

Reclaiming Mother–Son Relationships on Mothers’ Own Terms: Margaret Forster’s *Mothers’ Boys* and Rosellen Brown’s *Before and After*

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Abstract

This paper examines two contemporary mother–son novels, Margaret Forster’s *Mothers’ Boys* and Rosellen Brown’s *Before and After*, which offer similar scripts for raising sons. In these novels, both writers unmercifully depict the alienation between mothers and sons and describe how these mothers deal with their sons’ separation from them. Different from the forging of identification between mothers and daughters and the relative obscurity of the father figure in contemporary mother–daughter narratives, the delineation of estranged relationships between mothers and sons and the inclusion of fathers in raising sons enables the two mother–son novels to inform a new narrative structure of matrilineal narratives. In particular, looking through the lens of the mothers with their strong desire to (re)connect with their sons as well as the maternalizing of the father figure in these novels, the novels suggest the two writers’ concerted efforts to refigure the mother–son estrangement and to strengthen the mother–son bond on the mothers’ own terms. Drawing from this observation, this study concludes with the positive note that reinstating the mother–son connection is the trend that preoccupies these contemporary women writers.

Key words

mother–son relationships, mother–son separation, mother–son connection, Margaret Forster’s *Mothers’ Boys*, Rosellen Brown’s *Before and After*

Introduction

In contemporary matrilineal narratives,¹ the mother–daughter relationship is often seen as the nexus of the narratives. The mother–daughter bond,

¹ Feminist literary scholar, Tess Cosslett (1996), defines a matrilineal narrative as “one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors” (p. 7).

despite the likely conflict and ambivalence emerging from it, is still predominantly viewed by contemporary women writers as the binding force that ties mothers and daughters together. The mother-son relationship, however, carves out a different narrative for a feminist reading. It arouses both wonder and anxiety from most feminist mothers right from the moment of their realization that they may have given birth to sons. With the growth of this relationship, it is also the one that spins these mothers around the issue of mothering in connection with the socialization of sons. The recent development of feminist studies of mothers and sons is inclined to empower mothers with the agency and authority to effectuate the bringing up of new men who are nurturing, emotionally expressive, non-violent, confident, and self-reliant. Noteworthy is also the fact that mother-son relationships engender far more complicated daily experiences confronting mothers, feminists, and non-feminists alike, than mother-daughter relationships do, which registers this salient maternal issue of mother and son as displaying a vexed paradox: both the possibility and impossibility of the relationship. This paradox, as unfolded in several contemporary women writers' portrayals of mother-son relationships, encapsulates the dilemmas and contradictions most feminist mothers encounter in their experiences of raising sons. In looking through these complex layers of paradoxical mother-son relationships, I seek to tackle this subject by investigating two mother-son narratives, Margaret Forster's *Mothers' Boys* and Rosellen Brown's *Before and After*, in their delineations of the relationships between mothers and their adolescent sons.

Seen as the most disturbing period in the development of mother-son relationships, the second phase surrounding mothers' relationships with their adolescent sons features frequently in contemporary women's writings about mothers and sons. For instance, the two novels, Margaret Forster's *Mothers' Boys* and Rosellen Brown's *Before and After*, and the two essays, Jo-Ann Mapson's "Navigating the Channel Islands" and Sallie Tisdale's "Scars: In Four Parts" in Patricia Stevens' anthology, all describe how the sons have turned into total strangers to their mothers; this especially happens at a dreadful moment of one mother-son meeting in a juvenile prison. Exploring this mother-son theme in more detail, Forster and Brown are able to unravel more fully the development of the estranged relationship between mothers and their adolescent sons, and to interrogate more deeply the problematic issue of mothering sons. In their novels, they particularly

address the question of why too much mothering can become unwelcomed and even unpleasant at this stage of a son's life and describe a cultural conception of motherhood that prescribes less mothering for sons' healthy development. This construct of less mothering in a son's life, as hinted at in these novels, represents a prevalent cultural assumption of mothers' castrating their sons, and the sons' unavoidable separation from their mothers as a ritual by which sons develop into maturity or manhood.² Yet by taking into account mothers' perspectives, these two writers also showcase the thorny question of how mothers come to terms with their sons' separation from them in their novels. They even construct different resolutions of mother-son separation despite their portrayal of mother-son relationships as extremely difficult and ostensibly unresolved. It is this different rendering of the mother-son relationship, especially when it is seen through the lens of mothers that this paper purports to unravel by offering a comparative and feminist reading of the two novels. In what follows, I provide two contextual frameworks: one has to do with a brief overview of feminist discourses on mother-son relationships and the other concerns the two texts under analysis here.

The Feminist Maternal Context

In the only chapter on mother and sons in her book, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich discusses certain thought-provoking agendas surrounding the mother-son relationship. Tracing some historical precedents in certain ancient societies and cultures, Rich delineates a disturbing picture of the mother-son relationship in general. The mother-son relationship, as Rich (1992) argues, is encoded within and thus mutilated by the traditional, albeit still prevalent, cultural assumption that mothers all too often smother their sons, thereby symbolically castrating them, and that this mother-son relationship must be severed for the son to reach adulthood (p. 205). Rich's concern here is caused by the advocacy of the traditional Freudian theory of separation. Yet, her inquiry into mother-son relationships has, in partic-

² Caused by this culturally prevalent assumption of mothers' castrating their sons with too much mothering, several feminist critics and writers such as Adrienne Rich (1992, p. 205), Judith Arcana (1983, p. 1), Mary Gordon (2000, p. 157) and Susan Koppelman (2000, pp. 81 - 97) all exhibit their apprehension and fear of having and raising sons in a patriarchal society.

ular, opened up a new chapter in the studies of mother-son relationships. Her contention not only marks the divide between the traditionalist and the feminist maternal views of the mother-son relationship;³ her championship of the mother-son connection has also been picked up and vigorously explored by later feminist and women writers' publishing, especially since the 1990s.

Developing Rich's study further, later feminist maternal scholars such as Juanita Ross Epp, Sharon Cook, Dorothy Broom, Andrea O'Reilly, and Christine Peets all see the task of raising feminist sons as positive, rewarding, and worthwhile. They reach a consensus that their feminist mothering will not emasculate their sons, in the light of the reciprocity they establish with them. Pointing to the key issue in this salient feminist study of mothers and sons, Epp and Cook (2000) assert that feminists should not mistake the individuals under patriarchy, "especially not those who do not subscribe to patriarchy," as a threat; "it is the patriarchal system which is the enemy" (p. 19). Both Epp and Cook raise their sons "to become men who understand the issues associated with male privilege and refute the inequity that they see there" (p. 19).

In a special feature of *Feminism and Psychology* on "Mothering Sons: A Crucial Feminist Challenge," one of the feminist respondents, Dorothy Broom (1996), questions the often-perceived contradictory relation between being a good mother and a feminist. Broom's relationship with her son is not tainted with strife and conflict because her feminism and mothering are blended so well in her interactions with him that their relationship is a harmonious one (pp. 139-141). Moreover, as O'Reilly (2000) and Peets (2000) both note, the mutual influences of feminism and mothering have been so evident that the dual identities as a feminist and a mother (of a son) are

³ The traditionalist viewpoint here referred to the culturally prevalent assumption of mothers' smothering their sons with too much mothering. In psychoanalytic separation theory, Freud was addressing the need for emotional separation and boundary-setting between mothers and sons in order for a boy to develop his own identity separate from the mother and to develop a healthy mother-son relationship when the boy becomes a man. In contrast to the traditional Freudian separation theory, feminist maternal scholars argue that the mother-son connection rather than the separation can in effect form growth-fostering relationship between mothers and sons. They champion the practice of relational mothering for the bringing up of new men who are caring, non-violent, emotionally expressive, and confident. See Dooley & Fedele (2001). Raising relational boys. In A. O'Reilly (Ed.), *Mothers and sons: Feminism, masculinity, and the struggle to raise our sons* (pp. 185 - 216). New York and London: Routledge.

shaping and being shaped by one another (pp. 98–103, 185). The sons of Audre Lorde (1984) and O'Reilly (2000) confirm that their feminist up-bringsings not only established intimate and positive relationships with their feminist mothers but also enabled them to have an open-minded, responsive, and sensitive personality as opposed to traditional masculine traits (pp. 80, 185–191). Likewise, according to the responses given by most sons of feminist mothers, as described in Epp and Cook's (2000) survey, these feminist sons consider feminism as their worldview and an integral part of their daily life and experience when growing up. They benefit tremendously from feminism because they are more aware of issues related to gender differences and equity than their male peers and they also have few difficulties establishing good relationships with both women and men in their own age group (pp. 19–24).

Drawing from the consecutive studies of feminist theory and practice of mothering by herself and other feminist scholars over the decades, O'Reilly's research (2014) culminates in her apt definition of feminist mothering as “an oppositional discourse of motherhood, one that is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood, seeking to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood and to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women” (p. 187). Yet, the positive outcomes afforded by the aforementioned feminist scholars and mothers are indeed far from delivering an evangelical eulogy of feminists mothering sons—a feminist mothering fairy tale. Comparing her ways of mothering two daughters and a son, O'Reilly (2000) also avers that her feminist mothering of her daughters has been overt and to the point, whereas with her sons it “has been less direct and perhaps more complicated” (p. 186). Flipping to the other side of feminist mothering, O'Reilly (2014) delves into what she terms “the paradox of feminist mothering” by revealing the challenges feminists face when performing their maternal practice as their feminist beliefs are very much at odds with prevailing maternal practices. She hence calls for the development of “a new mode of mothering,” one that asks a woman to broaden the horizons of her life (pp. 198–201). In other words, the success of feminist mothering is often accomplished through feminists overcoming the social and cultural hurdles that are created by traditional, often Freudian, thought.

The Textual Background

Although Forster's *Mothers' Boys* (1994) is a British text while Brown's *Before and After* (1992) is an American one, these two novels are worth comparing because many of their commonalities afford valuable insights into studies of mother-son relationships apart from the fact that both share a similar Western context and the same mothering norms. They illuminate for us the disturbing issue of separation between mothers and sons especially when it is tackled from mothers' perspectives. In both texts, the mother-son separation is triggered by the violence incited by sons. Thus, both are concerned with the theme of late teenaged boys and violence that includes a similar family crisis in which a son is suspected of committing murder. This shocking news plays havoc with the whole family as it creates turbulence in family relationships and tests the value of kinship to the extreme. In addition, another striking similarity between the two texts occurs with respect to the parents' unpleasant encounter with their sons, who suddenly turn into strangers after they are suspected of committing murder. To a larger degree, the suspicions of the sons' committing crimes together given the dramatic changes occurring to them highlight and intensify the parent-child crisis and, in particular, the mother-son estrangement. In comparison with the mother-daughter separation, whose contributing factors are usually related to education, class, and/or the daughter's divorce, the mother-son separation has to do with violence and crime committed by sons.

In *Before and After*, Brown presents a tripartite narration of mother (Carolyn), father (Ben) and daughter (Judith), disclosing gradually the impact of such a dreadful occurrence on each of the three family members, and the likelihood of the son's (Jacob) having committed the murder of his classmate and girlfriend, Martha Taverner, a teenage girl living in the neighborhood in Hyland, Massachusetts. This triangulation of family narrative is unlike Forster's *Mothers' Boys* in which the perspectives are juxtaposed by the narrations of two maternal figures, Sheila Armstrong, the attacker's (grand)mother, and Harriet Kennedy, the victim's mother. In *Mothers' Boys*, Joe Kennedy, the second son of Harriet and her architect husband Sam, is suffering from a severe assault by two bigger boys. Although Joe will eventually survive this dreadful event, he has also been traumatized by it. This drastic change in Joe also depresses his mother,

Harriet, tremendously. Joe finally turns himself from being a mother's boy into someone who is independent from his mother. Another teenaged boy in the same novel, Leo Armstrong, who is black and one of the alleged attackers, was raised by Sheila, his maternal grandmother, who is in effect his mother,⁴ and her husband. Sheila finds it hard to believe that her Leo can commit violence. When she visits him in the young offenders' institution, she begins to experience and realize her alienation from him. Leo, who has remained detached from his (grand)mother since being suspected of exerting violence on Joe, has finally left her and the novel ends with the mother waiting patiently for his return.

In a similar vein to Sheila's experience in Forster's *Mother's Boys*, pediatrician Carolyn Reiser and her sculptor husband Ben discover that their son, Jacob, is the prime suspect in a murder of a teenager girl. Brown vividly portrays the Reisers' disbelief and devastation because their son's unruly behaviors are unthinkable to them. Shortly after the murder, Ben even destroys the evidence that can incriminate his son out of his strong parental love to protect him. Although Carolyn is initially hesitant about whether she should comply with her husband's wrongdoing, she decides to oppose him after taking her daughter's advice. The whole family then begins to be divided during Jacob's arrest and trial because of their different stances regarding how Jacob's case is handled. It is only after he is set free by the court because of lack of evidence to convict him that the whole family is reunited with the promise of leading a happy life thereafter.

Methods

This paper used qualitative research to provide a theme-based analysis of two novels. Because this study looks into the textual representations of motherhood and mother-son relationships, a close reading of the two novels is needed to probe deeply into the critical issue of mother-son separa-

⁴ Sheila's daughter, Pat, marries a black man in South Africa. Later, they are both killed in a car accident, leaving their young son, Leo, as an orphan. Out of her genuine concern for her only grandson, Sheila flies, for the first time in her life, to South Africa to bring her grandson back with her to England. Sheila then brings up Leo as her own son and becomes his substitute mother. Although this paper does not attempt to generalize the mother-son relationship by seeing Sheila as Leo's mother instead of his grandmother, the author, Forster, does portray Sheila as if she were Leo's real or substitute mother.

tion as well as its resultant resolutions. Besides, as each author offers her own individual and subjective presentation of the mother-son relationship, a qualitative study such as a textual analysis can more aptly grasp the truth about the personal, introspective, and even emotional aspects of mother-son relationships than a quantitative analysis. In addition to providing important plot summaries for readers to be more aware of the contents of these two key texts, a detailed and critical examination of certain significant plotlines will also be given, including using excerpts from these two texts for a close textual analysis and for clarification of major points. Thematic recurrences as shown in the mother-son relationships in both texts include “strange encounters between mothers (parents) and their adolescent sons,” “the mother-son separation,” “mothers’ yearning for reunion with sons,” and “the emergence of the father and matrilineal divergence from the Freudian family plot.” These topics will be dealt with one by one to offer a clear-cut investigation of the texts concerned.

Reading Forster’s *Mothers Boys* and Brown’s *Before and After*

Contemporary mother-son narratives written in the genres of the novel, the short story, and the autobiography, such as Ann Beattie’s *Picturing Will*, Margaret Forster’s *Mothers’ Boys*, Rosellen Brown’s *Before and After*, Jane Hamilton’s *Disobedience*, Amanda Cragic’s *In a Dark Wood*, Lynda Martín’s “Mother and Child: The Erotic Bond,” Marybeth Holleman’s “Joint Custody,” and Patricia Stevens’ anthology, *Between Mothers and Sons: Women Writers Talk about Having Sons and Raising Men* all focus on a common theme of mother-son connection in their navigation of different phases of the mother-son relationship. Often, these women writers depict the early mother-son relationship as the period when the mother-son bond exists and is firmly consolidated, the middle phase as the period when the mother-son relationship turns difficult and strained, especially in mothers’ confrontations with their adolescent sons, who become rebellious and unfamiliar to their mothers, and finally, the last stage as the period when sons step into adulthood and the mother-son relationship is thus moved into a new and more positive formation. In their depictions of the three major stages of mother-son relationships during the son’s childhood, adolescence and adulthood, they echo the triadic paradigm of “connection-disconnection-new connection” proposed by feminist researchers, Cate Dooley

and Nikki Fedele (2001), in their study of the mother-son relationship in the context of relational theory (p. 195).

Dooley and Fedele (2001) apply relationality to the mother-son relationship in their extensive and rigorous clinical research. Their theoretical premise is that by virtue of women's greater capacity for forming empathy and connection within relationships, the cultivation and maintenance of relational capability in sons can be actively and effectively executed by mothers themselves. Going against the grain of the separation theory derived from Freud's psychoanalytic theory in the early twentieth century to its insidious permeation via the media into the formation and perpetuation of cultural perceptions and values during the present day, Dooley and Fedele uphold what they term "relational mothering" to provide a remedy to heal the disconnection sons and men have suffered from in their relationships with mothers and other people. In their view, cultural imperatives of disconnection for sons and men have not only devastated them and their relationships with others but also created various social problems, such as violence and dominance destructive to the well-being of a society as a whole (p. 185). As Dooley and Fedele convincingly maintain, "our workshops with mothers and adult sons, as well as our clinical work with men and couples, tell us that boys with a secure maternal connection develop stronger interpersonal skills and enjoy healthier relationship as adults" (pp. 185-189).

More significantly, in establishing a firm and ever-lasting connection between mothers and sons, Dooley and Fedele (2001) make a breakthrough in outlining the aforementioned triadic progressive trajectory, "connection-disconnection-new connection," to complete this whole course of "healing connection" (pp. 189-198). Like many feminist maternal scholars, Dooley and Fedele's research offers a stance that refutes the traditionalist view by taking mothers' perspectives into account as their finding reveals that "many mothers follow their inclination and stay in relationship[s] with their sons" throughout their sons' life (pp. 187-188). The contributions Dooley and Fedele's study have made to feminist maternal studies provide an answer to why mothers can strike a connection with sons as well as suggesting how this mother-son connection can be put into effect in their experiment.

By allowing readers to look through the lens of mothers in their novels, both Forster and Brown unfold the perplexing issue of how mothers come

to terms with their sons' separation from them. Yet the ways in which they handle the impending separation between mothers and sons mark the discrepancy between traditionalist and feminist maternal viewpoints. Forster embraces the traditional Freudian theory of separation. She often cautions against the mother-son connection, which is prohibited and maligned in her portrayal of the interactions between mothers and sons. Specifically, she both ridicules and critiques mothers who have smothered their sons with too much love and attention and espouses the traditionalist viewpoint that prescribes less mothering for the son's healthy development.

On the other hand, Brown, working beyond the patriarchal script of mother-son separation, endeavors to reconfigure the mother-son estrangement and to strengthen the mother-son bond on the mother's terms by adopting a feminist maternal angle. The endeavor elicits a politically empowering reading against the grain, one that works to undo the cultural dictate of the necessity of the mother-son separation, thus refuting the idea that the feminist mothering of sons is necessarily bad or problematic. These different viewpoints exemplify the two major ways of reading mother-son relationships. They also illustrate the diverging ways in which women writers treat the theme of mother-son connections in their writing. The reason that these women writers vary in their views of the mother-son connection, in this second stage of mothers' relationships with their adolescent sons, is partly because of the fact that this period is seen as the most unsettling in the development of mother-son relationships. The variation also uncovers women's uncertain and complex experience of mothering sons. In what follows, I explore these two different representations of mother-son relationships by offering a comparative reading of the two novels.

Strange Encounters between Mothers and Their Adolescent Sons

In both Forster's and Brown's novels, a gnawing quest in the mother-son narratives is to uncover the truth about sons in the mothers' ceaseless search for a definite explanation as to whether their sons actually committed crimes. The arrangement of this central narrative plot of the murders committed by sons reflects the nature of the mother-son relationship prior to the murders. This weary quest later develops into a puzzle when the sons opt to remain silent in response to any of the enquiries from the mothers or parents. The son's inexplicable silences bewilder them so im-

mensely that it turns their daily life upside down. The attacker's (grand) mother, Sheila, in Forster's *Mothers' Boys*, repeatedly speculates on what causes this drastic change to her beloved son, Leo, who keeps this closely guarded secret to himself throughout the text. Her probing becomes futile and no answer is found by the end of the novel. Carolyn and Ben Reiser, the parents of Jacob in Brown's *Before and After*, are tormented by their son's harrowing changes and would defend their son strongly if provoked by questions concerning his normality and integrity. Fortunately, their son's breaking silence in the later part of the novel enables them to discover the truth. But this revelation of naked truth throws them into a family crisis. The extreme transformations befalling these two sons and their parents' torment, engendered by such incomprehensible situations, occur at a critical stage in the development of their relationships; the two sons are both seventeen, on the threshold of entering their adulthood or manhood. Each son's critical age, accompanied by their suspected involvement with crime, underscores the impending separation between mothers and sons and parents and children. Moreover, the interactions between mothers and sons, prompted by the murders, inform a large part of the strained relations between them that are devoid of mutual communication.

In Forster's *Mothers' Boys* (1995), Sheila's visit to Leo in the Young Offenders' Institution shortly after he has been found guilty of the murder demonstrates an awkward, unaccustomed, and even reluctant (from the son's view) encounter between a mother and her adolescent, awkward son. Sheila, although tortured by her anxiety as to whether her son has committed the crime, manages to subdue her unquenchable curiosity by greeting Leo with her normal enquiry concerning his daily life in the prison. Yet, Leo fails to reciprocate her warmth and caring:

Once, when she'd had flu and hadn't been able to go, though she'd been sure to send a message, she'd been upset that Leo hadn't asked her how she was feeling. Not a word. Just stared at her, arms akimbo, as they always were, eyes fixed on her but without contact. She heard herself rambling on about her illness, how she still felt weak, had no energy, and eventually he had broken in. "Don't come then," he'd said. Was it out of concern for her? She didn't think so (p. 55).

Ironically, Sheila's great concern about her son is translated into clumsiness and embarrassment because of Leo's apparent indifference to her. The son's becoming detached and numb baffles the mother and hence precip-

itates her predicament. Sheila realizes, in this instance, that Leo's final inconsiderate response keeps her at a distance, thus making a relationship virtually impossible.

In Brown's *Before and After* (1996), the parents' first strange encounter with their son is foreshadowed by an unfamiliar persona they detect in the postcards their son sends from various places when he mysteriously disappears after the murder of Martha Taverner. The inept messages disclosed in the postcards lead the mother, Carolyn, to suspect that their son, Jacob, might have been kidnapped, rather than having fled from an unfortunate accident. However, their daughter Judith's abrupt revelation of having once witnessed her brother's brutal torture of their dog shatters Carolyn's confidence and knowledge of her beloved son. The son's unknowability culminates in the parents' confrontation with a mute and seemingly traumatized son after Jacob is found and their first visit to him in the Cambridge jail is granted. The physical constraint of a glass window and "the inhumaneness of speaking through" a telephone intensify the parents' yearning for close contact with their now detached son (p. 133).

In a similar manner to Forster's *Mothers' Boys*, what makes the parents' hearts sink is the unknown and unfathomable silence and distance their son inflicts on them:

They were spared, at least, [of] having to confront the question of whether, if he could have, Jacob would have reached forward to fall into their arms. He stood utterly still, utterly blank. Carolyn raked his face for a sign—terror suppressed, or relief, or the beginning of a grief-stricken crumbling—but she saw a blankness so pure she had to restrain herself from thrusting herself through the window and shaking him. (pp. 131–132)

In striving to recognize her son, Carolyn instead has an encounter with someone unfamiliar. After having no response at all from their son, Carolyn and her husband, Ben, request a "contact visit" with him (Brown, 1996, p. 133). To their dismay, Jacob remains unconcerned to his parent's anxiety and agony (pp. 133–137).

Coincidentally in both novels, both Forster and Brown have tackled the mothers' sense of alienation from their beloved sons in their emotionally detached encounter in a juvenile prison. These women writers' choice of

this mother-son *reunion* in a prison points to the intensity of their physical and emotional distance. In contrast to their sons' indifference and cold-heartedness, the mothers suffer from their agony and powerlessness. They have to come to terms with the separation from their sons. This strange encounter of a mother with her son is also a harbinger of their further separation. As I demonstrate later, these mothers and sons will eventually separate from each other.

The mother-son separation.

In *Mothers' Boys*, the way in which Forster (1995) handles the separation between mothers and sons is her portrayal of the sons' attempted declaration of their independence from their mothers, juxtaposed by a merciless social critique of the mothers' overwhelming love. Portrayed as having a kind of obsessive maternal love, both Sheila and Harriet are constantly reminded of the impending dangers of harming family relationships. Sheila's sense of guilt and doubt around her motherhood and her relationship with Leo appear like a maze where she is trapped and completely lost with no sense of direction (pp. 94-95). The separation occurs when Sheila goes to visit Leo again and is informed of his pending release by the Deputy Governor with the additional and unexpected news of Leo's refusal to go home upon his release:

“He doesn't want to go home.”

She stared at him, at last surprised. He looked embarrassed, shuffled his papers around. She felt a combination of distress and anger rising within her and didn't know which was the stronger until she heard herself speak. “Don't talk silly,” she almost shouted. “Of course he wants to come home!”

“He's adamant he doesn't.”

“That's shame talking, that's all shame at last. He thinks he can't face us. He's nowhere else to go, nowhere, what would he do? He'd get into even worse habits, he'd have no stability, it would be the end of him [...]”

“Or the beginning. Maybe he knows best, eh?” (p. 201)

In response to Leo's intended separation from her, Sheila first denies the

fact and then delivers her intense worries about her son's well-being camouflaged in her explicitly angry tone and reproach. The Deputy Governor's harsh and sarcastic replies awaken Sheila from her dream of motherhood. Leo's willful separation entails the disruption of their relationship and of her nurturing in shaping Leo's past, present, and future. A contrast of attitudes and reactions is also highlighted in the succeeding conversation between Sheila and the Deputy Governor in which they have a serious debate about the issue of independence at the age of seventeen as Leo is now (p. 201). All of these contrasts, however, exhibit Sheila's unwillingness to sever her bond with Leo.

As for Harriet, a critique of her way of raising sons is directed at her by her husband, Sam. Harriet rears Joe to be a non-macho type of man and she wants him to remain as a model of her successful upbringing. Yet, her husband blames her for indirectly causing trouble regarding their son's inability to survive in an aggressive and male-orientated society:

Every time Sam bemoaned Joe's lack of strength, his sensitivity, Harriet rounded on him and asked him what was so wonderful about being and looking tough. She said she didn't want Joe to "toughen up," she wanted him to stay the same sweet, if difficult, boy he had always been. Sam said that in that case he was always going to have problems, he'd have to learn how to defend himself, how to conceal his lack of aggression. Then they had quarreled, about aggression, aggressively. Harriet said male aggression had caused all the trouble in the world and she and her generation of women had tried to rear sons who would not think aggression was part of being male [...]. Sam had just smiled. (Forster, 1995, p. 27)

What Harriet is being accused of is keeping her son a mummy's boy. Harriet's reference to her principle of raising a non-aggressive son displays a feminist mode of mothering.⁵ Sam's disapproval of Harriet's mothering

⁵ Adopting a feminist mode of mothering, many feminist mothers aim at raising their sons in a gender neutral and pacifist way in order to pave an egalitarian road to future gender relations. See Stevens (2001, pp. 9 - 15, 33 - 44, 45 - 58). See also O'Reilly (2000). A mom and her son: Thoughts on feminist mothering. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 2(1), 185.

points to the inappropriateness of her mothering. Yet, Sam's accusation of Harriet's feminist mothering is precisely a manifestation of the patriarchal imperative of "the displacement and disparagement of the maternal" (O'Reilly, 2001, p. 98). This issue of feminist mothers' emasculation of their sons, openly addressed in Forster's *Mothers' Boys*, provokes a feminist maternal reading of her text, one that I now turn to.

Indeed, such an appalling occurrence happening to their sons puts Sheila's and Harriet's acts of mothering and their mother-son relationships on trial. Their mothering of sons is tested to such an extreme that Harriet locks herself into being a selfless mother. Upon realizing the cruel infliction of violence and suffering on her son, Harriet cannot possibly spare any of her time for her work or her marriage. This brutal act of violence against her son is so incompatible with her maternal love to preserve and protect that, ironically, it defeats her and leaves her in a temporary state of psychological paralysis. Unwilling and unable to believe she and her son can recover from such a traumatic experience, she refuses any suggestions for family holidays to get over this crisis and allows her son to vent anger and resentment against her. Ginny, Harriet's sister who witnesses what has happened to the Kennedys, feels worried and expresses her great concern about her sister's condition:

It was what Harriet was enduring, a permanent sense of great pressure, an inability to relax for one single moment, it was living in a state of crisis all the time. Joe was attacking her, using her, every day, and she let it happen. She'd been in this very kitchen and heard Joe swear at his mother viciously, heard him heap contempt on her for her supposed stupidity. That, Ginny suspected, was only the half of it. (Forster, 1995, p. 74)

Harriet's maternal love consolidates her strength for maternal perseverance, but it is also the element that portrays her as ridiculous in Foster's depiction. Apart from this constant battle of endurance with her son, Harriet also senses a gap widening between herself and her husband. Seeing his wife being overindulgent to their son, Sam blatantly states that "Joe is wrecking our lives," and, "Joe only wants to make us suffer because he did," and, worst of all, "Joe is making us into enemies" (pp. 68-69). Harriet, of course, disagrees with Sam's assessment. The stark contrast she

now recognizes in her relationship with Sam lies in their different perceptions of parenting (p. 69).

When another suspect, Gary Robinson, is caught dealing drugs and Joe is asked to an identity parade to confirm whether Robinson is the real attacker, Harriet resents such an idea because she fears that this episode might interrupt her son's current gradual recovery from the trauma. On the contrary, Joe consents to it and insists on going alone without his mother, which marks both his great improvement in recovering from his trauma and his declaration of independence from his mother. This phase of Joe's gradual independence is completed when Joe eventually earns his driver's license and is allowed a second-hand car bought from his aunt Ginny, by his mother. Yet, while her son is spending the weekend with his girlfriend, Clair, whose appearance intrudes into and disrupts Harriet's mother-son dyad, Harriet still cannot get over her anxiety about her son's safety and independence (Forster, 1995, p. 311).

Later, when Harriet rushes back home from work and does not see Joe there, needing her, she comforts herself by thinking: "It was temporary, Joe's recovery, she knew it must be. He would crash again, he would be bound to need her again. The greater the apparent lift of his spirits, the greater the fall. It was a cheat, this 'happiness,' the driving, the car, Claire" (p. 311). Harriet's repeated denial of her son's independence from her and the haunting specter of deprived motherhood exemplify her extreme difficulty in letting go. Being in an empathetic state with Joe, Harriet goes through this crisis with her son in his gradual restoration to his normal state. Therefore, "the hardest thing" for Harriet at the moment is "to go along with it, *pretend* with him" (p. 311, emphasis original). This is, however, what Joe desires so that "he was free to escape the obligation she laid on him of always remembering" his mother's love (p. 311). Although this is heart-breaking to Harriet, it is "the greatest burden" of mothering that she "must lift it" first (p. 311).

Seen from a feminist maternal view, the mother-son separation as portrayed particularly in Forster's *Mothers' Boys* presents the most problematic aspect of the mother-son relationship. The mothers' difficulty in letting go of their sons is closely scrutinized by the psychoanalytic mandates of separation theory, as conveyed by certain male characters, including their husbands and sons. The mothers' reluctance to separate from their sons is mocked in stark contrast to their sons' determination to claim their in-

dependence from their mothers. In lavishing their unconditional love on their sons, both Sheila and Harriet succumb to old-fashioned feminine submissive roles that refute feminist advocacy of an egalitarian relationship between mother and son. Yet, what feminist maternal scholars fight against are the patriarchal dictates and enforcement of mother-son separation. The mothers' difficulty or reluctance to let go of their sons should not be regarded as a problem per se. Rather, it is the cultural permeation of separation into the mother-son relationship that treats maternal love as overwhelming and dangerous. Although the mothers in Forster's novel are blamed for their "obsessive" maternal love, the persistence of their love also signifies the mothers' strong desire to (re)connect with their sons. As I suggest later, the mothers' longing to restore their rupture with their sons continues with such maternal zest for (re)connection that it subverts the patriarchal imperative of mother-son separation.

Mothers' yearning for reunion with sons.

Another shocking episode of Sheila's mother-son story is when her father, Eric James, confesses to her that he has hidden Leo in his house after Leo's escape from custody. Running all the way from the hospital to his house, where Eric James has been staying after his fatal accident, Sheila anticipates seeing Leo. To her great disappointment, when Sheila discovers that her father's five-hundred-pound note long hidden in an old mattress has gone missing, she knows that Leo has already run away with the money. A note left by Leo reads:

'Dear Grandad,' it said, 'You said you wanted to give me all your money, so I hope it is all right to take some of it. I have taken £500 and left £200. I will repay all of it. I am sorry to go like this, but I can't stay forever. Thank you for everything. I am sorry about everything. Give Mum my love and tell her one day I'll come back. Sorry.' (Forster, 1995, p. 277)

While this single message from Leo is demoralizing to Sheila, she is still eager to find out what has actually happened to her son by dashing back again to the hospital to consult her father. Reading the note over and over again, Sheila notices Leo's remorse by counting the number of times he

apologizes in the note and treasures it as “a link” with her son (p. 279). Although it will be “a strain” to envision a future for her son and herself, there is still space for hope, which Sheila thinks is worth waiting for (p. 279).

Sheila’s final realization of her mothering and her relationship with Leo is that “she has struggled to make him, if not in her own image, then in the image of what she wanted him to be” (p. 312). This is why Leo has always remained “her boy”; “and he’d known that, which was why she had lost him” (p. 312). For Sheila, the problem lies in the fact that she feels responsible for the violence Leo is suspected of committing and she is unable to separate herself from this involvement. As Sheila admits later, the mother-son tie is so important to her that she will need to adjust herself to this new transformation in their relationship so that when her boy comes back, she will be able to be ready to reclaim him on his own terms (p. 313).

For Harriet, it is not only the process of separation that hardens the mother-son relationship but also the remains of the already cut umbilical cord—the first bond—which ties herself and Joe firmly together. The remedy for their mother-son relationship is their adjustment to their newly defined relationship as revealed dramatically in the transformation of Harriet’s attitude towards her son’s girlfriend from sheer hostility to complete acceptance. Letting her son go is still “a mystery” of motherhood Harriet needs to learn, but she entrusts it to Joe to “do the defining” (p. 312). As if succumbing to a traditionally submissive feminine role, Harriet carried on with her domestic tasks and “waited, patiently, humbly, for her boy to come home” (p. 312), by which Forster blatantly develops further feminist maternal issues toward the end of the novel.

In light of a feminist mode of mothering, both Sheila’s and Harriet’s yearning for restoration could be seen as retrograde. Besides, their final concession—to let their sons go by endorsing less mothering—can be said to comply with patriarchal norms of how a mother should raise her son(s). However, with their hopes for a mother-son reunion in the future, these mothers’ unfailing desire for the mother-son (re)connection still persists and is only transposed into a different form. These mothers, in fact, have not yet surrendered their bond with their sons to the patriarchy. While the mothers’ yearning for reunion with their sons signals a possibility of scripting a mother-son connection, there is also another possibility of resorting

to a patrilineal sideline as illustrated in Brown's *Before and After*, which I explore in the following section.

The Emergence of the Father and Matrilineal Divergence from the Freudian Family Plot.

Unlike Forster's *Mother's Boys*, Brown delineates a father instead of a mother who refuses to sever his connection with his son. Paternal love rather than maternal love pervades the novel. In Forster's *Mothers' Boys*, the consistent maternal love and perseverance suppress occasional maternal feelings of ambivalence and anxiety. Conversely, the mother-son relationship in Brown's *Before and After* is imbued with ambivalence, dilemma, and is even contaminated by a sense of betrayal, especially after the truth about whether the son has committed murder is unraveled. Alongside Carolyn's maternal narrative, the father, Ben, occupies a fairly significant position in the novel. Ben exhibits his overt paternal love and protectiveness for his son, feelings that are no less than Carolyn's maternal feelings. Both Ben and Jacob maintain an intimate and caring father-son relationship and their relationship is only altered slightly when Jacob reaches the period of adolescence, whereas in Forster's *Mothers' Boys* the father-son relationship is distant and antagonistic except for the (great)grandfather and (great)grandson relationship between Eric James and Leo Armstrong.

Apart from taking the initiative in destroying the evidence of his son's murder weapon out of his genuine wish to preserve his son's life, Ben is also the empathetic father when he sheds "huge and copious" tears upon seeing his son Jacob the first time after his running away (Brown, 1996, p. 132). His paternal love is overwhelming, as when he compares himself to Abraham in the Old Testament: "I am no Abraham. I will not sacrifice my son on the altar of any power that asks for him, I am no hero of the spirit like Abraham. He might have been the father of his people but—blasphemy—he was no proper father of his son" (pp. 263–64). In the process of dealing with the accusation against his son, Ben refers to his essential fatherhood, a patrilineage that has been passed on from father to son in his family. Recounting his Jewish father's version of "an eleventh commandment," "honor thy children," Ben cherishes his father's "most basic point of pride" to be his son's "shield" and "defender," which lies in the essence of his fatherhood (p. 275). Ben's unconditional protection for his

son, regardless of any circumstances, testifies to and consolidates his patrilineage.

Unlike Ben's unconditional love for their son, Carolyn's final decision to confess to the court her son's crime jeopardizes their family relationships and ruptures her longing for reconciliation with her son. Initially, she complies with her husband in his ruthless act to disguise their son's crime out of their pure wish to save his life. However, her daughter's discomfort with this dishonesty and their total neglect of her feelings awaken Carolyn's conscience, which also brings about her empathetic attunement with the victim's family, the Taverners. After letting her husband and son know what she has done, a family conflict occurs surrounding Carolyn's betrayal. Pulling Jacob out of his bed to confront his mother, Ben rebukes his wife's action. Ben sees Carolyn as a mother who brings life but also "puts her hand around your neck and squeezes" (p. 313). For Carolyn, however, her altruistic motherhood, which links her with another mother, Terry Taverner, the victim's mother, positions her in a maternal predicament as if she is "tugged" between two ends of a rope (p. 313):

'Every tug of rope,' she said with her eyes closed, 'made me most sure I had to do this. Benny, you'd do well to stop. When you get me to remember him as my baby, my boy, my darling, that only tightens the other end, why don't you understand that? Martha was their baby, their girl, their darling. Don't you hear me?' (p. 313)

These two ends of a rope symbolize Carolyn's relationship with her son and daughter. Carolyn's concern with Martha Taverner in this excerpt, as initially provoked by her daughter, suggests the retrieval of a female-centered motherline. That is to say, taking Judith into consideration in this family triangulation of mother, father, and son implies a divergence from the Oedipal family plot, a paternal plot that is enacted by Ben without consulting both Carolyn and Judith right at the beginning when he destroys Jacob's murder weapon, the jack left in the trunk of their car. As if plotting against the Oedipal script, Carolyn's confession results in her husband's six-month imprisonment and a seeming division between mother/daughter and father/son. Finally, thanks to the lack of evidence in court to convict Jacob of the crime, the Reisers can get away from their family misfortune

and start a new life in Houston. This family reunion is eventually achieved in Carolyn's final narration of a joyous family outing in a canoe sailing "down the bayou toward the silvered towers of the city" (p. 352).

Reverberating with Babette Smith's (1995) findings, the mother-son plot in both Forster's and Brown's novels becomes regressive and submerged once it is involved with the participation of other family members, such as fathers and daughters or soon to be in-laws (p. 98). In Forster's novel, the (grand)father and (grand)son collude in what Smith describes as "masculine conditioning"—cultural prescriptions for raising boys into conforming to rigid gender stereotypes such as a macho lifestyle (pp. 3–14). Even though a father, such as Ben in Brown's novel, possesses and expresses his overt paternal love and desire for the preservation of his son's life, it is, nevertheless, through the breaking down of this "masculine conditioning," as promoted by the daughter and instigated by the mother, that the family relationship can be revived. This enactment of empowered mothering by the mother, Carolyn, speaks to her recognition of and transition to the practice of feminist mothering, one that enables her to finally exercise her maternal agency, power, and authority to carry out what should be deemed right in her rendering of mothering roles.

Conclusion

The complexities and diversities revolving around mother-son relationships as disclosed in the above-mentioned feminist and women's writing, by and large address the paradox of this relationship, the possibility and impossibility of the mother-son relationship. Yet, it is precisely feminist mothers' attempts to redefine motherhood, and the mothers' desire to (re)connect with their sons in these two mother-son novels that reclaim the mother-son relationship as belonging to the maternal domain. In my examination of Forster's and Brown's novels, I have drawn on not only their similarity but also their significant differences, especially the ways in which they express their views about the theme of mother-son connection by demonstrating how they solve the problem of mother-son separation. In their delineations of mothers' relationships with their adolescent sons, they have presented a contrasting portrayal of the mother-son relationship, one that marks the fracture between traditionalists and feminists. Endorsing the traditionalist dictum of mother-son separation, Forster blames and mocks

the two smothering mothers in her novel for refusing to separate from their sons. Devoid of their agency and subjectivity, the resolution these mothers make is submitting to the role of passive femininity as they wait patiently for the son's return when they will reclaim the mother-son relationship on the son's own terms.

Having a mother who can exercise her authority and power to fulfill her role and responsibilities as a mother, Brown's *Before and After* can be said to have taken up a feminist maternal reading of the mother-son relationship. In this novel, although the interweaving of "love and pain" emotions tainted by sadness (Koppelman, 2000, p. 90) still persists in the mother-son story, the mother-son connection is re-established by the mother who extends her love for her son to her family as well as the rest of society. Refusing to be a parent like her husband, who breaks the law to save their son's life, Carolyn reevaluates her relationship with her son by taking her daughter's words seriously, whose opinion enables her to see her responsibilities to her children, her whole family, and the larger community. Read from a feminist maternal angle, Carolyn is the mother who executes her agency to recover her connection with her son by fulfilling her duty as a mother to both her son and daughter and shouldering her social responsibility for the community and the larger society.

Further, what the two novels have seemingly afforded as part of a resolution to the predicament of mother-son estrangement is the advent of patrilineal narratives, even coexisting with matrilineal narratives, as indicated in Brown's text. As suggested in Forster's *Mothers' Boys*, the father-son relationship linking Eric James with Leo emerges as a sideline to the mother-son relationship between Sheila and Leo. In Brown's *Before and After*, however, the father-son relationship appears to be more prominent than that in Forster's *Mothers' Boys* and is in conjunction with the mother-son relationship. Though the patrilineal narrative dominates in the father-son conspiracy to hide their complicity in the crime, the daughter, Judith, who has been discarded in this family triangular romance of mother, father, and son, plays a pivotal part in retrieving the matrilineal narrative. This suggests a new formation diverging from the structure of matrilineal narratives founded upon the mother-daughter dyad. Another remarkable transformation that is worth noting in this emergence of patrilineage is the maternalization of fathers. Therefore, this recourse to the father's line should not necessarily be seen as a threat to the mother's line but considered as

the remodeling of the Freudian Oedipal father under the influence of the transforming and growth-fostering dynamics of matrilineal narratives. It reinforces the mother-son connection in a different form.

The two viewpoints, the traditionalist and the feminist, display women writers' conflicting interpretations of mother-son relationships. The divergence these two novels make has to do with their common focus on describing mothers' relationships with their adolescent sons. In comparison with mothers' relationships with their young and adult sons, where the mother-son connection is either more secure or restored, mothers' relationships with their adolescent sons are often regarded as harder to reconcile because this period confronts mothers with the troubling issue of their sons' declared independence from them. In both novels, the threats these mothers and sons have been facing derive mainly from outside forces; these mothers have endeavored, regardless of their different means, to go through those crises and have reached a peaceful and steady state in their relationships with sons. Notably, what lies behind Sheila's and Harriet's final recognition in Forster's *Mothers' Boys* is another facet of their motherhood—another yearning and expectation for recovery and reclamation of their mother-son relationships. This maternal yearning, once fulfilled, will display a new face of motherhood; the first bond remains only to be amended with new transformations in the mother-son relationships, as hinted in Sheila's and Harriet's hopes for the future. Although the matrilineal narratives in Forster's and Brown's novels do not follow the exact pattern of what Tess Cosslett (1996) has termed "a new kind of matrilineal romance," in which "initial fear, mistrust and misunderstanding between generations [is] overcome at some climactic moment of coming together or mutual recognition" (p. 8), they suggest a simultaneous moving backward and forward culminating in a yearning for an unknown but promising future and the possibility of reclaiming mother-son relationships in a new light. As suggested by this formation of narrative structure in these mother-son novels, what concerns these women writers is restoring the mother-son connection on mothers' own terms.

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