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I'm Not a Mother, Therefore I Don't Exist

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"How many children do you have?" I have lost count of how many times I have had this question whispered to me, mostly by other women in Egypt. In their confident assumption that I must be a mother, they only find it necessary to enquire about the number of offspring I am supposed to have engendered. Upon declaring that I am no one's mother, a seemingly incomprehensible concept, I am met with reactions that range from words of comfort invoking religion, to confused, empty smiles, to badly concealed shock. Beyond the problematics of this question, we women who live in Arab societies have been raised with the notion that our lives and bodies do not belong to us. And despite the disparities of our lived realities, philosophically and materially, we are held to the same societal expectations when it comes to motherhood. It is as if my cultural and social contribution is limited to me taking pride in the photos of my children that I must show to whomever comes my way. Otherwise, I become suspected of not offering anything of value to society. It seems that I can only be a mother – anything else is an exception. Motherhood itself, and consequently, my role as a mother, become linked to class: just like the veil was historically worn by "free" women, the holes and cracks in the harmony of my social class are attributed to my not being a mother. I become the cause of its discontinuity. In a way, we are forced to justify to everyone why we are not married, why we are married without children, why we are not mothers, why our bodies did not do the labor they were supposed to do.

What is the purpose of interrogating me about the number of my virtual children? And what's with the frustration with me not being a mother? I am a wife, and that doesn't seem enough to wrap me in a safe social box that screams "virtuous." A husband is but a rite of passage into the ultimate stage of a woman's life: motherhood. Even my own mother attributes my not having children to "God's will." Her glances, a mixture of pity and dismay, transmit to me the burden of what she considers to be her own shortcoming: her failure to produce society with a daughter able to fulfill her compulsory reproductive role. I am not a mother, therefore my existence is flawed; my social self is lacking; my eligibility as a human being is questionable; my ability to live remains obscure. I cannot live as a human, that "me" that is mine and multiple and unique. I am only allowed to exist through someone else – a child. I am expected to raise them; bond with them; sacrifice for them; bear with all their absurdities; worry about them drowning; punish them; fulfill my dreams through them; impose my wishes on them; carry their picture in my handbag; cry and worry for them. If I am not a mother, then I am not complete. I, who did not make it to the rank of mother, who plans her life without taking children into consideration, am not a mother, therefore I don't exist.

How do I explain that my body did not perform what was demanded of it, in a culture where emotional blackmail is the foundation of the mother-child relationship? The journey was difficult and mountainous, to echo Fadwa Tuqan. Its difficulty lies in the fear of asking questions, of rejection, of isolation. Perhaps the hardest part of the journey remains the contradictions the mind stumbles upon, causing mayhem and confusion, before overcoming them or concocting solutions for them or refuting them altogether. And this refutation can only happen via a rigorous intellectual exercise that weighs what goes and what stays in order to reach a semblance of feminist consistency. What bridges do I need to navigate, what crossings do I need to undertake for my lacking self to march towards completion? How do I transform those parts of me that are seen as marginal to a vessel that fills me whole? How do I occupy a space, an interface that is

neither here nor there, without engaging in the emotional burden and sense of failure that condemn me to justify myself, again and again? I realized, maybe too late, that my mother's questioning glances, her fingers that handed me names after names of doctors capable of miracles were the major obstacles to my self-reconciliation. She would have seen me shrivel and wither away if that meant I sought "help" to fix my body. I realized too that my initial responsiveness to her every question and whim was egging her on in her perseverance. My responsiveness meant my complicity in forcing my body towards doing its job – that body that kept eschewing labels, stubborn in its refusal to yield to expectations. So I would come back to more pity, more prayers, more words of consolation, and my anger and estrangement grew in me like lava. There must be, I thought, other women in the whole wide world who stood up to their mothers and whose defiance could inspire me – other women who refused to be inducted into the cult of compulsory motherhood. If facing oneself is a lonely endeavor, I realized I was not alone in fraying that path. The years I spent in the company of books had earned me the mockery of many; if I could not find the support I needed there, those years would have been wasted in vain. Slowly, an idea took shape: why don't I transform the thorny concept of motherhood into a subject for a book? Surely, I could at least find solace in the writings of women who were far more courageous than I could ever hope to be. This is where my research journey started, and what I found surpassed my wildest dreams.

In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* published in 1958, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir details the autobiographical journey of her own crossings, liberating herself from traditions and customs into the welcoming arms of philosophy. De Beauvoir grew up in an environment that viewed obedience as the essence of femininity. Her conservative Catholic background, embodied by her mother's fanaticism, and the staunch bourgeoisie of her family, nuclear and extended, were factors that were debilitating to overcome. To do so meant to defy the figure of the mother, religion, and class – a peculiar trilogy rife with the myths of the inferiority of a so-called "women's nature." Any act of transgression, any trespassing, any minor fissure to the order of things were not without consequences: challenging the mother led to parental repudiation and a violent separation; challenging religion entailed processing guilt and bearing societal rejection; as for challenging class, it was considered pure madness for the France of the 1920s. As a result, dealing with religion first and subverting its order and institution would relieve the mind from the recurrence of guilt cycles. But it wasn't easy for a young girl who was used to going to church three times a week and confessing once a month to enact dissent of such a magnitude, especially that it was frowned upon by her family. Hence, philosophy became her sanctuary and refuge. De Beauvoir does not shy away from exposing all the contradictions she had to grapple with. In fact, she meticulously explains the epistemological how-tos that allowed her to embark on her transgressive journey and entirely rid herself from the gender norms that regulated her society. Confronting the mother was the biggest hurdle de Beauvoir had to face, but it was necessary to the conception and later drafting of her most famous work, *The Second Sex*. I employed all methods imaginable to explain to my mother that I would not be fulfilling her dreams, that she could not live her desires vicariously through me, that I was happy – although that last bit called for a bit of pretense, for can a woman find absolute happiness in a patriarchal world? – lifting a weight off my shoulders in the process. Then I realized that my mother equated my happiness with others' approval of me; she sought my husband's reassurance that everything was okay. In other words, he had to validate and recognize me as an independent being for my existence to become visible.

Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi wrote *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* in 1994. The text's format comes close to that of a memoir, but it could not be farther than de Beauvoir's. The story is narrated from the point of view of a 7-year-old girl who lives in a harem in Fez. It is the setting, equated with the structure of an extended family, that calls for a multitude of female voices encompassing of many generations of women. Therefore, the power dynamics that link social status with age and class are intricately enmeshed. But the concept of the harem can be traced back to a religious origin; the emergence of this closed space becomes the only arena available to women. If obedience was considered to be the natural French attribute of femininity, observing the rules of the harem in their reflection of dogmatic ideologies constitutes the site of struggle that calls for acts of transgression. Despite their difference in context – French and Moroccan – and religion – Catholic and Muslim, both novels groan under the weight of religious institutions that restrict the localities and spaces women are allowed to occupy. Unlike de Beauvoir's mother, Fatima's mother supported her daughter and encouraged her to break the rules of the harem. However, in the context of Morocco, trespassing was complicated even further by French and Spanish colonialism. The desires of the colonized to conserve their identity often meant leaving women's situation untouched under the guise of culture and tradition, confining them to shrinking spaces, imposing strict rules on them, and ensuring their adherence and compliance. At 7, Fatima had to attempt and subvert the very notion of the harem from within the religious system – a system that was dedicated to maintaining its oppressive structures. It is through her deliberate questions disguised as childish that she challenged other women in her vicinity, uncovering the structural contradictions of her lived reality so they transform into openings and possibilities of crossings.

Both texts are painstaking documentations of the overlaps between the private and public spheres, and the ways in which they are informed by what society perceives to be women's compulsory roles – daughter, wife, mother – and exacted by the institutionalization of religion and other forms of systemic power. The role of the mother is omnipresent, whether it supported a daughter's journey or further hampered her trespassing. Mernissi's mother told her daughter: "you must learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk. Crying when you are insulted is like asking for more" (9). Women must be fierce, even feral at times, regardless of the reasons employed to justify violence towards us. De Beauvoir says about her mother: "I did not look upon her as a saint, because I knew her too well and because she lost her temper far too easily; but her example seemed to me all the more unassailable because of that: I, too, was able to, and therefore ought to emulate her in piety and virtue" (13-14). The role of the mother, as dictated by social norms, cannot exist in a vacuum; it is supported by class, religion, and context. But a mother is a woman who also finds herself subjected to the same social constraints, limited by the conception of gender binaries, which could lead her to reproduce and perpetuate the same patriarchal norms that rule her existence – as was the case with de Beauvoir's mother and the mother of her friend, Zaza. So she could distance herself from the rebellion of a daughter she is no longer willing to protect, because her disobedience becomes the symbol of maternal disappointment. Or, she could be supportive of her daughter – like Mernissi's mother, who hoped her daughter would build a future for herself outside the confines of the harem. Even then, the mother still has to respond to the conventions enforced by other women of the extended family who enjoy a certain level of power and privilege. A mother's stances, therefore, can be

consistent, evolving, or contradictory, as they navigate a wide array of social, psychological, and structural powers. It is through a careful reading of the mother's role that we can grasp the essence of a daughter's journey of trespassing, who gradually interweaves a narrative of rebellion.

But what about women who have to negotiate the hardships of compulsory motherhood? The book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (1976) by American poet Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) is probably the best resource in this field. For its time, the book was groundbreaking in its discussion of motherhood, as even touching upon the subject was considered taboo: shrouded by undisputed heterosexuality, the fixity of gender roles as a binary bound the concept of motherhood to societal obligation rather than choice. It is not surprising, therefore, that the gains obtained by women would become the subject of vicious attacks and violent campaigns by a battalion of conservatives in the 1980s. It coincided with the harsh criticism directed at Rich's book, particularly at its style that enmeshed the author's lived experience with scientific research – a reflection of a political vision. For a later edition of the book (1986), Rich wrote a new introduction where she delved deeper into the rationale behind her style of writing: theorizing, for her, takes root in material experience and human condition. To that end, she had chosen her lived experience to be the starting point. But contending with the institution of patriarchy and its reductive image of women in their familial role was unusual in the 70s, and Rich's book was one of the first texts to venture down that road. That is probably why she eventually dedicated the book "To my grandmothers […] whose lives I begin to imagine and to the activists working to free women's bodies from archaic and unnecessary bonds." But to say that the book was subversive for its time alone would be inaccurate: the narration of the crisis of motherhood combined with Rich's fight as a writer remain relevant today. The intimate, mundane details Rich weaves into her narration to grapple with the pressure she was under transcend temporal and geographical borders, their cartography extending bridges between cultures. In fact, the Egyptian poet Iman Mersal referred to Rich's foundational text in her book *How to Mend: On Motherhood and its Ghosts* (2017). Despite Rich's discursive analysis that challenges patriarchal iterations, she clarified that her writings aimed at redressing the narratives that saw women written off, rather than an attack on motherhood itself – a preventive disclaimer and implicit apology that were probably necessary to allow for the publication of such a book in the United States' 1970s. This clarification holds true for Rich's 1980 article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in which she exposes compulsory heterosexuality as a tool that exploits women's bodies and labor, and advocates for women's ability to choose their sexual orientation. To counter the uproar the article provoked, Rich penned "Reflections on 'Compulsory Heterosexuality'" in 1984, where she referred to her initial article as an "exploratory piece." How many scopes remain out of reach when our ideas are under constant attack? In those moments, we yearn for the space of difference to disappear, almost falling back into the supportive arms of a hegemonic culture, into conformity. We are worn down. We cry in vulnerability. We reject the sheer solitude of the wilderness.

In my research quest, I was not only aided by memoirs, but by an array of literary writings, such as poetry and fiction, which ended up touching upon all forms of artistic expression. Poetry especially backed me up with answers. The Egyptian feminist poetic voice that took flight after the January 25 revolution was riveting in its loud rebellion against a patriarchal culture that puts the image of the patriarch on a pedestal. That

voice challenged the hegemonic by pitting motherhood against the buzz of questions and discourse-making. For instance, Sara Abdeen, a poet based in Egypt, exchanged poetic letters on Facebook with fellow poet Marwa Abu Deif, an Egyptian who resides in Canada, putting into motion the start of a boundless dialogue. Those letters became the subject of a collection of poetic exchange titled *There is a Garden Between Us* and published in 2017. The rigorous intellectual contribution of this exchange centers feminist politics into poetic interaction, without a hint of liberal competition, or a showmanship of skills hungry for accolades and covetousness. Instead, is a deep dialogue that unravels the layers of accumulated sadness, dusting them into a fresh poem so that poetry becomes thought. Yet, the exchange does not pass over other women who have had to grapple with the expectations of motherhood. The collection opens on a quote by Polish poet Anna Swir, borrowed from a poem that Iman Mersal translated to Arabic in her previously mentioned work. The exercise the two poets Sara and Marwa engage in plant a garden with motherhood's ghosts, joys, and discontents. But the collection is not about motherhood *per se* – that noble, utopian state that aggrandizes women overnight; it is about a self that finds itself in the impasse of motherhood, a predicament that is only comparable to Rodin's "The Thinker." The contorted position of the seated sculpture portrays the existential impasse of human condition in its entirety. Similarly, the impasse of motherhood leaves no exit and no going back to what was before – a cul-de-sac that prompts Abdeen and Abu Deif to mitigate the gap that disassociates their former selves from their present ones.

The different authors have to negotiate different localities and contexts. Concerning the post-war U.S. that was shaping modern thought, Rich writes: "I became a mother in the family-centered, consumer-oriented, Freudian-American world of the 1950s" (25). As for Sara, she writes for a different time that paralyzes her: "news instill fear in my heart every day;" and Marwa despairs: "the world has gone mad, Sara / it has become impossible to talk about freedom or justice or revolution" (112).

Rich's book is considered revolutionary in its expansion of the feminist theory of the 70s, so it is expected that later feminist works about motherhood would refer to it. But the collection of Sara Abdeen and Marwa Abu Deif is no short of disruptive of the status quo, like a rock that troubles stagnant waters. If the issue of motherhood has been extensively theorized in the west, our regional cultures still glorify it, waving slogans that promote the notion that women cannot be complete unless they are somebody's mother. Their life journey loses its significance; their achievements are considered vain if they do not acquire the label "mother." This is how motherhood devastatingly occupies the whole space, leaving no room for the individuality of the self. Marwa defines motherhood as "an attempt at stripping women from their individuality, perhaps even from their humanity" (90). As for Sara, she lucidly expresses: "Every day, I shed the letters of my name / I crawl towards a dwindling margin / for I have boarded ruthless motherhood" (130). The self, initially multiple, sometimes fragmented, is forcibly made to follow a linear track to fulfill the image of the mother – an image that held Rich captive when she had her first child. She realized that she was being asked to hold multiple roles, juggling between working woman in the modern world of the 50s, and perfect wife: "I only sensed that there were false distractions sucking at me, and I wanted desperately to strip my life down to what was essential" (27). With the pregnancy of her third child, Rich's newfound

awareness prompted her to take her life in her hands, snatching it away from "drift, stagnation and spiritual death" (28-29).

I too will not be drifted away, yet I will resist stagnation. I am no one's mother, yet I exist.

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