Good and Bad Mothering in the Fiction of Marian Keyes

A Discourse Analysis

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1. Introduction

The Irish novelist Marian Keyes has since the mid 1990s been one of the most prominent authors of the chick lit genre. Her books have sold in more than 23 million copies (Weathers n. pag.), and critics quoted on the covers and flyleaves of her novels profess her to be “the voice of a generation” and a “chronicler of our times” (Angels). These are all circumstances which, along with the fact that her target readership consists of women in their childbearing years, makes her work particularly interesting as the object of a study of contemporary literary discourses of motherhood.

This text will deal with the discursive construction of good versus bad mothering in Keyes’ novels, more specifically in Watermelon (1995), Sushi for beginners (2000), Angels (2002), and This Charming Man (2008): a complex structure that validates some permeating Western ideas about motherhood and contests others. I will endeavor to explore this web of meaning using analytical terms and tools from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory. In addition to mapping the discourses of “Good Mothering” and “Bad Mothering” in the primary literature I aim to explore which underlying discourses they build on and assess how those underlying structures are reproduced or called into question.

The thesis of this essay is that Keyes’ novels develop a discourse of good mothering that supports the vital importance of personal maturity and retained individuality in the mother, while establishing a discursive connection between bad mothering and mothers who relinquish their integrity and personal potential due to psycho-social pressures. In her article “Growing Old Before Old Age: Ageing in the Fiction of Marian Keyes”, Elena Pérez-Serrano identifies “the process of coming into adulthood” as a central theme in the chick lit genre, and states that “Keyes’ novels focus on the interpersonal relationships established by the characters and, through these, the protagonists become responsible adults, aware of the need to be in control of their lives and choices” (135). I agree with this assessment, which is highly applicable to growing into motherhood as well as growing into adulthood. Keyes fiction does not communicate that a good mother must be married or single, that she must work or stay in the home: it communicates that no matter what conditions a woman mothers under, she must look to her own development as well as her child’s. Failure to address her own strengths and weaknesses will result in bad mothering and ultimately damage to the child.
2. Literature

2.1 Primary literature

I have elected to include four of Marian Keyes’ eleven published novels in my analysis. A limitation was necessary due to the scope of the essay, and I have thus chosen to focus on the works in her production where the theme of motherhood is most prominent. The four novels are published within a 13-year period. Watermelon is Keyes’ debut novel from 1995; Sushi for Beginners came out in 2000, Angels in 2002, and This Charming Man in 2008. They all have female protagonists in their late twenties to early thirties and are set in an Irish context. Watermelon is the first-person narrative of Claire Webster, a new mother abandoned by her husband in the hospital immediately following the birth of their child. The novel relates how Claire returns from London to her native Dublin and the protection of her quirky family. There she regains her footing and forms new relationships, not least with her infant daughter Kate.

Sushi for Beginners interweaves three parallel narratives related by an extradiegetic narrator: that of kind but neurotic Ashling, her childhood friend Clodagh, who is a frustrated middle-class housewife with small children, and her harshly competitive editor-in-chief Lisa. All three women have highly charged relationships with motherhood that are instrumental to the momentum of the story. By and by, the reader comes to realize that Ashling suffers from the emotional scars that a childhood with a severely depressed mother inflicted, that Lisa’s marriage foundered on sacrificing motherhood for the sake of professional success, and that Clodagh’s inability to cope with the boredom and low self-esteem she derives from her role as a stay-at-home mother causes her to behave in ways destructive to both herself and her children.

Angels is another first-person narrative, this time featuring Claire’s younger sister Margaret. The novel begins with the breakdown of Maggie’s marriage and is the tale of its recovery. It is gradually revealed that the marriage crumbled under the weight of two miscarriages and that the pain and guilt associated with them must be addressed before the couple can be reunited.

Finally, This Charming Man is another work with parallel strands of narrative. The hub of the novel is the charming but brutal Paddy de Courcy, a serial perpetrator of domestic
violence. The protagonists are women whose lives he comes to affect in different ways. Marnie, who was his first love, never recovers from their destructive relationship and pulls her children with her into a chaos of depression and alcoholism. She is powerlessely watched by her twin sister Grace, who as opposed to Marnie is a first person narrator and a keen observer of other characters, some of whom will feature in this analysis.

It should be noted that Keyes limits herself to what E. Ann Kaplan refers to as the “‘Master’ Motherhood Discourse” (8), in other words that of the white, middle-class woman. This limited perspective affects Keyes’ construction of the single mother since it presupposes “a degree of economic security”, and also carries significant weight in the constructions of the working mother and the stay-at-home mum as it is assumed that professional life will result in economic independence, broadened horizons and social diversity, which precludes many low status jobs (Glenn 6). Worthy of note is also that motherhood in the studied material is always biological and heterosexual, and conception is unassisted. Yet while Keyes’ scope may be said to be limited in these aspects, it is broadened by the inclusion of the perspectives of both children and parents.

2.2 Secondary Literature

Considering Keyes’ vast readership, remarkably little academic work has been done on the subject of her authorship. The articles that have been published on the topic generally include a discussion of Keyes’ writing as part of an analysis also dealing with other chick lit authors. In total, I have found Keyes mentioned in three such genre-encompassing articles, dealing with consumerism, feminine sexualities, and the Irish context respectively. I have encountered only one academic article focused exclusively on Keyes’ authorship, namely Elena Pérez-Serrano’s aforementioned work. In other words, nothing appears to have been published concerned specifically with motherhood in Keyes’ fiction. However, while few scholars have engaged with Keyes’ novels directly, many have published books and articles dealing generally with the social construction of motherhood. For the purpose of this essay, I have read a number of such works. Aminatta Forna’s Mother of All Myths, Diane Eyer’s Motherguilt and Ann Dally’s Inventing Motherhood have been particularly valuable to me. It should be noted that these books, along with the majority of other works in the field, address an Anglo-American context. This is problematic since the Irish-Catholic context may be
expected to differ in some aspects. I do however feel that the studied literature is still applicable to Keyes writing, since she portrays young professionals who are highly attuned to the Anglo-American cultural sphere. An important part of their identity is the struggle to break free from traditional Irish values and instead embrace a secular Western lifestyle. For some characters, this cultural transition has been facilitated by work or studies in England or the United States. Most of Keyes’ protagonists are employed by Irish media outlets that are closely connected to or even owned by British and American counterparts. With this in mind, I argue the included secondary sources to be relevant.

In addition to literature on the social construction of motherhood I have consulted literature that provides theoretical tools for discourse analysis. This will be further discussed in section 3.
3. Discourse Theory

I have elected to use Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory as it is presented by Marianne Winther Jorgensen and Louise Phillips in their textbook *Discourse as Theory and Method* as the basis for my analysis. The main strength of this approach is that it allows me to account clearly and concisely for semantic patterns in the primary literature, even when there are contradictions in the text – for instance between the meanings established by the narrator and by the narrative as such. It also emphasizes the dialogical relationship between literary and social discourses, which is a central premise of this project.

The point of departure of Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective on discourse is that all meaningful units in our environment – whether they be material, social, or semiotic – can be related to each other in a discursive structure, and that the connections made in that structure determine which meaning each unit carries in that particular discourse (Winther Jorgensen & Phillips 33). Laclau and Mouffe claim that while there certainly is a material environment that exists independently of us, our understanding of that environment is always discursive (35). A tree’s physical existence is for instance beyond the scope of our meaning-making, but to us that tree is inevitably tied up in a discursive web: it is part of a biotope or of a landscape design, lumber or the home of a tree spirit. The meaning we attribute to it will determine the way we interact with it.

Laclau and Mouffe’s idea of discourse can be illustrated using de Saussure’s fishnet metaphor: all units of meaning can be viewed as knots in a net, and it is their differential positions that determine their meaning (25). However, while de Saussure viewed the relationships between the “knots” as constant, Laclau and Mouffe argue that they are subject to change; every time a meaning is established by way of an articulation – the writing of a text, the use of an item, the behaviour towards a person, or the design of a material facility – it excludes or attempts to exclude other possible connections. In this sense, discourse is a constantly ongoing struggle for the privilege to determine a certain meaning at the expense of others (28).

Laclau and Mouffe use a specific terminology to indicate that at any given time, some signs in a discourse have fixed meanings, whereas others are polysemic. The first type of sign is called *moment*, and the second type *element* (26-27). Elements that are central to a discursive structure are called *floating signifiers* (28).
According to this theory of discourse, new articulations are always made in the context of previous articulations and the discourses that they establish. They can either reproduce or refute meanings already made. Some discourses become so ingrained that we in a given time and place cannot see beyond them; they become part of what we as subjects perceive as objective reality. Such discourses are hence referred to as objective discourses by Laclau and Mouffe. They argue that objective discourses come into being through hegemony, which can be understood as domination through social consensus (Winther Jorgensen & Phillips 30-33). Their theory describes a process whereby political discourse, meaning one of several rivalling ways of organizing a social space, can be transmuted into objective discourse by means of a hegemonic intervention (36-37). This intervention may take the shape of a religious or scientific doctrine that is issued by an accepted authority at a time when other dominant discourses support the proposed principle. When such a doctrine becomes generally accepted as knowledge it ascends to power in the sense that it will affect how subjects think and act: what they perceive as right and wrong and what kind of social pressure they exert on their peers. In other words, it is possible to build such consensus around one version of reality that it during a period of time appears as the only possibility. However, even objective discourses supported by hegemony are liable to become unstable over time so that they sooner or later become subject to new discursive struggle: the discourse becomes political once more (37). In this essay, I will use the term hegemonic discourse to describe a discourse that is political but dominant: a construction of meaning that is recognized as valid by a majority in a social sphere or by a group that is socially dominant. A hegemonic discourse may be on the ascent to or decline from status as an objective discourse, but it is not given that it will ever reach that state.
4. Mapping Discourses: Good and Bad Mothering in the Fiction of Marian Keyes

When attempting to map the discursive structures in *Watermelon, Sushi for Beginners, Angels* and *This Charming Man* that can be tied to the floating signifiers “good mothering” and “bad mothering”, one quickly realizes that there is no clear line between the two discourses. They are interlocked, the one often being the negation of the other. It also becomes apparent that the narratives do not endorse all the meanings that they showcase. It appears that one of the points that Keyes is making is how multi-faceted the concept of motherhood is and how contradictory the discursive structures that surround it can be. Often, she outlines a familiar construction and then gradually subverts it by the narrative’s turn of events. Because of this, I argue that many units of meaning related to motherhood in the four analyzed novels – for instance “the single mother” as she is represented through speech, thoughts, actions and events – are to be viewed as elements, signs with ambivalent or questioned meaning. In such cases I attempt to show how rivaling discursive connections can be made in each case. I will also indicate a number of moments, signs with connections that appear unchallenged.

In my analysis, I attempt to shed some light over the structures that underlie the discourse of motherhood in Keyes’ fiction. This is necessary in order to more fully understand the meanings made and stances adopted in the studied narratives. Connections with underlying discourses will be indicated as the mapping progresses, but in order to facilitate the reading I will first provide a cursory introduction to some of the major underpinnings of the discourses of good and bad mothering in the primary literature.

4.1 Underlying Discourses

The twentieth century was the epoch when science started to dictate the terms for good mothering. During its first decades, enormous advances were made regarding children’s physical health, and infant mortality in Western Europe dropped steeply as a consequence (Allen 188-189). A by-product was the rise to eminence of experts and reformers in child care. As concern for the physical health of children abated, their mental health and
development came into focus (Forna 52). This coincided with wide recognition of Sigmund Freud’s ideas concerning the development of human behavior and personality.

Freud revolutionized the way both children and adults were perceived with his concept of the subconscious. In *Mother of All Myths*, Aminatta Forna states that “The resulting discipline of psychoanalysis has, at its core, the belief that early experiences in childhood set in place events and behavior in later life. It is this idea […] that is central to the tendency […] to scrutinize the relationship between mothers and their children” (51). Likewise, Ann Dally recognizes the impact of psychoanalysis on the hegemonic understanding of child development (85), but claims that it is not through Freud himself that these ideas have taken the most powerful hold. She states that the British psychiatrist John Bowlby more than any contemporary authority has influenced professional and governmental policies of child care, as well as the attitudes of mothers themselves (84).

Instrumental to this development was the 1951 report on children orphaned by the Second World War that the World Health Organization commissioned Bowlby to write. In it, he described the emotional and psychological disorders that could ensue from “maternal deprivation” (Forna 59). Bowlby posited that during the first years of a child’s life, the relationship with the mother must have such continuity that they are practically never apart; Forna cites a passage where he asserts that “we must recognize that leaving any child of under three years of age is a major operation only to be undertaken for sufficient and good reason” (58). The British authorities used Bowlby’s findings to rationalize the closing of a majority of the facilities for child-care that had been set up during the war, thus forcing many working women back into the home and making room for returning soldiers. Indeed, “It became accepted wisdom among health professionals, social workers and teachers that working mothers ran the risk of damaging their children” (59-60), and thus social support for women in that position was withdrawn.

It may then be speculated – as Forna does – that the immense impact of Bowlby’s ideas had to do with timing. Social and economic factors after the havoc of the war were set in his favor (59-60), resulting in what might be regarded as a hegemonic intervention in the 1950s. Though Bowlby’s so called attachment theory is now challenged by other discourses, its rhetoric is still recognizable in contemporary advice to parents. According to the psychologist Diane Eyer, “Magazines in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s reported on the growing arsenal of attachment research that was pouring forth from the psychology departments of universities […] The latest findings include […] cautions about the effects of nonmaternal care” (11). One of the foremost “gurus” of the 1990s, British psychologist
Penelope Leach, “with her own TV show and worldwide public appearances to promote the word”, is shown by Eyer to present professional work and child-rearing has mutually exclusive (4).

It is pointed out by critics that full-time mothering of the type that is propagated by the attachment theory is only possible for a married stay-at-home mother supported by a bread-winning husband (Nelson Garner 79). It hence follows that mothers who are not in such circumstances are incapable of good mothering; indeed, single mothers, divorced mothers, and working mothers have all been constructed as “bad” or deviant by the hegemonic discourses of motherhood of the twentieth century. However, since second wave feminism asserted itself in the West, these conservative discourses have had to co-exist with the increasingly established meaning that children need “a stable, happy mother with the opportunity to be a mother in the way that best benefits her and her children” (Dally 89). This perspective does not only put the mother’s needs forward in their own right, but maintains that some women can only be good mothers if allowed a certain amount of personal freedom and outside stimulation.

It becomes apparent that discourses that do become widely established have a substantial longevity. The nineteenth-century essentialist notion of maternal instinct, which stated that “the human qualities that [child-rearing] required […] were […] natural to the female sex” (Allen 10), has proved powerful enough to run parallel with the idea that good mothers need to be educated and heed the advice of (male) experts and later the idea that it is not necessarily the mother who provides the best mothering at all, at least not if she must do it without deference to her own needs. The coexistence of these powerful discourses makes for a tangled web of contradictory meaning.

4.2 Good Mothering in the Primary Literature

4.2.1 Proper Conditions of Mothering

In *Inventing Motherhood*, Dally states that today’s possibility to actively choose whether or not to conceive children has resulted in “the common idea that one should only have children if one is able to care for them properly, physically, economically and emotionally, according to today’s high standards”, and goes on to identify those standards as being married and the proprietor of “adequate material possessions” (43). This idea that good mothering involves
fulfilling a set of conditions – material and social – can be traced as a discursive structure in the primary literature, since it is a construction that the protagonists Maggie and Claire reproduce in their narratives. However, as their stories progress, it becomes clear that some of the most prominent signs in the structure – such as “married mother” – are in fact elements in this literary discourse. The connection between them and the floating signifier “good mothering” is challenged by the development of the narratives. The sign “adequate material possessions” can on the other hand be regarded as a moment, as its importance for good mothering is never refuted.

For the proper material conditions for parenthood to be met, a male provider is required according to the discourse of the studied novels – even when the mother is gainfully employed. That male provider can, however, have a variety of relationships to the mother and child: he can be a husband, a former husband, or the mother’s father. Maggie, the protagonist in Angels, reproduces the hegemonic standard of good mothering as it is her husband who is the chief bread-winner, and to her, the right time for having children is directly correlated to his career development: “after five years in Chicago, Garv was offered a promotion in the Dublin office and we decided to move back to Ireland. Garv settled into his new managerial position, I got a six month contract at McDonnell Swindel and suddenly it was baba time!” (250). Claire in Watermelon is in a different position as she finds herself alone with her child. She regards it as her maternal duty to arrange for a proper settlement in the divorce, thus making sure that little Kate will want for nothing (179). In the end, Claire does manage to “sort out” maintenance for Kate, and thus to provide for her in a way that the discourse of the novel recognizes as sufficient. In the mean-time, she relies on her parents for support.

It is significant that when Kate is conceived, Claire does live up to the hegemonic standard of good mothering in the sense that she is married. In Claire’s eyes, her subsequent abandonment disqualifies her from being a good mother. In the first half of the novel, her guilt at lacking a husband resurfaces again and again in variations on the following passage: “I hugged Kate fiercely. I felt so guilty. Because somehow, somewhere, without me even knowing that I was doing it I had messed up and because of that, poor Kate, innocent little bystander, had to do without her Dad” (166). Parts of her environment support this sentiment, most significantly her own mother, who, when the runaway husband James reappears, strongly advises Claire not to let her emotions get in the way of a reunion: “After all this is the father of your child we’re talking about. If you can’t swallow the anger on your behalf, think about Kate. Do it for her. Are you going to deprive your child of her father just because you’re angry?” (405). However, characters of her own generation advice Claire
against sacrificing her personal integrity and happiness, and after much consideration, Claire
decides not to return to James. The reader has been made gradually more inclined to view this
as the only viable option as James through his behavior is rendered less and less attractive.
Between his immature selfishness and the happy ending of the novel, hinting at a new and
more rewarding relationship for Claire and by extension a better environment for Kate, the
discursive connection between divorce and bad mothering is subverted.

Another instance where the hegemonic discourse of lone motherhood is
reproduced in Claire’s narration but refuted by the novel’s turn of events is the aspect of
social marginalization. The connection between single motherhood and social decay is,
according to Aminatta Forna, endlessly reproduced by the press:

The British media have consistently reviled the single mother. The campaign against her has
been led by, but is by no means confined to, the right-wing tabloid press. She is portrayed as
promiscuous, obscenely fertile, man-hating, sitting in her council flat raising a generation of
criminals for the future. She is a sponger. She takes from the state and gives nothing. (109)

Forna’s description of the stereotype bears an uncanny resemblance to how Claire envisages
the Deserded Wife:

I suppose I must have looked just like a normal mother to all the other passengers. But, and the
thought struck me quite forcibly, I wasn’t. I was now a Deserted Wife. I was a statistic. […] I
had always thought (in spite of my professed liberalism) that deserted wives were women who
lived in corporation flats, that their husbands, pausing only to blacken their eye, left with a bottle
of vodka, the Christmas Club money and the children’s allowance book, leaving them behind
weeping, with a huge mound of unpaid utilities bills, a spurious story about walking into a door
and four dysfunctional children, all under the age of six, joy-riders to a man. (Watermelon 31-
32)

Given this view, it is hardly surprising that Claire feels self-conscious about her new civil
state. Yet on the whole, it can be argued that Claire, who is educated, employed and firmly
middle-class, serves to undermine the construction she herself confesses to mentally
reproducing. With the help of her eccentric but loving family, she provides a safe and
nurturing environment for her daughter.

In sum, it can be argued that Keyes’ literary discourse subverts the hegemonic
construction of the nuclear family as a necessary platform for good mothering, while
recognizing that regardless of the mother’s civil state, good mothering entails providing a
reasonable material standard for one’s children. Although this often involves male support,
good mothering is achieved when the mother takes a conscious and responsible role in
providing for her children, thus showing herself to be a capable parent.
4.2.2 Giving Freely What Only A Mother Can Give

The construction that mothers have an irreplaceable role as nurturer and safe haven in their children’s lives, even after they have become adult, reoccur in the four studied novels. The female protagonists often experience a longing for the emotional security connected with their mothers, as in the case of Claire: “I wished that I was still a baby and that my mother could hold me and make me feel so safe and that everything was going to be all right” (Watermelon 39). In several instances, the mother actually does step in to help the grown child cope. When Ashling suffers a depression, it is her mother who moves in and takes charge, procures medical help and keeps her daughter going. In This Charming Man, Grace’s mother provides similar protection when she is devastated by the break-up of her relationship. Likewise, it is to the maternal home that Claire and Maggie flee when their marriages founder.

The hegemonic idea that the concepts of “mothering” and “mother” are inseparable tends to be reproduced in the studied literature. A scene in Watermelon where Claire’s father comforts Kate is telling; while it has previously been recognized that Kate’s grandmother can rock her to sleep with the expertise of an experienced mother (39), Claire’s response to seeing the grandfather do the same thing is to conclude that her daughter is “putty in men’s hands” (51). As Claire recovers from the shock of her abandonment, she regards it as obvious that none of the grandparents should need to be involved in her daughter’s care (121). With this individual responsibility follows guilt and anxiety, and there is ample evidence that Claire has internalized the discourse of maternal deprivation. The first time she leaves Kate is described as a haunting ordeal (191-192), and on coming home “It was such a relief to see that she was alive and well. I felt so guilty that I was convinced that something terrible had to happen” (214). Claire continues to feel guilty every time she leaves her daughter, even if it is for a short space of time and with another member of the family. In Sushi for Beginners, Clodagh is racked by the same emotions on the rare occasion that she leaves Molly and Craig (255), and the construction that a good mother’s natural reaction is to feel guilty and anxious on parting with her children is never effectively countered in the scope of the analyzed material.

This hegemonic perspective on the mother’s role and function is compounded by a representation of maternal emotions that might be referred to as essentialist. When Maggie becomes pregnant and begins to experience a strong longing for her child, it baffles Maggie whose “lack of maternal instincts had had me thinking I was almost a freak” (Angels 260), but is constructed as an inevitable response: “Call it hormones, call it Mother Nature,
call it whatever you want, but to my great surprise I suddenly really wanted the baby” (259). On the same note, it is posited that a mother’s love for her child once she sees it is automatic and violent. In Maggie’s case, it is said that her “love just exploded” when she sees her 7-week-foetus on a screen (259). Claire experiences similar emotions following Kate’s birth: “I had been told to expect to feel overwhelming love for my child […] But nothing could have prepared me for this intensity. This feeling that I would kill anyone who so much as touched one of the blonde wispy hairs on her soft little head” (Watermelon 24), and there is nothing in the studied material that subverts the construction that normal mother-love is spontaneous and self-evident.

It is however worthy of note that this essentialism refers to the responses of women who already are – or about to become – mothers. The Freudian construction that maternal instinct rather than sex drive is woman’s natural reproductive behavior (Forna 40), and that deviation from this norm is a sign of neurosis (Ayer 52), is at least in part negated by the protagonists’ sexuality as well as the fact that there is nothing obvious about a woman’s wish to have children in the primary literature. In the case of Maggie and Garv, it is the man who pushes to start a family, which Maggie acknowledges to fly in the face of the norm: “In other relationships, it seemed to be the women who wanted to have children while the men would do anything to get out of it. In fact, according to popular folklore (and women’s magazines), these child-shy men riddled the landscape like landmines” (Angels 252). What might however be seen as a remnant of the Freudian discourse is the characterization of those women - Lisa in Sushi for Beginners, Grace in This Charming Man - who overtly state that they do not want children, or those who devote themselves to their careers despite having children. Freud warned that girls who do not accept that motherhood is the only natural fulfillment of their female nature will be flawed: “competitive, frigid, and maybe even homosexual” (Ayer 52). While the primary literature hardly endorses this theory fully, it is interesting that Lisa is portrayed as almost pathologically competitive, Grace as a tomboy, and hard-headed career women such as Grace’s superior Jacinta as lacking in maternal concern (see section 4.2.3).

In the hegemonic discourse of motherhood, the construction that the mother is the natural agent of mothering is connected to the construction that a mother more than anyone else ought to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of her children. This is a connection that surfaces in the attitudes of the protagonists but is to some extent subverted by the over-all discursive structure. One challenged type of maternal sacrifice is that which pertains to personal gratification in the form of social contacts and leisure activities. When
Maggie initially thinks of having children, she is put off by memories of disappearing peers: “post-baba they’d seemed perpetually ensnared by their screaming child” (Angels 255). The stay-at-home mother must often face this “ensnarement” alone, as the working spouse has career-related social obligations. In Sushi for Beginners, Clodagh is frustrated at repeatedly finding herself alone with the children while her husband attends functions (98). The circumstance that Clodagh’s accumulated frustration causes her to act in ways that harm both herself and her children (see section 4.3.2) can be read as a critique against unnecessary maternal sacrifice, and thus the mother who sacrifices social stimulation becomes an element in the discursive structure.

Over-all, the concepts of mother-love and the unique function of the mother are moments in Keyes’ discourse of good mothering, but the connection between good mothering and maternal sacrifice remains ambivalent. Different ills follow in the tracks of too little self-sacrifice and too little self-fulfillment, as will be further exemplified below. Hence, the fundamental precondition for good mothering is the combination of maternal love with a personal maturity that recognizes the needs of both mother and child.

4.2.3 Making Work Work

The working mother is one of the most contested elements in the studied discourse of good mothering. The construction of the relationship between good mothering and professional work reveals a lack of good options for women who do not want to choose between a career and a family, and can be read as a critique against current conditions in the Anglo-Irish job market. Moreover, it is not only the working mother who is an element, but also the mother who elects to stay at home. The construction in the novels that prolonged domestic isolation may damage a woman’s capacity for good mothering adds another measure of ambivalence to the connections between good mothering and work outside the home.

The idea that a truly accomplished woman can straddle the rift between the professional and the domestic sphere surfaces in the characters from time to time, echoing the medial image of the Supermom, who juggles qualified work with ambitious child-rearing while “fending off stress and burnout with time management techniques and exercise classes” (Ayer 65). For instance, “Ashling knew Clodagh was vaguely defensive that she wasn’t one of those super-women who did a full-time job as well as rearing children” (Sushi for Beginners 150). Generally, however, it is negated that good mothering and professional
ambition can be acted out simultaneously. The novels show-case different ways in which the two can collide. On the extreme end of the scale one finds the character Jacinta in This Charming Man, who becomes a caricature of how the working mother relinquishes good mothering in a scene where she calls in to work to say that she must take her son to the hospital, related by first-person narrator Grace:

'No one dies from a burst appendix nowadays,' I said. 'He’ll be fine.'
'No, you don’t understand! Today’s my day for interviewing Rosalind Croft and I’ll be stuck at Oscar’s bloody bedside. Of all the fucking days he has to pick! Never have children, Grace, they are the most profoundly selfish –' (451-452)

While this and other similar passages suggest that Jacinta has little regard for the well-being of her children, it is on the other hand evident that Jacinta’s workplace is not one that condones prioritizing family matters during business hours; even Grace adds a sarcastic edge when she complains to the reader that “There was always something. She had to bring a child to the dentist, or to the nutritionist, or to EuroDisney…” (163). The only character in the studied novels who appears to fully live up to the Supermom ideal is Grace’s sister-in-law Christine, Head of Surgery at a prestigious hospital and mother of four extremely accomplished children. However, the connection between the Supermom and good mothering is subtly undermined by Grace’s observation that something appears out of order with Christine’s children: “Too weird. What nine-year-old would ask to learn Mandarin?” she inquires of the reader when Christine’s eldest daughter is revealed to go to such lessons (This Charming Man 232). The intertwining of motherhood and professional ambition is thus hinted to result in potentially damaging projections from mother to child.

The uncompromising attitude towards mothers in the British and Irish job market shines through repeatedly as a given precondition, for instance in Maggie’s case:

For over five years […] I’d been working very, very hard, pushing against the current, and I was still waiting for my job to plateau, to get to a position where I felt ‘safe’. Where I was established enough to be able to take maternity leave, sure that I’d be re-employed. (Angels 254)

When her husband states that discrimination against mothers is illegal in Ireland, she retorts:

Easy for him to say. He hadn’t heard a partner at my firm (a man, of course) complain about someone on maternity leave, ‘If I took four months off to sail around the Med, and expected to be paid for it, they’d laugh in my face!’ This was what I was up against. (254)
The same dilemma is faced by Lisa in *Sushi for Beginners*, who determines not to have children if the trade-off is her work. While Maggie finally decides she wants to be a mother despite the risk of damage to her career, Lisa abruptly goes back to using contraception when she sees female colleagues struggle professionally after having children. Lisa’s perspective echoes the hegemonic construction that the faculties engaged in good mothering are in binary opposition to those connected with professionalism: in the normally constituted mother, physical and emotional responses take precedence over intellectual and rational ones, making her unsuited for the professional environment (Glenn 13). As it pertains to mothers with infants, this construction is not refuted by Keyes’ over-all discourse.

The studied novels underscore the contradiction that working mothers are questioned but simultaneously admired, whereas stay-at-home mums are viewed as both responsible and pathetic. When Clodagh tries to combat her frustration and inertia by finding a job, she is treated with contempt and hostility at the employment agency:

‘You’ve been out of the workplace for a long time?’ Yvonne said. ‘It’s … how many… over five years.’

‘I had a baby, I never intended to stay away so long, but then I had another child, and the time never seemed right until now,’ Clodagh defended herself in a rush […]

‘So what *are* your interests?’ Yvonne challenged.

‘Ah…’ What were her interests? […]

‘You see, I have two children,’ she said feebly. ‘They take up all my time.’

Yvonne flashed her an if-you-say-so glance. (*Sushi for Beginners* 292-295)

According to this construction, full-time mothering is neither an adequate sole occupation, nor a merit in the professional sphere. A woman who is only a mother is connected with lacking initiative, competence and self-sufficiency, which by extension can be viewed as detrimental to her children.

The construction of the full-time mother as lacking in professionally viable competence is reproduced in the primary material by the circumstance that both stay-at-home protagonists – Clodagh and Marnie – have in fact used motherhood to hide from failed careers. Clodagh is not a graduate and has never held a stimulating or qualified job, and although Marnie has a university education, her grades are “lacklustre” and she had difficulties finding work before eventually landing a position as a mortgage broker (*This Charming Man* 282). When she became pregnant, she was relieved to give it up. To herself, she confesses that “the truth was, she’d been rescued by pregnancy. Her luck had been on the turn, she’d felt it slipping away from her. She’d got out before everyone else knew too” (251). And as it turns out, when Marnie is forced back to work by financial trouble, the alcoholism
that she has developed during her years in the home makes it impossible for her to function in the workplace. However, it is important to note that nothing suggests that paid employment is the only way for a mother to keep in touch with herself and develop her competence. There is any number of personally rewarding or rehabilitating pursuits that privileged middle-class women like Marnie and Clodagh could engage in without having to relinquish the day-to-day care of their children, and indeed, there is as much focus on Clodagh’s lack of outside interests as there is on her meager professional résumé when she fails to live up to the standards of the employment agency.

The bind in which the young mothers in Keyes’ fiction find themselves is connected in a significant way to their relationship with their own mothers. The width of the generational gap between the protagonists and their parents is a reoccurring theme as Keyes in her novels repeatedly returns to the archetype of the Irish Mammy or “Irish Mackriarch” (Angels 369). The Mammy is fondly and wittily caricatured with emphasis on her confined social space, limited knowledge, Catholic devoutness, and drab appearance. Rather than forming her own opinions and making her own choices, she abides by an extensive set of unspoken social rules. At the same time, she is an icon of maternal care and sacrifice. The ambivalence this inspires in the protagonists is palpable in the way they depend on their mothers for security and simultaneously distance themselves from them. As Claire states, she had promised herself never to become the kind of woman whose husband ceases to be her lover and simply becomes the father of her children, the kind that stops existing as a person – or in other words, “I had promised myself that I would never turn into everyone’s mother” (Watermelon 171). Part of the angst of a stay-at-home mother like Clodagh appears to be the fear of loss of identity that is connected with the Mammy; a fear that in Clodagh’s case surfaces in a destructive need for male attention in lieu of other sources of self-esteem.

In sum, the discourse of the working mother in the primary fiction indicates that under contemporary conditions, the odds of a successful combination of career and mothering are low. Sacrificing work, and thereby individual development and financial independence as in the case of the generic Irish Mammy, has its ills and is denigrated by the professional sphere – but at the same time, a professional career will most likely compromise a woman’s conditions for good mothering, while simultaneously sustaining damage from her attempts to mother. Thus, the female protagonists are shown to be caught between two political discourses, and it is indicated that a mother’s capacity for good mothering is not determined by her alone, but also by the support she may expect from her social and professional environment.
4.3 Bad Mothering in the Primary Literature

4.3.1 Losing or Rejecting Children

In *Inventing Motherhood*, Ann Dally states that one assumption fundamental to Western contemporary views on motherhood is that we now take it for granted that our children will survive and be essentially healthy. This, she points out, is a sentiment unique to our time: “In the past, mothers who lost children were [...] less likely to blame themselves, as they might today, and they were less likely to feel that they had failed” (28). Dally’s claim that the current hegemonic discourse encourages us to assume that any damage to the foetus or child indicates a fault in the woman’s capacity to mother is mirrored in the narrative of *Angels*.

The protagonist Maggie is at first very apprehensive about having a child. It is in response to her husband’s increasingly obvious longing that she decides to try for a baby (*Angels* 256). Maggie quickly becomes pregnant and still feels very ambivalent when the pregnancy test confirms that a baby is on the way (258). However, a couple of weeks into the pregnancy, Maggie starts to feel increasingly excited about the baby, and at the first scan she experiences a surge of love for it (259). Shortly after that Maggie miscarries to the devastation of both herself and her husband. However, for Maggie, the feelings of loss are intermeshed with feelings of guilt and shame:

> I could handle my own pain, but I couldn’t handle Garv’s. And there was something I had to say to him before the guilt devoured me whole.
> ‘It’s my fault, it’s because I didn’t want it. He or she knew where it wasn’t wanted.’
> ‘But you did want it.’
> ‘Not in the beginning.’
> And he had nothing to say to me. He knew it was true.” (262)

Maggie feels certain that her lacking mother-love has caused such direct damage to the foetus that it couldn’t survive.

As the narrative goes on, Maggie loses a second baby, another early miscarriage. While the second baby was dearly wanted from the start, another cause of guilt now rears its head. It transpires that Maggie had an abortion in her teens. She brings herself to ask her doctor whether she through “an operation” might have damaged herself, and is told that it is “‘Unlikely. Very unlikely. We can check but it’s highly unlikely’” (445). However, Maggie doesn’t believe him and feels certain that “Garv didn’t either, and though we never discussed it, that was the very moment our marriage keeled over and died” (445). The unhappy spouses
struggle on for a time under the weight of feelings of bereavement, guilt and failure, but the day comes when Maggie packs her bags and runs away.

In this narrative, discursive connections are made between miscarriage and failure to provide good mothering – in this case in the sense of not providing enough love, or of not wanting children enough. In the physical sense, Maggie takes extreme precautions during her second pregnancy, monitoring her diet, avoiding cigarette smoke and trying to eliminate the possibility of any lurch that might dislodge the baby (332). Her doctor does not subscribe to the idea that the earlier abortion would have caused any physical damage. The supposed harm rather seems to be envisaged as abstract; not so much a condition of the uterus per se, but of a mythical womb where the foetus is not only physically but emotionally sustained. The fact that Maggie once refused to bear a child – albeit with considerable pain – disqualifies her from good mothering according to this construction.

This construction is not, in the end, posited by the narrative. It negates it in two ways. First, by undermining Maggie’s projections of her own reasoning onto her husband Garv; it transpires that Garv never saw Maggie as having caused the miscarriages. His calm certainty that such a connection is unvalid calls it into question. Secondly, Maggie conceives again after she and Garv reunite and in the epilogue of the novel she is eight months pregnant. Over-all, Maggie’s adult reflections over the feelings her teenage self had regarding the termination of her pregnancy encapsulate the discourse of abortion endorsed by the novel quite well:

Contradictions pulled me this way and that. I felt I’d had the right to have an abortion – but I was still bothered by horrible uneasiness. No matter how cleanly I lived the rest of my life, till the day I died this would always be with me. I couldn’t exactly find the right description: ‘sin’ was the wrong word, because that was about breaking someone else’s laws. But a part of me would always be broken and I would always be a person who’d had an abortion. (438)

Abortion is, then, not so much an act of bad mothering as violence committed against the self – sometimes necessary, but never harmless. Early in pregnancy, the subjectivity of the foetus lies with the mother; it is she who pictures it as a person, rather than the foetus that exists as a person (262). It follows that in the studied discourse, the signs “miscarriage” and “abortion” are elements as their connection to the floating signifier “bad mothering” is challenged.
4.3.2 Depression and Aggression

The hegemonic discursive connection between a mother’s psychological disturbance and damage to her children is recognized in the studied fiction. The prime example is that of Ashling in *Sushi for Beginners*, whose mother’s depression débuts when Ashling is nine and does not really subside until her menopause (192, 400). Ashling describes her mother’s illness as a “rot” in the family (183), and as an adult she carries painful memories that revisit her when stirred by associations or questions from friends: “Suddenly Ashling was back there, mired in the craziness, the bewilderment, the ever-present terror. Her ears rang with long-ago yelling and screaming and her mouth muscles were unresponsive with the desire not to talk about it” (192). Ashling sometimes reflects on how her upbringing has affected her (278-279), but it is not until she herself succumbs to depression and is pushed by her doctor to see a therapist that she can trace the impact of her childhood on her personality in a more concrete fashion (519). The reader has made the connection long before Ashling herself does. She has been introduced as habitually superstitious and mildly neurotic, with an extreme sensitivity to other people’s emotions and a constant readiness to intervene with the stock of her handbag; be it a band-aid, painkillers or spare mascara, Ashling has it all, and is hence nick-named Little Miss Fix-it at work (108). Recounted memories account clearly for how Little Miss Fix-it came into being: since Ashling’s mother never seemed to stop crying, little Ashling “began to fold a tissue into her cardigan pocket every time they went out”; she started to take responsibility for her younger siblings, making sure to bring a bit of money should they need anything; band-aids were introduced when her mother “developed a new and alarming habit”, plucking at a cut on her arm until it opened up and began to bleed again (270-280). The narrative clearly posits that the events and environment of Ashling’s childhood has shaped her adult personality. However, it also posits the possibility of healing. When Ashling herself becomes depressed, it is her mother, now well again, who understands and supports her daughter – and a combination of therapy and personal development through work and relationships leads up to the final scene of the novel, where Ashling flings her over-loaded handbag into the sea in a symbolic act of cleansing.

Interestingly, the four studied novels also afford the view of maternal depression from the mother’s perspective. In *This Charming Man*, Marnie is described as having had a hypersensitive personality since childhood. As a teenager, she feels that “Terrible fears and unbearable griefs had always controlled her; she couldn’t remember a time when she wasn’t at the mercy of powerful tides of emotion” (*This Charming Man* 692). Even then, when she is
still living at home, it is described how she uses alcohol to take the edge of extreme emotional pain (466). In Marnie’s case, motherhood is both the center of goodness in her life and constant food for her anguish. As Dally puts it, “A mother has to cope with three types of anxiety: her own internal anxiety, her anxiety about her child, and the child’s anxiety” (250), but Marnie can cope with none of them, as is illustrated by the following passage:

She pulled Daisy close to her. Now she was carrying not just Verity’s perpetual anxiety, but Daisy’s guilt and resentment. How can I protect them from the pain of being alive?
‘Mom, you’re hurting me.’
‘Am I? Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry.’
She looked into Daisy’s clear brown eyes and thought, I love you so much I crumple with agony. I love you so much I wish I’d never had you. Either of you. You’d be better off dead. It took a moment for her to ask herself, not nearly surprised enough: Am I thinking of killing my children? (This Charming Man 266-267)

The extreme intensity of Marnie’s emotions leaves her exhausted in a way that makes her despondent, beyond caring about the practicalities of good mothering – as on the occasion when she reflects that her husband has bought their daughters far too much candy, and then slumps back into not caring: “Let their teeth rot. One day they were all going to be dead and it wouldn’t matter then if every tooth in their head was a black stump” (291). This corresponds with and adds perspective to Ashling’s childhood memories of wearing dirty clothes without her mother seeming to notice (Sushi for Beginners 279).

Related to the bad mothering of a depressed parent is the bad mothering of an aggressive one. In the case of Clodagh, her aggression towards her children appears to stem from depressed feelings she does not know how to deal with. Towards the end of the novel, when Clodagh’s materially privileged world has already crumbled over an adulterous affair, she tries to put her emotions into words – “I’ve been so unhappy, I’ve felt so trapped and like I was going mad” (Sushi for Beginners 451) – but on the way to the breaking of her domestic bubble, Clodagh’s frustration and insecurity mainly manifests itself in the way she lashes out towards her children. There are ample examples of this. Often Clodagh’s aggressiveness is underscored by the use of profanity, as when Molly first demands coffee and then burns her mouth:

‘Oh for fuck’s sake,’ Clodagh muttered.
‘Fuck’s sake,’ Molly enunciated, with crystal clarity.
‘That’s right,’ Clodagh said, with a savagery that shocked Ashling. ‘For fuck’s sake.’ (27)
There are also episodes where her aggression is more insidious, like when she “put[s] an end to Barney” (151). When an intrigued Ashling asks how that happened, it transpires that “I’ve told Molly that he’s dead […] Told her he’d been knocked down by a lorry”. When Ashling questions this, Clodagh elaborates that “I’d had quite enough of that big purple fucker and all those awful irritating brats, delivering morals and telling me how to live my life” and predicts that Molly will “get over it. Shit happens.” (151) The most overt show of aggression is when Clodagh actually slaps Molly during a tantrum (114), an act that startles Clodagh into a moment of introspection: “What was she doing, assaulting a defenseless little girl? What was wrong with her?” (115). It is hinted that Molly reacts to her mother’s behavior by acting up in Playgroup, from which the reader is told that she is repeatedly suspended for hitting other children (113) or trying “to set fire to the place” (214).

It may then be stated that the studied texts support the idea that bad mothering caused by depression or aggression in the mother is likely to affect children detrimentally, both in the short and long run. The psychoanalytic precept that events in childhood shape the adult personality, and that the mother has a particular power to inflict psychological damage, is hence reproduced. The depressed mother and the aggressive mother may be referred to as moments in Keyes’ discourse of bad mothering as long as their impairments last – yet even in such cases, the individual’s ability to grow, heal and change can be redeeming.

4.3.3 Substance Abuse

In This Charming Man, the alcoholism that compounds Marnie’s depression is repeatedly connected with failure as a mother. It is communicated that her drinking is a taint on her daughters’ innocence and an assault on their well-being. Even Marnie’s loving twin Grace is disgusted to find hidden bottles in the children’s wardrobes (This Charming Man 495).

During the course of the narrative, Marnie makes several attempts to stop drinking. Her foremost incitement to do so is the harm that she is aware of inflicting on her children. She is visited by intense shame at times when it manifests itself clearly, like when her elder daughter Daisy comes to her distraught at having wet her bed:

She had fraternized with criminals, she had broken her own bones, she’d been forced to attend AA, but this was what she needed to bring her to her senses. She loved her daughters with a

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1 A character in a children’s program.
passion that was painful. Her drinking was damaging them and she couldn’t do it – the guilt was crucifying. (525-526)

Yet every time, the compulsion to drink is stronger than the need to protect the children: “her mind slid over them. She barely knew them” (531). It is this constant betrayal, repeated every time Marnie gulps down a glass of vodka, that makes the connection between bad mothering and alcoholism so glaring.

The damage to Marnie’s girls is represented as real and palpable - “Daisy’s glow had disappeared; from one day she’d been a charming, beautiful child and now she was flat and plain and sullen. As for poor Verity, she was a ball of twitches and tics” (609) – and gradually, she begins to lose her right to her children. Her husband leaves, taking the girls with him, and reserving the right to cancel appointed visits when Marnie shows up drunk (627). The most poignant episode is however when Marnie appears at the school, intoxicated and aggressive, and is barred by the staff from collecting her children. After causing a scene in the hallway, the eldest daughter refuses to recognize Marnie as her mother in front of her peers (630).

In the case of substance abuse, the over-all discursive structure of the studied fiction offers no reprieve from the judgment of the hegemonic discourse. Drunk mothering is bad mothering, and alcohol abuse in a mother is tantamount to abuse of the child.
5. Conclusion: Meanings Made

In sum, then, we might say that the single and/or divorced mother, the working mother, the stay-at-home mother, and the Supermom, are all elements in the studied discourses of good versus bad mothering. In some cases, a hegemonic discourse is outlined and challenged, as in the case of the single mother; in others, it is simply demonstrated that co-existing discourses are contradictory, resulting in a complex and difficult situation. The latter applies to the maternal career-bind, where neither professionalism nor domesticity is unequivocally connected with good or bad mothering. Among the moments of the discourses, we find the alcoholic mother, the aggressive mother, and the depressed mother as firmly tied to bad mothering. The conception of essential mother-love and of the biological mother as the primary and irreplaceable agent of mothering also remains unchallenged, as well as the connection between maternal influence and adult personality in the child. One over-all assertion that can be made is that the discourses do not posit a necessary connection between “bad mothering” and “bad mother”; for instance, Ashling’s mother’s illness made her incapable of good mothering when Ashling was a child, but the recession of her depression enables her to once again show love and support for her children. A more complex case is that of Marnie, who is shown to both love and be loved by her children and to be able to give them comfort that no one else can provide, yet who simultaneously damages them through her pathological behavior.

In the terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, Keyes’ fiction can then be said to reflect an ongoing discursive struggle between different political discourses of good mothering. The cultural sphere in which she writes has moved on from a time – if such a time ever existed – when the discourse of the attachment theory was objective. In Keyes’ novels, the contemporary mother must negotiate the fact that several powerful discourses try to determine her in different ways. In order to be recognized as a provider of good mothering, she must be fully available to her children and always able to put them first; yet she needs outside interests in order to stay balanced and independent and thus in a position to give them a healthy and resourceful mother. She must be selfless but never lose her individuality.

In this essay I have argued that the novels of Marian Keyes develop a discourse of good mothering that emphasizes the subjectivity of the mother: that she must continue to mature and develop after entering the state of motherhood for the benefit of both herself and her child. If one considers the different mothers that have featured in this analysis, it becomes
clear that Claire lives up to this standard as she recovers from her abandonment and continues to grow into her new role as a mother, becoming more self-sufficient than ever before. Maggie confronts her past and her fears and achieves emotional readiness for motherhood. They are the success stories; in the cases of Clodagh and Marnie, it rather becomes obvious that continued personal development is what they would have needed to avoid falling into bad mothering. Hiding behind motherhood instead of building self-esteem through their own accomplishments or dealing with destructive thoughts and behaviors results in them hurting both themselves and their children. It is significant, however, that both their stories end on a redemptive note. Keyes does not subscribe to psychoanalytical defeatism: as Ashling’s story goes to show, even mothers get second chances – and children are individuals that in turn will have to negotiate their own way into adulthood.
6. Works cited


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