experience their mothers' outbursts of anger; because they see who seizes the ultimate power, a fact so evident to them when the mothers are "waiting for the fathers to deal with" (*LLL* 103) their daughters' misbehaviour. And finally, they understand these forces because they sense their mothers' powerlessness mixed in "the stew of [...] [their] misery, [...] [their] helplessness" (*LLL* 138). The daughters thus want to escape "the World of the Mothers" (*LLL* 283); they realize it is the world of ambivalence being both at once "a treasure, a monstrosity like the statue of the boy and the girl beneath an umbrella" (55) that used to belong to Baba Laryssa. The daughters fear it, plan their way out of this world, but subconsciously they know "the law, verging on commandment, that life – everyone's life, from Chucha Marta's to Baby Alix's – is fixed in a pattern rigid as the wool of Baba Motria's *kylym*, the black rug woven by Baba Motria herself" (*LLL* 55). The daughters realize this world is inescapable for them and thus they know that "what [...] [they"ll] be is nothing more than a version of [...] [their mothers], full view and profile [...] [although] [t]hey have imagined it so differently" (*LLL* 166).

Consequently, the daughters reject their mothers' weakness and they even "rage at [their] powerlessness or lack of struggle" (Rich 244). This is, as Rich explains, due to the fact that they closely relate their own identities to their mothers, but also "because in order to fight for [...] [themselves] [...] [they] [need] first to have been both loved and fought for" (244) by their mothers. This fact is to be observed in the scene in the novel that presents Sonia comforting Laura after the tragedy that took place at the Shkurkas' cottage. When Sonia endeavours to soothe her daughter's pain and the feeling of guilt she feels about Nastia, "Sonia feels something unlock in her, something buried painfully deep" (*LLL* 269) and she opens herself to her daughter, telling Laura about the incident from her childhood in Ukraine, when the group of youngsters attempted to drown her. At that point, "Laura barely breathes. For the first time in as long as she can remember she has her mother all to herself; [...] speaking to her as if her daughter were a friend, and not an enemy" (*LLL* 270). The girl feels the uniqueness of the moment and thus she is "afraid to break the delicate spell that binds them together" (*LLL* 270). But the magic spell does break, and with Sonia's statement that "it's time to get dinner ready" (*LLL* 272) the sense of reality sets in, making Laura furious about the fact that her mother's voice "is no longer the voice of the woman who held her in her arms [...]. It is the voice of Our Mother: tired, resigned, commanding" (272). The girl bursts out shouting and accuses her mother of lack of understanding, wishing Sonia her death.

Laura's behaviour in this scene exposes the extent of her "matrophobia". In her work, Rich mentions that "where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her

completely" (235). This can be observed in Laura's case because the girl "knows ***how close she'd come*** that afternoon, folded in Sonia's arms, in the warmth of her lap, ***to giving herself to the World of the Mothers***" (***LLL*** 283; emphasis added). The world which used Laura's relaxed vigilance and sent her "an invitation never before extended" (272):

> Join us, become one of us, women who know what life is and what it can never be, who must hoard what little power we have, power not to save the beaten or to keep ourselves from drowning, just power over our children's lives, for as long as we can hold them, nothing more than that. (***LLL*** 272)

What the episode additionally reveals is that patriarchy instigates the existence of "the 'motherless' woman" (Rich 243). As a result, the majority of female members of patriarchal society are robbed by the system of their experience of motherly power (cf Rich 243) because it is circumscribed to such an extent that "[f]ew women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough" (Rich 243). All of the women, mothers and daughters, presented in ***The Ladies' Lending Library*** are sorely in need of motherly love, a result of their mothers' literal/physical or symbolic/emotional absence.[5] Suffice here to refer to Sonia, Laura and Katia, all of whom express their longing for a mother through their recollections of the past. Each of them returns in her memories to the time when Sonia's mother and thus the girls' grandmother lived. For each of the women, Baba Laryssa becomes the epitome of "the perfect mother",[6] the person for whom and for whose love all of them desperately yearn. Their longing for Baba Laryssa's presence is the demonstration of the mother's absence; for Laura and Katia, this means the metaphorical and thus emotional absence of Sonia, their mother, who is present merely physically, while for Sonia, this means both the literal and symbolic absence of her mother, Laryssa, who when she passed away left Sonia stricken with inconsolable grief. Consequently, all of the women feel anger and regret at Baba Laryssa's death. While arguing with Sonia, Laura thinks of no one else but her grandmother: "[i]f Baba Laryssa were here this wouldn't be happening [...]. But Baba's dead, and there's no one to help her" (***LLL*** 99). Likewise, Katia recalls her grandmother when she desperately needs being comforted and this is not granted to her by Sonia. The girl's sentimental and regretful memories of her grandmother evoke in her violent anger expressive of the deep emotional scar that she carries: "she wants to hurt something as badly as she herself is hurting now with missing her baba" (***LLL*** 227).

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5) The prime example of "the motherless woman" in the novel is Marta, who experiences both her mother's physical as well as her emotional absence. When a child, Marta and her sister were left behind by their parents owing to the girls' illness on the point of their emigration. It was only after eight years that the family brought Marta to Canada. She came alone, as her sister had not survived the disease and died in Ukraine. This explains Marta's "sourness" (***LLL*** 136) and the fact that "Marta's drenched in [misery]" (136), "[carrying] her big black handbag on her arms as if it were the coffin" (136). While she was deprived of her mother's physical and emotional presence both in Ukraine and then in Canada, the very first expression of motherly love came to her from her niece Bonnie, which serves as an example of Rich's contention that "[w]e are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; [...] we are both" (253). Marta and Bonnie become both mothers and daughters for each other in their exchange of love; the idea is visually represented in the scene in which the two are standing at the beach "[s]ide by side, not touching, but seeming to be holding hands, though [in fact] [...] clutching [...] the straps of Marta's handbag" (***LLL*** 148).

6) And thus, another foil for Sonia, the incarnation of motherhood's ambivalence, but also for Nettie, the archetype of "the bad mother".

The inconsolable sorrow that both girls feel for their grandmother is even deeper in Sonia's case. In fact, Sonia herself "thinks that the only real thing in her life, the only real thing about her, is this ragged, unquenchable grief at her mother's death" (*LLL* 59). A longing for her mother makes Sonia desperate; Laryssa's death left her with nothing else but her emotional "emptiness" (*LLL* 60). The woman recollects the past and her mother not only out of her pain, but also out of her need to relate her experience of motherhood to Laryssa's. For, in Sonia's memories, Laryssa is not "[a] ***baba*** – [...] old woman, granny – but [...] still that lonely young woman" (*LLL* 59-60) and a mother who struggled with rearing her children on her own for a long time. Thus, Sonia's memory of Laryssa shows that motherhood should be reconsidered in double terms as mothering one's children and "being mothered" (243) by one's mother, but also that the recollection of the latter redefines the meaning of the former (cf. Woodward 243-44). This finally happens in Sonia's case when she comes to understand that "she wants something like her mother's talent for hopefulness" (*LLL* 285). This is what Sonia wants to teach her daughters. But before this could be possible, the woman needs to learn it herself. Only then can she transmit this value to her children. In this way, Sonia will endow her daughters with what Rich calls "a kind of strength which can only be one woman's gift to another" (246). She needs to achieve this because "[u]ntil a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness" (Rich 246).

That this "love, confirmation, and example" is already spread by Sonia is something of which the woman herself is unaware. And yet, it is made evident for the readers in the scene where Sonia again immerses herself in her memories of her mother and life in the Old Place. Thinking about them, Sonia holds in her arms her youngest, almost three-year-old daughter, Alix, who has awakened in the middle of the night. It needs to be mentioned that the baby was taken care of in her infant stage by Baba Laryssa due to Sonia's illness, and so "[i]f it hadn't been for Baba Laryssa, Alix would have never thrived" (*LLL* 117). That the baby is present in this scene is therefore no coincidence, for Alix becomes here the connection between Sonia's past, present, but also future. The child's presence in this scene is the more important when we connect this episode with another one taking place earlier in the novel.

Sonia feels guilty about the fact that Alix does not speak and that she seems absent. The mother blames herself for this, explaining her daughter's silence with her own emotional withdrawal. Although the child does not utter words, we learn that Alix does in fact know them or learn them because the child's perspective is presented to us through the narrator's description of Alix's silent pre-symbolic world. Consequently, what is disclosed to us is the fact that "Alix watches the words fly in pairs, English and Ukrainian, across the sky inside her head" (*LLL* 87). But, because the girl's logic is revealed to us, we also learn why the girl does not want to utter them: "[w]here her mouth is, there's a window, ***dangerous***; [...] [and because] [n]ames can't catch you till you say them loud; you must never, never let them go, you must keep them safe inside" (*LLL* 87-88). There is only one word the child wants desperately to know and utter; it is the word by means of which she could name a thing she notices "on the pillow beside her" (87):

> [A] candy, like a cinnamon heart [...]. A candy, but no sugar smell like the one her mother sprays on her neck; she pushes the pump, a cloud comes out and makes a smell like candy. This one has black spots so small she has to blink to see them, pushing with her finger. It stops being a candy: hairs shoot out its sides, black hairs like the ones round your eyes. Alix watches the red spot push itself up her finger, tickling her skin. Lets it crawl up one finger to the finger on her other hand, climbing up and over, like on the monkey bars at school when they're waiting for Bonnie. Up to her arm, meeting the fence her finger makes, and down again, and up and down. Till she holds it to her mouth and blows, gently. Two small, dark scarves shoot out from the red, a buzzing sound, and it's gone, her finger bare now, nothing. (88)

What we observe in this scene, so masterfully described, is Alix playing with a ladybug. Although the child does not know the name for it, she will learn it soon, as it is a word her mother will utter in the very scene where she holds Alix in her arms, "[reciting], very softly, the words of the rhyme" (118):

Ladybug, ladybug,
fly away home.
Your house is on fire,
your children are gone.
All save the little one,
whose name is Ann,
And she's hiding under
the frying pan. (LLL 118)

By giving this word to her daughter, Sonia gives "the Voice" (Kaplan 291) to Alix; she "[passes] the Voice on the female child" (291). Although it can be stated that, in this way, Sonia ushers Alix's path to the symbolic language of patriarchal order, it is not in fact the case, for the word is conveyed by Sonia through the ***rhyme***, a kind of verbal expression which belongs to "the pre-Symbolic world" (Kaplan 291). Reciting its words to her daughter, Sonia becomes for Alix "the Voice", which "sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation" (Cixous and Clément in Kaplan 290-91). This "Voice" is "milk that could go on forever" (Cixous and Clément in Kaplan 291) and it is for this milk-Voice that Alix in fact longs, an idea visualized by means of the image showing that "[t]he child's mouth lies open at her [Sonia's] breast as if she were about to nurse" (***LLL*** 118).

The two scenes conclude the whole discussion of motherhood and mother-daughter relations as presented in ***The Ladies' Lending Library***. They also emphasize the mastery with which Janice Kulyk Keefer deals with most delicate and at the same time most perplexing matters. By creating deeply psychological portrayals of her female characters, Kulyk Keefer reveals that the struggle to break the wall of silence enforced on women in patriarchy is not an easy task. But it is precisely by undertaking this subject for her novel that the writer gives the voice to mothers and to daughters. In this way, Kulyk Keefer has created one of very few chapters in this "great [but still largely] unwritten story" (Rich 225) about the mother-daughter relation-

ship, and by disclosing certain hushed aspects of motherhood, she has demonstrated to what extent the patriarchal "institution of motherhood" can ruin a woman's personal "experience" of being a mother.

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