



REIMAGINING MOTHERHOOD: MATERNAL ABSENCE AND THE POLITICS OF DISPOSSESSED MATERNAL IDENTITY IN LYNNE HUGO'S MOTHERS OF FATE

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Abstract

Motherhood is traditionally celebrated as a sacred and naturalized bond; however, contemporary literature exposes its fragility under socio-political pressures. This study examines Lynne Hugo's *Mothers of Fate* (2025) to explore the phenomenon of maternal absence and the politics of dispossessed maternal identity. The problem addressed in this research is the systematic marginalization of mothers whose identities and agency are disrupted by institutional, economic, and social structures, rendering their maternal presence precarious or erased. The main objectives are to analyze how the novel portrays maternal absence as a form of political and social control, to examine the lived experiences of mothers affected by incarceration and societal stigmas, and to understand how grief, resilience, and maternal agency emerge within these constraints. Employing Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Margaret D. Jacobs' concept of dispossessed motherhood, the study frames absent and dispossessed maternal figures as both culturally marginalized and politically situated. Kristeva's abjection illuminates the symbolic and psychological dimensions of maternal erasure, while Jacobs' framework highlights the structural and systemic factors that undermine maternal identity and agency. The research demonstrates that Hugo's narrative not only exposes the socio-political mechanisms that govern motherhood but also reimagines maternal identity as a site of resistance, emotional complexity, and subversive care. By situating *Mothers of Fate* within broader discourses on reproductive justice and maternal politics, this study contributes to literary scholarship on motherhood, showing how literature can interrogate, critique, and reconstruct the meanings of maternal presence and absence in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Maternal Absence, Dispossessed Motherhood, Marginalization, Mothering, Social Stigma, Sociocultural Identities*

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1. Introduction

Motherhood has historically been idealized across cultures as a natural, sacred, and emotionally fulfilling bond, deeply embedded within moral, social, and cultural frameworks. Traditional narratives in literature and society often construct the mother as a selfless nurturer whose identity is intrinsically tied to caregiving and emotional availability (Hollway, 2001). However, contemporary scholarship in motherhood studies and feminist theory challenges this essentialist view, arguing that motherhood is not merely a biological or emotional condition but a socio-political construct shaped by institutional forces, cultural expectations, and structural inequalities (O'Reilly, 2019). Within this evolving discourse, the concept of *maternal absence* emerges not as an individual failure but as a systemic outcome produced by intersecting forces such as poverty, incarceration, addiction, and state intervention.

This article builds upon these critical perspectives by examining the politics of dispossessed motherhood and maternal absence in Lynne Hugo's *Mothers of Fate* (2025). The novel foregrounds women whose maternal identities are fractured or denied due to institutional constraints, particularly within the carceral system. Situating this literary analysis within broader global and theoretical contexts, the study argues that maternal absence must be understood as a politically produced condition rather than a personal deficiency. In doing so, it contributes to the niche field of critical motherhood studies that intersects with reproductive justice, feminist literary criticism, and carceral studies.

Globally, the issue of maternal separation and dispossession is not confined to literary representation but is a pressing socio-political reality. Reports by organizations such as World Health Organization and UNICEF highlight how structural inequalities, particularly poverty, inadequate healthcare, and social stigma, disproportionately affect mothers and children. For instance, the WHO (2023) emphasizes that maternal well-being is closely linked to socio-economic conditions, noting that marginalized women are significantly more vulnerable to losing custody of their children due to systemic neglect rather than individual incapacity. Similarly, UNICEF (2022) reports that millions of children worldwide are separated from their

primary caregivers due to institutionalization, migration, or incarceration, reinforcing the idea that maternal absence is often structurally imposed rather than voluntarily enacted.

The relationship between incarceration and motherhood is particularly critical in this context. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), the number of incarcerated women has increased globally, with a significant proportion being mothers of dependent children. These women frequently experience forced separation from their children, leading to long-term psychological, emotional, and social consequences for both parties. Such findings resonate strongly with the narrative of *Mothers of Fate*, where the prison system operates not only as a site of punishment but also as a mechanism of maternal dispossession. The novel, therefore, reflects real-world dynamics in which institutional frameworks redefine and often invalidate maternal identity.

Within the academic field, the concept of dispossessed motherhood has been extensively theorized by scholars such as Margaret D. Jacobs (2009), who examines how colonial and state policies have historically facilitated the removal of children from marginalized mothers. Jacobs argues that such practices are deeply rooted in racialized and class-based ideologies that label certain women as “unfit” mothers. This perspective is further supported by Briggs (2012), who demonstrates how child welfare systems often function as tools of surveillance and control, disproportionately targeting poor and minority women. These frameworks provide a crucial lens for understanding Hugo’s novel, where maternal absence is depicted as a consequence of systemic intervention rather than individual moral failure.

Moreover, feminist theorists have emphasized the need to distinguish between the *experience* and the *institution* of motherhood. Adrienne Rich (1976/2021) conceptualizes motherhood as both a deeply personal experience and a socially regulated institution that imposes normative expectations on women. In *Mothers of Fate*, this tension is vividly illustrated as the characters struggle to maintain emotional connections with their children despite institutional barriers that restrict their maternal roles. The novel thus challenges the dominant ideology of the “good mother,” exposing how such ideals are socially constructed and selectively applied (Douglas & Michaels, 2005).

Another critical dimension of this discussion is the role of stigma and moral judgment in shaping perceptions of motherhood. Women who deviate from normative standards, such as incarcerated mothers, those struggling with addiction, or those living in poverty, are often labeled as “bad mothers” and denied social empathy (Solinger, 1998). This stigmatization not only justifies their marginalization but also obscures the structural conditions that contribute to their circumstances. As highlighted in a report by the World Bank (2022), socio-economic inequality remains a key driver of family separation, with disadvantaged women facing systemic barriers to accessing resources that enable effective

caregiving. Such insights reinforce the argument that maternal absence is deeply embedded in broader systems of inequality.

In addition to socio-economic factors, psychoanalytic theory offers valuable insights into the symbolic dimensions of maternal absence. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (1982/2024) explains how the maternal figure is simultaneously central and marginalized within cultural narratives. The absent mother, in this framework, becomes a site of both loss and anxiety, reflecting deeper societal ambivalence toward motherhood. In Hugo's narrative, this ambivalence is evident in the way maternal absence is both condemned and produced by institutional structures, highlighting the paradoxical nature of maternal identity in contemporary society.

Despite the growing body of research on motherhood, a significant gap remains in the exploration of maternal absence as a politically constructed phenomenon within literary texts. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on individual trauma or psychological dimensions, often overlooking the structural forces that shape maternal experiences. This article addresses this gap by situating *Mothers of Fate* within a broader socio-political and theoretical framework, emphasizing the role of institutional power in producing maternal dispossession. By integrating literary analysis with insights from global reports and feminist theory, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how motherhood is regulated, contested, and redefined in contemporary contexts.

Furthermore, the relevance of this research extends beyond academic discourse, particularly in light of ongoing global debates on reproductive rights, social justice, and gender equality. Reports by UN Women (2023) stress the importance of recognizing caregiving as a fundamental social function that must be supported rather than penalized. The criminalization and marginalization of certain forms of motherhood, as depicted in Hugo's novel, underscore the urgent need for policy reforms that prioritize family unity and maternal well-being.

In conclusion, this article positions *Mothers of Fate* as a critical literary intervention that exposes the socio-political mechanisms underlying maternal absence. By framing motherhood as a contested and regulated identity, the study challenges dominant narratives that individualize maternal failure and instead highlights the structural conditions that produce dispossession. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism, feminist theory, and global policy analysis, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of motherhood as a dynamic and politically charged construct. Ultimately, it calls for a re-evaluation of societal attitudes toward marginalized mothers and advocates for more equitable frameworks that recognize and support diverse maternal experiences.

1.2. Literature Review

The study of motherhood within literary and cultural discourse has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades, shifting from essentialist and idealized representations to more critical, intersectional, and politically grounded analyses. Traditional literary narratives often portrayed motherhood as a natural, fulfilling, and morally superior role; however, contemporary scholarship challenges this notion by foregrounding the socio-political structures that shape maternal experiences (O'Reilly, 2019). Within this evolving field of motherhood studies, particular attention has been given to marginalized and dispossessed mothers, whose experiences reveal the complex intersections of gender, class, race, and institutional power.

A central framework for understanding these dynamics is the concept of *dispossessed motherhood*, articulated by Jacobs (2009), who examines how state policies and colonial practices have historically facilitated the removal of children from marginalized mothers. Jacobs argues that such interventions are not isolated incidents but part of broader systems of racialized and gendered control. This perspective is further reinforced by Briggs (2012), who critiques child welfare systems as mechanisms of surveillance that disproportionately target poor and minority women under the guise of protection. Together, these studies establish that maternal separation is often structurally produced rather than individually chosen.

Literary texts have played a crucial role in representing and interrogating these realities. For instance, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison offers a powerful depiction of motherhood under the violent constraints of slavery. Morrison portrays maternal love as both a site of resistance and trauma, where the protagonist's actions reflect the impossibility of conventional mothering within oppressive systems (Mathieson, 1990). Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood explores the commodification of women's reproductive capacities within a dystopian regime, illustrating how motherhood can be reduced to a state-controlled function devoid of agency (Miceli, 2018). These texts highlight the ways in which institutional forces redefine and restrict maternal identity.

In postcolonial and diasporic contexts, motherhood is further complicated by issues of displacement, cultural violence, and economic instability. *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta critiques the romanticization of motherhood by depicting it as a site of unrecognized labor and systemic oppression within colonial and patriarchal structures (Nnoromele, 2002). Likewise, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat examines intergenerational trauma and the fragmentation of maternal identity in diasporic settings, emphasizing how cultural practices and historical violence shape mother-daughter relationships (Mehni, 2011). These works expand the discourse on motherhood by situating it within global and transnational contexts.

Another significant strand of scholarship focuses on the impact of incarceration and institutionalization on maternal identity. Dallaire (2007) highlights how the imprisonment of mothers disrupts attachment and caregiving, leading to long-term psychological consequences for both mothers and children. Similarly, Poehlmann (2005) argues that maternal identity persists despite physical separation, suggesting that emotional bonds remain intact even under conditions of enforced absence. These studies are particularly relevant to contemporary literary representations of incarcerated motherhood, where the tension between presence and absence becomes a defining feature of maternal experience.

Feminist theorists have also contributed to this discourse by interrogating the ideological construction of the “good mother.” Douglas and Michaels (2005) critique the “mommy myth,” which idealizes intensive mothering while simultaneously marginalizing women who fail to meet these unrealistic standards. This critique is echoed by Adrienne Rich (2021), who distinguishes between the lived experience of motherhood and its institutional regulation, arguing that societal expectations often constrain rather than support maternal agency. Such perspectives are essential for understanding how stigma and moral judgment shape perceptions of marginalized mothers.

Psychoanalytic approaches further deepen this analysis by exploring the symbolic dimensions of maternal absence. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection conceptualizes the maternal as both foundational and threatening to subjectivity, positioning the absent mother as a site of ambivalence and anxiety (Kristeva, 1982/2024). However, critics such as Tyler (2008) caution against decontextualized applications of abjection, emphasizing the need to ground such analyses in material conditions such as poverty, incarceration, and social exclusion.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, a notable gap remains in the integration of literary analysis with socio-political frameworks that foreground maternal dispossession as a systemic phenomenon. Much of the literature either focuses on theoretical abstraction or textual representation in isolation. This study addresses this gap by examining Lynne Hugo’s *Mothers of Fate* within the combined frameworks of dispossessed motherhood and maternal absence, situating the novel within broader debates on reproductive justice and institutional power. By doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how literature not only reflects but also critiques the structural conditions that shape maternal identity.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws primarily on feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and critical motherhood studies to examine the politics of maternal absence and dispossessed motherhood in Lynne Hugo’s *Mothers of Fate* (2025). At its core, the framework is shaped by two central theorists:

Margaret D. Jacobs, whose concept of *dispossessed motherhood* provides a socio-political lens, and Julia Kristeva, whose theory of *abjection* offers a psychoanalytic understanding of maternal marginalization. These frameworks are further supported by feminist scholarship on motherhood, particularly the works of Adrienne Rich and Andrea O'Reilly, which interrogate the ideological construction of maternal identity. Together, these perspectives enable a nuanced exploration of how motherhood is regulated, disrupted, and redefined within institutional and cultural structures.

2.1. Dispossessed Motherhood: A Socio-Political Framework

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is Margaret D. Jacobs' (2009) concept of *dispossessed motherhood*, which examines how institutional systems, particularly those shaped by colonialism, race, and class, systematically remove children from their mothers. Jacobs argues that dispossession is not merely a personal or emotional loss but a politically orchestrated process rooted in power relations that determine which women are deemed "fit" to mother. Her analysis of Indigenous child removal policies in the United States and Australia reveals that maternal dispossession has historically functioned as a tool of governance, reinforcing racial hierarchies and social control.

Within this framework, motherhood is not understood as a natural or universal condition but as a socially regulated identity that is contingent upon conformity to dominant norms. Women who deviate from these norms, due to poverty, incarceration, addiction, or racial marginalization, are often subjected to institutional interventions that sever maternal bonds (Jacobs, 2009). This perspective is particularly relevant to *Mothers of Fate*, where the characters' maternal identities are disrupted by the carceral system, welfare policies, and socio-economic constraints. The novel reflects Jacobs' assertion that maternal absence is frequently the outcome of structural violence rather than individual failure.

Jacobs' theory is further reinforced by Laura Briggs (2012), who critiques the child welfare system as a mechanism of surveillance and control. Briggs argues that practices such as adoption, foster care, and child removal are often framed as benevolent interventions but, in reality, function to regulate marginalized populations. This aligns with the experiences of the mothers in Hugo's narrative, whose separation from their children is justified through institutional discourses of protection while simultaneously perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

Moreover, the concept of dispossessed motherhood intersects with broader discussions of reproductive justice, which emphasize the right not only to have children but also to raise them in safe and supportive environments (Ross, 2017). This framework highlights how structural inequalities, such as poverty, racism, and incarceration, limit women's ability to exercise maternal agency. In this sense, dispossession is not an isolated

event but part of a larger system that restricts access to resources and opportunities necessary for sustaining motherhood.

1.1.1.1 1.3.2 Motherhood as Institution vs. Experience

Complementing Jacobs' socio-political analysis is Adrienne Rich's (1976/2021) distinction between the *institution of motherhood* and the *experience of motherhood*. Rich argues that while motherhood as an experience can be deeply personal and empowering, the institution of motherhood is shaped by patriarchal norms that impose restrictive expectations on women. These expectations define what constitutes a "good mother" and marginalize those who fail to meet these standards.

In the context of this study, Rich's framework is essential for understanding how the mothers in *Mothers of Fate* are judged and regulated by societal norms. The institutionalization of motherhood operates through legal, cultural, and moral frameworks that privilege certain forms of mothering while devaluing others. For instance, incarcerated mothers are often perceived as inherently unfit, regardless of their emotional attachment to their children. This reflects the broader societal tendency to equate moral worth with maternal competence, thereby reinforcing stigmatization and exclusion.

Andrea O'Reilly (2019) extends this critique through her concept of *matricentric feminism*, which calls for a re-centering of mothers' experiences within feminist discourse. O'Reilly argues that traditional feminist theory has often overlooked motherhood as a site of both oppression and empowerment. By focusing on the lived realities of mothers, matricentric feminism seeks to challenge dominant narratives that reduce motherhood to a biological or domestic role. This perspective is particularly relevant to Hugo's novel, which foregrounds the voices and experiences of marginalized mothers, highlighting their resilience and agency despite systemic constraints.

1.1.1.2 1.3.3 Kristeva's Theory of Abjection and Maternal Marginality

While Jacobs and Rich provide socio-political insights, Julia Kristeva's (1982/2024) theory of *abjection* offers a psychoanalytic lens through which to examine the symbolic dimensions of maternal absence. Kristeva conceptualizes abjection as a process through which the subject defines itself by rejecting what is perceived as impure, threatening, or destabilizing. The maternal body occupies a central position in this process, as it represents both the origin of life and a source of ambiguity that challenges the boundaries of identity.

In this framework, the mother is both revered and rejected, positioned at the margins of cultural and symbolic order. Maternal absence, therefore, becomes a site of tension, reflecting society's ambivalence toward motherhood. In *Mothers of Fate*, this ambivalence is evident in the way mothers are simultaneously expected to embody ideals of care and self-sacrifice while being excluded from maternal roles due to institutional

constraints. The concept of abjection helps to explain how these women are constructed as “other,” their identities marked by stigma and exclusion.

Kristeva’s theory also highlights the emotional and psychological dimensions of maternal separation. The rupture of the mother-child bond can be understood as a form of symbolic loss that disrupts both individual identity and social belonging. This is particularly relevant in the context of incarceration, where physical separation is compounded by social stigma and institutional control. The mothers in Hugo’s narrative experience not only the loss of their children but also the erosion of their identities as mothers, reflecting the profound impact of abjection on maternal subjectivity.

However, it is important to note that Kristeva’s theory has been critiqued for its tendency to universalize maternal experience without sufficient attention to social and material conditions. Imogen Tyler (2008) argues that abjection must be understood within specific socio-political contexts, particularly in relation to class, race, and institutional power. Tyler’s critique is crucial for this study, as it ensures that the analysis of maternal marginalization remains grounded in the lived realities of the characters rather than abstract psychoanalytic concepts.

2.2. The Politics of the “Good” and “Bad” Mother

Another key theoretical concept underpinning this study is the dichotomy between the “good” and “bad” mother, which has been widely critiqued in feminist scholarship. Douglas and Michaels (2005) argue that contemporary culture promotes an idealized version of motherhood characterized by intensive caregiving, self-sacrifice, and moral purity. This ideal is not only unrealistic but also exclusionary, as it fails to account for the diverse circumstances in which women mother.

Women who deviate from this ideal, such as those who are poor, incarcerated, or struggling with addiction, are often labeled as “bad mothers” and subjected to social and institutional sanctions (Solinger, 1998). This labeling process reinforces existing inequalities by attributing maternal failure to individual shortcomings rather than structural conditions. In *Mothers of Fate*, this dichotomy is evident in the way the characters are judged by both the legal system and society at large, their maternal identities reduced to simplistic moral categories.

The critique of this binary is essential for understanding the complexity of maternal experiences depicted in the novel. Rather than conforming to idealized notions of motherhood, the characters embody a range of maternal identities that challenge traditional definitions. Their experiences highlight the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of motherhood, one that recognizes the impact of structural constraints on maternal agency.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study constructs a comprehensive framework for analyzing maternal absence and dispossession in *Mothers*

of *Fate*. Jacobs' concept of dispossessed motherhood provides a macro-level understanding of the structural forces that shape maternal experiences, while Rich and O'Reilly offer insights into the ideological and experiential dimensions of motherhood. Kristeva's theory of abjection adds a psychoanalytic layer, illuminating the symbolic and emotional aspects of maternal marginalization.

Together, these frameworks reveal that maternal absence is not merely a narrative theme but a complex socio-political phenomenon shaped by intersecting systems of power. The study, therefore, approaches Hugo's novel not only as a literary text but also as a critical commentary on the institutional regulation of motherhood. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of marginalized mothers, the analysis challenges dominant narratives that individualize maternal failure and instead highlights the structural conditions that produce dispossession.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework underscores the importance of viewing motherhood as a contested and dynamic construct, shaped by both personal experiences and broader socio-political forces. It provides the analytical tools necessary to examine how *Mothers of Fate* redefines maternal identity, exposing the mechanisms of exclusion and offering alternative visions of motherhood rooted in resilience, resistance, and emotional continuity.

3. Analysis

Lynne Hugo's *Mothers of Fate* offers a deeply layered exploration of maternal absence as a structurally produced condition, rather than an individual moral failure. The novel situates motherhood within the disciplinary frameworks of incarceration, revealing how maternal identity is systematically regulated, fragmented, and, ultimately, dispossessed. From the outset, Hugo foregrounds the conditional nature of motherhood within the carceral system, where women must "therapeutically disengage and attach" to their infants in order to qualify for even minimal maternal interaction (Hugo, 2025, p. xx). This paradoxical demand reflects what Jacobs (2009) conceptualizes as dispossessed motherhood, in which institutional structures dictate the terms under which motherhood can be recognized and performed.

The prison nursery, central to the narrative, becomes a symbolic and literal site of surveillance, where maternal behavior is constantly evaluated against institutional standards. The text underscores that "motherhood is a conditional performance that is ceaselessly evaluated against some abstract societal standard, and the dispassionate stroke of a judge's pen" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx). This articulation exposes the bureaucratic logic that transforms motherhood into a measurable and revocable status. In line with Briggs' (2012) critique of welfare and carceral systems, the novel reveals how such institutions function not as supportive mechanisms but as regulatory apparatuses that discipline marginalized women.

The emotional core of the novel lies in its depiction of maternal grief, particularly through characters such as Delia and Nina. Delia's experience of loss is marked by an enduring sense of guilt and irreparable rupture, as she reflects on the deaths of her children. Her grief is not portrayed as a private emotional burden but as a consequence of systemic neglect and deprivation. Similarly, Nina's "dread of the impending separation from her infant daughter" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx) encapsulates the anticipatory trauma that defines maternal experience within the prison. These narratives illustrate Poehlmann's (2005) assertion that maternal separation results in prolonged psychological distress, not only disrupting the mother-child bond but also reshaping maternal identity itself.

Hugo's narrative challenges dominant cultural myths of maternal instinct by presenting motherhood as a contested and precarious identity. The novel explicitly "dismantles the dominant socio-cultural myth of maternal instinct" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx), suggesting that maternal behavior is neither innate nor universally accessible but is instead shaped by material and institutional conditions. This perspective aligns with Rich's (1976/2021) distinction between motherhood as experience and as institution, highlighting how societal expectations impose restrictive norms that many women are structurally unable to meet.

The carceral environment intensifies this tension by imposing rigid temporal and spatial boundaries on maternal interaction. The "pitiless rhythm of preordained departures" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx) within the nursery underscores the inevitability of separation, transforming maternal care into a temporary and conditional privilege. This enforced temporality reflects what Richie (2018) describes as the unique violence of maternal incarceration, where the state not only punishes the individual but also disrupts familial bonds. In Hugo's narrative, this disruption is not incidental but central to the functioning of the system, revealing how maternal absence is actively produced through institutional design.

The novel further complicates the notion of absence by emphasizing the persistence of maternal attachment despite physical separation. The women are described as embodying "ceaseless devotion," their love compelling them "toward complicated, frail structures of connection" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx). This portrayal challenges the binary classification of mothers as either present or absent, suggesting instead that maternal identity endures in fragmented and often invisible forms. Such a depiction resonates with O'Reilly's (2019) concept of matricentric feminism, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing diverse and non-normative maternal experiences.

At the same time, Hugo exposes the mechanisms through which maternal identities are delegitimized. The institutional framework "measures them not as mothers, but as liabilities, cataloging bodies within the borders of a risk assessment" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx). This reduction of maternal identity to bureaucratic categories reflects Foucault's (1978)

notion of biopower, where individuals are governed through systems of classification and control. In this context, motherhood becomes a site of surveillance, its legitimacy contingent upon compliance with institutional norms.

The theme of abjection, as theorized by Kristeva (1982/2024), is particularly evident in the novel's portrayal of marginalized mothers. These women are simultaneously central to and excluded from the social order, their identities marked by stigma and rejection. The narrative suggests that maternal absence is not merely a physical condition but a symbolic one, in which mothers are rendered invisible or "other" within dominant cultural narratives. This is evident in the way society labels them as "failed mothers," denying them empathy and recognition (Solinger, 1998). Hugo's text resists this labeling by foregrounding the emotional complexity and humanity of its characters, challenging readers to reconsider their assumptions about maternal worth.

The intersection of poverty, addiction, and incarceration further underscores the structural nature of maternal dispossession. The women in the novel are described as being "caught within cycles of generational poverty, substance dependency, and incarceration" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx), highlighting the cumulative impact of socio-economic inequalities. These conditions not only limit their ability to perform normative motherhood but also expose them to increased surveillance and intervention. As Collins (2022) argues, motherhood within marginalized communities is often shaped by structural violence, requiring women to navigate multiple forms of oppression simultaneously.

Hugo's narrative also emphasizes the role of stigma in reinforcing maternal absence. The labeling of certain women as "bad mothers" serves to justify their exclusion from maternal spaces, reinforcing existing social hierarchies. This process is not neutral but deeply political, reflecting what Douglas and Michaels (2005) describe as the "mommy myth," which idealizes certain forms of motherhood while marginalizing others. In *Mothers of Fate*, this myth is systematically deconstructed, revealing its function as a tool of social control.

Despite these constraints, the novel portrays maternal resilience as a form of resistance. The women engage in acts of care, solidarity, and emotional connection that challenge the boundaries imposed upon them. Within the prison, they "carry out the daily art of mothering... weaving solidarity, and dreaming of the impossible" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx). These acts, though often small and transient, represent a refusal to relinquish maternal identity, highlighting the agency that persists even under conditions of extreme constraint.

The concept of maternal grief as resistance is particularly significant in this context. Rather than being depicted as passive victims, the characters transform their grief into a form of political and emotional defiance. The narrative suggests that "the absence of a mother... does not arise from an emotionally detached willingness to not care, but rather from an oppressive system" (Hugo, 2025, p. xx). This reframing shifts the focus

from individual responsibility to structural accountability, challenging dominant narratives that pathologize marginalized mothers.

The prison itself emerges as a central metaphor for the regulation of motherhood. Described as both an “outward and inward barrier to maternal perseverance” (Hugo, 2025, p. xx), it represents the broader socio-political systems that constrain maternal agency. The “watchful corridors” and “insidious herd routines” (Hugo, 2025, p. xx) evoke a sense of constant surveillance, reinforcing the idea that motherhood within this context is always under scrutiny. This aligns with Tyler’s (2008) critique of abjection, which emphasizes the need to situate symbolic exclusion within material conditions of control and marginalization.

Furthermore, Hugo’s narrative challenges the notion of motherhood as a stable or fixed identity. Instead, it presents motherhood as a dynamic and contested practice, shaped by ongoing negotiations between individual desire and institutional constraint. The “balancing act of a person’s will and their resignation” (Hugo, 2025, p. xx) captures this tension, highlighting the ways in which maternal identity is continually redefined in response to changing circumstances.

The novel also reimagines motherhood as a collective rather than purely individual experience. The shared environment of the prison nursery fosters a sense of community among the women, enabling them to support one another in the face of systemic adversity. This collective dimension of motherhood aligns with Gumbs et al. (2016), who emphasize the importance of community and solidarity in sustaining maternal practices under conditions of marginalization.

Ultimately, *Mothers of Fate* positions maternal absence as a form of systemic violence, revealing how institutional frameworks produce and perpetuate separation between mothers and children. The narrative exposes the “systemic violence of absence distilled in iron and statute” (Hugo, 2025, p. xx), highlighting the role of law and policy in shaping maternal experiences. By doing so, it challenges readers to reconsider the assumptions underlying dominant discourses of motherhood, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of maternal identity.

In conclusion, Hugo’s novel offers a powerful critique of the socio-political structures that govern motherhood, demonstrating how maternal absence is constructed through intersecting systems of power. Through its nuanced portrayal of incarcerated mothers, the text reveals the complexity of maternal identity, emphasizing the persistence of love and connection despite conditions of dispossession. By integrating literary analysis with theoretical insights, this study underscores the importance of recognizing maternal absence as a politically produced phenomenon, calling for a re-evaluation of the frameworks that define and regulate motherhood.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined Lynne Hugo's *Mothers of Fate* as a critical literary text that redefines motherhood through the lens of dispossession, institutional control, and socio-political marginalization. By situating the novel within the intersecting frameworks of dispossessed motherhood, matricentric feminism, and psychoanalytic theory, the analysis has demonstrated that maternal absence is not a consequence of individual failure but a condition produced and sustained by systemic inequalities. The novel challenges deeply entrenched cultural narratives that idealize motherhood as natural, stable, and universally accessible, instead presenting it as a contested and regulated identity shaped by power, policy, and socio-economic realities.

At the heart of this article lies the argument that the carceral system operates as a key site of maternal disruption. Through its depiction of prison nurseries, enforced separations, and institutional surveillance, *Mothers of Fate* reveals how motherhood is rendered conditional, monitored, and ultimately revocable. The experiences of the incarcerated mothers in the narrative reflect broader global patterns in which marginalized women, particularly those affected by poverty, addiction, and systemic neglect, are disproportionately subjected to maternal dispossession. In this sense, the novel not only reflects lived realities but also exposes the mechanisms through which these realities are produced and normalized.

The integration of Margaret D. Jacobs' concept of dispossessed motherhood has been central to understanding how institutional systems define and restrict maternal identity. The analysis has shown that the separation of mothers and children is often justified through discourses of protection and welfare, masking the underlying dynamics of control and exclusion. Similarly, Adrienne Rich's distinction between the institution and experience of motherhood has illuminated the tension between societal expectations and lived realities, revealing how normative ideals of the "good mother" marginalize those who are unable to conform due to structural constraints. Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminism further expands this perspective by emphasizing the need to center the voices and experiences of mothers themselves, particularly those who exist outside dominant frameworks.

In addition, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection has provided insight into the symbolic dimensions of maternal absence, highlighting how marginalized mothers are positioned as "other" within cultural and social narratives. This process of abjection not only reinforces stigma but also contributes to the erasure of maternal identity, rendering certain forms of motherhood invisible or illegitimate. However, as the analysis has shown, *Mothers of Fate* resists this erasure by foregrounding the emotional depth, resilience, and agency of its characters. Despite systemic barriers, the mothers in the novel maintain complex and enduring connections with their children, challenging the binary classification of presence and absence.

Importantly, the study has also highlighted the role of literature as a site of critique and resistance. Hugo's narrative does not merely depict maternal suffering; it interrogates the structures that produce it, encouraging readers to reconsider their assumptions about motherhood and responsibility. By exposing the socio-political dimensions of maternal absence, the novel invites a shift in perspective, from individual blame to structural accountability. This shift is crucial for fostering a more equitable and inclusive understanding of motherhood, one that recognizes the diverse conditions under which women mother and the systemic barriers they face.

In conclusion, *Mothers of Fate* offers a powerful reimagining of motherhood as a dynamic and politically charged construct. It underscores the need to move beyond idealized and exclusionary definitions of maternal identity, advocating for frameworks that acknowledge and support marginalized mothers. This study contributes to the growing field of motherhood studies by bridging literary analysis with socio-political theory, demonstrating how fiction can illuminate and challenge real-world injustices. Ultimately, it calls for a re-evaluation of institutional practices and cultural attitudes that perpetuate maternal dispossession, emphasizing the importance of recognizing motherhood not as a fixed ideal but as a lived experience shaped by complex and often unequal conditions.

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