

Maternal Ambivalence in Contemporary Literature: Offill, Yoder, and Cusk

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Abstract

This article examines how Jenny Offill, Rachel Yoder, and Rachel Cusk represent maternal ambivalence in their contemporary works “Dept. of Speculation” (2014), “Nightbitch” (2021), and “A Life's Work” (2001). Maternal ambivalence, as theorised by Adrienne Rich and Rozsika Parker, refers to the coexistence of love and resentment, devotion and exhaustion, fulfilment and loss of self within motherhood. Offill’s fragmented prose mirrors the fractured consciousness of maternal life, Yoder’s surreal metamorphosis dramatizes the bodily and psychological upheaval of postpartum experience, and Cusk’s stark memoir confronts the realities of exhaustion and resentment directly. By situating these texts within the theoretical framework of maternal ambivalence, this article argues that they resist cultural idealisations of motherhood and instead embrace its contradictions. Together, they demonstrate that ambivalence is not a failure but the truth of maternal experience.

Keywords: Maternal ambivalence, motherhood, Jenny Offill, Rachel Yoder, Rachel Cusk, feminist literature, identity, surrealism, memoir, fragmentation

1. Introduction

Motherhood is often viewed as a powerful and rewarding experience, but many contemporary women writers challenge this idealization. Jenny Offill uses fragmented lyricism in “Dept. of Speculation” (2014), Rachel Yoder employs surreal metamorphosis in “Nightbitch” (2021), and Rachel Cusk confronts it through stark memoir in “A Life's Work” (2001). Each explores the contradictions of maternal life. They reveal how love and devotion coexist with exhaustion, resentment, and a loss of identity. Together, these works show that maternal ambivalence is not a failure but a true part of motherhood.

2. Maternal Ambivalence: Theoretical Context

The concept of maternal ambivalence has been widely discussed in feminist literary and psychoanalytic studies. Adrienne Rich, in “Of Woman Born” (1976) [4], captures this duality in strikingly personal terms, describing motherhood as:

“the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness” (Rich, 1976).

Rozsika Parker, in “Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence” (1995) [3], developed the idea further, insisting that “maternal ambivalence is not a failure of maternal love, but is intrinsic to it” (Parker, 1995). Parker goes further, arguing that “the coexistence of love and hate can actually stimulate and sharpen a mother’s awareness” of her child (Parker, 1995). Far from being a symptom of inadequate mothering, ambivalence is, in Parker’s framework, the motor of maternal thought itself.

3. Jenny Offill: Fragmentation and the Fractured Self

Offill's "Dept. of Speculation" [2] is composed of fragments, aphorisms, and brief vignettes. This form mirrors the fractured consciousness of a mother overwhelmed by childcare. The narrator, once an aspiring "art monster," finds her ambitions curtailed by domestic life. She reflects:

"My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things." (Offill, 2014)

Ambivalence surfaces in her resentment towards lost artistic identity, yet also devotion to her child. She describes the repetitive labour of motherhood:

"Caring for her required me to repeat a series of tasks that had the peculiar quality of seeming both urgent and tedious. They cut the day up into little scraps" (Offill, 2014).

At times she feels her love is hopelessly unrequited, yet she also finds joy in the smell of her daughter's hair and "The way she clasped her hand around my fingers. This was like medicine" (Offill, 2014).

Offill's fragmented style embodies ambivalence itself. The narrative cannot sustain coherence, just as the mother cannot sustain uninterrupted thought. The form becomes the content, showing how motherhood fractures identity and consciousness.

4. Rachel Yoder: Surrealism and Animal Transformation

Yoder's "Nightbitch" [5] takes a surreal approach. The protagonist, a former artist turned stay-at-home mother, begins to believe she is transforming into a dog. This conceit dramatizes the bodily and psychological upheaval of postpartum life. When she confides in her husband, "I think I'm turning into a dog... He laughed and she didn't", his dismissal underscores her isolation (Yoder, 2021).

The transformation becomes physical:

"She scratched the coarse hair that now covered the back of her neck and her shoulders, then bared her teeth. She could hear every sound, smell every smell." (Yoder, 2021)

Heightened sensory awareness symbolises maternal vigilance, the constant attentiveness to every sound and need of a child. Yet this vigilance erodes her autonomy, reducing her to instinct rather than creativity. At the climax, she embraces her animality: "Her eyes lit with fire... One thought came and then left as quickly: you are an animal" (Yoder, 2021). Motherhood is figured as both monstrous and vital, a state of primal strength and terrifying erasure. Yet Yoder also allows her protagonist to reclaim agency through "doggy games" (Yoder, 2021) with her child, transforming feral identity into imaginative play. Ambivalence here is not simply despair but a source of new maternal creativity.

5. Rachel Cusk: Memoir and Stark Honesty

Cusk's "A Life's Work" [1] is perhaps the most uncompromising of the three. Written as a memoir, it refuses sentimentality and confronts the raw realities and discomforts of early motherhood. Cusk describes exhaustion, resentment, and identity loss with stark clarity. She portrays infant care as relentless, consuming, and often joyless.

From the opening pages, Cusk frames motherhood as a kind of confinement, recalling how she was plotting her escape from it, and how a second pregnancy arrived like returning to a cell, greeted "with the cheerless acceptance of a convict intercepted at large" (Cusk, 2001). She did not stop loving her child; she simply could not pretend the condition of motherhood left her intact.

Her most direct statement of ambivalence echoes Parker's insight that maternal love carries a "conflicted core":

"Like all loves this one has a conflicted core, a grain of torment that buffs the pearl of pleasure; unlike other loves, this conflict has no possibility of resolution." (Cusk, 2001)

For Cusk, conflict is not something to be worked through but the very texture of maternal life. Elsewhere she captures the double bind with equal precision:

"When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them. To discover this is to feel that your life has become irretrievably mired in conflict, or caught in some mythic snare in which you will perpetually, vainly struggle." (Cusk, 2001)

The mother loses herself whether she stays or goes. Cusk extends this into her account of daily care, where she describes her relation to her daughter in strikingly reductive terms:

"At first my relation to it is that of a kidney. I process its waste... these tasks are not yet arduous; they already constitute a sort of serfdom, a slavery." (Cusk, 2001)

Yet even here the ambivalence holds: she waters her daughter "with love, worrying that I am giving her too much or too little" (Cusk, 2001). The love is real, and so is the feeling of being reduced by it. Cusk shocked readers not because she resented her child, but because she named what many mothers feel and are expected not to say. In this, her memoir does what Parker argues ambivalence can do: it refuses the myth of seamless maternal devotion, and in doing so tells a truer story.

Unlike Offill's lyrical fragments or Yoder's surreal metamorphosis, Cusk's prose is direct, unadorned, and confrontational. She strips away cultural myths to reveal the psychic upheaval of postpartum life.

6. Comparative Analysis

Though different in style, these three works converge on the theme of maternal ambivalence. Offill shows ambivalence through fragmentation, capturing the fractured consciousness of a mother torn between art and domesticity. Yoder dramatizes ambivalence through surreal metamorphosis, portraying motherhood as both animalistic vigilance and loss of self. Cusk confronts ambivalence head-on, refusing sentimentality and exposing the exhaustion and resentment of early motherhood.

Together, they resist cultural idealisations of motherhood. They show that ambivalence is not pathological but intrinsic, a truth that must be spoken. Each writer employs a different strategy like fragmentation, surrealism, and memoir, yet all arrive at the same insight: motherhood is dual, a site of love and fulfillment, but also of resentment, exhaustion, and loss.

7. Conclusion

By articulating ambivalence, these writers open space for more honest conversations about motherhood. They resist idealisation and instead embrace its contradictions: devotion and despair, intimacy and alienation, fulfilment and erasure. In doing so, they affirm what Rich called "the suffering of ambivalence" (Rich, 1976) and transform that suffering into literature that is clear-eyed, honest, and necessary.

References

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