



Jacqueline Rose: *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*

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1 Opening—a rupture, delivered

A crisis is born, kicking and screaming until another relegates it to partial nothingness. Crises never die; they occupy the cracks that one might eventually slip into, either on their own or, perhaps, *through* their own.¹ Crisis is born out of intention, not ignorance. We have heard this before, have we not: the triteness of speaking of the everydayness of the state of exception.² What is peculiar, however, is that while crises near and far find their place in words, those embedded in us, and in which we are embedded, forming the matter of our conscious and unconscious selves, remain repressed. How have we failed to see the living, breathing crisis of bringing a stranger into the world, raising them as one's own, and dying with the burdens they house? How have we collectively silenced the crisis of motherhood? Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers* splits our world open to reveal the ugly head of all that we buried deep inside the womb of our social fabric: our failures and the continual relaying of the same on to our mothers. Rose not only crafts an eloquent piece that leaves you gasping for air from the weight of her words, but also weaves an abundance of literature into an essay like no other. This literature reveals the insidious tensions

¹ Members within the law and on its margins gradually discover that the law not only silences crisis, but also fuels its very onset. See generally Vasuki Nesiha, who offers a 'counter-interpretation' of liberal constitutionalism's proclivity to turn to constitutional safeguards. She contends that the invocation of emergency provisions is not a 'reaction', but a catalyst in provoking and sustaining crisis. See Vasuki Nesiha, 'The Princely Impostor: Stories of Law and Pathology in the Exercise of Emergency Powers' in Victor V Ramraj and Arun K Thiruvengadam (eds), *Emergency Powers in Asia: Exploring the Limits of Legality* (Cambridge University Press 2010) 122, 123.

² Giorgio Agamben, as cited by Nesiha, states, 'The state of exception establishes a fundamental relationship between law and the absence of law. It is a void, a blank and *this empty space is constitutive of the legal system.*' Ibid. 141; emphasis added. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press 1998).

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that mothers bear within them and, more embarrassingly, in plain sight, for us to see. Throughout the book, a persistent call remains insufficiently answered by us all: what do we expect from our mothers, and why is it always everything? Why must they take the fall for the failing social, economic, and political systems (p. 1) that often leave little room for them? Motherhood, Rose writes, has become a metaphorical graveyard to ‘lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human’ (p. 1). As we will see, Rose grapples with most of these questions with frightening precision by uncovering aspects of motherhood often left outside of discourse, rewriting the language of motherhood through the voice of a mother who is honest with the world and herself. She unearths aspects of mothers’ desires to love and hate their children, their sexuality, and even some mothers’ urges to abandon their children. Towards the end of the ‘Opening’ (p. 2), Rose contends that we relay our imperfections to our mothers to deem ourselves whole. By ‘blinding ourselves to the world’s iniquities’ (p. 2),³ we expect our mothers to perform the unrealisable task of saving us from ourselves. In this collective repression, I draw parallels to law in crisis, the law’s promise to protect,⁴ and our deeming this system a saviour. The following review is structured as per the sections of Rose’s book, standing on the toes of her genius and flowing from the world around the mother, her inner world, and finally to a world beyond. For the sake of metaphors, what if, instead of seeing the written word of law as a father-figure,⁵ we saw it as the mother of conflict, failing in her duty? More importantly, can we realise that failure is not only acceptable, but also utterly necessary?

2 ‘Mothers always fail, as they should

Part 1 of the book, titled ‘Social Punishment’, takes us through the present (pp. 5–38) before falling into an abyss of a past so long gone that little trace of it remains (pp. 39–71). This choice of structuring, unlike conventional chronology, appears to ‘progress’ from the present to the past, where Rose is practising in form the matter of her substance—that the past, perhaps, *was* a less hurtful place for mothers than the present.

³ In an instance of oversight, I had mistaken ‘blind’ for ‘bind’. It is not incorrect, I would assume, to suggest that Rose, too, might agree that we inadvertently *bind* ourselves to iniquity in ensuring that mothers remain scapegoats for our contempt for our lives, and that it is easier to target our resentment towards them.

⁴ The principle of the judiciary acting as an ultimate ‘protector’ is known as *parens patriae*. See John Seymour, ‘Parens Patriae and Wardship Powers: Their Nature and Origins’ (1994) 14(2) *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 159. What is striking here is the single instance of judicial neutrality in deeming itself a ‘parent’ and not a mother.

⁵ See Sylvia A Law and Patricia Hennessey, ‘Is the Law Male: The Case of Family Law’ (1993) 69(2) *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 15.

2.1 The present

Motherhood, Rose writes, is a crucial element of the polity of nations (p. 17), compelling a historical moment to ‘reckon with itself’ (p. 17). Over time, the mother and the State will compete over to whom her child ultimately belongs.⁶ Rose outlines the travesty of it all, and I read her work on mothers alongside Ronit Lentin’s re-reading of Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer* in women of conflict (or, as I contend here, women generally)—the *femina sacra* or one who ‘*can be killed, but also impregnated, yet who cannot be sacrificed due to her impurity*’.⁷ Yet what makes these women whose journey Rose charts here—migrant mothers, mothers of colour whose children were shot and killed, pregnant mothers at work, and single mothers—palpably worse off is that they are unsacrificable despite and because of the State rendering them pure (to their own detriment), and they must suffer the sacrifice of their children by allowing the rage to build up and remain inside themselves.

Rose begins with the story of Bimbo Ayelabola, a Nigerian woman who held five babies in her arms for the *Sun* newspaper’s cover story on refugees and their proclivity for giving birth on foreign (read: European) soil to reap the benefits of the latter’s already overburdened healthcare system.⁸ Ayelabola reappears at the end of the book to reiterate the argument that Rose lays out here, at the beginning, mincing no words: in moments of crisis, the State shifts the focus onto mothering, deflecting from the problems at hand.⁹ Rose offers historical as well as present instances of this, such as the refugee crisis and the State’s narrative-building through the news by focusing on pregnant mothers entering foreign lands to freely avail of childcare benefits (pp. 6–9). While in the past these mothers were not held responsible for problems like Bimbo Ayelabola was, distraught mothers were seen as symbols of calamity (p. 12). What Rose describes here is akin to the introduction of ‘2-Child

⁶ Tangentially, one may recall the Judgment of Solomon (appearing as a reference much later in Rose’s work, on p. 201), where the contested child was ordered to be split into two. As the aphorism goes, the ‘real’ mother would willingly give up her child—even to be nurtured by an Other woman—without wanting her child to be severed. Turning this on its head, while the State constantly beseeches its ‘sons’ to die fighting for the ‘motherland’, a loving mother would never subject her children to such a fate.

⁷ Ronit Lentin, ‘*Femina Sacra: Gendered Memory and Political Violence*’ (2006) 29(5) *Women’s Studies International Forum* 463, 465. Giorgio Agamben advanced the concept of the *homo sacer* or ‘Sacred Man’ — an individual in ancient Rome who was only allowed to live a mere animalistic existence (*zōē*) instead of a qualified life (*bios*). This individual was a socio-political outcast and was at the behest of the State. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (n 2). Lentin, in her work, offers another reading of this idea by studying women in conflict suffering the same plight, re-gendering the phrase to offer a counter-narrative.

⁸ This reinforces the idea that the blacks and the poor reproduce irresponsibly (see Rose, *Mothers*, p. 6). On this, see also Ilan Kapoor’s *Confronting Desire: Psychoanalysis and International Development* (Cornell University Press 2020).

⁹ This bears an uncanny resemblance with India’s ‘Emergency of 1975’, where there was a simultaneous campaign for mass sterilisation spearheaded by Rajiv Gandhi. See Soutik Biswas, ‘India’s Dark History of Sterilisation’ (*BBC News*, 14 November 2014). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30040790>. Accessed 01 December 2021. Interestingly, most of these sterilisations were performed on women instead of on men, according to this article.

Policy’ bills in certain Indian states with the motive of ‘controlling population’.¹⁰ While certain Indian states intervene in matters that they deem are in the ‘public interest’, issues like marital rape and the ongoing pleadings in the Indian Supreme Court on a woman’s right to decline are still debated.¹¹ The crisis then results not only in silencing mothers’ claims, but also in turning them into the root cause of other problems.

From here, Rose charts the life of the mother as the ‘original subversive’ (p. 18). Rose instantiates how children have disappeared or been unfairly killed (p. 15), leaving their mothers searching relentlessly for them ‘to the end of the earth’ (p. 16), their cries faltering into echoes lost in the void. They remain singularly swallowed by the grief.

Despite all this, while motherhood becomes instrumental in the polity of nations, mothers’ presence in public life is still regarded as ‘exceptional’. Rose narrates this through the legal regime’s frightening control over the lives of pregnant women, eventually ‘punishing’ them by compelling them to forego their careers or avail with ease the benefits promised to them without feeling the guilt of doing so. In Indian labour jurisprudence, for instance, the erstwhile Maternity Benefit Act 1961 and the more recent Code on Social Security 2020 have offered mothers guaranteed leave without fear of termination (Section 59[1] of the Code), and granted other such protections (Sections 60, 64, 65, and 66, for instance, grant paid leave, medical bonus, leave in case of miscarriage, and nursing breaks respectively). Interestingly, however, none of these laws protects the rights of working mothers *beyond* childbirth. In this manoeuvre, the law is complicit in the notion of motherhood being the end of a woman’s career (not explicitly, but unconsciously).

Rose finally moves to the exemplary figure of the single mother who is at the receiving end of the continued, negative attention of the State and its laws owing to the law’s complete ignorance of her plight (once again, the crisis is one of silence) in the domain of affirmative action or in labour law.¹² It is commonly assumed that single mothers put their sexual freedoms ahead of all other considerations (p. 36).¹³ Single mothers reveal the failed paradox of our society: that a woman’s sexuality must disappear when married, unless she has children to *prove* that she is a sexual being worthy of recognition. In refusing to remain bound by marriage (Rose points out how single mothers might be so owing to abuse or rape), these women, seen in isolation, are deemed deviant merely for not having the masculine presence in the child’s life, despite still being expected to do all the rearing on their own. Rose

¹⁰ See Mohan Rao and Aprajita Sarcar, ‘Two-Child Norm: Curtailing Welfare, Weaponising Demography’ (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 August 2021). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2021/35/commentary/two-child-norm.html>. Accessed 20 March 2022.

¹¹ See Nupur Thapliyal, ‘Can Husband Be Prosecuted under Section 377 IPC When Section 375 IPC Exempts Marital Sex? Delhi High Court to Consider’ (*Leaflet*, 03 March 2022). <https://www.livelaw.in/news-updates/can-husband-be-prosecuted-under-section-377-ipc-when-section-375-ipc-exempts-marital-sex-delhi-high-court-to-consider-193233>. Accessed 20 March 2021.

¹² Harry Willekens et al. (eds), *Motherhood and the Law* (Universitätsverlag Göttingen 2019). <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/781b0184-9233-4e36-96de-c66d57012a4c/1006365.pdf>. Accessed 20 March 2022.

¹³ Rose writes that ‘the bodily necessities of mothering are brushed under the carpet’ (p. 46).

suggests that this mother brings ‘too close to the surface the utter craziness ... of the idea that a mother should exist for her child and nothing else’ (p. 28), revealing the failure of the heteronormative familial ideal, but also exposing the myth of the unit and the ultimate reliance on the mother alone.

Mothers are entry points to the world (p. 27),¹⁴ leaving their own entries unwritten. It is no surprise, then, that Rose relies heavily on Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*,¹⁵ a caustic, earth-shattering memoir, etched with the woes of the thanklessness and ignorance that characterise motherhood. In this act of consistent probing into the lives of mothers, we see how they are expected to do everything on their own except for mothering (p. 32). Mothers today bear the brunt of numerous intersectionalities that rip them apart, having to juggle class and other considerations while also being full-time mothers (is there such a thing as a part-time mother?). This is particularly true, Rose notes, for migrant mothers who lose motherhood to exploitation.¹⁶ The loss that mothers are compelled to bear, Rose argues, is necessary, and their failure as mothers, which stems from the cracks that form in being split in so many ways, is precisely what Rose suggests that we, as citizens and children, must begin to accept to enable them to be more like human beings—even if they are lesser mothers (p. 27).

2.2 The past

Rose makes a formidable case for the past, suggesting how it was once more forgiving of its mothers (as if being a mother is a crime) than the present. She goes back to the origins of these ideations of motherhood to ‘yank it up’ from when it ‘was not even there’ (p. 38). In ancient Greece, women were only meant to be mothers while they simultaneously held positions superior to men in the religious sphere (p. 39). This entitled them to maintain ties ‘to a realm that exceeded’ motherhood (as if that alone is never enough). Quoting Rachel Cusk, Rose notes that motherhood today is a ‘political act’ (p. 40) that narrows a woman’s horizons and cuts her down to size to fulfil a single role (against her will).¹⁷

¹⁴ Rose (p. 26) quotes Adrienne Rich who writes that the ‘male mind’ is ‘haunted’ by recalling that regardless of their chest-thumping masculinity, they will always be dependent on women (i.e., their mothers) ‘for life itself’. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (first published 1976, WW Norton & Co. 1995).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ It is worth noting here, as a parallel to the stories offered by Rose, the story of Baby Halder and her quest for emancipation from her life as a Dalit woman and mother since age 14, fighting the woes of an abusive marriage and grappling with her mother’s abandonment of her children when they were very young. Halder writes in her story *A Life Less Ordinary* of how she had to leave her eldest son to fend for himself when searching for work in New Delhi. While the book largely studies her trajectory as a domestic worker who eventually finds herself as an author, it resonates with Rose’s words on her life as a mother and as a daughter. See Baby Halder, *A Life Less Ordinary* (Harper Perennial 2002).

¹⁷ Rachel Cusk, *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* (Fourth Estate 2002).

Having seen an alternate version of political life for mothers in ancient Greek literature that granted these mothers more autonomy, Rose relies on select Greek tragedies, since she finds the telling and retelling compelling despite the little that Athenian mothers had left behind of their lives. Rose transcends aeons, beginning with how Pericles, an Athenian general, had passed a law that made citizenship contingent on one's being from the land, thereby excluding *xenos* or outsiders (p. 41). Mothers became a passage to such attainment, their bodies the soil where a seed might be planted. She begins with Euripides' 'suppliant women' eventually asking what the point of 'breeding sons' was if they were going to be sent off to battle (p. 47).¹⁸ Rose then moves to Euripides' *Medea*.¹⁹ The story entails Medea killing her two sons to protect them. These allusions to mothers, death, and war, Rose writes, are not tied together by pain (alone), but by 'beauty that violently aligns the archetypal trope of mothering—the milk of human flesh—and the spillage of war' (p. 51). Today, the mother's body is the battlefield, particularly in legal writing (p. 56), where the law extends its 'cold, hard reach deep inside' her body (p. 55). Rose instantiates this with a negligence case filed by a maternal grandfather on behalf of his grandson, where the mother was accused of the impairments that her son was born with when she was in a car accident (p. 55). She notes the tussle within the judiciary on whether to deem the mother and her child as a unit, noting that the debate often ends up neglecting the rights of the mother.²⁰ Such scenarios are also recorded in Indian case law. In *K Chandrika v Indian Red Cross Society & Ors (IRCS)*,²¹ a mother employed with the IRCS was wrongfully terminated from her employment on grounds of her pregnancy without prior notice and despite the existence of a law that prevented such events from happening (Section 12 of the Maternity Benefits Act 1961). After making her wait 18 years for relief and despite the solid case she had presented before the Delhi High Court, the court empathised with the mother and only offered her 50 per cent of the claim she had requested before informing her that she could not receive compensation for the total lost remuneration because the IRCS was a charitable organisation. What is more interesting is that the judge who delivered this verdict was a woman.

Of all these figures, Rose considers Medea the 'irredeemable mother' (p. 68) (whom even Freud ignored, she laments) who killed her sons not out of 'sexual rage' (p. 68) against the father, but owing to his loss of love for their children. She notes that aggression becomes the basis of relationships of affection and love (p. 68). Rose ends the section by citing Margaret Reynolds' dream of mothers being allowed to perform roles without being bound by convention, law, order, and decree (p. 70),²² and segues into rewriting the method (and madness) of motherly love.

¹⁸ Euripides, *The Suppliant Women* in *Euripides II* (David Grene and Richmond Lattimore eds, 3rd edn, University of Chicago Press 2013); do also recall the tale of Solomon (n 6 above).

¹⁹ Euripides, *Medea* in *Euripides I* (David Grene and Richmond Lattimore eds, 3rd edn, University of Chicago Press 2013).

²⁰ *Dobson (Litigation Guardian of) v Dobson* (1999) 2 SCR 753.

²¹ *K Chandrika v Indian Red Cross Society & Ors (IRCS)* 131 (2006) DLT 585.

²² On this, see Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (Routledge 1991). Cornell alludes to a similar feminism resonating with this idea of a life beyond.

3 'Love as perversion', hate as necessary

3.1 On loving

Loving unconditionally is the colossal demand we make on any love, yet we forgive failed attempts in every relationship barring that with mothers. While loving someone deeply might very well include the desire to die for them,²³ Rose asserts that to 'expect' this of mothers is a far cry from everything that love stands for, obliterating that which is loved and love itself (p. 77). Rose notes how the impossible demands of perfection from mothers compel them to seek the same from their child—a projection of broken dreams carried through from one generation to the other to 'fulfil' as if the dream was broken (p. 77), as if it ever existed. She notes that violence is essential in loving and takes us through writings of Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf, tending to the damage that too much caring for 'one's own' might do to the social fabric (p. 79). In partaking in 'absolute singular devotion and blindness' (p. 80), mothers nurture their children reinforcing the notion that one must care for one's 'own' people, limiting human possibility and fashioning factions from the very beginning. Despite or because of their constant care, their love is often deemed as 'suffocation' (p. 81) (a tasteless joke commonly goes that the word 'smother' has 'mother' in it). What fails to be realised is that it is not the infant but the mother who ends up suffocating under this persistent demand (p. 81). Sometimes, people love just as much by *not* having children as they do by having them, says Michel Onfray.²⁴ Earlier, Rose pithily wrote that a mother could, in her refusal to be one, steadily bring the world to an end (p. 48).

Rose remarks that the supreme symbol of maternal love is the breast (p. 84). She takes us through the unspoken eroticism underlying breastfeeding and how this desire is often only accepted (if at all) in infants' pleasure (p. 89), and not a mother's act of seeking it. We then find stunning imagery from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987),²⁵ where a woman kills her baby lest she should be forced into slavery soon after (p. 92). This takes us back to Onfray's quote, where to love *deeply* would entail saving these children from the treacherous world. Rose places careful emphasis on Sindiwe Magona's beautifully devastating story of a mother escaping her home, squeezing her milk onto the railway tracks and leaving without looking back.²⁶ This act—of leaving her children behind—is what she does to *be* their mother. The act of motherhood here is an act of absence, where she realised that she could only be their mother by abandoning them (pp. 95–96). While narrating Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* (p. 98),²⁷ where the mother abandons her family, the story

²³ Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Knopf 1981).

²⁴ Michel Onfray, *Théorie du corps amoureux* (LGF 2007) 219–220, cited in Elizabeth Badinter, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (Adriana Hunter tr, Metropolitan Books 2012).

²⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Chatto & Windus 1987).

²⁶ Sindiwe Magona, *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night* (David Philip 1991) 16.

²⁷ Edith Wharton, *The Mother's Recompense* (first published 1925, Wildhern Press 2008).

charts the structural impediments in that journey, marking how a woman, then, can never fully ‘leave’.²⁸ Finally, Rose underscores instances of daughters disgruntled with the mothers who left them in shambles by their abandonment. While this is often dismissed as mothers living ‘perversely eccentric’ lives (p. 106), Rose startles us by suggesting that this continued manipulation only ‘calls absolute motherhood to her aid’ (p. 106). The mother, Rose ends by saying, finds herself in the body of her daughter (p. 109) while in ‘denial of herself’ (pp. 106–107). The daughter, in turn, is ‘born into the slipstream’ of her mother’s unconscious (pp. 109–110).

3.2 On hating, with love

Guilt secures mothers to their children, Rose writes. In this section, Rose widens motherly love to include one of the most vital elements of loving, which is hating. She cites DW Winnicott who suggests 18 reasons why a mother could hate her baby (p. 113).²⁹ If a mother is forbidden from hating her child, she would ‘fall back on masochism’ (p. 114), i.e., turning her anger and violence on herself, thereby destroying herself without being able to express her feelings freely. The call is to recognise that ‘hate is a part of love’ (p. 115) so that mothers are not burdened by the pressure to love incessantly. Violence is etched into the human heart—particularly in those constantly presumed to have everything held together, although they might be completely and utterly broken. These demands affect not only mothers’ lives but also the lives of their children, for in loving so much, these mothers fail to then accept their children for who *they* are. The question that Rose then asks is what version of motherhood we must imagine so that a mother could ‘listen to her child’ (p. 120). There is always a limit to what mothers can do for their children, leaving both incomplete. Caring for others’ worries is a way of avoiding one’s own, Rose notes. This is, perhaps, the closest to the truth that we witness about mothers in our lives.

Rose relies heavily on Simone de Beauvoir in this section.³⁰ De Beauvoir rebelled against the very idea of women becoming mothers, for motherhood and a woman’s autonomy were antithetical for her. Reading her closely, Rose highlights how this then leaves the work of feminists more complex: how motherhood may be treated

²⁸ See also *Scenes from a Marriage* directed by Hagai Levi (premiered on HBO on 12 September 2021), adapted from Ingmar Bergman’s original 1973 Swedish series. The show’s female protagonist echoes these concerns of a tired mother aching to escape the institutions of marriage and motherhood without losing the love for her husband or her child. Also see Marley Marius, ‘How Hagai Levi Brought an Ingmar Bergman Classic Back to Life with *Scenes from a Marriage*’ (*Vogue*, 10 September 2021). <https://www.vogue.com/article/scenes-from-a-marriage-how-hagai-levi-brought-an-ingmar-bergman-classic-back-to-life>. Accessed 05 February 2022.

²⁹ DW Winnicott, ‘Hate in the Counter-transference’ (1949) 30(2) *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 69, 73–74.

³⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (HM Parshley tr and ed, Jonathan Cape 1953).

with utter disdain, yet is capable of unearthing the very core of what it is to be human. Rose then recounts how this explicit rendering of atrocity in mothering, even when brought before mothers, is denied. She tells the story of Aurelia Plath delivering a lecture on her daughter, Sylvia Plath, leaving out lines that betray the innocence of motherhood (pp. 122–123). Yet Rose does not overtly blame her for doing so, contending that the expectations of mothers are far too many to enable them to see the ‘dark underside of loving’ (p. 123). Reading de Beauvoir, Rose delves into the question of whether, under the current structural conditions, being a mother is fair. She remarks that the mother’s freedom might emerge from her claim-right over the child that *she* houses as her own property, eventually expecting too much from the child and merely seeing them as ‘gratuitous proliferation’ (p. 134). At this juncture, a mother confronting her child’s freedom would require accepting that this would be freedom from her, compelling her to take control and become, in ‘supreme irony’, like a man (p. 137). Motherhood then undertakes the task of giving up without giving in—to limit the pleasure mothers seek from their children and to love the stranger they bring into the world (the ‘Other’) and ‘desiring the happiness of someone other ... without placing that happiness in the service of your own ego’ (p. 139).

4 Something borrowed, incapable of return

4.1 Ferrante’s immutable wisdom

Rose dedicates an entire section to Elena Ferrante’s work, which, she believed (above all the other literature), attempted not to ‘solve’ the problem of motherhood, but merely enter its space (p. 151). The central thesis of Rose’s argument begins by circling Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter*.³¹ The protagonist, Leda, abandons her two grown daughters. On her impromptu beach holiday, Leda finds herself becoming obsessed with a little girl, Elena, who plays with her young mother. What Ferrante has tactfully done is subvert the original myth of Leda and Elena, wherein Leda had tended to the abandoned Elena and raised her as her own. Ferrante disrupts this to have Leda inflict torture upon Elena. Ferrante plunges into the recesses of mothering in every form, turning myths of motherhood that were hailed as ideal-typical into allowing for an image of mothers as the very opposite of care-givers. Rose finds promise in this work because Ferrante is shocking the general conscience of readers by unapologetically rendering mothers as deviant.

Ferrante’s disconcerting reply to the question of motherhood is transliterated by Rose to mean that being a mother requires one ‘to relinquish control of the human heart’ (p. 150). Rose takes us through Ferrante’s retelling of the sensuous, scandalous feelings of mothering that accompany the arresting imagery of pregnancy, crude and dripping with pleasure and pain, and moving to acknowledge that strife requires acknowledging that ‘the world around [the mother] has failed’ (p. 156).

³¹ Elena Ferrante, *The Lost Daughter* (Ann Goldstein tr, Europa 2008).

Rose moves seamlessly from a mother's willingness to stray from her child to the unconscious reluctance of a daughter in letting go of her, keeping her present (sometimes, even alive) through forced habits. To that end, Rose writes that daughters may forge their own paths but never fully eliminate the bond they have with their mothers (p. 158). Much of Ferrante's emphasis on motherhood stems from the concept of *frantugmalia*—a phrase hinting at the cacophony of voices inside the head (p. 168)—bequeathed to her by her mother. The vocabulary, too, passes unconsciously (p. 169), constantly escaping the legatee's grasp. Rose clutches Ferrante's invaluable logic, noting how Ferrante captures the 'unforgiving intensity' of the reality that the stories requiring maximum articulation are those constantly excluded (p. 179). The 'ecstasy', Rose finds, comes in writing. She quotes Ferrante twice (either by oversight or with utmost care) in saying that, 'To write truly is to speak from the depths of the maternal womb' (pp. 152, 180).

4.2 Inside out

Mothers seek to perform the impossible: to make their children happy, to fake their own happiness, and pretend as if the world, in its full glory of vileness, is a place worth suffering. The violence and anger that is socially unperformable by mothers is internalised and inflicted upon the mother and, by extension, her child (p. 187). The 'pernicious weight' of the desired role that a mother performs not only envisages her erasure of past violence, but also demands that she look to the future 'to secure a new dawn' (p. 188). Rose titles the last section 'Inside Out' to reveal the reverse pregnancy she felt in letting her child into her life through abortion. She then ties together tales of motherhood as universal, in those who might witness it and those who might, on their own, experience it. The hopelessness of it all remains in the realisation that mothers have in noting how, despite it all, their children harbour all their concerns—especially those that they tried escaping—in the recesses of their souls (p. 189).

Rose concludes with her experiences in the process of adopting her child of Chinese origin and the difficulties she experienced in bringing her home to the United Kingdom.³² We see the ultimate culmination of her work move from the political, poetic, to the personal, transcending the lines between what is fiction and what is real. I fear that this review pales in comparison with the original text that is raw with emotion and repressed voices of mothers across all epochs.

And what of law? Perhaps the crisis of motherhood and the pressures on origins enable us to relieve the law of its omniscient potential, becoming a voice of vulnerability. Mothers can teach us a whole lot, including what it must mean to fail as one. This lesson is important, for the law as it exists continues to treat mothers as devoid of personalities beyond their roles as mothers alone. The law, as a discipline, can move from

³² In India, adoption laws are governed by religion-specific legislation. More importantly, the law has progressed to allow single mothers to adopt children, but does not allow a single male parent to adopt a girl child. See Central Adoption Resource Authority, Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, 'Eligibility Criteria for Prospective Adoptive Parents'. http://cara.nic.in/parents/eg_ri.html. Accessed 21 March 2022.

being one that is etched in stone and is perfect, to one that is admittedly self-correcting, because it is *wrong*. This admission, and the dispensing of the ego that comes with it, can reveal a more humbled side to the discipline in crisis, that is currently suffering from illusions of being too perfect to be corrected by itself.

5 A note on form

Lastly, on form. Rose titles this an ‘essay’, a stroke of genius that marries form and substance to reveal the inconceivable fragmentation that mothers, too, face, encompassing every little thing. Brian Dillon’s *Essayism* reveals the essay as ‘less compact and smooth than thought, but instead unbounded and mobile, a form with ambitions to be unformed’.³³ Who else cannot echo these desires to unravel, if not a mother?

Declaration

Conflict of interest The author certifies that there is no conflict of interest with the organisation insofar as the subject matter discussed in the manuscript is concerned.

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³³ Brian Dillon, *Essayism: On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction* (Fitzcarraldo Editions 2017) 38.