SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN'S "A MOTHER IN INDIA"

Simone Vauthier (à ma mère)

Because women writers have not received as much critical attention as men, pleasant surprises still await researchers in that field. Thus I happened to 'discover' Sara Jeannette Duncan's novella, "A Mother in India."[1] Not that Sara Jeannette Duncan is an unknown writer, of course, but her short fiction usually gets . . . short shrift. Nor can I within the very limited scope of this article hope to do justice to the excellence of the story, but I would like here to share some of my pleasure in it through a glance at its major theme.

If the voice of the text is not unfamiliar, "A Mother in India" nevertheless displays freshness of perception. Mrs. Farnham, the narrator/protagonist, may be kin to some of Henry James's or Edith Wharton's minor characters; she may be a "social type", one (more) literary version of the *memsahib*. For all that, the story she tells of her dealings with her daughter Cecily significantly departs from most nineteenth-century renderings of the mother/daughter relationship. Furthermore, candid as she is, she nevertheless remains blind to aspects of herself which her narration cannot help but betray. Thus, although the novella is much concerned with manners and surfaces, it is also a study of inner depths and self-delusion.

The ageing narrator retraces her relations with her daughter from the very beginning. Posted in India, the Farnhams sent off the sickly infant to England where she was brought up by women relatives. "I may have been Cecily's mother in theory", says the narrator, "but I was John's wife in fact" (p. 58). For various reasons they only saw the child twice before they could "bring her out" at the age of twenty-one. A sophisticated woman of the world who has seen action in frontier outposts, Mrs. Farnham is disappointed in Cecily, a "satisfactorily simple and sturdy English girl" with charming manners but no imagination: "she could register exactly as much as a camera" (p. 90). So, when on the boat to India, Mrs. Farnham meets again an attractive man with whom she has for years enjoyed an innocent flirtation, she tells him frankly: "I find the young lady very tolerable, very creditable, very nice. I find the relation atrocious" (p. 70).

Dacres Tottenham, however, seeks Cecily's company more and more, and though Mrs. Farnham thinks at first that he is "moved by compassion" for her (p. 76), she eventually realises "that myself had preposterously deceived me" and she begins to "watch the affair with an interest which even to (her) seemed queer" (p. 78). Dacres, she feels, is much too intelligent and sensitive for her daughter and when he speaks out his intentions, she points out to him Cecily's limitations. "The hatefulness of the mistake," however, and his persistence suggest a "test" to her. She invites him to stay with them in Agra and "in these ten days with the marble archives of the Moguls" Cecily fails the "test of quality." Undeceived, the young man might still be inconsequent enough to marry the girl if Mrs. Farnham did not insist "You could not possibly stand it" (p. 109). Ten years later, contrary to her mother's expectations that she "would accept the first presentable substitute," Cecily has refused several good offers and "is growing into a firm and solid English maiden lady" (p. 112).

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>
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Such a story questions the traditional view of motherhood which is, moreover, overtly discussed by Mrs. Farnham and Dacres: "But between mother and daughter – I may be old-fashioned, but I had an idea that there was an instinct that might be depended on" says Dacres (p. 69). To which Mrs. Farnham answers: "Men are very slow in changing their philosophy about women. I fancy their idea of the maternal relation is firmest fixed of all." Thus are opposed two conceptions: the maternal relation as an *instinct*, a natural therefore immutable *datum*, or as a tenet in a "philosophy", and 'idea', a "view" (p. 70), i.e. as a mental image liable to change, according to circumstances or even fashions. The definition of the relation depends on the viewer's sex, and women, Mrs. Farnham implies, know better. To this is linked another question: is motherhood "beatitude" as men, according to Dacres, have it? Or is it "an exciting condition and an impossible ideal" (p. 86) as Mrs. Farnham says – a set of roles which one must play with strenuous effort (theatrical metaphors recur in Mrs. Farnham's description of her relationship to Cecily) at the constant risk of falling short of the ideal?

The fiction explores various possibilities and in the last analysis interrogates us. Are we to regard Mrs. Farnham, who lacks the mother instinct, as an aberration of nature? Or is she a woman more or less typical of a certain kind of mother who, for varying reasons, has not acquired the experience of nurturing?

The text makes a straightforward answer difficult. Although it purports to be the utterance of a single voice, it nevertheless programs a multiple reading. Insofar as the story is told from the point of view of Mrs. Farnham, who clearly expects to be understood, the reader is made to share some of her values and to participate in her rejection of the clichés on motherhood. Indeed, Tottenham's unhappy experience is an illustration of the perils of such stereotyping, if we accept that he is carried away by "an impulse of reparation" towards Cecily out of disapproval of Mrs. Farnham, "a creature recusant to her functions" (p. 77).

At the same time, because the narrator is egocentric and callous, hence "unreliable," the reader is led carefully to observe the many signs that qualify, or go counter to, her vision of things. But how to judge when we have no objective presentation of Cecily? For a time it might seem as if we might trust Tottenham's insight that Mrs. Farnham "undervalue(s)" her daughter and that under Cecily's placidity there *is* a great "sensitiveness to reflections and other things (which) might be a trifle beyond her mother's kin" (p. 89). But later events obliged him – and us – to reconsider. We are, of course, on much stronger

ground when we catch the narrator reporting things which belie her image of Cecily. Cecily turns out *not* to be "the kind of young person to marry a type and be typically happy" (p. 78). She proves that she has felt the influence of a better, more informed mind than the young men who court her. "To know that men like Mr. Tottehnam existed, and to marry any other kind would be an act of folly which she did not intend to commit" (p. 111). Therein lies one of the many ironies of the story: the daughter applies to herself standards that her mother used *against* her on behalf of Dacres.

Furthermore, Mrs. Farnham, however reluctant to play mother, assumes a parental role – almost a father's – when she discourages Tottenham, and is perhaps, in the eyes of a reader of the 1980s, never more a mother than when she unconsciously sees Cecily as a rival who is taking her place. Though she thinks she is actuated by an unselfish motive, she unwittingly reveals more egocentric motivation when she confides that her concern for Dacres was "mingled more with *anger* than with sorrow" (p. 79), that her "imagination" was "excited by its idea of what Dacres Tottenham's courtship ought to be" (p. 80). When he tells her that he wants Cecily, "it was a shock when it came, plump, like that; and I was horrified to feel how completely every other consideration was lost for the instant in the immense relief it prefigured. To be my whole complete self again, without the feeling that a fraction of me was masquerading about in Cecily!" (p. 86). But the confession of her wish to be rid of her daughter may well seem to us to mask another feeling, another "shock" at finding herself completely displaced in her role as queen. The image of her daughter as a double that endangers her self-integrity and freedom or as a mask of herself, is much more revealing than she is aware of.

"Detached or semi-detached" as she may think herself, the link between mother and daughter proves to have deep psychic roots. What the text suggests is that there is more to motherhood than Mrs. Farnham may dream of.

Finally, the story ends on an evocation of the family life of the Farnhams, now retired in England. This narrative choice enables the author unobstrusively to enhance the 'punishment' of Mrs. Farnham. "Our daughter is with us, permanently with us," repeats Mrs. Farnham. "I point out to John when she takes our crumpets away from us that she gets it from him. I could never take away anybody's crumpets, merely because they were indigestible, least of all my own parents'" (p. 112). The irony of the complaint (not to mention the possible sexual innuendo!) which, incidentally, presupposes a privileged relation between parent and child, does not seem to strike Mrs. Farnham, but it must the reader. Her control of the crumpets is one of the crumbs of comfort life has brough to Cecily. For, in a final reversal of roles, she may now assume the mothering function as she tries to cure Mrs. Farnham of chewing her pen-handle, or rearranges her bonnet strings. Far from being mere *effets de réel*, such details strongly connote a common enough motherly concern with food, clothes and writing habits, and therefore indicate the extent to which Cecily has taken over her mother's symbolic place. Mrs. Farnham's only power now is to tell her story. As a way to fulfil some obscure need of self-justification? Or to recall her moment of triumph?

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The irony of the reversal is one of the ways in which the text seems structurally to criticise the protagonist, while hinting at the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship. But the title, on the other hand, replaces the character within a socio-cultural group in which parents were, or felt, compelled to send back their children to the mother country. A mark of the author's presence, it turns an (imaginary) individual with a unique history into an emblematic case. Society is partly responsible for the "emotional dislocations the story explores."[2] And while the reader remembers that, from the first, Cecily was an unwanted child, as Mrs. Farnham subtly conveys, he/she must also understand that the young couple were "sodden poor" in a milieu where "everybody else" lived "in the open-handed Indian fashion" (p. 49) so that again the socio-economic pressures of Anglo-Indian life are implicated in the parental relation.

"A Mother in India" keeps us see-sawing from approval to disapproval of Mrs. Farnham, from a sense of her personal failure of love to a sense of the social factors invoved in what is the most intimate relationship, until we realise the purpose of the story is to keep us questioning. To be sure, the hesitation programmed by the text partly depends on our own sociocultural assumptions. We attach less importance than Duncan's contemporary readers to the negative signs ascribed to the character – her reading a French novel, for instance, at church time, her wish to remain young which contrasts with the shapeless dowdiness of Mrs. Morgan, the "mother-woman" (Kate Chopin) of this tale. But the point is that "A Mother in India" is complex enough to support these different readings. And its exploration of the so-called 'innateness' of mother love remains rather daring for the time, though Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) also comes to mind.

If it rests its case on conditions that are now as dated as the British Raj, "A Mother in India" transcends such limitations. Anyone trying to rewrite, from a female point of view, *Roman des Origines, Origines du Roman* (the stimulating book in which Marthe Robert shows the fictional impulse to be rooted in the Freudian family romance, but is only concerned with the male version of it) might take Duncan's novella into consideration. An elaborate version of the romance, inasmuch as it looks at the situation from the mother's and not the daughter's perspective, it nevertheless fictionalises the woman's dream of being queen/lover/mother, which involves the displacement of the mother or the attempt to keep the daughter in her place. It is significant that Cecily, frustrated in her hopes of being a lover, should boss her parents and impose on her mother the mothering Mrs. Farnham never gave her.

[1]First published in *Scribner's Magazine* (June and July 1903), the story was collected in *The Pool in the Desert* (New York: D. Apelton, 1903). References are to this edition.

[2]Thomas E. Tausky, *Sara Jeannette Duncan, Novelist of Empire* (1980), p. 228.

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