

**Searching for a Motherland:
Women Breaking Their Generational Chains in
Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, *Sommerstück*, and
*Medea. Stimmen***

HELGA W. KRAFT

Starting from a Marxist-socialist perspective, Christa Wolf has explored societal issues in great depth and breadth; her writings have prominently addressed the relationship of gender and nation, especially in regard to women's lack of public influence. There are a few studies, such as Lorna Martens's 2001 work *The Promised Land: Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic*, that focus on Wolf's attitude toward feminism and her deviation from the state's official image of women.¹ Wolf questions the place that both women and men occupy within public and private structures, first in the former GDR, and later within a united Germany; indeed, she searches for women's place within the nation in much of her fiction. Recognition of women's potential is only now seeping into the public consciousness of the German-speaking countries. Wolf's works reflect the ambivalence of attitudes toward that potential.

A recurring theme within the gender-nation complex of Wolf's texts, one that has not yet received full scholarly attention, is the issue of mother-daughter relationships and its relevance to public discourse.² In exploring female tradition and its unspoken, unwritten, but significant effect on society, Wolf goes beyond contemporary feminist and communist thought: she lays bare unrecognized dependencies and strengths of daughters in various historical, even mythical, times and presents them in diverse constellations. In this critical endeavor—which is always related to present conditions—she does not blame one societal structure more than any other. Matriarchies are shown in their strengths and weaknesses and patriarchies receive full deconstructive attention. In her 1983 novel *Kassandra*, she re-imagines the beginning of patriarchy as well as alternative women's cultures. The protagonist Cassandra will not emulate her birth mother, who lives in customary dependency to her husband, the king, as women of the upper classes did, sharing the oppressors' guilt. The daughter looks for autonomous surrogate mothers, mainly among those from the lower classes and those who secretly live outside the dominant system. Although the class system is disputed in *Kassandra*, the "women's question" is

dealt with by Wolf from both inside and outside of class structures. In the body of Wolf's work, women's rights are not seen as a secondary issue [Nebenanspruch] that would disappear—according to communist ideology—as classes disappeared. For her, the major political concerns, including those pertaining to gender and nation, are rooted not only in the economic but also in the private sphere. As Margit Reschke (29) points out, Wolf believed that “above all literature had to investigate the emotions, thoughts, and psychic structures of the individual.” In her texts, public discourses are thus intimately linked to private ones. The conflict between the “Party line” and Wolf's personal experiences as a woman seems to have been the source of her existential angst as a writer during the Communist regime; her untiring efforts to improve a society based on an untenable ideology engendered a strong sense of anxiety that informs all of her texts.

I have chosen three novels, spanning almost twenty years of Wolf's life as a writer, for their prominent concentration on three major aspects of the mother-daughter controversy. In *Kindheitsmuster* (Patterns of childhood, 1976; hereafter *Kindheitsmuster*), Wolf goes back to her own childhood to investigate the impact of the traditional mother model from the daughter's point of view. In *Sommerstück* (Summer play, 1989; hereafter *Sommerstück*), written from the mother's perspective, she imagines her ambivalent influence on her daughters and granddaughter. In *Medea. Stimmen* (Medea. Voices, 1996; hereafter *Medea*), she starts with a daughter's evocation of an absent mother who in many ways can be perceived as the missing representative of a utopian “Motherland,” in which private and public concerns flow together.³ Wolf (1990, 16-17) articulated her yearning for a motherland shortly after the breakdown of the GDR: “The words of politicians and businessmen count these days. The words of political parties count again. . . . All of them—politicians, managers from industry, party officials—need a fatherland for their ventures, I can understand that. As always, a motherland is not in sight.”

In the 1970s and 1980s a growing number of women authors in German-speaking countries joined Wolf in thematizing the mother-daughter question, thus helping to expose the traditionally very strong patriarchal structure of the public and private spheres in these countries. An abundance of autobiographical novels contributed to a destabilization of a fixed mother model for daughters.⁴ In the 1980s and 1990s researchers investigated this issue scientifically in psychological, historical, and political contexts. Wolf was influenced by the works of French and American feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler; she also read West German feminists such as the critic Elisabeth Lenk.⁵ Discourse analyses in the area of medicine, law, religion, and class supported the outcry of daughters in their confessional novels as they exposed the formerly tacitly accepted second-rate standing of women in society and their exploitation by leaders of the national infrastructure. In a 1983 interview with the American poet Grace Paley, Wolf (1993, 275) discussed her experience while writing *Kassandra*: “I suddenly had another real shock when I realized that in the past two thousand years women really have not

been able to exert any public influence.” A paradigm shift seemed possible. The formerly held belief maintaining that women’s natural predetermination justified their exclusion from public life, supported by so-called “scientific evidence,” started to crumble. Rejecting any essentialism, Wolf (1993, 75) probed women’s situation as a historical phenomenon that had not been resolved, even in the GDR, where ideology was based on historical materialism: “[M]en continued to feel that woman offered a threat to the patriarchy even after she had been completely tamed, redesigned, and deformed into a product of male culture.”

Wolf considered emotional and psychic structures as well as political and historical evidence. She adapted Freud’s work to demonstrate more clearly the source and reasons for the success of performative practices leading to social repression (see the examples from *Kindheitsmuster*). As she gauged the range of what daughters could strive for, she rejected the passive, submissive model of the past. To achieve the improved society she ceaselessly promoted during the existence of the GDR, citizens would have to move beyond the equalitarian goals of Friedrich Engels and August Bebel, phasing out gender inequities altogether. Regrettably, perhaps because of her optimistic utopian expectations or her indecisiveness, Wolf tacitly supported a discriminatory governmental system to the very end. She left the United Socialist Party of East Germany (SED) only in the last year of the country’s existence (1989). On the other hand, Wolf was anything but politically naïve; her published works are scarcely to blame for the long-term acceptance of the status quo by East Germans— notwithstanding the claims of some critics.⁶

She was wary not only about the practices of government, but also about feminism. After all, in both German states the women’s movement remained scattered throughout the last three decades of the twentieth century, exerting little influence on the old nationally ingrained patriarchal hierarchy; influence further diminished by esoteric essentialist expression proclaiming a return to mother cults.⁷ Even more than in the United States, for instance, the businesses and governments of the two German states continued to be run as usual, with women being granted only representation and with women’s issues being relegated to political campaign promises. Even after the unification in 1989, the inroads women had made in the GDR were reduced, and certain rights won in the past were lost.

At the beginning of her career, Wolf experienced the partial emancipation of women in her GDR homeland, which consisted largely of the opportunity to be gainfully employed.⁸ Most women, even when they worked, remained “traditional” mothers who could no longer serve as ideal role models for their daughters. The resulting psychological dilemma within the mother-daughter constellation allowed Wolf to pinpoint the generational implications for women and their significance in the public sphere. Though they had employment, women in the GRD were not included in leading positions, and in industry and government had only token representatives. The old patriarchal hierarchies remained firmly in place under “Realsozialismus,” just as before,

and—despite her success—Wolf as a writer experienced painful exclusion. Her profession was deemed “effeminate.” As she wrote to her friend the writer Brigitte Reimann in 1972: “[O]ur society is in the process of introducing a division of labor: For the men the real, mathematics, natural sciences, and connected with it a certain contempt for such mystifications as art and literature, which women are reserving for themselves” (Reimann and Wolf 1993, 142).

To gain respectability for their literary works, Wolf and other women writers of her time insisted on the importance of women’s experiences and their relevance to the general societal processes. Wolf opposed the trivialization of women’s concerns and the avoidance of their issues in serious writing. In *Störfall* (*Accident: A Day’s News*; 1987), a work that clearly foregrounds the interlinking of the private and public spheres, she prominently highlights the equal importance of parenting, gardening, and preparing food, on the one hand, and scientific research and political matters, on the other.

In her writings, Wolf does not blame individual men: fathers remain marginal yet benign figures. Although daughters adopt a number of the more positive traditional male qualities, they have no desire to adopt a male identity, especially not stereotypical negative characteristics such as egotistical striving or the desire to colonize, to wield power, to wage war, and to relegate relationships to a place of minor importance in favor of so-called higher civic callings. In Wolf’s novella “Selbstversuch” (Self-experiment), a woman transformed into a man through a medical experiment changes back in the end voluntarily because, “the model for the human being is not the male, but man and woman” (Wolf, 1987, 801). The writer is intent on emphasizing the unknown characteristics of women, and on telling their untold story. She implies that daughters can still learn from their mothers because they continue to display characteristics worthy of emulation. There is an insistence, especially in *Kassandra* and *Medea*, that, now as then, a mother’s skills—a caring practicality, nurturing circumspection, and peaceful strategies for solving problems—all attributes that women developed to maximize their existence within the restricted, historically assigned private place in society—are needed to overcome the shortcomings of governance in business, society, and politics. Wolf (1993, 280) notes, “I would welcome an institution where women could get together and deal with problems of war and peace.” Can the daughters have both: an emancipated, autonomous existence and the humanity practiced by their mothers? In *Kindheitsmuster*, *Sommerstück*, and *Medea*, Wolf poses this question with regard to her narrators, first as daughters, then as mothers, and finally as citizens of the nation.

The Conflicted Role Model: *Kindheitsmuster*

While the mother-daughter conflict is peripheral in *Kassandra*, it plays a central role in *Kindheitsmuster* (1976); impetus for Wolf’s engagement with the mother may have been the death of her own mother. Writing this autobiographical

novel, an attempt to conjure up her lost childhood and re-experience it, was perhaps a part of her process of mourning. In a 1988 interview with Therese Hörnigk (1989, 12-13), Wolf explains the situation of the young generation after the war: "We, the young generation, had been entangled in father-son, mother-daughter relationships that made it difficult to come of age." It was harder for girls to come of age because the process had never been dealt with in literature or in theory before; indeed, it lay outside the discursive historical consciousness. Equipped with the experience of an adult, Wolf undertakes what amounts to an archeological dig (she calls her excursion into her childhood a "trip into the Tertiary") in order to reconstruct the formation of her present self. Her curiosity about "how we became the way we are" connects to the more important question, "can we change, and what would such a change accomplish?" Wolf recognizes that the roles a human being grows into are difficult to discard because discarding them causes great anxiety. In the painful ordeal of recognizing dependencies, the narrator opts for a paradoxical freedom of choice: "Fear has been placed as a guardian at the gates of the hell of self-knowledge? . . . You say, perhaps it's the fear of tearing oneself apart trying to become detached from the role that was an integral part of the self. Is there an alternative? No, you say. But it's a choice, nonetheless" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 497).

Wolf speaks out for intersubjectivity. Envisioning the future, the narrator hopes at the end of the book: "At night I shall see—whether waking, whether dreaming—the outline of a human being who will change, through whom other persons, whether adults or, children, will pass without obstruction" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 497). Her narrator is searching for a location where the feminine subject is able to act autonomously, but where it can maintain a connection to society through a fluid intersubjective connection to all humans. It is a utopian place: the place of the mother.

The second wave of the women's movement in West Germany, precipitated by the fact that women had run the country's infrastructure while men were fighting during both world wars, encouraged such an intersubjective search for the self; in the GDR women continued working alongside men when WW II ended. Women writers who wanted to gain access to the male domain of literature and thus be recognized in public history needed to overcome a major hurdle—the internalized image of the traditional mother.⁹ At the beginning of *Kindheitsmuster*, the narrator has a dream about such a mother: "Suddenly, a shock all the way from head to toe: On the table in the living room was the manuscript, on the first page she could see in capital letters only the word 'mother.' She will read it, will guess precisely what your plan is, and will feel hurt" (19).

Christel Zahlmann bases her critical 1986 psychological analysis of *Kindheitsmuster*, on Freud, Laplanche, Klein, and Horney, dedicating only a few chapters of her study to the mother-daughter relationship. The mother is seen as an internalized power, as "Übermutter," a super-mother, who elicits fear and the craving for love, and who also promotes inferiority complexes and insecurity,

even self-immolation. Zahlmann points out that even adult daughters harbor a tendency and “yearning for a harmonious agreement” as an attempt to overcome their experience of loss, the loss of the initial symbiotic relationship with the mother.

Wolf’s approach draws heavily on feminist thought of the 1970s and 1980s, typified by the psychologist Nancy Chodorow, who postulates a pre-oedipal, unconscious symbiosis with the mother in her 1978 study. For Chodorow, a girl’s childhood trauma is not identified as fear of castration but as the pre-oedipal separation from the mother. Whether or not Wolf read Chodorow, she certainly was familiar with her ideas. The mothers in Wolf’s works stand out strongly and often play center stage whereas the fathers remain insignificant at the margin. The loss of the father’s central position was articulated in Germany already in the 1960s through Alexander Mitscherlich’s widely read 1965 study *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft* (Society without a father: A contribution to social psychology). Yet, though the son is expected to separate from the mother and try out possibilities for an autonomous identity, this process is much more complicated for a daughter, who traditionally was expected to become a copy of the mother. The daughter characters in Wolf’s novels often have great difficulty in successfully freeing themselves from the mother model. This is true of other texts associated with the literature of self-discovery [“Selbsterkennungsliteratur”] of the 1970s and 1980s, and many attempts are chronicled where daughters, despite their attempts, often did not gain autonomy. It was found that later in life such daughters compensated by seeking the accustomed dependency from people around them. They cared for others as a fulfillment of a “yearning for harmony.” These strong psychological barriers offer a reason why many women have not gained their participatory share in public life up to now. The comparatist Marianne Hirsch (169) enumerates certain constants within the various psychological theories that deal with mothers and daughters:

What has hardly changed, between Freud and the work of Nancy Chodorow or Luce Irigaray, is the presentation of a mother who is overly invested in her child, powerless in the world, a constraining rather than an enabling force in the girl’s development, and an inadequate and disappointing object of identification.¹⁰

This psychologically oriented consideration, already raised in Wolf’s novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (The quest for Christa T.; 1971) in form of a question mark, becomes pronounced in *Kindheitsmuster*, whose narrator experiences difficulties in saying “I,” and finds she cannot connect to the “I” of her childhood either, where she hopes to find answers. The experienced reality of that time is no longer attainable as a whole. She solves this problem by inventing a substitute figure for herself, the girl Nelly. By speaking through her in the third person, the narrator is able to conjure up scenarios of her childhood and to expand her consciousness. This method of going back—a kind of self-psychoanalysis—is practiced by Wolf through imagination and literature, which in her opinion are necessary to gain truth.¹¹ It enables the narrator, on the one

hand, to overcome the temporal, historical distance, while establishing, on the other, an inner, emotional distance that allows her to minimize a blind, subjective interpretation in this self-analytical experiment. To bring back memories through situational stimulation, the adult narrator travels with her husband, her brother, and her own daughter to her homeland in Poland where she grew up (as did Wolf). Her teenage daughter Lenka—as a girl of the new generation—functions as a corrective: she reacts to the early experiences of her mother quite differently at that age. Is the narrator writing her story and her reflections for her daughter, for herself, or for the female readers? Probably for all of them because she uses in her narration the same informal, interactive “you” [Du] with which she permeates the boundaries of her identity.

Through her imagined daughter figure Nelly, the narrator is able to confront her own mother, Charlotte Jordan. As it turns out, Charlotte, as an adult and a mother, was both a model for Nelly to emulate and a figure of power to be feared. Because of her powerful influence, it was difficult for the child to develop an identity in defiance of her mother’s wishes. Yet it must be remembered that this “Great Mother,” who taught her daughter “that obeying and being loved is one and the same thing” (*Kindheitsmuster*, 24), is a construct of the adult narrator herself. The political and the personal merge since it is known that the connection of loving and obeying was also used to keep the citizens of the German nation in place. Mothers prepared their children to fit the requirements of becoming “good Germans.” Not only in Nazi Germany but also in the GDR people had to endure extreme hardship and suppression to be worthy of their country’s love. Wolf now examines her former fear of losing her mother’s love, whom she could never satisfy as a child. Clearly now, she also fears the loss of love as a daughter of her nation, although the origin of her fear might have faded into the unconscious over the years. Yet, as Barbara Kosta notes in her 1994 study, such early patterns are incorporated into the psyche; they no longer are conscious but continue to be present and determine unrecognized and uncontrolled a person’s existence. The road to understanding is therefore not a rational trip to the father, but a route into the unconscious, a trip to the “mothers,” a journey that is also crucial in Goethe’s *Faust*.

Wolf’s narrator recognizes during this journey that her own desires, her mental and bodily wishes had been suppressed early on: “Nelly’s body, a stranger to her . . . gave signals to her head” (*Kindheitsmuster*, 172). Sigrid Weigel (148) writing in 1995, found multiple evidence in Wolf’s work “that body and thinking are in opposition to each other in the conflict between fear and weakness on the one and a strong will or consciousness on the other hand.” Wolf’s texts demonstrate what Leslie Adelson (15) has noted in her 1993 study *Making Bodies, Making History* within a German context: “[A] critical consideration of the body, especially of the body in literature . . . offer insight both into the nature and materiality and into the construction of subjective agents of history.” The gendered inscriptions of the female body that Wolf traces in *Kindheitsmuster* are at the same time attuned and in conflict with the demands of nationally established norms.

Wolf's narrator gropes for an understanding of what happened to her body as she was raised. Speaking of Nelly, she says, "She does not understand the girls who signal simply through their way of walking that they are in harmony with their own body" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 328). It is strongly hinted that the repression of bodily sensations, including sexuality, has been passed down from mother to daughter: "Charlotte does not allow her husband to put his arm around her shoulder in public" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 149). This taboo of publicly demonstrated intimacy reveals a certain hostility toward the body and reflects a relapse to attitudes of the Wilhelminean era and seems to be a consequence of a backlash against the "new woman" and her limited sexual emancipation during the Weimar Republic. When the mother has a miscarriage, this tragic event is passed over silently as an embarrassing event. Young Nelly reacts, "I know what's going on, she says: A child. If you know it then there's no problem, says Charlotte. Nothing more is to be discussed" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 327). Whether the last sentence is spoken by the narrator or by her mother remains unclear. In any case, the sexual dimension of the family must remain unspoken. Yet the narrator knows that the mother had rejected her father's sexual demands for good after he had returned from the war. The mother is bound to a system that promotes a negative image of the female body and its desires, and such repression is transmitted to the girl. Desire and fear thus become closely related for the daughter. When Nelly menstruates for the first time, she receives no explanation from her mother, except the directive "to keep herself always clean" from now on (*Kindheitsmuster*, 280). Here the phenomena of sexuality are associated with dirt and danger. The parents signal such concern because they worry that their daughter is growing up close to soldiers' barracks, exposing her to carnal desires. It follows that the mother's negative view of the body and sexuality contributes to Nelly's feelings of disgust she experiences when a boy is sexually attracted to her for the first time. The critic Marianne Hirsch (165-166) notes that women's problematic relation to their own body—for which she uses Elizabeth Spelman's term "somatophobia"—is related to women's fear of motherhood in their striving for emancipation.¹² In *Kindheitsmuster*, Wolf time and again focuses on the impact of bodily experiences on the mind and vice versa. Sickness occurs always at moments when a repressed problem causes irreconcilable doubts. Nelly's mother, for instance, no doubt suffers headaches partially as a result of the stressed relationship with her husband that is kept under wraps. Nelly gets sick when the first ideals of her internalized childhood patterns break down and present a dilemma she cannot solve. The body expresses such mental trauma in form of illness. This pathology can also be seen in the special case of insanity, which often afflicts or is ascribed to women when they cannot fit into the normative pattern of the dominant societal structure. Wolf noted that such complex hurdles for women are only slowly dismantled.

It is Wolf's special contribution that her depiction of the mother does not follow any stereotypes. Although Nelly's mother often remains silent in face of certain Nazi atrocities as she witnesses, she is by no means the image of

a traditional mother, neither fitting Hitler's ideal nor fulfilling the Church's expectations. Moreover, she did not sacrifice herself solely for family and children, and has none of the characteristics of an imagined femininity at that time, such as passivity, self-sacrifice, and dependency. Charlotte deviates from women's traditional existence that included the trinity "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" (children, kitchen, church). She is a businesswoman, working in the grocery store she runs with her husband, and does not go to church. The narrator remarks ironically, "The Jordans were not attached to the Church, they were attached to their children, and to their business, and to their new house" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 166). The daughter's disapproving tone with regard to her mother's capitalistic thinking carries over to her grandparents and other relatives: "She recognized that for them property and life was one and the same thing" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 389). The German nation was built on such thinking. In noting that property was sometimes regarded as more important than the children, Wolf links this sentiment to the practice of sending young men to war to defend or gain new property, as Hitler did. When Nelly's family has to escape the approaching enemy toward the end of the war, and the mother sends the children ahead, the adult narrator and daughter imagines what ought to have gone through the mind of her mother: "She could not allow the thought that she had lost her children. . . . All rationalizations she had resorted to rapidly disintegrated; to be protector of house and home, to be responsible to her husband for possessions and property, to protect the children's inheritance. But this is insane, she must have said to herself" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 372).

Wolf makes it clear that many mothers of Charlotte's generation clearly departed from the current ideal. Charlotte, who had "never considered the education of a girl as less important than that of a boy," knows the need for women to earn a living and wants to provide her daughter with the best opportunities for the future (*Kindheitsmuster*, 436). She promotes and believes strongly in her talents. Mothers who had struggled alone through the world wars were no longer passive homebodies. There were many active breadwinners like Charlotte. She became a model of practical reason for her daughter Nelly, who also receives a rudimentary apprenticeship in political opposition from her and a concern for the shortcomings of Germany as a nation. Charlotte sees through the machinations of Hitler and his consorts, perceiving the people around her as small chess figures in the game of the big powers (*Kindheitsmuster*, 436). Although she is always careful in order to avoid putting her family in danger, she cannot suppress her criticism of Hitler, for which she was in fact once denounced. It is always an inner triumph for her when she can scold police officers, but she does so only at times when it is safe to do so.

The daughter's growing desire to embrace Nazi ideology, despite her mother's example, was probably related to her wish to become independent of her mother. The daughter urgently needed to escape the oppressive centrality of the family modeled by her mother. In this endeavor, she is aided by a surrogate mother who became an ideological model with which she blindly identified. New ways of forming her own subject identity became possible for Nelly, as

other influences were accepted. The ideal image for the thirteen-year-old girl who had just entered puberty was found in her schoolteacher Julia Strauch. "Among the women she knew, no one besides Julia led a life she could wish or even imagine for herself" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 29). This adopted spiritual mother was to prove a dangerous influence: the young girl developed a love for her that was absolute in its abandon (*Kindheitsmuster*, 290). The nineteenth-century concepts of romantic love that apply here were very much the norm in Germany then, although it was still uncommon in literature to hint at homoeroticism, as Wolf does. Julia was a passionate disciple of National Socialism. Although the narrator calls the teacher's idealism honest, (*Kindheitsmuster*, 301), she—just as much as Nelly and Christa Wolf later in the GDR—disconnects from those practical, clear-eyed, and accurate perceptions that Nelly's mother used in her daily life to avoid being deceived. In contrast to the pragmatic birth mother, this new idealistic surrogate mother model is exciting, stimulating, and emancipatory. Having connections to the ruling structure of the nation, as Julia does, promises a woman entrance into the world of significance. It is said of Julia that she hates being a woman. Her influence is so great that the narrator is still struggling with such desire to be a man while she is writing her account in the 1970s. She tells of a dream she had in which she saw herself as a man, "endowed with characteristics and abilities that you lack in your real shape" (*Kindheitsmuster*, 360).¹³ The idealism of the teacher who orients herself on the male world of Hitler's entourage has been transferred to the girl Nelly and has become a necessity for her. But the narrator begins to examine the implications. Autobiographically speaking, Wolf herself had been taken in by ideologies in her search for ideal models of the self. What used to be the Nazi ideology for the child became the communist ideology for the adult narrator. She says in a 1988 interview with Therese Hörnigk (9): "My generation exchanged one ideology for another one early on. This generation has grown up late, with hesitation, or perhaps not at all." The patterns remained, the ideologies changed. A timid questioning is initiated in *Kindheitsmuster*. Only much later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was Wolf able to admit she had acted wrongly during the early era of the GDR.¹⁴ Very late in life she confessed to her short-lived Stasi (state security service) collaboration, which she attributed to a youthful idealism that turned out to be as disappointing as Nelly's was. She never stopped struggling with the pattern imprinted through the surrogate mother, never mind that she saw Julia being exiled to Siberia as punishment. The author suggests in *Medea* that women are still in exile. No motherland exists in which the daughters might find a safe haven rather than being exposed to exploitation and betrayal by the fatherland, as Julia was, as Nelly and Christa Wolf were. As Wolf makes clear also in *Sommerstück* and *Medea. Stimmen* mothers are controversial role models.

Farewell to the Mother as Role Model: *Sommerstück*

Among feminist scholars a complex question is being debated from opposing theoretical and methodological viewpoints.¹⁵ What contribution can women make to societal infrastructures as they connect private and public life at a time when mothers and daughters must work to earn money to cover the costs of the household? Should “maternal thinking” as theorized by Sara Ruddick in her 1989 study be brought into the public sphere—whatever source it may have, biological or cultural? Should the nation change its structural basis to incorporate it? Although the popular media have recognized that women’s leadership approaches, in dealing with problems, when mixed with certain androcentric ones, have delivered better results within the workforce,¹⁶ public discourse has not yet properly addressed the question of the double burden most women carry at home and in the work place.

In the mother-daughter relationship this question carries special weight because it bears on another, more central question: to what extent are mothers responsible, directly or indirectly, for the lives and suffering of their daughters? And what influence do largely emancipated daughters have on mothers still struggling with traditional inscriptions in their psyche? New patterns are visible in society, in part because the mother does not solely care for her children but is working outside the house and builds her own career. In some cases, the father now takes over some of the duties of the caretaker. Thus the mother as symbiotic love object for the daughter no longer reflects actual practice.

Until recently, women continued their traditional role as homemakers, even when they also were breadwinners, especially in the lower classes, where women had always worked outside the home, and considered a job not a privilege, but a second function and a second burden. When Wolf wrote her novel, this was still the reality for most women, especially in the GDR, as it is for many women even nowadays. Working mothers found the prospect of raising children to be especially troublesome, leading to a sharply decreasing birthrate and precipitating an actual decline in the national population. Having given birth to two daughters early in life and experienced the difficulties of raising children while pursuing a career, Wolf wrote *Sommerstück* (1989) from the vantage point of a mother analyzing her relationship to her daughters. She depicts Ellen, the narrator, as a mother and writer like Wolf herself, in all her individuality, in contrast to her daughters. Although the author calls *Sommerstück* fiction, it contains strongly autobiographical elements. The focus is on Ellen, who is not only a mother but also a grandmother. The perceptions of her granddaughter, Littlemary, are taken as seriously as those of the grown-ups. The narrator’s family and friends have retreated to a country home for the summer, sometime in the late 1980s. Ellen reflects on her identity in the generational chain as affected by her identity as a citizen. Her two daughters are at the beginning of their professional careers (as were Wolf’s at that time). Sonja, in her mid-twenties and a psychologist, is already divorced and raising a four-year-old daughter as a single mother. Jenny, nearly twenty, is studying for a

career as theater director.

The reader is drawn into an intensely experienced turning point in the life of the narrator. The realization that she is aging contributes to a crisis. Outer signs, such as dark pigment spots on her hands, signal a new epoch in her life. Also, the quality of passion has changed, and she wonders whether at a certain age husbands change from lovers to just being relatives. She considers it high time to question all her personal relationships and her place in society. Her reflections are also strongly influenced by her conclusion that her earlier political and societal endeavors have failed. Wolf, too, had idealistically and actively embraced the Communist cause because she thought she could make a difference in her country. But now she and her narrator had to recognize that she could not support the system as it was practiced in her homeland.

Without the active participation in public matters that had energized her younger years, Ellen feels robbed. In a nihilistic mood, she finds herself to be false and all her masquerades and pretenses to be nothing but “last barriers against the realization that there was nothing beyond” (*Sommerstück*, 190). Always unstable and vulnerable in her present full-blown crisis, she has to take steps to reinvent herself. To do so, she measures herself as a woman by the existence of her daughters and by her women friends who have taken different routes in their lives.

Much in *Sommerstück* suggests that the mother recognizes different aspects of her own personality within each of her two daughters. This split has led to different identities and to different life stories. Sonja, the elder daughter, a psychologist, is actively engaged in carrying the suffering of the world on her shoulders. Ellen understands because she had her share of sorrow in her politically active younger years. Jenny, the younger daughter, soberly extracts from the world what she deems necessary for a good life. As a future theater director, she concocts games or plays—as her mother does in her writings—but she also consciously builds her own reality. She recognizes outdated values and judges sharply, is outraged, and despises much. She also knows that sometimes one has to let go of a person instead of carrying around hurts, as her mother seems to have done without defending herself.

Wolf does not deal with the issue of her own failures openly, but keeps much under wraps. Ellen is neither a writer intoxicated with her career nor a doting mother and wife. In her tension-filled life, she tries to reconcile her many roles. She wants both to preserve the good traditional aspects of a woman’s life, and to affirm the public demands placed on a writer. The private and the public spheres are one and the same for her. Work in the garden, cooking, caring for children, talking with friends, reading, dealing with public issues—everything yields material for influencing the public sphere through her published texts.

Yet, even in the late 1980s, the narrator is constantly reminded that the proper role of the woman is still that of the housewife. “She had proved that she could make money with books. But it remained self-evident that such writings had to take second place to every other work, including women’s work” (*Sommerstück*, 128). Eventually she comes to recognize that being a writer is

less a career than a way out of her own "ineptness," her fear of getting into a "typical" profession, or of losing herself by total dedication to her family: "Ellen remained steadfast, kept her contours. That was not stability but incapacity . . . the embodied incapacity of giving herself up" (*Sommerstück*, 9). Her strength rests in her weakness. In her society she is more or less a hybrid nonperson who wants to play neither the traditional role of woman (as mother or housewife) nor that of man (as alienated professional). Published the year Wolf left the SED, expresses her abandonment of all utopian thought.

Through her narrator, Wolf articulates a syndrome historically typical of women faced with failure: she blames herself. Ellen is vaguely aware that a lack exists within her and that everything she has transmitted to her daughters is not enough: "In all practical things of life, I have not been a help to my daughters" (*Sommerstück*, 129). It escapes her notice that, unwittingly, she is handing down to her daughters and her granddaughters traditional women's practices that might perpetuate their dependency. For instance, Ellen, this modern socialist woman, plays a game with her granddaughter in which the little girl is the princess. Since princesses are to be rescued by a prince, such socialization of small girls in the circle of family and friends in this book appears oddly ambivalent and contradictory. The fairy tale will be continued soon again, says the grandmother. The same game—or performative exercise in women's dependency—was also played in continuing episodes by Ellen and her daughter Sonja when she was a child, as it had been played in *Kindheitsmuster* by the narrator and her daughter Lenka.

Sonja actually found her prince early, but realized the hard way that the stories of the fairy tale prince were not true. Although now divorced, she can be happy that her mother does not regard the divorce as "the greatest defeat of a woman" (*Sommerstück*, 146), but as a step towards independence. Indeed, Sonja has become so self-reliant after this step she no longer depends on her family: "I am not any more very interested in the intimate life . . . of [my] family" (*Sommerstück*, 170). She does not expect to find solutions to her problems there; and the family is no longer a place of order and peacefulness, or a model for the nation: "The four people around the family table. . . . Such constellation could not create order. On the contrary. Everything outside the circle of light thrown by this lamp . . . seemed to be in deeper confusion and disorder, and she was the only one who had to deal with this dangerous disorder. . . . On the other hand, the entanglements she had seen her mother stumble into [...] had not been really life-threatening." (*Sommerstück*, 172-173)

The daughter suddenly recognizes a certain traditional dependency of her mother on her family that explains her protective behavior and her inability to expose herself to the world. It allows her merely "to keep her nose above water." Sonja, on the other hand, wishes to express everything, to get to the bottom of things, to expose the sources of conflicts. Ellen must admit that she too had harbored this wish in her younger years, and had acted upon it. But she had come to realize that such openness did nothing but cause sorrow in her country. Now she prefers to let everyone be, even to treat others with

indulgence. But Sonja challenges the neo-Biedermeier attitude of her mother and other GRD intellectuals. While she accepts that there is no special consideration in real life, her mother's gentleness only obfuscates what is really happening. Sonja suggests she would have been better prepared for the callousness and tragedies of the world if her mother had raised her in a less protected manner. Through Ellen's confessions, Wolf practices a certain self-criticism of her own stance.

Ellen realizes she cannot determine the future of her daughters. She resigns herself to giving up any effort to do so "since it became clear that I could not help even the closest people to me" (*Sommerstück*, 137). Already in *Kindheitsmuster*, Wolf tried to shed the traditional belief that a daughter's life would be a copy of the mother's. It would be more complex. Ellen's elder daughter, Sonja, learns the tough lesson that an active life outside the family includes major responsibilities and failures, such as she experienced when one of her mental patients committed suicide after Sonja had ordered she be left unsupervised. For Ellen, Sonja's closeness to people seems threatening. Ellen considers it important to remain an enigma even to the people closest to her. When a friend asks her why she does not let anyone come close to her, she answers, "Why do you think I write" (*Sommerstück*, 210)? It becomes increasingly clear that Ellen/Wolf no longer sees herself as role model for her daughters to imitate. She cannot be expected to secure the future of her daughters by her example. Each generation needs to emancipate itself from the former one; the girls as much as the boys.

Yet, Wolf's text is ambivalent. The structures of the patriarchal family seem intact but are in danger of breaking down through the lack of communication between the generations: The atmosphere is often heavily laden with silence. As Sonja reflects "[M]any things remain unsaid in a talkative family like hers" (*Sommerstück*, 172). Questions are not being posed out of consideration or fear. Ellen compensates by inquiring in a motherly fashion about the physical well-being of her children, whether they slept or ate enough (*Sommerstück*, 171). The narrator justifies such seemingly trivial non-communication within the family because she believes in its protective function. Indeed, silence can also have a therapeutic value for the narrator; it builds a bridge across the family's chattiness, a bridge from concealing to revealing. After all, there is also a whole tradition that builds on the subversive silence of women, the passive-aggressiveness with which they were able to gain influence over men in the past. However, the narrator's striving for harmony, born out of her attempt to keep the private family sphere peaceful, has a serious side. It has led her to repress recognizing the deficiencies of the Communist government and her role in it, and to real depression on her part. Apparently troubled by the ambiguity of the problem, the author resolves it by having the narrator's silence lead to a time of reflection, almost a meditation, which allows her to question her identity and to reevaluate her own untenable position. Shortly after publishing this book Wolf left the Communist Party; in 1995 her real daughter, Annette Simon, who became a psychotherapist, published her own

reminiscences, in which she confirms the stress within the family. Simon blames her childhood environment, and with it, her parents for passing down to her an ideological blindness: "If you grow up in the middle of abominations that most people who are important to you don't find abominable, you arrange your life with them unthinkingly, without suspicion."¹⁷

Have Ellen's concerns as mother for the physical well-being of her daughters been used in order not to face other shortcomings? In *Sommerstück*, the mother dares to start all over as she suddenly recognizes that she began to change once more. The structures of her new identity draw on both traditional women's and traditional men's activities. At one time, Ellen asks herself if cleaning the stove could not be more important than writing. Through the sensual pleasures of doing women's work, its negative image is lifted. Mothers as well as daughters enjoy it just as much as work formerly controlled by men. It can be argued that Wolf indeed tried out a suitable female persona for both the private and the public arena.

The courage of Ellen in *Sommerstück* to follow her calling as writer instead of being the dedicated mother might have provided her daughters with the courage for their own independence, to make the decision to assert themselves, and to escape destructive relationships. The influence of the mother has become individualized.

Ellen's two daughters in turn influence their mother's search for identity. Ellen recognizes in her children her own youthful enthusiasm, her rebellious strength, with which she had set impossible goals—as she now soberly recognizes. Their energies that flow back toward her make a new beginning for her possible. Her daughters show her that there are other routes. Jenny constructs her world from the fragments of the old one: instead of looking for blind love, she develops deep friendships; instead of defending outdated structures, she manipulates and relocates parts of them in adventurous new ways, until they form a feasible new pattern. Sonja has the compassion and courage to alleviate suffering in improving an imperfect society without renouncing her own claims. Her actions show Ellen that her earlier passionate involvement with society, far from being a total mistake, had not gone far enough. The mother notes that her own tendency of making doubtful decisions is repeated by her daughters. Like Ellen, Sonja is very young when she gives birth to a child during her university studies. The consequences are even harder for her, raising the child without a father. Whatever traits the daughters received from Ellen, they have undergone an evolution through the influence of a different historical epoch during their formative years.

Wolf illustrates the formation of a female self that has little to do with a mother's possessiveness in the patriarchal paradigm. The self continues to develop dynamically in an exchange with other people, through actions and events. Rather than claiming her children for her own aggrandizement, the mother contributes to their expanded individuality through respect and trust: the daughters are not colonized as objects by motherly principles or needs nor do they function for the mother as a justification of her existence. On the other

hand, the daughters contribute to an expansion of their mother's self. Through their new lifestyles, Ellen notices certain stereotypes she has not yet worked through in herself. In *Sommerstück* the daughters have as mother model a somewhat insecure, self-doubting, but courageous, talented, and loving human being. Through her, traditional women's activities are given new value, together with independence and agency—which is no longer reserved for men. At the same time, the mother hands down to her daughters the notion that they cannot be protected from societal conflicts.

Little space in the novel (and the play within the novel) is attributed to men. The father, though represented as loving and nontraditional, appears mainly on the periphery of the action, causing no tension. The centerpiece of the novel is a play by the same name, summer play, solely produced and performed by the women at the retreat. The narrator has specifically come from the city to do this “woman-thing” in order to get away from Berlin, from the troublesome center of the nation, to pause and consider the vulnerabilities and strengths, the opportunities and risks of mothers and daughters in a modern community and a modern state.

A Motherland Is Not in Sight: *Medea. Stimmen*

Wolf's novel *Medea. Stimmen* (1996) begins with Medea's monologue to address her absent mother. As in earlier writings, the author inserts herself into the text, and the narrator of the novel merges with the protagonist Medea, establishing a deliberate intersubjective identity.¹⁸ Together, they long for their mother: “You sat next to me, Mother, and when I turned my head, as I do now, I saw the opening of the window, as it is here, but there had not been a fig tree, there had been my beloved nut tree” (*Medea*, 13).

With this stylistic strategy, Wolf succeeds in transcending the limitations of history and geography. The narrator's nut tree, growing now in her (and Wolf's) home country, conflates with a fig tree growing in Medea's country long ago. The image transports her back into early recorded history. Who is this mother? The narration speaks of a mythical mother, queen Idiya, wife of king Aeetes on the island Kolchos. She is separated from her daughter Medea, and lives in a country that had recently shifted from a matriarchy to a patriarchy. Medea lives voluntary in exile just as Wolf has been in exile when she wrote *Sommerstück*.¹⁹ Mythological mother images have ambivalent and contradictory features. Wolf's imagination renders boundaries porous, as she addresses a multidimensional primeval mother figure. She describes her in her “Frankfurt Poetik-Vorlesungen,” which accompanies her novel.²⁰ In some traditions the Greek primeval goddess Hecate is being identified as Medea's mother. In her triple manifestation, Hecate became the model of the Christian trinity; she also appears as personification of divine power. In the oldest records, she represents heaven, earth, and the underworld. Only much later was she identified with her negative, underworld aspect. In time, other goddesses

merged with this image, such as Selene (representing heaven), Artemis (earth), and Persephone (underworld). “The late Greek myth, which connects her [Persephone] with Demeter and Hecate, was the result of interference which used the matriarchal myths for a patriarchal interpretation of the world” writes Gerda Weiler, (32) a scholar of mythology. The concepts of the mother (Demeter) and daughter (Persephone) were thus conflated.

According to some sources, Medea belonged to the entourage of Hecate but was not her daughter. However, as Herodotus points out, Medea herself was the “Great Goddess” of all Aryan tribes in Parthia. Her name signifies “feminine wisdom” (Sanskrit; medha). She is initiated in the art of medicine and thus connected with magic. In addition, she is—as Cassandra was—clairvoyant. Speaking through Medea on the first page of her novel, Christa Wolf emphasizes the nurturing and instructive role of Medea’s mother. “I was a child, almost a child. I had bled for the first time, but that did not make me sick, you know. Yet, you sat by me and whiled away the time; you changed the herbal compresses on my chest and my forehead, you held my hands close to my eyes and showed me the lines of my hands” (*Medea*, 13). The menstrual blood connects her to her mother and her ability to bear children. The mother’s attending to the troubled child points to her caring, the herbal compress proves her medical knowledge, and her reading the lines of the daughter’s hands attests to her prophetic wisdom gathered through knowing the body. Such heritage is to be transmitted to Medea. In this brief passage, Wolf introduces the whole program of a desired “Motherland” as she foregrounds what is missing in the present “fatherland.”²¹ Yet—as elaborated below—her desired “Motherland” does not copy archaic matriarchies whose flaws she addresses as well.

In the first sentence of her book, Wolf has Medea say: “Even dead gods reign” (*Medea*, 13). Is she referring to the old matriarchs, whose rule is silently active? In this ambivalent statement she is most likely also referring to the outlived values of the patriarchy, which cause atrocities such as silencing, even killing daughters. The daughters, Medea and Christa Wolf, search for the culture of the mother to escape the impact of such patriarchal traditions. Indeed, Wolf deconstructs a great deal of distorted history and myths in her fiction. She discovers a different Medea than is conventionally known; one who did not kill her children in revenge against her husband, Jason, after he had left her. Medea is the vehicle that takes the author back to a secret place, where Medea can uncover for her the secret truth about human tribulations caused by the oppression of the rulers in the city of Corinth, in which she lives after she marries Jason. She wants to discover what price was paid to make possible a corrupt ruling dynasty. The long, difficult trip underground leads to the mythical place to which women were banned. But only here can Medea (and Wolf) learn about life and death: “My head hurts so much, Mother, something within me resists going back down into the caves again, into the underworld, into Hades, where everything dies and is reborn since ancient times, where living things are being baked from the humus of the dead, that is, I must go back to the mothers, to the goddess of death. But what is the meaning of forward,

what of backward?" (Medea, 19). In her Frankfurt lectures, Wolf deals extensively with Goethe's primeval mothers who are visited by the hero of his drama in *Faust*. Although they also live in a timeless space, there is an enormous difference in the intention of Medea's descent to the mothers and that of Faust's descent. In *Faust*, Wolf recognizes "false alternatives." The objective of Faust—the prototype of the Western man—is to conquer and gain for himself the best of human culture: the image of beauty, embodied by Helena. In this process, he not only betrays the mothers whose magic tripod (their trinity) he steals in order to gain a phantom. With Helena, he wants merge the aesthetic abstract with the real, an impossible wish that eventually fails. This mental process only flimsily covers his actual striving for exploitation and the loss of an ethics that Faust justifies.

Ethics was a major topic in feminist thinking of the 1990s, as indicated by a rise in works published in this area; Wolf's work is permeated with such thinking. Thus Medea goes down to the underworld alone and without help to search for the secret. It turns out to be the skeleton of a murdered girl, the daughter of Queen Merope. She had been killed because the girl's father, King Creon, had reason to fear that his government would be reclaimed by his wife and his daughter, and that the matrilineal rule practiced in earlier times would return. The murder has a double effect. The mourning mother, Merope, distressed by the death of her child, is judged insane and thus could be removed without much questioning from the circle of power. With the death of the daughter, women had been silenced and patriarchy strengthened.

Is the trip to the mother a necessity for the daughters because they cannot find role models among men who are involved in such inhumanity? Or are we dealing with an essentialist argument, that the feminine and the matriarchy are the only positive power? Hardly. Wolf's socialist/Marxist training protected her from a reversal of privileged positions and a sustained polarity, which in turn would bring advantages only to women. Wolf knows that patriarchy had its disadvantages as well. She did not subscribe to the new irrationalism developed by a group of German feminists of the 1970s and 1980s because it did not seem politically advantageous for women. In Medea's homeland, her father, the king, was able to exclude women from power and to silence the rebels of his government by allegedly uncovering and publicizing irrational, deadly matriarchal customs that demanded human blood sacrifice. This may not have been true in Colchis, but Wolf is rather certain about the practices in the GDR, where a patriarchy posed a similar threat: "I have loved this country. I know that it had come to its end because it was not able any more to integrate the best people, because it demanded human sacrifices" (Wolf 1994, 262).

It has been argued that the power of the primeval mothers in myths and the "otherness" of women alike inspire fear in males in general and in patriarchal government specifically. Indeed, women's otherness threatens their own dominant discourses. Goethe's Mephistopheles warns Faust with great urgency against the emptiness that he will experience in the realm of the

mothers. Feminist theories of the last thirty years have attributed this “emptiness” or “lack” to the forced absence of women’s voices in public discourses. Wolf does not know how to heal a corrupt state but, as a first step, can expose its basis and speak out. To uncover the crime, Medea, the daughter, dares to go on a prohibited road to the mothers in a rational way. In September 1992, Wolf notes that the Corinthian hatred against Medea stems from her resistance to be silenced.²² For her endeavor to disclose suppressed reality, she needs to use intelligence, imagination, and aggressiveness, all traits underemphasized in women’s education. Wolf foregrounds these characteristics with passion.²³ Medea already possesses an autonomy for which earlier women protagonists in Wolf’s fiction, such as Cassandra, had to strive laboriously. Women in most texts by Wolf learn to utilize positive traditional “male characteristics,” such as using rational thinking. The writer is thus not so much intent on proving that the irrational matriarchal rule is better for society as on seeing that women, half of humankind, get a chance to develop their full potential and that they integrate into public life the important wisdom they have accumulated as women, mothers, and daughters, rather than confining their influence to the family circle. Already in her Frankfurt lectures Wolf states:

However, the ability to take the trip is not improved by substituting female mania for male mania, and when the fruits of rational thinking—only because men have brought them about—are thrown overboard by women for the idealization of pre-rational stages in human evolution. The tribe, the clan, blood and earth: These are not the values men and women can relate to nowadays; on the contrary, they can only offer pretenses for terrible regressions. Autonomy is a task for everybody, and women who withdraw into their femininity as a value act basically as they had always been socialized: They react with a grand strategy of evasion to the challenge reality poses for the totality of their person. (Wolf 1983, 148)

Wolf’s writings were from the beginning a process of emancipation, a road toward autonomy. What she considers “feminine writing” thus does not belong to a special aesthetics:

To what extent is there really ‘feminine’ writing [weibliches Schreiben]? To the extent that women live a different reality than men due to historical and biological reasons. . . . To the extent that women do not belong to the rulers but to the ruled, they belonged hundreds of years as objects of the objects. . . . To the extent that they stop exhausting themselves trying to integrate into the crazy systems of domination. To the extent that they, writing and living, are looking for autonomy. (Wolf 1983, 146)

By means of her trip to the mothers in the underworld, Medea finds her answer through the skeleton of the murdered girl: women had been brutally hindered in participating in government; they were driven to death and insanity. Everything women had learned in raising children—care, love, intersubjectivity—had been driven underground to make space for the personal greed and the hunger for profit displayed in this novel. Women's bodies and their bodily functions, their sexuality, had become colonized and devalued.

But make no mistake, for Wolf, patriarchal self-aggrandizement is not limited to men but to any "patriarchal person," such as the career woman Agameda, Medea's friend. It follows from Wolf's considerations that there is no essentialist necessity dictating men to be exploiters, egoists, or suppressors. Men can change as well. For instance, more than in any other novel, Wolf focuses in *Medea* on a new kind of equal sexuality. Medea's lover, the sculptor Oistros, is a man who desires equality in a partnership without claiming ownership. His partner's body belongs to herself, and when Medea has sexual intercourse with Jason, her former husband, whom she no longer loves, no drama ensues but an affirmation of each person's autonomy and the separation of sex and love. Such utopian autonomy was also illustrated in Wolf's Frankfurt lectures in the context of multicultural relationships: [Women] "are meeting men who are looking for autonomy. Autonomous persons, states, and systems can support each another, do not need to fight one another unlike those whose inner insecurity and lack of maturity constantly require delimitation and gestures to impress the others. (Wolf 1983, 146)

This utopian situation does not yet exist. Precisely the daring trip to the mothers brings renewed, more excruciating exile to Medea, who is, falsely accused and eventually driven out into the desert. The "Motherland" that she is looking for is far away. It is not found in a place where traditional mothering is handed down to the daughters. Inge Stephan has shown in her analysis of Wolf's *Medea* in this volume that Medea herself—desperately seeking her own mother—fails as a substitute mother to Glauce. Medea's lack of motherly caring causes her death. Her failure as mother could be viewed as Wolf's realization that women cannot always be responsible for their children. As suggested in *Sommerstück*, the mother can no longer successfully care for the daughters by herself. In the case of Medea, her behavior is in keeping with Wolf's recognition of blind spots in individuals and society, reflecting a weakness that does not exclude women's potential inhumanity. At a time when heroes have become suspect, so have heroines. Wolf does not make one out of Medea, but shows her shortcomings as well. A perfect person in a perfect society does not exist, but a utopian possibility can be envisioned: "Barely do I dare to express it—very slowly, a need for utopian thinking might grow again. It would have to be developed from daily life experiences, not from theory" (Wolf 1994, 21). Yet Christa Wolf had to recognize that a backlash had occurred in her home country. Certain women's advantages that had been established in the GDR were revoked after unification in 1989. Especially women's position in the workforce became devalued. This trend of devaluation

did not stop before Wolf, the writer, herself. For instance, Heiner Müller dismissed the writings of Christa Wolf in a TV interview in March 1994 as conveying the mentality of a high school teacher. In the same program, it was prophetically “announced” that Wolf would never again write an important work. As *Medea* intimates, Wolf’s utopian thinking and her optimism are quite muted. In the Frankfurt lectures she asks, “Shouldn’t we try once to find out what would happen if we replaced men with women as the great models of world literature?” (Wolf 1983, 146). This has not yet happened. Women still attempt in vain to search for a motherland. The daughters Medea and Christa Wolf remain in exile without a homeland.

Notes

¹Among the feminist approaches to Wolf’s work, see also: Vanhelleputte, 1992; Kuhn, 1988; and Lennox, 1979.

²Scholars have instead focused mostly on „the individual“ in Wolf’s texts. See, for example, Angela Drescher, 1992. Concentrating *Der geteilte Himmel* (Divided heaven), where Wolf barely mentions a mother; on *Störfall* (Accident: A day’s news), where daughters occur only marginally, and on *Sommerstück* (Summer play), where the important second daughter and a granddaughter are not even mentioned. Drescher skims *Kindheitsmuster*, leaving out any important aspects of its treatment of gender. Indeed, she barely considers the implications of gender differences in her essays, discussing generational problems in the same vein as the father-son conflict. But see also Christel Zahlmann 1986 analysis of *Kindheitsmuster*, which though it focuses on the personal, does not use contemporary feminist psychological theory, seeing the mother as the internalized super-mother and interpreting the mother-daughter relationship according to the theories of Freud, Laplanche, Klein, and Horney.

³Translations throughout this essay are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴Examples of such novels are Waltraud Mitgutsch, *Die Züchtigung*; Elfriede Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*; Helga Novak, *Die Eisheiligen*; Jutta Heinrich, *Das Geschlecht der Gedanken*; Gabriele Wohmann, *Ausflug mit der Mutter*; Ingeborg Drewitz, *Eis auf der Elbe*; Claudia Erdheim, *Bist du wahnsinnig geworden*.

⁵Indeed, Wolf used a quotation from Lenk as a motto for *Medea*.

⁶See Margit Reschke (29, 163-164) for a discussion of such claims.

⁷Books such as *Die Mutter* von Karin Struck, 1975, and mythological studies such as those by Heide Goettner-Abendroth 1982 did little to convince an enlightened citizen. Unlike their American counterparts, most German women’s groups did not want to pattern their organization on established national structures, nor did they desire to change the situation from within such structures.

⁸ For example, Wolf writes to Brigitte Reimann in 1992: “I’ll probably want to kill too many birds with the one stone of this story—Selbstversuch— not only the false concept of emancipation which is rampant here, but at the same time the false concept of science altogether.” (Reimann and Wolf, 141).

⁹ See Kraft and Liebs, 1993.

¹⁰ Hirsch 169.

¹¹ Wolf (1994, 21) writes, “Literature will have to achieve what it has always and everywhere achieved. It will have to locate the blind spots of our past and to accompany mankind in new circumstances.”

¹² See also Spelman, 1982.

¹³ Much later, Wolf recognized that the male picture within herself had to be expelled. She was more successful than Bachmann’s protagonist in *Malina*. She writes in poetic prose to Volker Braun:

“Bin dachte ich
 den Fremden in mir
 es war eine männliche Person
 allmählich losgeworden
 indem ich mir ein Herz gefaßt ihn zu betrachten
 (Was ist alle Angst gegen die Angst vor der Selbstkenntnis)
 ihn nicht umbrachte
 sondern möglichst
 ihn mir anverwandelte
 Und was von ihm übrig blieb
 versuchte anzunehmen.“

I was able, I thought, to get rid of the stranger within me—it was a male person—through taking the courage of looking at him (what is any fear against the fear of self-knowledge), I did not kill him but as much as possible integrated him into myself, and tried to accept that what remained of him.

“Rückäußerung auf den Brief eines Freundes,” (Answer to a letter from a friend; Wolf 1994, 275-276).

¹⁴ See, for example, Wolf’s diary entry of September 27, 1993, in Wolf, 1994, 281.

¹⁵ An earlier version of part of this section appeared in Kraft and Liebs, 1993.

¹⁶ Shere Hite (ix) writes optimistically: “New kinds relationships between the sexes, pioneered in the workplace, will spread to the rest of society and ‘private life’, as more people fundamentally change how they relate to one another at work.”

¹⁷ Annette Simon, 58.

¹⁸ See also Wolf 1979, 7, *Kein Ort Nirgends*, where a gesture of the narrator and the writer Heinrich von Kleist become indistinguishable.

¹⁹ See also the title of Margit Reschke 1979, *Christa Wolf: Returning to a Foreign Land*, which is based on Wolf's basic conflict of living in a homeland that is foreign to her.

²⁰ Wolf (1983, 69) writes:

[I] "knew about the trinity of the old mother goddesses (the first trinity at all from which all later ones are derived), in whom "three" was equal to "one," in that one goddess—according to the three-tiered structure of the world—appeared in three emanations: a bright, young, hunting girl of the air (Artemis), as the woman goddess in the middle, dispensing fertility, ruling over land and oceans, an erotic godhead (Demeter, Aphrodite, Hera, called before "Era-earth," and whose other names were "Gaia" and "Rhea" . . .), and finally the old woman who lives in the underworld, the goddess of death who causes rebirth as well (Io, . . . an aspect of Hera, and of course Hecate-Hecuba).

²¹ See Grosz, 1994. The feminist philosopher suggests a completely new paradigm of knowledge in which the Cartesian polarity is replaced by a circulating continuity of inside with outside much like a Klein bottle.

²² Wolf (1994, 244) writes: "Is Medea, the goddess, the healer, being ostracized, betrayed, hunted by the male society of Corinth because of her excessive imagination, just because she has not killed her children, as Euripides fictionalizes the truth? Apparently, he needed a strong motive for the enormous measure of hatred that follows her throughout the centuries. I should, in order to explain the hatred, break open the story again. Medea, the sorceress, scares men including Jason, because she has brought new values from Colchis to Corinth. Who was to be colonized in the end?"

²³ Wolf needs creativity and overflowing imagination, as she sees it in *Medea*, to uncover the repressed reality: "We do know where denied, repressed reality ends up: It disappears in blind spots of our consciousness, where it destroys activity, creativity, but sprouts myths, aggression, illusions" (Wolf 1994, 337).

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