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Mothers on the Edge: Identity and Resistance in “Borders” and “A Sorrowful Woman”

Motherhood in literature has often been romanticized as a site of boundless love, selflessness, and stability. It is portrayed as an idealized role that leaves little room for complexity, struggle, or refusal. Yet behind the myth of the “good mother” lies a more unsettling truth: many mothers experience profound psychological, cultural, and institutional pressures that shape, and often distort, their sense of identity. Gail Godwin’s “A Sorrowful Woman” (1976) follows a white middle-class mother who, overwhelmed by domestic life, gradually withdraws from her family and kills herself. Thomas King’s “Borders” (1993) tells the story of a Blackfoot mother who resists colonial labels by identifying solely as “Blackfoot” at the U.S.-Canada border. Though set in different cultural and political contexts, both stories feature mothers who challenge the limitations placed on them by family, society, and nation. Through contrasting portrayals, one focused on internal psychological despair and the other on external political resistance, Godwin and King illuminate the cost of maternal defiance and the marginalization women face when asserting agency within their environments. Using narrative voice, structure, tone, motifs and symbolism, both authors reveal the emotional and structural violence inflicted upon mothers who cannot or choose not to conform. This essay argues that maternal defiance, whether inward or outward, functions as a powerful act of self-preservation, and that literature makes visible these often-overlooked forms of quiet endurance.

In “A Sorrowful Woman”, Gail Godwin employs a detached, third-person limited narrative voice to emphasize the emotional distance between the mother and the world around her. The protagonist remains unnamed throughout the story, a narrative choice that represents her erasure not only by those around her but also by a mother’s systematic narrative itself. This reflects what Julia Kristeva terms the

"abject", the cast-off aspects of identity that society refuses to acknowledge (Kristeva 4). The mother's withdrawal is mirrored by the story's flat tone and emotional distance. When the narrator states, "The sight of them made her so sad and sick she did not want to see them ever again," (Godwin 167) her pain is presented without explanation or introspection, rendering her suffering incomprehensible within traditional maternal roles. In contrast, Thomas King's "Borders" uses a first-person narrative told through the son's perspective, allowing the mother's defiance to be filtered through a lens of young innocence, but also admiration and confusion. While the mother in "Borders" is also unnamed, her identity is fiercely focused on her Blackfoot nationality. "'Blackfoot' my mother told him. / Ma'am? / 'Blackfoot,' my mother repeated. / Canadian? / 'Blackfoot.' (King 135) highlighting her quiet but unwavering resistance. Though her words are few, the narrative voice ensures her stance is not erased but emphasized, framing her silence and repetition as acts of strength seen as rebellion. By contrasting these two narrative strategies, the texts illustrate how maternal resistance, whether expressed through silent incomprehensibility or repeated vocal defiance, challenges the limits of societal recognition, revealing both the vulnerability and power embedded in a mother's refusal to conform.

The structure and tone of each story reflect the nature and consequence of maternal resistance. In "A Sorrowful Woman", the fragmented structure of surreal and disconnected scenes mirrors the protagonist's mental unraveling. The tone remains detached, creating a sense of emotional indifference. When she begins to isolate herself, the narrator reports that she "All day long she stayed in the white room," (Godwin 171) a detail that emphasizes her total retreat without offering access to her interior world. Later, she attempts to reclaim purpose through traditional domestic tasks such as baking "five loaves of warm bread, roast[ing a] stuffed turkey, glaz[ing a] ham" (Godwin 174), only to abandon this effort, highlighting her struggle to conform. Her resistance is quietly accommodated by her husband as he takes over domestic responsibilities without complaint, encouraging her sense of erasure. Godwin uses this husband's act to highlight the subtle and systemic forces that erase women's identities,

suggesting that even the accommodation in 1976, when men were rarely expected to manage the home, can reinforce a woman's sense of disposability rather than empowerment. During the post–World War II years, American society emphasized a strong return to traditional gender roles, particularly positioning women as mothers and homemakers (Marshal 29). The protagonist's passivity becomes a final, tragic form of resistance, an attempt to reclaim identity through choice. In contrast, "Borders" unfolds in a linear structure, with a tone that is often humorous despite the underlying seriousness of the mother's standoff with border authorities. Her resistance is not internalized but outwardly directed at an accommodating system. The repetitive questioning functions as both a literal and symbolic standstill, dramatizing the bureaucratic refusal to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty. The child recalls, "we had nowhere to go, that neither the Americans nor the Canadians would let us in," (King 140) capturing the absurd limbo. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, the story critiques the rigidity of colonial borders and exposes how Indigenous identities are made invisible within nation-state logics. (Simpson 46) The system is overwhelmed not by her emotion but by the weight of her intersectional identity, as a mother, an Indigenous person, a woman, and a noncompliant citizen, all of which resist easy classification. King's conclusion, in which the mother's persistence gains media attention and ultimately forces a concession from authorities, becomes a subtle yet powerful assertion of Indigenous sovereignty. Thus, structure and tone in both stories are not merely choices but crucial mechanisms for revealing how maternal resistance plays out.

Symbolism plays a key role in both stories, offering deeper insight into the internal and external forces shaping maternal resistance. In "A Sorrowful Woman", the motif of the closed door, represents her growing alienation from her family. When the narrator notes, "She got herself upstairs and locked the door," (Godwin 169) the door becomes a potent symbol of both retreat and exclusion, representing her attempt to carve out a space where she can exist beyond the expectations of motherhood. This resonates with Virginia Woolf's argument in A Room of One's Own that women require literal and

figurative space to think, feel, and exist freely (Woolf 4). Yet, unlike Woolf's intellectual refuge, the mother's room offers no liberation, only isolation. The symbolic weight of the closed door and physical distance serves to externalize the psychological cost of a mother refusing to perform the role society demands of her. Conversely, in "Borders", the border itself becomes the central symbol, at once a literal checkpoint and a metaphor for the ideological boundaries that marginalize Indigenous identity. The mother's insistence on identifying as "Blackfoot" functions as a symbolic reclamation of identity, one that echoes Rosi Braidotti's theories of posthuman subjectivity, where identity is not fixed but flows beyond colonial frameworks. (Braidotti 2) Her stand is both maternal and political; by refusing to yield, she preserves not only her own sense of self but her son's cultural inheritance. Revisiting Virginia Woolf's argument in A Room of One's Own, the mother claims a kind of symbolic space by resisting the imposed definitions of nationhood. Though she has no literal room of her own, there is a space of sovereignty at the border, however brief, in which her identity is self-defined rather than state-sanctioned. These symbols, the closed door and the border, function as each mother's version of her own space where they assert identity and autonomy in defiance of the roles and boundaries imposed upon them.

Ultimately, "A Sorrowful Woman" and "Borders" reveal how maternal resistance unfolds within vastly different but equally confining systems. The mothers in both stories are silenced, marginalized and claim space through symbolic acts to create their own, fragile sanctuaries where identity is briefly self-authored. Yet while these acts of resistance are deeply significant, they are also invisible to the children who witness them. The child in "A Sorrowful Woman" does not understand that his mother has died, just as the boy in "Borders" cannot fully grasp the cultural and existential battle his mother is fighting. Through this recurring motif of childhood innocence, both stories are the quiet tragedy of maternal struggle—the way it is often overlooked, misread, or softened through a child's eyes. In this structural, poignant and symbolic way, both stories not only center maternal resistance but also reveal

how its emotional and symbolic weight often goes resisted, unacknowledged, and intersectional, even by those closest to it.

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