

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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**THE REPRESENTATION OF QUEER MOTHERING IN
MAGGIE NELSON'S AUTOFICTION *THE ARGONAUTS*
MA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

This MA thesis analyzes the representation of motherhood in the autofiction genre in the face of social changes in the understanding and structure of family. Its main research aim is to find out to what extent Maggie Nelson's autofiction *The Argonauts* represents queer mothering experience.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two core chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction provides the broader social aim of writing the MA thesis, showing the broader social changes that affect the understanding of motherhood and explain the boom in books about mothering. The MA thesis focuses on the life-writing genre because it is perceived to be authentic in its representation of life experience.

The first core chapter consists of three parts. The first part discusses Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework and the double-voiced discourse through which *The Argonauts* will be analyzed. The second part discusses different feminist approaches to motherhood from Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of motherhood and Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood and mothering. The third part discusses Lee Edelman's definition of queerness and whether queer mothering can be viewed as a part of Rich's empowering mothering practices.

The second core chapter applies Showalter's notion of the double-voiced discourse to analyze *The Argonauts* by showing the presence of dominant voices and Nelson's subversive responses to them. The MA thesis proposes that Showalter's double-voiced discourse is too binary to describe Nelson's experience. Instead, *The Argonauts* can be read as an example of multi-voiced discourse. The last section describes how autofiction's flexible boundaries allow Nelson to create this multi-voiced discourse to represent her queer mothering experience.

The conclusion presents the summary and key findings of the thesis. It further discusses the importance of the thesis and possible research relevant to the topic.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A 2015 for Nelson (2015) *The Argonauts*

INTRODUCTION

The notion of motherhood has changed alongside with changes in family structure. In the early 20th century, the ideal model of the family consisted of a breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife, and two children. However, as society changes, so do family structures and ideals. According to the Population Reference Bureau (Vanorman and Scommegna 2016), new family forms are emerging problematizing the notion of the nuclear family. One of the most notable changes has been an increasing number of marriages among queer members of society, who are categorized in the U.S. Census based on their sexuality such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) adults. The definition of ‘queer’ and ‘queerness’ is complicated because of the variety of perspectives from academic and literary critics (Hall 2003: 5). For instance, according to Lee Edelman (2004: 17), “queerness can never define an identity; it can only disturb one”. Overall changes in the American family structure and the increase of marriages among queer members of society show that they are transforming and ‘disturbing’ the previous traditionally defined institution of the family. Throughout the MA thesis, I will use Edelman’s definition of queerness. In order to understand queer families, we need to place them into the broader changes in American beliefs concerning family.

Nowadays, the American marriage rate is declining in comparison to the 1950s. According to the Pew Research Center (Parker and Stepler 2017), approximately 50% of all U.S. adults are currently married, down from a peak of 72% in the 1960s. According to the U.S. Census data, in 2019, the median age at first marriage for men was 29.8, and for women, 28. In contrast, in 1950, the median age for men was only 22.8, for women, 20.3. According to the Pew Research Center Survey in 2016 (Vanorman and Scommegna 2016), the majority of young

people cite financial instability and not being ready to settle down as the major reason for not wanting to get married.

More people are delaying their marriage, other people are divorcing, and not remarrying later in life, though remarriages are on the rise today in comparison with the 1960s (Livingston 2014: 4). According to the Pew Research Center survey in 2013, 40% of new marriages involved remarriages. In 1960, only 14 million of all U.S. adults had been remarried, which tripled to 42 million in 2013.

Today, more people than in the past cohabit before entering official marriages. According to the analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth (Horowitz et.al 2019), the percentage of adults aged 18 to 44 who have ever cohabited is 59%, surpassing the percentage of people ever married (50%) in 2017. Moreover, the nationally representative survey of 9834 American individuals using the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (2019) shows that contemporary couples claim that financial security is a prerequisite for marriage. Today, married couples tend to be older and educated. The majority of American adults (54%) agree that marriage is important, but not essential for having a fulfilling life (Horowitz et.al 2019: 28).

One more trend is the increase in single-parent households. According to the Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (Livingston 2018a), in 1968, only 13% of children lived with an unmarried parent, which grew to 32% in 2017. Children also are more likely to experience different family arrangements because of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation. The Pew Research Center (Livingston 2018b: 4) predicts that in the long run, by the time a child turns 9, over 20% of American children born in a married couple setting, and more than 50% of those born in cohabiting parents may experience the breakup of their parents. Even if the approval of single parents raising children has increased from 35% in 1994 to 48%

in 2012 based on the data from the General Social Survey, many Americans still view this trend – especially solo-mothering – negatively (Livingston 2018b: 4). However, this is understandable given the statistics that around 30% of solo mothers live in poverty, in comparison to 17% of solo fathers, 16% of cohabiting parents, and just 8% of married parents (Livingston 2018b: 9).

Even if same-sex relationships are not a recent phenomenon, legal marriages between same-sex couples are. According to the Population Reference Bureau (Vanorman and Scommegna 2016), the estimated number of same-sex married couples more than doubled from 230 000 in 2013 to 486 000 by 2015 in the USA. In 2009, only two states, Massachusetts and Iowa, had legalized same-sex marriages. However, in 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court granted a constitutional right of marriage for same-sex couples in all states (Maschi et al. 2019). According to the 2017 Gallup Daily report (Jones 2017), 10.2% of the American LGBT adults are currently married to a same-sex spouse, which rose from 7.9% in 2015 before the Supreme Court ruling, and from 1% in the 2010 Census Data. The Gallup (ibid.) survey results show that 61% of same-sex cohabiting couples were married in 2017, an increase from 38% before all U.S. states legalized same-sex marriage. Even if the number of same-sex marriages increased after the court decision, the rate of increase is not sharp (Jones 2017). According to the 2013 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, LGBT adults and the general public agree on the most important reasons for getting married. Love, companionship, and making a lifelong commitment rank as the top three for both LGBT adults and the general public. In the latest survey conducted in 2019, there was no separate section for sexuality, and love and companionship are still the top reasons for marriage (Horowitz et.al 2019: 6).

According to the polls conducted by the Pew Research Center (Drake 2013) from 2003 and 2013, there is an increase in support for same-sex marriage rights among all age groups. In the 2003 survey, 33% of Americans were in favor of same-sex marriages, 58% were against it. In 2013, 49% supported and 44% opposed same-sex marriages. This is largely attributed to the arrival of the Millennials who are more open to gay rights than the older generation (ibid.). However, support for gay rights and marriage increased among those born in 1928-1945 as well. In 2003, 56% of the surveyed individuals believed that allowing same-sex marriage would undermine the traditional American family, and only 39% disagreed. In 10 years, the figures changed to 46% and 51%, respectively. 64% of respondents support the view that same-sex couples can be as good parents as heterosexual couples, and 66% agree that same-sex marriages should have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples (ibid.). These changes show that American adults are becoming more open to diverse family practices regardless of one's sexual orientation. In the 2020 census (Cohn 2018), there will be separate categories for "opposite-sex" and "same-sex" spouses and unmarried partners because the increase in same-sex couples demands more consistent information.

Changes in the meaning of marriage and family are closely related to the position of women in society. In 1950, women made up only 30% of the labor force, which increased to 47% in 2016 (Fry and Stepler 2017). In the 1960s, women increasingly gained higher education and economic independence. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2019, women are 50.2% of the college-educated labor force, up from 45.1% in 2000 (Fry 2019). Moreover, currently, women make up the majority of all college-educated adults in the U.S., who hold at least a bachelor's degree. However, since women are still regarded as the primary caretakers of children, they bear the burden of balancing work and family (Berman 2019). Census Bureau

figures show that the median wage for a college-educated man is \$74,900, while the wages for college-educated women are only \$51,600 (ibid.). However, the growing number of college-educated women contributes to the increased earning opportunities for women overall, which correlates to the changes in the meaning of the institution of a family (Gerson 1983: 138).

Changes in the views on family and childbearing have also affected the laws and new medical advancements. In the 1950s, contraceptive pills were invented (Nikolchev 2010). However, only in 1960, did the Federal Drug Administration approve the use of the pills which gave American women greater freedom about whether to become a mother and when. In the 1970s, rising educational attainment and women's participation in the labor force led to an increase in the postponement of childbearing (Livingston 2015). Nowadays, highly educated women aged 40 to 44 with an M.D. or Ph.D. are more likely to become mothers than a decade ago. In 2014, childlessness among this group has dropped to 20% from 35% in 1994 (Livingston 2015: 9). This shows that first, women prioritize their education, and then, consciously decide when to become a mother. Across all levels of education among American women, the timing of when to become a mother has shifted because of declines in the childbearing among teens and those women in their early 20s (Livingston 2018b). All these changes are interrelated as more women delay their first marriage and motherhood until attaining education and financial security because family and work balance still demands more devotion and sacrifice from women than for men.

These changes in the roles of women, in the nature of family, and ideals of parenting suggest that we should also see a shift in literary responses to the experience of motherhood. Since people's life choices are potentially affected by written and spoken texts they consume, it is useful to look at literary representations of the experience of motherhood. Specifically, I

will focus on the life writing as a genre that is perceived to be authentic in its representation of life experience. For the purpose of my thesis, authentic means the subjective truth of the author and her/his vision of “how to live or how to create” (Sturgeon 2014).

The genre of autobiography as life writing implies the “distinctive relationship to the referential world in its temporality” (Smith and Watson 2010: 18), which means that autobiography refers to the real world and time in history. This is the main characteristic that distinguishes autobiography from literary genres. However, autobiography is also in many ways similar to literary genres. For instance, autobiography shares similar features like plot, setting, dialogue, and literary language with the novel. However, autobiographers above all engage the reader in their lived experiences through the dialogue of their memories and the expectations of their realities (Smith and Watson 2010: 15).

According to Phillipe Lejeune (1989: 3), the identification of the author with the narrator of the autobiography is the result of the signature of the author or the “autobiographical pact”. This pact means that there is an implicit contract of identity between the reader and the author according to which the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of a book are assumed to be the same person. However, there are indeterminate cases when there is no information about the pact being either autobiographical or fictional, and the protagonist’s name is absent either intentionally or accidentally. In this case, the reader stays in a state of mistrust and it depends on the reader what he/she chooses to believe.

Since Lejeune’s theoretical framework does not focus on works with clear elements of fiction, Serge Doubrovsky (1977) coined the term ‘autofiction’. According to Doubrovsky, autofiction should not be viewed as a distinct genre, but the extension and evolution of autobiography. Autofiction provides “the fictionalization of a framework through which to

represent a ‘deeper’ truth of selfhood” (Jones 2010: 178). Since it considers the constructed nature of selfhood, autofiction does not view the self as a whole and a unified concept. Instead, it creates an imaginary world through which the deeper truth of the fragmented self can be found. Gasparini (2008: 209) summarizes Doubrovsky’s articulations on autofiction by claiming that the relationship with time is the key characteristic and signature of autofiction, which means that the author of autofiction mostly writes in the present tense. The second characteristic is related to the relationship with language. For instance, traditional autobiography tends to follow a formal style. In contrast, in autofiction “there is a much more immediate relationship with the violence of words, scenes and memories” (Contat 2001: 119). This means that authors who write autofiction play with the language and narrative that diverges from traditional autobiographical texts. Doubrovsky (1977: 75) argues that this play with the language is related to the possibility of being close to one’s subconscious mind. Isabelle Grell (2014: 10-12) similarly argues that 20th century psychoanalytical, modernist and post-structuralist inventions influenced the way authors write autofiction. Since they all aimed at unraveling how the human mind works, writers of autofiction used the genre conventions of both autobiography and fiction and provided an innovative way of representing one’s life in writing.

Laura Di Summa-Knoop (2017: 3) argues that memories “are prone to subjective remodeling” because they can change over time. This can take place in the form of protection from some painful aspects of life and making different memories more connected and whole. Lin (2014) also claims that the experiences that a person did not have also affect the experiences he/she had negatively. If the intention of the author is to provide his/her authentic experience through the ‘remodeling’ of the memories, the pact between the author and the reader is not broken.

According to Jonathan Sturgeon (2014), autofiction creates the room for discussion on “how to live or how to create” moving from “our preoccupation with authenticity and the relationship to truth”. This is because the idea of truth and authenticity is problematic even in the traditional autobiography. Since truth is subjectively constructed, the readers understand the unfeasibility of telling the truth because of the difficulties of separating “poetic truth from factual truth, psychological truth from family truth” (Adams 1990: 9). Since there is no autofictional pact, Sara Pitcher McDonough (Dix 2018: 148) proposes to create one, in which an author articulates to the reader that he/she “is not honest, but is sincere; he will lie, but will attempt to reflect the world with justice”. Other critics, like Catherine Cusset (2012), argue that the author should have an autofiction pact with himself/herself by being “as honest as possible”. Cusset (2012) believes that reaching a certain truth in autofiction implies the ability to achieve a deeper emotion so that this deep emotion is transmitted to the audience. This means that when the author who writes autofiction pronounces ‘I’, the reader feels the collective ‘we’. As a relatively recent genre, autofiction has flexible boundaries that allow writers to represent any kind of experience of one’s life innovatively and creatively. This is especially appealing to authors who want to discuss their experiences that also fall outside the expectations of mainstream, like queer mothering.

However, today not all writing on and by mothers is necessarily innovative. Today’s mothers are surrounded by the ideology of ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays 1996) and ‘new momism’ (Douglas and Michaels 2007) that suggests that women should dedicate themselves to childrearing. The desirability of those activities is circulated by the media (Heffernan and Wilgus 2018: 4), although the ideals are only available to high-income mothers (Bailey 2008: 39). However, working-class and poor mothers participate in the perpetuation of new momism

as well, although they cannot afford it (Takševa 2012: 142). Therefore, it is important to look at the literature written by mothers to see what kind of themes are emerging in their writing.

According to Andrea O'Reilly (2010: 203), motherhood literature is a relatively recent genre. Wilkinson and Niesslein (2005: 6) argue that women started to feel that their voices and experiences matter because of the feminist movement. However, Podnieks and O'Reilly (2010: 4) believe that most motherhood memoirs are “(in)formed” by new momism”. On the one hand, it allowed women to publicly write about their motherhood experience. On the other hand, memoir authors argue that there is a mismatch between the expectations and realities of motherhood. The realities are still silenced, as mothers are not expected to share their true experiences because of the ‘mask of motherhood’ (Maushart 1999: 1, 2).

Even if most motherhood memoirs to an extent at least perpetuate patriarchal ideology (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010: 4), they also represent people's reactions to challenges to the traditional heterosexual institution of the family. For instance, in the past, the voices of queer mothers and their experiences were absent. Today, there is an increasing number of texts that describe family-making among LGBT people. Motherhood memoirs written by queer mothers both provide an alternative interpretation of their experiences and show how changes in society are reflected in their family-making and mothering practices. Moreover, those mothers often write in a language and narrative form which resists the dominant cultural construction of motherhood (Frye 2010: 188). O'Reilly (2010: 210) argues that most of the motherhood memoir writers stick to the philosophy new momism and therefore they cannot challenge the roots of the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Only when motherhood memoir writers move this genre into “revolution” (O'Reilly 2010: 212), the realities and expectations of mothers' experiences will coincide. Queer motherhood memoirs are the quintessential example of the

genre of revolution in the representation of motherhood; hence, they should be studied and analyzed in-depth.

One of the most popular contemporary American writers who represents her queer family making and mothering experience is Maggie Nelson, especially in her groundbreaking book *The Argonauts* (2015). Nelson plays with the genre conventions of both autobiography and fiction, creating autofiction, to describe the challenges she and her gender-fluid partner faced as a queer couple in American society. Nelson's use of language and her creative and innovative approach at describing her pregnancy, body transformation, family-making, and mothering experience makes her book an interesting example of both motherhood memoir and autofiction. Autofiction, as a relatively recent literary genre, enables Nelson to represent her queer mothering experience by moving from autobiography's "preoccupation of authenticity and the truth" into the discussion and analysis of "how to live or how to create" (Sturgeon 2014).

Therefore, the present thesis aims to study how Maggie Nelson uses the autofiction genre in *The Argonauts* to represent queer mothering experience and to what extent her text can be seen as an example of the double-voiced discourse, as defined by Elaine Showalter. In order to reach this aim, the first chapter introduces Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework and the double-voiced discourse, as well as different feminist approaches to motherhood, especially Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood and mothering. It also discusses Lee Edelman's definition of queerness and whether queer mothering can be viewed as an example of Rich's empowering mothering practices. The second chapter applies Showalter's notion of the double-voiced discourse to analyze *The Argonauts* by showing the presence of dominant voices and Nelson's subversive responses to them.

SHOWALTER AND GYNOCRITICISM

Throughout the history of literature, women's place was mostly described by male authors through the androcentric viewpoint. In 1981, Elaine Showalter (1981: 184) coined the term "gynocriticism" to describe the study of women as writers. Gynocriticism analyzes the way women writers describe their experience, and what genres and styles they use. Showalter (1981: 180) argues for a solid theoretical basis for women's writing which departs from the male canon and allows women to assert their authorship in the literary tradition. Showalter (1981: 185) poses the question "What is distinct about women's writing?" and answers it by discussing biological, linguistic, psychological, and cultural approaches to women's writing.

The first three approaches are interrelated and complement each other in their description of women's writing. Biological criticism focuses on the significance of the body as a root of imagery. This approach attempts to redefine biological differentiation by viewing women's "physicality as a resource rather than a destiny" (Rich 1986: 39). This means that once women writers write through their bodies as a source of power, they create innovative styles and forms, which distinguish their writing from men's.

However, differentiating women's writing is not possible through the study of biological imagery only. Therefore, Showalter proposes the second approach in terms of women's language. Feminist critics like Adrienne Rich (1971) argue that women must stop using the "oppressor's language", which is male-constructed and foreign to women. Showalter (1981: 190) argues that women have to reinvent the female language within the discourse of male language and deconstruct it through writing on the subjects that were not written about extensively before, e.g. motherhood and pregnancy. However, the problem with the reinvention

of language is that female language is not separate from the dominant language. Studying silences and omissions in the female language is the next step of differentiating women's writing from men's.

The third approach is psychoanalytical, covering both biological and linguistic models to the study of female psyche and self. The Freudian and post-Freudian theory focuses on the female disadvantages and lack. Those theories claim that women's unfulfilled desires are 'erotic', while men's fantasies can be 'egoistic', 'ambitious', and 'erotic' (Showalter 1981: 195). According to the gynocritical model, women's writing is not confined to erotic desires, and can incorporate the same fantasies as men's. Some feminist psychoanalysts focus on the development and construction of gender identities by departing from the Freudian theory. For instance, Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) proposes that children develop core gender identities through their relationship to their mother, during the pre-Oedipal phase but the core psychosexual identities are formed differently for boys and girls. Boys experience gender formation negatively through the realization that they are different from the mother, whereas girls form their identities through positive identification and sameness with a mother. The importance of psychoanalysis in feminist criticism lies in the analysis of the relationship between the mother and the daughter that can be viewed as the source of female creativity. Moreover, the psychoanalytical difference is not only limited to the mother/daughter relationship and includes female bonding in general.

The fourth, cultural difference accounts for historical changes, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic factors affecting women's writing. According to the cultural approach, women's conceptualization of their experience is affected by the social context and cultural environment.

Showalter (1981: 197) argues that women's culture shapes "a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space". Showalter (1981: 199) borrows Edwin Ardener's (1977) argument that women constitute the *muted group* which is subdued by the male *dominant group*. The concepts of *muted* and *dominant* imply difficulties of language and authority. This model assumes the existence of the wild zone or the 'female space' (Showalter 1981: 201) which can "make the silent speak". This wild zone is the space for the previously repressed women's language and writing.

Double-Voiced Discourse

Showalter (1981: 201) claims that the cultural approach considers women's writing "a double-voiced discourse", which should be read as containing the voices of both the dominant group, men, and the muted group, women. Since men's voice is part of the dominant structure, men cannot reach the wild zone, while women can access both the male zone and the female, or the wild zone. This gynocritical model provides the framework to locate a woman writer in the cultural space that helps define female literary identity and women's position in society. The model also rehabilitates the marginalized female genres and situates them as part of the general tradition (Showalter 1981: 203). With the gynocritical model, the reader engages in women's texts which are situated between both female and male literary tradition.

The gynocritical model has also been criticized for its essentialist outlook. For instance, poststructuralist critics argue that the model relies on the binary feminine/masculine universal and ahistorical values (Moi 1986: 89). Since gynocriticism provides the framework for analyzing women's writing only, this view presupposes gender while selecting texts. Susan Friedman (1998: 23) argues that this focus leaves out other aspects of writer's identity, including

race, class, religion, and sexuality, because one's self is not one-dimensional. Friedman (1998: 23) further claims that Showalter's gynocritical model ignores the feminist aim of destroying the prescribed definitions of femininity. However, despite these shortcomings, this women-centered focus allows one to reveal the deeper meanings of women's writing by deconstructing women's historical, social, and political position and revising the patriarchal canon. Moreover, Showalter's (1981) double-voiced discourse framework allows one to recognize the dominant voices in the women's writings, and how women authors respond to those voices. This has been proved by studies in different cultures (e.g. Sheckels 1997, Richards 2004, Hoza 2013)

I chose this approach because the questions of women's writing that were raised by the second-wave feminists of the 1980s were never answered definitively (Moi 2008: 259). Moi (2008: 261) argues that this happened because of the rise of poststructuralism in the 1990s which stressed the notion of the death of the author. As a result, Moi (2008: 260) believes some contemporary feminist theory "is no longer concerned with women and writing". One of the questions that has remained under-explored in feminist criticism after the 1980s is the question of the specific poetics of women's writing. This is why we need to return to some of the early feminist criticism, like that of Showalter and her attempt to find a specifically female poetics and read it in the context of contemporary queer theory.

The gynocritical tradition can also be useful for analyzing texts that focus on women's experiences, especially bodily experiences. In the MA thesis, I will apply Showalter's (1981) notion of double-voiced discourse as a primary framework to analyze how Nelson describes her pregnancy, mothering and queer family-making experiences in parallel with a multitude of other people's voices (e.g. psychoanalytical thinkers, feminists, psychotherapists, poets, authors, and her partner, Harry Dodge) to which Nelson refers in the book (direct references and names on

the margins of the book). I argue that even if Nelson puts different dialogues together, she reverses her position as the muted group and her voice becomes the dominant one in the text, which could be read as a feminist move. Showalter's (1981) double-voiced discourse is based on the dominant/muted binary, but Nelson expands this understanding to represent a multi-voiced discourse which allows Nelson to express her distinct voice outside of the gender binary thinking.

In order to develop my own analysis, in the next section I will discuss different feminist theories of motherhood. I will not focus on psychoanalytical theories, as they have already been used extensively by other scholars. Instead, my starting point is the work of Simone de Beauvoir whose *The Second Sex* (1949/2011) opened the discussion of many aspects of female experience, including mothering. Although Beauvoir's text is very old, recent feminist scholarship (e.g., Stone 2017) has returned to it because Beauvoir was the first to describe the complexities and ambiguities of women's experiences of motherhood. This maternal ambiguity is what interests me. Beauvoir's ideas will be compared to those of Adrienne Rich whose discussion of the two meanings of motherhood in *Of Woman Born* (1986) I will place within Showalter's (1981) framework of double-voiced discourse.

Beauvoir and Motherhood

Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) *The Second Sex* provides a historical account of women's inferior status in society. Beauvoir (1949/2011: 26) argues that biological, historical and cultural forces created ideals of femininity and the ideology of women's innate inferiority to justify women's position as the *Other*. The *Other* is defined as relative to "the *Subject*, the *Self*", the man (ibid.). If the Self is absolute, the Other is inessential; if the man is an active

subject, the woman is a passive object. A man needs the *Other*, a woman, for his identity and self.

According to Beauvoir, the basic existential ambiguity in human's lives is the distinction between transcendence/immanence. Transcendence is reaching out for future and freedom through active participation in projects of the life. In contrast, immanence is stagnation which maintains the status-quo and includes a passive engagement in everyday habitual activities. These two concepts are gendered because a woman is associated with immanence, a man with transcendence. For instance, when a woman gives birth, for Beauvoir (1949/2011: 98) this is not a surpassing activity but a manifestation of her natural functions which repetitively continues in the woman's life. However, men create and invent in order to transcend (Beauvoir 1949/2010: 99). In contrast, women are biological beings who engage in the repetitive cycles of pregnancy, giving birth, childcare, and everyday mundane activities such as "washing, ironing, sweeping" (Beauvoir 1949/2011: 541). A woman's situation as the *Other* places her into immanence because "her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness" (Beauvoir 1949/2011: 37). Thus, from the childhood, women were prepared to accept her immanence first by their mothers, and then later by their husbands.

The concept of transcendence stands at the core of feminist criticism on motherhood. Beauvoir (1949/2011: 641) demystifies the idealization of motherhood as the only place for happiness in women's lived experiences. While women raise children, they believe that they are exercising transcendence. However, once children grow up and leave mothers, women feel that their purpose is lost, and hence, they are left unfulfilled. Patrice diQuinzio (1999) argues that Beauvoir's demystification of motherhood disrupts the ideology of "essential motherhood" which argues that women are naturally destined to be mothers. Beauvoir (1949/2011: 643)

argues that motherhood must be a matter of choice, not the natural destiny. For Beauvoir, women's reproductive capabilities innately make them stay in immanence, which limits their power and agency. Sandra Dijkstra (1980: 292), examining the differences between the American feminist thinker Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, argues that Beauvoir's study of women's oppression was too radical for the American society in the 1950s. In an interview with Friedan (1976: 396-397), Beauvoir argues that government should not encourage mothers to have children through wages for housework because it will discourage mothers from finding potential in the public sphere. Instead, Beauvoir claims that government should support the socialization of childcare which will decrease the amount of work performed by mothers and will give the opportunity to find transcendence in paid work.

Beauvoir has also been criticized for her equation of masculine values with human values, and her rejection of female body as the basis for the feminist movement (Evans 1985, Lloyd 1984). According to Bonnelle Lewis Strickling (1988: 36), Beauvoir failed to properly understand the role of immanence in human's lives by giving greater value to transcendence. Strickling (1988: 42) agrees that transcendence is associated with creativity and creativity with the will. However, Strickling (1988: 42) argues that transcendence should not be achieved without respecting and valuing immanence. Thus, it can be seen that Beauvoir's criticism of motherhood has also been criticized by feminist thinkers because Beauvoir seems to reject the value of women's experience and fail to see alternative interpretations of motherhood, in addition to the patriarchal one.

However, more recent feminist scholarship has found Beauvoir's work to be more nuanced than feminist criticism from the 1980s claimed. For instance, Alison Stone (2017: 125) argues that Beauvoir's discussion of women's situation shows her ambivalent position towards

motherhood. Even if Beauvoir's basic assumption is that motherhood is immanent in nature, Stone (2017: 132) reads Beauvoir's *Second Sex* as a discussion of maternal ambiguity, creativity inherent in women's bodies, and connectedness with others. This is especially related to the mother/child relationship. Beauvoir (1949/2011: 615) argues that mothers have ambiguous feelings toward their children because women either dominate their children without allowing them to separate from them or mothers divert their anger into children because they were not able to find other activities for transcendence. As a result, women are trapped in believing that they transcend life by giving birth as part of their creativity, which does not produce new projects in reality. Stone (2017: 130) argues that Beauvoir was the first one to position maternal ambivalence of feeling both love and hatred towards children as a normal state in maternal life because of the basic ambiguity of transcendence/immanence distinction. However, the problem arises when mothers have to repress those feelings because of society and be proclaimed as bad mothers. Fredrika Scarth (2004) defends Beauvoir's discussion of motherhood because it is based on women's position as *Other* in society. Since society leaves no choice to women about their pregnancy, they expect mothers to leave other activities to pursue only their maternal identities. Scarth (2004) argues that Beauvoir's discussion on motherhood became the basis for studying maternal subjectivity and autonomy.

Stone (2017: 128) also defends Beauvoir by stating that Beauvoir's description of female body is related to the body experienced in Western culture. Stone (2017: 131) argues that for Beauvoir, mothers feel a "fleshy connectedness" from the enjoyment of their children's bodies more than they feel the urge to dominate them aggressively. This is because newborn children remind mothers of their connectedness with their own mothers and how they were separated from them. Stone (2017: 131) argues that bodily connections with others create maternal

autonomy instead of limiting it. Thus, Stone (2017: 132) claims that Beauvoir was not just the opponent of the motherhood, but that she illustrated all the ambiguities and complexities of women's experiences of motherhood.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is also important for the discussion of specificities of a woman's writing about topics like motherhood and pregnancy. According to Moi (2008: 265), Beauvoir's discussion of sexism shows that when a woman states "I am not a woman writer" or any claim that emphasizes her gender and/or sex, this is "always in response to a provocation, usually to someone who has tried to use her sex or gender against her". Moi argues that this is a valuable lesson from Beauvoir, which is to look for such provocations and point them to the audience, without apologizing or justifying your answer. This is relevant for the discussion on motherhood because mothers can notice those provocations from the dominant culture, especially when provocations imply incompatibility of motherhood and writing.

Rich and Mothering

Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and her discussion of motherhood as a patriarchal institution inspired the American feminist and poet Adrienne Rich's 1976 distinction between two meanings of motherhood. This can be in itself seen as a double-voiced discourse (Showalter 1981) on motherhood. According to Rich (1986: 13), the institution of motherhood is a male-dominated site as it aims at controlling women's lives and bodies. Rich's discussion of motherhood echoes Beauvoir's criticism of patriarchy which makes motherhood oppressive and immanent in nature. Rich (1986: 42) argues that "the institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love" because both institutions create rules which force women to

accept male control. In biological motherhood, “a woman was not merely a producer and stabilizer of life: there, too, she was a *transformer*” (Rich 1986: 101). However, in the patriarchal institution of motherhood, mothers started to transform their children by conforming them to the gender-proper behavior.

Rich (1986: 13) stresses two aspects of this institution of motherhood. The first is that motherhood is natural to women and only biological mothers are responsible for caring for their children. This assumption represses a mother’s own selfhood in the name of a child. The second is what Rich (1986: 52) calls the “powerless responsibility” because this assumption is based on women’s restricted power to determine how to raise children. Mothers have to raise children in accordance with the dominant culture’s ideology, which takes agency and authority away from mothers. These two assumptions also give rise to the modern ideology of intensive mothering (Hays 1991: 26) as explained in the introduction. However, these demands are not based on children’s needs but are socially and culturally determined (Buskens 2001: 81). Beauvoir and Rich both agree that the institution of motherhood is inattentive to women’s needs. Beauvoir’s solution for women is to find transcendence in public sphere, while Rich suggests that mothering can also become a source of power for women.

Rich distinguishes mothering as an experience that empowers mothers through her reproductive capabilities and relationship to her children. Rich’s (1986: 280) aim was to recreate mothering as a freely chosen practice. This site of empowerment situates women as “outlaws from the institution of motherhood” (Rich 1986: 43) because mothering goes against the conventions created by the dominant culture. Even if Rich has not provided an extensive discussion of how mothering can be realized, she deconstructed the meaning of the institution of motherhood and opened a new feminist discussion of it.

American feminist critic Andrea O'Reilly (2004: 10) focuses on "empowering mothering ... as a site of power and resistance for women" that aims at providing mothers with agency and rearing a child based on a feminist counternarrative of mothering. According to O'Reilly (2004: 10), a feminist counternarrative of mothering is "concerned with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is *empowering* to women as opposed to oppressive, as it is within the patriarchal institution of motherhood". O'Reilly looked at non-Western cultures because black mothering was an inspiration for Rich (1986: 75) as a source of power. Rich mentions three examples of black motherhood. They are "othermothering/community mothering" as an assistance to biological mothers by "sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins 1993: 47); "motherhood as social activism" as a "symbol of power" (Collins 1993: 49) which allows black mothers to feel responsible for all the Black community's children; and "nurturance as resistance" which defines black families and their homeplace as a site of resistance (hooks 1990: 42). Fumia (1999: 91) also believes that looking at communities other than North America can introduce alternative family structures and empowering mothering practices. Since Rich advocated for the women-centered and non-sexist child-rearing for both sons and daughters, O'Reilly (2004: 15) also focused on these practices of mothering and gender socialization.

According to Rich (1986: 225), the "cathexis between mother and daughter, essential, distorted, misused is the great unwritten story". Rich means that the mother/daughter relationship was narrated by the dominant culture as being based on antagonism. When daughters see their mother's low self-esteem and self-hatred, they do not want to identify with mothers (Rich 1986: 243). This has led to the "estrangement of mothers and daughters" (O'Reilly 2004: 162). Rich (1986: 243) also argues that a woman "who has felt 'unmothered'"

may seek mothers all her life - may even seek them in men". This is related to the mother/daughter relationship because if a daughter does not see a strong and empowering figure in her mother, she may develop resentment towards her mother. Another important addition from Rich is to separate mothering from biological reproduction. A woman may be involved in mothering in the role of "teacher, doctor, political activist, psychotherapist" (Rich 1986: 243). Rich (1986: 246) states that "we want courageous mothers". O'Reilly (2004: 172) develops this idea further, arguing that when mothers are empowered, they transmit this empowerment, a sense of freedom, and knowledge on how to live in a world without losing their agency and autonomy. As a result, their daughters become empowered and later transmit the same knowledge and relationship to their daughters.

Rich (1986: 211) also states that it is important to "discover new ways of being men... as we are discovering new ways of being women". This means that once women become more empowered, they can rear sons in a way that does not reinforce sexism (O'Reilly 2004: 165). Masculinity as a social construct makes men repress feminine qualities like "empathy, vulnerability, compassion, gentleness" in themselves (O'Reilly 2004: 167). This is what mothers should discourage.

However, many feminist thinkers like Alison Thomas (2001: 125) argue that rearing more empathetic and connected sons is more difficult than raising empowered and courageous daughters because the costs of abandoning patriarchal masculinity are still higher than benefits because masculinity is more privileged in society. Judith Arcana (1983: 247) also argues that mothers have to live their lives outside motherhood which will make sons appreciate mothers as "whole people", not just through their maternal identities.

Thus, feminist thinkers agree on the possibility of empowering mothering when mothers exercise their maternal agency and autonomy in places other than motherhood. This makes women reject the patriarchal ideology which defines motherhood as the only source of happiness and fulfillment for women. For most feminist analyses, the problems lie in the patriarchal family and social institutions. It is therefore important to analyze whether queer family practices can provide examples of non-hierarchical and empowering parenting practices.

Edelman and Queer Mothering

In the following, I will provide the theoretical discussion on the concepts of queer and queer mothering. According to Donald Hall (2003: 5), there is no single definition of queer, but a multitude of different overlapping perspectives. For the purpose of my MA thesis, I will use Lee Edelman's definition. According to Edelman (2004: 17), "queer can never define an identity, it can only disturb one", which means that queerness disturbs the functioning of the social organization of gender and sexuality by disrupting the binary social order but it never itself establishes a new norm.

Queerness is against the rhetoric of reproductive futurism, that is, the belief in a better future for our children which has "unquestioned value and purpose" (Edelman 2004: 4). Edelman (2004: 17) argues that reproductive futurism is largely heteronormative because only heterosexual relationship is believed to be the natural way of building a family for the future of children. In contrast, the social order assigns a negative position to queers because they have non-procreative sex (Edelman 2004: 3). Since queerness resists identity categorizations based on sexuality and gender, anybody could be queer (including cisgender heterosexuals) if they challenge and disrupt the social order that puts forward reproductive futurism in the name of

the Child. When somebody is identified as queer, he/she is positioned in this negative position within the social order. However, James Penney (2013: 184) argues that Edelman's perspective is quite problematic because "no future queerness fails the test of universality". In other words, Edelman does not seem to have left any room for a positive vision of queer future and limits queerness only to those people who violate reproductive futurism. The question arises when, for instance, homosexuals decide to adopt children. Does the mere fact of choosing parenting result in the loss of queer identity? At this point, it is important to stress that Edelman's argument is not about the rejection of children per se, but against the political rhetoric which is oppressive towards marginalized people in the name of a metaphorical Child figure.

Since Rich's mothering experience is also in opposition to the institutional motherhood, queer mothering combines two concepts united by their shared resistance to narrowly defined reproductive futurism. Mothering is against the political order's ideology which claims that only biological mothers must perform childcaring and do so within patriarchal limits. Similarly to a multitude of definitions of queer, Margaret Gibson (2014: 6) argues that there is no single and fixed definition of queer motherhood; instead, queer motherhood can "start where any of the central gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of 'expected' motherhood are challenged". Here, the 'expected' motherhood is institutionalized motherhood with a set of expectations that mothers are required to comply with to be accepted as proper mothers in the male-dominated world. Once mothers perform their mothering experience outside those confined rules and conventions, they engage in queer mothering. Since queers disturb dominant social order, mothers who are identified as queer participate in queer mothering experience as well. However, queer mothering should not be limited to gay and lesbian couples, including transwomen's parenting or heterosexual cisgender women with

transgender children as part of the queer mothering experience (Hall and Hall 2019: 317). Since queerness goes against identity categorizations, queer mothering includes a variety of mothering practices that disrupt the institution of patriarchy and its ideology by offering empowering mothering experience.

Methodology

My primary research method will be to analyze *The Argonauts* through the close reading technique. To answer my main research question “To what extent does Nelson’s autofiction *The Argonauts* (2015) represent queer mothering experience?”, firstly, I will use Showalter’s (1981) double-voiced discourse framework. I will create the list of the dominant voices (signs of patriarchal society, great thinkers, and traditional discourse on motherhood) in the text, and how Nelson responds to those voices using the ideas of feminist thinkers, poets, authors, and her partner Harry Dodge. I will focus on the scenes that describe queerness, mothering, pregnancy, body transformation, and those sections where Nelson rejects binary categorizations. The latter is important for the justification of using Lee Edelman’s (2004) definition of queerness. I will look at language (poetic devices and vocabulary), imagery, style, and form that shows that Nelson’s text produces a multi-voiced discourse, as an extension of Showalter’s (1981) double-voiced discourse. Then, I will identify the sections that have elements of autofiction whose flexible conventions enable Nelson to use multiple voices in parallel with her position to create this multi-voiced discourse to represent her non-traditional mothering experience.

However, one of the limitations of my research methodology was that Showalter’s (1981) double-voiced discourse is based on the binaries of the dominant/muted and man/woman to describe Nelson’s non-binary text. Therefore, I decided to critically develop gynocritical

methods to propose that in fact, Nelson's text should be read as a multi-voiced discourse. Showalter's (1981) double-voiced discourse allows me, firstly, to identify the complex nature of the dominant voices in the text, and secondly, Nelson's creative approach of combining those different voices together produces her distinct voice which is informed by other people's ideas, but never enforced by them.

THE REPRESENTATION OF QUEER MOTHERING IN MAGGIE NELSON'S *THE ARGONAUTS*

MAGGIE NELSON

Maggie Nelson is the author of five non-fiction books and four poetry collections, who has been widely praised for her creative experimentation and the mixture of different genres including autobiography, theory, and poetry (Feigel 2016). Nelson has earned a Ph.D. from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 2004. Currently, she is professor of English at the University of Southern California. Nelson has been awarded numerous awards and fellowships, including a 2007 Arts Writers grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation, a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2011 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a 2013 Literature Fellowship from Creative Capital and a 2016 MacArthur Fellowship (A 2015). Her groundbreaking and genre-mixing autofiction *The Argonauts* (2015) won the National Books Critics Circle Award in 2015. Even if her writings have gained a lot of attention from numerous reviewers from *The New York Times* (Szalai 2015), *The Guardian* (Laity 2016), *The New Yorker* (Als 2016), *The Paris Review* (DeWitt 2018) and etc., *The Argonauts* (2015) has not yet fully academically discussed. Therefore, I believe that my MA thesis will add to a scholarship on *The Argonauts*.

THE ARGONAUTS

Following Showalter's (1981) double-voiced discourse framework, this section analyzes how Nelson illustrates the complex nature of the dominant voices in the text. The first approach is using the signs of the patriarchal and homophobic society. For instance, the reason why

Nelson and her gender-fluid partner, Harry Dodge rushed to get married was because of the news that Proposition 8 in California that aimed to ban same-sex marriages might pass the next day. Nelson (2015: 23) writes “Poor Marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable)”, which conveys double meaning. On the one hand, Nelson and Dodge’s ability to marry challenged, and for more conservative observers, destroyed the old traditional heterosexual institution of marriage. On the other hand, they stepped into a marriage, which is a traditional institution. They hope that they are not losing their critical position but are strengthening a new union among queer members of society, thereby giving hope to other LGBT adults. When Nelson and Dodge stood in the queue to get a marriage certificate, they met hundreds of queers who also wanted to officially get married because of the fear that Prop 8 may pass. Although Prop 8 does not have an explicit voice, it still embodies the dominant patriarchal discourse the force of which can be seen in the large number of people who have been brought together by the fear that it might pass. One older male couple stated that they wanted to get a copy of a marriage certificate because when the previous one arrived at their mailbox “they noticed the signatures had been botched by their officiant” (A 2015: 24). Queer interactions with heteronormative institutions continue to be fragile. Nelson also describes the instance of a homophobic judge who was deciding the fate of Harry Dodge’s son. Initially, Nelson wondered why her partner did not adopt his son after birth. However, later, she said that she also would not “allow a social worker into our home to interview our children, to deem us “fit”” (A 2015: 137). The sanctioning gaze of the dominant society is intimidating because of its ability to destroy the fragile sense of domestic safety that the queer family has established. Nelson gives these examples of a homophobic society, through officiant and judge, to illustrate

the difficulties queer people encounter even when they want a legal union and an adoption, something that is relatively easy for heterosexual couples.

Nelson also comments on the YES ON PROP 8 sign with four stick figures which advocated heteronormativity with the writing of “PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN” (A 2015: 11). This poster is related to Edelman’s argument that the dominant order designates queers with a negative position in the name of a Child figure. Nelson points that one of the stick figures had a tringle skirt and quotes “many-gendered mother” (A 2015: 57) of her heart, the American poet Eileen Myles: “*What is that triangle, anyway? My twat?*” (A 2015: 11). This quote shows that even if people believe that the triangle designates a dress and the stick with a triangle a woman, Nelson cites Myles’ subversive line to show that this imagery is arbitrary. Nelson (ibid.) also questions Catherine Opie’s photography *Self-Portrait/Cutting* with a carved “drawing of a house and two stick-figure women holding hands (two triangle skirts!)” in her back. Nelson asks why does one want to carve the Prop 8 version with two triangles skirts? This pondering illustrates that Nelson does not only against the original legislation and the implicit anti-queer aggression of the poster of Prop 8, but she also questions why one needs to continue to perpetuate different signs of homonormativity.

The next example of the signs of homophobic society is evident in the religiously affiliated educational institutions. For instance, in 2012, Biola University, an evangelical Christian school, invited Nelson to speak on the theme of art and violence. Nelson (2015: 27) describes that she was struggling with whether to accept the invitation (which could pay for one-month babysitting for her son) or not because Biola University expels any students who engage in homosexual activities. Nelson (2015: 28) read online that Biola University is against any sex outside of “biblical marriage...a faithful, heterosexual union between one genetic male

and one genetic female”. Then, she found that there was a student group called “The Biola Queer Underground” (ibid.), which seemed promising to Nelson until she read the FAQ on their website. The question was related to “The Biola Queer Underground’s” position on homosexuality. They answered that they support any homosexual behavior “in its proper context: marriage...premarital sex is sinful and outside of God’s plan for humans and we believe that this standard also applied to homosexuals and other members of LGBTQ community” (A 2015: 28). Nelson illustrates that the dominant discourse can be so pervasive that it persists even within the groups which call themselves queer. At the end, Nelson declines the invitation because she does not support Biola’s doctrine, as well as the so-called queer student group which tries to classify when homosexual behavior is proper and when not. In this example, Nelson again illustrates that she also does not support the rise of homonormativity that advocates the same inclusion/exclusion binaries that characterize heteronormative groups within the queer community.

There are other examples that illustrate Nelson’s resistance to identity labels. Nelson (2015: 8) recalls that once at dinner with her friends, a presumably straight woman tells Nelson: “So, have you been with other women, before Harry? Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry”. Nelson becomes frustrated with those questions and assumptions. Nelson states that some people get angry if people do not openly identify as gay/lesbian. For instance, Nelson (2015: 9) refers to Djuna Barnes who preferred to say that she “just loved Thelma”, or Gertrude Stein who had similar statements about Alice B. Toklas. Then, Nelson (ibid.) gives an example of T. J. Clark’s who defended his interest in the painter Nicolas Poussin by stating that “the interest itself may still be more complete and human” than calling it as “hetero – (or homo) – sexist”. Nelson (ibid.) writes that “letting an individual experience of desire take precedence

over a categorical one” has always been romantic to her. This quote illustrates that Nelson prefers non-categorical explanations of relationships between people.

The next two examples are related to Nelson’s encounters with men, as a part of the patriarchal society, who indirectly provoked Nelson to think of her maternal identity by implying the incompatibility of the experience of pregnancy and writing. For instance, once Nelson (2015: 37) “ran into a superior” in the café who asked when her next book would be out. When Nelson answered that writing may take longer because her son had been born recently, he told her a story about his female colleague who became bored with her research after giving birth to a child. Then, the man stated that “But then, after two years, her interest came back” and repeated “It came back” (A 2015: 38). Here, Nelson (2015: 37) illustrates how the dominant voice of “a superior” connects women’s physicality and impossibility to continue other things than being a mother. He seems to support Nelson by assuring that she does not have to be worried because in two years (supposedly, after emotional and physical devotion and caretaking of her child), she will continue her career. In reality, he provokes Nelson to think that the public perception is that pregnancy and motherhood constrain her creativity. This is related to what Beauvoir states about motherhood and its association with immanence. Beauvoir’s answer is to search for transcendence outside motherhood, but Nelson sees a woman’s bodily experience not as her limitation, but a source of inspiration and therefore also a possibility for transcendence.

The next encounter occurs during her talk about her book on cruelty at New York University. A well-known playwright states:

“I can’t help but notice that you’re with child, which leads me to the question – how did you handle working on all this dark material [sadism, masochism, cruelty, violence, and so on] in your condition?” (A 2015: 91).

Nelson (ibid.) allows the reader to see that this is another example of provocations from the dominant group and its “wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*”. Nelson (ibid.) states that this is just the changed version of a “general oxymoron, *a woman who thinks*”. That famous playwright wanted to remind Nelson of her gender, her female experience, and incompatibility of writing on cruelty with being a mother. Nelson agrees that writing on more happier topics might be comforting for a baby during pregnancy. However, Nelson (2015: 92) writes that:

“babies grow in a helix of hope and fear; gestating draws one but deeper into the spiral. It isn’t cruel in there, but it’s dark. I would have explained this to the playwright, but he had already left the room”.

This quote shows that as a woman who experienced the processes of conceiving, carrying and laboring, she does not need the dominant culture’s suggestions on which topics to write as a woman and what is better to her baby. The playwright’s comment is related to Rich’s discussion of one of the assumptions of the institution of motherhood, which determines under which conditions to raise a child. Nelson’s response to the playwright’s comments shows to the reader the implications of those words to mothers and she answers with her creative thoughts without justifying anything. This is related to Moi’s discussion of the importance of noticing those provocations from the dominant culture and finding a way to answer them without apologizing and accepting those provocations.

The next two examples are related to the internalized patriarchal voices that are within Nelson’s circle of close people. For instance, Nelson (2015: 38) recalls that in the past, her mother would ask Nelson to change the channel to a male weatherman by saying “They usually have the more accurate forecast”. This is related to Rich’s discussion of the mother-daughter relationship, and how mothers teach patriarchal values to their daughters. When Nelson (ibid.)

argued that all weather people have the same scripts regardless of one's sex, her mother would answer that "It's just a feeling". Nelson (ibid.) argues that "it isn't just a feeling" and women are always suspected because of their sex. Nelson's (2015: 39) quotes the French feminist thinker and philosopher Luce Irigaray's answer to this problem as "to destroy... [but] with nuptial tools... the option left to me was to have a fling with the philosophers". Nelson cites Irigaray to show that in order to make a woman's voice heard, one needs to have intertextual intercourse with men philosophers, using their ideas, and responding to them with your voice. Throughout the book, Nelson adopts this strategy of using other people's voices to strengthen, but never to dominate her voice.

The other instance is related to her mother's gift of a mug with a picture of pregnant Nelson, Harry Dodge, and her stepson, taken during the Christmas holiday. When one of Nelson's friends saw the mug, she stated: "Wow...I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life" (A 2015: 13). Nelson contemplates what exactly represents heteronormativity in the mug: Nelson's participation in the family tradition of taking photos during the holiday, the representation of a queer household as a traditional family unit, her mother's gift as a representation of her acceptance of Nelson's family or Nelson's pregnancy? Nelson responds by raising an important idea that pregnancy is queer in nature. Nelson (2015: 13) states that pregnancy "profoundly alters one's "normal" state and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from one's body", in which "normal" is a state before transforming one's body in a "strange and wild and transformative" way. This is the case even in the most conventional pregnancy within a heterosexual relationship, because of the ways in which the developing child alters the mother's body and being. Nelson's claim that pregnancy is queer illustrates that she refuses one definition of subjectivity. Since a pregnant mother contains

another subject, mothers have multiple subjectivities. This is important because Nelson also aims at providing the reader her ‘self’ formed from different experiences and subjectivities, a self that is multiple and speaks in multiple discourses.

When Nelson describes the problematic nature of heteronormativity, later she also raises the problem of homonormativity. Nelson (2015: 72) states that “any bodily experience can be made new and strange” and that “no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative”. Nelson (2015: 73) views homonormativity as “a natural consequence of the decriminalization of homosexuality” that stops representing the “subversion, the subcultural, the underground ... in the same way”. Nelson (2015: 73) also thinks homonormativity would lead to the identification with “the worst stereotypes” in heteronormativity. When queer behavior starts being normative, it loses its radical resistance. Nelson wants to show that with the rise of homonormativity, queerness would define an identity, which it desperately wants to avoid and resist. This is related to Edelman’s definition of queerness, which aims at disrupting any identity classifications. Nelson (2015: 26) finds it troubling that currently some of the GLBTQ+ movements want to enter “two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military”. She (ibid.) quotes the American literary theorist Leo Bersani, who states that the troubling fact of homonormativity is that “*you can be victimized and in no way be radical; it happens very often among homosexuals as with every other oppressed minority*”. Nelson (ibid.) quotes Bersani to show that she does not devalue queerness. Instead, she says “we have our work cut out for us” because homonormativity is not a solution. In one of the interviews, Nelson gives her solution “I guess I’d say it’s (still) the revolution, man—the total rearrangement of society, economy, and mind” (Scarpa 2015).

Nelson also raises an important question on the difference between radicality and normalcy. Nelson (2015: 27) proposes to rethink the word “radical” into “openness” and quotes the American Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön who states that

“you’re the only one who knows when you’re suing things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you’re opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is – working with it rather than struggling against it. You’re the only one who knows” (A 2015: 27).

Nelson (ibid.) follows the quote by arguing that “the thing is, even you don’t always know”. Nelson’s response shows that she enters into a dialogue with Chödrön’s idea and Nelson’s answer is in her uncertainty. Nelson (2015: 98) admits that she is “afraid of assertion”. She (ibid.) quotes Roland Barthes, whose solution is that “it is language that is assertive, not her”. Barthes thinks of “add[ing] to each sentence some little phrase of uncertainty, as if anything that came out of language could make language tremble” (ibid.) as an absurd activity. Nevertheless, Nelson (ibid.) argues that her book is full of such uncertainties and “tremblings” which allows her to write in a language that is “neither native nor foreign” to her. This is one instance of her recognition of double-voiced discourse in her own writing. When Nelson (A 2015: 27) questions whether “openness” could be “good enough” to represent radicality, she applies Winnicott’s expression “good enough” (A 2015: 19) to describe whether words are good enough to stand for experience, thoughts, and identity. Nelson answers that words are never good enough, but the dominant society keeps using them to categorize people. However, Nelson also uses words, but she aims to disrupt those categorizations with her writing and to point out to the reader their detrimental consequences.

Nelson (2015: 25) argues that for queers “same-sex marriage” is not the same as desiring the “same sex”. She views same-sex marriage as a “shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy” (ibid.). This quote supports Edelman’s (2004: 17) definition of queerness, which disturbs the social structure created and sustained by patriarchy. Thus, being queer means understanding the detrimental consequences of patriarchy and interrupting its functioning. Nelson (2015: 75) quotes Edelman, who states “*Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized*”. Then, she refers to her friend, who succinctly puts it as “*Don’t produce and don’t reproduce*”. Even if Nelson’s mothering seems to go against Edelman’s criticism of a Child figure, Nelson (ibid.) understands that Edelman is not against “children per se”. Nelson (2015: 76) claims that people must disturb and challenge “the specific forces that mobilize and crouch behind its [Child’s] image”. Nelson’s queer family making supports her position. However, Nelson (2015: 32) feels disappointed with the fact that the dominant world perpetuates injustice to people who “savage the norms that desperately need savaging”. In the last quote, she positions herself as one of those people who want to challenge the laws and conventions that are oppressive to queer people, among other things, with her queer family making and queer pregnancy. Nelson also illustrates her non-hierarchical writing by combining Edelman and her friend’s thoughts that contribute to the multi-voiced discourse in the text.

The second example of the dominant voices in the text is the voices of famous thinkers like Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek, and Sigmund Freud. For instance, to show that Nelson is against classifications and fixed identity, first, Nelson (2015: 14) quotes Lacan’s statement that “*If a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so*”, meaning that a fixed belief on realness is problematic and can lead to psychosis. Nelson

wants to show that feeling real should never be aligned with identity. She supports Winnicott's idea of feeling real, which "is not reactive to external stimuli, nor it is an identity. It is a sensation – a sensation that spreads" (A 2015: 14). Nelson (2015: 18) also states that she has "long been lucky enough to *feel* real" even if those sensations brought depression into her life. To further explain why fixed claims of identity are dangerous, Nelson (2015: 15) starts her discussion on gender by first, citing the English poet and philosopher Denise Riley who argues that it is impossible to be aware of one's sex and gender for twenty-four hours. Then, Nelson (ibid.) refers to her friend, who thinks of "gender as a color". Nelson (ibid.) considers that gender and color share "a certain ontological indeterminacy: it isn't quite right to say that an object *is* a color, nor that the object *has* a color... Nor is color *voluntary*, precisely". Nelson (ibid.) argues that none of these statements means that "the object is colorless". To apply these formulations to people, Nelson argues that a person may still have gender assigned, but gender should not define the identity of the person. Then, Nelson quotes a passage from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* which argues that gender is about performativity, while performativity is "*the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms*" (A 2015: 15). In this discussion, Nelson starts with the thought of a great thinker, Lacan, and then adds the ideas and words of a psychotherapist, a poet, a friend, and a feminist thinker, to describe her thoughts of gender, identity, and performativity. Again, Nelson illustrates that her writing is non-hierarchical because the ideas of critical theorists and poets have the same value and use as of her personal friends. The great thinkers are not unquestioned authorities but partners in a dialogue, contributing to the multi-voiced discourse of the text.

Later in the book, Nelson (2015: 58) continues her discussion of performativity by describing her intellectual mother and one of the "many-gendered mothers" of Nelson's heart,

a college-professor of feminist theory, Christina Crosby. Crosby, like Butler, taught students to deconstruct identities and complicate the use of labels. Crosby was also Nelson's thesis advisor despite her dislike of Nelson's (2015: 60) "personal made political" position. The title of her thesis was "*The Performance of Intimacy*" (A 2015: 60). Nelson (ibid.) states that the "performance" was not in opposition to "the real", but the performance means "writing that dramatizes the ways in which we are for another or by virtue of another, not in a single instance, but from the start and always". Nelson places Butler's words inside her explanation, which suggests that Nelson writes on personal subjects and allows the reader to experience her writing from the beginning, especially, when the writing represents experiences that other people could relate to. This quote also implies Nelson's view of interdependence between people, which is evident in her writing and inclusion of different people's voices.

Nelson (2015: 45) also mentions the idea of a dramatized writing when she quotes the American poet Michael Snediker's "lyrical waxing". Snediker argues that sometimes "lyrical waxing" can ignore "the specificities of the situation" (A 2015: 45). Then, Nelson (2015: 46) quotes her another "many gendered mother", the poet Wayne Koestenbaum whose former girlfriend accused him of not writing to her, but to the "nothingness at the end of writing". Nelson (ibid.) responds that "the older I get, the more fearful I become of this nothingness, this waxing lyrical about those I love the most (Cordelia)". Here, Nelson (2015: 48) alludes to Shakespeare's *King Lear* where his younger daughter Cordelia refuses to take part in his love test by saying "Nothing". For Nelson (2015: 46), waxing lyrical might represent nothingness and Cordelia's tragic ending reminds Nelson of the potential consequences of her writing.

Since Nelson used assisted reproduction, she challenges Baudrillard and Žižek as the dominant voices related to her experience. Nelson (2015: 78) criticizes Jean Baudrillard's

argument that any assisted forms of reproduction lead to the “suicide of our species” because they separate procreation and sex and transform people from “moral, sex beings into clone-like messengers of an impossible immortality”. According to Baudrillard, artificial insemination would destroy what makes us human. Nelson (2015: 79) states that “I find it more embarrassing than enraging to read Baudrillard, Žižek, Badiou, and other revered philosophers” who contemplate how they can save the lives of the “sexed, moral being”. For Žižek (ibid.), this sexed being has the “transcendental difference that grounds human identity”, while “trans-gendered subject” is always doomed to “Masturbathon” which is “an ideal form of the sex activity of this trans-gendered subject”. Nelson criticizes two points in Žižek’s argument. Firstly, Žižek claims that there is only one sexed being with a fixed identity. The second is that trans-gendered people do not deserve the same sexual activity as the sexed being. Žižek argues that “it is love, the encounter of the Two, which ‘transubstantiates’ the idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper” (A 2015: 79). Nelson writes that these are the radical voices of current times. Her answer is to “leave them to their love, their event proper” (ibid.).

When Nelson (2015: 52) discusses the current trans-narrative, she questions the meaning of the word “trans”. Again, Nelson is unsure if the word is good enough to represent one feeling for all. For some people, the mainstream narrative like being “born in the wrong body” (ibid.) could be useful, while not for others. Nelson (2015: 53) states that “transitioning” could mean entering new gender for one, while “for others – like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T – it doesn’t?”. Instead, Harry Dodge states “*I’m not on my way anywhere*” (ibid.). In other words, he challenges trans experience as a journey to a fixed and stable identity. Nelson (2015: 7) recalls the period of her “pronoun avoidance” to Harry Dodge. She (ibid.) explains that one needs to “learn to tolerate an instance beyond the Two” even when representing the nuptial

partnership. Nelson (ibid.) quotes Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet who state that nuptials “*are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is – simply the outline of a becoming*”. Later, she (2015: 18) quotes the feminist thinker Sara Ahmed who states that the “*moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you*”. Although Nelson (2015: 7) understands the meaning of this quote, she still feels “shame or befuddlement” for those people who keep making presumptions. For instance, Nelson encounters those problems when she books airline tickets to her and Harry Dodge or deals with the human resources department. The problem is that Nelson (ibid.) cannot correct them because “words are not good enough”.

Nelson (2015: 53) engages in a dialogue with Spanish philosopher and writer Paul B. Preciado, who also transitioned from female to male. Preciado (A 2015: 53) states:

“I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that she state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don’t want any of it”.

This quote shows how this “irresolution” (ibid.) of gender is fine with some people. Not everything has to be placed into labels and categories. Nelson’s (ibid.) response is that the best way to know “how people feel about their gender or their sexuality...is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly” without imposing your version of reality into others. However, those people who keep categorizing engage in what Nelson (ibid.) states “*presumptuousness*”. Nelson (ibid.) then quotes Butler, who argues that after writing the whole book that challenges identity politics, people read her book as an example of lesbian identity politics. Butler calls the problem as the “commodification of identity” (A 2015: 54). Nelson (ibid.) writes that a person who calls lesbian as *identitarian* simply means that “the listener who

cannot get beyond the identity that he has imputed to the speaker”. Calling the speaker *identitarian* works as “an excuse not to listen to her” (ibid.). At the end, Nelson (ibid.) argues that Jacques Ranciere, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek can speak on the topics of Self and Other, determination of the existence of only Two, “all at the feet of yet another great white man pontificating from the podium, just as we’ve don’t for centuries” (A 2015: 54). Nelson is ironic about the abstract nature of most philosophical discussions that are not related to the lived experiences of queer people. Thus, instead, she uses Preciado and Butler’s ideas to show the problems of binary identity categorizations and, through that evokes Edelman’s (2004) definition of queerness.

She next challenges Sigmund Freud’s distorted discussion of a mother’s pleasure in the Castration Complex theory. Nelson (2015: 20) quotes the feminist thinker Elizabeth Weed who asks, “*Do castration and the Phallus tell us the deep Truths of Western Culture or just the truth of how things are and might not always be?*”. Nelson (ibid.) responds that “It astonishes and shames me to think that I spent years finding such questions not only comprehensible, but compelling”. This quote illustrates that Nelson has previously had a more respectful attitude toward the authority of the great thinkers and their abstract thoughts. Now, she uses Freud’s ideas to show the faults in his discussion.

Instead, Nelson (2015: 69) stresses a mother’s pleasure by using the feminist thinker Susan Fraiman’s analysis of sodomitical maternity, a mother with access to “non-normative, nonprocreative sexuality, to sexuality in excess of the dutifully instrumental”. This allows Nelson to describe queer family-making and queer mothering. Nelson (2015: 70) gives the example of sodomitical maternity in A.L. Steiner’s 2012 installation *Puppies and Babies*. Nelson (2015: 72) wonders if Fraiman’s sodomitical maternity needs a revision by combining

sodomitical parenthood, caretaking, and love between animals and people. Nelson (2015: 72) believes that one of the benefits of “genderqueer family making ... is the revelation of caretaking as detachable from – and attachable to – any gender, any sentient being”. Family making is not just about reproduction but new notions of caregiving. Childrearing in queer families disrupts the importance of gender categorization, thereby caretaking ceases to be solely a mother’s role like in patriarchy. Nelson (2015: 72) stresses that “queer family making is an umbrella category under which baby making might be a subset”. In other words, while in traditional families, reproduction is often the core of being, queer families are open to a wide range of practices and have other aims beyond reproduction. This has clear parallels with Rich’s notion of mothering.

Nelson (2015: 97) also situates herself as a queer mother in her discussion of Silverman’s “maternal finitude”. Nelson (ibid.) quotes Silverman’s statement that “Our culture should support [the mother] by providing enabling representations of maternal finitude”. The maternal finitude is the belief that mothers should not devote themselves entirely to their children. This view is related to Rich’s (1986) and O’Reilly’s (2004) discussion of empowering mothering which aims to show that mothers have their agency and autonomy. Children must be taught from childhood that there is no infinite presence of the mother and that children are not the sole source of happiness for a mother.

The discussion of both maternal finitude and sodomitical maternity emphasizes that mothers should be given the freedom to receive pleasure from other experiences than from their role as mothers, illustrating Rich’s empowering mothering. Nelson (2015: 140) states that she “will be the right kind of finite or sodomitical mother” to her son. She would not lose herself but will give as much as she can. She will try to show that she is a person with her “own needs

and desires” (A 2015: 140). Nelson practices empowering mothering by maintaining her agency. Nelson (2015: 96) discusses the necessity to teach a child of the “me and the not me” so that she gets her personal space. This example shows how Nelson’s experience differs from the institutional motherhood which limits women’s individuality, agency and autonomy.

The last dominant voice in the text is related to the traditional discourse on motherhood. The first example is related to the time when Nelson (2015: 39) attended a seminar talk by Jane Gallop and Rosalind Krauss, where Gallop presented the photography of her and her son being naked in the bathtub from the position of the photographed subject, a mother. She alluded to Roland Barthes, for whom, “the mother remains the (photographed) object; the son, the (writing) subject” (A 2015: 40). Nelson (*ibid.*) states that this is not always the case, because “sometimes the writer is also the mother (Möbius strip)”. Nelson gives the imagery of the Möbius strip to suggest that a mother’s identity has multiple subjectivities, even if on the surface there is only one side. This is also related to Nelson’s description of pregnancy being queer in nature because it supports the mother’s multiple subjectivities. Krauss accused Gallop of misusing Barthes’ ideas and “taking her own personal situation as subject matter” (A 2015: 41). Nelson (*ibid.*) argues that Krauss’s main criticism was that “Gallop’s maternity had rotted her mind” because staging “a fling with a philosopher” cannot be equated with a mother who is proud of presenting a picture of her ordinary experience. At that time, Nelson’s response to Krauss’s shaming of Gallop for presenting her personal maternal experience in the public was incomprehensible. Nelson (2015: 42) states “I felt no choice. I stood with Gallop”. Nelson illustrates that even among feminist thinkers, there might be disagreements on whether a woman’s maternity experience should be a source of academic work and authority. Nelson (2015: 41) puts it as “two perversities that proved, on this occasion, to be incompatible”. Nelson’s support for Gallop

can be seen as another instance of Rich's empowering mothering that aims to present a woman's experience of maternity as a source of her power, not a constraint.

Nelson (2015: 99) continues her support of the idea that the personal is political in her example of Steiner's installation *Puppies and Babies*. One photo depicted Steiner's ex-lover, Layla Childs, who was pumping milk using "'a hands free" pumping bra and double electric pump" (A 2015: 99). Nelson (ibid.) states that "pumping milk is, for many women, a sharply private activity" because it reminds mothers of their similarities with mammals. However, Nelson argues that pumping is not just about nourishing a child, but also stands for accepting "of distance, of maternal finitude" (ibid.). This is because sometimes mothers could not be there for their children "either by choice or by necessity" (ibid.). Nelson (2015: 100) also confesses that she wrote 90% of the book while she was free, and 10% while she was in the hospital pumping milk into the machine. Nelson describes her private maternal activity and makes it public for the reader to show that she was able to transform her maternal experience into creativity in writing.

The second example of the dominant voice in the traditional discourse on motherhood is related to Nelson's pondering about advice books. For instance, Nelson (2015: 43) discusses the fact that "The most oft-cited, well-respected, best-selling books about the caretaking of babies ... are mostly by men". As a feminist, Nelson questions why books written by women are not popular. Even if a woman is part of the book, her contribution is only in the sidebars and as anecdotes. Nelson (ibid.) admits that among all books on caretaking, she also chooses male pediatrician and psychologist, Donald Winnicott's "contaminated" ideas on actual mothers' experiences of pregnancy and caretaking. Nelson (2015: 19) uses Winnicott's concept of "good enough mothering" according to which mothers do not need to be available to children upon

their every cry and frustration. Instead, mothers should teach children the realities of life by being not perfect, but good enough. However, even if she chooses and praises his explanation, she also questions why *Winnicott on the Child* has three introductions by male pediatricians, and not a single female one (A 2015: 43). This illustrates that Nelson (2015: 39) also has a “fling with the philosophers”, but she notices their shortcomings and points them out to the reader. Nelson (2015: 44) also questions William Sears’s *The Baby Book*, with a little sidebar, which states that having sexual feelings towards a baby as a result of breastfeeding should be forgiven because the hormones during sex and breastfeeding are similar. Nelson (ibid.) disagrees with this position and asks, “How can it be a mix-up, if it’s the same hormones?”. Instead, she (ibid.) argues that “It isn’t *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair...It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology”, showing that one should not partition one presumably real feeling from the other. Nelson (2015: 20) also quotes the American writer Susan Sontag who states that “*In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.*” Nelson (ibid.) answers that she does not want an eros, nor hermeneutics of her child because both are not “dirty” and “mirthful, enough”. Thus, Nelson again shows that words are not good enough because of being distanced from experience.

Nelson maintains a dialogue with Winnicott’s ideas with other people throughout the book. For instance, Peter Sloterdijk describes the “rule of a negative gynecology” (A 2015: 37), which argues that any outside observations into intimate relationship between a mother and her child is a fundamental mistake. Even if Nelson (ibid.) agrees with this view, she states at the end that “But here’s the catch: *I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write*”. Nelson reminds the reader that even if she wants to remain inside the bubble with her child, she still has to connect with the outside world. In Sloterdijk’s terms, the bubble consists of “blood, amniotic fluid, voice, sonic bubble and breath” (A 2015: 36), meaning the interconnected relationship

between a mother and a child. In contrast, Nelson (2015: 37) quotes Winnicott's idea that "*When a mother has a capacity quite simply to be a mother we must never interfere*". Nelson (ibid.) responds that "As if mothers thought they were performing their ordinary devotions in the wild, then are stunned to look up, and see a peanut-crunching crowd across a moat". The ironic reference to the public who takes obsessive interest in mothers' private decisions about their children argues that today we do not trust mothers but want to subject them to different normative standards. Even if Nelson agrees with Winnicott and Sloterdijk, she still responds to their views and has the final say.

The third example of the dominant voice of the traditional discourse on motherhood is *The New York Times* book review that stated that literature about motherhood is not interesting to read because writing well about children is difficult. However, the review continues, "What is interesting is that despite the mind-numbing boredom that constitutes 95 percent of child rearing, we continue to have them" (A 2015: 71). Nelson (ibid.) responds by stating that "how could this latter proposition truly fascinate?" if almost in every society, having children is associated with a meaningful life and women are punished by different means for their refusal to become mothers. Here, Nelson agrees with Beauvoir, who demystified motherhood as the only place for happiness and meaningful life for women. The response also reminds the readers that the same dominant discourse that assumes that all women should want to be mothers, nevertheless, stresses that motherhood locks women into immanence, like the reviewer who thinks that it is boring to read about. Nelson challenges this view by making the reader to think of who gets to decide what is boring?

The next example is related to the period when Nelson (2015: 92) was pregnant and visited the doctor to check on her baby. In the traditional discourse on motherhood, mothers are

supposed to visit doctors regularly and have check-ups. Nelson then asked her doctor why they have to measure her baby's organs and have an ultrasound every week if they cannot change and affect when the baby would be born. The doctor, avoiding Nelson's eyes, answers that "*Most mothers want to know as much as possible about the condition of their babies*" (ibid.). Nelson tries to make the reader question the norms that subject an even unborn baby to constant monitoring and comparison to different norms. Nelson (2015: 94) recalls how the technician always exclaimed like "*Boy, he's sure proud of his stuff*" or "*He really likes to show it off*" every time she printed the photos from an ultrasound. At that time, Nelson (ibid.) thought that "just let him wheel around in his sac" and "let him stay oblivious" because even in utero, the baby is asked to perform a self to others. Nelson (2015: 95) continues her thoughts by stating that a person develops "in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us". As a result of all those projections, "a self" (ibid.) develops. Nelson looks at "a self" (ibid.) as a snowball and Argo.

The imagery of Argo, which is a part of the title of the book, comes from Roland Barthes' description of the ship Argo whose parts are replaced and rebuilt over time, but the ship remains Argo (A 2015: 5). This imagery is important on multiple levels because Nelson (2015: 95) wants to show that subjectivity is "relational, and it is strange". The last quote is from the "many gendered mothers" (A 2015: 57) of her heart, the American gender studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Nelson alludes to Sedgwick's quote twice in the book. The first is in relation to what is queer. Nelson (2015: 29) argues that Sedgwick wanted the "term to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of placeholder – a nominative, like *Argo*... a means of asserting while also giving the slip". In other words, Sedgwick wanted the term queer to disrupt identity categorizations, as well as defining an identity. The second allusion is in relation to subjectivity. This means that

Nelson uses Argo imagery to denote both the subjectivity and queerness. Combining both, Argo stands for her queer identity because Nelson resists a single definition of subjectivity. Nelson states that there is constant interdependence with others right from the moment a baby is in a mother's belly. Nelson (2015: 95) uses Butler's quote for the second time as well, which states that "*We are for another, or by virtue of another*" to support her view. In the first instance, Nelson (2015: 60) uses Butler to show interdependence in writing, while here, Nelson (2015: 95) argues for intersubjectivity between people. Nelson's choice of repeating quotes illustrates that she uses Butler and Sedgwick's ideas to produce her argument, viewing them as her collaborators.

The imagery of Argo also stands for body transformations in the book. In traditional pregnancies, it is only the mother's body that undergoes dramatic changes while the father can continue with his previous life undisturbed. This is not the case in Nelson's family. Nelson describes the transformation of her body during pregnancy in parallel with the transformation of her partner's body, who was injecting testosterone and getting ready for the top-removal surgery. Nelson (2015: 83) reflects on the instance in the restaurant, when she passed as a pregnant woman, and Dodge passed as a man. She states that on the outside it seemed that she was becoming more female, while her partner was becoming more male. However, on the inside, they simply were "undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness...we were aging" (A 2015: 83). As their bodies change together like the ship Argo, Nelson argues that they have not changed on the inside. Nelson illustrates how they were interdependent during those bodily transformations. For instance, Dodge supported Nelson while she was preparing for pregnancy and visiting doctors, while Nelson was helping Dodge by injecting testosterone and changing bandages after the double mastectomy operation. Nelson

(2015: 80) writes “I was dizzy and exhausted from early pregnancy and the suffocating heat and you were just barely over the lip of the Vicodin”. Nelson (2015: 86) also writes about her partner that “Via T, you’ve experienced surges of heat, an adolescent budding, your sexuality coming down from the labyrinth of your mind” which illustrates his ambiguous feeling and effect of those changes. As they witness each other’s changes, Nelson also describes her ambivalent feeling via pregnancy.

Nelson (2015: 86) describes her ambiguous physical and emotional feeling of fullness and quiver, after pregnancy. She (2015: 84) compares her state to the poem line “falling forever, falling to pieces”. Carrying a child and then giving birth is a difficult activity. In the past, it was a taboo to describe the pain women feel while giving birth. In patriarchal motherhood, mothers are expected to express happiness about their pregnancy and children. However, Nelson is sincere in her description of ambiguity. Even if she (2015: 86) loves her child, this feeling of having been scattered to pieces remains while she was writing her book two years after giving birth. For Nelson (2015: 124), “to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces”. This quote supports the fragmented feeling that accompanies mothers. This ambiguity is also parallel to Beauvoir’s description of motherhood as a complex and ambiguous experience in women’s lives. Nelson (2015: 109) also recalls how the woman at the hospital gave her an elastic-plastic band for her belly and said, “Thanks for doing your part to keep America beautiful”. Nelson has in a way become the reproductive machine in society’s eyes. Nelson (ibid.) states with criticism that “who cares what SHE feels like doing? It’s her conjugal duty to get over a massive physical event”. This quote shows how Nelson criticizes the patriarchal institution’s ideology which requires women to hide the painful and disfiguring aspects of pregnancy and to always position themselves for the critical male gaze.

Nelson's exploration of her experience of pregnancy implicitly argues against Beauvoir. Beauvoir thinks that pregnancy ties a woman to the tradition and immanence. Nelson's experience of pregnancy is not oppressive or locking her into immanence. Viewed from the perspective of Rich's mothering and female experience outside of patriarchal institutions, pregnancy becomes a possibility to observe her own changing body with wonder. Nelson (2015: 103) contemplates "the capaciousness of growing a baby" and discusses the transformation of her internal organs, the dirt collecting in her belly, her breasts filling up, and feeling hard and painful. This honest and open portrayal of pregnancy shows that the experience is transformative but also challenging.

When Nelson (2015: 129) was giving birth to her son, Iggy, her partner's mother dies. Since Nelson's book is about Harry Dodge and to him (the book's dedication is "*For Harry*"), she gives the reader his actual voice. In one of the interviews, Nelson admits that his testimony of his mother's death in parallel with her portrayal of their son's birth works as her interpretation of interdependence and intersubjectivity (Perta 2015). Nelson wants to show the separateness of their experiences, but also that they are deeply connected.

Nelson also illustrates the difficulties of being queer family on the inside, while passing as traditional heterosexual family on the outside. Nelson recalls how Harry Dodge wanted to pay with his credit card at a restaurant, and the waiter asked whether the card belonged to Nelson. Nelson (2015: 89) remained silent until Dodge answered that the card is his, but "it's complicated". When Nelson (2015: 138) and Dodge went to the hospital to check on their baby, the nurse exclaimed how she is happy "to see a father helping out with a baby". This instance illustrates that in the traditional discourse on motherhood, mothers take the sole responsibility for child-rearing. As a result, it becomes surprising when fathers are involved in those activities.

The stereotypical image is also transferred to the queer family because outwardly they pass as heteronormative.

Nelson's stepmother experience can also be classified as part of her queer mothering experience. In the traditional, heterosexual family setting, her stepson is supposed to have one mother and one father. However, Harry Dodge, as the primary caregiver to his son, forms a union with a woman, Nelson, who becomes another mother, and caregiver. Nelson (2015: 21) argues that all stepparents are publicly perceived as "interlopers, self-servers, poachers, pollutants, and child molesters". Any stepparent is an intruder who breaks and disrupts the previously normal state of a family. Nelson's description of her step-parenting shows her to be anything but a poacher or self-server. Instead, Nelson devotes her time and love to her stepson. In one of the games in which he pronounced *b* sound for *m* sound, he proclaimed her as his *Bombi*, meaning Mommy (A 2015: 23). Nelson becomes a mother to her stepson, not privileging her own birth child over Harry Dodge's.

Nelson does not only resist the heteronormative vision of gender roles and motherhood, but also the very idea that women naturally enjoy domesticity and taking care of the home. When Nelson (2015: 12) describes her thoughts on domesticity, she recalls how she was renting an apartment in New York City because renting "allows you to let things literally fall apart all around you". Then she quotes the feminist thinker Susan Fraiman who argued for "*the decline of the domestic as a separate, inherently female sphere and the vindication of domesticity as an ethic, an affect, an aesthetic, and a public*" (A 2015: 12). Nelson then questions this assertion by replying that "in my book I was angling for something of the same" (ibid.). Nelson (ibid.) argues that she did not have a domestic and she "liked it that way". This flow of thoughts

illustrates how Nelson uses a feminist thinker's argument of domesticity and gives her personal experience.

Nelson also addresses the ways in which society views women's aging. For instance, she (A 2015: 55) alludes to the American novelist Dodie Bellamy, who asked "*do labia really start to hang? She said, yes, just like men's balls, gravity makes the labia hang. I told her I never noticed that, I'd have to take a look*". Nelson states that she was contemplating the aging female body and feels repulsive to Allen Ginsberg's misogynistic description of his mother Naomi's genitalia. Then, Nelson (2015: 56) describes how "the image of that decaying, cackling crone" from *The Shining* remained in her memory. Nelson (2015: 57) alludes to Bellamy's response to Jonathan Franzen's portrayal of a middle-aged woman's insecurity. Bellamy provides "the sappy image of a crone to wipe out the evil Franzen-view" (A 2015: 57). Nelson illustrates how male authors describe the aging female body negatively. Instead, Nelson (ibid.) describes people whom she calls her "sappy crones (except that they aren't really sappy, and they're not really crones)". She refers to them as "many gendered mothers of my heart" (ibid.), the term borrowed from the American poet and writer, Dana Ward. For Nelson (ibid.), "the many gendered mothers" of her heart are those people who influenced her thinking and her writing pays homage to them.

Autofiction and Multi-Voiced Discourse

The previous section analyzed Nelson's writing using Showalter's (1981) notion of double-voiced discourse. Nelson describes her queer family-making, pregnancy, and mothering that is permeated with the dominant discourse and always struggling against it. However, Showalter's (1981) framework of the muted/dominant is too binary to describe Nelson's

experience. Therefore, Nelson queers her writing and produces a multi-voiced discourse. Nelson's multi-voiced discourse is evident in her dialogues with different people including her many gendered mothers (A 2015: 57), feminist thinkers, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, poets, authors, friends, and her partner. Although there is no one dominant voice in the book, Nelson controls those voices that strengthen her distinct voice and connect multiple subjectivities into a unified self, like the image of the Argo echoed in the title of her book. This argument illustrates that Nelson's book resists one fixed definition of identity.

Nelson achieves this multi-voiced discourse by combining genres. The most prominent among them is autofiction. It is in itself can be seen as an example of multi-voiced discourse combining both autobiography and fictional elements. Autofiction allows Nelson to go beyond the limiting categorizations of traditional autobiographical genre, as well as of solely theoretical texts. For instance, in traditional autobiography, the narrative form is usually ordered and linear. Instead, Nelson writes in fragments and pieces. Following the image of the ship Argo, Nelson's fragmented writing becomes the unified book of her experiences. Moreover, autofiction allows Nelson to create a "fictionalization of a framework" (Jones 2010: 178) in terms of her writing style that includes other people's ideas through references both directly and on the margins, which is not a usual way of using citations in traditional autobiography. Autofiction also allows Nelson to represent her multiple subjectivities that are denied in traditional autobiography.

Nelson's fictional elements are also evident in her creative style combined with complex theories in line with her personal lived experiences. Unlike in academic writing, those complex theories have the same weight as her friends' contributions and ideas. The inclusion of many voices makes the text fragmented and unstructured, but this is a conscious strategy to show the unstructured nature of experience and yet produces a unified collage that describes her identity.

Nelson (2015: 128) writes that she is “more of an empiricist, insofar as my aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced”. This quote supports Sturgeon’s (2014) argument that autofiction allows authors to move away from finding “authenticity and the relationship to truth” into the discussion on “how to live or how to create”.

There are other more explicit instances that support that Nelson’s book is an autofiction. For instance, she affirms at the beginning that “I’m writing this in public now” (A 2015: 12). This is related to what Gasparini (2008) suggested as the key element of autofiction, the relationship with time, that is everything is written in the present tense. Nelson (2015: 46) also questions if a book can be “both a free expression and a negotiation” when she gives a draft of a book to Harry Dodge. Eventually, Nelson’s book includes the elements of both autobiography and fiction.

Nelson considers writing as her own place of expressing her inner thoughts and her true self. This is related to Jones’ (2010) argument that autofiction allows the author to represent the deeper truth of selfhood. For instance, Nelson (2015: 47) states that “writing has been the only place I have felt it [my own me] plausible to find it”. Nelson (2015: 60) states that even if “there is a persona or performativity” in her writing, this does not mean that she is not herself in writing; instead, she is struggling to make the personal into the public. Nevertheless, she wrote about the personal and queer parts of her life and made the reader feel strong connectedness by engaging and talking directly to the audience. For instance, she (A 2015: 74) states that “You may keep saying you only speak for yourself but your very presence in the public sphere begins to congeal difference into a single feature”. This quote illustrates that even if she describes her family experience as a part belonging to her life, she is aware of how quickly this can be

transformed into a non-queer normativity. When Nelson (2015: 97) describes her aim of writing *The Argonauts* she states that “I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth”, where she admits that her text is an attempt to convey the complications of her experiences and mode of thinking to the reader. In turn, the reader can read ‘we’, where Nelson writes ‘I’. This shows how autofiction allows one to explore his/her experience experimentally, without submitting it to the genre requirements of autobiography.

Finally, on the first page, Nelson (2015: 3) describes her writing and alludes to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea that “the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed” and “Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent”. Nelson says that the paradox of these statements explains why she writes and how she feels about writing. For instance, Nelson does not know which words to use to describe the inexpressible things, and if they have to be good enough to stand for her ideas and experiences. Nevertheless, Nelson keeps writing and representing them to the audience. In one of the interviews (Perta 2015), Nelson states that one cannot fully control “the inexpressible” things and “call something into being”. However, Nelson states that “we can always sing” (ibid.). This is exactly how Nelson (2015: 143) finishes her book. She rhymes the last sentence and produces a musical effect, reminding a song: “But is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don’t know. I know we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song” (ibid.).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyze the representation of queer mothering experience in Maggie Nelson's (2015) autofiction *The Argonauts*. The broader social aim was to analyze the changing meaning of motherhood through the autofiction genre in the face of social changes in the understanding and structure of family.

In introduction, the thesis described the social changes that affect the notion of motherhood and explain the boom in books about mothering. Those social changes include a diverse range of family practices in American society from the 1950s, including changes in traditional heterosexual marriages (decrease in marriages, increase in divorces, cohabitation, and single-parenthood) and challenges to the traditional heterosexual institution of family (increases in same-sex and queer families). The thesis focused on the life-writing genre because it is perceived to be authentic in its representation of life experiences of people affected by those changes. Since life-writing is a complex phenomenon, I described autobiography and autofiction, the genre analyzed in the present thesis. To explain further how and why women write about their experiences, I described the ideology of 'new momism' (Douglas and Michaels 2004) in consumer culture which is an extension of 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1991: 26) that explains an increase in literature about motherhood. I concluded by stating that even if most motherhood memoirs to an extent at least perpetuate patriarchal ideology they also represent people's reactions to social changes because mothers often write in a language and narrative form which resists the dominant cultural construction of motherhood.

The first part of the first core chapter gave an overview of Elaine Showalter's (1981: 457) gynocritical model and four approaches to answer the question "What is distinct about

women's writing?'. This return to the early feminist criticism of the 1980s is necessary because, according to Moi (2008: 261), some of the second-wave feminist questions were never answered definitely because of the rise of poststructuralism in the 1990s which stressed the notion of the death of the author. Since one of the questions that has remained under-explored in feminist criticism after the 1980s is the question of the specific poetics of women's writing, I applied Showalter's (1981) notion of the double-voiced discourse to find a specifically female poetics and to read it in the context of contemporary queer theory.

The second part of the first core chapter described Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) contribution to the understanding of many aspects of female experience, including mothering. Although Beauvoir's text is very old, recent feminist scholarship (e.g., Stone 2017) has returned to it because Beauvoir was the first to describe the complexities and ambiguities of women's experiences of motherhood. In the next part, Beauvoir's ideas were compared to those of Adrienne Rich (1986) whose discussion of the two meanings of motherhood I placed within Showalter's (1981) framework of double-voiced discourse. Rich's deconstruction of motherhood paved the way to a new feminist discussion of motherhood, including "empowering mothering ... as a site of power and resistance for women" (O'Reilly 2004: 10).

The third part of the first core chapter described Lee Edelman's (2004: 17) definition of queerness, according to which "queerness can never define an identity, it can only disturb one". According to Edelman, queerness stresses that identity is constructed, and therefore it cannot be defined as a singular notion. Moreover, queerness is against the rhetoric of reproductive futurism that is largely heteronormative. The section also pointed out that Edelman's argument is not about the rejection of children per se, but against the rhetoric which is oppressive towards queer people in the name of a Child figure. Similarly to Rich's (1986) mothering experience

which is in opposition to the institutional motherhood, queer mothering includes a variety of mothering practices that resists the institution of patriarchy and its ideology by offering empowering mothering experience.

The second core chapter analyzed the representation of queer mothering in *The Argonauts* by applying Showalter's (1981) notion of the double-voiced discourse. This chapter analyzed the dominant voices in the text including the signs of patriarchal and homophobic society, the voices of great thinkers, and traditional discourse on motherhood, and Nelson's subversive responses to those dominant voices. Nelson illustrates the complex nature of the dominant voices because some of them are explicit, while others implicit and internalized. Among explicit instances are the voices of famous thinkers like Freud who erased the discussion of mother's pleasure from his Castration Complex theory, Baudrillard who is against any assisted forms of reproduction, and Žižek who distinguishes between what he considers proper love and sexual activities for sexed beings and trans-subjects. Among implicit dominant voices are the instances with men who provoked Nelson to think about the incompatibility of motherhood and writing. Nelson also illustrates internalized patriarchal voices in terms of her mother, and one of her friends who called the mug with a picture of Nelson's family heteronormative.

This thesis showed that Edelman's definition of queerness is applicable to Nelson because she speaks against those voices that produce binary categorizations and fixed claims of identity. For instance, when Nelson describes the detrimental consequences of heteronormativity for queer people, she also states the problems with the rise of homonormativity. Nelson also raises an important idea of pregnancy being queer in nature because a mother has multiple subjectivities as she contains another subject. The thesis also

illustrated that Nelson implicitly argues against Beauvoir's claim that motherhood locks women into immanence. Instead, Nelson transforms her mothering experience into creativity. Finally, Nelson's queer mothering experience becomes an example of Rich's empowering mothering because Nelson shows that her mothering is a source of power, not a constraint, by maintaining her agency and autonomy.

Thus, the second chapter illustrated to what extent Nelson engages in queer mothering experience which includes a variety of mothering practices that resist the dominant construction of motherhood and its ideology. Firstly, Nelson used assisted reproduction and in-vitro fertilization to become pregnant which resists Baudrillard's argument (A 2015: 78). Secondly, she (A 2015: 95) proposes that pregnancy is queer in nature because a mother has multiple subjectivities that are "relational" and "strange". Nelson also points to the intersubjectivity and interdependence between people and that "We are for another, or by virtue of another" (A 2015: 95) from the moment a child is conceived. Thirdly, Nelson refers to Fraiman's "sodomitical maternity" (A 2015: 69), Silverman's "maternal finitude" (A 2015: 97), and Winnicott's "good enough mothering" (A 2015: 19) that supports her position as a mother with her own needs, pleasures and autonomy. Finally, Nelson's stepmothering experience is also a part of her queer mothering experience because of her queer family making with her gender-fluid partner, Harry Dodge.

The thesis also found out that Showalter's (1981) double-voiced discourse framework is too binary to describe Nelson's experience. Therefore, Nelson queers her writing and produces a multi-voiced discourse which is evident in Nelson's engagement in dialogues with different people including feminist thinkers, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, poets, authors, friends and her partner, Harry Dodge, that produces her distinct voice and identity. Nelson's

choice of writing autofiction is also an example of a multi-voiced discourse that combines both autobiography and fictional elements. Autofiction allows Nelson to go beyond the limits of traditional autobiographical genre and of solely theoretical texts. Nelson creatively combines complex theories in parallel with her personal lived experiences that produce a unified collage of her identity. As a result, Nelson's writing allows the reader to read 'we', when she writes 'I', thereby showing a deeper truth of her identity.

Even if this MA thesis answered the main research question of the representation of queer mothering in *The Argonauts*, there are three potential further research suggestions. The first is to expand the theoretical framework of the double-voiced discourse and read the text using Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) multi-voiced discourse. The thesis claimed that Showalter's framework is too binary, but, because of the limitations of the length of the thesis, the multi-voiced discourse framework was not developed extensively. Although the double-voiced discourse model allowed me to describe the complex nature of dominant voices in the text, there is potential for more nuanced future analysis.

The second further research suggestion is to expand the theoretical framework in a new context. This MA thesis focused on the traditional discourse of motherhood in American society. However, there might be differences in other societies. The final suggestion is to analyze whether double-voiced discourse can be used to study Nelson's other works of fiction and whether there will be significant differences in the results.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ramilya Bakiyeva

The Representation of Queer Mothering in Maggie Nelson's Autofiction *The Argonauts*
Queer-emaduse kujutamine Maggie Nelsoni autofiktsioonaalses teoses *The Argonauts*

Magistritöö

2020

Lehekülgede arv: 75

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev magistritöö uurib emaduse kujutamist autofiktsioonis ja kuidas see peegeldab perekonna olemuse ja selle struktuuriga seotud ühiskondlikke muutuseid. Töö peamine eesmärk on uurida, millisel määral esineb *queer*-emaduse kogemus Maggie Nelsoni 2015. aastal avaldatud autofiktsioonaalses teoses „*The Argonauts*“.

Magistritöö koosneb sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest. Töö sissejuhatus annab ülevaate magistritöö olulisusest ja arutleb, millised sotsiaalsed muutused on mõjutanud arusaama emadusest ning selgitab, miks emadusest on kirjutatud üha enam raamatuid. Magistritöös uuritakse konkreetsemalt autofiktsiooni kui žanri emaduse kujutamiseks.

Magistritöö esimene peatükk koosneb kolmest osast. Esimeses osas arutletakse Elaine Showalteri (1981) günokriitika ja kahehäälsuse diskursuse üle, millele toetudes analüüsitakse teost „*The Argonauts*“. Peatüki teises osas arutletakse erinevate emadust puudutavate feministlike arutelude, nt Simone de Beauvoir'i (1949/2011) arutelu emadusest ja Adrienne Richi (1986) mõttekäigu sõnade *motherhood* ja *mothering* erinevusest. Peatüki kolmas osa arutleb, kuidas Lee Edelman defineerib mõistet *queerness* ja kuidas see sobitub emaduse ja Richi mõttekäikudega.

Magistritöö teine peatükk kasutab Showlater'i (1981) kahehäälsuse diskursuse mõistet analüüsima teost „*The Argonauts*“ ning näitab dominantsete hääle olemasolu nimetatud teoses ja Nelsoni vastuseid nendele häälele. Magistritöös pakutakse, et kahehäälsuse diskursus on liialt binaarne kirjeldamiseks Nelsoni kogemusi ja seetõttu võib väita, et „*The Argonauts*“ on võimalik käsitleda kui mitmehäälsust. Peatüki viimane osa kirjeldab, kuidas autofiktsiooni paindlikud raamid võimaldavad Nelsonil luua mitmehäälsust diskursust arutlemaks enda alternatiivse emaduse kogemuse üle.

Tööst selgub, et Nelson piltlikustab dominantsete hääle keerulist olemust, sest mõned sellistest häälest on ilmsed, teised varjatud ja kolmandad hoopistükkis sisemised. Lisaks näidatakse magistritöös, et Edelman'i (2004) definitsioon mõiste *queerness* kohta sobib ka Nelsoni omaga, sest viimane kõneleb nende hääle vastu, mis vaatlevad identiteeti binaarselt. Muuhulgas näidatakse magistritöös, kuidas Nelson vastandab kaudselt end Beauvoir'i (1949/2011) emadusekäsitlusele. Kokkuvõttes sobitub Nelsoni alternatiivne emaduse kogemus Richi (1986) arutlusega, sest Nelson näitab, et emaks olemine on loov ja võimustav.

Märksõnad: Maggie Nelson, Ameerika kirjandus, autofiktsioon, kahehäälsus, *queer mothering*

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