The Repression of the Bad Oedipal Mother in Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

Despite the disagreeable cliché that psychoanalysis is a mother bashing theory, the mother has been a latecomer to the field. Till the end, the Freudian theory did remain father centered and paternal. Freud, who knew the castrating mother very well, didn’t give the mother a central place in his theory, and didn’t feel this absence was worthy of elaboration. It was Abraham who introduced the concept of the “bad mother” when he was working with Freud, and later as Klein’s analyst influenced her return to the mother as the most important object in the child’s encounter with the world. Yet, Klein’s notion of mother remained as a phantasy object in the child’s internal world of object relationships. Even Winnicott who seems to be concerned with the external mother in the environment, is concerned primarily with the pre-oedipal mother in relation to the infant. The Oedipal mother of the later years who may actively become the subject of seduction, rivalry, and envy in her relationship with her daughter or son is only seen in case reports, but rarely in psychoanalytic theorizing. It seems safer to talk about the absence of a good mother rather than about the presence of a bad mother. Bad mother is a concept that should be inferred rather than presented. This apparent anomaly is explored here through the review of Volver (2006), Pedro Almodóvar’s powerful movie, and within the context of the presentation of a clinical vignette.

Le refoulement de la mauvaise mère oedipienne en psychanalyse

Malgré le cliché désagréable que la psychanalyse est la théorie de la mère dénigrante, la mère est arrivée relativement tard sur le champ. La théorie freudienne est restée jusqu’à la fin une théorie paternelle centrée sur le père. Freud, qui connaissait très bien la mère castratrice, n’a pas donné une place centrale à la mère dans sa théorie et ne pensait pas que cette absence était digne d’élaboration. C’est Karl Abraham qui a introduit le concept de la “mauvaise mère”, quand il travaillait avec Freud, et plus tard, comme analyste de Mélanie Klein, a influencé son retour à la mère comme l’objet le plus important dans la rencontre de l’enfant avec le monde. Cependant, dans la notion kleinienne, la mère reste comme un objet de phantasme dans le monde interne de relations d’objet de l’enfant. Même Winnicott qui semble être préoccupé par la mère externe dans l’environnement, s’intéresse principalement à la mère préœdipienne en relation avec l’enfant. La mère œdipienne des années plus tard, qui peut, dans sa relation avec sa fille ou son fils, devenir activement le sujet de séduction, de rivalité et d’envie, existe seulement dans les études de cas, et rarement dans la théorisation psychanalytique. Il semble plus prudent de parler de l’absence d’une bonne mère, plutôt que de la présence d’une mauvaise mère. Cette dernière est un concept qui doit être plutôt déduit que présenté. Cette anomalie apparente est explorée ici au travers de Volver (2006), film puissant de Pedro Almodóvar, ainsi que la présentation d’une vignette clinique.

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In his early attempt to decode the language of hysteria, Freud developed his famous but soon-to-be-rejected seduction theory. As early as 1896, in “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” he wrote about “premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood” (p. 203). Later, when the number of cases with a history of childhood sexual experience increased, he moved the weight of aetiology toward wishful thinking and fantasy, although some authors believe that he never completely abandoned the idea of external seduction (Diamond, 1989). Nevertheless, psychoanalysis—as the science of internal psychic dynamics—identified a tendency to ignore the question of real-life events. This was similar to the failure to acknowledge incest in other branches of the mental health system. As Benvenuto (2016) argues, the DSM-5 doesn’t even include incest in the list of paraphilia, because “Western laws are slowly going in the direction of decriminalizing any form of incest among adults” (p. xvi).

Our question here does not concern criminalizing incest, however, since most sexual experiences in childhood occur within the family and quickly become a shared secret; the family can appear to live up to social norms and continue for long years without talking about the transgression. This is what Billig (2006) calls “discursive unconscious”: “If we have secrets from ourselves, then not only must we forget the secrets, but we must also forget that we have forgotten them” (p. 13).

Trying to forget that they have forgotten the obvious, family members avoid giving words to what they feel in the ambience. It’s difficult to imagine a pedophile without a context that confers some sort of immunity to continue acting on his morbid desires. This is also true for other types of perverse acts. Russell Williams, former Colonel in the Canadian Forces who was convicted of multiple rapes and murders, is an example of a pervert whose wife turned a blind eye on the signs of her husband’s pathology. His full confessions on YouTube and in the movie *An Officer and a Murderer*, which is based on his story, shows how his wife remained silent and looked the other way until it was too late.

The same theme appears in the BBC crime series *The Fall*, in which a murderer—who appears to be a decent person enjoying a normal life with his wife and children—sneaks out at night to stalk women, breaking into their houses to rape and eventually kill them. His young daughter gradually recognizes her father’s pathology, but his wife continues to believe his stories and even lies to the police to protect him. A similar dynamic is at work in an incestuous relationship between a father and his child: The mother remains silent and allows it to happen, and therefore it becomes increasingly “acceptable” within that dynamic.

I believe that psychoanalytic literature has ignored this problem. While some cases of female sexual perversion (Benvenuto, 2015) have been reported, mothers’ perverse acts seem to be an unpopular topic to write about. A simple search through the archive of psychoanalytic papers, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP), shows that out of 602 papers with the word “Mother” in their title, only four papers are about the “Bad Mother”, one paper is on the “Castrating Mother” and just one on the “Abusive Mother.” Maternal love is a relatively new concept in human history (Freud, 2010), yet it’s easier to believe in the myth of a steadfastly loving mother than face the unsettling truth about the mother who harms her child. Analysts are familiar with the narratives of bad mothers, but they curiously shy away from examining the manifestations, complexities and dynamics of how and when a mother may become castrating, devouring, attacking, and abusive.
In this paper, in which I discuss Volver (2006), Pedro Almodóvar’s powerful movie, and analyze a clinical case, I intend to share my thoughts about one particular type of bad mother, the shadowy partner of perverted father. I will conclude by taking a closer look at the resistance around the concept of bad mother in psychoanalytic literature.

Volver and the Ghost-like Mother

In Volver (To Return), Almodóvar explores a mother’s complexities in a story that centers on transgression. The mother, Irene—who is presumed dead when the story begins—was the quintessential example of a woman who was a victim of circumstances. Her daughters, Raimunda and Sole, believe that their mother and father died in a fire three years. When the sisters return to their hometown to attend a funeral, Irene (who villagers claim has returned from the dead) hides in the trunk of Sole’s car and returns with her to the suburb of Madrid where she and Raimunda now live. Irene reveals herself to Sole, who allows her mother to move in with her. However, knowing that Raimunda hates her—because Irene failed to acknowledge that her husband had raped and impregnated their daughter when she was a teenager—Irene is afraid to reveal herself to Raimunda. The two had been estranged long before Irene’s death; in the aftermath of the rape, and newly pregnant, the teenaged Raimunda had refused to talk to her mother, and moved in with her maternal aunt.

Home from the funeral, Raimunda learns that her husband, Paco, has tried to rape her daughter, Paula. Paula killed him to stop the attack, however, and Raimunda hides his body in a deep freeze at the restaurant she owns. As the story continues she discovers that Irene has returned, and the two gradually begin to reconcile.

In a scene in which the two, newly united, are walking together, Irene tells Raimunda about how, four years earlier, she finally learned about the rape and that her husband was the father of Raimunda’s child. Irene says, “How could such a nightmare unfold in front of my eyes and I didn’t understand anything?” She tells Raimunda that when she went to ask her husband for an explanation, she found him asleep in the arms of another woman and burned down the house. Afterward, her daughters and everyone else assumed that Irene had died in his arms, not his lover, and Irene had vanished. The twist is intriguing: Irene is willing to commit murder when her husband is with another woman, but looks the other way when he rapes her own daughter.

The coming back, or volver in Spanish, is what caught viewers’ attention; critics tended to summarize the plot by depicting a repentant mother who returns from the dead to repair a relationship many years after destroying it. This image runs parallel to the daughter’s yearning for her mother’s love: At the end, Raimunda says, “I need you so much—I have needed you all these years.”

In Borden’s (2008) review of the movie, she notes that in these situations, anger is often directed at the mother instead of the real perpetrator. But the mother is not a displaced object of aggression in Volver, as Borden suggests; when the father rapes his teenaged daughter and gets her pregnant, the mother is a coconspirator. Almodóvar also presents a radically different way to mother a daughter who is in danger of being abused. Earlier in the story, when we see Paco’s erotic gaze at his teenaged stepdaughter, Raimunda intervenes by yelling at him—and when Paula kills him in self-defense, Raimunda takes responsibility by saying, “Remember, I killed him.”

In a sense, this could be Raimunda’s dream, an instance of Freudian wish fulfillment, in that the rapist “father” is not really her father, and he is being killed before he can rape her. When Paula is distraught after
killing her stepfather, Raimundo hugs her and is willing and able to take care of the mess. In contrast, in Raimunda’s own story, her rape was followed by years of neglect by her mother—on top of having to survive rape and teenaged pregnancy. In Irene’s dialogue with Raimunda about the possibility of police investigation, she says: “I would swear I had a life without a sin.” This sounds familiar; Irene sees herself as a saint, and disavows the ugly reality. She assumes no responsibility, and, ironically, feels victimized by Raimunda: “It’s terrible when a daughter doesn’t love her own mother,” Irene tells her grandchild.

Raimunda is an energetic and cheerful young woman. Her restaurant’s lively ambience, with the vibrant colors of fresh vegetables and sounds of music, contrasts sharply with the frozen corpse of the husband in the basement. This is the tragedy of a woman with a background of sexual abuse by her parents: She struggles with deadness, which is depicted literally in the scenes in which Raimunda tries to move the corpse. We can feel its heavy weight on her soul, which she doesn’t seem to be able to get rid of.

To manage the internal deadness, she asks for help from female friends. She doesn’t engage with men, and keeps herself unaware of the effect she has on them. Obviously, being desirable to men has cost her not only the best days of life, but also her mother. So while we see a courageous, mature woman dealing with life’s crises, when she encounters her femininity she behaves like a little girl who is overcome by shame. Her love life has been foreclosed, not only because she had to endure being raped and impregnated by her father, but because of her profound sense of being unlovable; her husband, she tells Paula, was simply someone who “agreed to take us in.” Klein (1936) reminds us that internalization of the loving mother is the cornerstone of feeling worthy of love and belonging. Raimunda, in contrast, found someone who “took her in” rather than someone who loved her.

Once Paco, the uncaring and perverted husband, has been removed from the story, the women are left to work through the unfinished business of being a daughter to a shadowy mother. At the beginning of the movie, Raimunda is in the cemetery, obsessively trying to clean her parents’ graves; “The letters should shine,” she says, as she struggles against the wind. We hear in this Raimunda’s wish: “If the letters (the word presentation) were shiny enough, there would have been no wind (chaos, lack of law).” The residents of Raimunda’s hometown say that there are many fires in the village because of the hot winds, and Raimunda tells Sole and Paula that “this wind is maddening.” In a sense, the opening scene captures the story’s essence: The lack of law is maddening indeed.

Mothers’ relationships with their children are essentially narcissistic. Freud (1914) wrote, “In the child which they bear, a part of their own body confronts them like an extraneous object, to which, starting out from their narcissism, they can then give complete object-love” (p. 90). But can all mothers give their children complete object-love? Winnicott, dealing with real mothers, was fully aware of their potential power to hate; he was so familiar with bad mothers that he devoted his career to identifying the nuances of being a good-enough mother. In “Hate in Countertransference” (1949), he enumerates the ways in which mother can behave hatefully toward her baby. According to Winnicott, all mothers, at some level, hate their children for ordinary reasons—from the hardships of pregnancy to the exploitative nature of the baby’s love and the baby’s ultimate disillusionment with mother, despite all the care she has provided. Winnicott emphasizes that the mother should be able to tolerate her hate without doing harm to her child. This requires a level of personality integration, since “the mother hates the baby before the baby hates the mother, and before the baby can know his mother hates him” (p. 73).
The required integration of personality on the mother’s part should not be taken for granted. To be able “to tolerate hating her baby without doing anything about it” (p. 74), the mother must be aware of her own internal world and recognize that the baby is a separate being. With this awareness comes the ability to dream, fantasize, and play. This is the territory of secondary process and word presentation rather than primary process and thing presentation; it is also the territory of depressive position rather than paranoid-schizoid, and of conscience rather than superego (Carveth, 2010). It is clear that many mothers fail to reach that level of personality integration, and act out their hate instead of tolerating it. Among them are mothers who gratify their impulses to hate but “leave those around [them] to pay the bill” (Racamier, 2014, p. 122). This is the caricature of a “phaloid mother” who, according to Racamier (2014), is a woman who is of course castrating, utterly full of hate, constantly avoiding depression which she brushes against, greedy to take possession of her prey even if it is then dead, and even capable of using her own children as hostages, instruments of revenge and guided missiles. (p.122)

In this type of Narcissistic Perversion, the action takes place in the shadow and behind the scene. Children are the most available, ready-to-be-exploited proxies that narcissistically perverted mothers can use.

Racamier’s description of Narcissistic Perversion echoes with Kernberg’s concept of Malignant Narcissism. To Kernberg (2007, 2014), this type of narcissistic pathology is characterized by excessive self-centeredness, greediness, and exploitative behavior toward others; severe superego pathology; and antisocial behavior. He believes that in this condition, aggression predominates and triggers a fixation on primitive defensive behaviors. Kernberg’s superego pathology and antisocial tendency is similar to Racamier’s use of perversion.

Dr. X’s Futile Love

Two years after Dr. X terminated his treatment, I called him to inquire about his condition. Our conversation took as much time as a therapy session would have—but in the end, I did not feel that he had any inclination to continue his treatment. He said:

I’m back to work again, doing research and writing papers. It’s good. You did your best. I know that you wanted to help me and I appreciate your effort. Although you couldn’t do much. I appreciate that you remember me. Sometimes I think about our sessions. But I think there is nothing more that you can give me. That’s my life. I have to deal with it.

Dr. X., a tall, thin man in his early 30s, was a successful scientist who had been referred to me by a private sex clinic in Tehran six years ago. I always associate him with a certain darkness; he had dark complexion, black hair, and dark circles under his eyes, and he always wore black. He began by introducing himself as gay, and said that he wanted me to help him change his sexual orientation. To familiarize myself with his internal conflicts, I asked, “What is troubling you about being gay?” He answered:

My mother should not find out. If she knows, she’ll have a heart attack. I’m her only son and she is very proud of me. Besides, she is strictly religious. I am from a small town, [where] people know each other very well. If people find out about this, my mother [will] lose face. She is known as a kind, religious woman and everyone likes her. This can ruin her life and her relationships with people. I can’t do this to her.
In the following sessions, the story unfolded. He talked about his love for a butcher in his hometown, and said that he could not function as a researcher. He had lost his concentration, appetite, and sleep due to his preoccupation with the butcher.

I just want to look at him when he is working. I enjoy seeing him chopping the meat. I can feel the strength of his hands. I keep thinking about his hands. He has got these big, powerful, hairy hands. I’m sure you are surprised that a scientist has fallen in love with a butcher. But I’m madly in love with him. Sometimes it’s unbearable. If you could see him you would be even more surprised. He is bald, with a fat belly. I’m sure he must be sweating when he is chopping the meat. I was so inspired by his sweating that I wrote a poem about it one of my sleepless nights. Even thinking about it makes me excited. I will bring you my poem later. But I’m sure he is straight. He must have wife, kids and all these normal things that normal people have. I have to end this. I have to do something about this love. You should help me with that.

He definitely seemed troubled, and with a trembling voice, he asked me to perform what amounted to a kind of magic.

The dark circles under his eyes were only the beginning of a series of cosmetic plastic surgeries he underwent out of fear of looking old and ugly. Gradually, the surgeries made his face look more like a frozen mask—and despite his unhealthy thinness, he restricted himself to one serving of bread and cheese, and nothing else, every day. To reach our sessions, Dr. X. took on the burden of traveling more than 600 km from his hometown to Tehran every week. He was always on time, always in black, always extremely thin, always under pressure to speak, and always in the midst of an emergency. When I was with him, I couldn’t help but feel like an out-of-tune instrument, making the wrong noises at the wrong times.

He continued to talk about his obsessive love in our sessions, with details of their interactions: how he started getting close to his love object, formed a friendship with him, and finally confessed his love. The butcher—a homophobic macho—was highly resistant to Dr. X.’s strong wish to have sex with him, which greatly upset the patient; even so, he did not intend to give up. Somewhere between talking about his sleepless nights and crying about his frustration, he shared memories of his childhood:

My father has always been an alcoholic. I used to sleep in his bed from my childhood up to the time when I was accepted to the university . . . [hesitantly continues]. I know this sounds bizarre but I should tell you this . . . I used to rub my father’s penis before falling asleep. I had thought that he couldn’t understand anything because he was always drunk. But when I was about to go to university, he told me that I was a grown up now, I am going to be a scientist and I have to stop doing this and find a separate bed for myself.

Where was your mother all this time? I asked.

I had told you that she was very religious. She used to pray all night long. You see, I was really embarrassed when I realized that my father was not that drunk and knew what I was doing all that time. I think this part has somehow contributed to my problem. Maybe that’s why I’m so miserable. Maybe that’s why I can’t have a normal life like normal people.

After a while, he started to spend money in an attempt to bribe the butcher and maintain a relationship with him. He bought him expensive alcoholic beverages, paid his mortgage, and offered his family a tour abroad. In the meantime, he continued to obsessively watch the butcher from a distance; he also began to
feel jealous, and became angry anytime he saw the butcher talking to or with a woman. He couldn’t get the butcher out of his mind. He had closed his office, and couldn’t work, eat, or sleep. He was in deep pain. In one session, he talked more about his fantasies:

I can understand those people who become serial killers. After seeing him with women, I hate women who dress up, wear makeup, and make themselves attractive to men. They are whores. I hate them. He hangs out with that type of women, and I think that’s why he doesn’t like me. It’s really painful that they’ve got something to offer him that I can’t ever give him. I can’t compete with them. He likes them. He is not going to like me, no matter how hard I try. That’s why I thought I could be a serial killer and kill all those women who ruin other people’s lives.

To him, women were castrating monsters—ruthless, greedy, omnipotent creatures who would deprive him of any satisfaction. He wanted to kill them all, perhaps to set himself free from the prison of the very first woman he had known.

Dr. X’s mother prayed all night long, turning a blind eye to a tragedy that was unfolding in front of her eyes. Apparently she had not noticed that her son had been sharing a bed with his perverted father for many years; as Racamier (2014) suggests, she was acting “completely on the sly and in the wings.” Appearing to be a saint, she could render herself oblivious to the fact that she had become an ally to her husband’s perversion. This, in itself, is an instance of Freud’s notion of the underlying factor in perversion, in which “we see that the perception [of the vagina] has persisted and that a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal” (1927, p. 153). Here, Freud is referring to an erotogenic pleasure that makes the person disavow castration to keep on finding replacements, such as shoes. What demands our close attention is the type of pleasure this mother got out of the disavowal of her child’s sexual abuse. The unconscious satisfaction of this “specific type of choice of object” in a woman who continues living with a perverted man at the expense of her child’s life is unclear. Dr. X’s problem was not his homosexual orientation, but his deadness and masochism. He had not been able to form a satisfying relationship of any kind. He had been in love with someone else before the butcher—but, since it was limited to his fantasies, that love was also futile. With the butcher, all he could manage was to perform oral sex on him once, and even that remained unfinished. What had made him helpless was his compulsion to pursue men who not only didn’t desire him, but were disgusted by the thought of even touching him. He was unable to reflect on or try to find any meaning in his ongoing predicament.

At some level, he knew that his problem was linked to his history of sexual contact with his father. But his concrete mode of cognition prevented us from making further progress. In Playing and Reality (1971), Winnicott warns against instinct satisfaction and writes: “If when a child is playing, a physical excitement of instinctual involvement becomes evident, then the playing stops, or is at any rate spoiled” (p. 39). Dr. X had lost the intermediate-area experience by using his father’s penis to soothe and satisfy himself; he had no capacity to play. His love—as he declared—was void, empty, and full of darkness. He was clearly paying the price for his parents’ pathology.

Following Freud’s concept of disavowal (1927), Benvenuto (2016) believes that the pervert has a double knowledge: (S)he doesn’t want to know what (S)he already knows.

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2 This resonates with Freud, who quotes a German proverb in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905): “A young whore makes an old nun.”
With pedophilia, what is disavowed is the common knowledge surrounding childhood (and on which psychoanalysis has cast some doubt), that is, one knows that children do not long for genital pleasure as adults do. Yet, the pedophilic Other, through his act, “knows”—convincing himself at times even rationally—that the child enjoys genital-sexual games. (p. 9)

In his new conceptual framework, Binswanger (2016) suggests that perversion occurs when a person strives for non-sexual aims through sexuality—that is, non-sexual functions predominate in the sexual drive:

- Release of aggression;
- Stabilization of the sense of autonomy;
- Stabilization of the narcissistic equilibrium;
- Covering up of grief;
- Compensation of depression;
- Staging and working out conflicts from the oedipal past;
- Staging and working out of early infantile scars;
- Compensation of trauma, e.g. the transfer of sustained traumatic experiences to sexual objects. (p. 17)

The mother, who sets the stage for her pedophile husband, has a double knowledge and is using sexuality to achieve non-sexual aims—specifically, to release aggression and achieve narcissistic equilibrium. Her sexual satisfaction lies in actualizing her hate. She hates and envies life, liveliness, love, and sexuality. As Klein (1957) states, in elaborating on the mechanism of primitive envy, the goal is to “completely scoop out and suck dry” and “put badness, primarily bad excrements and bad parts of the self,” into the other person (p. 181). Through passive collaboration, mother preserves her non-guilty façade along with her favorite victim role, while in fact she has become the master of the slave husband in a sadomasochistic relationship. There isn’t a paucity of attributes that can easily characterize a mother as bad, or really bad.

Freud had a tendency to idealize the image of mother. In his analysis of Leonardo Da Vinci (1910) he writes: “A mother’s love for the infant…is in the nature of completely satisfying love-relation, which not only fulfills every mental wish, but also every physical need…” (P.117). He did seem to be myopic when it came to instances that didn’t fit his image of the loving mother. Mahony (2007) analyzed Freud’s famous case study on Rat Man. He noticed that despite patient’s narrative around the importance of his mother, “in Freud’s schema of detecting and assigning influence, she [mother] hardly exists” (p. 103). Mahony regards this as Freud’s own mother complex which was unconsciously at work when he was extracting the concepts from the clinical material to write a persuasive paper about obsessional neurosis. Hartke (1994) takes a different angle and analyzes psychoanalytic theory on castration anxiety to relate it to Freud’s history with his own mother. He cites Freud in “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” when he writes that “…..usually it is from women that the threat [of castration] emanates.” (1924, p.174). Abraham (1984) reminds us that Freud’s mother was known to be “full of charm with strangers, but over weening, demanding and tyrannical with her family” (p.444). He believes that Freud’s description of the paternal oedipal figure fit the character of his dominant mother instead of his passive father. Yet, till the end, the Freudian theory remained father centered and paternal. Freud, who knew the castrating mother very well, didn’t give the mother a central place in his theory, and didn’t feel this absence was worthy of elaboration

May (2001) describes how Karl Abraham introduced the concept of the “bad mother” when he was working with Freud. In his analysis of the paintings of Giovanni Segantini, Abraham departed from the Freudian theory of the centrality of the father, and for the first time used the term “bad mother” in 1911. Segantini was a famous painter in the early twentieth century who was preoccupied by the image of the mother. His paintings contrasted the good mother with the wicked, bad mother. Through applying
psychoanalytic theory to the Segantini’s biography and two specific paintings (The Two Mothers and The Wicked Mother) Abraham became “substantially certain that it is the mother who puts pre-odipal disappointments in love in the way of the boy [child]” (p.298). He concluded that Segantini’s depressive mood swings was directly linked with his repressed image of the bad mother. This is the point where Abraham’s view of mother departs from Freud’s. Abraham’s discovery of bad mother could be considered as a precursor to the Kleinian theory (May,2001). Being analyzed by Abraham, Klein continued this line of thought and brought mothers to the scene. The good, nourishing, supportive mother became separated from the bad, attacking, persecutory mother in face of frustrations. In “Weaning” (1936) Klein indirectly elaborates on ways that a mother can actually become a bad mother: from not enjoying the care she is providing to interfering with the child’s masturbation. In her discussion “on being a mother,” Klein (1937) describes how the mother’s own early relationships, her unconscious fantasies, and even her history of sibling rivalry can potentially affect the quality of her motherhood. Still, Kleinian school gravitated toward inner life and unconscious fantasy. Joan Rivier, the second analyst of Winnicott and a devoted Kleinian famously stated that Kleinian position did not concern itself with the real world, rather it was simply concerned with childish mind and fantasies (Phillips, 1988). So, Kleinian concept of the “bad mother” became more about child’s inner destructive fantasies and his/her projected hatred and envy rather than the presentation of the bad mother in the external world. Winnicott appreciated Klein and her theory but remained concerned with the external mother, as he could not imagine a baby except in his/her relation with the mother (Modell, 1985). As a pediatrician and a psychoanalyst, he knew that an “ordinary” mother is not necessarily a “good-enough” one. His experience with evacuated children during the war made him aware of the importance of environmental factors in general and of the existence of the external mother—good, bad, and ugly— in particular (Phillips, 1988). Even here, the mother’s role is relegated to the pre-odipal life of the infant. As an incestuous, seductive, envious, and abusive figure in the life of growing boys and girls, she is hardly visible in the mainstream psychoanalytic theories. It seems safer to talk about the absence of a good mother rather than about the presence of a bad mother. Bad mother is a concept that should be inferred rather than presented. Are we still operating under the shadow of the founding father of psychoanalysis or are simply afraid of meeting the archaic mother in our unconscious, is a question that needs further exploration.

References


Following Freud’s famous line in Mourning and Melancholia (1915): “The shadow of object fell upon the ego” (p.249)


