

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**

***THE DEAD MOTHER:***

***SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN TWO CANADIAN NOVELS***

**by**

**SUSAN HOLLOWAY**

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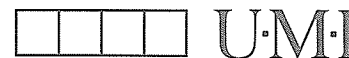
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BY

SUSAN HOLLOWAY

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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water finds in the body its own  
congruence scaling the insides  
like a kettle remembers past levels  
as signs as letters as words as the words  
that remember my past

*crazyWoman remembers water*  
*A Fine Grammar of Bones*  
Méira Cook

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## ABSTRACT

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* both employ powerful matriarchal figures in secondary but important roles. This study will examine these literary matriarchal figure in respect to their relationship to power. The theories of Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva both take into account the relationships of subjects as well as the subjects themselves. In trying to locate subjects, both theorists look towards anomalies or points of "difference" in relationships to reveal where power resides. The matriarchs dominate within their immediate families yet, in the context of larger social milieus, they struggle for power. They generate and derive power through their being (re)created retrospectively in the stories of other characters. Foucault and Kristeva perceive gender as socially constructed. Sexuality is important in defining the matriarchs in *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot*. Foucault's study of sexuality and repression in relation to the confession provides a theory of power larger in scope than traditional notions which define power as a transgression of boundaries. Kristeva speaks of "women" and power in terms of what she calls "the abject". "The abject" lurks on the borders of the body, language, society and challenges those borders. Filth and defilement on the border of identity threatens the unity of the ego, but "the abject" - decaying flesh, menstrual blood, excrement - is nevertheless a part of that identity. Kristeva posits that women are "abject". Sexuality in these novels becomes what Foucault refers to as a technology of power. The matriarchs, Lalla and Rahel, use their sexuality in different ways, but both, use it to obtain power. My study will trace some of

the technologies of power employed by the matriarchs in these two texts in order to further reveal them as social constructs. The matriarch is not the central character in either *Running in the Family* or *Crackpot*. However, in both instances, the matriarch is important if peripheral to the story because in both texts she helps to define the position of women.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE PROBLEMATICS OF DISCOURSE:  
AN ANALYSIS OF FOUCAULDIAN AND KRISTEVIAN  
MODELS OF POWER

Power, according to Foucault, manifests itself in many varied forms and is in a constant state of change. In the first book of *The History of Sexuality* he speaks of the "omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93). Power relationships can never be exterior to one another even though their connection may not appear readily obvious. Rahel, the matriarch in *Crackpot*, only exhibits control when in confrontation with her Uncle Nate. Power in their relationship manifests as a result of difference in how they perceive loyalty to family members. She gains autonomy for her family by scrubbing the floors of her rich uncle's enemies. Yet her means of obtaining power simultaneously subjects her to larger societal powers which penalize her for being Jewish, crippled and a woman. Her employees pay her below the accepted wage, forgo feeding her an agreed upon meal, and harass her verbally as she works. They justify their actions towards Rahel through a philosophy of *laissez faire* capitalism that

permeates the larger power network of the Western hemisphere in the early 1900's when this novel is set.<sup>1</sup>

Power cannot be defined from one individual's or group's experience. Instead, it is best described in terms of manifold relations. Relationships, rather than the speaking subjects of relationships, are the focus of Foucault's study. The existence of power relationships "depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network" (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 95). A plurality of resistances exist within the strategic field of power relations and Foucault argues that in finding these moments, where "difference" or "resistance" become evident, power relationships open up to analysis. In continuation of the previous example, a point of resistance in *Crackpot* emerges when it becomes obvious that Rahel's Uncle Nate holds fiscal power over her, but that he defers to her will with respect to her sentiments for other family members. He dares not laugh at her father, Shem Berl, the tinker, who is repeatedly duped into re-enlisting for military duty. The narrator does not dwell on this dynamic of their relationship, but it becomes evident momentarily that Rahel's strength of conviction in loyalty to her immediate family intimidates Uncle Nate. The power relationship usually understood to exist between these two characters is subverted and calls into question other nuances of their relations.

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<sup>1</sup>Sandra Lee Bartky's essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" points out that "Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the "docile bodies" of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men" (*Feminism and Foucault*, 63)?

Foucault traces power relationships through a close examination of a specific time, place, and event. Power relations are unique to every situation and each situation has what Foucault refers to as sites of power. As an example, Foucault addresses sex and the discourses of truth that have taken charge of it. He formulates questions which delineate sites of power. Foucault writes:

In a specific type of discourse on sex, in a specific form of extortion of truth, appearing historically and in specific places (around the child's body, apropos of women's sex, in connection with practices restricting births, and so on,) what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 97)?

Foucault argues the importance of locating the subject in the most specific terms possible is to pinpoint and articulate diversity within patterns. Discovering patterns follows the tendency of conventional historicism to link events in linear chronological time and encourages an approach which may not account for all the variables bound up in individual cases. The Foucauldian approach does not attempt to universalize women's problems. The women in *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* must be evaluated within their own contexts rather than plugged into a formulaic feminist strategy. Foucault examines societal aberrations of hegemony rather than hegemony itself.

Foucault does not make a gendered reading but a number of his books such as *The History of Sexuality* and *The Birth of the Clinic* are concerned with the marginalization of groups of people, in particular, prisoners, the mentally ill and gays/lesbians. He

questions who has authority and by what means they gain it to label others as Other. To marginalize through a medicinal discourse, to claim another person is insane and therefore should be subject to those who have discharged the diagnosis, is a form of power. Such an example points to Foucault's larger project and gives some insight into his approach to defining power. Foucault studies history as a genealogy, moving from the present to the past in search of points of resistance. He attempts to articulate voices silenced by authoritative official records throughout the centuries. He looks to the marginalized subjects of society as representatives of "difference" or "points of resistance" to guide his evaluations. Points of resistance illuminate cracks in the societal facade of normality. The prisoner or homosexual is not an anomaly but instead is indicative of power networks obscured in their very pervasiveness.

Of particular interest to this study is the way women access power through their relations to family and friends. The matriarchs of *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* reign within the matrilineal realm, yet are simultaneously subject to the oppression of the larger patriarchal framework. This position of women as both manipulated (by power) and manipulators (of power) works well in conjunction with the Foucauldian power model. Some of the technologies of power are: speech/silence, humour/solemnity, extravagance/economy. These and other binaries provide sites of power that help distinguish the matriarch's position.

The matriarchs, Lalla and Rahel, construct themselves through technologies of power, but are also socially constructed through the discourse of their own communities. Both *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* are literary texts, and so the matriarchs they present are constructed in retrospect through the mediation of narrators who tell their

stories. The narrators' biases expose a great deal about their own characters as they relate information about the matriarchs. The narrators as mediators and their compulsion to (re)tell the story of the matriarch provides another important site of power in both of these texts.

Thus sites of power in *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* can be traced through points in the texts where technologies of power are illuminated. Technologies of power are techniques used by an individual, group or institution to obtain and maintain power. Foucault refers to technologies of power as polymorphous, because they are so woven within power networks that it is sometimes difficult to identify them as strategies. Technologies of power are evident in our behaviours, discourses, in what we desire or reject, and thus they infiltrate our every mode of living. The effects of technologies of power "may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification" (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 11). Sexuality, for example, is a technology of power used in extremely different ways in *Crackpot* and *Running in the Family*.

Foucault's analysis reshapes the focus of traditional notions of power and sexuality which claim that sexuality has long been suppressed in the Western tradition. Instead, Foucault proposes sexuality and the measure of that sexuality's repression is articulated with passion and resentment through channelled discourses.<sup>2</sup> Some of the discourses available to express what is supposedly repressed are pinpointed by Foucault, one

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<sup>2</sup>Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* writes: "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (119).

example being the binary of confession/silence. Confession, like silence is one of the ways in which sexuality is inserted into discourse. However, confession unlike silence is an attempt to reclaim that which is hidden through a detailed recounting in the presence of an authoritative figure (priest, psychologist) of a person's deepest secrets. Foucault describes the delicate balance of the confession/silence binary and its relation to power:

Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power anchoring its prohibitions, but they also lessen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 101).

The difference between *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* lies in the fact that Lalla makes a loud confession/profession of her sexuality through the attention she gives to her artificial breast, whereas Rahel's survival partially depends on her sexuality remaining hidden and silent from a society which openly disapproves of her procreative abilities.

Lalla flaunts her breast as easily as her sexuality and defies convention appearing slightly insane. Rahel hides her tumour as she does her anger against repression, the tumour continues to grow inside of her yet she seems sane. In contrast is Rahel's daughter Hoda who like Lalla flaunts her sexuality, defies convention, and appears insane but by doing so comes to terms with life. Hoda, though, unlike her mother, must deny her child though in her struggle to survive. This is an example of the power which society exudes and reveals insanity and sexuality as social constructs.

Confession explicates desire through an officially condoned channel, an interlocutor, to whom the subject is compelled to tell, "with the greatest precision, whatever is most



difficult to tell" (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 59). Confession is also the site of desire, where the confessing subject is guaranteed an attentive audience in the priest. The confessor is not only allowed a venue for the discussion of sexuality, s/he is encouraged to divulge all desire. Desire is sought out in the farthest corners of the confessing mind and articulated into language. Confession is the transformation of desire which forces the body into an interplay of pleasure and sin. The construct of this discourse disallows what it simultaneously encourages, that is sex is repressed and condemned to silence, yet confession incites the subject to speak of it. A deliberate transgression is enacted which transforms into a perpetual spiral of pleasure and power. The confession obscures the power discourse residing in it by not admitting to its own transgression. Foucault's approach to and tentative explanations of how power operates are important in a study of relationships in both texts.

The matriarch and her relationship to power, however, invites a feminist perspective which the Foucauldian power model does not ostensibly provide.<sup>3</sup> Although Julia Kristeva rejects the label of feminism, some of her theories that move towards social gender construction may be useful in examining the positioning of the matriarchs in *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot*. Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray (often grouped as

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<sup>3</sup>The introduction to *Feminism and Foucault* identifies some useful parallels: "Four convergences of feminism and Foucault are especially striking. Both identify the body as the site of power, that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted. Both point to the local and intimate operations of power rather than focusing exclusively on the supreme power of the state. Both bring to the fore the crucial role of discourse in its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or unrecognized discourses. And both criticize the ways in which Western humanism has privileged the experience of the Western masculine elite as it proclaims universals about truth, freedom, and human nature" (*Feminism and Foucault*, x).

the French feminist theorists) argue that the speaking subject "I" is constituted through language.<sup>4</sup> The body is inscribed in such language and the female subject can now be the speaking subject whose physicality is expressed on the page in both contained and liberated ways. Kristeva in particular suggests that self-identity is language-oriented and cannot pose as "natural". In *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot*, the physical bodies of the matriarchs are not present in the text. The speaking body is nevertheless noticeable in both texts. The absence of their biological selves heightens the awareness that their presence is felt through language and the telling of their stories.

Kristeva develops the notion of the semiotic element in signification, allowing the body a place in the very structure of language.<sup>5</sup> The semiotic is pre-symbolic and comes prior to the emergence of a signifier and signified. It is paradoxical to write about the semiotic, because upon doing so, it becomes a part of the Symbolic Order. Kristeva writes that semiotic impulses in language are revolutionary because they activate drives into language. The music and rhythms of poetic language is the semiotic language which

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<sup>4</sup>Toril Moi first coined the terms "the French feminists" and "the Unholy Trio" in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London and New York: Methuen, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>The semiotic as posited in Kristeva's theories develops out of and is relative to Lacan's imaginary phase and Freud's pleasure principle. What is important to recognize is that all three theories involve a moment in which there is a shift into the Symbolic Order. However, the semiotic, according to Kristeva, is operating prior to the mirror and reality stages of Lacan and Freud. Semiotic drives act as a disruptive force and begin the construction of the speaking subject prior to signification. The semiotic is necessary to the thetic break at which point the subject acquires an identification. The thetic body enters into language upon recognizing the split image of self in the mirror as Other, which is also the distinguishing moment between the semiotic and the Symbolic Order. Kristeva contends that the semiotic is never completely lost or repressed within the Symbolic Order.

challenges signification. The semiotic is not representation, although Kristeva observes the semiotic and symbolic must interact if the semiotic is not to lapse into delirium.

Kristeva, like Foucault, tries to pinpoint philosophies surrounding sexuality and expose them as social constructs. Both theorists emphasize that they are always dealing with what Kristeva calls "subjects-in-process/on-trial". The works of Foucault and Kristeva reflect this belief in ongoing change in that they both avoid presenting solutions or totalizing systems of thought. Kelly Oliver in *Reading Kristeva* observes: "Kristeva proposes a way to conceive of a productive but always only provisional identity, an identity whose constant companions are alterity, negation, and difference" (14). Identity and power are inconstant and thus need to be continually renegotiated. A subject-in-process embraces that which hegemony marginalizes: the logical coherency of accepting an individual as one identity. John Lechte in *Julia Kristeva* writes: "The subject in process is a subject of flows and energy charges, of jouissance and death. It is what emerges in light of Kristeva's theory of the 'semiotic' in contradistinction to the 'symbolic'" (124).

Semanalysis, a term used by Kristeva in *Desire in Language*, points to a subject in transformation that is caught between the semiotic and the Symbolic Order. The purpose of semanalysis is to continually disrupt linguistic representations and paradigms which might stagnate or bury the semiotic. Semanalysis self-questions and relies on transforming the discourses of other texts and disciplines for its own renewal. It brings discourse to a crisis point by acknowledging "the intertextuality of all signifying systems" (Oliver, 93). Crisis, for Kristeva, is somewhat akin to Foucault's "points of resistance" in

that both theorists look towards sites of difference, rupture, and aberration from systems for explanations of those very same structures.

Kristeva articulates what she calls "the abject" in *Powers of Horror* as a way of reclaiming the body back into the text. Elsewhere, Kristeva refers to the semiotic as inserting the body back into the language of the Symbolic Order. The semiotic and "the abject" bear a close relationship. "The abject", however, not only borders the frontier of language as does the semiotic but also undermines the authority of language itself. "The abject" is on the border, but does not respect borders. It draws you to the place where meaning collapses and crushes you with meaninglessness. Abjection, according to Kristeva, "does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it object, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire...The abject has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to I" (*Powers of Horror*, 1). "The abject" infers that identity is not as coherent as society suggests; "the abject" lurks below the surface filling the speaking subject with horror. Society, based on this horror, simultaneously rejects and is fascinated by "the abject" despite its repulsion. Kristeva suggests that *jouissance*, not further repression, is the means by which to come to terms with "the abject". Lalla's artificial breast and Rahel's dead child Malka are "abject", yet both women refuse this label. They counter and challenge societal judgements with *jouissance* and a celebration of their sexuality. Lalla constantly draws attention to her artificial breast, heightening an awareness of her whole body. Rahel makes love with her husband Danile and has a second child (Hoda) despite the community's voiced disapproval. The concept of "the

abject" is useful in analyzing how matriarchs cope on the margins of the patriarchy, and how they use their bodies to open up space for their entry into language.

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, often figured in critical literature as autobiography, is the story of a young man returned to his family's home in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from Canada in search of his past. Ostensibly, the narrator's central quest is for a better knowledge and understanding of his father who appears prominently in his anecdotes. Stories from the past are told and relived.

The narrator, however, also provides a biography of his grandmother Lalla. Lalla, even after death, remains influential because she is constructed through her grandson's tales, the fictive Michael Ondaatje. Kristeva argues that discourse is not only produced by the speaking subject but also governed by the evaluations inherent to the discourse of other characters. Ondaatje creates a powerful mentor in Lalla, a woman who uses her sexuality and sense of humour to negotiate the trials of life and evoke the admiration of her fictive audience.

Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* centres on a Jewish family who emigrate from Russia to Winnipeg, Canada in the early 1900's. Hoda, who is also the "Crackpot" of the title, is the one surviving daughter for whom the parents willingly sacrifice everything, although most of their efforts for a better life in the new country prove futile. Hoda grows up to become the celebrated town prostitute. The narrative focuses on the development of Hoda's character as she learns to negotiate the trials of life.

Rahel, the matriarch in *Crackpot*, in an apparent negation of power, withholds language. She plays a central role at the commencement of the novel but by her death is transformed into a shadow or trace in the text. Yet her presence resonates throughout

the remainder of the text with the power of an internal discourse that marks her as a strong character despite her decrepit body. The dead mothers of *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* exert control because of their own power and the power delineated to them through the discourses of their communities.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FIGURING THE CRITICAL SPACE

Criticism to date of the matriarchal figure in Canadian fiction has been limited mainly to discussions of her symbolic value and traditional role within the extended family. How the matriarch is constructed by both the author and the other characters locates her in an ambiguous position insofar as she is created through the discourses of others. In *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot*, the mothers are constructed after death and depicted largely in relation to their various roles as daughter, mother, grandmother, wife, and sister. Most studies of *Running in the Family* centre on the construction of the fictive author and his relation to his father, while some articles survey the role of "the old woman" in Wiseman's fiction. In contrast to previous feminist examinations of the position of the female in the patriarchy, this study will focus on women as part of the matriarchy.

Since its publication in 1982, *Running in the Family* continues to be the subject of critical works. Leslie Mundwiler devotes several pages to *Running in the Family* in his book *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination* (1984) by placing it within the context of modernism while indicating that the text resists this genre. Mundwiler discusses the narrative techniques used and pinpoints orality and the transcendence of reality as key features. Bernard Hickey's brief article "Michael Ondaatje's Return: Running in the Family" (1988) locates Ondaatje's work within the Canadian tradition of what he refers

to as "The Return". Hickey writes: "The idea of the return to the country of one's family's origins outside Canada has been isolated as a recurring theme...of Canadian ethnic writing, of which Ondaatje's Sri Lankan account is an example" (37). Hickey's only mention of Lalla is in reference to her death as a "type of image informed by a natural fatalism" (38).

Smaro Kamboureli's "The Alphabet of the Self: Generic and Other Slippages in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*" offers a postmodernist reading and provides interpretations relevant to this study. She challenges the categorization of *Running in the Family* as autobiography, suggesting instead that the prevalence of many genres, helps "deconstruct the autobiographical privileging of self-referentiality" (81). Kamboureli also talks of slippages of the self: between the author and writer; or Ondaatje and his father Mervyn. She posits: "Perhaps Ondaatje's ultimate autobiographical act is that he names his father as his other. The father, not the mother, is the matrix of *Running in the Family*" (88). Kamboureli's analysis will be important for my own formulation in Chapter Three. Linda Hutcheon in an essay entitled "*Running in the Family: The Postmodernist Challenge*", also concerned with genre, calls Ondaatje's text "historiographic metafiction" which refers to a "self-conscious opening up of the borders of both history and narrative" (312). Hutcheon uses the term magic realism to evoke images of Lalla and her death in order to link *Running in the Family* intertextually with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (308).

In Douglas Barbour's recently published book *Michael Ondaatje* (1993), Barbour calls *Running in the Family* a "collage text" (136) of genres and surveys it in chronological analysis. Barbour's ideas of Lalla's experience at sea, her death, and relationship to her



daughter, are relevant to my study. Although it is interesting that Barbour is one of the few writers to discuss Lalla as a separate character, he does so in a limited way, because his study is a comprehensive yet broad overview of several of Ondaatje's works.

Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*, published in 1974, has not received extensive critical attention. Wiseman in an interview in Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan's *Lives and Works* (1992) comments on how the narrative of Rahel's marriage affects her daughter, Hoda. Wiseman contends: "Hoda has a strong personal myth. She has been given it in the intimacy of childhood even though it is a bizarre myth to everyone else around her...Hoda's sense of herself has been forced into a kind of hermeticism that produces, to my mind, some of the more interesting deviations such as incest. How does the outside world look when you are not accepting the views of the outside world" (122)? This view of an individual isolated and marginalized by her community will be important for my own study.

Marco LoVerso briefly discusses the role of Rahel in his essay "Language Private and Public: A Study of Wiseman's *Crackpot*" (1984). LoVerso's main argument is that Hoda is not provided with the necessary knowledge to lead a moral life, and implies that this also inhibits her acquisition of language. He observes that Rahel and Danile continue what he calls the "tradition of ignorance" represented in their paganistic marriage ceremony. LoVerso suggests: "Rahel's situation is, in fact, quite ironic, for although she considers herself to be in touch with 'the real world,' (p.24) she fails, as her death indicates [because her superstitions prevented her from following medical advice] to learn enough about the world in order to survive in it. And, except for a sense of

cynicism about life, she leaves her daughter with no real legacy of practical knowledge" (80).

A gap exists in the discussion of the maternal discourses in *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot*. In neither of the critical bodies of literature available on these texts, are the literary maternal figures given the attention that they deserve. The importance of Lalla and Rahel as female characters empowered within the matrilineal framework, should no longer be marginalized outside of the text by the silence with which they have been treated by literary criticism.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *JOUISSANCE*, "THE ABJECT", AND PERFORMANCE:

#### THE MATRIX BODY

Lalla, the matriarch in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* is constructed through the problematic autobiographical approach of the narrator. Lalla achieves female agency through the technologies of power of performance, *jouissance* and her sexuality.

The narrator tells Lalla's story as part of his autobiography. Thus the reader's perceptions of her are mediated through a male discourse. Yet as Kamboureli points out the autobiography and "the textuality of *Running in the Family* keeps its final intelligibility forever at bay by practising a deferral of meaning and of generic definition related to the autobiographical elements of the book" (Kamboureli, 80). Critics such as Kamboureli, Hutcheon, and Barbour have pointed out that autobiography as a generic niche is destabilized in the text by the constant slippage of the narrator as author, writer, character, reader, and first and third person pronoun.

The narrator of *Running in the Family* has come back to Sri Lanka with the intention of discovering more about his family connections. His quest is that of the prodigal son returning home to resolve feelings within himself toward a family, many of whom he has not seen since he was a young child. He returns to find them and does so by sitting in the old governor's home and listening to the reminiscences of his sister and Aunt Phyllis.

He also gathers information from old photographs, tombstones, and not least important, taking in his surroundings. The narrator relies on secondary sources for all of his stories. All of what he relates has been filtered through at least one other source. Foucault suggests that searching for connections between children and parents is based on a societal fable which nurtures familial connections. Ondaatje-the-narrator tries to create himself through a version that he generates of Lalla. The family that the narrator creates is to some extent a projection of himself. Lalla, her son Mervyn, and her grandson (the narrator) have in common a penchant for excess. What is important to realize is that the narrator may nostalgically (re)member his family according to a personal (if unconscious) desire to bond with them. The Lalla that the narrator presents is appealing; he chooses to retell her life as outrageous. Although Lalla appears frequently in the narration, episodes of her life are usually described, and she rarely is given the chance to speak for herself within the narrator's dialogue. He brushes over the darker sides of her life though, such as her youth, the many years of Lalla's marriage, her mastectomy, and her drinking problem.

Although Lalla appears powerful within the realm of the matrilineal world, she is simultaneously marginalized in subtle ways by the patriarchal community. Foucault observes that people are grouped by society as either participants or outcasts, and are treated accordingly. Lalla fosters the impression that she is unruly and incorrigible which allows her greater agency than most women, yet conversely, this image also marginalizes her to the position of an eccentric old woman. Lalla can storm into a school to steal a niece for an afternoon of fun without any substantial protest (117). However, she becomes a source of public embarrassment to her daughters, for example, "when in

Nuwara Eliya she simply stood with her legs apart and urinated" (124). Lalla's actions are subject to a cultural code which decides what is taboo. Such social disapproval tends to exert control over an individual's behaviour. Foucault calls this disapproval a moment of "difference", when the actions of an individual reveal the hidden power mechanisms of society found in censorious attitudes which prescribe the norm. When Lalla relieves herself, she acts as any "man" would but in doing so is temporarily ostracized by family members who normally submit willingly to her eccentric habits. Lalla's bravado could be interpreted as an imitation of "male behaviour" which would undermine the notion that she obtains real matriarchal power. Lalla would not then be seen as a model of female agency for other women. Conversely, her open acknowledgement of her fluids flowing beyond the borders of her body could be seen as Lalla accepting what is "abject" in herself.

First and foremost Lalla is constructed as a woman, her multiple other roles as wife, daughter, mother and as her granddaughter's "mother's mother" are secondary (107). Lalla is described by her actions and apparently liberated from the constraints of the propriety and domesticity associated with other female roles. Her identity does not come from adhering to a stereotypical notion of "woman". Lalla celebrates the body but is not confined by it. In the Western tradition, a dichotomy exists where women are categorized as either subservient nurturers or unpleasant dominant matriarchal figures. Cathy Davidson and E.M. Broner in *The Lost Tradition* point out that men fear the bonding of women, as seen through the creation of stock figures such as mother-in-laws who are often subject to ridicule (Davidson and Broner, 2).

Lalla appears as a powerful figure but not in the mythological sense of the matriarch who is portrayed as maternal or terrifying. Lalla is best described as a woman full of "passions" who achieves her desires because she willingly transgresses boundaries while purposefully ignoring the hegemony (122). On several occasions Lalla takes the law under her own command. She owns a dairy farm at one point and when one of the cows becomes ill with Rinderpest Fever, Lalla quietly shoots and buries the cow herself. Economic survival, always a primary concern for single women, is a motivation for this action. Although Lalla is extravagant, she is also financially impoverished: "She would take groups out for meals and be refused service as she hadn't paid her previous bills. Everyone went with her anyway, though they could never be sure of eating" (117). Lalla commands attention but as female and eccentric (ex-centre-ic) she will always remain to some extent on the periphery of the cultural hegemony.

Patriarchal resistance to Lalla's assertion of self in a male-dominated world resides but is not prevalent in the narrative. Lalla, despite her rebellion against traditional female roles, never encounters direct confrontation or overt punitive measures for disregarding the norms. Lalla is always victor and goes so far as to make the men who have challenged her power look ridiculous. Often she escapes retribution, as is the case when she impulsively decides to hide and aid in the escape of her milkman Brumphy accused of a brutal murder. When brought to court for suspicion of having aided in the escape of the milkman, Lalla manipulates the judge. She achieves an uproar by making personal quips to the judge so that she is merely thrown out in contempt of court without further reprimand. The narrator creates the false impression that Lalla is not subject to larger systems of power. Yet Foucault suggests that power networks obscure

themselves by their very pervasiveness. A justice system and social mores are the backdrop for Lalla's initial involvement in the aforementioned example. She uses excess and laughter as shock tactics to push her way through troubles. Lalla is exceptional, and appears to be outside the grasp of the patriarch, because problems are minimalized or subverted in her presence.

Lalla joins the art of performance, her sexuality, *jouissance*, and "the object" under the sign of her artificial breast:

Lalla's great claim to fame was that she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy. It turned out to be unnecessary but she always claimed to support modern science, throwing herself into new causes (123).

The tragedy of this operation is never discussed openly, instead, her humour presides over the memory. The reader is made graphically aware that the grandmother of this story is a sexual being. Especially considering Jane Ussher's argument that "...the relative lack of visibility of the female genitals, both literally and within the discourse concerning women's sexuality, results in breast development occupying great importance..."(22).

Lalla is not ashamed apparently nor does she feel less feminine because of her loss of a breast. In fact, the fake sponge breast is a source of laughter and becomes to her and her close friends and family, a recurring motif throughout their lives.

Lalla lives her life to excess, and she embraces her false breast as a part of her body with joy and laughter, recognizing the power she maintains in her own life. Kristeva refers to the text as a site of bliss, and Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* describes the state of *jouissance* which Lalla manifests as a way of transcending the

shame possibly associated with her body. Barthes describes *jouissance*, a French term not easily translated:

Therefore, "pleasure" here (and without our being able to anticipate) sometimes extends to bliss, sometimes is opposed to it. But I must accommodate myself to this ambiguity; for on the one hand I need a general "pleasure" whenever I must refer to an excess of the text, to what in it exceeds any (social) function and any (structural) functioning; and on the other hand I need a particular "pleasure," a simple part of Pleasure as a whole, whenever I need to distinguish euphoria, fulfilment, comfort (the feeling of repletion when culture penetrates freely), from shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss (19).

*Jouissance* is a discourse of the body which utters itself through laughter. Lalla's "loud laughter" (114) will not be silenced nor confined to condoned codes of speech. Kristeva posits as well that "laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8).<sup>6</sup>

Except for a few vague references to her "romantic relationships," Lalla's sexuality is discussed in terms of herself rather than in relation to anyone else. The first time the false breast is mentioned is also the only time in the text Lalla is touched sexually.

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<sup>6</sup>Furthermore, Kelly Oliver writes: "In order not to get trapped in the double-bind of identity, Kristeva suggests that women must articulate their *jouissance* with the symbolic without relinquishing their difference. This project requires both symbolic law and negativity. It requires that women take up their identity as an identity-in-process in order not to be linked to that identity in a negative way. Women need to take up identity always tentatively and never completely in order to avoid annihilation of difference" (Oliver, 187).



While on a crowded bus, Lalla becomes aware of the disapproving looks and "whispers" of the other passengers. She is shortly apprised of the reason behind their censure:

Lalla looked at the man next to her who had smug smile on his face. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Then she looked down and saw that his hand had come over her left shoulder and was squeezing her breast. She smiled to herself.

She had not felt a thing. Her left breast had been removed five years earlier and he was ardently fondling the sponge beneath her gown (42-43).

The man's impropriety is diffused by his ignorance of Lalla's secret knowledge. He believes himself in control and ironically never learns otherwise. A woman who did not have Lalla's "advantage" of a fake breast might have felt molested or humiliated. The shock the other passengers reveal does not concern Lalla because she realizes and is satisfied with her own personal triumph and the superiority the listeners (readers) feel over her "victim." The chapter is entitled "The War Between Men and Women" and Lalla is the victor. The man manipulates what he believes to be her skin but instead he is the one "squeezed" like the sponge.

The scar tissue from the mastectomy is never discussed by the characters. The scar is a physical reminder of absence, of torn flesh, but also of the healing process. Kristeva in *Stabat Mater* presents a text that is scarred: two discourses in competing parallel columns that are seamed together by white margins (present/absent space). She speaks of motherhood and its emotional and physical scars: "A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language - and it has always

been so" (*Stabat Mater*, 178). Torn flesh rips the tissue of the woman's body which is text. How does one read the markings on a woman's body when the scars are a reminder of the process of alienation: the cut umbilical cord or the incision that took the malignant breast? Lalla's mastectomy scar is made present by its absence. The excessive metalinguistic narrative proliferates on every aspect associated with the false breast, except for a glance back at the loss of the original. The binaries of the breast(s) are present/absent, real/fake, body/prosthetic. Derrida's concept of invaginated terms often take precedence in this text making the reader extremely conscious of the absent/present breast. The nonchalance with which Lalla uses her breast alludes to an understanding of the body as ephemeral. By substituting fake flesh for the real flesh she exercises control over the manufactured breast which can be harmed but also easily replaced.

The artificial breast is a prop in the theatre of Lalla's life. The notion of performance presides: "In the early years her two children, Noel and Doris, could hardly move without being used as part of Lalla's daily theatre" (118). Later, Doris similarly co-opts her children into partaking of staged and real life dramas. As a prop, Lalla's breast is in high profile. The "dog would be found gnawing at the foam," Lalla forgets it "on a branch of a tree," and it would crawl over to join its twin on the right hand side or sometimes appear on her back" (124). Lalla refuses a motor cycle ride from her brother joking: "Cannot wreck this perfect body, Vere. The police will spend hours searching for my breast thinking it was lost in the crash" (127). She also refers to the breast as her "Wandering Jew" (124). Lalla's maintains a carefree attitude. The text focuses on artifice, exposing the "natural" world as construct.

The notion of performance as a technology of power suggests that Lalla can selectively reveal herself to her audience and maintain an elusive distance. Barthes posits the way speaking subjects locate (enact) themselves: "Then perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as *fiction*. A certain pleasure is derived from a way of imagining oneself as *individual*, of inventing a final, rarest fiction: the fictive identity. This fiction is no longer the illusion of a unity; on the contrary, it is the theatre of society in which we stage our plural: our pleasure is *individual* - but not personal" (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 62).

Confession functions as a performance in *Running in the Family*. Autobiography as a confessional discourse leans towards the exposure and purification of the narrator whose identity parallels the author. The narrator's desire to confess is based on the sin of not knowing his father more personally. Yet neither confession nor autobiography are ever fully successful because as the many conflicting styles of genre intimate, every attempt to articulate feelings only shows more clearly how impossible is the task. The narrator's compulsion to draw out each character into language situates him as confessor wanting to track down and pinpoint the deepest secrets of others. The discourse of Lalla's body is performance. Her artificial breast becomes the site of discourse for how women are constructed in this text. Through her body she confesses with ostensible pleasure what is normally viewed with shame.

The breast, normally highly eroticized is not construed sexually in the context of Lalla's stories. Lalla's radical openness questions the assumed symbolism and sense of "feminine mystery" that usually accompanies the breasts: breast feeding, maturation, nurturing, softness, maternal motherhood. Interestingly, the artificial breast is made of

sponge, which can absorb, as opposed to natural breasts, which produce milk. She perceives the artificial breast as a sponge or an accessory. Lalla's disregard for the breast is a defence mechanism against the societal view which perpetuates the notion that woman is her body and breasts are essential in acknowledging her femininity.

The artificial breast is "abject" because it is a sign of a prostheses or maimed body. "The abject" is not object because it is a part of us that we can never lose. The woman's body becomes "the abject". Kristeva gives the example of menstrual blood as "abject". It is perceived with disgust by society and self but nevertheless is inherent to the body. The jettisoned abject becomes object when it leaves the body and becomes refuse. Abjection is figurative as well, it is not lack of cleanliness or health "but what disturbs identity, system, order" (*Powers of Horror*, 4). Yet Kristeva seems to suggest in her discussion of *the deject* that the speaking subject constitutes her territory and never stops "demarcating the universe" when it is edged by abjection (*Powers of Horror*, 8).

Lalla's body is disfigured and the artificial breast is "abject". However, Lalla rejects this reading of her body and instead inscribes it with the language of *jouissance*. Lalla makes ridiculous or sublime what generally is acknowledged with shame. Kristeva posits an interdependence between "the abject" and *jouissance* as both necessary to identity.

She writes:

It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many

victims of the abject are its fascinated victims--if not its submissive and willing ones (*Powers of Horror*, 9).

The ambiguity of "the abject" is also the ambiguity of the self. Kristeva implies that it may even act as a barricade for the preservation of self-identity. In turn, Lalla's construction is dependent upon her reconciliation with "the abject" within herself.

Lalla uses her sexuality as a technology of power. Rather than repressing that which is "abject", she draws it out through *jouissance*. In this way there is a proliferation of power that reflects Foucault's theory which argues that power is continually produced although, ironically, the myth of power as suppression prevails.

The stories of the four breasts that Lalla goes through in her life time are mythologized and passed down as legend and legacy to her grandson, the (re)teller of these tales. Mark Shorner observes: "Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves" (Murdock, 142). Myths that are created by and surround Lalla empower her to act out her life according to her own desires regardless of social constraints. She becomes a mythical being subject only to her own rules. The narrator creates Lalla in part to create himself. Lalla is the narrator's Other, not in the sense of Man's Other (read woman), but as a mirror to his own character.

Another problematic of the narrator's autobiography is that he reveals very little about himself in a direct fashion. Lalla has experiences that he finds difficult to confront in his own life. Through constructing a character like Lalla who is on the border yet powerful, he begins the process of finding his own identity. Of course, Kristeva argues that identity fluctuates as the subject is always in-process/on-trial. The narrator presents

a coherent yet enigmatic reading of Lalla that resists closure. He similarly structures the entire text upon multiple discourses which suggests that identity is only provisional because the narratives we use to articulate ourselves into thinking beings continually fluctuate and negate.

At times it is hard to recall Lalla as a grandmother figure, in part due to her reckless disposition, and because of the shifting time frames. The narrator captures moments that range over a whole lifetime and span several generations: "Lalla could never be just a mother, that seemed to be only one muscle in her chameleon nature, which had too many other things to reflect" (124). Lalla's relationships with other characters locate her in the text as a family (m)ember, but defy the norms of the patriarchy: "She would be compassionate to the character of children but tended to avoid holding them on her lap" (119). Her priorities are not maternal: she "would quickly divert them [the children] into the entrance of the frightening maze in the Nuwara Eliya park and leave them there, lost while she went off to steal flowers" (119). Davidson and Broner state: "The mother is monster because the daughter too much sees herself reflected in her mother's image, in her mother's life. The fear of all the daughters is that in looking at the mother they will also see themselves and turn to stone" (Davidson and Broner, 190). The narrator comments several times that his mother and grandmother are "too similar to even recognize much of a problem...both carrying their own theatre on their back" (125). He also notes that Doris never spoke of her mother giving the explanation that "eccentrics can be the most irritating people to live with" (119).

Lalla's daughter Doris is a strong female character in *Running in the Family*. Critics might argue that she is in fact more central to the text than Lalla since she is the mother

of the narrator. However, I have chosen Lalla as the subject of this study because she is more representative of all the roles a woman can play. Lalla's sexuality is more controversial in that the artificial breast and her unconventional behaviour publicly challenge traditional roles assigned to women. Overall, Lalla presents a more hopeful alternative to how women can emerge from the margins. Doris is last seen in a bedroom boarding house heating crumpets on a gas ring (176). She is visited by her niece out of pity but has no other apparent friends or family. Doris's decision to leave her husband Mervyn in the end contains her in this bleak picture. Lalla, conversely, right up to and including her death intimates her empowerment is in part due to her being socially constructed as a woman.

Lalla's surface relation to Mervyn, the narrator's father, is stereotypical of a son antagonistic to his mother-in-law. The most outstanding similarity in character shared between these two are their outlandish prerogatives. Their antagonism is best illustrated in the "saga" of the flower war. The version of Lalla that the narrator creates links her with the symbols of flowers. She is described as an "overbearing charmed flower" (125) and to have "blossomed" (41) after her husband's death. She ravages some of the best gardens in Colombo "all so she could appreciate it [the flower] for one moment" (122). She is famous for her passion for flowers and disregard for others' property. On one occasion Lalla states: "Darling, I've just been to church and I've stolen some flowers for you. They are from Mr. Abeysekare's... and the rest are from *your* garden" (122). The narrator symbolizes Lalla in the flowers she so passionately loves but does not attempt to objectify her as a woman likened to a fragile flower. Lalla is banned from the public gardens much in the same way that Mervyn is prohibited from using the trains.

Mervyn challenges her flower obsession with one equal to his own, as the narrator relates: "He loved ordered gardens and hated to see beds ravaged by Lalla's plundering. Gradually the vegetation of Kutapitiya took on a prickly character. He began with roses, then Lalla wore gloves, and so he progressed to the cactus. The landscape turned grey around us" (145). Eventually Mervyn becomes president of the Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society and writes a book, absorbing himself in a subject that he originally took up merely to spite Lalla. Both are obsessive in their individual projects and their mutual antagonism. The family feuds between Lalla and Mervyn are atypical in their creative obscurity and the extremity to which they are willing to carry their performances. Yet their antagonism perpetuates the stereotypical relationship of mother-in-law/son-in-law in that they struggle to usurp each other's power.

Lalla and Mervyn are similar as well in their passion for drinking which leads them both to craziness and excess. The narrator's first person opening is of a party in Canada and is one of the rare episodes in which the narrator speaks about himself. He remembers:

Once a friend told me that it was only when I was drunk that I seemed to know exactly what I wanted...dancing, balancing a wine glass on my forehead and falling to the floor twisting round and getting up without letting the glass tip, a trick which only seemed possible when drunk and relaxed... (22).

Alcohol gives Lalla, Mervyn and the narrator licence to do the outrageous and intensifies all their experiences but the constant drinking and occasional "quick swig of eau de cologne" also alludes to a darker side of this glitter filled world (123).



Alcohol is an artificial substance that simultaneously contaminates the body's natural functions and produces an artificial sense of *jouissance*. The body and mind are temporarily released from social conventions which regulate our daily behaviour. A person "under the influence" has access to a discourse normally suppressed. The narrator links himself in this enjoyment of drinking with Mervyn and Lalla. There is however a fatalistic element to this link as both Mervyn and Lalla die when inebriated.

Lalla is born, "outdoors, abruptly, during a picnic" which is the first indication of her mysterious, stormy self (113). That Lalla only claims it "and there is little evidence for this" does not matter because the mystical experience is validated by Lalla's wish to construct herself.<sup>7</sup> She perceives herself as a person who *should* have had such a dramatic birth, and expects her audience to do so as well. The narrator also constructs himself as someone intimately related to the characters but able to tell their stories from an objective stance. Linda Hutcheon remarks, "one of the connections between life and art is the performing narrator, whose act of searching and ordering forms part of the narrative itself" (Hutcheon, 303). In this construction, Lalla distances herself from the vulnerabilities usually associated with childbirth as well as the whole maternal realm.

The narrator tells of how Lalla, always in command of situations, survives an experience at sea. While swimming, one of the men is caught in a rip tide and killed, however, Lalla survives the incident as family members recount to themselves:

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<sup>7</sup>Barbour points out: "Whether all the tales are "true" or not, they assume a fictional propriety that cannot be denied, as in the case of her [Lalla's] famous false breast, which assumes a character of its own in its wanderings" (151).

Laughing at Lalla, because Lalla had nearly drowned. You see she was caught in a current and instead of fighting it she just relaxed and went with it out to sea and eventually came back in a semi-circle. Claimed she passed ships (106).

Traditionally, the sea is perceived as feminine and Lalla's survival could be seen as her going back in to the body's water from which she was born.<sup>8</sup> She later dies in water and the ebbs and flows of the tide that she needs not fight against are a part of her "natural" self. While Lalla's survival depends on her flowing with the tide it is still a struggle for life. The danger of the situation in which a man drowns is undermined by the narrator's use of the word "claimed" which by this point in the text automatically signals Lalla may be exaggerating. This episode acts as a metaphor for Lalla's struggle with her femininity. Rather than be pulled into playing roles that limit her to the parameters of a script, Lalla imagines herself into new ways of being that allow her to "semi-circle" around the traditional female paradigm.

The first mention of Lalla is of her death, not her birth. This is a subversion of (male linear) chronology. Chapter One ends with the narrator answering a friend's question: "So how did your grandmother die?" "Natural causes." "What?" "Floods" (23) which again questions the notion of the "natural". Lalla, like her life, is extraordinary. From the first pages, Lalla is flooding all over the book and the other characters are being swept away with her. In death Lalla finds a freedom she cannot in life. She is

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<sup>8</sup>The water imagery I am referring to could be construed as an essentialist argument, but I do not think it has to be seen that way because the narrator's and Lalla's own imaginings lead to the image association.

finally outside of the male discourse and beyond the reach of societal repercussions. The narrator is fascinated by her because he can make Lalla into anything that he wants through his storytelling. Lalla is not present to contradict him, he has only to vie with competing (re)tellings. The narrator feels a compulsion to explain or relive what can never be repeated. Lalla beyond the realm of the living is unobtainable and thus more desirable. By bringing Lalla back through narrative, the narrator exerts control over her memories. He introduces the semiotic, the drives and impulses of language, into his discourse on Lalla. His lyrical narrative activates the semiotic element of language. The narrator inserts his life into the telling of hers which also reclaims her body into language.

Lalla makes the "story" of death desirable. After playing cards with Vere for two days straight she steps out into a storm of floods:

Lalla took one step off the front porch, her handbag bursting open. 208 cards moved ahead of her like a disturbed nest as she was thrown downhill still comfortable and drunk, snagged for a few moments on the railings of the Good Shepherd Convent and then lifted away towards the town of Nuwara Eliya. It was her last perfect journey (128).

Death and sexuality are closely linked as the powerful images of Lalla riding "on her last perfect journey" are climatic. The reader feels the *jouissance* of Lalla as the mad world swirls around her. There is a sense that she is a part of the storm rather than subject to it that is alluded to in the text repeatedly: "Lalla was loved by most people who saw her arriving from the distance like a storm" (119). The narrator helps weave this story which

transcends the boundaries of reality. The finale is described in excessive detail that at least in part must be the product of the narrator's imagination.

If Lalla's life is a "theatre", the storm allows her to exit dramatically, yet not die. She merely stops existing for the audience or is simply off stage. In this theatre analogy, Lalla maintains control over her death much in the same way she provides stage directions for her own birth. Even towards the end of the scene when the narrator describes her as seeing "the dead body of a human" and as "not comfortable anymore" there is a sense that the storm must survive Lalla, not the reverse. Lalla's strength comes from her being in possession of the creation of her own birth, death and the storm; she is immune to the danger of the storm in her keen interest to partake.

Throughout *Running in the Family* the women make their presence known in the text in unexpected ways. A labyrinth of connections builds between the narrator, Mervyn, and Lalla. Although the text reports that the story is about the narrator's relationship with his father Mervyn, it is as much about their relationship with Lalla. Lalla too makes demands upon the other characters and the reader as she expresses her desires which often in turn reveal how she constructs herself.

The critical works on *Running in the Family* concentrate on autobiography, and the text's transgressions into other genres, however, the grandmother figure of this novel is important to understanding how the boundaries of a female construct can transgress boundaries through performance, *jouissance* and a celebration of the "abject".<sup>9</sup> Lalla's

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<sup>9</sup>Foucault in *Language, Counter-Memory Practice* remarks: "Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed space. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust" (35).

life parallels Mervyn's in a number of ways, yet she is not merely Other. The inclusion of Lalla in the framework of the novel invites discussion about the portrayal of women in literature. Lalla, like her name, carries the tune whether she knows the words or not because like all women she has only begun to articulate herself. She simultaneously portrays women as both survivors and challengers of the patriarchy, and her humour is instrumental in widening the scope of roles available to her and other women. If not at the centre of this text, Lalla is central to the construction of a family whose lives have been "touched into words" (22).

CHAPTER FOUR  
SILENCE AS DISCOURSE:  
THE SACRAMENTAL BODY OF THE DEAD MOTHER

Rahel, the mother in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* obtains power through an apparent negation of silence and the eroticization of her "abject" body. Although the text centres on her daughter Hoda, the novel acknowledges and gives importance to Rahel and her husband Danile from the very first sentence: "In the daytime her frail and ever-so-slightly humpbacked mother, or so they described her to blind Danile before they rushed them off to be married, used to take Hoda along with her to the houses where she cleaned" (9). An onslaught of information is provided by the omnipotent narrator in this opening, information which slowly unfolds throughout the text to make sense. Rahel's humpback and Danile's blindness are foregrounded, as is "they", the unnamed society, who "describe", name, and judge this family as outcasts. Rahel dies quite early on in the text, yet her influence on Danile and Hoda continues to affect their lives even after her death. Rahel rules within her family but is also subject to the oppression of larger social forces. She negotiates in both her private and public life through the technologies of power of silence, negation, and the use of her sexuality. Unlike the extroverted character of Lalla, discussed in the previous chapter, the limitations placed on Rahel's life are more blatant and her struggles as a woman are prescribed by financial pressures and familial obligations.

The narrator of *Crackpot* is an omnipotent voice that weaves in and out of the mindsets of each character. Such a narrator can create the illusion of having objective distance but the insight provided shows a definite bias in favour of Hoda and family. This sympathy places the narrator on the margins with the newly immigrated family of outcasts. The narrator is made an observer whose commentary provides social criticism. A sense of trust for the narrative develops because s/he presents a wide range of heroic qualities and character flaws in the important persona of the novel. A kindred feeling seems to exist between the narrator and Rahel, for although Rahel's bitterness at times consumes her, she is justified and championed for her outrage by the very facts of her life which have positioned her as "abject". The narrator is also careful to show how Rahel, despite the atrocities of her circumstances, ekes out a family life that fosters happiness. She uses what few resources she has to strengthen herself against social foes. With delicacy, the narrator depicts a powerful character entrapped in a body and social situation which make her legacy small yet Rahel's influence never fully subsides.

Hoda, the protagonist of the novel and "Crackpot" of the title, is a cracked/pot, a broken vessel, navigating in a world where she is not readily accepted. Society views her as a humorous but bizarre character as revealed when she is referred to as "Crackpot". Hoda is not insane in the sense of mental illness but there is a schism in her life that causes her world view to be almost schizophrenic at times. She must find a means to cope with the disparity between her desires and the barriers of circumstances. She tries to account for the desperate harsh poverty of her real life, the expectations she places upon herself, and her mother's hopes for her to live a happy respectable life. In her yearning for acceptance, Hoda offers her body while still almost a child in the belief that this gift will reciprocate love. She loses her virginity naively unconscious of what she has

done, and in this sense as well, she is a broken vessel. The hymen is broken, and her innocence is cracked.

Even Hoda, later in the novel, refers to herself as "Crackpot", but when she does the connotations are complicated. She acknowledges the town's perception of her as the eccentric local whore and the degree of affection coupled with malice used in this terminology. She recognizes the vessel of her family has been cracked or broken into "shards" (epigraph) and no remorse can make her family whole again. Hoda, in calling herself "Crackpot", acknowledges the cracks within herself as part of her identity. She also reclaims the pain associated with this name because in her long journey of discovering who she is, Hoda knows her suffering has made her cognizant of the muted shades of human nature and more perceptive than the people who label her. The insult "Crackpot" is first applied to Hoda's father when a "customer" of hers laughs at Danile for believing Hoda is an academic tutor rather than a whore (169). Yet by the end of the novel, the vision of kindness and generosity that Danile and Hoda offer despite the cruelty with which their gestures are often received, reveals that it is not they who are truly cracked or distorted.

Although the novel is set in Winnipeg, Danile, the storyteller of the family, keeps reverting back to anecdotes of the family's past in Russia. His narrative usually goes back to the story of his marriage ceremony. A plague broke out in the old country and in submission to pagan superstitions, "the two poorest, most unfortunate, witless creatures, man and woman" (24) were brought together in marriage to ward off the spread of disease. Rahel and Danile were this couple. The ceremony took place in a graveyard witnessed by the townspeople. This tale which easily could be perceived as



horrific is made heroic in Danile's narrative. He claims their marriage saved the town, and on a personal level, allowed him to meet Rahel and from their union produce Hoda. He tells Hoda this tale as a bedtime story but he also recollects for his own pleasure. Danile feels compelled to give a detailed version of the events but is aware Rahel does not fully approve: "But because he felt a little guilty about it, he always tried, when he suspected he might have talked too much, to round off his tale with a compliment to Rahel, to smooth the edge of her disapproval" (27). Rahel's habitual cynicism and bitterness towards the world is momentarily suspended by this small gift of her husband's which makes "her laugh when she would have liked to scold" (27).

Rahel rarely discusses her opinions aloud, even with her family. She cleans in the kitchen while the story of their marriage is told, listening but seldom verbally partaking in Danile's rhetoric. Her thoughts are usually expressed in the form of an internal discourse. Rahel in this way articulates passionately her love and rage at Danile's (re)telling of their nuptial ceremony. The family are immigrants in a new country and Rahel is conscious of their position. She senses that the "self" is language-oriented and wishes her family situated in the discourse of the New World. She wants to forge a new identity and reasons that Hoda should be safeguarded from the pain of their past. Yet perhaps Rahel allows Danile to keep telling the story because it recreates herself as she was previously in the old country when she could have more hope of denying her frailty. The retelling is also cathartic because the ritual of their marriage functioned as a purification for the town. Similarly, the repetition of the story brings to Rahel's family a sense of purpose, a reminder that their lives can be interpreted as fated, meaningful and

mythically heroic. They are cleansed momentarily of the language of their every day lives which surrounds and calls them "crippled" (31).

Rahel's humpbacked body is "abject" and she struggles with society's and her own personal condemnation of her physical self all of her life. In telling the story of their immigration, Danile makes reference to Rahel's physical disability by calling her back "a little crooked" (14) which sparks a tirade of discourse within Rahel's mind. The narrator recalls from Rahel's point of view:

All her life, all her childhood and all her girlhood she had prayed, at times with an almost demented intensity, for that deformity to disappear. For years she had gone nightly to bed, forcing herself every night to picture and to believe in the picture of herself arising the next morning and simply, luxuriously, stretching herself straight as everyone else did. That skew of her body wasn't really hers, she wasn't really that way (14).

Rahel's outward expression of the pain of this unrealized desire which obviously still resonates powerfully within her emotions is to slam "the full kettle noisily on the hottest part so that it splashed and hissed" (14). She cannot voice what is "abject" even if it is the singular most important way in which she defines herself. Rahel may even still dream of the "luxury" of an unmaimed body, however she needs to nurture this hope and anguish privately. When Danile calls it her "lucky charm" (15), Rahel resents the intrusion or commentary on this sensitive subject. In terms of "the abject" Kristeva writes, "what can defilement become if not the negative side of consciousness - that is, lack of communication and speech?...according to which it is a border of discourse - a

silence" (*Powers of Horror*, 30). If Rahel speaks her body into language, she risks exposing her pain and confronting the horror of "the abject" within herself.

Rahel's silent presence during the narrative of their marriage acts in a twofold manner. Her silence allows Danile to tell the story but simultaneously causes him to edit it. Rahel uses silence as a technology of power. Danile must listen and interpret the semiotic language of the kettle slamming rather than Rahel's personal verbal response to his discourse. Rahel's silence is imitative of the patriarch's exclusionary response to those it marginalizes. As well, when her silence does rupture into fragmentary sentences, the rareness of the occasion reveals her anguish and strength, and commands attention. The silent shoulders of Rahel carry the responsibility of the care and well being of her family, yet it is her right shoulder hiked higher than her left which is her deformity.

The "lump" which we assume is cancer that grows within Rahel and causes her death is also "abject". The lump remains unnamed in the discourse of Rahel and Danile. She hides her pain thinking that had she not thought about the symptoms of the tumour, it would not have grown. When she does find words, it is to transcend the pain which otherwise will engulf her:

Perhaps, it occurred to Rahel now for the first time, perhaps pain and deformity are given to special people who have the strength to bear them...now she took a certain grim satisfaction in the thought, for it enabled her to shift her mind somewhat from the doctor's terrifying simplification, and to repeat to herself with something of the savour of righteousness, that she could be equal to her pain, and bear it a while longer (40).

Rahel accepts and gains power from "the abject" within by perceiving it as a challenge. At the same time, she frames the challenge as a moral and personal test of her strength, and in doing so, Rahel displaces the medicinal discourse which she feels threatens to overpower her body.

Malka, the older sister of Hoda, is premature and dies shortly after birth. Rahel's pain at the recollection of her dead baby is tangible. When Danile praises Malka's beauty and assures Hoda that she was not a crippled child, Rahel in her mind cries out: "Of course she wasn't! Perfect, perfect" (30). A direct reminder and contrast to her own imperfect body. The body of the mother has split in two, and what at first appears as "perfect" is turned into "the abject". Malka's death leaves the bereft couple with a corpse to pay homage to and only brief memories. The baby is made "abject" not only in the sense that the foetus is spit out of her mother's body, challenging the body's boundaries. She is also made so through the outlook of the community because their response to the child's death is to claim it as an act of God or complain that "wards of the town have no right to raise a family at the town's expense" (31). Rahel must bear their cruelty as well as the death of her first child. The community ignores their marital rights and assumes a complete disregard for Rahel's and Danile's feelings.

Rahel's response is bodily rather than verbal. They make love despite the town directives and Rahel becomes pregnant with her second child, Hoda. Kristeva questions: "The erotization of abjection, and perhaps any abjection to the extent that it is already eroticized, is an attempt at stopping the haemorrhage: a threshold before death, a halt or a respite" (55)? Through her body Rahel enacts life, and her child Hoda, becomes her reason for living. Death and life joined poignantly in the child Malka taking Rahel's

body to new boundaries. The death of the one child, Malka, is to some extent consoled by the birth of another, Hoda. Danile, in general, is complacent and willing to accept other's judgements readily. For example, Danile's version of their fate is uncomfortable to listen to at times as it refuses to acknowledge how horribly some people have treated them. He would most likely have allowed for the town's interference into his private sex life, justifying his reaction through his obedience to God and the unfolding ways of Providence. Although it is never explicitly said, Rahel must provide the impetus for this personal rebellion against the town's general will. She advocates for herself in a physical way by making love to her husband. She realizes that no words she speaks will persuade or allow her to reason with the prevailing attitude of her society towards "cripples". Rahel's response relies to some extent on her perceiving herself in terms of her sexuality. Although their lovemaking is in private, it is also made public because the act situates them in direct opposition to the will of the townspeople. However Rahel's and Danile's sex life is not only for reproduction or in reaction to their community mores. Their sexual relations subvert "the abjectness" of their disabilities. The intimacy expressed in their lovemaking is tender and excludes the grotesqueness associated with their disabilities, thus creating an awareness that they are only perceived as such from the point of view of other people.

The only noticeable deterrent to their lovemaking in the "equalizing darkness" (55) is Rahel's heavy groaning or breathing attributed to her illness. Danile denies the presence of these noises which foretell the death of his wife:

...he became aware also of the faint whisper of a groan in her breathing,  
and aware also of the fact that she often breathed this way nowadays...he

had not been able to exorcise these illicit, impersonal groans that rasped out a ragged, insistent rhythm, counter to the rhythm of her life...His flesh shuddered...it was along moment before he was able, in his horror, to turn to comfort her (57).

Danile temporarily experiences the horror of "the abject" which he fears recognizing in either himself or Rahel. Her breathing difficulties may also be her feeling the weight of disapproval of "the beautiful people", which is how earlier on in the text Rahel describes Malka's inability to continue living: "No wonder she did not have the strength to go on breathing...with the weight of the disapproval of all those beautiful people lying down on her" (31). Hoda, too, can "hardly breath" (65) left trapped under her bed when Danile rushed Rahel to hospital. The breath needed to articulate language is sucked away by the voices which will not listen. Despite the oppression they experience, usually their lovemaking itself is *jouissance*, for Rahel and Danile find pleasure in each other's bodies and at least temporarily warm themselves from the coldness of outside attitudes.

The *jouissance* of their love is communicated to Hoda. From Hoda's point of view as a child, she is most happy when at home with her parents listening to "the good stories" (13). She instinctively detects a difference between how her family functions internally as opposed to how they are perceived by the outside world. According to Danile, their lovemaking, as he explains it to Hoda, is a heroic act that welcomes Malka into the world and hears Hoda knocking at "the door" of life (32). These stories help Hoda discover her identity and take pride in herself and her personal heritage. Yet Rahel breaks into a rage and outpouring of emotion when Danile talks of Malka. Rahel's longest spoken passage is about her feelings for what happened to her first daughter.

Hoda learns from her mother about the harsher realities of life. Rahel is not blind to other people's cruelty and her sense of moral outrage and belief in justice is conveyed to her living child. Both parents provide Hoda with important information which she will later need to cope with her own life.

To say two people love one another is cliché and open to broad interpretation because overuse of the word "love" has drained it of meaning. Rahel's relationship to her family is complex. In part, their relationship is founded on a tender pity for one another. Danile remembers their first touch, he was trying to place the wedding ring on Rahel's finger but kept fumbling. He recalls: "Finally, a gentle little voice took pity on me, as she has taken pity on me ever since. "Let me" she whispered, and all was well" (27). Rahel is ashamed that because of his blindness such "a fine looking man" (15) as Danile could marry with her deformity. They elevate each other's worth which in turn reflects positively back on their individual self-esteem. Kristeva notes: "Love is the time and space in which "I" assumes the right to be extraordinary. Sovereign yet not individual. Divisible, lost, annihilate: but also, and through imaginary fusion with the loved one, equal to the infinite space of superhuman psychism" (*Tales of Love*, 5). By investing mutual trust, they each find a partner with whom they can strengthen themselves against the rest of society which perceives them as "abject". Danile constructs the story of their marriage as fateful, and he tries to communicate to Rahel his hope and belief in an entity greater than themselves. Rahel, also believes in God, but alternatively focuses her energies on their immediate family. Her love for Danile and Hoda is an expression of her fierce familial loyalty which provides the impetus for her living despite their harsh circumstances.

Rahel's loyalty to her family partly stems from her position as matriarch. Her family is dependant upon her ability to provide for them. Rahel has learned to survive in the patriarchal world by using some of the tools of that world. Her hard work and practical mind indebt the family to her in that they are always conscious that they owe their continued existence to her efforts. This positions her as central and essential to the lives of Danile and Hoda. She may be cast off from society but within her family she is important and powerful. What Foucault refers to as a moment of "difference" occurs when "at times she [Rahel] had the not entirely comfortable feeling that they [Danile and Hoda] could, in some ways, take care of themselves far better than she knew" (33). Rahel has this thought during one of Danile's storytelling sessions, and on her part, there is a recognition that she is not indispensable. When such a thought comes into Rahel's mind, the power she has is placed in doubt. Rahel cares for her husband and child not merely out of duty or because it gives her a sense of power over them. She is seduced by the strength of emotion evoked in herself through feeling loyalty and concern for their well being.

When Rahel realizes that she will die, she focuses all of her energies on preparing her family to survive without her. She is the sole income earner of the family, taking home a meagre salary from cleaning the houses of middle-class Jewish families. However, as the cancer in her stomach continues to grow and she refuses operations fearing death "under the knife", Rahel decides she must give Danile and Hoda some means to live. She discovers a Christian mission set up to teach the blind how to weave baskets. Rahel coaxes Danile with considerable efforts to learn this trade. His resistance stems from denial that Rahel will die, yet Rahel in her practical manner will not allow



herself such an emotional luxury. She is gentle but insistent and finally successful when she thinks to name his fear as shyness. "One could cope with shyness, be persuasive about, argue, rally, insist all without coming too dangerously close to hurting too deeply, as she had already done out of her own pain and fear once or twice" (55). Rahel exerts her authority in terms that she knows her family can cope with; Danile manages his fear when able to contain it in the humorous dialogue of his overcoming shyness in "meeting strangers" (54).

Although Rahel's death is imminent, it is unexpected when it finally arrives. The dying scene is mainly shown from the point of view of Hoda who hears her mother's hardly recognizable voice, "an animal was screaming in her mother's voice" (63). Rahel is at the mercy of her body whose disease she has too long ignored. The silence that normally surrounds her pain is turned into literal screaming anguish. Her last breath fights against what Danile later contemplates as "the abyss discovered by the sundering of lives" (66). Rahel wants her family to remain a whole vessel. Her actual death is compacted into one sentence when a doctor gives his regrets to Danile in the hallway of the hospital. A gap exists between the narratives of Rahel's dying and death. The chapter closes with Hoda asking her father what has happened to her mother but no answer is readily provided in the text. The narrator only notes Danile's "anger", an anger never explicitly stated before by him at the treatment his family has met in the care of society.

Turning the page, Chapter Three opens with Uncle Nate, Danile's rich and powerful relative, who refers to Rahel as "the sack". "Uncle Nate saw Rahel's death as an act of personal malice toward himself" (69). Danile's grief juxtaposed against Uncle Nate's self-

centredness further illustrates the external perceptions of Rahel as "abject". "The sack" as a misnomer at this point in the narrative is especially cruel, drawing on the image of the corpse in a body bag. Kristeva suggests that the corpse is "abject" and "is a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3). Uncle Nate, threatened by Rahel's inner-strength, feels that even in death she is able to exert control over him. His belligerence is a defense against what he sees and fears in her death, an infection of life itself. Kristeva elaborates:

...refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - *cadere, cadaver* (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3).

Rahel's dead body is "abject". Her frail physique failed in her lifetime and has now become simultaneously a site of horror and of honour. The wake is the site of honour where the body is ornamented for a final farewell and people are given the opportunity to pay their last respects. This intention is subverted in Rahel's case as the narrator reveals by concentrating on the petty dialogues of the women of the community. The corpse is made central/peripheral, beautiful/grotesque, and is acknowledged more as a spiritual vessel than for its actual physical presence.

Hoda, a child unversed in the protocol of mourning, knows not how to define boundaries between her alive/dead mother. Rahel's corpse is present but her living

presence is absent. Hoda has difficulty associating the "mound that had lain under the cloth in the living room the first night" (72) with her mother. When she concentrates and envisions *herself* as a corpse, she feels guilty for the insult implied in her revulsion for the physical remains of her mother. The narrator shows Hoda imagining the corpse coming alive: "it might get up and walk right into her room and she'd die of fear and scream for her mamma and then what could it do? Would it say, "I'm your mamma!" And would she have to put her arms around it? Yes, she would have to; she ought to be glad to. You have to love your mother even when she's dead. What would it feel like? But her mother wouldn't do that..." (73). Hoda's dilemma of whether or not she is supposed to embrace the corpse of her dead mother, "the abject", is very real. She feels the boundaries between life and death are blurred, and through her imaginings, tries to reposition her mother.

Hoda's obsessive eating during the mourning period is due to anxiety of the inexplicable rupture in her life but also a fear for the depletion of the parameters of her own physical being. She later transposes the "abject" image of her mother's body by attempting to describe the cause of Rahel's death to the Christian Church ladies who run Danile's basket weaving school. In reference to the theory that "a suppurating spleen" was the cause of death, Hoda is inspired to show them the "grey skinful of spongy, stringy purple stuff in the pot" (90) of soup to illustrate the body organ whose name she only knows in Yiddish. The body as edible is grotesque but the image is inescapable in the corpse which is food for worms. The polite formal conversations which surround Rahel's death try to ward off the horror of the deteriorating borders of the corpse.

After Rahel's death, Uncle Nate wants to place Danile in a senior citizen's home and Hoda in an orphanage even though they are neither old nor completely orphaned. Uncle decides on this course of action as the most expedient way to relieve himself of the care and responsibility of destitute relatives. Foucault suggests that power resides in certain discourses which decide who is or is not ill in a society. Uncle Nate as a respected businessman and benefactor of charities is perceived by the community as knowledgeable and in a good position to decide what plans would best serve his relatives. He assumes this authority and informs Danile and Hoda of their future without regard for their feelings. He speaks in the tone or discourse of an administrator or guardian making important beneficial decisions. Paul Bové's essay "Discourse" discusses Foucault's writings: "Discourses and their related disciplines and institutions are functions of power: they distribute the effects of power. They are power's relays throughout the modern social system" (Bové, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 58). He refuses to think of them in any terms other than financial. Uncle Nate, a man who highly values the notion of family, through his ambivalent decision to separate Danile and Hoda, obviously does not recognize the validity of their family unit. Hoda realizes how powerless she and her father are when subject to this discourse: "It was all a lie, all those other things people said; her mother had known it. All you had to be was rich, and Uncle knew it, he could make the police and the government and everybody come and punish her and her daddy because they were poor and drag them apart..." (100). Although only a child, Hoda perceives herself and her father as pawns in a power structure much larger than themselves. Uncle Nate is shocked and considers them ungrateful when they resist what he terms as generosity. Hoda follows in her mother's

footsteps in that she is a survivor and refuses to lose agency in her life and the cohesion of her family. She is also not unlike her father in that later she would "be able to reconstruct from the shambles of that visit the great myth of their heroic resistance to Uncle" (105).

Danile started weaving baskets as a way to free Rahel of the physical hardship of working as a cleaning woman for their family income and thus allow her to recuperate from her illness. He continues weaving piles of (useless or non-used) baskets after her death. The weaving is a metaphor of his attempt to reconstruct the memory of her. He feels guilt over his initial resistance to learn basket weaving and wonders if it contributed to Rahel's death: "Would that have made any difference? Was that what her screams had been trying to communicate? An accusation? Almost, he wished it were so, to keep it personal, between himself and her, to deny the indifference" (104). The scream, the final sound of communication between Rahel and Danile, is superimposed on the silence of her life. Yet he prefers this scream to no dialogue at all. Danile will use his gift of storytelling and his weaving abilities to recreate Rahel the rest of his life, his own life story too interwoven with hers for it to be otherwise.

Rahel continues to weave in and out of the lives of Hoda and Danile as they struggle to maintain a sense of family. She becomes a guiding force and their important decisions are always measured against whether or not they think Rahel would have approved. What they perceive as Rahel's ideal, rather than what society dictates, both Hoda and Danile use to shape their morality. Rahel's strong commitment to the idea of family is instilled in both husband and child. Yet this ideal proves difficult to maintain in the face of their extreme poverty. They must make sacrifices in order to keep their

family whole. Hoda sells her father's baskets in the markets and takes to cleaning the houses where her mother once worked, but as an adolescent, is not able to earn a decent salary. She slowly turns to prostitution, and the narrator implies this inexorable process happens because Hoda loses the key support of the maternal figure.

The narrative of her parents' marriage continues to resurface as the novel progresses with a certain compulsion to recreate the living Rahel. This tale made heroic by Danile however becomes sordid when Hoda decides to make it public. Following her mother's death, Hoda's yearning to be accepted is increased, and as part of a class activity where students are asked to make a speech about a personal story, she conceives this opportunity as a chance to finally reveal her "true self". Hoda relates the events of the nuptial ritual from her naive child's viewpoint. As she does so, it becomes evident that what was previously hinted at in Danile's narrative is confirmed. A physical as well as a spiritual union of Danile and Rahel took place in the graveyard in front of the rabbi and townspeople as a part of the paganistic ritual to ward off the pogrom. Rahel alludes to this sexual reality earlier on when Danile mentions in the course of his narrative that she was taken for an examination and ritual bath: "Rahel squirmed but dared not interrupt. If the child asked for an explanation here, then she would really put her foot down, she promised herself" (26). Hoda vaguely refers to this union when she reasons with her classmates in obvious imitation of Danile's explanation: "You have to start a life thing happening instead of a death thing" (137). The production of life is celebrated in the pagan ritual. Miss. Boltholmsup, the teacher, articulates what has up to this point in the text only been suggested. She quickly calculates the meaning of Hoda's speech:

What did she mean by "married?" What exactly did she mean? Light and heat flooded Miss. Boltholmsup's brain simultaneously. Suddenly she knew exactly where Hoda was leading, saw in disgusting detail the whole obscene picture, the wretched couple of cripples copulating in the graveyard while a bearded, black-robed, fierce-eyed rabbi stood over them, uttering God knows what blasphemies and unholy incantations, with the whole, barbaric townful of them avidly looking on" (138).

In juxtaposition to this interpretation a little further down the page, Hoda thinks the teacher is emotionally moved by the tale: "Hoda could feel her own excitement mounting with the unbearable poignancy of it as her father and mother took on their holy roles" (138). The scene lends itself to Bakhtin's *Carnival* where holy ritual is subverted into images of the celebrated grotesque and carnal body. However the two key players in this scene are unwilling performers forced into the position of scapegoats. The consummation of their marriage is made public and they are denied the respectability of privacy. Yet observers insist such a story is only "appropriate" (144) in private.

Immediately following this crushing scene, Hoda loses her virginity as a prize to the winner of a crap game. All the holiness, meaning, and ritual of her parent's marriage ceremony is further undermined by the absence of such in Hoda's initiation into sexual intercourse. She justifies her intuitive sense that what she has done is "wrong" by the more powerful emotions she feels towards her mother of abandonment, betrayal, and remorse:

Hoda knew that Mamma wouldn't have liked it at all. The very thought of Mamma knowing it made her feel just sick and awful. Well, what did she have to go and die for, and leave her that way, with Daddy to look after and everything. Did Hoda tell her to go and die? Why should she expect Hoda to do everything just as she would have liked it now, without her even being around (150)?

Hoda patrols her own thoughts with what she feels are the vestiges of her mother's authority. Rahel's memory exerts control over Hoda but the responsibility which Hoda resents in this supposed intrusion of her mother is actually a product of her own mind. Despite her plaintive voice, Hoda asks important questions that refuse to be answered. She continually confesses to her mother with no relief of penance. Hoda too is made silent in that the only person she can discuss the important issues of her life with is her dead mother.

Hoda's desire to conform with the wishes of her mother become ironic in that she mixes her naive child-like understanding of adult admonishments with the realities of her life as a prostitute. Hoda wistfully longs for a confidante but knows none of her customers can play this role, in part because "her mamma had told her that she shouldn't talk to boys about things like what happened to a girl every month" (193). Hoda tries to adhere to her mother's advice but her modesty is incongruous with her employment. When Hoda mentions at a later point in the text that she has her period to some of her customers as an alibi for staying in bed after secretly giving birth, she does so "in spite of what Mamma has said...Mamma didn't understand. She had to" (223). At all of the



important moments in Hoda's life, she confesses and justifies her actions by way of apology to the maternal figure of Rahel.

By the end of *Crackpot*, the development of Hoda's character and the loss of her innocence, allow her to see her parents lives objectively. She perceives Danile and Rahel outside of their parenting roles. Hoda acknowledges the narrative of her heritage: "She saw the old stories, saw through the old stories, saw beyond the old stories to what the man her father was and what the woman her mother must have been; she heard the stories and knew them all, and gathered them back into herself.." (362). This recognition coupled with love for the failed lives of her parents embraces and is embraced by Hoda.

Rahel functions on the margins of society, using the technologies of power of silence, negation, and her sexuality. She generates power out of what is "abject" and the silence which oppresses her and her family. The narrator constructs in Rahel a matriarch who is both powerful and sensitive. She provides a trace in the text which holds together the cracks of her family. The symbol of her matrilineal power and positioning is central in that it becomes a mirror for Hoda and Danile. In turn, their family is a site of power that reflects difference in a hegemony which presents itself as unified. The character of Rahel is important in understanding how power as negation, but not oppression, works effectively. Women in the matrilineal worlds of *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot* access power in unforeseen ways which in turn reveals how they are socially constructed.

## CONCLUSION

An understanding of how power functions in literary texts is important because it affects perceptions of the representation of characters. Power is exerted by literary figures, the narrative and the framework itself in which a written work is constructed. Few critical works have tried to trace the production of power, especially with a consideration for the ways it is negotiated by women. My study has attempted to look at certain technologies of power as they are used by the matriarchs in *Running in the Family* and *Crackpot*. The maternal discourses of these and other texts are heterogenous yet share in the production of female social constructs. The dead mother will continue to recur in Canadian fiction and signify through her body and the retellings of her life.

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