

Katarina Carlshamre

Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

Introduction

In this article I analyse the image of the father in four recent Swedish mother-narrated novels.¹ My interest in this motif was born in the course of determining the corpus for a research project concerning contemporary French and Swedish literature.² In that project, I study novels published between 2000 and 2011 in which the protagonist and narrator is a mother, and one thing that struck me when reading these books was how different the image of and the role given to the father was in the texts from the two countries.³ Whereas absence is his main characteristic in many of the French texts, the father is given a more active role in many of the Swedish ones, where the mothers often seem to struggle just as much with the idea of the family as with mothering per se. I suggest that the longstanding, widespread idea of the father as an image of authority, performing his task of fatherhood mostly by ways of acting in the public sphere (contrasting and complementing the intimate mother-child dyad), can give us an interesting backdrop against which to understand the image of the father in these books. In a recent article about two French novels, the Canadian literary scholar Lori Saint-Martin underscores that ‘absence often seems to characterise fathers in literature, even when they still live with the family, in contrast with the often overly-present, sometimes invasive mother’ (Saint-Martin, 2013). Saint-Martin, who has been working on the representation of parenthood in literature since the early nineteen nineties, rightly points out that there is a shift going on in French literature and that ‘one of the most significant trends to emerge in French women’s writing of recent years is their exploration of the father figure’ (ibid). It is, on that account, interesting that this development does not seem to include the novels in which the protagonist and narrator is a mother. On the contrary, it appears as if the father’s absence continues to be a salient feature of many French mother-narrated novels during this period. The mother-child dyad is often described as a closed space from which the father is excluded (for example in Olmi, 2001 and Tardieu, 2004) and, when the father is present, he rarely incarnates bodily presence and care. Rather, he often corresponds to a quite traditional image of the father as bread-winner (for

Katarina Carlshamre, *Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland*

Studies in the Maternal, 5(2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

example in Abécassis, 2005 and Darrieussecq, 2007) and, most importantly, this role is rarely questioned.

In light of this, it is also interesting to observe that in the Swedish part of the corpus, the motif of the father as a caring presence and as linked to the children and to family life is quite common. This undoubtedly supports the image of Sweden as a gender equal country, where a large proportion of fathers are directly involved in the care for their small children, and where the combination of active parenting and professional life is a real option for a large majority of parents.⁴ But alongside this image of the father, there was another insistent image that, given the socio-political reality of Sweden, struck and intrigued me more, and it was the image of the mother as severely unhappy within the family, and the father as, not only present, but also absent – in the sense that he is described as blind to the mother's problems. In this article, where I focus on the Swedish novels and merely use the French texts for contrast, I set out to analyse this double image of the father, and to do so in the light of sociological and historical studies, as well as statistics on the general situation of parenthood in Sweden. I suggest that this ambiguous literary image of the father can be understood as an articulation of the imbalance between norm and reality concerning gender equality which seems to be present in Sweden today.

In this article, I will focus on four novels that are thematically close to one another. In different ways, they are all about the mother's struggle to come to grips with herself, not only as a mother, but also as an individual outside of mothering, and they are all set within the framework of the nuclear family. They all contain a tension between the mother's subjectivity and the denial or impossibility of living this subjectivity, a tension in the light of which the role of the father becomes particularly interesting. One of the stories chosen, *Nordin* (2011), stands out in that the narrating mother does not, in any conscious level, struggle to get in touch with a 'genuine' subjectivity, but on the contrary, struggles to repress her real self, and uses the nuclear family as what she believes to be a protection against authenticity. This novel is also different in that it consists of two temporally separate stories, where one is set in the nuclear family, and where the narrator is a mother, whereas the other relates the protagonist/narrator's kidnaping of her sister's child, before she was a mother herself. After some hesitation, I have decided to include this book despite its difference, because of the problematisation of the nuclear family that it conveys and the presence of a strong pulsion towards subjectivity (which emerges despite her efforts) in the narrating mother. The idea that the family and female subjectivity is a difficult

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

combination is thus equally present in this book as in the others, but only considered from a different perspective.

These stories stage mothers who, in many ways, are not especially avant-garde, or original in their mothering. They are all biological mothers of their children, they all live in heterosexual nuclear families, and they all correspond quite well to the Swedish average mother when it comes to gender positions in relation to their male partners: i.e. both parents are taking care of the children and the household, but the mother does so to a greater extent. The tension between nuclear family and maternal subjectivity presented in these books is not in itself new – it is for example an oft-present theme in Swedish feminist literature of the 1970's (see for example Witt-Brattström, 2013) – but the conflict with which these contemporary fictional mothers struggle is represented differently than the struggle of mother narrators from earlier generations, and I suggest that the trope of the father is an important part of this difference.⁵

The novels that I will analyse are: Myrén, Viktoria (2009) *I en familj finns inga fiender* (In a family there are no enemies), Sandberg, Kristina (2003). *Ta itu* ('Ta itu' means both take apart and set about), Sveland, Maria (2007) *Bitterfittan*, which is the only one of the books translated into English (as *Bitter Bitch* [2011]) and Nordin, Sofia (2011) *Gå sönder, gå hel* (Break, heal). All translations from Swedish, except those from *Bitter Bitch*, are my own.

Gender equality as norm and reality

In *The reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Nancy Chodorow analyses the social organization of parenting, and claims that 'any strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of an unequal social organization of gender must take account of the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women' (Chodorow, 1978, p. 215). In Sweden, this kind of reorganization of parenting has been a political ideal for over forty years. Whereas in France, as in many other countries, women's liberation has been conceptualized as a woman's issue, and the reforms to get mothers into the workforce have mainly been motivated by a political will to increase birthrates and reconciling women's work and family life, this is not the case in Sweden⁶. Instead, women's liberation, and the problem of combining motherhood and work, has been conceived, not so much in terms of 'women's liberation' as in terms of 'gender equality'; not mainly as a 'women's issue' but as a problem of equality, concerning women and men alike. (On this issue see for example Lewis and Åström, 1992, Åseskog, 2003 and Klinth, 2013). A claim similar to that of Chodorow is expressed in a declaration backed by the Swedish government in 1968.⁷ The mother's entrance

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

into the workforce must, according to this way of seeing the problem, be complemented by the father's entrance as caretaker in the home. In Sweden, gender equal parental leave legally replaces the old maternal leave in 1974, and today, the difference between Sweden and France is such that the average father in Sweden takes more parental leave than does the average French working mother.⁸

Despite this strong norm of gender equality and the widespread vision of Sweden as a gender equal country – and the relatively strong gender equality which does exist – things look different if instead of comparing the situation in Sweden to that of other countries, we turn our focus to the relationship between the political ambitions and the factual situation. We then see a country where 75% of the 16 months parental leave is still taken by mothers and where mothers stay at home from work when the children are ill to a much higher degree than fathers do. It is also a country where women living in couples are in worse health than single women, whereas for men the situation is the opposite.⁹ Even though Sweden, from an international perspective, is a model of gender equality, there is an important imbalance between norm and reality.

This discord between norm and reality is interesting and can be seen in light of the flexibility of the correlation between social arrangements and imaginary schemata which the philosopher Alison Stone discusses in her book *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (2012). Stone points out that even though our social life has changed regarding gender roles, and Stone is here particularly interested in the gender roles of parenting, this does not mean that our imaginary, our ways to conceive these roles, have changed to the same extent. This is possible, she says, 'because social arrangements and ways of imagining are distinct, so that changes in one do not automatically induce changes in the other' (Stone, p. 23). Imaginary schemata can hence 'be applied and interpreted in more than one way; social arrangements can be given imaginary significance in more than one way. In consequence, the same imaginary can persist and outlast social changes' (Stone, *ibid.*). Stone writes from an Anglo-Saxon perspective and presents a situation where old imaginary schemata survive where the social reality has changed, but in the present case, the situation is partly the inverse. The core idea, however, about the plasticity of the correlation between social reality and imaginary schema, gives us a useful approach to investigating the role of the father in these novels. I suggest that the image of the father in these stories is closely linked to the conflict between two imaginary schemata comprising two different visions of the mother. On the one hand the 'traditional' mother, and on the other, a 'gender-equal' mother – whose attachment to the child is less exclusive – and that this conflict is at work

Katarina Carlshamre, *Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland*

both within the mother and between her and other characters. In *Bitter Bitch* the mother articulates this problem:

Yes, I want to have the cake and eat it too. I want to be able to work, party, be alone now and then, and be the mother of a beloved child. The self-sacrificing mother is still there, living within us as a discordant and hated ideal. But she lives in stark competition with lots of other ideals. Thankfully. She must even fight to survive within us. (Sveland, p. 88)

Sara, in *Bitter Bitch*, says that she wants both to be a mother and a person outside of mothering, and her main obstacle, as presented here, is not some external phenomenon, but her own inner image of what a mother should be: someone who gives up everything for her child. Sara very strongly identifies with the gender equal mother and to her, this coveted position of non-exclusive parental attachment is also close to a traditional ‘male position’ of subjectivity, where independence and autonomy are valued over relationality, closeness and care (see Carlshamre, under review). This is not, however, the case in all the books (and of course not a necessary consequence of the idea of the gender equal mother). On the contrary, the struggle for individuality is strongly linked, in at least one of the novels (Myrén, 2009), to the wish to be able to be close to the child, but to be so without losing grip of the differences between them – that is, without confusing her child’s feelings and behavior with those of her own. Even though the ideas of selfhood and individuality are dealt with differently in the novels, I claim that the tension, the conflict between the two imaginary schemata (one patriarchal and one represented by the ideal of gender equality) operates not only in *Bitter Bitch* but in all of them, and I suggest that the presence of the father plays an important role on both sides of this conflict. I will first present two motifs where the father is positioned as a helper on the side of gender equality, and then look at how he is also positioned as working against gender equality, on the side of the more traditional idea of what a mother and a father should be.

The Father as helper 1: maternal instinct revisited

In her now classic, and much discussed, *The myth of motherhood* ([1980] 1981), the French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter concludes, after her survey of the history of motherhood in France, that ‘no universal and absolute conduct on the part of the mother has emerged. On the contrary, her feelings, depending on her cultural context, her ambitions, and her frustrations have shown themselves to be extremely variable’ (Badinter, p. 327). Badinter comes to the conclusion that ‘maternal instinct’ is not an instinct, but a cultural construction. In the novels

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

analysed here, the authors seem to share the same view. After the birth of her first child, one of the mothers relates her reaction like this:

When Sara was born she was sticky and almost blue. Children look like that when they are born, still I was shocked; I thought that she was dead. When put in my arms, I shook her so she started to scream and the midwife and the nurses looked strangely and severely at me. Anders had tears in his eyes and stroke my sweaty hair over and over. At last he dared to stretch out a finger and touch the sticky infant cheek. It all seemed so easy for him, he did not need to decide what his hands would do, and then execute it with precision. He just did, felt. (Nordin, 59)

This scene illustrates a distribution of positions which comes back in at least three of these novels. And even though, in this case, it is only about the father touching the child, it is the difference between the representation of the two parents which interests me: the father as someone who naturally relates to the child, and the mother as alienated and non-natural in her behaviour. In one of the books, Myrén (2009), the father is presented as the only naturally caring parent: ‘His closeness to the children has always been self-evident. I am not jealous of that. It is just the way it is.’ (p. 17) and the protagonist claims that she herself just ‘feigns to be a parent’ (p. 125). The father in the same book is considered by the mother to be both the one who wanted children in the first place (p. 17-18), and as the parent really suitable for the tasks of child-care (as was her own father). And according to her, she could never live up to the ideal of a parent that he represents ‘I can’t be like him, always patiently listening and understanding’ (p. 34). In *Ta itu* (2003) where the gender roles are more traditional than in the other novels, the mother does not feel connected to her children in any prioritized way, but rather has serious problems with relating to them. The father is often depicted together with the children, the narrating mother watching them, feeling that she does not belong, as for example in the scene where we are first introduced to the family. The mother arrives by train to the central station, and warily looks around for her husband, Anders, and their children: ‘First I couldn’t see them. Then I saw Anders’ blue skiing cap, Siri next to him, Fredrik slightly behind. I waved, but they didn’t seem to notice. Anders stretched, turned away, then Fredrik got sight of me, was he happy to see me?’ (p. 8) In the context of the novel, this is an example of her strong insecurity and feeling of being alienated from the family, something which intensifies as the novel progresses. Finally, in Sveland (2007) where, at the beginning, neither the man nor the woman knows how to be a parent, the mother claims that the parental leave gives him, just as it gave her, all the qualities of a primary caretaker:

When it was Johan’s turn to stay at home everything changed, slowly but surely. Suddenly Johan was the one who knew everything, from when something was missing in

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

the fridge or that Sigge needed a new winter coat, to which story Sigge liked the best. Suddenly I was the one who came home to a tired Johan in need of relief. I came home happy and filled with stories from the outside world. (Sveland, p. 77)

Thus, in various ways in these books, there is a displacement of the traditional ideas of mother and father, and an opening of a potential space for the father to be as a caring presence for the child, something which goes, in this last example, hand in hand with the making of a place for the mother in the outer sphere.

Maternal instinct is a longstanding and, within feminist scholarship, much discussed idea. Maternal guilt is another. And these two are not without connection to one another. According to Badinter ([1980] 1981) the socially constructed phenomenon of maternal instinct plays a decisive role for the overwhelming feelings of guilt that many mothers struggle with. And as Gill Rye (2009) states: ‘across Western cultures, guilt appears to be coextensive with mothering’ (Rye, p. 139).¹⁰ It is also, as Rye points out, a common theme in contemporary women’s writing.

But what happens to maternal guilt if the idea of the mother as *the* naturally good parent, which has been a powerful tool for binding women to mothering, and also an effective way to justify men’s lack of involvement in the home, is absent, and the idea of the caring parent is modified so that it also encompasses the father? One could expect, following Badinter, that this would affect the mother’s life in a more general way, and to make her less susceptible to guilt. I suggest that we find themes and motifs in these novels which point in this direction, and I will focus on one important trope: the mother who leaves the children, and the father who stays.

The Father as helper 2: the union of mother and child revisited

In literary fiction, the mother image has often been dominated by the very close and even suffocating mother.¹¹ Within feminist scholarship, there has been a widespread idea that the early relationship between mother and child, to a large extent, is deprived of symbolization and subjectivity. Alison Stone (2012), inspired by psychoanalysis and drawing on thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Genevieve Grosz, argues that the conceptualization of subjectivity in Western culture relies on the view that it is only with the separation from the mother that subjectivity is born. In this narrative, the father plays a crucial role for effecting the separation between the mother and the child, thereby securing a place for the child in the cultural order. What is problematic, according to Stone, is not the idea that separation and loss are important aspects of the parent-child relationship, but the stereotypical roles that are assigned to fathers and mothers in the process of becoming a subject. In Stone’s formulation, ‘the father cannot but represent civilization and culture: he is ‘the original representative of the Law’s authority’ (Lacan [1966]

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

2002, 299) and the lynchpin of the symbolic order. In contrast, the mother cannot but represent the bodily realm prior to the acquisition of meaning.' (Stone, 2012, p. 25) To summarize, the maternal is that which needs to be repressed for the subject to emerge, and to be so in favour of the paternal. According to this scheme, separation and individual subjectivity are incompatible with the maternal.

This cultural repression of maternal subjectivity is also part of what makes mother-narrated novels interesting. The mother, 'the impossible subject, par excellence' as Lisa Baraister calls her (2009, p. 4) is according to the traditional image, and in contrast to the child, not separating herself from anything. She is that which is left behind in the act of subjectification, and the mere act of telling her own story is a subversion of this order. She separates herself from the world, to be able to see it, and tell it. As Marguerite Duras says in reference to fiction writing: 'The person who writes books must always be enveloped by a separation from others', 'the solitude of writing is a solitude without which the writing could not be produced, or would crumble, drained bloodless by the search for something else to write' (Duras, [1993] 2011, p. 3, 2), and to create this kind of space as a mother is to go against the traditional idea of what a mother is. In different ways, this applies both to writing and subjectivity. A narrative cannot arise without a certain separation from others, and, as Stone claims, subjectivity cannot arise without a narrative: 'If being a subject means having lived experience, it also means giving one's experience meaning, actively connecting its elements together under narratives and narrative conventions and under concepts and judgments. To be a subject is not just to undergo experience but to author its meaning' (Stone, p. 52-53). I suggest that the theme of the mother leaving her child, in these novels, can both be construed as a concrete need to leave found in the protagonist/narrator and as a metaphor for the separation necessary for the fiction writer.¹²

In recent French mother-narrated novels, the mother rarely leaves her child; mother and child is a strong dyad and, even within the nuclear family, she usually cares for the child alone. In two of them (Olmé, 2004 and Tardieu, 2001) the mother refuses separation even to the extent that she kills her child when separation becomes inevitable. In the case where the mother does leave, something which indeed can be seen as a metaphor for separation in a more general sense, the situation is pictured as extreme, as if she needed an extraordinary force to break free from a closed space in which she is expected to stay whatever happens. Alison Stone observes with reference to the French novelist Marie Darrieussecq's *Le mal de mer*, where the protagonist leaves her child at the end of the book, that this mother is caught between the alternatives of 'selfless

mergence in maternal bodily relations versus individual selfhood predicated on the rejection of those relations' (Stone, 2012, p. 14) She is not able to be both a mother and a subject, the differentiation between child and mother seems to demand a radical separation, and a complete cut with maternity. This problem is an important theme in the Swedish novels too, as the mothers struggle with unclear borders between themselves and others, and feelings of being annihilated. But I claim that the problem is also different, and that the role given to the father is a significant part of this difference. When the mother leaves, the father is there for the children, and his presence in the children's life changes the dynamics of mothering. In Darrieussecq's novel, the father is not represented as a caring presence, but as somebody who antagonistically claims the child when the mother fails. In another rare story (which is actually not narrated by the mother, but still a text where the mother is focused), one of the three novellas in Marie Ndiaye's *Trois Femmes puissantes* (2009), the mother leaves her child with her partner, who is not the biological father, but nonetheless a father figure for her child, when she goes away for a couple of weeks. But she does not trust her partner's parenting capacity, and worries about her child when she is away. This father figure is described as himself a big child, who she considers irresponsible. The mother dreams of being alone again with her child, without him, and when she is away she cannot let go of the responsibility of a primary exclusive care-taker, obsessively calling and checking on those left behind.

In light of all this, it is interesting, as I mentioned, that in all the Swedish books that I analyze here, the mother leaves her children, and when she leaves, it is the father who stays. And none of these mothers ever doubt the father's parenting capacities. The father is considered to be a fully capable caretaker, something that is also demonstrated by the absence of the motif of the mother worrying that the child would not be cared for properly.

Focusing on the mothers' leaving is not to argue that these mothers, in a simple way, take the 'male position' in a reversal of the roles of mother and father, but to establish that something interesting is going on in these books concerning gender positions. The possible separation between woman and child within the family, the loosening of the exclusive tie between them, is a representation of a change with regard to the more traditional imaginary schemata of parenting. By letting the mothers leave and the fathers stay, the authors give the fathers an important role in this displacement, and at times also very tangibly help the mothers to see the often confusing patterns of gender inequality more clearly – as for example, Sara's husband in *Bitter Bitch*, who makes her understand why their son does not accept her leaving for a week, but never has any

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

problems to accept that his father is away. Her husband says to her: ‘I have a clear conscience when I’m gone, but you feel so guilty it almost makes you sick. He senses your guilt and it confirms that he’s right to be angry at you.’ I stood quietly for a long time, staring blankly. So damned obvious.’ (Sveland, p. 13) Here the father helps the mother to free herself from feelings of guilt and to challenge the old imaginary schemata, and to consolidate the imaginary configuration of gender equality. In all the examples given here, we see a displacement and an opening up of the roles within the nuclear family, and this change leads among other things to a possibility for the mother to reflect on her life, not as a mother, or a wife, but more generally, as an individual. If real change is to happen, and if the patriarchal imaginary schemata is to vanish, more cultural images that conceptualize the mother-child-father bond differently need to be created. Alison Stone writes:

[R]ejecting the traditional view opens up possibilities for re-imagining the paternal figure as a bodily figure. This re-imagining would support men and fathers participating in childcare at a corporeal level, sharing fully in the everyday material and emotional care of children, directly from the birth of those children onwards. (Stone, p. 86)

And these novels, in which there is a grappling with, and a displacement of, the traditional positions within the nuclear family, all participate in this kind of re-imagining.

The Father as Obstacle

But the father is not only associated with gender equality and new parental roles, or seen as a helper in the mother’s quest, he is also depicted as blind to the mother’s problems, and where she sees injustice and gender inequality, he doesn’t always agree.

When looking for a common denominator for these mothers’ quest, selfhood and individuality come to mind, even though the meaning of these notions are different in the different stories. In *A family there are no enemies* (Myrén, 2009), selfhood implies a position where the mother can mentally manage both a close relationship to the child and an individual life separate from the family; in *Go to pieces* (Sandberg, 2003), the mother struggles to mentally survive at all; in *Bitter Bitch* (Sveland, 2007), the idea of autonomous freedom is often highlighted; and in *Break, heal* (Nordin, 2011), the conscious quest is about suppressing the strong subjectivity and vitality that emerges against the mother’s very rationalistic plan. None of these mothers can cope with life as it has turned out, and they need to get away to get a perspective on life and themselves. This is something that the three fathers who know of the mother’s leaving, at least in theory, accept.¹³ But the fathers are also portrayed as failing to

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

understand or acknowledge *why* the mothers feel the way they do, and why family life is impossible for them whereas the fathers themselves seem to be fully content within the realm of the family. And this difference leads us back to the gap between ideal and reality discussed in the beginning of this paper.

In Sweden, in line with the ideal of gender equal parenting and contrary to many other countries, the political discourse on mothers and fathers has presented them as equally competent and willing with regard to parenthood. As Roger Klinth writes in an article which treats the history of ‘father politics’:

The dominating representation of gender equality also included an idea of shared profits between men and women. There was an optimism concerning men’s will and capacity to change, and a belief in their capacity as parents. This is far from evident if we look at other countries. To the contrary, the debate in many countries was dominated by the image of fathers as a threat. It is the violent and sexually threatening father, rather than the active and competent father, which is in focus. (Klinth 2013, p. 256)

As I hope to have shown, this kind of optimism and belief in the competent father is communicated in these stories. But even if parents are considered equal when it comes to the potential and willingness for parenting, it does not, as we have seen in regard to the Swedish socio-political context, follow that they are so in reality. Another slant of this same question which is important here is that ‘mother’ and ‘father’ have very different historical baggage (see for example Baraister 2009, pp. 19-23). To be a mother and to be a father, even within hegemonic gender equality of Sweden, means performing within very different spans of expectation.¹⁴ Despite its obvious positive sides, the tendency to conceptualize the situation of mothers and fathers and the work that they do, in terms of *parenting*, as is common in Sweden, rather than in terms of *mothering* and *fathering*, is, as Klinth & Johanson underscores (2010, p. 110) not *only* inclusive, carrying the possibility of gender equality. It also carries the risk of covering up the historically ingrained differences between mothers and fathers which still exist and to deny the specific problems experienced by mothers, whose existence is generally affected by pregnancy, child birth and child rearing – in ways that the fathers’ existence is not.¹⁵ I claim that the motif of the father as blind to the specificity of the mother’s situation is dealt with in all these books and that it is here that he functions as an obstacle for the mother’s subjectivity and can be positioned on the side of the traditional mother image mentioned above. One aspect of the mother’s parenting that the fathers don’t share, even to the extent that they practice gender equal parenting, is the heavy ideological package of guilt and impossible ideals linked to the idea of the mother, and this difference is not always seen and understood by him. In *Sandberg* (2003) the

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

mother struggles to establish a feeling of selfhood and has decided to study at the university. But the father has no understanding for this.

But what is it going to lead to, that thing in Umeå?
I wanted to explain. I really wanted to explain. That it was about conquering something. Something which was mine. That didn't press itself inwards, over. That instead opened up, let something else in. Not just fear.

Does everything have to lead somewhere?

...

I think 'we', he said. The family. You and me. The kids. A house, a garden. For us.
(Sandberg, p. 74)

Their focuses are very different. She feels invaded by the people around her and needs more space to be able to exist, whereas for him, there is no conflict between existence and the nuclear family. He is happy there, in this 'we' where she is suffocating. In Myrén (2009), the mother has serious problems with impulse control, and needs to medicate. Her husband exclaims 'Why the hell should you take pills, you don't feel worse than anyone else' (Myrén, p. 65). The mother responds to his unwillingness to understand the width of her problem by saying that there is nothing you can answer when someone doesn't want to see that you are ill. And:

Didn't he see? You can't live together, sleep in the same bed, sit in the same TV-couch, in front of each other at the breakfast table without seeing that a person needs help. [...] He wants me to give him an explanation that takes away all responsibility from him. (Ibid.)

In Sveland (2007), the parents take it for granted that they shall live parenthood gender equally, but it doesn't turn out to be as easy as they thought, and they do not share the work of parenting equally from the beginning. Sara, the protagonist, is overwhelmed by the demands of the baby and she needs her husband to help. 'I need Johan here now, next to me on the sofa. I realize that I am alone. Am I supposed to solve this problem alone? I cannot get Sigge to take the breast although he is hungry. I start to panic because this baby has taken possession of me' (Sveland, p. 50). She needs him to be there, but he prioritizes work. He is a theatre director, and when he is offered a job in a different city, he prefers not to see the width of her problem and decides to take the job, which means staying away during ten work-weeks counting from when their child is three months old. When he comes home during the week-ends, she demands that he take the baby when it wakes up during the night, something which he at first refuses, saying that he is tired too. She cannot believe what is happening:

Again I have a horrible foreboding, a feeling that I do not really know him, this man with whom I have been living for seven years.

Katarina Carlshamre, *Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland*

Everything is surreal and the floor is moving. I do not know how I am going to get him to understand what it means to be alone with a three-month-old baby around the clock. It is something you cannot understand if you have not experienced it. (Sveland, p. 61)

For her, his decision to take the job when the baby was newborn is an enormous betrayal, whereas he, who agrees that his leaving was unfortunate, thinks that he couldn't have done things differently and that he was a victim of unlucky circumstances. No matter the view taken on this, it is clear that his choice works against gender equality and is rather linked to traditional patriarchal organization of parenting with the father as bread-winner, and an agent in the outer sphere.

In Nordin (2011), the novel in which the play with the nuclear family is the most unusual in that she uses the family as a protection against selfhood and genuineness, there are two contradicting tendencies, one that works to deny the mother's real self and her deeper feelings, and one that operates in the opposite direction, working to reveal her real self. In this struggle, the nuclear family is used as a protection against her more genuine feelings, and the father is the most important building block of her very purposeful construction of a fake 'perfect life'. The father is linked, all along, to the artificial and blind construction of the nuclear family where she believes that the cemented roles make it possible for her to deny who she really is. And when her genuine feelings and desires can't be stopped anymore, she believes that her husband probably would still avoid to see who she really is: 'Maybe Anders would have closed his eyes and continued to see me as the one he till now had believed I was, even if my disgusting interior had started to transpire.' (Nordin, p. 229).

I will end with a scene which exemplifies the double image of the father, how he is both manifested as linked to a displacement of old gender roles, and as supporting and encouraging this traditional schemata. It is the opening scene of Myrén (2009), when the mother leaves. The father who encouraged the mother to leave is devastated and angry now that she finally does so:

'I will make sure they get to know. I will tell them what you did, that you just left. Damn it.'

He spits the words, I feel the saliva and his aggressive breath, and I back away as fast as I can. He does it so mean, he has dragged the children onto the driveway and stands there holding Alma's hand and with Leo in his arms [...] The children are scared by his hysterical crying, they don't know what to do, he who never cries, his face is ugly from crying, he screams himself mean and red, even though we agreed, he said it himself, that this is best for all, he was so bloody understanding. And here it comes, hits me straight in the face, and there is nothing I can do, but to stand here and take it. It's not fair, it's just not fair, and if I had not thought that, I would not have had the strength to open the car door, seat myself in the front seat, roll up the windows, turn the key, back out and drive away. (Myrén, p. 9)

Katarina Carlshamre, *Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland*

This scene contains several reversals of the traditional images of mother and father. He is associated with the home; she with the car and the outside world. She is leaving, while he stands in the doorway with the children, crying, watching her leave. In the context of my analysis, these are all elements of change as they represent a counter image to traditional gender positions. But if we look at the feelings expressed, we can see a significant struggle which points in another direction. The mother and the father in this novel had agreed that her leaving would be best for them all, but now, he doesn't accept this. And it is interesting to see that the tool that he uses to get to her is guilt. And it is also noteworthy that it is the idea of fairness/equality that gives the mother the power to resist. Myrén makes the idea of equality function as a protection against feelings of guilt; guilt, which in turn, and as I have mentioned, generally is considered to be linked to the disproportionate responsibility often demanded of mothers.

Conclusion

I have argued that, in these stories, the father's presence is an important tool to help the mother free herself from the idea of the mother as the exclusive natural parent, and to move towards gender equality. But, as we have seen, he is not only a helper in this quest. Depending on the situation, he functions *both* as a force linked to gender equality *and* as a force pulling the mother back into a mothering which renders subjectivity difficult. In the beginning of this paper, I discussed the gap between norm and reality regarding gender equality in Sweden and these writers seem to situate their protagonists to struggle in precisely this gap, in this tension between imaginaries: one which points towards traditional gender roles, and one which point towards a subversion of these roles.

My argument also suggests that the insistent dilemma within feminist theory between essentialism and social construction is reactivated in these texts and I have linked this to the sociopolitical situation of parenthood in Sweden, where politics of parenting is, currently, to a large extent conceptualized in gender neutral terms (not 'mother' and 'father', but 'parent'). This willingness to conceptualize parenting beyond gender, despite its potential to liberate both women and men from essentialised gender positions, does not *only* carry the possibility of rendering visible and defying power structures between the sexes and thus lead to gender equality, but it also carries the risk of rendering *invisible* these power structures and the differences between mothering and fathering which do exist (linked to ideas of what a good mother/father is for example). The fathers' blindness to the mothers' problems in these stories,

Katarina Carlshamre, *Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland*

which surprised me at first, can be seen as suggestive of the more conservative potential of this move.

¹ When I talk about mother-narrated novels, I mean novels in which the narrator is a mother. All of the novels I have found also put the mother's relation to her children in a central position. This, however, is not a prerequisite; I am interested in the voice of the mother. As Gill Rye states (2009, p. 15), for a long time, the mother rarely told her story in literature, and I want to analyze the stories that now are being told. My choice of not including mother focal novels has to do with the fact that, in this specific project, I want to focus solely on stories where the reader, all through the story, is held within the perspective of the mother, without any other point of reference.

² Amongst the questions that I explore are the transition to motherhood, the role given to the fathers and the manifestation of mental illness in the stories.

³ Some examples of recent French mother-narrated novels: *Bord de mer* (2003) by Véronique Olmi, *L'inattendue* (2003) by Karine Reyssset, *Tom est mort* (2004) by Marie Darrieussecq, *Un heureux événement* (2005) by Eliette Abécassis, *Le jugement de Léa* (2007) by Laurence Tardieu, *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) by Marie Ndiaye.

⁴ For more, see : http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/LE0201_2012A01_BR_X10BR1201.pdf.

⁵ There are exceptions, such as Enel Melberg's novel *Modershjärtat* (The mother's heart) in which there are caring fathers represented.

⁶ All of the Nordic countries are precursors regarding fatherhood and care. Martiskainen compares the French and the Finnish situation: 'Explicit norms of marital support and fathering at transition to parenthood have long been absent from the French policy clearing. Indeed, the father has long been a 'significant absent' of French policy and the creation of a two-week paternity leave in France by Ségolène Royal, Minister of Family and Childhood, only took place in 2002 (only a three-day leave existed until then). [...] Crossing gender and nationality, it appears that in terms of family leaves at birth (excluding HCA) Finnish fathers have been provided with more leaves since 1980, than are French mothers currently.' (Martiskainen 2006, p. 91).

⁷ The declaration backed in 1968: 'A policy which aims to give women the same economic opportunities as men, but at the same time preserves the traditional responsibilities of women with regard to home and children, cannot possibly succeed. Economic equality can only be reached when men are educated and encouraged to take active responsibility for parenting, and are given the same rights and duties as women' (Sandlund, 1968, p. 4).

⁸ For more, see: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_124442.pdf.

⁹ Swedish statistics on gender equality up until 2011 (in Swedish):

http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/LE0201_2012A01_BR_X10BR1201.pdf.

¹⁰ Gill Rye refers in this context to a variety of scholars (Rye, p. 139-140). The psychologist Ylva Elvin-Nowak underlines that parental guilt is a question of policy of distribution. She points out, in *I sällskap med skulden* (2001), that guilt and responsibility go hand in hand; the one who is considered responsible in a certain situation, and who considers him or herself as such, is also apt to feel guilt. Guilt is thus not in itself a bad thing – a guilt-free relationship to the child is nothing to strive for – the potential of feeling guilt comes with responsibility, but the

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

guilt-burden of mothers have been excessive, and, according to Elvin-Nowak's argument, this is so because, particularly during the 20th century, mothers have been held excessively responsible for children's well-being. And this, in turn, is linked to the idea of the mother as the natural caretaker.

¹¹ When the mother is not, as is also often the case, entirely excluded from the story. (On this issue see for example Saint-Martin, 1999).

¹² See Nancy Huston's thought-provoking article 'Le dilemme de la romancière' for a discussion on the intricacies of mothering, writing and separation (Huston 1995, p. 123-130).

¹³ In Nordin (2011) the mother leaves only in the last pages and does so without telling anyone and the reader does not meet the father after this.

¹⁴ See, for example, Cristina Grenholm (2011, p. 49-53).

¹⁵ See, for example, Lisa Baraitser (2009, p. 21)

References

Novels:

Abécassis, Éliette (2005) *Un heureux événement*. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel.

Darrieussecq, Marie (1999) *Mal de mer*. Paris: P.O.L.

Darrieussecq, Marie (2007) *Tom est mort*. Paris: P.O.L.

Myrén, Viktoria (2009) *I en familj finns inga fiender*. Stockholm: Ordfront förlag.

Ndiaye, Marie (2009) *Trois femmes puissantes*. Paris: Gallimard.

Nordin, Sofia (2011) *Gå sönder, gå hel*. Stockholm: Norstedts förlag.

Olmi, Véronique (2001) *Bord de mer*. Paris: Actes Sud.

Sandberg, Kristina (2003). *Ta itu*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand.

Sveland, Maria (2011 [2007]). *Bitter Bitch*, trans. by Katarina E. Tucker. London: Corsair.

Tardieu, Laurence (2004) *Le Jugement de Léa*. Paris : Arlea.

Other works cited:

Badinter, Elisabeth (1981 [1980]). *The myth of motherhood: an historical view of the maternal instinct*. London: Souvenir P.

Baraitser, Lisa (2009). *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. London: Routledge.

Carlshamre, Katarina (under review). 'Living the paradox – the transition to motherhood in two European novels; the French *A Happy Event* (2005) and the Swedish *Bitter Bitch* (2007)'

Duras, Marguerite (2011 [1993]). *Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Elvin-Nowak, Ylva (2001). *I sällskap med skulden*. Stockholm: Bonnier.

Grenholm, Cristina. (2011) *Motherhood and Love; beyond the gendered stereotypes of theology*. Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans.

Klinth, Roger & Johansson, Thomas (2010). *Nya svenska fäder*. 1. uppl. Umeå: Boréa

Klinth, Roger (2013). 'Den svenska pappapolitiken I historisk belysning' in *Arbete och jämställdhet: förändringar under femtio år*, edited by Eva Blomber och Kirsti Niskanen. Stockholm: SNS.

Lewis, Jane & Åström, Gertrud (1992) 'Equality, difference, and state welfare: Labor market and family policies in Sweden' in *Feminist Studies*. Spring 92, Vol. 18 Issue 1, p59.

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland

Studies in the Maternal, 5(2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

- Martiskainen de Koeningswarter, Heini (2006). *Discursive Matrixes of Motherhood, Cultivating Decency and Emotion in Finnish and French Mother-Talk*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Printing House.
- Rydström, Jens & Tjeder, David (2009). *Kvinnor, män och alla andra: en svensk genushistoria*. 1. uppl. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Rye, Gill (2009). *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Saint-Martin, Lori (2013). 'Rediscovering the absent father, a question of recognition: Desportes, Tardieu' in *Women's Writing in twenty-first-century France*, edited by Amaleena Damle and Gill Rye.
- Saint-Martin, Lori (1999) *Le nom de la mère - mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au féminin*. Québec : Éditions Nota bene, Collection Essais critiques.
- Sandlund, Maj-Britt (1968). *The Status of Women in Sweden: Report to the United Nations*. Series: Sweden Today.
- Stone, Alison (2012). *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* New York: Routledge.
- Sweden (2012). *Påtal om Kvinnor och Män. Lathund om jämställdhet 2012*. Available at: http://www.scb.se/statistik/_publikationer/LE0201_2012A01_BR_X10BR1201.pdf. Accessed 9 December 2013.
- Witt-Brattström, Ebba (2013). 'Kärlekskriget som blev en skatt i svensk litteratur', in *Dagens Nyheter*, 2013-01-26.
- Åseskog (2003) 'National machinery for gender equality in Sweden and other Nordic countries' in *Mainstreaming gender, democratizing the state?: institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women* edited by Rai, S.M. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press.

Katarina Carlshamre, Helper and Obstacle: the image of the father in four Swedish mother-narrated novels of the early 21st Century: Myrén, Nordin, Sandberg and Sveland