

“I SEE MYSELF GOING TO THE FOREST AND LETTING THE STROLLER ROLL DOWN THE HILL”: Maternity in *Morra, amor*

“EU ME VEJO INDO ATÉ O BOSQUE E DEIXANDO O CARRINHO IR LADEIRA ABAIXO”: A maternidade em *Morra, amor*

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Abstract: This article proposes a critical reading of the novel *Morra, amor* [Die, My Love], by Ariana Harwicz, based on a dialogue with historiography and social theory on the normalization of female bodies. The narrative, marked by a chaotic and sensory stream of consciousness, presents a maternal character who challenges traditional models of motherhood. Based on Badinter (1985), the historical devices that naturalized the role of the mother as the moral center of the family are analyzed. The work highlights a motherhood experienced with anguish, hostility, and a desire for rupture, reflecting the subjective effects of social impositions. The character does not represent an anomaly, but rather the symptom of a model that oppresses and silences. Her refusal to perform the maternal ideal is interpreted as a gesture of subversion, highlighting the importance of denaturalizing motherhood and listening to experiences that break with the myth of the ideal mother

Keywords: Motherhood, Contemporary Literature, Gender Studies.

Resumo: O artigo propõe uma leitura crítica do romance *Morra, amor*, de Ariana Harwicz, a partir do diálogo com a historiografia e a teoria social sobre a normatização dos corpos femininos. A narrativa, marcada por um fluxo de consciência caótico e sensorial, apresenta uma personagem materna que desafia os modelos tradicionais de maternidade. Com base em Badinter (1985), analisam-se os dispositivos históricos que naturalizaram o papel da mãe como centro moral da família. A obra evidencia uma maternidade vivida com angústia, hostilidade e desejo de ruptura, refletindo os efeitos subjetivos das imposições sociais. A personagem não representa uma anomalia, mas sim o sintoma de um modelo que oprime e silencia. Sua recusa em performar o ideal materno é lida como um gesto de subversão, trazendo a importância de se desnaturalizar a maternidade e escutar experiências que rompem com o mito da mãe ideal.

Palavras-chave: Maternidade, Literatura Contemporânea, Estudos de Gênero.

Introduction

The experience of motherhood is a constantly debated topic in the globalized world. Every day, new products and approaches emerge, presented as more humanized

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and suitable for mothers. On social media, theories, methods, and content about maternal practices multiply, such as BLW (Baby-Led Weaning), positive discipline, conscious mothering, and Montessori pedagogy. This torrent of information converges on the same demand: the mother must be emotionally stable, intellectually up-to-date, affectionate, and simultaneously responsible for her appearance, her husband, and her home. Furthermore, the notion that a woman's full realization only occurs through motherhood is reinforced.

The promise that such practices promote the child's integral development coexists, however, with the reality of exhausted and guilty mothers facing an unattainable ideal, often based on digital influencers whose conditions differ from those experienced by the majority. Meanwhile, the demands regarding the paternal role are considerably lower, both on digital platforms and in everyday life. This logic is based on the construction of a myth of motherhood, which places the woman at the center and responsible for family balance, tasked with educating children and husband because she supposedly possesses an instinct.

The role of motherhood has been naturalized in this way over time. However, much of the current conception of childcare is based on the 18th century and was socially constructed. With the social construction of modern states and the favoring of a bourgeois economic order, there was a need for greater care for children, with this function falling on mothers (Moura; Araújo, 2004). It is understood that, historically, the mother-child relationship does not have the same values and meanings, just as the conceptions of what mothering practices would have also been influenced by the needs of each historical moment.

In contemporary times, maternal practices are still based on medical and scientific discourses that define behavioral patterns and goals. These discourses spread among the elites through the valorization of feelings and, in the popular classes, through coercive strategies, such as punishments for child abandonment, which forced women to keep their children alive (Badinter, 1985; Moura; Araújo, 2004). That way, motherhood was constructed as intrinsic to the female condition, uniting biological functions with the feeling of care. Mothers were then required to exhibit behaviors of tenderness and dedication, treated as "intuitive" and "natural," associated with a promise of physiological happiness.

The mother was also transformed into a moral example, a Christian role model, and an educational agent, in addition to being responsible for feeding and educating future citizens. Thus, a goal of motherhood was consolidated, in which deviations were

pathologized or considered anomalies, producing feelings of guilt in women who did not conform to the established social standard. In this way, a maternal myth is configured that associates female fulfillment with the condition of being a mother (Badinter, 1985; Moura; Araújo, 2004; Damaceno; Marciano; Di Menezes, 2021).

Although transformed over time, especially with technological advances and discussions about fatherhood, the concept of motherhood is still structured around sacrifice for the sake of offspring. The valorization of this role and the consequent feeling of guilt remain central to how society conceives the maternal function.

In this work, we propose a critical analysis of maternal expectations based on the dialogue between the book *Um Amor Conquistado: o Mito do Amor Materno* [Conquered Love: The Myth of Maternal Love] by Elisabeth Badinter — important for challenging what motherhood is historically constructed; and the contemporary literary work *Morra, Amor* [Die, My Love], by Ariana Harwicz, placing the backdrop of a deviant motherhood. Using literature as a lens to understand the historical and subjective conflicts that permeate motherhood, we investigate that which is exhausting about maternal care when it is regarded as an obligation.

Methodologically, this work is based on a qualitative and interpretative approach, focusing on the critical analysis of discourses on motherhood from the intersection between literature, feminist theory, and gender studies. We start from the premise that literature can function as a tool for problematizing and revealing subjectivities, enabling a deeper understanding of female experiences, often silenced or idealized by common sense and contemporary media.

Thus, the analysis is structured around two central works: *Um Amor Conquistado: o mito do amor materno* [A Conquered Love: the myth of maternal love], by Elisabeth Badinter, and the novel *Morra, Amor* [Die, My Love], by Ariana Harwicz, as already mentioned. The first work of an essayistic nature, provides the theoretical-historical basis on the social construction of motherhood, deconstructing the idea of maternal instinct as something natural and universal. The second of a literary-fictional nature, allows for a sensitive and visceral visualization of the dilemmas of a woman overwhelmed by psychological suffering and inadequacy in the face of the ideal of a “good mother”.

Based on gender studies theories, the proposal is to reflect on how discourses surrounding motherhood impose idealized expectations that negate the complexity of the female experience, such as the suffering of postpartum depression, the exhaustive comparison with perfect motherhood, and the imposition on those who do not wish to be mothers. The lack of personal fulfillment with motherhood will be addressed through the

work *Die, Love*, which was recently produced in cinemas and demonstrates the psychological terror of the postpartum period.

In this sense, the analysis of the literary work will be carried out based on thematic and discursive criticism, considering both the narrative aspects and the symbolic elements present in the text, articulating them with the references of gender studies and with the thought of authors such as Jane Almeida, Silvia Michelle Perrot, as well as Badinter herself. The choice of literature as an object of analysis is justified by its potential to represent subjective and social conflicts in depth, challenging culturally established norms and expectations. In this way, the methodological approach used prioritizes interdisciplinary dialogue and critical listening to fictional and theoretical female voices, with the aim of reflecting on the effects of the idealization of motherhood and its impacts on the reality of women. Motherhood will thus be treated not as a biological essence or destiny, but as a historical and symbolic construct that needs to be continually revisited and questioned.

In the novel, the Argentinian writer Ariana Harwicz breaks with idealized discourses of motherhood and leads the reader through a dense and disturbing narrative. The protagonist, a new mother, finds herself isolated in the countryside with her husband and baby, and is constantly traversed by fragmented thoughts, contradictory impulses, and a constant feeling of inadequacy. Harwicz's writing follows the flow of thoughts of a woman who finds herself crushed by the expectations surrounding motherhood. Instead of acceptance and fulfillment, what emerges in the portrayed reality is the discomfort, anger, and rejection experienced by the protagonist, not only towards her son, but intrinsically towards the social role expected of her. The novel, by refusing to offer comfort, reveals precisely what normative motherhood tries to hide: that there is not always love, and that, often, mothering can be experienced as a process of exhaustion, ambivalence, and disintegration.

In this sense, the methodology adopted also relies on the principles proposed by content analysis outlined by Laurence Bardin (2016). In this way, we organized the reading of the fictional work into emerging thematic categories — such as guilt, refusal, isolation, and symbolic violence — seeking to identify discursive regularities that point to a critique of the normative ideal of motherhood. At the same time, we were guided by the conception of text and discourse understood as social practice, as proposed by Fiorin (2012), who understands the text as articulated form and content, bearer of multiple meanings and traversed by historical conditions of production. Regarding the historical perspective of the research, it is based on the perspective of Júlio Aróstegui (2006), which

allows us to understand motherhood as a construction that transforms over time, and whose analysis requires attention both to the context in which the discourses are produced and to the effects they generate on the subjects. In this direction, literature is treated as both source and object: a symbolic text laden with historicity and disputes about what it means to be a woman and to be a mother.

Finally, we refer to the contributions of Núncia Constantino (2002) to reinforce the relevance of the articulation between content analysis and historical research, especially when seeking to understand the meanings inscribed in cultural representations. Thus, the methodology adopted prioritizes the intersection between discourse, language, and history, with the aim of highlighting the tensions that permeate the contemporary maternal experience, as narrated in *Morra, Amor*.

The cultural construction of motherhood

Motherhood as we know today is neither natural nor universal. It is the result of a long historical process of institutionalizing the family and normalizing gender roles. As historian Michelle Perrot (1991) demonstrates, the 19th and early 20th centuries were marked by a social and political effort to organize private life around the bourgeois model of family: monogamous, patriarchal, hierarchical, in which the father held legal and moral authority, and the woman, confined to the domestic space, assumed the care of the home and children as a natural and noble mission. In this context, motherhood became not only a biological function, but a symbolic construct laden with moral, affective, and religious values.

Perrot (1991) describes this as a family model that triumphed not because of its neutrality, but because of its ability to efficiently order and monitor intimate life. The woman was responsible for representing the “heart” of the family, exercising a form of invisible, emotional, but profoundly disciplinary power. The mother became a central figure in the moral formation of children and, at the same time, a symbol of sacrifice, silence, and devotion. This ideal imposed itself as the norm, marginalizing any experience of motherhood that escaped sweetness, surrender, or passivity.

This expectation encompassed the insertion of women into the Brazilian public workspace, when it was expected that they would occupy positions consistent with their maternal role, resulting in the so-called feminization of teaching. This discourse constructed arguments that “allocated to women a better professional performance in

education, derived from the fact that teaching was linked to the ideas of domesticity and motherhood” (Almeida, 1998, p. 64).

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, teaching became one of the few socially accepted paid occupations for women, especially for those who had not married or had children. In this scenario, teaching came to be understood as a choice compatible with values associated with femininity, such as care, dedication, and selflessness, often linked to motherhood. The historian Guacira Lopes Louro (1997) observes that, for a long time, the figure of the teacher was associated with that of the single woman. The one who, having not followed the destiny considered natural, such as marriage and motherhood, dedicated herself to teaching as a way of symbolically fulfilling the maternal role. Despite the stigmas, this path also allowed women access to education, a certain presence in the public sphere, and some economic independence, albeit limited (Louro, 1997).

Over time, a rigorous expectation has been created around the moral stance of the female teacher. Her image should be irreproachable, marked by discreet behavior and a neutral appearance. Any sign of sexuality or desire should be erased from her conduct. Ideally, the teacher’s personal life should be private, without public displays of affection, marriage, or motherhood. Pregnancy, in particular, was viewed with censure, as it highlighted the sexual dimension of women, which contradicted the ideal of the pure educator devoid of desires (Louro, 1997).

The traditional explanation for the feminization of teaching revolves around the low remuneration of teaching compared to other professions. Educated men, seeking higher salaries, would migrate to other areas, with teaching becoming a work alternative for women (Oliveira; Martiniak, 2018). However, this justification has been revisited. The educator Jane Soares de Almeida (1998) considers that, in addition to the economic issue, there was also a planned articulation between what was socially expected of women and the possibility of occupying a professional space compatible with these expectations. In this way, teaching functioned as a form of insertion into salaried work, without a direct rupture with the gender roles then in force (Almeida, 1998). The author argues that:

Primary school teaching represented the starting point and what was possible at the historical moment. And it was passion, in the sense of desire, effort, seizing the opportunity and achieving insertion into the public sphere and the world of work. After that, some subsequent rights can be associated with women’s achievement of teaching, such as female education, co-education, a certain economic and personal independence, the vote, maternity leave and others (Almeida, 1998, p. 75).

In Brazil, this configuration remains evident in current statistics. Early Childhood Education continues to be predominantly composed of women, who represent approximately 90% of the workforce at this stage. On the other hand, the presence of women in Higher Education is still limited, especially in areas traditionally considered masculine (Vianna, 2002). As observed by Cláudia Pereira Vianna (2002), professions such as teaching and nursing continue to be seen as extensions of the female vocation for care, often interpreted as activities linked to a moral commitment. According to her, there is a binary system that fuels this cultural construction of roles:

The binary scheme that situates the masculine and the feminine as mutually exclusive categories extends to definitions of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman, a male and a female teacher in our society. This dichotomy crystallizes conceptions of what should constitute masculine and feminine attributes and hinders the perception of other ways of establishing social relations. Care, for example, is seen as an essentially feminine characteristic — for some a natural responsibility, for others, a result of women's socialization [...] thus, various stereotypes are created about men and women: aggressive, militaristic, rational, for them; docile, relational, affectionate, for them. As a result, functions such as feeding, motherhood, preservation, education, and care for others become more identified with female bodies and minds, thus gaining an inferior place in society when compared to functions considered masculine (Vianna, 2002, p. 93).

It is precisely against this binary image that the protagonist of *Die, My Love*, does not perform — or fails to perform — the loving and stable mother. The tension that runs through Harwicz's novel takes on new contours when we read her character in the light of the genealogy proposed by Perrot: the suffering experienced by the woman in the novel is not individual or pathological, but an expression of a historical conflict, between a subjectivity in ruins and a model of motherhood that still demands completeness, sweetness, and meaning. What Harwicz ultimately does is collapse the myth of the mother as the center of family harmony, by dramatizing an experience of refusal and exhaustion in the face of a role that, although inherited, no longer finds emotional or symbolic support.

The social construction of motherhood as a woman's natural destiny is one of the most persistent and normalized structures of the Western imagination. This idealization, consolidated especially from the 19th century onwards, was critically analyzed by Elisabeth Badinter (1985), in which the author states that maternal love, nowadays considered instinctive, is, in fact, a cultural, historical and political construction. Historically, motherhood has become an instrument of social control over women, tying their identities to the exclusive role of caregivers and reproducers of a conservative social

order. Philosophers and doctors have sometimes supported this construction through biologizing arguments. However, as Badinter (1985) points out, for much of modern European history, direct childcare was not considered a moral obligation. In the Old Regime, for example, the practice of mercenary breastfeeding was common:

of the 21,000 children born annually in Paris, only 1,000 are breastfed by their mothers. A thousand others, privileged children, are breastfed by resident wet nurses. All the others leave their mother's bosom to be raised in the more or less distant home of a mercenary wet nurse. Numerous are the children who will die without ever having known their mother's gaze. Those who will return, some years later, to the family home, will discover a stranger: the one who gave birth to them. Nothing proves that these reunions were experienced with joy, nor that the mother hurried to satisfy a need for tenderness that today seems natural to us (Badinter, 1985, p. 68).

The author points out that a “revolution of mentalities” was encouraged at the end of the 18th century, even though behaviors were slow to change, evoking the myth of instinct and promoting breastfeeding and maternal love as natural and social values, favorable to the species and society. To convince women, promises of beauty and happiness, moral and religious or medical condemnation were used, arguing the risk of death from milk retention or other conditions pointed out by “science”:

Not to mention the ‘acute and chronic affections of the mammary glands, the severe fevers of metrorrhinitis, the affections of the uterus’. [...] [...] This tragic description of the risks faced by the bad mother showed that nature knew how to take cruel revenge on women who disobeyed it. But nature was not the only one to punish them. The abandonment of breastfeeding is presented by everyone, not only as a dietary error, but also and above all as a sin against God, an immoral action (Badinter, 1985, p. 197).

Badinter (1985, p. 198) also points out that “in the 18th century, moral condemnation will replace theological condemnation. Breastfeeding abandonment is deemed an injustice committed against the child,” emphasizing that it is the child’s right to access the milk produced. Over time, this view became increasingly internalized, being imposed as an ideal standard: the woman should sacrifice herself without question. This cultural demand is later reinforced by medicine and psychoanalysis, as in the work of Freud, who attributes to the mother a central role in the physical and psychic development of the child. According to Badinter (1985, p. 238), “Rousseau and Freud both developed a singularly similar image of women [...]: they emphasize the sense of dedication and sacrifice that, according to them, characterizes the ‘normal’ woman”.

Die, My Love gives a warning: motherhood is not always beautiful

In contemporary times, literature exposes the unreality of the idealized image of women, revealing the anxieties, frustrations, and sense of not belonging to the maternal role, challenging the cliché and revealing the search for a new family order that recognizes maternal love as a constructed feeling, and not a natural feminine duty.

This perspective is explored in the literary work *Die, My Love*, by Ariana Harwicz, originally published in 2012 and edited in Brazil in 2019. The Argentinian author represents motherhood not as an instinctive gift, but as an oppressive experience, marked by loneliness, physical and emotional exhaustion, and the subjective erasure of women. As Amanda da Silva Oliveira (2022, p. 122) analyzes, “The inability to perform the supposed role of exemplary mother suffocates the protagonist character, [...] because she can no longer recognize herself as a subject”. Thus, motherhood is represented there not as an instinctive experience, but through a subjective erasure of the woman and her desires, which boil over in the writing in a stream of consciousness. As Dafna Hornike aptly analyzes:

The text plays with these poles of love and danger, thus provoking a tormented reading, full of horror. The protagonist’s declarations that she will not hurt the baby are repeatedly accompanied by images of knives, broken glass, fast cars, and the crying of the baby who is left alone several times. She is totally isolated in her own world, populated by surreal images that are read with fear. Seeking clues to the baby’s health, it relieves us to discover that they are nothing more than illusions, and thus the mother’s delusions are the only excuse that can calm our horror (Hornike, 2023, p. 5, own translation).

Harwicz’s writing breaks with the gentleness normally associated with the maternal figure with explicit sexual descriptions and outbursts of sadism. The language used by the author in constructing the novel is one of the elements that most contribute to the feeling of strangeness and tension. Harwicz opts for a fragmented structure, without clear marking of speech or thoughts, causing the narrative to slide between the reality and imagination of the character. This formal choice is not merely aesthetic, but functions as a representation of the protagonist’s emotional disorganization.

Thoughts collide, images overlap, and the reader is left to grapple with this destabilizing stream of consciousness, which mirrors the psychic collapse experienced after childbirth. What is produced, therefore, is not just a story about the rejection of motherhood, but the experience of mothering as something that dissolves identity and blurs the boundaries between the self and the other. The character speaks bluntly about her exhaustion:

It feels like the baby pooped and I have to go buy his monthly birthday cake. Other mothers certainly bake the cake themselves. Six months, they say, is not the same as five or seven. Every time I look at him, I remember my husband behind me, almost coming on my back, when he suddenly decided to turn me around and enter me at the last second. If it weren't for that gesture of turning me around, if I had closed my legs, if I had grabbed his penis, I wouldn't have to go to the bakery to buy the cream or chocolate cake and the candles, half a year already. The others, a second after giving birth, say, I can't imagine my life without him anymore, it's as if he's always been with me, pfff. I'm coming, love! I want to scream, but I sink even deeper into the furrowed earth (Harwich, 2019, p. 9).

In one of the unsettling passages, the character confesses: "I noticed, as someone would notice when they discover they are missing an arm or an eye, that I no longer feel love for my son" (Harwicz, 2019, p. 113). At another point, the author exposes the sadistic feasibility:

And if I want to leave my baby in the car under a forty-degree heat index, I will. And don't tell me it's illegal. If I want to choose illegality, if I want to become one of those many fetus freezers, I will. If I want to go to jail for twenty years, or run away, that's also a possibility (Harwicz, 2019, p. 18).

These passages deliberately create discomfort in the reader, challenging the belief in the universality of maternal tenderness and the very concern for the unloved child. Therefore, there is not only tension between love and repulsion, but, as Badinter (1985, p. 130) proposes, "the image of the monstrous mother is so strong because she represents the negation of what society wants to impose as absolute truth: maternal love".

Throughout the narrative, the crisis and inclinations toward "madness" experienced by the protagonist lead her to an asylum. To Dafna Hornike, the representation of madness indicates the tension between the social view of motherhood and the mental crisis that this mother faces. Therefore, it is "her last effort to resolve the polarity she experiences, to find a socially acceptable way to fit into the typical heteronormative family" (Hornike, 2023, p. 5). According to the author, the climax occurs on her son's second birthday, in a scene that contrasts the expected happiness with fear and pain. The protagonist then decides to leave, breaking with the traditional model of the selfless mother. Her act of leaving her son is not seen as altruistic, but as a conscious decision that she is not worthy of taking care of him; the father is the one who should assume this responsibility (Hornike, 2023).

It seems that the protagonist reclaimed her sense of being separate, an independent subject with her own feelings and desires, no longer haunted by images of knives and blood. It is not a tranquil forgetting that erases the past, but an immense sadness that

accompanies her at all times. In this sense, the release from her responsibilities as a mother does not undo her maternal being, which continues to be part of her subjectivity (Hornike, 2023).

By translating into literary form the anguish of those who mother under pressure, but also the sadism with the intention of shocking the sacred arena of motherhood, Harwicz reinforces what Badinter (1985) calls “forced love”: the obligation to love, care, and sacrifice oneself without question. According to the French author, imposing this ideal requires the repression of women as subjects of autonomous desires. Maternal love, when imposed, erases the complexity of the female experience. In this book, the protagonist subverts this order, aware of her obligation, but with raw and transgressive thoughts. It is not about normalizing the exposure of the child to risk, but novels like this seek to reveal that certain people do not have the desire to realize motherhood, thus, through an intense sensitization of the reader’s feelings, shock is used as a tool to reflect on motherhood for certain women.

Other points are perceived in the work. The relationship with the mother-in-law is one example. It’s not about adopting her husband’s mother as her own, but rather about bringing up the feelings of looking at another mother and not understanding how she plays the role expected of her. Thus, there are few moments in which she manages to understand some of the character’s attitudes. We highlight the care the mother-in-law takes in administering an antidepressant: “How can my mother-in-law speak so softly, walk with such short steps, be so well-behaved, and offer Prozac to a future mother?” (Harwicz, 2019, p. 18). There is a strangeness in the mother-in-law’s behavior precisely at a moment when the character is trying to understand herself in the midst of a difficult situation, while the other performs exactly what is expected of a mother: dedication to the family.

Another point where the mother-in-law is the protagonist is in a dialogue with the father-in-law presented by our protagonist:

“What would you like us to do with your ashes?” she asked her husband when her lungs could no longer hold out. “Huh?” he said, losing his hearing. “Do you want us to bury you or scatter you, Dad?” she had to shout. “It doesn’t matter”, he replied. And he had no interest in leaving that, or anything else, recorded (Harwicz, 2019, p. 23).

There is an importance in thinking about what comes after, in this case, death, as it demonstrates concern for those who remain. When the husband passes away, it falls to the wife to think about this end, or where his mortal remains will rest, and the task of organizing the funeral ends up being the children’s, but mainly it is up to the widow to

think about it, because now she will be the “head of the family,” even if quite closely observed by the children.

In the context of family tasks, it is observed that many responsibilities still fall on the figure of the wife-mother, accompanied by social and emotional demands. Ariana Harwicz, in her work, forcefully exposes the weight of these demands, revealing the emotional strain and instability that emerge from this socially imposed place for women. The following excerpt illustrates, in a visceral way, the fraying of traditional structures of domestic life, highlighting the woman’s position within the family and her conflictual relationship with the domestic space and with her husband:

“What happened?” the husband asks, startled, upon seeing urine and broken glass. No wonder, if I were him I’d be startled too, but I’m me and I remain seated. He takes a little walk around the table, glances around, and questions me. I know, I say. What do you know? Don’t make me tell you, if I say I already know, that’s enough. And, in truth, no. What are you doing sitting there? Can’t you see the little dog is peeing, poor thing? **Can’t you see he’s stepping on the glass? Why are your pants open? I felt sorry for him, married to someone with their pants open.** Can’t I?, I ask. **You know very well it’s not about the pants! I want to be able to keep my pants open if I want!** Come here, she says, opening her arms. No. Come No. Why not? Because. What should I do, sweep? Do whatever you want. Are you staying there? Yes. **You could start taking better care of the house!** Do you know what I found in the kitchen behind the bottle? A gnawed rat and earthworms, how long has our baby been eating there? And you, I retort. Stop throwing ashes on the cups, on the saucers, for example, how long has our baby been eating there? Buy some ashtrays, then!” (Harwicz, 2019, emphasis added).

In the transcribed excerpt, the narrator’s speech not only deconstructs the expected codes of behavior for motherhood and marriage, but also exposes the meaninglessness and symbolic violence contained in everyday demands. The excerpt from Harwicz (2019) highlights domestic conflict as a space of oppression and resistance. The scene, permeated by images of dirt, chaos, and emotional exhaustion, symbolizes the character’s rupture with the role traditionally assigned to wife and mother. The open pants, a gesture that for the husband is a sign of inadequacy, becomes an expression of bodily freedom and a refusal of the social norms that regulate female behavior. The dialogue, marked by tension, shows the woman in direct confrontation with the logic of the mother’s exclusive responsibility for the care of the home and family, while the husband, although demanding, also reveals negligence. The dialogue, punctuated by abrupt and unresolved phrases, reflects a silent clash, in which the woman no longer responds to appeals for normalization, the open pants, the silence, the repeated and unjustified “no”, establishing a rupture with the imperatives of domesticity.

The tension between the characters, especially when faced with mundane issues like the dog peeing or the mess in the house, reveals how much the protagonist no longer submits to the mechanisms of care and zeal that have historically been attributed to women. As Silvia Alexim Nunes (1991, p. 75) proposes, it is a matter of rejecting a “program of education and control for women”, which aims to discipline the body and character so that women conform to the demands of life in society. In the character’s case, this program fails: there is a body that does not respond, a presence that disobeys, and a family bond that becomes a field of conflict, not affection. Thus, the excerpt powerfully illustrates how Harwicz’s writing dismantles the image of the “triumphant family” and reveals its undercurrents of oppression and frustration.

This is relevant in the current context, as the ideal of motherhood resurfaces in new guises, as is the case with so-called “positive parenting”. Despite presenting itself as a progressive pedagogical approach centered on respect for the child, this discourse often keeps the woman-mother bond at the center of absolute responsibility. The demand for emotional self-control, affectionate discipline, active listening, and constant empathy falls, for the most part, on the maternal figure, reinforcing the logic of guilt and performance. Thus, even with updated language, positive education updates the historical mechanisms of surveillance over motherhood.

In Brazil, the social construction of motherhood was closely linked to the discourses of medicine and public health. As Nunes (1991) argues, between the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, Brazilian social medicine reinforced the representation of women as almost exclusively responsible for the biological and moral reproduction of the nation¹. The female body became the target of increasing surveillance by medical knowledge, which associated it with fragility, irrationality, and a natural vocation for motherhood. In this process, care, pregnancy, and childcare practices were medicalized, reinforcing the idea that a good mother was one who followed the scientific, hygienic, and moral guidelines of the State and medicine. According to Silvia Alexim Nunes (1991):

Regarding the lady, the woman of the family, the question that arises is how to rescue her from total submission to the father and place her in a new position within the family organization. Medicine turns to this woman - who was kept secluded, devalued, and without any kind of autonomy - and begins to value her as a wife and mother, as a family agent in the medical project and the perpetuation and protection of childhood (Nunes, 1991, p. 51).

This discourse played a crucial role in consolidating a modern maternal ideal in Brazil, aligned with what Michelle Perrot (1991) describes for the European context, but

with local particularities marked by social inequality, racism, and urban sanitation policies. By placing the protagonist of *Morra, Amor* in confrontation with these traditions, even if not directly located, the analysis highlights how maternal suffering is not only the result of an intimate experience, but of a set of historical and institutionalized norms that shaped motherhood as a duty, control, and sacrifice.

Nunes (1991), in analyzing medical and hygienist discourses in 19th and early 20th century Brazil, shows how the female body was systematically subjected to normalization through a social pedagogy that aimed to mold women “fit” for life in society. According to the author, it was “a program of education and control of women, which should function as a mechanism for disciplining their bodies and their character, with a view to training them as best as possible for life in society” (Nunes, 1991, p. 75).

In this context, social medicine not only acted on women’s health, but also on their ways of being, thinking and acting, reinforcing ideals of docility, submission, purity and a natural vocation for motherhood. Motherhood, therefore, ceased to be merely a biological and affective experience, becoming a rigidly controlled social function, a duty inscribed in medical, school and legal discourses, which sought to train women to fulfill this role with obedience and sacrifice. This process is fundamental to understanding how certain maternal experiences, such as those that emerge in the narrative of *Morra, Amor*, not only deviate from an individual normative ideal, but also break with broader power structures that have historically organized the presence of women in the public and private spheres.

Final considerations

By historicizing the reading of the work *Morra, Amor* [*Die, My Love*], the subjective causes and effects of motherhood are revealed when it is lived under the weight of a normative ideal. The protagonist, who finds no room for error, ambivalence, or even silence, finds herself trapped by a model that demands selflessness and unrestricted dedication, without ever questioning the desires or real conditions of those who mother. The novel brutally highlights the disruption of what is expected of women: that they be loving mothers, even when emotionally destroyed; that they care, even when no one else cares for them. And, above all, that they remain silent. Harwicz’s character, however, does not remain silent; her mind screams discontent with such a posture. Her refusal to play the role of the ideal mother is, even if uncontrolled, an act of rupture.

By portraying motherhood as a construct rather than an instinct, Harwicz dramatizes, in fictional language, the consequences of this myth: by naturalizing maternal love as an obligation, society isolates and blames women who do not fit in. The character in *Die, My Love* is not just a woman in distress, but a reflection of a structure that demands that mothering be pleasurable, beautiful, and constant, even if it costs the mental health of those who experience it. By refusing to perform the ideal mother, she dismantles what is most fragile and oppressive in this imaginary: the assumption that every woman should, by nature, desire to be a mother, and unconditionally love that role.

Works like *Die, My Love* function as a counter-discourse to the silencing of maternal unease, opening space for the expression of ambiguous feelings and experiences that do not conform to the ideal mother model. In this way, the articulation between feminist theory and literature reveals the importance of deconstructing the uniform image of motherhood. Recognizing motherhood as a cultural construct and a multiple experience is a condition for freeing women from forced love and for rethinking motherhood outside the binary between the ideal mother and the bad mother. Listening to subjective experience, even through fiction, is therefore a political act.

By confronting the idealized discourse of motherhood with the literary experience presented in Ariana Harwicz's *Die, My Love*, this work sought to challenge the social expectations placed on women who mother. The novel's protagonist embodies, in an extreme and painful way, the subjective effects of an imposed motherhood, lived without desire or enchantment, but marked by guilt, isolation, and refusal. Her voice, chaotic and violent, breaks the silence that has historically surrounded maternal suffering, revealing a reality often denied or disguised in the name of an unattainable ideal.

By bringing to light the contradictions, anxieties, and ghosts that permeate the postpartum period, Harwicz not only denounces the symbolic violence of a model that demands unconditional love from mothers, but also opens up space for other experiences to be legitimized. Far from being an isolated case of disturbance, the protagonist of the novel is a symptom of a social structure that glorifies female caregiving while simultaneously devaluing and isolating those who practice it.

In this sense, the dialogue with the reflections of Elisabeth Badinter (1985) contributed to historicizing this model of motherhood, allowing it to be understood as a cultural construct and not as a spontaneous expression of female nature. By using literature as a tool for critical analysis, this work proposed an attentive and unfiltered listening to what is conflicting in mothering, especially when it becomes an obligation, not a choice. Recognizing suffering, exhaustion, and ambivalence as legitimate parts of

the maternal experience is a necessary step in dismantling the myth of the ideal mother and paving the way for a freer, more honest, and possible motherhood.

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¹ It is worth mentioning that the work analyzed emerges from a specific Argentine context. A closer look at the Brazilian experience could broaden the discussion, proposing a more in-depth approach in this regard in future works.