

Monique Saigal. *L'Écriture Mère et Fille chez Jeanne Hyvrard, Chantal Chawaf, et Annie Ernaux*. Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000. 180p.

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Monique Saigal's exhaustive acquaintance with the numerous writings of Jeanne Hyvrard, Chantal Chawaf, and Annie Ernaux, as well as her personal interviews with each of these prolific contemporary French novelists, make this book a particularly rich analysis of the mother-daughter link in fiction and in the late 20-century search for self through an expanded feminist language.

In its five-chapter format, Saigal's French-language study refers to 27 writings by Hyvrard (b. 1945), including 18 novels written between 1975 and 1998; 24 pieces by Chawaf (b. 1943), including 20 novels, 1974-1998; and 13 publications by Ernaux (b. 1940), including nine novels, 1974-1997.

In her Introduction, Saigal notes that each author seeks—often painfully—to integrate that which is maternal intricately and irrevocably into her life, for each has been unable to cut free from her mother or the sense that an intimate knowledge of one's mother is vital for self-comprehension, if not always inner peace.

Hyvrard, who initially had a bad relationship with her mother, reflects this uneasy portion of her past metaphorically in her works. A central theme in her works protests what she refers to as the *logarque*, a term associated with patriarchy, but also espoused by certain women who consciously allow their societies to be dominated by males and their literature by the confines of male language.

Chawaf was pulled surgically from the body of her dying mother just after both parents were attacked in a World War II bombardment, and later illegally adopted. Although she did not find out about her native origins until she was an adult, she insists her "fetal memory" was manifest in her dreams, fantasies, and early childhood writing as she strove to reconnect with her birth mother so they both could live. Her subsequent writings reflect this inter-uterine link with her mother and the striving to create a viable maternal language.

Ernaux had a loving, though difficult, relationship with her own mother, leading up to the tragedy of having to watch her mother's memories and essence waste away in Alzheimer's disease. Her novels such as *Une Femme* (1988) and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (1997) underline the primordial role her mother played in her life and seek to honor the working-class woman who labored as a waitress and encouraged her daughter to study and read good books so she would have a better life. Ironically, the daughter came to realize that the books only distanced her from her mother whose coarse language and pink-collar position kept her from entering the

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more prestigious social milieu into which she had pushed her child. Ernaux's other prevalent theme, therefore, is the lag or *décalage* between her proletariat upbringing and the bourgeois milieu into which she was thrown after her childhood during her education and marriage and into which she never fully integrated.

Saigal's book contains no photographs of the authors (who are all Caucasian and now in their early 60s), but the personalities, joy, pain, longings, frustrations, and idiosyncrasies of each come alive through the pages as Saigal shares quotations from numerous novels, includes some commentaries by other critics, but mostly writes her own impressions on the poignant messages behind the authors' themes and metaphors and shares moments from personal interviews with each one.

The Hyvrard chapter reveals the author's background as professor of economics, who spent two years teaching in Martinique where she discovered a simple, warmer, more natural kind of woman, the "bonne mère," with whom she urges individual women to reconnect. She describes this mother figure in her early novel *Les Prunes de Cythère* (1975): "Mère Afrique... à la fois toi et moi. L'une dans l'autre. Mère Afrique, j'étais toi" (qtd. in Saigal 19).

In *La jeune morte en robe de dentelle* (1990), Hyvrard identifies a mother as *logarque*, who holds so tenaciously to her patriarchal culture that she makes her daughter into her "clone," and thereby annihilates her. Hyvrard, then, seeks a transcendental society, "une tierce culture" with a "mère idéal" (12).

A particularly intriguing Hyvrardian work is *Le Cercan* (1989), a reversal of the word cancer, in which Hyvrard quotes female cancer sufferers via a collection of conversations, poems, and philosophical essays as they accuse doctors and other elements of society of inhumane treatment. "La structure de l'ouvrage naturalise le cancer, le végétalise et le poétise," states Saigal. "La structure de l'ouvrage organisé comme un collage de textes divers met en relief l'univers du 'désordre' chaïque où se mêlent non seulement divers genres mais aussi le langage oral et écrit" (29). Therefore, the cancer becomes "échomonie," or the oppressive echo of the feminine condition. It also symbolizes the disarray of the daughter who wasn't able to be what the mother wanted her to be. The mother's cancer represents her inability to love the daughter as she is.

Among other Hyvrard works, Saigal mentions the value of *La Pensée du Corps* (1989)—"sorte de cordon ombilicale et noyau matriciel de tous ses textes" (32), which by necessity includes alphabetical explanation of hyvrardien terms, and *Cellla* [sic] (1998), which include poems, prose, drawing and photographs, all by Hyvrard. In *La Meurtritude* (1977), Hyvrard explores Tarot cards and alchemy to underline the role of the Mother. When Saigal asked Hyvrard in a personal interview why she chose Tarot, Hyvrard responded that the faces in the game represented for her

the fundamental history that has been lost from view, i.e., “La mère vue comme la Grande Toute disparaît de plus en plus dans une société où domine la technologie moderne” (37).

Hyvrard’s horror of society and technology substituting the machine for the mother is described in detail in *La jeune morte en robe de dentelle* as well in the personal interview. Speaking to Saigal, Hyvrard described “la mère machine” or the “matrice cybernétique” as a consequence of the modern world that atrophies the “bonne mère” and devours women in the same way as the Voreux mine destroys lives in Zola’s *Germinal* (41).

Chawaf’s point of departure is the search for the biological mother she never knew through an “sensorial,” inter-uterine language “qui expriment les perceptions et les sensations du corps, la musicalité du langage” (109). “Elle veut faire parler le corps maternel au moyen d’images sensorielles qui diront le charnel, l’intre-utérin, ce qu’un fœtus peut sentir, goûter, et entendre” (65). Saigal provides examples of such language from Chawaf’s novels that illustrate this question, such as her first book *Rétable-La Rêverie* (1974), written while the author was pregnant and uprooted from her native France by a lengthy stay in Syria, and *Le Manteau Noir* (1998), which describes a 50-year-old woman’s latent search for her unknown biological parents, as well as in *Rougeâtre* (1978), which actually invokes Chawaf’s in-utero memories.

Similar to Hyvrard’s concern with corrupt patriarchy, Chawaf described to Catherine Rogers in a 1997 interview the problem of “la maternité non résolu dans un monde partriarcial de violence où le père domine et où la mère a un rôle minime dans le domaine de la pensée, et de l’action” (58).

Although Ernaux is best known for her 1983 novel *La Place*, which won the Renaudot Prize for its portrait of her café-owner father, her most profoundly personal works—*Les armoires vides* (1974), *Une Femme* (1987), and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (1997)—all honor her mother, with whom she battled in her youth, but adored as the two grew older.

“Ce qui caractérise Ernaux c’est son authenticité,” Saigal states in her book’s conclusion. “Elle tient à dire sans honte, la vérité sur ses parents, sur elle-même... Issue du peuple, c’est à sa mère qu’Ernaux est redevable pour avoir choisi la profession d’écrivain” (161). Actually, it is the very influence of the mother, alive or dead, loved or abhorred, that inspires this astonishing output of mother-daughter-centered fiction from all three of these authors.

One of the most touching portions of Saigal’s chapter on Ernaux is her descriptions of the author’s poignant writings about her mother’s slow demise in a nursing home. As the mother’s mind deteriorates, Ernaux senses a role reversal between them, and sometimes a melding of their personae. From *Je ne suis pas partie de ma*

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*nuit*: “Elle est ma vieillesse, et je sens en moi menacer le dégradation de son corps... je suis elle et je suis moi en elle” (Saigal 150.) Hyvrard used similar terms in *Jeune morte en robe de dentelle* when she said of her mother, “Elle me fait elle. Elle m’elle” (150). But, conversely, Saigal notes, Hyvrard’s sentiment contained less pathos than fear of her mother’s parasitism.

Saigal’s thorough knowledge of and perceptive analyses of these authors’ texts is an inspiration and an excellent resource to those who would wish to build up their own expertise with this interesting element of current French women writers and the increasing academic emphasis on women’s issues in literature. ✱