

## Fragmented Selves: Ambiguity and Identity in Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021)

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**Abstract:** *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder is a 2021 magical realism novel that tells the story of a nameless mother, formerly an artist, who believes she metamorphoses into a dog, an ambiguous and feral transformation that reflects her struggles with self-identity, motherhood, suppressed rage and societal norms, leading to an identity crisis. This paper aims to analyze how ambiguity in *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder is used as a feminist strategy to highlight how imposed feminine and maternal identities fail to fully grasp the complexity of the protagonist. This paper focuses on exploring narrative, bodily and emotional fragmentation through a feminist reading of the novel *Nightbitch* and the theoretical framework consists of Hélène Cixous' views on the power of "écriture féminine," Julia Kristeva's theory on maternal abjection and Adrienne Rich's comparison between motherhood as a lived experience and motherhood as a social institution. The protagonist's ambiguous metamorphosis and fragmentation reflect her identity crisis, her descent into abjection, as well as her rejection of the institutional expectations of motherhood, therefore asserting a more realistic, complex and fragmented self.

**Keywords:** *fragmentation, ambiguity, identity crisis, motherhood, female rage.*

### Introduction

*Nightbitch* is a 2021 magical realism novel by Rachel Yoder. It tells the story of an unnamed stay-at-home mom (who once used to be an artist) who starts turning into a dog, or at least starts to believe she is turning into a dog. As her ambiguous metamorphosis intensifies (growing a tail and fur, sharpening teeth, developing a taste for raw meat), she faces the feral, instinctive faces of motherhood, her repressed identity and societal expectations imposed on women, especially on mothers. Blending elements of magical realism, dark humor and feminist critique, the novel delves into themes of identity, rage and maternal self-sacrifice.

The concept of "literary ambiguity" was first coined by William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), who defined it "as an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (Empson 1930: 5-6). Literary ambiguity refers to the issue of various perceptions and meaning taking place concurrently (Peters 2020: 16).

Fragmentation serves as a compelling literary technique that authors have employed to convey intricate concepts and mirror the fragmented essence of human existence. In modern literature, this technique is frequently utilized to subvert traditional narrative frameworks and to illustrate the personal perceptions of characters. In postmodern literature, fragmentation evolves into a more experimental form, incorporating intertextuality and metafiction to challenge established ideas of authorship and the consistency of narrative structures (Almaroof 2024: 3). According to Guignery and Drag (2019), fragmentation in literary fiction challenges “completeness, linearity and coherence in favour of incompleteness, disruption and gaps” (XI).

An identity crisis is a significant theme in literature that examines the challenges individuals encounter while trying to harmonize their authentic selves with the demands of society. It highlights the tension between personal identity and social influences and characters usually struggle to manage the expectations thrust upon them by their families, cultural backgrounds, and the broader social framework (Wang 2023).

Ambiguity highlights the instability, contradiction and ambivalence within someone's sense of self. Ambiguity serves as a coping mechanism that permits individuals a less strenuous and more empathetic means of engaging with and understanding their identities. The concept of ambiguity can also be viewed as indicative of ambivalence, particularly when it comes to the internal struggles involving feelings of shame and aversion towards perceived inappropriate or taboo emotions. Individuals may find themselves confronting with a sense of self that is subject to societal disdain, functioning as a target for societal contempt. As we inhabit social and cultural realms where prevailing narratives delineate what is deemed acceptable behavior, the feelings of stigmatization and inferiority become pronounced (Ohnstad 2016: 3-4).

### **Literature review**

In her article on “challenging the institution of motherhood” in Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*, Paula Serrano Elena (2024) dwells on the connection between motherhood as an institution as Adrienne Rich describes it and the mental health of mothers. Serrano Elena argues that Yoder's protagonist's transformation works as a coping mechanism intended to shelter her from mental burdens and her paper discusses how the fantastic genre promotes new representations of motherhood, as well as powerful scenarios, such as the use of monstrosity to reject the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The protagonist discloses her metamorphose into a creature as a performative act, thus displaying a sharp critique of the pressure the patriarchal institution of motherhood exercises on mothers. *Nightbitch* thus can be read as a rewriting of the female monster in contemporary fantastic feminist literature whose aim is to deconstruct patriarchal myths on motherhood. The protagonist's transformation allows her to free herself from the constraints of the institution and embrace the experience of motherhood, thus gaining back her identity and her content.

Laura Álvarez Trigo (2024) examines the representation of monstrous motherhood in *Nightbitch*, by means of female monstrosity theories intersected with discussions on the role of food and art in the narrative. Her article focuses

on how the burdens of motherhood, social norms, gender roles and artistic inclinations build up the protagonist's character and turn her into a monster. Furthermore, it analyses how anxieties and frustrations related to food, as well as the mother's art influence the narrative. The mother's loss of identity is the basis of her metamorphosis into a monstrous figure, loss that is highlighted in the novel through the lack of name for the main character: she is the nameless mother who gave up her career as an artist (her identity) to be a stay-at-home mom. As she starts noticing and accepting her new animalistic traits, she acquires a new identity, *Nightbitch*. The protagonist also perceives and constructs her identity or lack thereof through other people's perspectives and expectations regarding motherhood and artistry. Álvarez Trigo highlights how her analysis of *Nightbitch* is rooted in the belief that female monsters stand for rebellion and breaking the stereotypes and norms upholding the societal power dynamics between genders.

### **Methodology**

This paper applies feminist critique and narratology, with a focus on narrative, bodily and emotional fragmentation to analyze how Rachel Yoder uses ambiguity to explore the disorienting experience of motherhood, the suppression of female rage and identity and the gap between societal expectations and lived reality leading to the protagonist's identity crisis. Thus, the novel constructs a narrative that resists clear categorization, reflecting the protagonist's rebellion against imposed roles.

The theoretical framework is based on Hélène Cixous' views on female writing as a source of power and self-expression, Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection associated with the maternal body and Adrienne Rich's views on the ambivalence between motherhood as a lived experience and motherhood as a social institution.

### **Narrative fragmentation**

Hélène Cixous employs a term she calls "écriture féminine" in her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", in order to call for a form of writing that emerges from the female body and empowers women: "Woman must write her self [...]. Woman must put herself into the text" (Cixous 1976: 875). Cixous argues that women need to express themselves through their physical experiences and bodies to create a powerful language that challenges traditional social norms. This language should break through the limitations imposed by traditional discourse, especially those that dismiss the importance of silence or the idea of impossibility. By doing so, women can reclaim their voices and assert their identities in a world that often tries to silence them.

Cixous claims that the female body is a source of empowerment and subversion, a body that historically has been silenced or rendered abject. In the spirit of "écriture féminine," *Nightbitch* depicts the body as a site of ambiguity and power and reclaims the maternal body not as passive or nurturing, but animalistic, raw and desiring. Thus, the mother's bodily transformations can be understood as a revolt against the clean, contained image of idealized femininity: "She scratched the coarse hair that now covered the back of her neck

and her shoulders, then bared her teeth. She could hear every sound, smell every smell" (Yoder 2021: 72). The identity crisis occurs when the mother can no longer perform a culturally imposed maternal identity. Furthermore, her body begins to communicate in its own language, dissolving the symbolic order that has constrained her.

*Nightbitch* resists coherent identity and a traditional narrative form, through the use of stream-of-consciousness technique, despite the third-person narration:

But then the baby. She had considered it might present a complication, but not anything she couldn't handle. After all, women didn't have to stop their lives now, in this day and age, for babies. They could work in the office and work at home. They could work and work and work around the clock if they wanted! (Yoder 2021: 10).

Thus, Yoder adapts the technique to match the psychological and emotional journey of her protagonist – a stay at home mom spiraling into a surreal identity crisis. The incoherent narrative structure is further sustained through the way the protagonist's voice often turns into visceral monologue and surrealism:

She didn't want to think, only to act. Only to survive. She snarled, then lunged blindly into the throng of bodies surrounding her, teeth searching for flesh. She was hair and blood and bone. She was instinct and anger. She knew nothing but the weight of her body and the pull of the earth against it, the particular wetness of the night air, the bats that flew through her periphery, every movement of the paws and legs and heads around her. She searched the night with her mouth, wanting to sink her teeth into anything. She closed her eyes and became pure movement, pure darkness, a twitch and surge, the animal's first dream. (Yoder 2021: 74).

Yoder's narrative fragmentation blends dream, fantasy, realism and magical elements and refuses a linear or fixed identity, aligning with Cixous' rejection of phallogentric narratives and structures that limit the female experience:

Behind them, scores of other dogs—more even than twenty, she now saw. *I know you, she growled at the canine trio, not altogether meanly but more like I'll be damned, waking me up in the middle of the night, I really should have been more polite to you today.* They had come for her, as she had both feared and hoped they would. They wanted her to join them, to take her, but she wouldn't go, she would not [...] Besides, what she was seeing simply could not be real, had to be a waking dream, some sort of hypnopompic hallucination brought on by stress and exhaustion. (Yoder 2021: 72).

Cixous also suggests that if there is a unique quality to womanhood, it lies in her ability to selflessly share and connect with others, creating a sense of wholeness that is dynamic and ever changing. Rather than being defined by fixed parts or roles, women are portrayed as complex beings, like a universe filled with diverse elements, where no single aspect is more important than another. This perspective emphasizes the fluidity of women's identities and experiences, contrasting with more rigid, traditional views of gender. The mother in *Nightbitch* is portrayed as a complex figure, overwhelmed by her new role as a mother, enraged by her husband's dismissive attitude to her physical changes and lack of implication ("Happiness is a choice, he said" (Yoder 2021: 21)), judged by the society, desperate to work and to be herself again. This

portrayal once again supports our claim that the fragmented narration of the novel challenges a monolithic identity of the protagonist and aligns with Cixous' views on the power of female writing.

### **Bodily fragmentation and the abject mother**

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva introduces the term "abjection" to define the attitude we have to something that is no longer subject, not yet object, something that challenges the perimeter of the self and of the symbolic order (culture, language, social norms). It often refers to bodily functions (blood, vomit, milk), death or decay, factors which are deeply disturbing and, thus, abjection disrupts the sense of a clean, ordered and autonomous identity. Abjection is especially associated with the maternal body, which both gives life (object) and threatens to absorb or destroy identity (subject). Kristeva considers the mother as the first Other, a paradoxical figure who is both origin and threat. The maternal abjection occurs the moment the child enters the symbolic order (they start communicating and socializing). The maternal body is thus characterized by fluidity, ambiguity and lack of borders, features that threaten identity stability.

Yoder's protagonist is the epitome of Kristeva's abject, as she is caught between binary positions (woman/mother, animal/human, subject/object). Her physical transformation (hair growth, sharpened teeth, the emergence of a tail) mirrors her unstable identity and decline into abjection, as it is fragmentary, unpredictable and ambiguous:

She curled her fingers against the pavement of the driveway, showed her teeth. Her eyes lit with fire, and she could feel the hair on her head growing, her mane expanding into a monstrous spectacle. The muscles in her haunches rolled. One thought came and then left as quickly: you are an animal. (Yoder 2021: 74).

Yoder does not disperse this pressure and ambiguity in her narrative. On the contrary, it embraces it, highlighting how the maternal body rejects limitations. Her bodily transformations (hair growth, insatiable hunger, animal instincts) are not just metaphorical, but physical outbursts of the abject that undermine her as a stable self.

The animal pulled back its lips to show its teeth, then snarled, quietly, from deep in its chest. In one sharp movement, the dog rose and sprinted to the back of the house, to the French doors, which had been left open, and out onto the lawn, where the long day was darkening. The child screamed with glee, and the husband chased after the dog, out the same open doors. His wife, he thought, moving toward the coming night. She must be out there. (Yoder 2021: 86).

Her body becomes the realm for identity search and its fragmentation reflects internal turmoil. The novel challenges idealized expressions of motherhood, it portrays its raw reality, violence and ambiguity, all aspects Kristeva renders repressed.

### **Emotional fragmentation**

Adrienne Rich (1976) encourages women to express themselves through their body, to reclaim complexity, ambivalence and even rage in their expression of motherhood. Rich also discerns between the actual lived experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood, imposing social expectations onto mothers. Yoder's protagonist sustains profound contradictions: she loves her child, but hates her new life as a homebound mom, she experiences guilt over her rage when she should feel the happiest and most fulfilled and also she desires animalistic freedom. These contradictions are not an imperfection of her character, but reveal what Rich refers to as the hidden, painful reality of motherhood.

I'm fine! she declared somewhat hesitantly to no one in particular. And she had been fine. She nursed him and walked through the neighborhood with a cooing bundle strapped to her chest. She rocked him and napped with him and cooked and cleaned. She slept, but mostly she did not sleep, and it was fine, but then the boy turned two, and with that, something in her turned as well. She didn't want to be *Nightbitch*, wouldn't have chosen it if she felt she did indeed have such a choice. And her husband: she didn't want always to be angry at him, for she did, she really did, love him. It was just so hard to conjure these days. (Yoder 2021: 18).

Through her mental, emotional and bodily fragmentation, the protagonist refuses an institutional wholeness. Thus, she rebels against the institution and asserts a more truthful, complex, fractured selfhood. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is overwhelmed by the institutional norm of a "good mother," which demands a mother to be nurturing, selfless, domestic, capable of unconditional love.

Yes, indeed, she was a good mother, one of the very best. A testament to her goodness: that preternatural ability to wake and wake and wake again, night after night, ever since the day the boy was born. Her husband—bless his heart—had never done well with sleep deprivation, yet she, surprisingly, had taken to it as if she hadn't been a lifelong oversleeper, as if waking at all hours of the night and getting up at 5:30 a.m. was something she was somehow genetically programmed for. (Yoder 2021:17-18).

Her selfhood is split in a multitude of personas: the mother, the artist, the woman, the animal. This fragmentation mirrors the emotional and mental toll of motherhood, considering the societal expectations of monolithic identities. Her metamorphose into a dog, which is a violent, raw and instinctual creature, becomes a monstrous, but liberating rescue from the pressures of socially sanctioned motherhood. Therefore, her identity crisis is not just personal, it is a political rebellion fighting the roles dictated to her, a topic central to Rich's feminist critique.

### **Conclusions**

The protagonist's transformation into a dog (or belief as such) is never confirmed as literal or metaphorical, creating a deliberate ambiguity. This uncertainty reflects her psychological state, the strains of motherhood and the blurring of personal identity. Yoder uses this ambiguity to challenge the readers: is

the protagonist going mad or is she finally clarifying her thoughts? This ambiguity keeps the reader in tension, mimicking the protagonist's unstable reality.

The use of fragmentation further supports this point of view. The novel does not follow a traditional structure and this narrative fragmentation encapsulates dream, magic, fantasy and surrealism, refusing to construct a fixed identity of the protagonist. Her ambiguous bodily transformation and fragmentation reflect her identity crisis and her descent into abjection. Her mental and emotional fragmentation is the denial of the institutional demands of maternal identity and works as an assertion of a more realistic, complex and fragmented self.

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