

Sample Research Essay

Maggie Nelson Motherhood: An Examination of the Sodomitical Mother

One of the main tensions presented in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is the struggle between balancing self-identity and motherhood. In order to address this tension, Nelson reframes Susan Fraiman's idea of the "sodomitical mother" to fit her personal experiences. The "sodomitical mother" is a mother with access to "non-normative, nonprocreative sexuality, to sexuality in excess of the dutifully instrumental" (Nelson 69). Nelson's focus on the sodomitical mother highlights questions like *What does it mean to be a mother who enjoys anal sex?* and *Does being a sodomitical motherhood change anything about the essence of motherhood itself?*. However, Nelson's use of "sodomitical motherhood" is not meant to make an argument about all sodomitical mothers. Rather, Nelson uses the sodomitical mother to make an argument for herself as an *individual*. She focuses on the individual identity of mothers because there is a fear of loss of self-identity associated with motherhood, specifically in D.W Winnicott's theory on motherhood entitled the "good enough mother." Nelson uses Winnicott's abstract theory of motherhood in order to address the collective fear of the depersonalization of the mother and the coupling of the mother and child. To address this fear, Nelson adds the adjective "sodomitical" in front of "motherhood" to highlight the unique experience of mothers as individuals separate from their children. Conversely, when discussing "motherhood" as a concept, Nelson focuses on the general experience of motherhood and not the personal. By generalizing "motherhood" and personalizing "sodomitical," Nelson creates a universe in *The Argonauts* that emphasizes the importance of adjectives to bring out the unique self-identity that distinguishes each mother from one another within the overall, general concept of motherhood. Ultimately, Nelson does not

address whether the addition of “sodomitical” to “motherhood” successfully balances self-identity and motherhood, but she does create a space for mothers to have personal identities that dually separate and coexist within the realm of motherhood.

Nelson substantiates the fear of loss of individuality associated with motherhood as a universal fear of all mothers through the use of popular maternal theory in order to solidify the idea that there is an inherent undoing of the mother as an individual in motherhood. When Nelson discusses motherhood, she uses abstract sources that she believes to be universally known and recognized such as the child psychologist D.W. Winnicott, specifically referencing his theory of the “good enough” mother. Winnicott’s definition of the good enough mother is “one who makes active adaption to the infant’s needs, ... an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant’s growing ability to account for failure of adaption and to tolerate the results of frustration” (Winnicott 10). Inherent to Winnicott’s theory is the coupling of the mother and the infant. The concept “motherhood” does not exist if there is no child or child-like figure. Furthermore, the identity of the “mother” does not exist if there is no child or child-like figure. Therefore, the mother and the child are naturally bound together in the concept of motherhood and this coupling is treated as a universally known condition. Winnicott’s concept of the good enough mother abstracts the idea of motherhood, not specifying any particular examples of motherhood. Instead, it focuses on the general relationship of dependency between the mother and the child, ignoring the mother as an individual separate from the child.

While Nelson herself never presents the actual definition of a good enough mother, she does address Winnicott’s concept as if it is relevant to *all* mothers. Nelson’s belief that Winnicott’s theory is a widespread, generalized experience of motherhood is present when she explains that “Winnicott’s concept of “good enough” mothering is in resurgence right now. You

can find it everywhere from mommy blogs to Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Are You My Mother?* to reams of critical theory” (Nelson 19). By using the word “everywhere,” Nelson implies that good enough mothering applies to all mothers, that this theory holds a universality that transcends individual mothers and combines the experiences of all mothers. In stating that Winnicott’s theory can be found in informal publishing mediums like mommy blogs to formal publishing mediums such as Alison Bechdel’s published graphic novel, Nelson further demonstrates the universality of this theory on motherhood. By showing Winnicott’s concept as universal, Nelson simplifies the idea of “motherhood” to the relationship between mother and child and the implications of that relationship as a general axiom for all mothers.

Furthermore, Nelson expands on the universality surrounding the concept of “motherhood” by itself though imagining a dialogue in which a baby speaks to a mother by using Winnicott’s theory:

If the baby could speak to the mother, says Winnicott, here is what it may say:
 I find you;
 You survive what I do to you as I come to recognize you as
 not-me;
 I use you;
 I forget you;
 But you remember me;
 I keep forgetting you;
 I lose you;
 I am sad. (Nelson 19)

This dialogue describes the mother-child relationship that Winnicott presents in his good enough mother theory. While the dialogue itself makes an argument for the mother and child as a pair and the mother’s loss of individuality, the formal elements stress the idea that Winnicott’s theory is relevant or common to all mothers. The universality of this constructed dialogue is highlighted through the ambiguity of “I” and “you.” In theory, the “I” and the “you” could refer

to anyone reading the dialogue. The use of “I” and “you” allows for the insertion of any person, whether it be Nelson and her baby or any other mother-baby pairing. Thus, the ambiguous pronouns in the dialogue further suggest that “motherhood” is a universal experience rather than a personal one. Furthermore, Nelson reinforces the idea of the mother and child as couple in motherhood through the formal construction of each line in the dialogue. There is a “you” and an “I” or some version of this pairing in every line except the last. The use of these two pronouns reasserts the idea of motherhood being a relationship involving two people, thus illustrating the general understanding that “motherhood” is not about the individual mother.

Nelson uses the idea of “motherhood” as a defense mechanism to qualify her own fears about losing herself as an individual and assuages these fears by introducing the concept of the “sodomitical” mother. An explanation as to why Nelson generalizes the concept of “motherhood” is presented by Jackie Stacey as she attributes Nelson’s use of Winnicott’s “good enough” mother theory to the fact that it refuses “both maternal idealization and denigration — two sides of the same tendency” (Stacey). The refusal to idealize and denigrate motherhood depersonalizes the concept of motherhood as it puts neither praise nor blame on “motherhood” itself. In doing so, Nelson is using Winnicott’s theory like a defense mechanism. By placing neither praise nor blame of “motherhood,” Nelson is able to protect the general idea of motherhood as there is no attachment of personal attributes. Attributes like “good” or “bad” cannot be associated with motherhood, so the idea of motherhood itself cannot be seen as a personal experience and remains a general, abstract concept. By allowing motherhood to remain in the general and universal sphere, Nelson is able to establish some commonalities between all mothers. Thus, Nelson is able to contend that her fears of losing herself as an individual person is not a fear specific to herself but to all mothers. Inherent in Winnicott’s idea of the good enough

mother is that the relationship between the mother and child will gradually lessen. Winnicott implies that the breakdown of this relationship will be initiated by the child as “the infant’s growing ability to account for failure of adaption and to tolerate the results of frustration” (Winnicott 10). Therefore, the mother has to actively adapt to the child’s needs while the child develops personal agency in order to leave the mother. The destruction of the coupling that is inherent in motherhood leaves the question of *Where does the individuality of the mother come into play and does this individuality work within or outside the realm of motherhood?* Nelson attempts to address this question through her idea of the “sodomitical” mother. Attributes such as praise or blame come into play when personalization is attached to the concept of motherhood through ideas like “sodomitical motherhood,” specifically through the adjective “sodomitical.”

In retaliation to the loss of individuality in motherhood, Nelson introduces adjectives as a combative method to assert that the mother can act as an individual in association with the concept of motherhood, specifically with Winnicott’s theory of the good enough mother. Abby Paige from the *Los Angeles Review of Books* introduces the idea of “aggression” in regards to Nelson’s idea of motherhood (Paige). She claims that “Nelson defends robustly the sexuality of the mother, the *sodomitical* mother in particular, and argues with D.W. Winnicott that the child’s development is dependent upon the mother’s “aggression,” her demonstrating for the child that she has a self and subjectivity separate from his” (Paige). Furthermore, Paige goes on to argue that “Nelson makes motherhood a specific, personal experience rather than a general, archetypal one, and in so doing, allows mothers to be people (some of whom happen to be “interested in ass-fucking”)” (Paige). However, Nelson never criticizes Winnicott’s theory of the good enough mother in *The Argonauts*. In fact, Nelson actually expresses her dependency on Winnicott as he was the only child psychologist that felt relevant to her as a mother (Nelson 20). Thus, Paige’s

idea that the sodomitical mother argues with Winnicott's good enough mother seems to be unsupported due to Nelson's affection for Winnicott. However, Paige's argument that Nelson makes motherhood a personal experience rather than a general, archetypal one does hold true with Nelson's concept of the *sodomitical* mother. It's not that Nelson takes issue with the concept of motherhood. Her heavy use of Winnicott's good enough mother theory proves that she is comfortable with his arguments and its application to all mothers. Rather, Nelson takes it into her own hands to turn the general, abstract concept of motherhood into a personal one through the adjective "sodomitical" by choosing to make an argument about the individual mother that is specific to her rather than all mothers.

Nelson's choice of the adjective "sodomitical" to describe her personalized version of motherhood comes from experiences that can be only attributed to her. She specifically writes about navigating her identity as a mother with her identity as a lover of "ass-fucking" (Nelson 85), thus explaining her choice of the adjective "sodomitical." In an interview with *The Brooklyn Quarterly*, Nelson explains that sodomitical maternity is important to her because "there has been an exile of the maternal body from those conversations" (Doerr) about perversions like sodomy. Instead of fitting sodomy into the conversations about mothers, Nelson attempts to place mothers into the conversation about sodomy. Hence, Nelson is creating space for mothers who enjoy anal sex. However, the term "sodomitical mother" goes beyond just meaning a mother who finds access and excess to anal sex. Rather, Nelson uses the term as an even more specific descriptor by attributing the concept to feeling rather than meaning.

By attaching the concept of feelings and human emotion to anal sex, Nelson breaks down *sodomitical* motherhood to an idea that is based on inner experience which does not try to relate the experiences of all sodomitical mothers into impersonal theories. In the text, Nelson discusses

Eve Sedgwick and Susan Fraiman's attempt to insert anal eroticism into mainstream culture, but she presents another tension by explaining that "while Sedgwick (and Fraiman) want to make space for women's anal eroticism to *mean*, that is not the same as inquiring into how it *feels*" (Nelson 84). The emphasis on the words "mean" and "feel" attaches a personal quality to the term "*sodomitical* motherhood" that does not make an argument for all sodomitical mothers, but specifically for *Nelson* as a sodomitical mother. Nelson attributes Sedgwick and Fraiman's theories to having helped attach meaning to sodomitical maternity. However, the definitions and theories that Sedgwick and Fraiman have created do not *feel* personal to her. By stating that Sedgwick and Fraiman are ignoring the *feeling*, Nelson reinforces the personal quality that "sodomitical" encompasses in sodomitical motherhood as feeling is a subjective concept.

Nelson's own personal version of the sodomitical mother makes space in the conversation about motherhood and self-identity to explore the separation between and coexistence of the individual mother and the child. Unlike Winnicott's good enough mother and Susan Fraiman's sodomitical mother, Nelson's sodomitical mother is able to navigate the realm of motherhood by being both attached to and separated from her child. While Nelson does embrace Susan Fraiman's term "sodomitical motherhood," she admits that Fraiman's theory on sodomitical maternity needs revision (Nelson 72) because "one of the gifts of genderqueer family making... is the revelation of caretaking as detachable from—and attachable to—any gender, any sentient being" (Nelson 72). Nelson demonstrates that the sodomitical mother is able to *detach* and *attach* herself to her child when she, in the context of her expressing her interest in anal sex, recounts listening to Mary Roach talk about the human anus being one of the most innervated parts of the human body on the radio while driving her son Iggy home from his twelve-month vaccinations and periodically checking on him for signs of a vaccine-induced

neuromuscular breakdown (Nelson 85). Through this scene, Nelson shows that she is able to be attached to her child by taking care of him; she is simultaneously able to be detached from her child by listening to a conversation about anal pleasure, an activity that is of interest to her as an individual separate from her child. The simultaneous occurrence of these two activities illustrates the sodomitical mother's ability to operate both within the realm of motherhood by portraying the mother-child relationship and outside the realm of motherhood by retaining her individuality. However, the simultaneous action of both the mother-child identity and the individual identity proves that the individual mother can coexist with the child bearing mother. Nelson is able to perform her motherly duties of adapting to the child's needs while also pursuing her personal interest in anal sex. Thus, Nelson's sodomitical mother has a personal identity that is separate from the realm of motherhood, but her individual identity is also able to operate in tandem with motherhood.

The sodomitical mother that Nelson presents is able to find a balance between D.W. Winnicott's good enough mother and Susan Fraiman's sodomitical mother. She is able to maintain agency as an individual while still adapting to her child's needs in the mother-child relationship. Although Nelson makes a personal argument for her ability to act as an individual that is both detached and attached to her child through the *sodomitical* mother, Nelson's ideas could also be useful to mothers who are also navigating the balance between motherhood and the individual self. While each individual mother has a unique experience with motherhood, Nelson's concept of adjectives helping to establish the mother's individuality can be applied to any adjective of the mother's choosing. Nelson uses the term "sodomitical" due to her personal interest in anal sex. However, other mothers could decide on adjectives that are more fitted towards their own personal interests. Overall, Maggie Nelson illustrates a universe in which a

mother retains her personal identity while still maintaining her partnership with her child, creating a space for the individual mother to simultaneously coexist and separate from the world of motherhood.

Works Cited

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