

Trauma and Reconciliation: An Interpretation of Intersubjective Mother-Daughter Relationship in Rita Dove's *Mother Love*

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Abstract

In the poetry collection Mother Love (1995), Rita Frances Dove, the contemporary American Poet Laureate, rewrites the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone by embedding these two prototypes within the lives of a modern African American mother and daughter, offering a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in maternal relationships. Through multiple narrative voices, the collection portrays the psychological pressure and emotional wounds inflicted upon the daughter as a result of the mother's compromised subjectivity, as well as the estrangement and conflict arising from mutual emotional withdrawal. This thesis, based on trauma theory, interprets the consequences of the absence of intersubjectivity in the mother-daughter relationship in the collection from three dimensions: symptoms of trauma, causes of trauma, and healing of trauma, revealing the importance of the reconstruction of intersubjectivity. As a meaningful social relationship, the mother-daughter relationship holds practical significance in the contemporary context. This poetry collection interweaves myth and reality, endowing the mother-daughter trauma with historical depth, highlighting the critical role of intersubjectivity in fostering relational restoration, and providing the possibility of healing the mother-daughter trauma.

Keywords: Rita Frances Dove, *Mother Love*, Trauma; Intersubjectivity, Mother-Daughter Relationship

Introduction

Rita Frances Dove (1952-) is the first African-American poet laureate in the United States and the only American poet to have received both the National Humanities Medal and the National Medal of Arts. She has received many important awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the Wallace Stevens Award, and the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Rita Frances Dove has significantly contributed to American literature, especially African American poetry. Her poetry, from the unique perspective of black women, has absorbed the nourishment of American, European, and African American cultures and has integrated various art forms such as music and dance, presenting her unique worldviews in the exploration of African American identity, history, and culture, with a highly experimental style. She significantly impacted the "post-blackness" movement in the United States. Dove has published eleven volumes of poetry since the release of his first collection, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980). In addition to poetry, Dove has also contributed to fiction and drama, having published the novel *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), the short story collection *Fifth Sunday* (1985), and the Play *The Darker Face of the Earth: A Verse Play in Fourteen Scenes* (1994).

Mother Love (1995) is Dove's sixth collection of poems, consisting of seven chapters and thirty-five poems, most of which are sonnets or sonnet sequences. In the prologue "An Intact World," Dove tells the story of the ancient Greek myth of how Hades abducts Demeter's daughter Persephone and how Demeter searches for her daughter, which serves as the mythological tone for the entire collection. This myth explains the alternation of four seasons and is "an archetypal narrative of women's experience" as it depicts the separation and bond between mother and daughter, inspiring later literary exploration of the mother-daughter relationship (Hurst 176). Dove creatively rewrites the archetype of mother and daughter of Greek mythology, sets it in modern society, and tells the story of a daughter fleeing her mother's control for Paris. Through the intersection of mythological stories and contemporary life, Dove explored the complex emotions between mother and daughter and provided a delicate portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship.

The current research on the collection mainly focuses on themes such as mythological rewriting, female growth, mother-daughter relationships, and black female identity. Zeng Wei argues that the collection's structure mirrors Persephone's dual travels "aboveground" and "underground," which, with autobiographical elements of Dove, symbolise the self-knowledge of women at different life stages (150). Besides, Alison Booth emphasises the collection's feminist undertones in Dove's reinterpretation of myth, which preserves traces of widespread worship of the mother goddess (126). Moreover, Lotta Lofgren focuses on the journey from fragmentation to healing and explores how *Mother Love* critiques destructive maternal narcissism and celebrates the possibility of finding regeneration through fragmentation (142). Tracey L. Walters, on the other hand, probes into incorporating cultural elements, such as the concept of "good hair," and argues that Dove's blending of Western and African American traditions expands the definition of Black art (46). Together, these perspectives reveal the richness of *Mother Love*, showing Dove's ability to bridge mythological and modern narratives while discussing universal themes of motherhood. However, scholarly engagement with the mechanisms of trauma and emotional repair within the mother-daughter relationship remains relatively limited. In the context of contemporary society, with increasingly diverse family structures and mothering patterns, re-examining the process of emotional reconciliation in *Mother Love* not only helps to expand the interpretation of the text but also responds to the concern regarding intimate relationships and intergenerational interactions.

The term "trauma" originates from the Greek word "τραύμα," meaning a physiological wound inflicted on the body. Thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and William James have extended the study of trauma to the psychic realm, describing trauma as "the release of unpleasant release" or a persistent "thorn in the spirit" (Freud 416; James 199). Since the 1980s, trauma narratives have gained increasing prominence, and trauma theory has gradually entered the fields of the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, and sociology. The intersection of trauma and literature lies in literature's unique capacity to illuminate "the relation between psychic wound and signification" (Hartman 257). In this way, trauma theory and literary criticism complement one another, and trauma theory offers a robust analytical framework for interpreting literature. Cathy Caruth, one of the founders of the deconstructionist strand of trauma theory, critically inherited Freud's psychoanalytic theory and proposed that the core feature of trauma lies in its delay and uncontrollability, defining trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (11). With the rise of various social movements and waves of feminism, trauma

studies have increasingly incorporated feminist perspectives. Judith Herman, in her analysis of victims of sexual and domestic violence, concludes that traumatic events can make people doubt basic interpersonal relationships and tear apart the dependencies of family, friends, lovers, and communities, and trauma, she notes, shatters the victim's socially constructed sense of self, and recovery is only possible through the restoration of meaningful connections with others (51). In addition, during the second wave of feminism, French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray emphasised the importance of intersubjectivity in the mother-daughter relationship, arguing that both mother and daughter should establish their own subjective identities, build a female cultural system, and communicate actively on that basis (1996, 47). In *Mother Love*, the breakdown of the mother-daughter relationship is due to the absence of such intersubjective dynamics. The mother, unable to recognise her daughter's autonomy, prompts the daughter's desire for escape and ultimately leads to the breakdown of their emotional bond. However, after experiencing separation, the two gradually understand each other, rebuild an intersubjective connection based on mutual recognition, and eventually reach reconciliation.

To explore how Rita Dove interprets the relational predicament caused by the mother's lack of subjectivity and to demonstrate that the key to reconciliation between mother and daughter lies in the reconstruction of an intersubjective relationship, this paper, based on the trauma theory, conducts an analysis from three levels: first, the trauma between mother and daughter is caused by the absence of intersubjective relationship, as the mother's failure to constitute her subjectivity leads to a desire to control her daughter; second, the symptoms of trauma are manifested as a rupture of intersubjectivity, and the mother and daughter experience inexpressible pain; third, the possibility of healing emerges through the restoration of intersubjective connection, and with mutual recognition and understanding, the mother and daughter gradually rebuild their bond and ultimately move toward reconciliation. By analyzing the three aspects mentioned above, this paper finds that the collection, through the interweaving of mythological archetypes and real-life experiences, shows the process of the intersubjective relationship between mother and daughter from rupture to repair and that the reconstruction of the intersubjective relationship is the key for the mother and daughter to resolve conflict.

Cause of Trauma: Absence of Intersubjective Relationship

Mother Love transfers the trauma caused by patriarchy in Greek mythology to the intergenerational tension between mother and daughter in modern society. In Greek mythology, Persephone is a victim of kidnapping, and Demeter is a mother in grief over the disappearance of her daughter. The source of the trauma lies in the structural violence of a patriarchal system, the forced intrusion of male authority into female bodies and destinies. In contrast, Dove places these mythological archetypes into the context of modern society, transforming the mythic resistance against Zeus and Hades into a more intimate emotional conflict between a mother and daughter, and the focus of the narrative shifts from women as victims to a daughter who leaves voluntarily. Through creative rewriting from a feminist perspective, Dove reinterprets the daughter's disappearance not as an act of a victim but as an assertion of identity and a pursuit of individual autonomy.

In a mother-centred family structure, a daughter's early identity formation is closely tied to her relationship with her mother. As she matures, the daughter gradually constructs her subjectivity by reflecting both connection with and differentiation from her mother. In *Mother Love*, the mother positions herself rigidly as a "guardian," building her identity

through her daughter's needs, thus lacking self-awareness and independent subjectivity. As a result, the mother unintentionally undermines her daughter's development of self-worth. Moreover, the mother's excessive emotional focus on the daughter places a psychological burden on the child, contributing to mounting tension and, ultimately, mutual harm. In the first poem, "Heroes," Dove compares the daughter to "the last poppy / that gave her the strength every morning" in the mother's barren garden (3), highlighting the importance of the daughter as the mother's spiritual pillar. However, the poppy, though precious, is on the verge of withering, suggesting that the mother has failed to give her daughter enough emotional nourishment and care. The act of the thief picking poppies in the poem is a metaphor for Hades' abduction. Unlike Hades in the myth, the thief styles himself as a hero, claiming to rescue the fading poppies, which caters to the daughter's desire to escape from her mother's guard and restraint. However, his presence hastens the withering of the flowers, suggesting that his intervention brings not salvation but destruction. Thus, the poem subtly critiques the illusion of liberation, indicating that the daughter's departure does not lead to genuine freedom but will trigger damage for herself and her mother.

A mother's excessive desire for control may often be expressed as oppression disguised as love. As the daughter's sense of independence awakens, she begins to resist "motherhood" and attempts to establish her identity by escaping her mother's protection. In this process, the mother, whose identity is closely tied to her daughter's dependence, will encounter a crisis as her caregiving role is no longer needed. Then, there will be a conflict between mother and daughter. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, motherhood can provide women with a sense of absolute authority that parallels the superiority men often feel over women, particularly when they feel regarding daughters, and if a mother has to give up her privileges and authority, she will feel frustrated (497). The daughter shows an attempt to break free from her mother's control in childhood. When she is bullied at school and surrounded like prey by three girls, the "five-foot-zero" mother drives to rescue her, but the daughter refuses to get into the car and states, "I took the long way home" (7). The mother's car symbolises protection and control, and the daughter's refusal to it marks her will to resist maternal authority, foreshadowing her later more decisive act of independence of leaving home for Paris. While her departure benefits her subjectivity, it simultaneously makes her mother lose spiritual attachment. This dual portrayal of the daughter's assertion of autonomy and the mother's experience of emotional damage highlights the complexity of the mother-daughter bond.

The daughter's longing for freedom in the poem is a rebellion against her mother's expectations and behavioural norms. The mother keeps telling her daughter, "Remember: go straight to school. / This is important, stop fooling around! / Don't answer to strangers. Stick/Keep your eyes down with your playmates" (9). These instructions ostensibly represent maternal concern and protection and reflect the daughter's behavioural habits shaped by the mother's fear and control. The phrase "keep your eyes down" is a pragmatic safety warning, an injunction against curiosity, and a symbol of the mother suppressing her daughter's vision and growth space. Ironically, it is precisely this command that leads the daughter to notice the daffodil on the ground, triggers her voluntary choice to defy maternal control, and brings her mother unbearable trauma.

Symptoms of Trauma: Manifestation of Lacking Intersubjectivity

In Greek mythology, Demeter is the Earth and Grain Mother, a giver of crops (Keller 31). Her divine power governs nature and the growth of crops. Upon the abduction of her

daughter Persephone, Demeter is so devastated that she renders the earth barren, ushering in a prolonged winter. Then, Zeus is compelled to ask Hades to release Persephone. This rebellion is seen as a dereliction of duty due to irrational and excessive emotional outbursts. As Beauvoir observes, the root of most myths lies in men's spontaneous attitude toward their existence and the world surrounding them (266), thus reflecting a masculinist perspective that often pathologises female emotion. In *Mother Love*, grief does not empower the mother to rebel against structural injustice but isolates her. In the search for her daughter, the mother in the poem not only suffers the daughter's disappearance but also critiques the suppression of women's emotional expression by society, making her grief an unspeakable pain.

When confronted with profound psychological distress, an individual's mental order often collapses, and people will neglect appearance and decorum. In "The Search," Dove shows the mother's emotional breakdown after her daughter's disappearance through a description of her appearance. The mother's dishevelled appearance: "wandered the neighborhood hatless, breasts / swinging under a ratty sweater, crusted mascara blackening her gaze" (10), suggests she has cried for a long time. However, her grief is not understood or supported by the community as people believe that "It was a shame, / the wives whispered, to carry on so" and "The men watched more closely" (10), which depicts the coldness and judgment of women towards her, but also show the prying gaze of men. Her grief is not considered a proper outburst of emotion but rather an act of "losing one's composure," some even sneer at her: "Serves her right, the old mare" (10). Even though some women come to her aid, the advice they offer is just "I told her: 'enough is enough. / Get a hold on yourself, take a lover, / help some other unfortunate child" (15), asking her to control her grief, continue to play a role of self-sacrifice and motherhood. In the public space shaped by patriarchal discourse, women's emotional expression is often suppressed, and Dove profoundly reveals the "double trauma" that women endure in a patriarchal society, namely, the personal grief and the silencing of that grief by social discourse. This unspeakable grief not only reflects the mother's isolation but also criticises the patriarchal society that marginalises and devalues the legitimacy of mothers' vulnerability.

Traumatic events are highly invasive, disrupting the memory and emotional mechanisms of the affected individual. Such events often reemerge through "nightmares, flashbacks, and behavioral reenactments" (Herman 7), and anything associated with the trauma can awaken the traumatic memories, leaving the individual in an unhealed state all the time. In *Mother Love*, the mother is constantly disturbed by traumatic memories, and she is so fragile that even fleeting sensory cues can provoke a stress response. Upon seeing a vine in the garden, she immediately recalls her daughter's soft, curling hair. While looking for her daughter, she repeatedly asks, "Are you having a goodtime? / Are you having a time at all?" (11). Even after their brief reunion, she still repeats the question, showing her refusal to accept her daughter's departure as an act of independent will and revealing her deep entrenchment in the role of motherhood. Although the poem implies that the daughter left voluntarily, the mother imagines that she is unwillingly taken away and constructs a scene of victimization: "She cried out for Mama, who did not hear. / She left with a wild eye thrown back / she left with curses, rage/that withered her features to a hag's" (13). The mother places herself in an imagined crime scene she never actually witnessed, reflecting her psychological predicament of being entangled by trauma and unable to reconcile with reality.

Traumatic events can severely disrupt an individual's emotional system, rendering them mentally confused, numb, isolated, delayed, and persistent with mental disorders (Wang

73). The mother, devastated by her daughter's departure, says, "Nothing can console me. You may bring silk / to make skin sigh, dispense yellow roses/in the manner of ripened dignitaries" (48). Silk and yellow roses, as representations of tactile and visual stimuli associated with comfort and beauty, fail to elicit any emotional response, and this failure of perception of pleasure signifies a post-traumatic paralysis of her emotional system. Following a brief reunion with her daughter in Paris, the two are once again separated, and the mother's unresolved trauma is reactivated and deepened. She laments: "She is gone again and I will not bear/it, I will drag my grief through a winter/of my own making" (56). The word "winter" corresponds to the Greek myth of Demeter plunging the earth into barrenness after losing her daughter, signifying the mother's mental state that she has fallen into desolation after losing her daughter.

The mother in the poem is thrown into mental confusion by her daughter's departure, experiencing emotional breakdowns in repeated loss and reunion, not only bearing the moral judgment of society for a mother's dereliction of duty but also losing the ability to regulate cognition and emotions due to unspeakable trauma. However, as the poem's narrative progresses, the mother realises that the trauma can be healed only by easing the long-standing emotional conflict between her and her daughter.

Recovery of Trauma: Construction of Intersubjective Relationship

As Irigaray observes, in the myth of Persephone, patriarchy destroys the mother-daughter relationship that embodies the most precious love and abundance (1994, 112). She stresses that Greek mythology, shaped by patriarchal ideology, forcibly intervenes in the emotional bond between mother and daughter and deprives both mother and daughter of the opportunity to exist as autonomous subjects. In the collection, although the mother and daughter are trapped in emotional rupture fueled by trauma and misunderstanding, they do not remain suspended in disconnection. The collection traces their joint journey toward the reconstruction of intersubjective relationships. While searching for her daughter, the mother gradually accepts her daughter's independence and realises that she should not always be bound to the role of motherhood. The daughter also gradually understands her mother's vulnerabilities.

Dove presents the deep and complex emotional resonance between mother and daughter through monologues: "No matter where I turn, she is there / screaming. No matter how / I run, "pause to catch a breath - / until I am the one screaming" (14), which shows the strong sensory connection and emotional resonance between mother and daughter; the mother's pain has already permeated the daughter's consciousness. The daughter cannot escape her mother's scream because it has become part of her emotional experience. In this sense, the cycle of suffering between them reflects not only an intergenerational transmission of trauma but also an emotional bond that resists severance. Irigaray argues that the mythological narratives involving Demeter and Persephone, including their stories, cultural backgrounds, and narrative styles, have been obscured to varying degrees by the expanding patriarchal order and that Persephone never turned to her mother for help when facing a crisis (Irigaray 1994, 106), which indicates that the maternal lineage and cultural heritage between mother and daughter have been severed. This disconnection not only implies the fading of kinship but also symbolises the disintegration of the ethical relationship and the loss of subjectivity between mother and daughter. In Dove's rewrite, this disconnection is repaired, and the daughter does not remain silent. Instead, she engages in a spiritual exchange with her mother through emotional resonance, showing maternal intimacy transcending patriarchal

containment. With open and honest communication between the mother and daughter, the relationship between the two also tends to ease. In “The Bistro Styx,” Dove depicts a moment of reunion between the two in Paris after a period of separation. Although brief, this reunion becomes a key point in developing their relationship: for the first time, the mother is forced to confront the fact that her daughter no longer entirely belongs to her. The line “I’ve lost her” signals the mother’s painful recognition of her daughter as an autonomous subject (42), prompting her gradual withdrawal from emotional patterns rooted in control, possession, and dependency. This internal transformation is further developed in “Demeter’s Prayer to Hades,” a turning point in the mother’s emotional journey. In this poem, the mother abandons the rhetoric of blame and denial and instead addresses her daughter’s partner in a tone of prayer. In the line: “There are no curse-only mirrors/held up to the souls of gods and mortals” (63), the image of “mirror” implies self-reflection and observation of others, suggesting that the mother is beginning to see her daughter as an individual with independent consciousness and destiny. From denial to acceptance, this process reflects the mother’s emotional growth and maturation and the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship from one-directional attachment to reciprocal understanding. Ultimately, in the poem “Her Island,” the mother-daughter relationship is restored, with the mother no longer trying to reclaim her daughter but watching her grow from afar. Through this picture, Dove envisions a possible pathway toward reconstructing intersubjective relationality grounded not in possession or sacrifice but in acknowledgement and mutual respect.

Conclusion

In *Mother Love*, Rita Dove reveals the conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship by rewriting the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The mother in the poem constructs her self-worth entirely on her daughter’s needs, leading to overcontrol and ultimately breaking their bond. As the daughter matures, she develops a strong desire for autonomy and independence, and her departure is not only a resistance to her mother’s control but also a construction of her subjectivity. Although this process triggers the mother’s emotional collapse, it also initiates a path toward transformation and reconstructing a more balanced relationship. Particularly significant is that Dove does not limit the narrative to conflict and rupture. Instead, she charts a journey of mutual recognition, in which respect, communication, and responsiveness begin to replace asymmetry and silence. After the daughter’s departure, the mother must dismantle her mother-centred identity and reconfigure her understanding of relational value. Meanwhile, through her pursuit of selfhood, the daughter acknowledges her mother’s vulnerability and emotional needs. Through conflicts and emotional negotiation, the two move toward reconciliation and restore an intersubjective relationship. In *Mother Love*, Dove reconstructs the patriarchal narrative of Greek mythology to address contemporary issues such as mother-daughter conflicts, female trauma, and identity formation. Her depictions of mother-daughter relationships and her profound insights into women’s experiences offer a nuanced and humanistic vision of female subjectivity, providing critical insights into the possibilities of maternal connection beyond the constraints of patriarchal discourse.

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