Hetty Sorrel, Infanticide and the Articulation of the Ideology of Motherhood

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George Eliot began to write *Adam Bede* in 1858 and published it the next year, a time when the historical record documents England as experiencing an epidemic of infant-killing (*Behmer*, 423). In a journal entry of 30 November 1858, Eliot mentions that the climax of this novel is the prison scene in which Hetty Sorrel confesses her infanticidal act to the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris (*Berry*, 151). She also reveals elsewhere that Hetty's story is based on a real case she heard from her aunt who once persuaded a woman named Mary Voce into confessing the murder of her own child. Eliot seems to show so much concern for the macabre social phenomenon, yet strangely, child-murder remains what Maria Piers calls "a clandestine topic" and is acknowledged by scholars as being inadequately treated (*Piers*, 9; *Corti*, ix; *Hausfater & Hrdy*, xiii). Though this topic began
moving into the scope of literary critical attention a decade earlier, the infanticide case represented in Eliot's first novel remains to be further explored. This paper reads infanticide as demarcating the boundaries of motherhood from the feminist perspective. Informed by Louis Althusser and Frederick Jameson's philosophy on ideology, Michael Foucault's philosophy on power and the articulation theory in cultural studies, this paper investigates how the ideology of motherhood acts both as Jameson's "textual unconscious" and Althusser's "repressive state apparatus" within the novel. It demonstrates the embodiment of motherhood both in the collective ideological system and the individual conviction.

Victorian motherhood embraces mother's unconditional love for her child and maintains that the qualities of being caring, ministering, and self-sacrificing are the fundamental attributes of a virtuous mother. In the presence of this monolithic ideology, Hetty Sorrel, who commits the crime of murdering her own child, undoubtedly falls within the category of what Foucault defines the marginal, the different and, above all, the bad and the sexually transgressive. She was created by Eliot as lacking women's "natural" altruism, "with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts" that allow nothing but her own dreams of luxuries (Adam Bede, ix, 104). When her own child is born out of season and jeopardizes her reputation, she chooses to preserve herself rather than accepting the unconditionally loving and self-sacrificing mother role the Victorian society prescribes for her. Being such a mother iconoclast, Hetty thus calls into question the idealized assumptions underlying notions of the mother's instinctual and unconditional love. Given Stuart Hall's articulation theory that emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the subordinate social groups and the ideology that dominates them (Morley & Chen, ed., 1996), Hetty, as the resistant force against the ideological power, denotes exactly the articulation of the monolithic ideology.
This is, however, "phenomenological" based on Edmund Husserl's philosophy that stresses the critic's understanding of the text. If highlighting Hetty's true subjectivity, we find that she is conspicuously childish and paradoxically succumbs to the repressive ideology of motherhood. Hetty is brought up in an environment valuing virtue and respectability. The Poyzers, her foster parents, are models of the virtuous and respectable English peasantry for whom "custom holds the place of sentiment" (Pinney, ed., 279 –80). It is not surprising that Mrs. Poyser appears to be a harsh, patriarchal mother. It is always her censure that Hetty shrinks from most; though Hetty cannot "resist spending her money in bits of finery which Mrs. Poyser disapproved", she would "die with shame, vexation, and fright" if her aunt knows. Harris points out that Hetty is instilled by her aunt a fierce desire to remain respectable, and the love of respectability, as one of the paramount psychological forces, drives Hetty ultimately to kill her own baby (Harris, 183 –4). I would argue that this respectability incorporates the maintenance of chastity and purity as one of the essential attributes of a virtuous woman in accordance with the Victorian patriarchal standard.

Berry reads Hetty's infanticidal behavior as driven by "animalistic instinct" (Berry, 149), which, for me, seems to overlook the powerful cultural forces that make her commit the gruesome crime (Berry, 149). McDonagh's point serves well as a footnote:

"...all the good mother is identifiable by...her possession of moral goodness,...the same figure in all cases... In such a context, unmarried women who become pregnant, especially at a time when all extramarital sex is the cause of moral and social stigma, have no hope of being anything but deviant bad mothers" (Greenfield & Barash, ed., 228).

For Hetty, to face the reality means to acknowledge herself as bad, devi-
ant, and morally degraded, as is undoubtedly not her intention.

Within the novel itself, there are details showing that Hetty experiences a mental or psychological conflict that denies the possibility of an action otherwise driven by animal instinct. In Chapter 37, Hetty was depicted as destitute, desperate, and thoroughly alienated, her illegitimate baby soon to be born yet herself having no prospect of reaching her lover. Confronting the monolithic ideology of Good Mother and striving desperately for the maintenance of her own image, Hetty has no way out but risking her baby's life. We see that the ideology has secured the consent of, or to use Althusser's term, "interpellated" both the populace of Hayslope as a repressive force leading to Hetty's murder and Hetty herself as an "individual in lonely subject isolation" (Tambling, 106). It is the static, singular, essentialist female role stereotyped in the oppressive cultural myths—rather than animalistic instinct—that drives her to commit infanticide. This cause, while demonstrating Hetty as the victim, testifies to the overwhelming, oppressive power of the ideology of motherhood functioning both "collectively" and "individually".

It is also enlightening to probe Eliot's own attitude toward the character she creates. If representing Hetty as a deviant mother is Eliot's strategy to challenge the ideology of motherhood, then why does she, who proclaims the doctrine of sympathy as her aesthetic principle, appear to be unsympathetic to her own protagonist? This representation actually exemplifies Tambling's conclusion that "behind the narrator stands an ideology which has interpellated him/her" (Tambling, 33). That is, the unsympathetic representation of Hetty articulates the author's own views of the Victorian construction of femininity and motherhood. In the chapter "The Two Bed-Chambers", Hetty is sarcastically portrayed to be a light-headed girl fond of glass earrings, being preoccupied excessively with dreams of being Captain Donnithorne's majestic lady. Simultaneously, Eliot exhausts every
means to depict Hetty's physical beauty and the fantasy it arouses in Victorian males; for any man who would become her husband, he would imagine "how she would dote on her children" (153). Both Arthur's desire and Adam's love for her evidence how effectively the myths of patriarchal construction of femininity operate in the psychic machinery of Victorian young men (a theme Eliot picks up again in Middlemarch in Lydgate's choice of Rosamond as his wife who later turns out to ruin his own life). Yet when they are finally brought to confront Hetty as a condemned criminal, we understand that Eliot's juxtaposition of Hetty as an infanticidal mother with the feminine beauty that deceptively elevated her as a loving wife and mother in masculine eyes blatantly challenges Spencer's good-mother theory that equates feminine beauty with the capacity for good motherhood.

The unsympathetic representation of Hetty also bespeaks "the textual unconscious" within the novel, Jameson's term referring to the repressed form of the ideology at work in a text. In other words, Eliot's "unsympathetic" attitude articulates her own notion of maternal love as shaped by the existing ideology. In Chapter 40 the author defines Adam's tender forgiveness as "mother's yearning, that completest type of the life in another life which is the essence of real human love, ..." (409) To call a man's tender and sympathetic nature "mother's yearning" evinces that Eliot cannot avoid the idealization of maternal love; while defying the Victorian ideology of unconditional motherhood, she herself inevitably succumbs to its permeating power. So the ideology is not only articulated by the representation of Hetty but revealed by the author herself being interpellated, who, by taking the role of a narrator, is to further interpellate the readers.

The articulation of the ideology of motherhood is also incorporated in the climactic confession scene, in which Hetty ultimately confesses her infanticidal act to Dinah Morris, the pious Methodist preacher. It is significant firstly to see Dinah as the embodiment of Methodism and a capable,
devoted preacher of the doctrine she adopts. In Chapter 2, we see her preaching emotionally, eloquently and inspiringly, changing the original negative attitude toward Methodism that had spread among the Hayslope people. Later she refuses Seth’s genuine love in order to devote herself completely to God. Dinah’s ardent faith and her preaching skills qualify her as the spokeswoman for Methodism, a kind of religion, though once at tension with the Church of England, whose essence has never gone astray from that of Christianity (Davies, 105; 33). When Hetty violated the mothering law, Dinah turns out what Foucault calls “the agency of domination” (Foucault, 62), and we hear her saying: “Hetty—now: confess the wickedness you have done—the sin you have been guilty of against your Heavenly Father” (Adam Bede, 426). By applying confession—the Christian traditional form of eliciting truth, Dinah as an interlocutor, a listener, thus a dominator threatens and provokes Hetty into accepting herself as a sinner, or rather, succumb to the Christian rhetoric of motherhood. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault insightfully sees confession as “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship”:

"for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; ..." (Foucault, 61 - 2)

Judged within the framework of Althusser's philosophy on religion as a type of “ideological state apparatus” and Foucault's power theory, Dinah definitely epitomizes loyalty for the Christian institution upholding the Virgin-Mary-type of altruistic maternal love. In the climactic scene, she succeeds in making Hetty accept herself as being bad and in need of discipline and punishment. Thus the Christian myth of motherhood rearticulated, internalized and solidified.

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Then what does Hetty's ultimate confession signify? Hetty originally shows an obstinate resistance to acknowledge that she has ever had a baby, even when the acknowledgement is most needed to make a plea for mercy and save her from the death penalty. Nevertheless, she eventually breaks the silence and admits the crime she commits, significantly, on hearing Dinah's powerful speech addressing to “the Heavenly Father”:

“Lord, ... Make her dread to keep the accursed thing within her soul. Make her... confess her sin, and cry for mercy... Melt the hard heart. Unseal the closed lips; make her cry with her whole soul, ‘Father, I have sinned.'...” (428).

Hetty's obstinacy proves vulnerable in the presence of Dinah's articulation of the overwhelming power of the Heavenly Father. Despite her long-kept silence, she finally yields to the religious power that Dinah represents and the ideology it sustains.

More significantly, during her confession, Hetty reveals a kind of maternal feeling which finds expression in her auditory hallucination after abandoning the baby:

“I did it, Dinah... I buried it in the wood... I heard it cry... ever such a way off... all night...; it was the baby's crying made me go” (xlv, 428, 430).

After burying the baby alive, the predominant feeling for Hetty is not that she has triumphantly ridded herself of the baby—a burden that is to ruin her fame and life, but a strong wish that the baby is still alive. In spite of Hetty's selfish nature and her lack of maternal affection, she proves unable to free from the maternal guilt generated from the ingrained notions of Good Mother. Here we recall Johanna Geyer-Kordesch's study of the eighteenth-century infanticide, particularly that in Scott's and Goethe's works which:

“constructed the feminine as dependent, contrite and in need of supervision. The economically marginalized and powerless child-murder-
esses... was recast in the mould of the chaste female saint. Pious edification began to erect a female image of weakness, innocence and holy chastity. Remorse meant reinstating the confines of gender expectations." (Jackson, ed., 99-100)

Given Eliot's idealization of maternal love discussed previously, I conclude that her rendering of Hetty in the climax of the novel represents infanticidal women as succumbing to the ideology of femininity/motherhood. In letting her most feelingless character appear to be grabbed by the maternal guilt, she again testifies to the power of the ideology at work. In other words, Hetty in the confession scene envisions the repressed form of the motherhood ideology that interpellates the author, and thus exposes the "textual unconscious" in the novel.

The juristic treatment of Hetty's infanticide case goes onward to demonstrate how the state works to consolidate the ideology to sustain the patriarchal social order. In the chapter "The Morning of the Trial", Bartle Massey's report to Adam about Hetty's trial basically reveals that Hetty's fate is essentially determined by four factors: the doctors, the counsel, the jury/court and Mr. Irwine. The doctors, who provide "the chief evidence", may easily prove Hetty's physical maternal condition that runs against her own assertion, and this comes out as one of the crucial causes for the court to announce a verdict of guilty. Not coincidentally, the nineteenth century witnesses the ascendant power of the clinic; with their professional knowledge and medical training, doctors in most cases outwit lawyers in jurisdiction, criticizing judges who relied always on "aesthetic, particularistic, subjective standards of evidence" (Krueger, 283). When the doctors' evidence is "heavy" on Hetty, the medical institution reveals its power to condemn those who have violated or threatened the dominant ideological system.

Hetty's counsel is designated by the court, yet Bartle's remarks shows
that the counsel's work is strictly money-oriented. Later, we understand that the counsel has not been granted any chance to speak for Hetty in which he may make a plea for mercy, "a favor not granted to criminals in those stern times". Obviously "the sympathy of the court was not with the prisoner" (xliii, 413 -4).

Mr. Irwine seems to be the only hope for Hetty's commutation. Yet he deliberately delays Arthur's knowledge of Hetty's trial and holds back Adam when the latter threatens to fetch Arthur to shoulder the responsibility. So, John Sutherland infers that, for a parson, there are other matters which are more important than the life of "a light-headed milkmaid". Besides, He tries to save Hetty by stressing her "unblemished character" and the "virtuous habits" she grows up with. Along with the counsel's strategy to save Hetty by means of emphasizing her maternal affection so as to win a chance of plea for mercy, Mr. Irwine's effort comes out of the same logic; he tries to help Hetty by providing testimony of her womanly attributes the society worships and that of her growing environment that contributes to nurturing these attributes. Later, when Arthur eventually obtains the "hard-won release from death", it may well be inferred that it is again the plea for mercy that functions (xlvii, 438). So if we judge the legal business as a whole, the prospect for an infanticidal mother is either that she is a deviant mother who violates the institution of motherhood and must be sentenced to death, or that her case appeals to mercy for which she is commutated or acquitted.

Interestingly, historical records demonstrate a general legal tendency of acquitting the infanticidal mothers from 1799 to 1809, the exact time span during which the story of Adam Bede takes place (Symonds, 159). Inspector Walcott's justification for the 1834 Poor Law Act denotes the true meaning of the acquittal tendency:

"...infanticide would be less frequent...because...the female,...from maternal feelings and natural timidity, would seldom attempt the
destruction of her own offspring.” (Rose, 25)

Walcott’s optimistic attitude rests on the quasi-scientific notions of “maternal feelings and natural timidity” which comply with the same old trick of the stereotyped femininity and maternity. If the prosecution of the murderous mother bespeaks the state’s legal institution functioning in the maintenance of the ideology of motherhood, commutation or acquittal stresses maternal feeling as “natural” and “instinctual”, and is therefore the state’s stratagem to consolidate the ideology through interpellation. No matter what results from Hetty’s trial—to be hanged or released from death—she proves to be the victim for the state to internalize and solidify the ideology that sustains Victorian patriarchal social order.

In conclusion, the infanticide narrative in Adam Bede, specifically, the representation of Hetty Sorrel, her murderous act, the subsequent confession, and the juristic treatment of her case, together with the author’s attitude toward the perpetrator, articulates and rearticulates the monolithic, totalizing ideology of motherhood. Hetty and her infanticidal behavior have to be either punished on account of the deviance of her nature which the society condemns, or sympathized considering the generally-held women’s vulnerability in character, their necessity to be guided, and above all, the natural, biological and instinctual quality of mother love. Yet both attitudes turn out to be ideologically-oriented; while the religious, legal and medical institution threatens jointly to rob Hetty of her life, it also maneuvers to transform its eyesore into a symbol with which the patriarchal ideology is consolidated and internalized. Eventually, by appealing to mercy, Hetty is saved from death penalty as a reward for her yielding to religion and patriarchal motherhood, but, as one who violates the order, she still needs to be expelled, tortured in colonial Australia, and die before she can return to the state.
Notes:

(1) See Bowers, 1996; Berry, 1999; Kreuger, “Literary Defences and Medical Prosecutions”; Matus, 1995; Symonds, 1997; McDonagh in Greenfield & Barash, (ed.), 1999; Corti, 1998; Hansen, 1997.

(2) John Sutherland argues that Mr. Irwine cares much more about his own benefit and maneuvers to secure England's old institutions. See Sutherland, 117-26.

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