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BOOK REVIEW: Sara Hosey. *Home Is Where the Hurt Is. Media Depictions of Wives and Mothers*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019, 232p. ISBN (ebook) 978-1-4766-3736-5.

ANDREEA ȘERBAN

West University of Timișoara

andreea.serban@e-uvt.ro

Approximately sixty years ago Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer began to challenge American assumptions and stereotypes – and, implicitly, those governing western societies in general and widely supported by the media – that women should be ‘good girls’ who could only attain fulfillment at home as nurturing wives and mothers. Although no widespread radical developments have occurred in the meantime, in the sense that the media still idealize motherhood and women’s happiness as based on heterosexual romantic love, new attitudes and representations of wives and mothers appear on the horizon.

Published in 2019, Sara Hosey’s *Home Is Where the Hurt Is* traces the evolution of motherhood – mostly as an example of single-parenthood – and the domestic sphere as depicted in the media (i.e. films and TV series) over the past thirty years, aiming to show the larger shifts in the cultural attitudes and representations of women’s status and their evolving roles. Relating the analysis to the influence of feminism, postfeminist ideology and neoliberalism, Sara Hosey (an associate professor at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York) ambitiously explores how American popular culture films and TV series contribute – as per the author’s stated claim – to the development of (post)feminism. Organized in two parts, “Hurt” and “Hope”, the nine chapters of the book are cleverly connected by the overarching space of the home. The first half of the book deals with “troubling realities” and “limiting understandings of gender roles” (p. 7), where the home is a dangerous space of captivity and suffering, and where women are marginalized, disempowered, isolated, or trapped with abusive partners. Contrastingly, the book’s second half, while still identifying “contradictions and limitations surrounding gender roles, [...] also

present[s] women and mothers as individuals deserving of dignity and safety” (p.7), suggesting potential empowerment through complex maternal representations that negotiate and instantiate change, flexibility and diversity.

Considering the wide range of intricate topics that Hosey sets out to cover in *Home Is Where the Hurt Is*, the selection of films and genres in the book may seem subjective but it is justified by the author’s personal watchlist. Nevertheless, by prioritizing white heterosexual and often self-sufficient motherhood over other, less privileged representations, Hosey’s choice of texts reflects the myriad productions in mainstream pop culture media that deal with white (and often well-to-do) mothers to the detriment of other, less stereotypical forms of maternity. For example, there is only one case of an African American drag mother figure discussed in Chapter 6, whereas a single chapter (9) – in my view, the most impactful, compelling and eye-opening to today’s changing realities – is devoted to trans-motherhood and the transitioned self’s acknowledgement of internalized sexism. Even if the analysis at times does not delve into deeper, more nuanced critique of the feminist aspects and remains somewhat superficial, only mentioning what the films and TV series do or don’t vis-à-vis depictions of maternity and the domestic space, the underlying red thread is clearly emphasized over and over again: that media are reductive of and harmful to women. Yet media have an unquestionably strong impact on popular culture consumers, reflecting larger cultural attitudes as well as possible changes in the future.

The five chapters in Part I, “Hurt”, mainly raise awareness of the problematic depiction in mainstream media of “the good mother”, traditionally associated with whiteness and various other privileges, which function as excuses for such mothers’ occasional taboo-breaking behaviours (drinking, smoking, shunning responsibilities) meant to make them happier and, consequently, better mothers. At the same time, non-white lower-class women are othered, vilified and punished for the same type of behaviours. “Good moms” are characterized by maternal devotion and self-sacrifice but also by hyperfemininity, ‘hotness’, and subservience to men, whereas “bad moms” are irresponsible, “aggressive, promiscuous and selfish”, “embrac[ing] a highly performative and constructed version of female beauty” (p. 48).

Chapter 1 discusses the issue of pregnant women and mothers’ houseboundness as a source of terror, contributing to nightmarish experiences from which medical and social authorities cannot provide salvation. In her analysis of *American Horror Story*, *The Babadook* and *Precious*, Hosey argues that such horror drama films illustrate a wider concern with the mother’s authority and the ways in which her physical, but chiefly mental, fitness relates to

the home. Interestingly, if the authorities interfere, they only contribute to the escalation of the danger for the single-parent family.

The second chapter focuses on TV series like *Gilmore Girls*, *Parenthood* and *Teen Mom*, bringing into the foreground representations of “girly moms” (single, young and attractive but emotionally immature women) and “worldly girls” (independent, mature daughters). While the first two series highlight the mother as “endlessly reinscribed as a daughter in need of the patriarch’s support” (p. 38), the last one, a reality TV show, emphasizes the fact that there are only two possible outcomes for the teenaged mother: she can either struggle and mature in order to form a nuclear family, or become a social failure (p. 51).

Centered on depictions of “matrophobia” (as defined by Adrienne Rich), Chapter 3 discusses *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, whose female protagonists reject their mothers, align themselves with father figures and reposition themselves in the home and the family. Above all, the chapter emphasizes maternity as the consequence of choice. In a similar way, the fourth chapter examines three hypostases of “bad moms” in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, *Safe* and *Consumed*, whose protagonists are single housewives, who fight invisible dangers caused by toxicity in the home. Unsuccessful in their attempt to prove the danger and damage posed by cleaning products, these caring single mothers end up being labelled hysterical by the medical and/or government authorities whose assistance they seek.

Chapter 5 analyses instances of domestic violence in *Enough* and *Waitress*. Both films present protagonists who manage to escape their abusive relationships with the help of a benevolent patriarch and not because the state institutions (the police, social services or government agencies) are adequate to support battered women. The main message such films transmit is that patriarchy is inescapable, and the woman has again two options: either she can masculinize her body and mind in order to survive, or, if she decides to leave her husband, she must return to the father.

By contrast to these, the chapters in Part II, “Hope”, generally focus on changing ways of perceiving and experiencing motherhood and mother-child relationships, while also highlighting the media’s “discomfort with the label of victim” (p. 123). Sharing portrayals of violence with the fifth chapter, Chapter 6 deals with more nuanced media productions selected from the author’s personal preferences, such as *Personal Velocity*, *Madea’s Family Reunion* and the first season of *Big Little Lies*, pointing essentially to the importance of supportive female-centered community as a replacement of the oppressive patriarchal model.

Madea's Family Reunion seems here the odd one out, as it is the only portrayal (and comedic at that) of how an African American woman/drag escapes violence through retribution.

Chapter 7 investigates some examples of maternal homes in independent films (*Margot at the Wedding*, *Obvious Child*, *Tiny Furniture*, and *Grandma*), where the mother – despite being a secondary figure – is a liberated, powerful and successful woman. Hosey contends that, unlike mainstream studios that construct the twenty-first-century woman's success on her consumer power, claiming she no longer needs feminism, independent films acknowledge the rights obtained by previous generations of feminist activists and propose new paths for the future. Tackling the link between mothering and success, the indie films analysed in this chapter celebrate the impact of the exceptional mother on her children, while simultaneously promoting the idea that a feminist context is flexible and allows for a woman's failure as an opportunity for learning. Moreover, a crucial shift in maternity-related attitudes featured in such films is the occasional suggestion that a "good mother" need not always be available to the child.

Chapter 8 dwells mainly on surrogacy as a form of "outsourcing" in an analysis of *Tully* and *The Handmaid's Tale* series, both of which "re-idealize motherhood and assert the home as a potential place for hope, healing and redemption" (p. 143) but which also emphasize the "care gap" in connection to the mother within the traditional family, suggesting a fairer division of housework and childcare through the inclusion of male nurturers.

The ninth and last chapter discusses the most nuanced media representations in the entire book, namely the challenges faced by trans-parents in *Transamerica*, *Orange Is the New Black* and *Transparent*. Such films and series, argues Hosey, feature trans-parents who "possess a unique and valuable vantage point [...] draw[ing] on the social and emotional pain they experience before transitioning in order to comprehend and critique the privileges they may have enjoyed as men." (p. 161). The characters' evolution reflects increasing understanding and compassion as they confront internalized sexism and renegotiate their position within both the family and the larger society. An important point Hosey makes here concerns the fact that such films and series are broadcast by paid streaming services like Netflix or Amazon, which gradually accustom viewers to the changes in "understandings that there are different *kinds* of women and *ways of being* a woman" (p. 174, emphasis added).

The book ends with a brief analysis of the pastiche *Jane the Virgin* as an example of a pop culture text that promotes women's complex stories of "connection, awareness, and even healing" (p. 181). Centered on domestic issues, especially the relationships between three generations of Latina women sharing the same home, the series means to deconstruct several

of the Latinx stereotypes and to engage with feminist thinking by welcoming feminists behind the cameras and thus opening the door to fresh and diverse possibilities. Even if the representation of women as wives and mothers is still a long way from non-stereotypical, Hosey optimistically concludes that gradual, albeit timid, changes do occur in American mainstream media.

Overall, the book is not only an engaging read but also a useful one for all fans of pop culture – whether academics or the general public – and may well be a good starting point for students interested in gender studies as well as in film studies. Sara Hosey's *Home Is Where the Hurt Is* represents a significant and timely contribution to the ways in which the media both reflect and shape our attitudes, values and beliefs, further affecting the relationships we build.

Andreea Ioana ȘERBAN, PhD, is Senior Lecturer at the West University of Timișoara, Romania. Her research interests cover Anglophone literatures, modern transmediations of William Shakespeare's works (manga in particular), gender and cultural studies. Her publications include book chapters in various thematic volumes, academic articles, as well as a series of three volumes on the cultural history of England/Britain covering the Elizabethan, the Victorian and the modern periods, published in Romanian in 2010, 2012, and 2015 respectively. She is also a member of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies at the university where she currently teaches.