

Maternal duality in Nathalie Sarraute's autobiography, *Enfance*

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Abstract. This study, actually considered as a psychoanalytic interpretation, intends to depict a mother's indifference to her child. To this aim, the image of Nathalie Sarraute's mother and her indifference was explored in her autobiography, *Enfance* (Childhood). Sarraute is creative in using different aspects of her childhood feelings to make a story without trapping the reader in its pain. In 22nd chapter of the book, Sarraute depicts the beauty of the doll which represents her mother's beauty. She compares the beauty of the doll with her mother's beauty and finally concludes that her doll is more beautiful than her mother. The only real feeling which has remained from the mother is her beauty. Hence, based on the mother's beauty, seriousness, obduracy and unnaturalness, the role of the doll is compatible with her indifference and coolness. Moreover, it is a symbolic image which should be unmasked. In fact, for Nathalie, the doll is the embodiment of her selfish and careless mother in the mind. The doll can also represent Nathalie's negative feelings towards her mother.

Key words: Mother, Maternal duality, Autobiography, Mother's beauty, Doll, Mother's indifference, Child's psychosis

1. Introduction

Nathalie Sarraute is one of the most remarkable writers in France in the twentieth century [1]. Sarraute was born in 1900 in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, near Moscow, in a wealthy and intellectual family. When she was 2 years old, her parents got divorced and she had to stay with her father. In February 1909, Nathalie moved to France and her father remarried in Paris. Since that time she had little contact with her mother and their relationship was very weak so that they had no real love in their hearts [2].

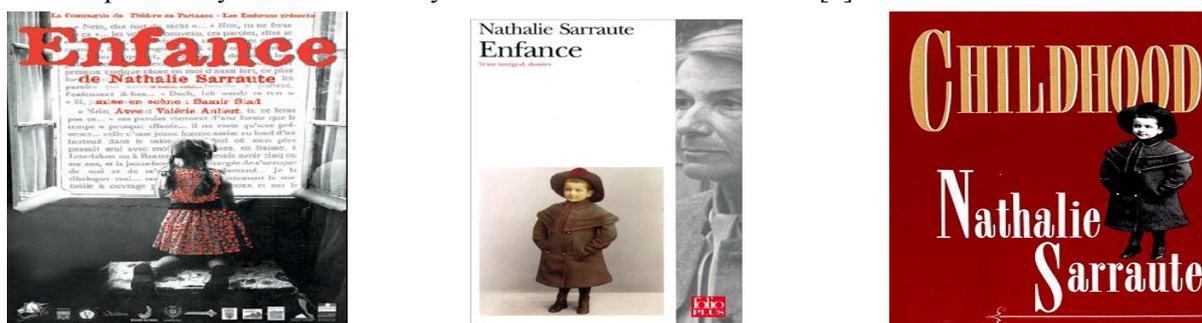


Figure 1: Nathalie Sarraute's autobiography, *Enfance*

In *Enfance* (Childhood), published in 1983, Nathalie Sarraute brings together memories of her first eleven years (see Figure 1). As a child of divorced parents, the effect of divorce was recognized in her works. The influence of mother's distance and lack of empathy weigh heavily on Nathalie's autobiography, *Childhood*. Throughout the story, the readers are especially struck by her mother's absence; therefore, two questions can be posed. Is it possible that the experiences and grief in her childhood caused by the abandonment of her mother have really inspired Nathalie to become a writer? Is this suffering the source of her literary vocation?

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2. The maternal image

“I cannot detach myself from it” [2] (p. 94). Her mother, a talented Russian writer, is best characterized as a pure selfish mother. Unfortunately, she is also depicted as an absolute indifferent mother: “A great person with casual behavior and impassive gaze” [2] (p. 90). It is literally heartbreaking to see how we can be so indifferent and we wonder how a little girl recovers from all the sufferings she receives, primarily from her mother. The narrator gives us little information about her mother. Instead, it is through facts and sensations that she depicted 70 years later in her work, *Childhood*, that the image of an indifferent and careless mother is delivered to us. The atmosphere regarding this relationship is typically contrasted diffuse, gray and misty, and we cannot see a concise description of her mother. In fact, it looks like a doll, beautiful but indifferent. It also makes us think of a silhouette. The only real feeling that remains of her face is her beauty.

We have seen that the structure and theme of this autobiography involve simultaneously several images of her childhood. Nathalie Sarraute explained that universal point and it evoked the commonplace by exposing a few fragments of her childhood. We also try to study the maternal image and progressive detachment of the mother.

Chapter 22, one of the five chapters longer than the others in the book, shows both tropisms of childhood and the birth of a writer [2] (No. 22, pp. 91-103). In this chapter, little Nathalie is still with her mother in St. Petersburg. She is completely obsessed with the ideas about her relationship with her mother, a kind of madness probably caused by her experiences painful enough for a child. She suffers apparently from her parents' divorce as they no longer speak together. Throughout this chapter, it is impossible not to perceive that there is no contact between the parents and the effect of divorce on the little girl can vividly be seen. The readers are especially struck by her mother's absence in the whole story and especially by her distance and lack of empathy for her child.

In addition, in the era of psychoanalysis, we can imagine that the experiences of her childhood and the grief caused by the abandonment of her mother determined her future path. Even if she started quite late, Nathalie has really grown up to become an outstanding writer of the twentieth century. We even see the importance of this chapter, not only in this book, but also in terms of her vocation as a writer.

3. The doll

The term doll depicts the image of Nathalie's dream mother and has been mentioned several times before the 22nd chapter: “And I embrace the doll and move forward; I put my lips on its fine and silky skin; the cheeks are so sweet” (8th chapter, P. 40) or as a description of her real and indifferent mother, “But I do not feel very comfortable with it. And with passing time it gets worse [...]. I do not like to play with it. It is very hard, too smooth; it has always the same movements” (9th chapter, P. 49). We have already seen that her mother probably is compared to “a statue” (p. 20), and this reinforces our impression of an indifferent and selfish mother.

Then, Nathalie's ambiguous dependence on her mother is also depicted by the description of her teddy bear, Mishka. Although this point is not mentioned in the 22nd chapter, we consider it important enough to show the maternal duality. In order to describe her teddy bear, Nathalie uses the same adjectives used to describe her mother's skin: “silky, warm, soft, smooth” (p. 49); however, Nathalie feels a permanent proximity to her teddy bear compared to her real mother: “she always sleeps with me” and “she is near me”(pp. 49-50). And then it seems that the teddy bear most embodies her dad: “Mishka, my teddy bear, is really close to me [...]" (p. 49).

The 22nd chapter of the book first presents the beauty of the doll that can simultaneously embody her mother's beauty: “How beautiful she is ... I cannot detach myself from her eyes” (p. 91). Then the narrator continues to contemplate trying to explain what the beauty was [3]. It is like the calmness before the storm because little Nathalie feels bad with her mother (p. 49). She compares the doll with her mother and concludes that the doll is much prettier than her mother. She even dares to say: “I think she is more beautiful than you” ... (P. 95). Of course, Nathalie dreams of a quite normal response or reaction from her mother, like

what one would expect from a mother: “Look here mom; I think it is more beautiful than you and the mom will say it is true, of course, it is more beautiful than me ...” [4].

It should be noted here that Nathalie expresses her mother’s expected reaction using the future tense, but the “answer” she imagines is expressed in direct speech using present tense. In addition, this extract seems to be a sort of mixture of free indirect dialogue and interior monologue in which the narrator expresses her thoughts on the distant sensations. At first glance, this modest speech is full of hopes and sweet illusions that attract our attention and make us think of this relationship because these words should normally be expressed by her mom, not Nathalie [5].

Contemptuous and negative reaction of her mother cannot be expected [6], “but mom loses my hand or she holds my hand less strong; she looks at me angrily and says: “A child who loves her mother thinks no one is more beautiful than her mother” (p. 95). On the one hand, this vehement utterance shows the complete failure of the narrator and emphasizes the superiority of her mother. On the other hand, it shows her mother’s pure cruelty which is incomparable with others [7].

The fact that she compares a doll to her own mother may at first glance seem a bit odd. This kind of game is normal or even necessary, for a child. However, instead of encouraging and helping her daughter to go and play with other children, the mother reproaches her for her behavior (p. 30). And what is worse is that the mother never plays with her daughter. So, in her solitude, the daughter splits her game into two parts and plays two different roles, her mother’s role as a selfish mother and her own role as a little girl.

Beautiful in appearance, but fixed and unnatural function of the doll corresponds to her mother’s indifference and inaccessibility. So far this child has learnt to adore and love her mother and even says “I have never asked if mom was beautiful” (P. 94). But when she sees a doll in a shop, she asks herself “what the word beauty means and who a beautiful person is”. It is truly a doll that forces the child to ask critically about her mother: “her look was strange and unusual ...; closed and sometimes hard and sometimes bright and naive ...; mom was often absent ...” (P. 94). Nathalie was often inspired by her natural cognition and this reaction to her mother is quickly accompanied by a sense of sacrilege. However, she admits that her memory is not entirely accurate because she says: “And I still do not know what prompted me that day to use the sentence “she is beautiful”, which was so perfectly used for the doll, and try to make it fit for the mom who left me alone [...]. One point which is clear for Nathalie is that “the doll is more beautiful than mom” (P. 94).

Taking into account that the doll is mentioned several times, it can be stated that it represents not only the rigidity of Nathalie’s mother, but also an icon that must be unmasked. To see one’s self, usually hidden, this work of internal discovery is necessary. It is therefore a kind of freedom by scraping the appearance that the truth or the true beauty appears. In this case, the truth means a mom who is selfish and careless, and the doll represents the negative feelings that Nathalie has felt toward her mother. It has obviously taken a long time for her to admit what her real “self” says about her mother’s cruelty. Her mother lacks goodness and she “never tried to think of her daughter” (P. 27). In fact, Nathalie’s aunt, Aniouta, has been more kind to her and she has been the embodiment of beauty for little Nathalie [8].

It seems that this chapter mostly shows the sense of indifference and cruelty of a mother towards her child and the emerging consequences of such behavior: “the only thing that has remained is discomfort and mild pain [...]” (p. 101). The writer uses present continuous tense to describe such discomfort, whereas her appreciation of both her mother’s beauty and maternal behavior is stated indirectly and can be interpreted from the whole text. Since Nathalie is not successful in climbing up an unreal ladder towards her mother, she starts to make some ideas in the mind about her mother. We have already seen that some of the ideas imposed by her mother are mentioned in the first part of the book [9].

4. The ideas

“The ideas come to the mind anytime, bite and hurt; well, here is one of them [...] I feel pain in my body” (p. 99). In Switzerland, Nathalie’s ideas come to the mind by tearing apart a silk cushion (p.9), while in St. Petersburg, the ideas cause a tear in “self” (p.277). When Nathalie concludes that the doll is more beautiful than her mother, the maternal image becomes so sour and inevitably causes Nathalie’s madness. It even alters her ego; however, we should analyze and interpret the whole text to know her mother’s character. At

first, her internal voice defends the mother: “It is likely that she had misspoken. She was probably meant to say a child who loves her mother does not compare her to anyone else” (P. 96). After the narrator’s consent, the internal voice continues to echo and forces the ego to see the reality even if it is cruel and heartbreaking: “what had annoyed her was that you had taken her from where she was.... outside, beyond; and you had pushed her to be with others where she was compared with other people.... She preferred not to be compared with others and did not try to locate a specific place for herself” (p.96). However, the narrator insists on this fact that a girl of 8 or 9 years can recognize other meanings of the words that her mother uses because as we have already seen children normally cannot distinguish the double meanings of a speech. In this regard, we wonder why it was necessary to decode what the mother meant because one would have expected that a mother herself should be able to speak clearly and concisely with her daughter. Is this another indication of the poor relationship that existed between the mother and her daughter and that the mother never tried to understand her child? A mother-daughter relationship should normally be close enough especially when the girl is still small.

Nathalie compares her mother with a stepmother due to her inhuman and unbearable behavior, and lack of inner sweetness and maternal kindness [10]. The word “stepmother” also refers to the fairy tales, but unfortunately, the fairies belong to the wonderful stories and cannot intervene in the world of the little girl. In fact, fairy tales remind us of the children’s unreal dream world. The ideas certainly highlight the uniqueness of the child, a trait for an inspiring autobiography, but they also show the dilemma of the child who cannot cope and therefore causes her psychosis.

5. Conclusion

Nathalie Sarraute, a famous writer whose literary works helped to shape French literature in 20th-century, writes an autobiography in the age of 83 in which the meaning of writing itself is a central theme. She tries to employ an interrogator who functions like an empathic and knowledgeable psychoanalyst in her work. The comparative structure used in 22nd chapter of her autobiography, showing the mother’s beauty, causes the narrator's guilt and grief. Indeed, all children who love their mothers must find them more beautiful than others as is the case at the beginning of this chapter. Nathalie finds that her mother is not beautiful and starts to doubt about her mother’s love and affection. Such thoughts result in psychosis and a detachment from reality. It can be concluded that beauty is the only real feeling which has remained from the mother; however, this beauty is merely external. In fact, for Nathalie, the doll is the embodiment of her selfish and careless mother in the mind. The doll can also represent Nathalie’s negative feelings towards her mother. Finally, Nathalie learns to distinguish good from evil. In this sense, this chapter is essential not only for her autobiography “Childhood”, but also for all of her works and her literary vocation

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