

Maternal Neonaticide, Shame and Social Melancholy in Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo*

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ABSTRACT

Most critics read *Love and Vertigo* (2000) by Chinese-Australian writer Hsu-Ming Teo as a novel about diaspora and migrancy. However, the recurrent trope of maternal neonaticide has been critically neglected considering Teo's portrayal of the predicaments of two generations of mothers who either dispose of or kill their neonates. This article refutes the cultural and radical feminists' reductionist essentialization of maternal morality depicted in most literary works by probing into the ambivalence in motherhood represented by maternal neonaticide in the selected novel. Drawing on Kelly Oliver's theory of social melancholy, this article critically examines motherhood against the specific sociohistorical context, aiming to deconstruct the stigma and pathology surrounding maternal neonaticide. Oliver proposes that social melancholy stems from one's inability to mourn the lost lovable self due to the unavailability of positive representation of motherhood in the phallogocentric society. Traditional maternal ethics tend to stigmatize or pathologize mothers who kill, which covers up the institutional causes for maternal neonaticide as a symptom of social melancholy. This article interprets maternal neonaticide as a manifestation of what has been suppressed by the hierarchical and phallogocentric discourses. It aims to illustrate that the fictional representation of maternal neonaticide discloses exactly the pathology in the real world that devalues women and deprives them of positive social space for sublimation. It is social melancholy that constructs passive and shameful female bodies that disempower mothers. The article concludes that despite the prevalent literary discourses that assign blame to mothers, it is more constructive to look beyond the text and examine the underlying melancholy of social oppression that internalizes the sense of shame within mothers and impedes their ability to love.

Keywords: Maternal neonaticide; maternal morality; sociocultural pathology; social melancholy; sense of shame

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of neonaticide, first defined by Resnick (1970) as the killing of a newborn at or within hours of one's birth, is not a modern phenomenon. The trope of maternal neonaticide has been prevalent in world literature, from Greek mythology *Medea* (1938) to Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). This crime signifies not only maternal atrocity but denotes a sociocultural endorsement that involves the dynamic ambivalence of maternity and femininity. Cultural feminists and radical feminists who argue for the essentialism and universality of maternal ethics find maternal neonaticide abnormal since they believe in an essentially natural ethic of care in women. This universal belief in the ethics and commitment of motherhood has been variably examined in such conceptions as "maternal bonding" (Kennell & Klaus, 1979, p. 59), "feminine personality" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 209), "womanly morality" (Gilligan, 1993, p. 19), "maternal thinking" (Ruddick, 1995, p. 10), and "the divine feminine" (Gatta, 1997, p. 80) among others.

However, the idealized maternal ethos valorizes an essentialist female morality and falls into the feminist paradigm exclusively applicable to the western, middle-class women. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) comments, by presuming a universal norm of idealized maternal love, those feminist theories are "inadequate" since they "alienate the experiences of many poor, working-class, and Third World women, who become a feminist version of the non-Western other" (p. 401). If what radical feminists propose is a reductionist generalization of maternal experience, they may implicitly alienate those underprivileged women living in poverty or the Third World countries, those who do not meet the standard of common maternal morality due to their adverse subject position. Therefore, Scheper-Hughes proposes that motherhood "is anything other than natural and instead represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced" (p. 341). This intersectionality of multiple power systems may explain the ambivalence residing in maternity, that is, the paradoxical coexistence of meek Madonna and murderous Medea.

Even from an evolutionary and anthropological perspective, this ambivalence of motherhood is normal since the nature of motherhood does not guarantee selfless and unconditional love, but is the result of a "natural repertoire of behaviors" (Sieff, 2019, p. 19) that imply both nurturing and destruction of their offspring for the survival of human species. From the Jungian perspective, this vacillation between motherhood and neonaticide constitutes part of the "collective psychological and embodied heritage" of all mothers, in which the shadow of the Death Mother archetype is lurking and would come out in certain circumstances (Sieff, 2019, p. 15). In this sense, maternal neonaticide is all about mothers' psyche and "what has been suppressed" psychologically (Laufer, 2021, p. 233).

However, apart from the suppressed maternal psyche, Ruddick (1995) also indicates the complexity of mothering by pointing out that "war, poverty, and racism twist a mother's best efforts. These are not sorrows brought on by mothering; they are socially caused and politically remediable" (p. 29). In a patriarchal society where "no further identity" other than the "natural mothers" is granted to women, mothers' ambivalent feelings towards their children would not be tolerated (Rich, 1995, p. 22). Maternal neonaticide is then deemed as a severe deviation from the patriarchal norm of motherhood, for which mothers are too often blamed. Instead of asking questions like "Why do mothers kill?", it would be more productive to ask "What makes mothers kill?" because such a change in wording indicates a shift in responsibility: from blaming mothers to emphasis on the social, cultural and political contexts that make them murderous mothers.

Social psychologists and cultural psychodynamicist emphasize the need to associate both the study of the psyche and the study of social-cultural relations in understanding human behaviour to “avoid both psychological reductionism and social determinism” (Denham, 2020, p. 78). They argue against the general notion that the pathology of the mother gives rise to death and abnormality in children. Rather than blaming mothers, they reproach social, cultural and material contexts to illuminate why mothers choose motherhood or infanticide. Laufer (2021) makes it explicit by stating that “[m]otherhood does not exist in a vacuum. . . . The intersectionality — the multiple systems of oppression that interact in a person’s experience — is likely the locus of the factors that determine a mother’s propensity for infanticide” (p. 226).

American feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver also suggests that if sociocultural circumstances are not taken into consideration in explaining this maternal ambivalence and its consequences for children, psychoanalysis may become “another blame-the-mother discourse” (Oliver, 2004, p. 109). In her book *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (2004), Oliver develops a theory of social melancholy to counteract prevailing medical and psychological discourses about the pathology of women and mothers. While Freudian melancholy is the pathological attachment to lost loved object, Oliver reformulates it and proposes social melancholy as a consequence resulting from the loss of one’s loved self-image due to sociopolitical repression (Oliver, 2004). The lack of positive representation of oneself in an oppressive society gives rise to a sense of shame over one’s very being, rendering the underprivileged subject passive and incapable of action. Oliver’s theory operates not only to diagnose social phenomena but also to illuminate subjectivity development in studies of issues like colonization (Koopman, 2013; Barclay, 2018), women’s melancholy (Chowaniec, 2015), alienation (Shamur, 2019), and depression (Zhou & Omar, 2022), etc. Following Oliver’s logical reasoning, the maternal neonaticide portrayed in *Love and Vertigo* should be considered as the consequence of the intersectional oppression against women in general and mothers in particular. The novel links neonaticide to two generations of mothers who are subjugated and raped by their husbands, leading to a sense of shame over their womanhood and loss of their bodily autonomy. In a phallogocentric society where the only image available for women is sexist, flawed, denigrated, or defective, their sense of shame would be internalized, and their psyche damaged. This internalization of their abject images prevalent in the mainstream culture is what Oliver calls “the melancholy of oppression” or “social melancholy” (p. 121).

Conducted from a psychoanalytical social perspective, this article examines maternal neonaticide represented in the novel as a manifestation of women’s social melancholy. These women characters suffer from social melancholy resulting from their loss of positive self-image because the unsupportive social contexts against which the selected novel set, such as war, poverty, and patriarchal debasement of women’s value preclude the positive representation of womanhood and motherhood. It argues that maternal neonaticide as a symptom of social melancholy can be the pathology of social institutions rather than individual psychosis. This study gains its significance as a counterbalance to established national or psychological discourses about mothers’ pathological propensity for neonaticide. By unraveling the ways in which external systems of power hierarchies infiltrate and influence the internal psychic space of individual woman, the current perspective not only demystifies the prevalence of maternal neonaticide, but also depathologizes the stigma concerning murderous mothers by bringing to light the pathological mechanism of society in endorsing such atrocity.

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF NEONATICIDE IN *LOVE AND VERTIGO*

Love and Vertigo (2000) is the debut novel by Chinese-Australian novelist and academic Hsu-Ming Teo. It portrays the life trajectories of three generations of Chinese immigrant daughters in Southeast Asia, following their migration from Malaysia and Singapore to Australia in the middle and late twentieth century. While most critics identify the recurrent issues of migration, displacement and assimilation common to ethnic literature in *Love and Vertigo*, Teo clarifies it by stating that the novel “drew upon my research into the history of the relevant periods, and upon oral interviews with relatives and my parents’ friends. I didn’t understand it as a migration novel or multicultural, Asian Australian novel until it was labelled that way” (Teo, 2020, AA17).

Teo’s fascination with relevant history such as Japanese occupation of Singapore enables her to situate the women characters in a specific subject position. Moreover, her personal feminist scholarship into romantic love, rape and sexual violence facilitates her exploration into women’s sufferings in the Third-world countries, the war-time and post-war Malaya and Singapore. Tamara S. Wagner (2003) acknowledges Teo’s concern over the harrowing history of women by comparing Teo with Amy Tan, labeling *Love and Vertigo* as the “bad time” fiction characterized with “its exploitation of the exotic and its somewhat sensational foregrounding of the plight of women” (p. 19). Similar to novels of Amy Tan, *Love and Vertigo* explores central connections between women, especially connections between mothers and daughters (Wagner, 2003). It follows the traditional narrative structure of diasporic texts by tracing the family histories and juxtaposing generations of maternal sufferings “conceived in violence and rape, raised in sullen resentment and unspoken grief” (Teo, 2000, p. 25). In that sense, *Love and Vertigo* is concerned not only about “migrancy and diaspora” (Perks, 2019, p. 364), but also about mothers and maternity. Their traumatic maternal experience is characterized by the critically neglected trope of neonaticide. The fact that both the protagonist Pandora and her mother Mei Ling have committed neonaticide or symbolic neonaticide of baby girls raises questions about the prevalence of this phenomenon, as well as the sociocultural psychology lurking behind it. Considering this, it is necessary to understand traditional Chinese society and culture that implicitly endorse this act of violence.

Neonaticide, especially the killing of infant girls is not a modern phenomenon in China. This is partly because traditional Chinese Daoist philosophy usually does not regard a newborn as a real existence. Neonaticide is distinguished from murder in the belief that the newborn child is merely in a “vegetative state of infancy” and is still not a fully developed human being (Mungello, 2008, pp. 5-6). Moreover, of all the infants drowned, killed, or abandoned throughout Chinese history, baby girls are the most susceptible victims (p. 9). The primary reason is the inferior position of women and daughters, a tradition deeply rooted not only in China but also in most Asian countries (Abrejo, et al., 2009). Traditional Chinese culture has been a patriarchal one, in which sons are believed to maintain the patrilineal lineage while daughters are supposed to leave the natal family to marry and contribute to other family’s lineage. The Confucian teachings about the code of conduct and virtues of women also demonstrate the subordinate and transient status of females, of which “The Three Obediences and Four Virtues” are among the most frequently cited (Gao, 2003, p. 116). To abide by these precepts, a woman has to be obedient to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her eldest son after the death of her husband, and to be well behaved in morality, speech, demeanour and household affairs (Thakur, 1997). Being less valued and considered dispensable in their natal family, females are more susceptible than males to infanticide, especially in times of scarcity and starvation (Mungello, 2008).

However, what seems to be ghosts of the past still haunt the present. The killing of baby girls still prevails as it has always been, though in different forms. In modern China, female infanticide is still common under the disguise of sex-selective abortions (Thakur, 1997; Mungello, 2008). It has been estimated that for the past four decades, there were nearly thirty million female fetuses aborted in China, not including cases that have not been reported (Mei & Jiang, 2022). Despite the deep-rooted preference for sons endorsed by conventional Chinese culture, maternal infanticide is not a phenomenon exclusively pervasive in China but prevalent worldwide, which provokes questions of the great complexity involving it. Mungello (2008) proposes that infanticide should not be understood as a typical case unique to China, rather, it should be seen from “the common practical, moral, and spiritual dimensions that mark this as a human rather than a Chinese problem” (p. 129). More specifically, I would argue that maternal neonaticide reveals part of the maternal experiences common to women in general and marginalized groups of mothers in particular, since this is what Vilar (2009) identifies as the ubiquitous predicament of women: “The body of a poor woman still obeyed its own laws; there are no alternative but to ‘choose’ motherhood . . . or infanticide” (p. 71).

The passivity and subjugation of women in a society that denigrates Asian women are well represented in *Love and Vertigo*. In one of her interviews with Broinowski (2009), Teo talks about the plight of being a young woman in the “traditional, conservative ethnic community . . . in which I as a woman am made powerless” (p. 192). Likewise, Teo’s female protagonists suffer from “social melancholy” since a positive or lovely self-image of woman is denied within a dominant culture. As Oliver (2004) states:

Social melancholy is the inability to mourn the loss of a lovable self because there is no affirmation or acceptance of this lovable self within mainstream culture. Social melancholy is not followed by guilt over hateful thoughts or actions toward the lost love but rather by shame over one’s very being. (p. 123)

In a society where women and mothers are undervalued and when there is no positive representation of womanhood and motherhood, women are made to be ashamed of themselves and ultimately suffer from social melancholy. Oliver relates this sense of shame to women’s and maternal depression (p. 109). Psychologists consider neonaticide as “an announcement telling us about the psyche and what has been suppressed” (Laufer, 2021, p. 233) and diagnose maternal depression as highly related to a mother’s propensity for neonaticide. However, without examining the sociocultural contexts within which the psyche has been suppressed and damaged, traditional psychoanalysis may misdiagnose neonaticide or infanticide as a consequence of individual pathology like maternal depression. According to Oliver (2004), this maternal depression is not so much a personal matter as a social one, as it should be attributed to the pathology of a society that prefers patriarchal sexist stereotypes over positive representation of motherhood (pp. 122-124). Following Oliver’s psychological social theory of oppression, this article aims to demonstrate how maternal neonaticide is a consequence of social oppression induced by the melancholy of oppression. More importantly, this article argues that if maternal neonaticide becomes epidemic worldwide, it is the pathology of the society that needs to be examined, rather than the pathology of women’s psyche.

PATRIARCHAL SUBJUGATION, SHAME AND THE ABANDONED CHILD

Many feminist theorists have pointed out that motherhood “is organized as a patriarchal institution that is deeply oppressive to women” (O’ Reilly, 2005, p. 126). To bear and nurture a baby is what patriarchy prescribes as the “definition of femaleness” (Rich, 1995, p. 37). The essentialist patriarchal notion of women and motherhood that “woman = mother = womb” (Huffer, 1998, p. 10) has objectified female body and degraded motherhood as a site of subjugation and disempowerment. In cases of pregnancy, motherhood renders women passive and powerless in controlling their own bodies. Barbara Katz Rothman (1994) clarifies the tug of war between motherhood and patriarchy by pointing that:

Our bodies may be ours, but given the ideology of patriarchy, the bodies of mothers are not highly valued. The bodies are just the space in which genetic material matures into babies. In a patriarchal system, even if women own their bodies, it may not give them any real control in pregnancy. Women may simply be seen to own the space in which fetuses are housed.

(p. 151)

In this sense, motherhood renders women little agency since the female body is metaphorically both a birth-giving machine and a colony over which men as the colonizers have complete control. This sense of powerlessness can trigger in women transgressive acts like infanticide because infanticide is “acting out of powerlessness in their lives, breaking free of roles they are trapped in” (Laufer, 2021, p. 233). However, this claim to power is short-lived and only limited to mothers’ transient control of their children’s life because at its core, women’s subjectivity is the product of the phallogocentric discourse and is “constructed by the dominant discourse based on the concepts of difference and power” (Joodaki & Elyasi, 2015, p. 168). In a patriarchal society where only the stereotypical representation of motherhood is available, mothers are often stigmatized or pathologized if they fail to conform to traditional notions of femininity. Women who violate the prescription of the ideal femininity are deemed as perverted or psychopathic, a practice that Oliver (2004) diagnoses as “the patriarchal construction of a passive female body” (p. 104). In the case of maternal infanticide, the murderous mother is usually dichotomized as either mad or bad (Laufer, 2021, pp. 231-232), which implicitly lays the blames on mother. Oliver (2004) criticizes this blame-the-mother approach, arguing that the pathologization of mothers “covers over the institutional causes” (p. 102) by “rendering social and political problems as individual problems” (p. 106). She further proposes that instead of examining the pathology of individuals, it is the pathology of the culture and its relation to the individual’s psyche that shall be further probed into. Laufer (2021) agrees that infanticide should not be regarded as an issue specific to women and women’s pathology that needs to be corrected, but more as an indication of the mechanisms of the world that need to be fixed (p. 225).

The mechanisms of the patriarchal institutions in manipulating women towards infanticide are well explained by Oliver’s notion of social melancholy. According to maternal bonding theorists, infanticide is the inability of mothers to bond with their neonates. The ambivalence and alienation murderous mothers experience towards their newborns denote their loss of agency in attaching to the infants. In a patriarchal society where women and mothers are presented with no positive images, but only sexist ideas about their inadequacy are internalized, women might easily perceive themselves as “unable to function” (Oliver, 2004, p. 103). This disability of function or loss of agency is closely related to the loss of a lovable self-image as an active agent. In an oppressive culture lacking social support for positive womanhood or motherhood, the absent

woman or mother becomes the object of melancholy. Maternal infanticide, interpreted as mothers' inability to function, should be seen as the manifestation of the melancholy of oppression since it "fragments the ego and undermines the sense of agency" (p. 121), thereby rendering mothers ineffective in functioning as lovable mothers.

Oliver's notion of social melancholy suggests the subtle link between institutional oppression, melancholy, and maternal neonaticide embedded in the infanticidal narratives of Mei Ling and her daughter Pandora in *Love and Vertigo*. The two women characters are depicted as both the perpetrators of baby killing/abandonment and victims of male domination of the female body. Mei Ling epitomizes the plights of traditional Chinese women living in the middle of the 19th Century when women were subordinate to men and were deprived of autonomy of their own lives. In a traditional patriarchal culture like that of China, daughters were supposed to be obscure and obey their parents. Mei Ling's marriage is arranged against her own will, and despite her attempt to resist the patriarchy by refusing to sleep with her husband to avoid pregnancy, she ends up being beaten hard by her father to teach her women's duty of submission to men. Mei Ling's story of resistance and ultimate defeat serves as a cautionary tale for every woman in the Lim family, passed down from mother to daughter. Defeated by patriarchal power and deprived of any positive social support, Mei Ling has no alternative but "only to succumb to the inevitability of disillusionment and defeat" (Teo, 2000, p 25). In subjugation and frustration, Mei Ling is forced to give birth to six children, "all of them unwanted" (p. 25). What Mei Ling has suffered, as Rich (1986) points out, is "the double violence of marital rape . . . and of institutionalized motherhood" (p. 265). Repellent as she is to sex, she is forced to accept sexual abuse covered in the patriarchal institution of marriage, where her husband's sexual violence is legitimized in the name of conjugal rights. Moreover, she has to bear the risks of bearing children she doesn't want at all.

Mei Ling's subject position as a third-world woman living in a traditional Chinese immigrant family in the 1950s Singapore undermines her sense of subjectivity. Teo echoes this sense of self-denial and self-depreciation in an interview that "when you grow up as a Chinese daughter, you grow up with a lot of guilt" (Broinowski, 2009, p.192). Mei Ling is subject to traditional subjugation of social oppression, with pregnancy being the result of her forced submission to the patriarchal system. Her motherhood is one without autonomy and choice, conceived in rape and violence. As Rich (1986) comments: "The motherhood created by rape is not only degraded; the raped woman is turned into the criminal, the *attacker*" (p. 35). Mei Ling's act of getting rid of the neonate is an announcement to revolt against the mandate of patriarchal cultures. Her rage and powerlessness in controlling her life accumulated over the years first turn inward into self-hatred, and then outward, begetting violence against the one who triggers such feelings of hatred and powerlessness — her newborn child, who is also vulnerable enough to be subject to her manipulation. Furthermore, in a patriarchal culture where motherhood is idealized as selflessness and sacrifice, she has to suffer the violence of institutionalized motherhood for not conforming to the norm of femininity. Any woman who attempts to defy the norm is subject to debasement and stigmatization:

The very fact that a woman cannot tolerate pregnancy, or is in intense conflict about it, or about giving birth to a child, is an indication that the pre-pregnant personality of this woman was immature and in that sense can be labeled as psychopathological.

(Romm, 1954 as cited in Solinger, 1998, p. 3)

Mei Ling has to suffer this debasement as a mother because she is unwilling to bear children. Her act of openly inviting curses to the child by calling it the “damned baby, rubbish child” (Teo, 2000, p. 22) is deemed extremely “folly” (p. 22) and hysterical. However, considering Mei Ling’s subject position, her repulsion to motherhood should not be understood as the abnormality of maternity, but as a symptom indicating “the patriarchal construction of a passive female body” (Oliver, 2004, p. 104). The fact that Mei Ling’s experience of delivery, accompanied by the Japanese occupation of Singapore, further frustrates her experience of motherhood since she doesn’t “have the means to take care of the child” (Teo, 2000, p. 22). War and poverty problematize motherhood by intensifying the ambivalence mother feels.

Instead of blaming the mother for what she has done, Mei Ling’s hatred toward the neonate arises from social melancholy. Social melancholy occurs when the maternal subject feels shameful over her very sense of being. Mei Ling’s screams when giving birth attract the Japanese soldiers looking for comfort women. The powerlessness of being a woman and mother manifests itself in Mei Ling’s experience as she has to bear not only the pain of childbirth but also the humiliation of opening her legs before the Japanese soldiers. Moreover, her subject position as a victim of war also contributes to her perception of her daughter as inauspicious and completely useless. The baby has become such a source of unpleasant feelings that she feels an urge to distance herself from the object triggering these feelings. The feelings can be so intensified that ultimately there comes the desire to exterminate the source of displeasure. Mei Ling’s sense of shame of being a woman has been intensified when she finds she has given birth to “another fucking useless cunt of a girl” (Teo 2000, p. 27). Within the patriarchal ideology, giving birth to a baby boy can be a source of gaining power for a woman in that she has contributed to her husband’s patrilineal descent, while a daughter can be a thorn in the mother’s flesh that constantly reminds the mother of the debasement and desperation she has experienced as a woman. The fact that the baby is born both as a girl and during the war contributes to Mei Ling’s repulsion against her child, who is being perceived as abject and devalued by the virtue of her sexual identity and subject position.

Battered by patriarchal laws and the adverse environment, Mei Ling is rendered more susceptible to the invasion of dominant patriarchal ideology. The sense of shame intensifies as she is forced into the position (being a woman) and situation (suffering from the pain and humiliation of childbirth) she does not want at all. Her perception of herself has been degraded during the distress and humiliation of her labor experience. Herman and Lewis (1986) have pointed out that it is through the daughter that “the mother relives her own rebellion, her own discontent, her own shame at being a woman” (p. 157). When the baby is born both unwelcome and female, she despises it as a reflection and extension of herself. This sense of shame and humiliation turns inward as anger against the patriarchal stereotypes and develops into a sense of depression, which is a social pathology that facilitates women’s internalization of mainstream values (Oliver, 2004, pp. 113-114). Mei Ling’s repulsion against the baby girl is the manifestation of her internalization of the mainstream patriarchal ideology of devaluation of women. It indicates her identification with the dominant sexist ideology about the inferiority and abjection of women. Rather than resisting the abject image of women prescribed to her, Mei Ling conspires with the patriarchal culture in devaluing women as she keeps hurling abuse at her newborn daughter. Patriarchal ideologies have been ingrained in her mind as one of her daughters observes: “Boys are good, girls are not. Some things you learn early on in life, and then you just learn to live with it” (Teo, 2000, p. 60). Being such a misogynist mother signifies her internalization of the patriarchal devaluation of women.

By waiving her right to mother and nurture a baby girl, she conspires with the patriarchy in debasing women, a symbolic rejection of empowering women through motherhood. To perceive both her daughter and herself in a demeaning light disempowers her from nurturing her daughter since only mothers who value their own bodies can transmit the maternal power to their daughters. To quote Rich's (1986) statement about the ambivalent power of mothers in rearing daughters: "The nurture of daughters in patriarchy calls for a strong sense of self-nurture in the mother" (p. 245). Mei Ling is unable to nurture her newborn daughter because she has experienced humiliating situations related to her own sense of womanhood and motherhood. All in all, Mei Ling's decision to abandon her infant daughter demonstrates how her sense of ambivalence is magnified by war, patriarchal oppression, grievances of becoming a mother, and most importantly, shame of being a woman in a man's world.

GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF NEONATICIDE AND COLONIZATION OF MATERNAL BODY

Neonaticide is considered by Estela Welldon (2018) as the perversion of motherhood, which may be attributed to the early experiences of murderous mothers who have suffered early infantile neglect, abandonment, or abuse (p. 64). To figure out the root of neonaticide, it is necessary to know her mother and mother's mother since the murderous mother will "turn her infantile fear and impotence into cruel dominance — violence or hatred against someone weaker" (Welldon, 2018, p. iv). Chodorow's view also echoes Welldon's that "women's mothering is reproduced across generations" (1978, p. 3). It seems that neonaticide has become another indictment blaming the mother for perversion or death in their children. However, Oliver (2004) argues that instead of focusing only on mothers and their psychosis, it is more sensible to figure out what lies behind the sufferings of so many mothers. She accuses medical discourse and the mainstream culture of conspiring together to attribute children's problems to maternal pathology. She maintains, "Rather than blame mothers for their children's problems, traditional notions of maternity can be seen as the source of a cycle of violence and oppression" (p. 107). The established conception of idealized maternity becomes a social context in which women are forced to be mothers and then their motherhood is denigrated. Under such an unsupportive milieu, mothers are deprived of the necessary space to articulate their repressed affects and have to struggle with depression. This maternal depression becomes a cover for social melancholy, a melancholy resulting from the deprivation of positive representation of womanhood and motherhood (Oliver, 2004). Pandora, the cursed and abandoned daughter upon birth by her mother, reveals how the violence of institutional sexism is sustained through generations and perpetuates the oppression against women and mothers.

As her name indicates, Pandora "was cursed from birth" (Teo, 2000, p. 28) since she was born during the Japanese occupation of Singapore, for which she has been accused of bringing disaster and shame to people around her. She is abandoned by her mother upon birth and is temporarily adopted by her mother's sister, Madam Tan, who has only two sons and views her merely as a substitute for a daughter. The early experience of infantile abandonment and neglect is nearly deadly for Pandora as she "was exiled to the servants' quarters where she was looked after by bond maids already irritable from overwork" (p. 30). During her stay at the foster home, the dominant patriarchal ideology becomes deeply ingrained in her consciousness. She has to serve tea and breakfast to her foster father every morning to demonstrate that "she was a humble, filial daughter" (p. 39). Constantly being preached to be "good and obedient" (p. 36), as it is considered

the code of a woman's conduct, Pandora has been instilled the idea that marriage is the ultimate goal of a woman. Pandora has been constantly told: "If you are good and obedient you will find a rich husband to marry you when you grow up" (p. 38). These teachings foster an attitude of submission towards men in Pandora. Deviation from such socially prescribed virtues is deemed unacceptable. Teo portrays another character, Pandora's eldest sister Lida, as a counterpart to this norm. Lida is what Mupotsa (2017) terms "the undutiful daughter" with "oppositional or differential consciousness" (p. 38). Being intractable and rebellious, Lida values individual freedom so much that she disobeys parents and pursues her own desires. However, in a society where women's individuality has been denied by patriarchal stereotypes, little space is available for women like Lida to pursue personal happiness. Lida is defamed, accused of ingratitude and lack of filial piety for not conforming to the expectations of obedience. The strict requirement of obedience and filial piety exerts such powerful control that failure to comply results in the repudiation of kinship between the daughter and her family. The truth that Lida is expunged from the family and deemed "dead" (Teo, 2000, p. 46) serves as a disciplinary power warning other daughters in the Lim family to be obedient and respectful, otherwise they would not be loved. Paradoxically, obedience and subjugation become prerequisites for women to be loved and accepted, which in turn perpetuates the sexist ideologies.

Despite being obedient, Pandora is destined to be a victim of patriarchal oppression in which girls are denigrated and abandoned at will. The trauma caused by infantile abandonment is so immense that she fears not being welcome in the Lim family. In a desperate desire for love and acceptance, Pandora does everything to make herself "indispensable" to the family (Teo, 2000, p. 42). However, throughout most of Pandora's childhood, she is haunted by memories of mistreatment and neglect by her mother. Pandora is not well nurtured and supported since she is mothered by a woman who does not even value herself as a woman. Lack of maternal love, Pandora becomes desperate for love yet uncertain about what love is. Her early traumatic experiences lead to a distorted relationship with her future husband, Jonah Tay, in which she becomes preyed upon. Pandora's affection towards Jonah is not genuine love, but a sense of "overwhelming gratitude for his constant solicitude" (p. 108) and the allure of freedom he brings as "he took her out of the crowded, noisy tenement where they were constantly breathing each other's stale air and invading each other's space (p. 101)". Pandora's marriage with Jonah is doomed since she has merely escaped from the trap of her natal family but steps into another.

If what Pandora has suffered in the Lim family is patriarchal oppression as a daughter, then what she has to bear in the Tay family is the double oppression as being both a daughter-in-law and a wife. By marrying Jonah Tay, Pandora "had also married his mother" since Madam Tay assumed the role of a surrogate patriarch, the representative of the "time-honoured Chinese tradition of bullying her daughter-in-law" (Teo, 2000, p. 115). Pandora's role of an obedient daughter has been replaced by the dual identity of dutiful daughter-in-law and wife. However, Pandora's role change does not guarantee her the assumed security since "she was less than a guest and more than a servant" (p. 118). In her mother-in-law's house, there is no supportive space for her to become what she wants to be. She lost herself in the confluence of patriarchal stereotypes as a daughter-in-law and wife, leaving her unable to mourn the loss of the lovable self since she has "lost her time, her space, her privacy and her boundaries" to "collect herself, to remember who she was" (p. 120). In the sense that Pandora has lost her ideal self in the grueling triviality of daily life, she suffers from social melancholy. This powerlessness to get rid of the melancholy of oppression might explain why Pandora aborts the fetus in her mother-in-law's house. As Laufer (2021) points out the root of infanticide:

Infanticide or maternal filicide is an announcement telling us about the psyche and what has been suppressed. Women are acting out of powerlessness in their lives, breaking free of roles they are trapped in. Infanticide is an escape from the mundane daily tasks, the concrete and literal, an opportunity to rise above into something bigger and metaphoric.

(p. 233)

Pandora's act of neonaticide reflects the consequences of the deprivation of a positive social space, which renders women lack of agency and powerless to love. The lack of supportive space elicits a loss of self in Pandora who has even lost control of her own body. Moreover, the persistent deprivation of personal space and body, coupled with a sense of shame, denies her any sense of power, as "[s]hame is opposed to autonomy" (Oliver, 2004, p. 113). For women like Pandora, marriage becomes yet another shackle fettering their bodies and minds. In her mother-in-law's house, not only has Pandora's private physical space been invaded, but also her psychic space. Even while using the toilet or bathing, she must remain alert just in case her mother-in-law "pushed open the door and flicked a scornful glance at her daughter-in-law's wet naked body" (Teo, 2000, p. 119). Teo portrays Pandora as constantly plagued by dyspepsia and constipation. This physical dysfunction to excrete the wastes from her body becomes a metaphor indicating her psychological inability to discharge the accumulated negative affects in front of her mother-in-law. The encroachment of both her physical and psychological spaces reveals not only Pandora's subordinate position in the patriarchal family but also instills a sense of self-abjection within her. She feels shame over her body as she perceives herself reflected through the eyes of her mother-in-law. This sense of self-abjection aligns with Bartky's (2015) notion of "women's shame", which indicates both "an affect of subordination" and women's self-disclosure within the patriarchal contexts (p. 85). Pandora's personal space and body have not been valued as she had expected before marriage, instead, they have been invaded and disregarded. Her marital bed was taken over by Jonah and her parents-in-law on her wedding night, leaving her to sleep on the floor, squeezed between two sisters-in-law. Her sense of individuality has been destroyed as the boundaries between individuals are blurred: "Hands touched, skin rubbed, bodies invaded personal spaces and overlapped individual lives" (Teo, 2000, p. 120). The deprivation of space and individuality renders her passive and "clumsy overnight" (p. 118) as she is deprived of full autonomy of her own life.

If Pandora has been denied the positive space to retain her sense of self, it is because the patriarchal culture has denied her any social support to sublimate. Being a stereotyped woman in the sexist society, Pandora could not rely on her husband for help to fight against "the subtle slights" (Teo, 2000, p. 120) from her mother-in-law. She lacks what Oliver (2004) calls "the accepting third", which should be provided by "social institutions and values that support the transfer and sublimation of women's drives and affects into language" (p. 128). Pandora's overlapping roles as both a daughter and wife presuppose the double oppression, which hinders her from articulating the negative affects of oppression. Besides the disparaging encroachment of her body by her mother-in-law, Pandora inevitably suffers from her husband's invasion of her body in sexual intercourse. For Pandora, her body becomes a battlefield where two antagonistic wills are at war and where her female body seems destined to be conquered. Her matrimonial relationship with Jonah mirrors that of a colonized and a colonizer, in which Pandora has been robbed of the meager control of her body with Jonah's lovemaking that "wrested away from her what little control she had over her emotions and sensory response" (p. 120). Under the erotic invasion of her body, Pandora becomes the colonized who has to be manipulated by Jonah the colonizer. Her pregnancy signals her surrender to the colonizer as she has to "make space for his colony" (p. 124). Instead

of moments of intimacy, sexuality becomes a weapon for Jonah to subjugate and disempower Pandora: Each night when Jonah invades her body, Pandora gets lost and “[feels] her sense of self slipping away little by little” (p. 120). This sense of passivity and powerlessness is repeatedly revealed in the depiction of the sex scene, in which Pandora could do nothing but only imagine herself as “a giant white mushroom, vegetative, still, silent, solitary in the forest dark” (p. 122). This vegetative and passive state of Pandora is intensified when she is pregnant and has to be confined to the bed: “She vegetates and roots in her bed in the darkness of her bedroom, her belly ballooning like a septic cyst” (p. 124). Her body has been manipulated as the foreign fetus invades and colonizes her body, which prevents her from acting like “human again” since “[h]er body is no longer hers to control” (p. 125). The metaphoric metamorphosis of Pandora as a fragile and silent mushroom signals her seclusion and lack of outlet to discharge her negative affects, which can evoke a sense of shame over one’s very sense of being. According to Oliver (2004):

Lacking socially acceptable words or symbols to discharge affects that have been excluded within mainstream culture, marginalized people are not only shamed and then silenced but also vulnerable to depression, a consequence of the inability to manifest or discharge affects into language.
(p. 124)

In the unsupportive patriarchal system, Pandora has been neglected upon birth in her natal family, bullied by her mother-in-law, and abused by her husband. The only image available for her in the dominant patriarchal culture is sexist and devalued. Pandora becomes ashamed of herself and silenced because she has been deprived of any support in the “dark forest” of patriarchal oppression to articulate her voice. Pandora’s inability to control things outside herself by failing to ward off Jonah’s erotic invasion of her body, and her powerlessness to control things inside herself by failing to prevent her belly from swelling because of pregnancy, further solidify her complete loss of control over her life and her agency. Pandora suffers from “social melancholy” defined as “the double loss of a sense of oneself as an agent and the loss of the sense of oneself as loved or lovable” (Oliver, 2004, p. 123). While both senses of love and agency are essential for one’s sense of self, the double loss undermines Pandora’s subjectivity and induces a sense of shame over her very being.

Pandora’s sense of shame is closely associated with her lack of social support, which then manifests in maternal depression, “a depression caused by a social context that forces women to ‘choose’ motherhood and then devalues it” (Oliver, 2004, p. 112). Pandora is forced into motherhood without autonomy and has been deprived of her sense of self as she is not the one she used to be “in her place as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother-to-be” (Teo, 2000, p. 125). Her propensity for neonaticide, the urge to purge the foreign fetus inside her, reveals her extreme revulsion against her own body as she is unable to retrieve her lovable self and reclaim agency. The fact that she gives birth to a stillborn baby girl symbolizes her completion of neonaticide, not so different from what her mother did decades ago. Her ruthlessness toward the fetus becomes a symptom of maternal depression, highlighting her passivity and incompetence to love. She kills “because she no longer knows what love is” (p. 123). She is rendered disabled in manifesting her negative affects under social oppression. This repetition of maternal violence against the neonates substantiates the practice not as an individual problem, but as the consequence of the vicious circle of social melancholy perpetuating the oppression against women and mothers. The seemingly multigenerational transmission of murderous mothering serves not as an accusation reproving the violence of mothers, but verifies the prevalence of social melancholy in undermining women’s sense of agency and leading to their inability to discharge their affects and nurture their offspring.

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates how Teo's portrayal of the loss and suffering of Mei Ling and Pandora discloses not the generational transmission of maternal abnormality inherent in mothers, but rather the revealing of the vicious cycle of patriarchal ideology in perpetuating the oppression against women and mothers. As Mei Ling's abandonment of her infant daughter indicates her internalization of patriarchal ideologies about the denigration of women and her loss of agency in nurturing and empowering her daughter, so does Pandora's ruthlessness to the stillborn fetus signify her disability to love and her shame of being colonized both physically and psychologically by the patriarchy. They seem to suggest that failed motherhood occurs when mothers perceive themselves as inferior and abject. Both of them suffer from social melancholy due to the pathology of a society which is lack of positive social space for self-restoration and for mourning of the loss of a loved or lovable self.

Although maternal neonaticide in the novel takes place in the distant past, the issues about motherhood and maternity remain just as pertinent today. This study shifts its focus from such issues as diaspora, immigration, and ethnic identity commonly explored in ethnic literature studies to a broader perspective on universal themes relevant to the entire human community. By diverging from the feminist paradigm of essentialist maternal morality, this study illuminates the ambivalence of maternity not only among Chinese women, but also among women subjugated to institutional patriarchy globally. The recurring narratives of neonaticide in the novel reflect the common literary motif of the patriarchal subjugation of women who are forced to relinquish their rights to motherhood. This manipulation of women's bodies can be compared to the contemporary clamor for women's rights to abortion, as both situations deny women's autonomy over their own bodies. If mothers are blamed for neonaticide, it is because of the pathology of social oppression impeding women from accessing the positive social support necessary for sublimation. More specifically, it is the consequence of social melancholy that devalues women and deprives them of positive representation, thereby giving rise to a sense of shame resulting from the loss of a lovable self-image, and ultimately rendering them inadequate and disabled to love. The present study thus demystifies the presumed generational transmission of women's sufferings pervasive in ethnic literary works and depathologizes women characters that are too often stigmatized as psychopathological. As such, Teo's writing is consistent with Deleuze's perception of literature as "an enterprise of health" in the sense that "both artists and philosophers operate in their separate ways as physicians of civilization, diagnosing the values of which cultural products and institutions are the symptoms" (1-2). Therefore, writers like Teo are physicians for society in diagnosing not individual pathology, but pathology of social or institutional structures that contributes to such atrocity as maternal neonaticide.

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