

Infanticide, Suicide, Matricide, and Mother- Daughter Love

Suzanne Jacob's *L'obéissance* and
Ying Chen's *L'ingratitude*

Fiction has the power to create a space where the unspeakable can be represented and explored. One of our greatest taboos, maternal violence, is given powerful expression in two contemporary Québec novels by women: Suzanne Jacob's *L'obéissance* (1991) and Ying Chen's *L'ingratitude* (1995). What links these two novels is their portrayal of a mother who is determined to control every aspect of her daughter's existence and who ultimately causes her death: in *L'obéissance*, a mother orders her eight-year-old girl to drown herself in the icy river behind the family home; in *L'ingratitude*, a young woman plans to kill herself in order to destroy her harsh, overly controlling mother. The two novels are similar in other ways as well, beginning with their titles, a single highly-charged word which condemns the mother-daughter relationship. Both Jacob and Chen locate the failed mother-daughter bond in a broader social and political context (including the reality of male power) rather than seeing it as a merely personal and psychological issue. Their narrative structures allow room for maternal subjectivity to supplement the daughter's point of view, so that the mother, here, is not the larger-than-life monster of much male writing (Thurer 267-71). Instead, she is a woman whose sense of self and of her femininity have been damaged beyond repair, a victim who lashes out at the daughter she loves and wants to spare her own fate at the same time as she takes care to inflict that very fate on her. In both novels, in fact, mother and daughter are so closely bound up that the distinction between one body and the other, between matricide and infanticide, nearly disappears. Paradoxically, although violence and rejection dominate, mother and

daughter love each other and long for dialogue and contact, which never come but which are suggested in the text as a source of hope for the future.

L'obéissance is first and foremost the story of Florence Chaillé, an unhappily married mother of two who falls into a strange depression punctuated by intermittent violence, and of Alice, the brilliant eight-year-old daughter Florence orders into the river. It is also the story of Marie, Florence's attorney, who manages to have Florence acquitted at the cost of her own mental balance; of Marie's husband, Jean, and his love affairs; and of Julie, Marie's friend, who is obsessed with the idea of putting a stop to domestic abuse and political torture, which she sees as closely related. The story of *L'ingratitude* is simpler, although far from linear. As the novel opens, the narrator, Yan-Zi, is already dead. The book contains two narrative threads: one, the story of Yan-Zi after her death, as she observes the reactions of survivors from an out-of-body vantage point while waiting to be cremated and buried, and, the other, the sequence of events that led up to her death, including her stormy relationships with men, with her father and especially with her strong-willed and possessive mother, the person her death is calculated to punish and, she hopes, destroy.

The settings of *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* are very different: contemporary Québec and the People's Republic of China. In Québec, when studying the mother-daughter relationship, we need to take into account the influence of Catholic and nationalistic doctrine, which led clerical and political elites to see women mainly as mothers, encouraging them to have many children to protect Québec as a nation from assimilation by English and Protestant Canada ("la revanche des berceaux"). As well, as Québec texts, Jacob's and Chen's novels should be read in the larger context of women's writing on the mother-daughter relationship. Infanticide and matricide have been an important theme in Québec women's writing since the 1940s: Françoise Loranger's *Mathieu* (1949), Anne Hébert's *Le torrent* (written in 1945, but not published until 1950), Marie-Claire Blais' *La belle bête* (1959) and Diane Giguère's *Le temps des jeux* (1961) all portray real or symbolic matricides. In nearly all these novels, the mother is seen not as evil but as a victim of social pressures and control: she is a woman who has been deeply humiliated either by a man or by an intolerant society and who can express her anger only by mistreating a being even less powerful than she is: her child. The mothers in these novels, with the exception of Louise in *La belle bête*, are abusive mothers because they did not want to be mothers at all, a strong criticism of Quebec society of the time, where birth control was not

available, married women were pressured to reproduce (with priests calling on childless couples to ask what was keeping them from doing their duty), and single mothers were severely condemned (see Lévesque). In some feminist texts of the 1970s, such as the collective play *À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine* (Gagnon *et al.*), the “patriarchal mother,” the agent of male authority, is put on trial and symbolically murdered; in others, mothers and daughters unite to escape from patriarchal reality. For example, in Jovette Marchessault’s short play “Les vaches de nuit,” submissive “day cows” turn into free-spirited “night cows” and celebrate their love for each other in company of other mammals who remember “the time of the mothers,” a matriarchal and pre-Oedipal paradise. Finally, novels of infanticide appear in the 80s (Aline Chamberland, *La fissure*, 1985) and 90s (*L’obéissance* and *L’ingratitude*).¹ Suzanne Jacob’s other novels, especially *Laura Laur* and *La passion selon Galatée*, touch upon the question of mother-daughter bonds and the roots of adult submission to authority in childhood violence, but it is only in *L’obéissance*, a work very unlike any of her other novels, that Jacob devotes her attention almost entirely to these issues.

Born in 1961 in Shanghai, Ying Chen moved to Montreal in 1989. She has published four novels in Québec, all in French: *La mémoire de l’eau* (1992), *Les lettres chinoises* (1993), *L’ingratitude* (1995) and *Immobile* (1998).² Her novels are set in the People’s Republic of China, except for the second, an epistolary novel, which alternates between recent immigrants to Montreal and Shanghai dwellers who only contemplate the possibility of exile. Ying Chen is one of the few Asian Québec writers publishing today; for various linguistic, historical, and geopolitical reasons, there are many more Québec writers of Haitian, Italian, Middle Eastern, North African and Central or South American background.

As background to my reading of Chen’s novel, I offer the following, necessarily incomplete, elements related to gender roles in China.³ Traditional Chinese society was shaped by the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BCE), who defined the ideal woman in terms of “three obediences” (to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son in the case of widows) and four virtues, namely propriety in behavior, speech, demeanour and employment (Thakur 36). This view of women created a doctrine of separate spheres which has proved lasting. Women were denied participation in political institutions and, if they belonged to the upper classes, were secluded within the household; the tradition of foot-binding, which served a number of purposes, also reduced upper-class women’s

mobility. Although norms for female behavior were not always respected, women generally remained confined and subordinate. The only way for an “ordinary” woman to gain power was by having sons and by one day becoming the matriarch whom her daughters-in-law would be forced to obey and serve. Into the nineteenth century and even beyond, deference toward authority and respect for filial duties was still considered to be “the essence of morality and virtue” (Kazuko 96). In such a system, there is little room for values like individual freedom or inalienable personal rights; children belonged to the family unit, ruled by the father, and therefore could be sold if necessary (Sinn 142). The requirement of filial piety remains powerful: Yan-Zi’s mother, in *L’ingratitude*, expects deference and obedience from her daughter, and in fact receives it until Yan-Zi is in her mid-twenties. Yan-Zi’s ultimate rebellion is all the more shocking in the context of a Chinese mother’s expectations. Female chastity (that is, virginity before marriage, conjugal fidelity and celibacy, if not suicide, for widows) was also an important social value despite some intellectuals’ calls for reform of women’s education and social status during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Larson 74-5, 128).

Over the course of the twentieth century, both the Nationalists and the Communists promised women status as equal citizens, although they failed to deliver entirely despite major changes in women’s political, economic and legal status (Gilmartin *et al.* 2; Ziyun 204). The Marriage Law of 1950 allowed individuals to choose their own spouse, rather than have their marriages arranged by their parents; both women and men could file for divorce. Still, the mother Ying Chen describes in *L’ingratitude* was married off by her parents and sees her own role as the traditional one of safeguarding her daughter’s reputation and finding her a good husband. She expects Yan-Zi to remain a virgin, although she is twenty-five, and sees herself as responsible for finding Yan-Zi a good husband, rather than letting her fend for herself. In modern China, abortion of a female foetus, female infanticide or abandonment of baby girls are relatively common, marriage is still seen as the aim of all women (Thakur 58), and the double workday for women is standard despite an official ideology of equality: “The new orthodoxy on gender relations is a curious mixture of patriarchy and socialism, where the tensions between women’s productive and reproductive roles remain unresolved” (Thakur 62).

Generally speaking, and whatever the challenges to gender roles in today’s China, the society Chen depicts in her novels is still a traditional and hierarchical, father-dominated one. It comes under fire from many of her characters

for that very reason. Chen's first novel begins with the narrator's grandmother studying traditional Chinese characters and learning that "une femme qui faisait quelque chose était dangereuse," "une femme n'était bonne que lorsqu'elle avait un fils," and so on, and continues with a presentation of the hierarchy of authority: king, superior, father, son, all of whom the daughter must obey, in addition to obeying her mother in her father's absence (*La mémoire de l'eau* 11-12). The narrator's grandmother has bound feet, while her mother is a transitional figure whose feet were unbound in the middle of the process and are therefore of in-between size. The narrator herself, a young contemporary woman, is no freer than her elders, since she hobbles about on high heels which leave her feet bleeding (in an ironic yet tender scene, her grandmother gives her some leftover bandages.) Chen seems to be suggesting here, as she does in *L'ingratitude*, that there has been little progress for Chinese women over the past few generations.⁴ *L'ingratitude* should therefore be read within the context of contemporary Chinese society, without forgetting that, although Yan-Zi, Chin's protagonist, has never been outside of China, Chen gives her character values (privacy, separateness, individuality, and autonomy) which are at least partly Western⁵ and which challenge the ways in which, according to Chen, even post-Mao Chinese society favours the group over the individual, filial responsibilities over autonomy, and duty over pleasure.

In this paper, I will be examining a number of issues that both *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* raise: the traps involved in the mother-daughter bond, the exclusive nature of the relationship, the causes of maternal violence, the forms the daughter's reaction may take. I will also look at narrative form as overdetermined by the subject of violence, asking to what extent the novel as genre, with its ability to represent multiple and conflicting voices, makes it possible for both maternal and daughterly subjectivities to be heard. Finally, I will attempt to show how, though both novels represent a daughter's death, both also contain a fragile but real hope for the futures of mothers and daughters, despite the weight of male-dominated culture.

Maternal Control and Violence

To make sense of the tangled mother-daughter bond, I have selected an approach based on contemporary feminist psychoanalytic theory. While I would not argue for the applicability of all Freudian theory to non-Western contexts, recent feminist psychoanalytic theory, particularly French psychoanalyst and anthropologist Françoise Coucharde's work on abusive mothers

in Northern Africa and elsewhere, does shed light on both Jacob's and Chen's work. I also am indebted to Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, and many other feminist writers who deal with the mother-daughter relationship. Generally speaking, these writers take the work of Freud as a starting point, while correcting for gender biases and filling in a number of gaps in Freud's exploration of the "dark continent" of femininity.

Couchard's clinical and anthropological observations show that, especially in cultural contexts where boys are preferred to girls, abusive mothers tend to be more strict with their daughters than with their sons, whom they often smother with excessive attention and tenderness (66). Because of her sex, the little girl reminds her mother of the child she herself once was and reactivates the older woman's past or present conflicts with her own mother. In other words, while a boy may be a source of narcissistic gratification and vicarious prestige, a daughter can be a constant reminder of her mother's earlier frustrations and disappointments as a woman in a man's world, a fact North-American researchers have also pointed out:

In each stage of her life, the daughter reawakens the mother's own childhood and adolescent struggles to come to terms with her identity as an inferior female, and reopens all the narcissistic wounds the mother suffered in growing up. . . .

Through the daughter, the mother relives her own rebellion, her own discontent, her own shame at being a woman. (Herman and Lewis 157)

A woman who, first as a daughter, later as a mother, learns that she is worth less than a man, can only pass on the same pain and emotional damage to her daughters. At the same time, some mothers, like those portrayed by Jacob and Chen, overinvest in their relationships with their daughters, becoming controlling and abusive and refusing to recognize the younger woman's growing autonomy and need for her own voice and agency. In fact, according to Couchard, the abusive mother has truly lost sight of the psychic boundaries between her daughter and herself and therefore sees the younger woman as a part of her. A mother who is unhappy in her marriage or thwarted in her ambitions may vent her anger and frustration on her daughter rather than on her husband or on society. In this sense, and because raising children is traditionally seen as the mother's job, poor treatment of daughters is tolerated by fathers and by the community at large as long as it does not become excessive or threaten male privilege. Couchard goes on to identify the shapes maternal control may take. Physical abuse is only the most extreme form along a continuum which includes spying on the daughter, controlling her movements, making her feel responsible for

her mother's unhappiness and refusing the right to express her sexuality. All of these reactions are forms of violence as well.

Although they give rise to very different reactions in their daughters, the mother figures of *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* are strikingly alike. Both are obsessed with their daughters and oblivious to the world around them: outside of that single relationship, nothing really exists in their eyes. Like jealous lovers, they long to keep their beloved to themselves: Florence is tormented at the thought that Alice might care for her father, her grandparents, or her teachers, and Yan-Zi's mother hates her daughter's admirers because they are "des concurrents menaçants, des voleurs et des mangeurs de sa fille" (96). In fact, both mothers are in love with their daughters rather than their indifferent or brutal husbands. Florence falls in love with Alice the day she gives birth to her:

Elle qui n'a jamais rien à dire à personne, elle voudrait tout dire à Alice. Elle lui répète les mêmes choses: tout est blanc parce qu'elle a voulu que tout soit blanc pour l'accueillir, c'est toi, c'est moi, c'est moi, c'est toi. Elle la contemple comme si c'était elle-même qui venait d'arriver sur la terre avec une nouvelle chance. Elle se sent délivrée de tout ce qui pèse sur elle depuis le début de sa vie. (Jacob 70-71)

Confusion over pronouns ("c'est toi, c'est moi . . .") reveals Florence's dangerous inability to distinguish between herself and her daughter. Similarly, although prolonged and painful labour deprived her of that initial ecstasy and sentiment of fusion, there is no doubt that Yan-Zi's mother shares Florence's inability, as her statements reveal: "Tu ne peux pas m'échapper, c'est moi qui t'ai formée, ton corps et ton esprit, avec ma chair et mon sang—tu es à moi, entièrement à moi!" (20). Powerful in Florence, this "ownership of the body and mind," here further legitimized by the traditional concept of filial piety (Maria Ng 202) is even stronger in Yan-Zi's mother, who insists, over and over, that a daughter is always a part of her mother, with no identity of her own. She imagines their future together as a couple, with the men in their lives as necessary, yet peripheral: «une place pour papa qu'on devrait accepter par charité et une autre pour mon futur mari, indispensable quant à la continuité de notre famille» (99).

Issues of protection and mastery merge as these mothers try to save their daughters from the dangers they sense all around them; ironically, their own violent control is the greatest threat of all. Alice's natural energy and vitality become her mother's enemies and must be destroyed: "Pour lui refroidir les sangs, comme elle disait, elle la mit aux douches glacées, puisque les privations de dessert et l'isolement dans la chambre ne suffi-

saient pas" (71). She beats Alice and ultimately causes her death by drowning. Yan-Zi's mother is an expert in what Françoise Couchard calls "le terrorisme de la souffrance maternelle" (125): she constantly reminds her daughter of her own sacrifices and of the physical and emotional scars motherhood has left on her body and psyche. Unlike Florence's, her abuse is generally verbal rather than physical, a mixture of guilt, emotional blackmail, insults, blandishments, and threats:

Elle avait plusieurs fois parlé de s'enfoncer un couteau dans la poitrine, de sortir son cœur saignant et de me faire voir comment par ma faute il vivait mal. "Tu ne vois donc pas, disait-elle, que mon cœur marine dans le sel?" (32)

Although she seems cold and indifferent and is unfailingly critical, Yan-Zi's mother is in fact passionately engaged in controlling her daughter and keeping her close. In addition to displaying her own suffering in the hopes of binding Yan-Zi to her, she refuses even to let Yan-Zi eat dinner out; she must return home directly after work. She also watches her daughter's every movement, keeps Yan-Zi (who, at twenty-five, still lives at home, because of parental expectations and a chronic housing shortage in Shanghai) ignorant of sexual matters, dresses her in shapeless clothing, and urges her to keep her virginity; whenever thwarted, she becomes verbally abusive (for instance, she says that if she had known beforehand what kind of daughter Yan-Zi would be, she would have had an abortion rather than keeping her). In other words, she is, like Florence, a controlling and manipulative mother; Yan-Zi's rebellion clearly shows she finds her mother's actions abusive, violent and unacceptable, even in a context of filial duty and obedience to elders.⁶ Again here, the mother seems to be defending traditional values such as obedience, filial piety, submission to authority and the need to subordinate one's desires to the greater good of the group (she says ants are smarter than Yan-Zi because they understand humans are social animals), all qualities she feels are essential to survival and is proud of passing on to her daughter, while Yan-Zi defends more modern, perhaps more Western values: freedom and autonomy, but also physical tenderness and soft words from her mother, none of which is forthcoming since such actions would undermine her mother's authority.

In an attempt to maintain their early, exclusive bond forever, both mothers refuse to recognize that their daughter is growing up. As Marie realizes, what Florence demands of Alice is that she stay a child forever; Alice, by agreeing to die, grants her mother's wish at the cost of her own life. Yan-Zi's mother says that, as painful as childbirth was, watching her daughter grow

away from her is immeasurably more so. She also insists on the debt of gratitude her daughter owes her in exchange for the mother's "unrepayable love"; the mother thus becomes her child's economic creditor (Chow 159). The images that describe her (a devouring spider, a pair of handcuffs) confirm her despotic nature, at least in her daughter's view, as does this ironic remark: "Avant moi, maman avait possédé d'autres choses. Elle avait élevé des oiseaux en cage" (53).⁷

The inability, or the unwillingness, to distinguish between herself and her daughter leads the abusive mother to leave her mark, physically, on her daughter's body (Couchard 149). Florence repeatedly strikes Alice to relieve her own unspeakable suffering. We are told that Yan-Zi's mother has a snake-shaped Cesarean scar on her stomach and that, if Yan-Zi were to swallow the sleeping pills she has accumulated with suicide in mind, a doctor would cut her stomach open in the same way, marking her with the same scar, to her mother's delight. When her mother takes her hand crossing the street, Yan-Zi says: "J'avais peur que ses ongles solides ne déchirent ma peau et ne s'enfoncent dans ma chair" (95), leaving a permanent injury, an indelible mark. "Writing" on the daughter's body, causing its suffering and ultimate death, is the mother's most powerful desire, although it also causes her great pain.

When these mothers abuse their daughters, they act out of a misguided desire to protect them from the world, not realizing the full extent of their own destructive power over them. Maternal violence, in these novels, is born of love, of a desire for complete and unending union with the daughter, of a tragic inability to distinguish between self and other. It is as if they were entirely lacking even in the permeable ego-boundaries Nancy Chodorow sees as a sign of women's superior relational abilities, so that, instead of being capable of empathy, they literally cannot or will not distinguish between themselves and their child, with disastrous consequences for both.

Daughterly Reactions: (Dis)Obedience and (In)Gratitude

How do daughters react to their violent, controlling mothers? Alice and Yan-Zi seem reverse images of each other: one strives for perfect obedience, the other rebels; one calmly destroys herself, the other angrily plots to destroy her mother. But, as we will see, their reactions are ultimately linked.

Alice has abdicated her right to judge her mother and replaced rebellion with pity and compassion. She intuitively understands Florence's pain and tries to alleviate it through total obedience, even developing "perfection exercises" to control her emotions, thoughts, and involuntary reactions

such as blinking. In fact, Alice has deliberately made her life into a living death. A child who cannot run, sing, play, or laugh out loud, who strives only for perfection, is arguably already dead. Walking into the river is simply the ultimate step in a long suicidal process Alice has begun out of love for her mother.

But a daughter cannot alleviate her mother's suffering; the causes are too distant, too obsessive, rooted in the mother's own childhood. Alice's obedience is as painful to Florence as her rebellion would have been. In reality, obedience is never complete enough. If the child is perfect, the mother will invent new crimes and change the distinction between right and wrong so she can punish her, as she is compelled to, again and again: "La mère devenue gravement maltraitante guette donc, dans ce double qu'est sa fille, le moindre écart avec un modèle qu'elle s'est fixé pour cette dernière. Dès que se produit l'écart, elle n'est plus capable de reconnaître cette fille sur laquelle éclate sa fureur" (Couchard 157). Then finally, one day, Alice walks into the river:

Il est quatre heures de l'après-midi quand l'eau de la rivière vient comme un chat qui a faim se glisser et s'enrouler autour des jambes d'une petite fille. Elle pénètre dans deux petites bottes blanches, dans des collants blancs, elle s'y réchauffe à peine. La petite fille avance en elle, et, elle, elle entre dans la robe jusqu'au ventre chaud de la petite. Une mouette perdue ricane soudain. Le vent s'engouffre dans le bec de la mouette. "Maman, aide-moi, je vais me noyer." La lune pousse l'eau, l'eau pousse la petite fille, lui fait perdre pied, l'emporte, la remplit, bouche, narine, gorge, jusqu'au fond des poumons. (104)

The water which enters Alice's body and blocks up all its orifices recalls both the cold showers Florence forces upon Alice to tame her and the psychic "infibulation"⁸ both have undergone at their mother's hands. The water is also her mother's body, as shown by the frequent repetitions of the pronoun "elle" referring simultaneously to the mother, the water, and the moon. The river as maternal element absorbs and destroys Alice, but also reunites mother and daughter in death: one body, one embrace, and one death for both. If, as Marie later realizes, "grandir, c'est désobéir, c'est rire du monde" (213), which would lead to loss of the mother's love, it becomes clear that Alice died so she would *not* grow up. She is willing to sacrifice herself in order to preserve her mother's love for her.

Yan-Zi is also ready to sacrifice herself, but her motives are very different. Alice acts out of pity and compassion, Yan-Zi out of rebellion and rage. She portrays herself as initially obedient, in an attempt to win her mother's love; but she is quickly declared a hypocrite by that ever-attentive judge. Her planned suicide is carefully calculated to achieve two goals. First of all,

mother and daughter are so closely bound together that death seems to Yan-Zi to be the only escape: “J’avais vécu en tant que l’enfant de ma mère. Il me fallait mourir autrement. Je terminerais mes jours à ma façon. Quand je ne serais plus rien, je serais moi” (24). But Yan-Zi dreams as much of destroying her mother as of freeing herself: “Je brûlais d’envie de voir maman souffrir à la vue de mon cadavre. Souffrir jusqu’à vomir son sang. Une douleur inconsolable. La vie coulerait entre ses doigts et sa descendance lui échapperait” (24). Yan-Zi’s mother derived all her self-worth from her image of herself as a wonderful mother. Without a child, she will no longer be a mother at all; and since being a mother was her only self-definition, she will no longer exist. Finally, by killing herself, Yan-Zi will violate filial piety and deprive her parents of descendants to ensure their immortality and tend their graves. Suicide is therefore also an indirect form of matricide, especially since Yan-Zi plans to write a falsely loving farewell letter that will exacerbate her mother’s regret at losing her.

Love, Hate, Reciprocity and Double Binds

Alice and Yan-Zi react in opposite ways: Alice is willing to die to keep her mother’s love, while Yan-Zi plans to die to escape that love. Alice’s death is motivated by love, Yan-Zi’s by hate. But between mothers and daughters, nothing is as simple as it seems. There is way out of that complex, ambivalent bond: “je comprends maintenant que notre mère est notre destin” (129), says Yan-Zi, half-bitter, half-resigned.

For all her criticism, Yan-Zi constantly describes a longing to fall into her mother’s arms, to stay near her and be loved by her, even to die in her embrace. As Adrienne Rich (242) points out, an unmothered woman may look for her mother all her life, even in the arms of men. The three men who, throughout the novel, interest Yan-Zi to some extent, are all described in relation to her mother: the first turned away from Yan-Zi because her mother was jealous of Yan-Zi’s affection for him; the second, Chun, courts her through her mother and Yan-Zi feels more and more estranged from him. She asks a third young man, Bi, to make love to her to free her from her mother, but during the act and afterwards, she can think of nothing but her mother. Even her boss is reminiscent of the older woman, assigning Yan-Zi “self-criticism” exercises as her mother does, and commending her mother’s severity; the owner of the Restaurant Bonheur, where she spends her final hours, is, like her mother, a strange mixture of approval and severity; it is to this woman, ironically, that Yan-Zi’s mother sold her caged birds.

Another paradox lies in Yan-Zi's actual death, an accident rather than a suicide (or is it both?). As she sits in the restaurant writing yet another version of her letter to her mother, Chun appears at the window and then comes inside: his persistent shadowing of her, his tender but smothering attitude, his blend of concern and reproach, his admonitions that he is acting "for her own good," all remind Yan-Zi of her mother. She runs away, with him in full pursuit, and is hit by a truck. Given that, earlier on, we were told that traffic noise in the street, especially honking horns, reminds her of her mother's voice (20), and that the mother has "[une] voix de sirène et [un] front de fer" (13); given that Chun is clearly a mother substitute; given that Yan-Zi's father was also hit by a passing vehicle, it seems clear that, on a symbolic level, Yan-Zi's suicide has failed: she has, instead, been murdered by her mother. This complex mixture of suicide, matricide and infanticide illustrates the double bind Yan-Zi finds herself in. She has to destroy herself to become herself; either way, she dies.

The major female characters of *L'obéissance* are similarly trapped in a double bind. By destroying Alice, Florence obtains a measure of revenge for the wounds to her self-esteem, but she is also painfully aware of destroying her only hope of beginning her life again, of seeing her daughter, that other self, flourish where she could not. As Nancy Huston (127) has pointed out through her analysis of a number of women writers, matricide, for a woman, is always akin to self-destruction; infanticide may come even closer. Although Florence kills Alice, she too is destroyed when Alice disappears: "tous les efforts d'Alice pour l'aimer et la séduire, la séduire et l'aimer lui parviennent enfin et cet amour la cloue sur place, lui donne la mort." For Alice, the contradiction is equally deadly: her mother does not want her to grow up. If she does, she will destroy her mother; but the only way to avoid growing up is to end her own life. Again, either way, she dies.

Marie, the attorney who successfully defends Florence, is also trapped. She becomes both the guilty mother and the murdered child:

... je me suis mise à vivre la vie de Florence pour pouvoir avoir accès à Florence.
 [...] Je ne cesse pas de voir Alice entrer dans l'eau. Je manque d'air à mon tour.
 Je l'ai trahie. J'ai trahi Alice. (175-6)

For Marie, a victim of child abuse herself, there is no way out of the trap. If she loses Florence's case, she betrays her parents; if she wins, she betrays Alice and herself. As a victim of childhood abuse defending an abusive mother, she defends the cruelty that was inflicted on her, trivializing her own suffering and that of others like her, legitimizing torture, just as Julie

foresaw in her opening monologue on dictatorships and torture. Is Marie simply another over-obedient child, allowing her beloved parents to kill her? Or is she an abusive adult conspiring with the system to allow infanticide to go unpunished? The contradiction is so great that Marie cannot survive it. In fact, all the major characters, Julie, Florence and Alice, and Marie, are caught up in issues of violence and obedience, problems of identification and autonomy, as are numerous minor characters space restrictions make it impossible to deal with here.

All these traps and insoluble paradoxes raise the same question: how can mothers and daughters be freed from obedience and its deathly consequences? Rethinking the mother-daughter relationship and recognizing the violence it inevitably contains, in a society where the Father's Law dominates, will lead inevitably to a new ethic of human relationships, both private and public, as we will see. This new ethic first requires a critical look at male responsibility and the social order as a whole.

The Father

Little is said in *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* about the father: the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter plays out to its violent end almost as if he had never existed. Rather than the traditional Oedipal triangle, we are faced with a mother-daughter dyad whose very closeness makes it deadly.

As Couchard points out, when child-rearing and discipline are left to women alone, men maintain distance and prestige. They are often willing to let mothers dominate daughters as long as their own powers and privileges remain unchallenged; in fact, this kind of domination is a kind of safety valve to direct women's violence against their children rather than against men. In many cases, there is a "une blessure narcissique, une humiliation permanente faite à la femme, dans son rapport avec l'homme: il serait trop dangereux de s'attaquer directement à ce dernier, le ressentiment et la vengeance sont donc détournés sur l'enfant" (35).

The mothers of Jacob's and Chen's novels have suffered this kind of humiliation, first at the hands of their own mothers, then of their husbands, and they pass it on to their daughters. Florence's mother abused her, showering her with arbitrary punishments, insults and blows, while her husband enjoys forcing her to dance naked for him and barely notices when she mistreats their children. In fact, the children themselves are a punishment he inflicts on her through marital rape:

Hubert crut qu'elle lui résistait. Il fallait lui montrer. Il lui montra. Neuf mois plus tard, Florence accouchait d'un garçon, Rémi. Onze mois après Rémi, ce fut Alice. (69)

Florence soon becomes consumed with weariness, blind anger and an obsession with order and obedience. At the very end of the novel, the scene that gave rise to Alice's death is finally revealed:

Alice qui se lève la nuit en proie à un cauchemar. Elle ouvre la porte de la chambre de ses parents. Florence danse nue. Hubert va la prendre. Florence veut s'échapper, fuir le regard d'Alice. Hubert la force à continuer. Il la tient. Il l'oblige. Il a vu Alice. Il s'est excité davantage. La fin de tout, pour Florence. Alice recule, referme la porte de la chambre. (179)

Unable to bear the idea that Alice has judged her, Florence must eliminate her. The primal scene Alice witnesses here, what Couchard calls "le théâtre de la sexualité maternelle" (89), is also the scene of woman's humiliation by man and is deadly for the little girl who witnesses it.⁹

As Adrienne Rich (241) has noted, victimization of the mother is humiliating and disempowering for the daughter-spectator. Yan-Zi witnesses another kind of humiliation. We are told that her mother was beaten by her parents with a bamboo rod "pour qu'elle apprenne à se soumettre et aussi à s'imposer dès le moment venu" (92),¹⁰ forced into an arranged marriage, and subjected to various privations. In addition, Yan-Zi's father, a noted professor and intellectual, spends all his time in his study writing, indifferent to his wife and daughter and to material concerns of all kinds. Although the father is clearly a victim both of fate and of changing times (he was hit by a car and pushed into early retirement after the accident), he is also a figure of power for his daughter and his wife;¹¹ his disgust with the body and with food, in fact with "toutes ces insignifiances qu'il qualifiait de charnelles" (90), makes them ashamed of their own femininity. The mother's grudging admiration, resentment and repressed anger at the father are deflected towards Yan-Zi, who clearly recognizes her father's responsibility:

S'il était allé plus souvent au marché qu'au musée, s'il avait daigné se montrer un peu plus attentif à maman et à ce qu'elle faisait à la maison—combien de fois par semaine en effet nettoyait-elle le plancher? . . . —maman aurait été moins dépendante de ma présence et de ma vertu. (30)

While not a tyrant (although he does beat his daughter when he learns she has had sex for the first time), Yan-Zi's father exercises considerable power. He does so not by actively dominating his wife and daughter, but by withdrawing into his own work, around which the entire household revolves; after his retirement, he still shuts himself up in his study, although he no longer writes, without any attempt to become closer to his family. The

father's indifference, the male-female, mind-body split he encourages, his withdrawal and quiet scorn, have left Yan-Zi with the sole responsibility for her mother's happiness. While realizing her father is guilty too, Yan-Zi dreams only of punishing her mother, knowing he will remain untouched and indifferent no matter what she does.

Neither Jacob nor Chen blames mothers alone or endows fathers with all the virtues; indifferent or abusive fathers are the accomplices, even a root cause, of maternal cruelty. Jacob draws a striking parallel between "normal" family behaviour (children must be taught obedience), child abuse, and oppressive political regimes, where the leader plays an idealized father role. Ying Chen insists on the way children are dominated by adults only to become dominating adults themselves, so that a system based on a hierarchy of power (old over young, men over women) is perpetuated. Maternal violence is therefore part of a larger social order, which these texts challenge, rather than an individual pathology.

Narrative Form and Maternal Violence

How does the form of these novels mirror the theme of mother-daughter violence? One similarity between them, closely related to their subject matter, is their tone. Throughout much of *L'ingratitude*, there is a curious contrast between Yan-Zi's violent anguish and her detached, cynical tone as she methodically plans to die in the way that will be the most painful for her mother. In *L'obéissance*, after an initial monologue by Julie, there is a dramatic shift in tone as the story of Florence and Alice begins. All marks of spontaneous oral discourse disappear. Sentences become shorter and their structures more rigid; Julie's conversational first person gives way to an icy, detached third-person narrative. The use of the simple past tense and a flat, almost journalistic tone create an impression of fatality: even at the outset, we sense that there is no hope for these characters, no way out. Perhaps this kind of detached tone, in both novels, is at once a recognition of the fact that it is too late for these mothers and daughters and a defence mechanism to avoid being destroyed by the almost unbearable effort of telling the story.

Couchard points out that one of the consequences of abuse is a kind of fragmentation of the self (152), mirrored here by extreme narrative fragmentation. As we have seen, Ying Chen's novel follows two threads, before and after Yan-Zi's death; many scenes are not precisely located in time and the total effect is of a kind of breakdown in the links between events. The very brief chapters, ranging from two to five or six pages in length (35 chapters in

a 133-page novel), add to the general effect of collapse and destruction of the self. In *L'obéissance*, narrative fragmentation is once again a sign of the breakdown of self and the relationship to others in the context of maternal violence. Infanticide is so unthinkable that it is possible only to circle around it without facing it directly;¹² at the same time, it affects the lives of all the characters in the novel, even those who do not know the mother-daughter couple involved, so that every other story is linked to that one. The heart of the novel, the story of Florence and Alice Chaillé, covers only 70 pages of Jacob's 250-page novel. It is located between the first-person meditations of Julie, who is obsessed by the question of private and public violence, and the third-person story of Marie. The novel also contains a number of other elements which at first glance seem superfluous, including a long account of one of Marie's dreams, the story of an unsuccessful love affair between Marie's husband, Jean, and a woman named Muriel, and a passage relating the death of Jean's mother. A closer reading reveals the importance of these scenes for the novel as a whole: although space restrictions make it impossible to discuss them here, they all deal with violence, motherhood, and an unspeakable secret. Violence by or against mothers recurs in nearly every episode, so that readers are confronted with multiple images of the unbearable.

Another formal similarity between the novels is the extensive use made of repetition. As Marianne Hirsch points out, maternal intrigue, if it finds expression at all, is always "repetitive, literal, hopelessly representational," rooted in the suffering body "rather than in the eyes or in the voice which can utter its cries of pain" (185). In *L'ingratitude*, Yan-Zi returns obsessively to the same images: the mother "swallowing" her up, the caged birds, the father writing in his office, the tubes of pills in her purse, her body waiting to be burned and buried. We have seen how the rare events of the novel (relationships with Chun and Bi) constantly return to the mother-daughter bond, and how Yan-Zi acts out her love-hate relationship with her mother on her own body. The result of these recurrent obsessions is of painful stagnation and inability to move forward, even into death. The immobility of the novel's form mirrors the impossibility of finding a way out of the mother's grasp. Dominant metaphors (such as the mother as devouring spider or as keeper of caged birds, as seen above, and the mother's womb as both prison and refuge), as well as the very limited number of settings the novel represents (mostly the family apartment and the Restaurant Bonheur, with a few scenes in Yan-Zi's office, a park, or a streetcar, all of which are confined and/or crowded spaces), also contribute to a sense of imprisonment

and stagnation, showing that there is no way out of the trap.

In *L'obéissance*, repetition is also the textual figure for what is unspeakable in maternal discourse. Stories of abuse constantly echo each other from one part of the novel to another. Julie insists on the importance of breaking the silence surrounding torture:

Comment un petit couple humain en vient à saigner à mort ses enfants bien-aimés, comment ces enfants bien-aimés laissent leurs parents les saigner à mort, voilà ce que je vais m'obliger à essayer de dire, de redire et de montrer. (Jacob 11)¹³

There is a cruel paradox here: to avoid the repetition of torture, Julie must constantly repeat that torture must not be repeated. Hence the bogged-down sentences of the novel, unable to break out of the cycle of cruelty which all the novel's episodes reflect as in a series of mirrors all trained on the same unbearable scene.

As both these novels show, maternal subjectivity, when violently repressed, can express itself only through violence. Repetition is thus the rhetorical device which both resists violence and continually reinscribes it in the text.

Who Speaks?

Marianne Hirsch has pointed out the importance of distinguishing between writing as a daughter and writing as a mother. Pursuing that idea a step further, we must avoid judging a mother as "bad" simply because her daughter says she is; we need to look at whether, and how, the text accommodates the mother's subjectivity as well as her daughter's. Some authors, writing as daughters exclusively, reduce the mother to silence, which is an act of aggression against her.

The daughter is the sole narrator of *L'ingratitude*, and her portrayal of her mother as a monster is certainly convincing. But is the mother really a larger-than-life figure of horror, or is she deeply and sincerely concerned for the well-being of the daughter she is convinced cannot protect herself? The reader is left in some doubt. Certainly Yan-Zi seems helpless on her own, and directly or indirectly, the text often proves her mother right. Early in the novel, we are told how she insists on holding Yan-Zi's hand to cross the street, an overprotective attitude which Yan-Zi resists. Yet, the first time Yan-Zi says she feels truly that she is out alone, after being sent away from her mother's house, she is in fact hit by a truck. It is almost as if the mother had been right all along in trying to protect Yan-Zi from herself.

Even the novel's title seems mother-oriented, ironically reflecting the mother's negative judgment of the daughter rather than the opposite. And

Yan-Zi is so closely bound to her mother, so aware of every heartbeat in her mother's breast, so struck by her words, that she effortlessly conveys her mother's opposing viewpoint even as she is attacking her. Time and time again, direct quotations from the mother, Yan-Zi's own musings, and narrative action plunge us into the mother's subjectivity, as when the older woman expresses her refusal to be destroyed by her daughter's death:

Je te préfère ainsi, commence-t-elle tout bas. Oui, je te préfère en poudre. [. . .] Avec ta mort, tu comptes affoler ta mère, ma pauvre idiote, tu as peut-être raison, mais ton silence suffit pour me calmer maintenant, me sauver du désarroi dans lequel tu as voulu me pousser. (111)

Although the daughter's voice dominates, there is a kind of double effect, a two-voiced perspective within a single-voiced narrative. The mother's pain and her strange bravery are as apparent as her recriminations and her cruelty.

The situation in *L'obéissance* is more complex. There are first-person narrators, notably Marie and Julie (both of whom are also described in segments narrated in the third person), and a great deal of the novel shifts back and forth from first-person narrators to a kind of free indirect speech which is not attributed to any particular character; however, Florence is never allowed to speak as a narrator. In fact, she seldom speaks at all: her frustrated thoughts and her violent actions are reported, rarely her words. In sharp contrast with the long-winded and highly articulate musings of characters in other parts of the novel (Marie, Jean, Julie), Florence is reduced by her circumstances to near silence. Alice is not a narrator either, although we do have slightly greater access to her thought processes (up to but not including the day when she walks into the river). Neither has enough perspective on her situation to succeed as a narrator. It would be fair to say that a daughterly perspective dominates overall in the novel, since Julie and Marie speak as daughters rather than as mothers, but Muriel is a mother figure who appears briefly and Jean calls up his own mother's dying words. In addition, the multiple perspectives encourage readers to seek out the hidden subjectivities and the unspoken sufferings that lie in the margins of the text or between the various spaces it constructs.

Exclusive focus on a single viewpoint means doing violence to the one who is silenced. In order to eliminate both matricide and infanticide, the stories of mothers and daughters need to incorporate both perspectives, so that each can recognize the other's subjectivity instead of seeing her as the enemy who threatens her own existence and must be eliminated. Mutual recognition would also make it possible to establish the psychic and physical boundaries whose lack gave rise to abuse and violence. Only if they can recognize each

other as separate beings, listen to each other and become open to each other's views can mothers and daughters begin to live fully, both as separate beings and as part of a dyad that could strengthen rather than destroy them. To the extent that they allow, or at least point to the need for, mutual affection and understanding, both novels hold out a promise for the future.

Is There Hope?

Both novels, as we have seen, show that when maternal subjectivity appears, there is at least some hope for dialogue across generational boundaries. Another sign of hope is the obvious, although distorted, love between mother and daughter. There is a feeling that everything could have been—or could be—different, if only mother and daughter could talk to one another. Yan-Zi's mother is invariably stern and unsmiling, an uncompromising figure of authority. But one day, Yan-Zi sees her laughing and talking with a neighbour woman and is dazzled by her beauty, her scent, her luminous smile. When the mother realizes Yan-Zi is watching, she frowns and begins questioning her about her homework. But the suggestion remains that a bond could form between a smiling, pleasure-loving woman and a daughter who would be happy at her side. Similarly, time and time again, Florence and Alice just miss making contact: “Moi, je cherche Florence, répond Alice, toute la nuit, tout le jour, mais je suis trop petite pour soulever le mur” (100).

A third form of hope lies in the fact that a private tragedy, when it becomes public, calls attention to abuse in both “normal” and violent relationships. Florence is acquitted in court, logically, since she was only enforcing patriarchal law, that is, obedience and conformity. Still, her action makes abuse a public issue rather than one that takes place behind closed doors and, in that sense, it challenges the social system, which, according to Jacob, is based on violence and mute consent. Yan-Zi's death, giving rise as it does to public scandal, raises the same issues, exposing family violence to public scrutiny.

A final note of hope occurs at the very end of each novel. Both narratives begin after the daughter's death when it is already too late to change what happened, and circle back to examine the events leading up to it. Yet both novels close in such a way as to require a rereading that offers the promise of a different path. Shortly after her successful defence of Florence, Marie becomes pregnant and is then diagnosed with cancer. Her husband, Jean, is convinced she wants to die before her daughter is born so she can break the cycle of

violence and avoid repeating her own tragic past.¹⁴ By letting herself and her daughter die, Marie feels she can put an end to the cycle of abuse; while she may condone past violence, she refuses to pass it on to future generations. The final passage encourages us to reread the novel in a different light:

—Elle ne m'aimera donc jamais? Je suis si fatiguée de . . .

Elle avait pris ma main. Elle respirait ma paume:

—Chèvrefeuille, a dit Marie. J'essaie de la remettre au monde, je n'y arriverai pas. Oh! Julie, je n'y arriverai pas, il faut tout recommencer!

—Ta fille?

—Oh non, Julie, ma mère. (250)

Marie dreams of beginning again, undoing the past, healing old wounds. She dreams of a dialogue with her dead mother that would lead to forgiveness, understanding, and a new sense of well-being. Her dual status as both mother and daughter is of key importance, but she dies before she can take advantage of it to change the mother-daughter relationship. Fortunately, her efforts will not die with her, connected as they are to the concerns of the novel as a whole, and pursued by Julie. The fact that the novel ends, not with Alice's death and Florence's acquittal, but with Marie's willed, hopeful death and Julie's continuing commitment to understanding and action, holds out the promise of a better future.

Similarly, at the close of *L'ingratitude*, Yan-Zi recalls the hypocritical letter she wrote to sharpen her mother's remorse through false words of love; it now seems to her that every word was true. She longs for her mother to receive this loving message and realize the depths of Yan-Zi's feeling for her. The hate and resentment emphasized throughout give way to tenderness, requiring us to reread and reinterpret the whole novel in that light. The final paragraph is revealing: "À travers le brouillard de cette mémoire, me parvient, comme une lamentation enchantée, une dernière voix humaine, le cri d'un nourrisson peut-être: Maman!" After life is over, even beyond death, one word and one longing remain, the need for the mother.

A dead daughter yearns to have her words of love read and accepted; a dying daughter who refused to be a mother longs to give birth to her mother and alleviate the mother's suffering, which gives rise to the daughter's, and so on, without end. Both Jacob and Chen seem to be suggesting that only this kind of mothering of mothers by daughters, this kind of retroactive dialogue and healing, holds out any hope of renewal. As Luce Irigaray has stated, mothers and daughters have been separated from each other by the law of the Father. Rethinking the mother-daughter relationship is therefore

a way of beginning to challenge the social order as it stands, however solid it may be. As readers of these novels, we are invited to reconstruct meaning, rethink the mother-daughter bond, reinvent an ethics of human contact based not on control and violence but on mutual recognition and respect. As extreme examples of failed mother-daughter dialogue, *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* point to the need for exploring new ways of reconciling intimacy and autonomy on either side of generational borders. Even after death—especially after death—everything can, and must, begin again.

NOTES

- 1 These works and others are studied in Saint-Martin, *Le nom de la mère*.
- 2 For background information on Chen and her novels, see Bordeleau, Chartrand and Lachance. For a brief but interesting consideration of *L'ingratitude* which appeared after this article was written, see Lequin.
- 3 The following remarks are drawn from Chow, Gilmartin *et al.*, Kazuko, Larson, Sinn, Thakur, Wolf and Witke, and Ziyun. Since *L'ingratitude* is not a novel of immigration, it does not raise issues common among Asian diaspora writers, which, as usefully summarized by Mari Peepre, include “the loneliness and alienation of the displaced person, the struggle to survive in harsh circumstances, the battle to retain their heritage culture while adjusting to the strange, new host culture, and the search for tradition and roots by the partially acculturated second and third generation” (80). I will therefore not refer here to the many excellent critical studies on Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian women’s writing from which I have drawn elsewhere to study Amy Tan and Fay Myenne Ng (Saint-Martin, “Ta mère”). For reasons which include material conditions, changing maternal and daughterly attitudes in a host culture, and daughters’ desire to become more like the Caucasian friends who support them in their desire for autonomy, the mother-daughter relationship described in *L'ingratitude* is different from the more reciprocal, caring and tender, although still often conflictual and even manipulative, mother-daughter relationships described by Chinese Canadian or Chinese American women authors like Patricia Chao, Gish Jen, Larissa Lai, Sky Lee, Aimee Liu, Fae Myenne Ng, Mei Ng, and Amy Tan, among others.
- 4 Obviously, I study only the relationship Chen depicts in *L'ingratitude*, with no intention to generalize about mother-daughter relationships in contemporary Chinese literature.
- 5 Ying Chen insists that mothers like Yan-Zi’s “existent ici [that is, in Canada] aussi” (quoted in Lachance 90), adding that she prefers to explore universal themes rather than those that apply only to China.
- 6 Although I will not deal with issues of immigration here, it is possible that Chen’s character’s rejection of her mother resembles the process of “demonization” described by Peepre: the mother becomes a symbol of a negative past and the daughter’s rejection of her is also a rejection of the motherland and mother tongue. Dubois and Hommel write that “c’est pour échapper . . . à l’hégémonie de ce texte (familial/national) que la narratrice de *La mémoire de l’eau* quitte sa patrie à la toute fin de son histoire” (44).
- 7 At the end of the novel, once Yan-Zi is dead, the mother is again happily occupied with some birds in a cage, indicating that her need for mastery has not changed.

- 8 The term "infibulation" is used several times to indicate the severe kind of emotional and physical frigidity Florence will suffer all her life
- 9 Rémi, Alice's brother, died a little earlier, after fighting with a schoolmate who taunted him with the fact that his mother was a stripper before her marriage. As in the case of Alice, a glimpse of the mother's sexuality is fatal to her child.
- 10 This repetition over generations implies that, in Chen's opinion, the move from submissive childhood to abusive adulthood is legitimized, even institutionalized.
- 11 In *L'ingratitude*, other parents also exercise stringent control over their children's lives: one of Yan-Zi's colleagues' father opens her mail, while her little brother reads her diary out loud at the dinner table. Yan-Zi finds such behavior, however widespread it may be, unacceptable.
- 12 There is a parallel here with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, another story of the murder of a daughter by her mother.
- 13 For an in-depth study of repetition in Jacob's novel, see Saint-Martin, "Les deux femmes . . ." and *Le nom de la mère*.
- 14 Years before, Marie had an abortion rather than bearing "un enfant qu'on menacerait de noyer à [s]on insu" (242).

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