



# The Dark Side of Domesticity: Ana María Shua's "Como una buena madre"

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The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines *domesticity* as "the quality or state of being domestic or domesticated" with two of the definitions of *domestic* being "of or relating to the household or the family" and "devoted to home duties and pleasures." In the popular imagination of many cultures, those expected to be devoted to home duties and pleasures are women, particularly mothers. Mothers are to stay at home raising children, taking care of the household, and creating a cheerful and loving domestic space for their families. Both popular culture and pop psychology present visions of domestic goddesses who cook delicious meals, keep beautiful homes, and raise wonderful children while staying young and fit, but the reality of women's lives is often quite different. In *The Mask of Motherhood*, Susan Maushart employs the metaphor of the mask to represent that idealized and unattainable image of motherhood that women feel that they must achieve, one that causes them to feel anxiety, guilt, and resentment about their own, less perfect experiences. Andrea O'Reilly's *Mother Matters: Motherhood as Discourse and Practice* focuses on "how the normative ideology of motherhood is *constructed* by various social texts—film, popular fiction, children's fiction, magazines, judicial rulings and parenting books" (13; emphasis in original) and then contrasts that normative ideology with actual practices of contemporary motherhood.

Feminist literary critics also address this disjuncture between the representations and the realities of motherhood. Marianne Hirsch asks, "[W]here are the voices of mothers, where are their experiences with maternal pleasure and frustration, joy and anger?" (23). In this essay, I present a short story by the Argentine author Ana María Shua as an answer to that call. Shua's story presents a different vision of domesticity, offering a narrative space for a mother to tell of

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her experiences with pleasure and pain, joy and frustration. Shua's text is an example of storytelling that, in Hirsch's words, "treat[s . . .] motherhood [. . .] as *story*—as narrative representation of social and subjective reality and of literary convention" (10; emphasis in original).

Ana María Shua, born in Buenos Aires in 1951, is a prolific and award-winning author who published her first book of poetry at sixteen and has continued to publish in a variety of genres, including the novel, the short story, children's literature, essays, and poetry. Her short stories have been widely anthologized in different languages, and her 1994 novel *El libro de los recuerdos* was released in English as *The Book of Memories* (1988). In 1988, Shua published *Viajando se conoce gente* [Traveling You Meet People], a collection of short stories divided into three sections: "4 de hombres," "3 de mujeres," and "4 altamente improbables" [4 About Men, 3 About Women, and 4 Highly Improbable Ones].<sup>1</sup> The story discussed here, "Como una buena madre" [Like a Good Mother], holds a central place, as the middle story of the middle section, the section devoted to women. In 2001, the story was republished as the title story in the collection *Como una buena madre*.<sup>2</sup>

Shua structures "Como una buena madre" from the perspective of the maternal, providing a space for the voices of mothers, a textual space for their experiences with maternal pleasure and frustration. "Como una buena madre" is exemplary in its depiction of maternal frustration and anger, as well as of the guilt created in a mother who feels those emotions. Shua's story is powerful precisely because it is "a story about the inner world of motherhood *as it is felt*, not as it is mythologized in women's magazines" (Suleiman 374; emphasis in original) nor as it is misrepresented in traditional psychoanalytic theories.

That it is the mother who is placed at the center of the inquiry in "Como una buena madre" is made obvious by the fact that the female protagonist, the focalizer throughout the text, is nameless, identified only as "Mamá." In *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune addresses the problem of identity in that genre, arguing that at the lexical level, the problem of identity is "resolved" by the use of "proper names": "The name is the guarantor of the unity of our multiplicity: it federates our complexity in the moment and our change in time" (34). But in "Como una buena madre," the protagonist is a nameless woman, her identity thus not "resolved" at the lexical level by a proper name. Her status as mother is her defining characteristic. She has lost her individual identity as a unique, named person and is seen only as mother to Tom, Soledad, and the baby. She exists only in the domestic sphere. Indeed, the entire story takes place within the domestic space of the apartment, mostly in the kitchen, the bathroom, and the children's bedroom.

The story begins with the very short sentence, "Tom gritó" [Tom screamed] (69). Tom is four years old and described as healthy and rather large for his age, capable of screaming very loudly for extended periods of time. From the first paragraph, readers are presented with a woman who is very aware of the

prevailing discourses about maternity. She sees mothers as constructed by medical and literary discourses and finds herself lacking:

Mamá siempre leía libros acerca del cuidado y la educación de los niños. En esos libros, y también en las novelas, las madres (las buenas madres, las que realmente quieren a sus hijos) eran capaces de adivinar las causas del llanto de un chico con sólo prestar atención a sus características. (69)

Mama always read books about the care and education of children. In those books, and also in the novels, the mothers (the good mothers, the ones who really loved their children) were capable of diagnosing the causes for a child's crying by paying attention to the characteristics of the crying.

But Mamá feels that she cannot be a good mother, one who really loves her children, because she cannot differentiate amongst Tom's cries. He screams and cries loudly "cuando estaba lastimado, cuando tenía sueño, cuando no encontraba el mango del saco, cuando su hermana Soledad lo golpeaba y cuando se le caía una torre de cubos" [when he was hurt, when he was tired, when he couldn't find the sleeve of his jacket, when his sister Soledad was hitting him and when a tower of blocks fell down] (69). His cries are the same in volume, passion, and intensity. "Sólo cuando se trataba de atacar al bebé Tom se volvía asombrosamente silencioso, esperando el momento justo para saltar callado, felino, sobre su presa" [Only when he was trying to attack the baby did Tom fall startlingly silent, waiting just the right moment to jump quietly, catlike, on his prey] (69). Here, the domestic scene is one of violence and danger as Tom is described not as a sweet, innocent young boy but as a ferocious feline with the baby as his prey.

From the first page, the two older children are presented as mischievous, malicious, with tendencies toward violence. In the opening paragraph, Tom is crying because Soledad "le pateaba rítmicamente la cabeza" [was rhythmically kicking him in the head] (70). Later, when Mamá is changing the baby's diaper, Tom and Soledad paint their faces with their mother's cosmetics and drop them into the flood of soapy water on the bathroom floor that emanates from the overflowing bidet—another result of their handiwork. Mamá investigates when she hears Tom shouting and discovers "deslizándose por debajo de la puerta del baño, un flujo lento y constante de agua jabonosa inundaba la alfombra del pasillo haciendo crecer una mancha de color oscuro" [leaking out from underneath the door to the bathroom, a slow and constant flow of soapy water was inundating the carpet of the hallway, leaving a growing dark stain] (74). Pushing Soledad out of the way, Mamá opens the door to find "Tom tenía la cara pintada de varios colores y en el pelo un pegote de pasta dentrífica" [Tom had his face painted in various colors and a big glob of toothpaste in his hair] (74). No sooner has she stopped the flow of water than she must race to answer the phone. While their mother is on the phone, the children picnic on the kitchen floor, breaking china and glassware, spilling sugar over the baby, and staining their mother's best tablecloth. The descriptions of these and other actions of the children dispel any vision of that ideal domestic space that the sacrificial mother is to create in the home.

The mother's day progresses from bad to worse as she tries to respond to each new crisis in the domestic space. In every case, she reflects on what a good mother would do and contrasts that with her own, often desperate response. Mamá has been influenced by psychoanalytic theories such as those of Alice Balint, who asserts that "[t]he ideal mother has no interests of her own. [. . .] For all of us it remains self-evident that the interests of mother and child are identical, and it is the generally acknowledged goodness or badness of the mother how far she really feels this identity of interests" (qtd. in Chodorow 77). Mamá wants to be the ideal mother that she has read about, and her inability to feel that her interests and the children's are always identical puts her in a position of acknowledging her "badness" as a mother.

When she gives Tom a piece of candy as an incentive to stop crying after Soledad kicked him, she does not accede to Soledad's demand for candy, nor to Tom's request for more candy: "como una buena madre, equitativa, dueña y divisora de la justicia" [like a good mother, fair, possessor and dispenser of justice] (8). But she also realizes that "una buena madre no consuela a sus hijos con caramelos, una madre que realmente quiere a sus hijos protege sus dientes y sus mentes" [a good mother does not console her children with candy, a mother who really loves her children protects their teeth and their minds] (8). When the children sit too close to the television screen and watch cartoons with the sound blaring, she reflects both that "una buena madre, una madre que realmente quiere a sus hijos, no lo hubiera permitido" [a good mother, a mother who really loves her children, would not have permitted it] (9) and that "se iban a quedar ciegos y sordos y que se lo tenían merecido" [they were going to end up blind and deaf, and they deserved it] (9). In preparing some dough for a tart, she wonders if a good mother, one who really loves her children, would buy "masa para pascalina La Salteña?" [La Salteña dough?] (9).

Similar guilty thoughts invade her mind when the greengrocer delivers her order of fruits and vegetables. "Una buena madre no encarga el pedido: una madre que realmente quiere a sus hijos va personalmente a la verdulería y elige una por una las frutas y verduras con que los alimentará" [A good mother does not have food delivered: a mother who really loves her children goes personally to the vegetable shop and chooses, one by one, the fruits and vegetables with which she will nourish them] (10). Her guilty feelings increase when the greengrocer twice reminds her that the kids are too close to the television. "Ahora había un testigo, alguien más se había dado cuenta, sabía qué clase de madre era ella" [Now there was a witness, someone else had realized it, someone else knew what kind of mother she was] (10). Although the domestic space is usually envisioned as a private one, it is societal discourses that determine if she is a good mother, society that judges her performance in the domestic sphere.

While Mamá's interactions with the small children cause mostly anger and frustration, her interactions with the baby showcase both maternal pleasure and frustration. When she changes the baby's diaper after nursing him, "Miró con placer la caca de color amarillo brillante, semilíquida, de olor casi agradable, la

típica diarrea posprandial, decían los libros, de un bebé alimentado a pecho" [She looked with pleasure at the brilliant yellow, semi-liquid feces, of an almost agreeable odor, the typical diarrhea, according to the books, of a breast-fed baby] (12). She feels pleasure, satisfaction, and pride in her decision to nurse the baby, "como una buena madre," and in the resultant bowel movements, ones consistent with what her books say about a normal nursing baby. But at the same time, she frets about whether she cleans the baby's bottom in the proper way or uses the best diapers: "Tenía la cola paspada. A los bebés de otras madres no se les paspaba la cola. Una buena madre, una madre que realmente quiere a sus hijos, ¿usaría, como ella, pañales descartables?" [He has a chapped bottom. Other mothers' babies do not get chapped bottoms. Would a good mother, a mother who really loves her children, use, like she does, disposable diapers?] (12). She worries that a good mother would use cloth diapers and wash them lovingly by hand.

Throughout the story, the mother often feels like crying and wants to be alone. But at each point, she needs to respond to her children's needs, to react to the continuing chain of disasters. She has no time to reflect on the upsetting long-distance telephone conversation with their father; she must remove the baby from the pile of sugar, ensure that the older children are all right, and sweep up the broken pieces of glass and china before someone is hurt. She has no time to mourn her mother's china plate, now in pieces on the floor: "Nadie que no tuviera ese platito azul en un estante de la alacena podría ser una buena madre. Tuvo más ganas de llorar" [No one who did not have that blue plate in a shelf in the cupboard could be a good mother. She felt even more like crying] (76).

Before Mamá can clean up the broken china and glass, Soledad pushes her, and Mamá falls on a sharp piece of glass, badly cutting her hand. Mamá needs stitches but cannot face the prospect of the emergency room with three small children in tow. The continuing chain of disasters overwhelms readers as well as the mother in the text. Mamá repeatedly tells herself that she must get organized to do all that needs to be done—attend to her wound, change a diaper, clean up the mess in the kitchen, and so forth—but always, before she can manage to carry out her plans, a new disaster demands her attention.

Mamá must also become a plotting mother. To have time alone in the bathroom, she must take a child in each arm, drag them out into the hall, and "cuando calculó que estaba lo bastante lejos los soltó de golpe, empujándolos para asegurarse de que se cayeran" [when she had calculated that she was far enough away, she let them go suddenly, pushing them to make sure that they would fall] (83). Here, the domestic sphere is presented as a war zone, in which the mother must outsmart the enemy, running back to the bathroom and shutting herself in, slamming the door on Soledad's foot. Alone in the bathroom with her baby, she takes comfort in the infant: "Su bebé. Chiquito. Indefenso. Suyo. Mamá lo abrazó, lo olió. [. . .] Puso su cara contra la del bebé, tan suave, cubierta por un vello rubio casi invisible. Despedía calor, amor" [Her baby. So little. Helpless. Hers. Mama hugged him, smelled him.

[. . .] She put her face against the baby's face, so soft, covered with an almost invisible blond fuzz. He gave off heat and love] (84). She takes comfort in the warm body of her infant, in the thought that the baby is still a part of her. The baby is waving about his arms "como si quisiera acariciarla, jugar con su nariz" [as if he wanted to caress her, play with her nose] (84). She notes that some movements seem random, others deliberate. The last lines of the story are "[e]l índice de la mano derecha del bebé entró en el ojo de mamá provocándole una profunda lesión en la córnea. El bebé sonrió con su sonrisa desdentada" [The index finger of the baby's right hand entered into his mother's eye, creating a profound lesion in her cornea. The baby smiled with his toothless smile] (84).

Shua's ending leaves readers distraught, like Mamá. The baby who was still hers, so sweet and warm, has moved over to the dark side, to the side of children who harm their mothers. As Susan Suleiman notes, normal motherhood entails, in traditional psychoanalytic theories, "the masochistic-feminine willingness to sacrifice," a sacrifice made easy by maternal love, whose "chief characteristic is tenderness. All the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman's personality are suppressed and diverted by the central emotional expression of motherliness" (Deutsch qtd. in Suleiman 353). As Andrea O'Reilly affirms, this normative, sacrificial motherhood "requires and results in the repression or denial of the mother's own selfhood, in particular her agency, autonomy, authority, and authenticity" (15). Not only have feminist critics taken issue with Deutsch's point of view but also stories such as "Como una buena madre" serve as narrative examples of how a mother's frustration and aggression are not always suppressed and diverted by tenderness and motherliness. Like Adrienne Rich's journal selections in *Of Woman Born*—in which she writes that "[m]y children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence; the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance" (1)—"Como una buena madre" packs a powerful punch as that rare example of a narrative that explores the feelings of maternal frustration and anger, feelings taboo in our society's imposition of an ideal domesticity.

Until recent decades, the mother has been studied mostly from "an Other's point of view," as E. Ann Kaplan points out on her work on motherhood and representation (3). Suleiman notes, "[A]s long as our own emphasis, encouraged by psychoanalytic theory [. . .] continues to be on the-mother-as-she-is-written rather than on the-mother-as-she-writes, we shall continue in our ignorance" about the inner discourse of a mother (358). Shua is a mother who writes, and her narratives help us leave that ignorance behind, responding as they do to the imperative in Suleiman's text: "It is time to let mothers have their word" (360). In Shua's 1984 novel *Los amores de Laurita*<sup>3</sup> and her short story "Como una buena madre," mothers have their word.

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## NOTES

1. All English translations are my own.
2. Page numbers are from the *Viajando se conoce gente* edition.
3. See my "Celebrating Female Sexuality from Adolescence to Maternity in Ana María Shua's *Los amores de Laurita*" for a discussion of female sexuality in the novel.

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