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UNMOTHERED DAUGHTERS, UNFATHERED HOMES: REPRESSED HISTORIES IN JEWISH IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES BY BERTHA PEARL MOORE

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Abstract

This article examines how early twentieth-century Jewish immigrant narratives circulate across the Americas, shaping imaginaries of "America" as both promise and rupture. Focusing on Bertha Pearl Moore's neglected novels *Sarah and Her Daughter* (1920) and *The Love Child* (1923), it argues that Moore offers a counter-genealogy of immigrant writing that resists the assimilatory triumphalism often associated with Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska. Rather than narrating migration as upward mobility, Moore figures it as affective collapse, tracing how poverty, cultural dislocation, and gendered labor fracture family life and destabilize mother–daughter bonds. Drawing on feminist, psychoanalytic, and trauma theory, the article shows how maternal silence and somatic inheritance transmit displacement intergenerationally, turning immigrant narrative into an archive of what cannot be spoken. Recovering Moore's work thus reframes Americanization as a traumatic intercultural encounter and demonstrates how overlooked texts redraw inter-American cultural mappings through their refusal of narrative resolution.

Keywords: Jewish immigrant literature, intergenerational trauma, maternal silence, somatic inheritance, postmemory

Introduction

Despite a recent surge of interest in early twentieth-century Jewish women's literature, Bertha Pearl Moore remains conspicuously absent from both the literary canon and critical discourse. While the works of contemporaries such

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as Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska have garnered sustained scholarly attention, Moore's fiction, rooted in the emotional complexities of working-class Jewish motherhood, has been largely overlooked. This critical silence is symptomatic of a broader discomfort with narratives that resist redemption and reject the triumphant arc of assimilation. Moore's two extant novels, *Sarah and Her Daughter* and *The Love Child*, offer deeply intimate portraits of maternal collapse and intergenerational trauma. Turning away from celebratory immigrant tropes, they examine the fractures between mothers, fathers, and daughters shaped by poverty, cultural dissonance, and emotional repression. Moore's voice is deeply embedded in the social and cultural realities of early twentieth-century Jewish American life, making her perspective not only recoverable but urgently relevant. Her fiction also exposes a narrative logic in which the immigrant story is structured not by upward mobility but by the transmission of psychic wounds—an affective architecture that unsettles the genre's conventional teleology.

This essay intervenes in Jewish American literary scholarship by arguing that Moore's fiction exposes a counter-genealogy within Jewish immigrant literature—one that replaces narratives of rebellion and assimilation with accounts of maternal collapse, psychic inheritance, and emotional non-survival. Reading Moore alongside Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska, I show that Moore does not merely revise immigrant optimism but dismantles it, reframing Americanization as a process of intergenerational fracture rather than liberation. In doing so, her work invites a reconsideration of the immigrant novel's narrative form itself, revealing how somatic inheritance, maternal silence, and emotional rupture function as organizing principles rather than thematic embellishments.

To illuminate this counter-genealogy, I combine close reading with feminist and psychoanalytic theory, drawing on Abraham and Torok's "crypt" (1986), Hirsch's (1997) "postmemory," Kristeva's work on abjection, and Winnicott's "holding environment." These frameworks reveal how trauma circulates through silence, gesture, and bodily collapse in Moore's fiction, reshaping the immigrant narrative around psychic endurance rather than progress.

To guide this reassessment, the article pursues three objectives. First, it repositions Moore within early twentieth-century Jewish American literature, challenging her longstanding marginalization. Second, it offers sustained readings of *Sarah and Her Daughter* and *The Love Child*, tracing how maternal silence, failed fatherhood, and emotional inheritance structure the daughters' psychic lives. Finally, it argues for Moore's inclusion in contemporary scholarship as a writer whose fiction complicates dominant narratives of assimilation, agency, and generational progress by formally reorganizing immigrant narrative itself. Moore's novels do not merely represent trauma; they reconfigure narrative causality around silence, delay, and somatic interruption, producing what might be understood as a trauma-driven narrative form in which affect, rather than plot progression, governs narrative movement.

Biographical Context

Apart from a brief and sparsely detailed obituary, virtually no biographical records of Bertha Pearl Moore have survived. What remains is therefore an uneven and fragmented archive—scattered across brief notices, reviews, and institutional traces—rather than a cohesive record of Moore's life. **Much of her life is undocumented,** obscured by the broader historical silence surrounding early twentieth-century immigrant women, particularly those from working-class and marginalized communities. What can be pieced together suggests a life shaped by displacement, economic hardship, and emotional vulnerability—circumstances that deeply informed the emotional terrain of her literary work.

Moore, brought to the United States as an infant and raised in the tenements of New York's Lower East Side, lived a life marked by instability, hardship, and resilience—experiences that left a lasting imprint on her literary imagination. At just eight years old, due to her mother's inability to care for all her children, she was placed in another household—a formative rupture that exposed her early to the emotional costs of maternal separation and the fragility of familial bonds. Moore later spent time in various institutions (Anonymous 1920, 8), a detail that further accentuates the vulnerability and social precarity that shaped her worldview. Throughout her adolescence and early adulthood, she worked in factories, shops, and offices, eventually teaching school—all while navigating the harsh realities of working-class survival. By her early teens, Moore had become secretary of the University Settlement in New York, similarly to Minnie, in *Sarah and Her Daughter* —a position that reflected her early engagement with community work and a nascent trajectory of social mobility. In her twenties, declining health led her to Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan—a hub of Adventist-run health reform, self-help literature, and utopian ideals—where she wrote her first novel, *Sarah and Her Daughter* followed by *The Love Child*. Both novels were composed under the isolated and therapeutic conditions of her convalescence, and the psychological terrain they explore—maternal absence, premature caregiving, and emotional displacement—bears the imprint of these lived experiences, which Moore transforms into the raw material of her literary project.

Her debut novel draws heavily on her own biography, albeit through fictional reconstruction. In the novel, the young protagonist, Minnie, leaves home at the age of fourteen—a detail that parallels Moore's early departure from her natal household. The novel portrays the emotional and social aftermath of this separation, emphasizing the ache of maternal loss, the disorientation of early independence, and the tenuous agency of immigrant girls navigating premature adulthood. Moore's own experiences—early abandonment, institutionalization, labor, and frail health—reverberate through Minnie's character. In this way, Moore channels personal trauma into literary form, mapping individual pain onto the broader social canvas of immigrant life in New York.

Moore's professional literary affiliations, though not extensively documented, included publication through Thomas Seltzer, a progressive New York-based publisher known for championing experimental and socially engaged literature. That both *Sarah and Her Daughter* and *The Love Child* were published by Seltzer—a figure associated with modernist voices like D.H. Lawrence and Anzia Yezierska—suggests Moore's brief connection to New York's vibrant literary networks. The tension between this momentary access to literary modernism and the geographical and social remove of her life in Battle Creek shaped both her publication trajectory and the muted reception of her work.

Moore's fiction—though now largely forgotten—was initially received with notable critical enthusiasm, especially for its radical commitment to emotional realism. Early supporters praised her work for its unflinching honesty and psychological depth. A 1920 review lauded *Sarah and Her Daughter* as "a book of life" that captured the full spectrum of immigrant experience—one that "goes where people live. It goes where they hate, where they love, where they do good things and bad things, where they laugh, hope and dream—and are disappointed […] a book that […] cannot easily be forgotten" (Anonymous 1920, 8). Reviewers such as Levinger admired her refusal to idealize Jewish immigrant life and her willingness to depict emotional hardship, particularly among women (1920, 620), while another 1924 notice similarly commended the novel's realism (Anonymous 1924, 8). Supporters recognized that Moore deliberately rejected the formulaic optimism of popular narratives—the "Munsey flavor" (Benson 1920, n.p.) characterized by tidy upward mobility and triumphant romantic closure. Instead, she crafted plots that were "unpredictable, bittersweet, and truer to the complexities of human experience," offering a portrayal of Jewish immigrant life that was unusually candid for its time.

Yet this early praise stood in stark contrast to the swift decline in her literary reputation. Opponents—or, more accurately, the forces that marginalized her work—interpreted Moore's narrative austerity as commercially and culturally untenable. A 1925 obituary in *The American Hebrew* underscores the social and geographical dislocations that marked Moore's life, implying that her outsider status, combined with the bleak emotional landscapes of her fiction, hindered her integration into mainstream literary circles (Anonymous 1925, 76). While supporters viewed her emotional realism as courageous, detractors and market conditions deemed it too somber, too unconventional, or too unsettling to sustain broad readership. The very qualities that her admirers celebrated ultimately contributed to her rapid exclusion from the literary canon, revealing the tension between Moore's uncompromising aesthetic vision and the cultural expectations governing immigrant narratives in the early twentieth century.

Moore's second novel, *The Love Child*, continued her exploration of generational estrangement, maternal grief, and identity negotiation within the Jewish immigrant family. At the time of her premature death in 1925, at the age of 35, Moore was working on a third novel, which remained unfinished. Although

the manuscript's contents are unknown, its existence signals her continued commitment to probing the emotional realities of women on society's margins.

With so little personal documentation—no surviving letters, journals, or recorded interviews—Bertha Pearl Moore remains an elusive figure in American literary history. Yet in the semi-autobiographical textures of her fiction, she crafts a legacy that resonates far beyond her brief life. Through her imaginative reworking of experience and trauma, Moore offers a rare and poignant window into the emotional worlds of Jewish immigrant women—narratives of loss, survival, and resilience that deserve renewed critical attention.

Overview of Moore's Fiction

To ground the following analysis, this section offers a brief synopsis of Bertha Pearl Moore's two novels, *Sarah and Her Daughter* and *The Love Child*, clearly introducing the main characters and their circumstances.

Sarah and Her Daughter (1920)

Sarah and Her Daughter follows the lives of Sarah (the mother) and her daughter, Minnie, tracing their experiences from their initial immigration to America and the subsequent generational divergence. The novel is structured in two books, first focusing on Sarah's life. Sarah, an immigrant woman, struggles with the crushing poverty and trauma of displacement in the American tenement. Her marriage to her husband, Elias, is defined by their economic hardship and the emotional chasm that opens as they attempt to survive in the New World. Sarah's suffering leads to emotional withdrawal and silence, making her physically present but psychically unavailable to her children.

The second book shifts focus to the daughter, Minnie. Minnie grows up striving for independence by attempting to assimilate and secure upward mobility away from the generational trauma symbolized by "The Cellar," their childhood home. Despite achieving a measure of outward success, Minnie is unable to escape her mother's inheritance. She develops severe, unexplained psychosomatic symptoms (such as palpitations and nervous collapse) that effectively inscribe her mother's unspoken trauma onto her own body. The novel ends without a resolution, suggesting that the psychic cost of Americanization is the daughter's fundamental fracture.

The Love Child (1923)

The Love Child explores a different facet of working-class Jewish immigrant life, focusing on the daughter, Annie, and the instability of her home. The novel centers on Annie from her youth to early adulthood as she struggles to define her identity within a deeply dysfunctional family structure. Annie's parents, Mira (the mother) and David (the father), are trapped in an emotionally volatile and

economically insecure marriage. The title, *The Love Child*, alludes to the shame and emotional secrecy that defines the family's past and present. David, a failed patriarch, is a source of disappointment and financial instability, leaving the emotional weight of the home to Mira, who, like Sarah, is often incapacitated or unavailable.

The core of the narrative is Annie's overwhelming emotional disarray. She experiences extreme confusion and conflicting sensations—a desire to both flee and belong, to laugh and to cry—as she attempts to make sense of her parents' failure and her own ambiguous status. This emotional incoherence prevents Annie from achieving the unified selfhood that defines the "successful" assimilation narrative. The novel depicts the dissolution of the nuclear family and Annie's ultimate alienation, making a forceful claim that shame and silence can shatter the familial and psychological foundations of the second generation.

Taken together, these synopses establish the narrative and emotional framework on which the following theoretical analysis will build.

Comparative Analysis: Moore, Antin, and Yezierska

In examining narratives of immigration by early twentieth-century Jewish American women writers, certain patterns emerge: journeys of transformation, narratives of struggle culminating in rebirth, and the repositioning of parental figures within the arc of Americanization. Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) exemplify these models of immigrant self-fashioning and generational conflict. Yet, Bertha Pearl Moore's work diverges sharply from these familiar trajectories.

Unlike Antin's account (1912), which climaxes in a triumphant declaration—"I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life?" (1)—Moore's protagonists remain suspended in states of unresolved trauma and emotional fracture. Antin structures her story around a linear progression of assimilation and uplift. Her mother, though present, is absorbed into this narrative as a figure of passive sacrifice: "My parents knew only that they desired us to be like American children … and seeing how their neighbors gave their children boundless liberty, they turned us also loose, never doubting but that the American way was the best way" (271). In this vision, the immigrant mother becomes an accessory to the daughter's American rebirth.

Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) offers a confrontational model that powerfully critiques the emotional costs of immigration, centering on the generational rupture between Sara Smolinsky and her oppressive, dogmatic father, Reb Smolinsky. While the novel is saturated with the trauma of poverty and conflict, and presents the mother figure with a subversive complexity that complicates simple narratives of assimilation, Sara's narrative arc still privileges a difficult, yet ultimately triumphant emancipation. This triumph is achieved through an active, conscious rebellion and rejection of the Old World's patriarchal

legacy. Sara declares: "Thank God, I'm living in America! You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life!" (Yezierska 175). Here, emancipation is difficult and painful but ultimately triumphant. Reb Smolinsky, Sara's father, embodies patriarchal oppression, and Sara's eventual independence marks a victory over that legacy.

The critical difference, however, lies in the nature of the daughter's response and the narrative's outcome. Sara Smolinsky is defined by conscious rebellion and active struggle—she rejects Old World patriarchy in order to claim her own agency. Moore's protagonists, conversely, are characterized by emotional devastation and passive drift. Minnie and Annie are emotionally paralyzed and move away from their mothers, inheriting unarticulated trauma rather than actively fighting for self-determination. This distinction shows that Moore is not simply duplicating Yezierska's critique but shifting the site of devastation. Whereas Yezierska's Sara reaches a painful yet self-willed emancipation through outward action, Moore's protagonists remain inwardly undone, manifesting the immigrant wound somatically or psychologically. Moore's work thus offers a unique and radically different critique of assimilation. To describe the intergenerational mechanism by which this psychic damage is transmitted—where trauma persists without narrative access—a specialized theoretical vocabulary becomes necessary. The psychological dynamics in Moore's novels are best understood through trauma theory, specifically Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of the "crypt." Moore depicts Sarah and Mira as figures who carry the unspeakable burden of immigrant experience—poverty, loss of status, and cultural displacement—not as a coherent narrative but as an internal, buried secret.

Moore's work subverts conventional immigrant narratives by shifting the locus of trauma from an external, patriarchal antagonist to an internal, maternal collapse. While Anzia Yezierska's narratives of rebellion culminate in the daughter's successful assertion of self against the father, Moore's stories foreground the daughter's psychic disintegration due to the mother's emotional absence and incapacitation. The mother figures, Sarah Mendel (*Sarah and Her Daughter*) and Mira Cohen (*The Love Child*), are unable to connect, nurture, or protect. Consequently, Americanization is not liberating—as it is for Sara Smolinsky—but traumatic, fracturing emotional bonds and leaving behind the affective debris of immigration.

This fracture is deeply inscribed in the second generation's relationship to culture and agency. Minnie, Sarah's daughter, demonstrates this cultural rupture by consciously turning away from the German and Yiddish texts her mother cherished. Instead, she frequents the public library and relishes her independence, feeling "proud as a peacock" as she carries English books home (Moore *Sarah*, 45). This linguistic transition—from Yiddish to English, from communal storytelling to American individualism—becomes the site of disinheritance. Assimilation, for Moore's daughters, does not lead to self-actualization or declarative power (like Yezierska's Sara); rather, it is a quiet devastation that results in alienation. Moore's

protagonists do not internalize American ideals as a path to agency; they embody the wounds left by cultural dissonance and the trauma their mothers could not articulate. In her fiction, assimilation does not resolve the immigrant struggle; it reconfigures it into an intimate drama of loss, where progress is measured in estrangement rather than empowerment.

Mothers and Daughters: Trauma, Silence, and Somatic Inheritance

1. Somatic Testimony and the Hysterical Body

Moore's fiction presents a devastating portrayal of mother-daughter relationships forged not in intimacy or continuity but in rupture, silence, and psychic burden. Moore establishes the mother, Sarah, as a figure consumed by despair and physical limitation. "Sarah's face was yellow and lined. When she attempts to speak, she can only manage "'Minnie, Minnele!' with a shaky hand" (*Sarah* 499-500). The daughters do not inherit stories or traditions; they inherit unspoken griefs, emotional wounds, and the affective debris of immigration.

The inability to articulate emotions, needs, and vulnerabilities leads to misunderstandings, alienation, and a breakdown in the maternal "holding environment" crucial for the daughters' emotional development. Attempts at connection are often thwarted by the weight of what remains unsaid. Silence can also be interpreted in the context of cultural dislocation. For immigrant women, silence might represent a response to the loss of their native language and culture or a struggle to find their voice in a new, often unwelcoming, society, leading to a sense of being silenced by the dominant culture, unable to fully express their experiences and identities. To fully appreciate the significance of silence, it's crucial to examine the moments where characters attempt to find a voice. These attempts, whether successful or failed, highlight the oppressive power of silence and the characters' yearning for connection and understanding. Annie's intermittent expressions of anger and despair, for instance, reveal her struggle against this silence, even as she remains trapped within its grip.

In *Sarah and Her Daughter,* Minnie, the American-born daughter of Sarah Mendel, turns instinctively toward American classrooms, and the possibility of upward mobility. But her intellectual accomplishments come at a psychic cost. She distances herself not just from Yiddish and religious customs but from the emotional world of her mother. The consequence is not liberation but fragmentation. Moore renders Minnie's psychological condition through hysteria, a literary convention the novelist uses to register the physical effects of repressed immigrant trauma. Minnie suffers from palpitations, breathlessness, and regressive thumb-sucking, and is emotionally fragmented.

Moore immediately demonstrates that Minnie's American ambition is crippled by overwhelming emotional pressure. When faced with the prospect

of social or professional advancement, she is paralyzed by symptoms: "She knew herself; in front of the chief, she would be tongue-tied, the beating of her heart would stifle her thoughts. She hated herself for her nervousness" (Moore, *Sarah* 339). Even emotional intimacy is registered as a threat; she tells her suitor, "Abraham, I haven't been feeling well. I get such headaches and palpitations. Please don't upset me so" (Moore, *Sarah* 431). Her internal conflict is further characterized by paralyzing anxiety, undermining any sense of successful self-determination: "She got herself nervous, confused, excited, anxious to have it over with... Her breath came quickly. He held out his hand. She felt as if danger were lurking" (Moore, *Sarah* 453).

Minnie's physical symptoms—her sudden palpitations, breathlessness, and nervous collapse—are not merely details of her distress; they serve as a bodily register of inherited trauma. Moore utilizes Minnie's afflicted body to create a "language of the body," aligning with Hélène Cixous's assertion that hysterics "are pushed to the point of choking…their tongues are cut off…it's the body that talks" (1981, 49). The fact that these symptoms lack a medically identifiable cause is Moore's deliberate choice to show the wounds of Americanization are psychic, not merely circumstantial. The cost of Minnie's "upward mobility" is literally inscribed on her body, providing Moore's starkest critique of the celebratory immigrant trope. The symptoms become a form of testimony, an archive of the unspoken suffering that her mother, Sarah, could not articulate "Her heart began to pound and her breath came hard and short. She pressed her hand to her chest as though trying to hold back something that was about to burst" (Moore, *Sarah* 308).

Moore constructs this bodily register of suffering as the daughter's only language of inheritance. Furthermore, the trauma ultimately forces Minnie into a regressive state, undermining her hard-won independence and completing Moore's critique of the triumphant immigrant arc: "She was a little girl again with Foxy tugging at her skirts; Abie assailed her with 'Fights.' Her thumb was in her mouth" (Moore, *Sarah* 499). From the top-floor window Sarah called "'Minnie!'" She was back again in the present with a broken heart and silent sobs rending her being" (Moore, *Sarah* 499). Minnie cannot communicate with her mother through words, culture, or shared dreams. What she receives is Sarah's silence—dense, melancholic, and unreachable. Sarah, "tall and thin … harassed and embittered … [whose] pale, thin lips quivered" (Moore, *Sarah* 16), represents the maternal figure emptied of affective vitality. Her gestures are mechanical, her emotional availability minimal. This lack of maternal attunement generates what D. W. Winnicott termed a breakdown in the "holding environment"—the maternal context necessary for the child to feel safe and develop a cohesive sense of self (1965, 31). Without it, Minnie experiences the world as unsafe, unpredictable, and threatening. Her distress is not the result of specific events, but of sustained emotional absence. The theoretical implications of Minnie's symptoms deepen when placed within feminist psychoanalysis. Hélène Cixous asserts that "silence is the mark of hysteria" (49). Minnie's fainting, her nervous collapse, and her anxiety attacks all become part of what Cixous refers to as "the language of the

body." The body speaks when the voice cannot, when inherited trauma, gendered socialization, and emotional dislocation block verbal expression.

2. Maternal Ambivalence and the Collapse of the Holding Environment

Similar dynamics shape *The Love Child*, where maternal collapse is rendered with even greater clarity. Mira Cohen, the mother, embodies this collapse through a combination of personal tragedies and emotional exhaustion. The harsh trials of immigration, coupled with the emotional absence of her husband, David, and the unrelenting economic pressure to sustain the family, culminate in a fractured maternal self— "harassed and embittered," emotionally volatile, and worn thin by grief and duty (Moore, *Love* 47). Mira's response to her daughter's attempts at care is emblematic of her psychological strain. When Annie tries to assist her mother, Mira is "much pleased at any show of consideration" as "it intensified a feeling of martyrdom she carried with her. Strangely, consideration always spurred her on to seek greater martyrdom" (Moore, *Love* 38). Mira's ambivalent behavior vacillates between expressions of tenderness and acts of abrupt cruelty, a dynamic that destabilizes Annie's emotional development. This mother-daughter tension aligns with Chodorow's analysis of maternal ambivalence: "Having denied their daughters the stability and security of a confident early symbiosis, they [mothers] turned around and refused to allow them [daughters] any leeway for separateness or individuation" (1979, 100). In Mira's case, this results in Annie growing up within a climate of love that is erratic, anxious, and permeated with dread. She is simultaneously cherished and emotionally burdened, leading to a hypervigilant personality desperate for approval and riddled with guilt. Annie internalizes her mother's suffering, convinced that her own goodness might alleviate Mira's pain. She clings to a self-imposed promise: she hopes to be good to Mama when she grows up (Moore, *Love* 38). Yet, this vow is immediately complicated by a moment of revulsion—Mira wraps Annie in an old coat, and Annie recoils in disgust. This complex emotional response encapsulates the core of Annie's childhood: a longing for connection entangled with shame, confusion, and a deep-seated need for maternal stability that never arrives.

Annie's psychic vulnerability deepens as she ventures into the world beyond her home, where her anxieties about not belonging are heightened by her mother's emotional inconsistency. Mira, burdened by the demands of survival, is often unable to provide Annie with the steady reassurance she craves. Yet in one pivotal scene, this pattern is momentarily broken. In a rare outburst of affection, Mira dashes over to Annie, seizes her hands, and whirls her around the room, singing, "My, you are beautiful—my, you are beautiful!" to the tune of "How fickle women are." Mira's laughter fills the room, creating a fleeting atmosphere of warmth and joy (Moore, *Love* 215). This spontaneous display stands in stark contrast to the usual environment of their home, typically shaped by Mira's

exhaustion and the burdens of daily life. Mira's sudden expression of pride and love reveals the deep, if often inarticulate, bond she feels for her daughter. For Annie, caught in the unexpected whirlwind of her mother's affection, this moment becomes a cherished memory, a brief but powerful validation of the love she longs for. Yet its rarity also leaves her confused, highlighting the emotional distance that usually defines their relationship. Mira's spontaneous outburst—"My, you are beautiful!" (Moore, *Love* 215)—momentarily approximates Winnicott's "holding environment," offering Annie a fleeting sense of safety. Yet its rarity intensifies instability: each burst of maternal presence underscores the chronic absence that defines Annie's world.

Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection" further complicates the psychic entanglements between mother and daughter in Moore's work, especially in *The Love Child*. Kristeva describes abjection as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" and defines it as "the jettisoned object [that] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (1982, 2). Abjection, in Kristeva's formulation, should not be understood simply as disgust toward an external object. It arises when the distinction between self and other becomes unstable: what must be expelled in order for the subject to establish a coherent identity remains disturbingly intimate. This dynamic is particularly important in the maternal relation, since the mother is simultaneously the origin of the self and the figure from whom separation must occur. Annie's response to Mira therefore exceeds embarrassment at poverty. Her attraction to and recoil from her mother register the difficulty of establishing an autonomous identity while remaining psychically bound to the maternal world she seeks to leave behind. Annie's relationship with her mother Mira is steeped in this destabilizing logic. Mira is simultaneously a source of nurturance and a figure of emotional instability—offering love that is interwoven with fatigue, bitterness, and unresolved sorrow. Annie cannot fully separate herself from her mother's wounded presence, nor can she fully merge with her. The maternal relation thus takes on the structure of abjection: Mira is both foundational and repelling, a source of Annie's identity and a threat to its boundaries. Annie's oscillation between guilt and longing, resentment and attachment, positions her within the psychic terrain of abjection, where emotional clarity is perpetually deferred, and selfhood remains in flux. This concept illuminates Annie's visceral disgust when Mira wraps her in an old coat—a moment where poverty materializes as repulsion. The mother's worn garment becomes a jettisoned object, signaling how material deprivation renders the maternal body abject.

Annie's longing for connection and affirmation is further complicated by her encounter with Doctor Ellis. During a period of illness, she misinterprets the doctor's professional attentiveness—his kind words, gentle touch, and small gifts—as signs of romantic interest. Emotionally starved and desperate for tenderness, Annie idealizes him, projecting onto him the fantasy of a redemptive love that might rescue her from the isolation of her world. When she later seeks him out to claim this imagined bond, her hopes are cruelly shattered: Doctor

Ellis barely remembers her. The devastation deepens when, instead of offering kindness, he sexually harasses her, treating her not as a beloved figure but as an object of opportunistic desire. Annie's humiliation is total. She must confront, all at once, the painful recognition that her yearning for love has been not only dismissed but violated. This betrayal forces her into a premature and brutal awareness of adult exploitation, reinforcing the mistrust, shame, and emotional isolation that already mark her inner life (Moore, *Love* 176-177).

This longing and ambivalence encapsulate one of Moore's central themes: motherhood as a site of love continually disrupted by necessity, fatigue, and survival. Both Sarah and Mira are forced into dual roles as caregivers and breadwinners, a burden that fractures their emotional availability. Their daughters, Annie and Minnie, experience this rupture as psychic trauma. Annie, in particular, is sensitive to the tension: she regards her mother with a mixture of tender gratitude for her sacrifices and resentful criticism, describing her at different times as "a fault-finder, a busy-body, a haggler" (Moore, *Love* 16, 222). This emotional contradiction aligns with Melanie Klein's theory of early relational ambivalence, in which children experience their caregivers as simultaneously nurturing and threatening. Klein's concept of splitting—the mental separation of objects into "good" and "bad" parts, with anxiety-provoking aspects repressed—helps explain Annie's experience (1932, 193). Although originally applied to infants, this mechanism persists into adolescence, as children continue to struggle with reconciling conflicting images of their caregivers. In Annie's case, the psychic conflict does not arise from overt neglect or cruelty, but from the impossibility of integrating these opposing emotional truths into a coherent whole.

Through Annie and Minnie, Moore dramatizes not a simple story of generational conflict but a haunting portrait of intergenerational burden. These daughters do not inherit trauma directly, through story or confession, but indirectly, through gesture, silence, and psychic resonance. Their symptoms become a form of testimony, their suffering an archive of what their mothers could not speak.

3. Fractured Fatherhood: Patriarchal Absence and Ethnic Shame

While the majority of critical commentary on Jewish immigrant literature emphasizes patriarchal authority—often embodied in religious, dogmatic father figures—Bertha Pearl Moore departs from this dominant portrayal. Unlike Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, where Reb Smolinsky represents oppressive, moralistic patriarchy, Moore presents Elias (in *Sarah and Her Daughter*) and David (in *The Love Child*) as emotionally and materially impotent. They are not agents of tyranny, but symbols of collapse—men rendered irrelevant by migration, cultural dissonance, and economic hardship. Their failure destabilizes the family from within and deepens the psychological burden borne by their daughters.

Elias's refusal to work on the Sabbath, even under conditions of severe economic hardship, becomes in Moore's narrative a source of tension between religious fidelity and material survival (Moore, *Sarah* 11). His observance should not in itself be understood as irresponsibility; rather, Moore uses the conflict to dramatize the pressures placed on traditional Jewish practice within the immigrant economy. For Elias, adherence to religious law preserves continuity with the world he has lost, even as it intensifies the family's material vulnerability. The resulting tension contributes to Moore's representation of paternal disempowerment, while avoiding any simple equation between religious observance and paternal failure.

Moore further develops the motif of paternal breakdown through the character of David Cohen, whose failures are even more pronounced and tragic than those of Elias. Unlike Elias, whose religious overzealousness serves as a shield against confronting material insecurity, David is marked by a different kind of impotence—emotional vacancy coupled with professional uselessness. He is introduced as "a man with soft hands and no trade" (Moore, *Love* 28), a succinct but damning description that highlights his detachment from both the labor economy and the affective economy of the immigrant family. His soft hands, uncalloused by either work or intimacy, suggest not merely a failure to provide but a failure to connect, nurture, and belong.

David's retreat into nostalgic memories of Regina, a gentile woman he idealized during his youth in Russia, serves as more than a personal coping mechanism; it becomes a profound act of psychic withdrawal. Rather than grappling with the humiliations and economic emasculation he experiences in America, David flees into an imaginary past, constructing Regina as a lost ideal of love, beauty, and social elevation. Emotionally unavailable and chronically rejecting of his wife, Mira, David leaves their daughter Annie suspended in a psychological no-man's-land—caught between a mother too worn down by survival to offer consistent care and a father who refuses the emotional labor of fatherhood altogether. Annie, trapped within this void of unmet needs, becomes what Abraham (1994) would define as a bearer of the "phantom"—a living vessel for the secret traumas and unspoken losses of her parents, which continue to act upon her unconscious mind. Importantly, David's idealization of Regina is not merely personal but culturally symptomatic. Regina, as a gentile figure, embodies a fantasy of belonging to a world of privilege—qualities David, as a poor Jewish immigrant, has been systematically denied. His rejection of Mira is not rooted solely in marital dissatisfaction but can be read as emerging from a deeper, more corrosive form of internalized stigma. Mira, with her visible markers of Jewishness and her association with material struggle, comes to embody everything David both despises and fears in himself: cultural marginality, economic helplessness, and emotional excess. Sander Gilman argues in *Jewish Self-Hatred* that "the gentile woman is desired not for who she is but for what she represents—the fantasy of integration into a social order that has rejected the Jew" (1986, 52). Regina, then, is less a remembered beloved than a symbolic talisman of lost possibilities, unattainable and ultimately hollow.

Moore does not present America as the sole origin of familial trauma. Her immigrant characters arrive carrying memories, losses, and unresolved attachments whose meanings are subsequently reshaped by migration. David's idealized recollection of Regina is particularly revealing: the Old World survives in his memory less as lived reality than as a retrospective psychic construction through which present disappointment is negotiated. Immigration thus intensifies and reorganizes earlier wounds rather than simply producing them.

This retrospective reconstruction can be read, in Freudian terms, as a kind of "screen memory"—an idealized and selectively edited recollection that displaces more painful and unresolved psychic conflicts. In constructing this fantasy, David avoids confronting the realities of his failure, not only as a provider but as a husband and father. As Freud notes, "the mirror image of the present is seen in a fantasied past, which then prophetically becomes the present" (1985, 320). David's retreat into a mythologized past thus helps ensure the continuation of emotional abandonment and familial disintegration in the present. In seeking to escape the burdens of Jewish immigrant life, he replicates its most painful conditions—alienation, silence, and loss—transmitting them, unspoken but powerfully felt, to the next generation.

This psychological displacement has distressing consequences for Annie, David's daughter. David's emotional withdrawal and his idealization of another woman create an absence that is both literal and symbolic. He cannot provide financial support, nor can he offer affection, guidance, or protection. His disengagement leaves Annie with a psychic void—what Moore describes as "the habit of long years of silence…he had the appearance of a troubled, dumb animal" (Moore, *Love* 17). Chodorow emphasizes the continued importance of "the girl's external and internal relation to her mother, and the way her relation to her father is added to this," a process that "entails a relational complexity in feminine self-definition and personality which is not characteristic of masculine self-definition or personality" (92–93). **In Annie's case, the father's emotional absence distorts rather than enriches this relational structure,** leaving her without the stabilizing paternal presence that Chodorow identifies as formative. Moore's depiction of David thus exemplifies a shift in literary representations of immigrant fathers: from authoritarian figures to broken men, overwhelmed by dislocation and emasculated by socioeconomic failure. David's failure, then, is not simply a personal shortcoming but a structural condition of immigrant masculinity. He is displaced not only from the homeland but from a role in the family that once conferred identity, purpose, and dignity. He becomes a ghost in his own home—present but ineffectual, remembered more for what he failed to do than for who he was. This absence shapes Annie's sense of self and her view of the world. She is unable to make sense of her father's absence, unable to narrate her own experience, and therefore unable to process or heal from it. When the father fails to arrive to Annie's elder sister's wedding as he gets drunk, Moore contends that "Sensations possessed her [Annie], contradictory sensations each keenly felt. She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry. She wanted to fly through

the air, she wanted to sink through the floor, she wanted to be silent, she wanted to shout" (Moore, *Love* 238). This disorienting surge of feelings, evoked in rapid succession, embodies the emotional disarray that characterizes Annie's childhood and underscores the unpredictable emotional terrain left in the wake of paternal abdication.

Moore's portrayal of immigrant fatherhood complicates the narrative of patriarchal dominance common in immigrant literature. Her men are not tyrants, but casualties. Their failures create a vacuum that mothers and daughters must navigate with little guidance and less hope. The fathers' disempowerment is not confined to the fathers themselves. It reshapes the emotional ecosystem of the family. The result is a family system defined not by structure but by disintegration. And it is in this disintegration that Moore locates her most powerful insights—about gender, trauma, and the quiet devastations of immigrant life. In this way, Moore's failed fathers not only destabilize the family but also become crucial agents in the intergenerational transmission of trauma, shaping the psychic landscapes her daughters inherit.

Psychoanalytic Resonances: The Crypt, Fractured Self and Postmemory

Bertha Pearl Moore's narratives are deeply suffused with psychoanalytic resonances, particularly in their portrayal of trauma that resists articulation yet imprints itself indelibly upon future generations. Her depiction of immigrant families—fractured by grief, muted by silence, and marred by emotional estrangement—aligns meaningfully with the psychoanalytic paradigms developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Marianne Hirsch, Julia Kristeva, Cathy Caruth, and Dori Laub. In Moore's fictional worlds, trauma is not merely represented; it is inscribed into the very grammar of narrative, emerging through fractured bodies, halted speech, and atmospheres of emotional disorientation. Moore's fiction theorizes trauma not as a past event but as a present and often hereditary condition, one that haunts familial structures and particularly distorts the mother-daughter bond. Her work, therefore, does not merely borrow psychoanalytic theory but enacts it, embedding abstract concepts within the lifeworld of her immigrant characters and their intergenerational entanglements.

Central to this theoretical web is Abraham and Torok's notion of the psychic "crypt," a metaphorical tomb constructed within the ego to house unassimilated trauma. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, Abraham argues that "a trauma suffered in silence can lodge in the crypt of the ego and be passed on like a secret, a phantom, to descendants" (1994, 171). This theory finds compelling literary embodiment in the character of Sarah. Sarah, a figure shaped by coerced marriage, intellectual repression, and cultural alienation, never verbalizes her suffering; instead, her body and affect testify to the unacknowledged pain she harbors. Her gestures— "quivering lips," "mechanical movements," and a distant

gaze fixed on "a blank wall" (Moore, *Sarah* 156)—evoke a woman whose interior world has been sealed off, whose grief has been entombed rather than narrated. The silence surrounding her trauma becomes its most eloquent expression, transforming her body into the site of an unresolved history. She becomes, in effect, the living archive of what cannot be spoken, a haunted subject transmitting trauma in spectral form.

This legacy is inherited by Minnie, who becomes the corporeal register of Sarah's psychic disintegration. Minnie's physical symptoms—palpitations, breathlessness, and episodes of emotional regression—lack any medically identifiable cause. Instead, they are the bodily manifestations of an inherited trauma, symptoms of a wound that was never hers to receive but which she nevertheless embodies. Minnie's afflictions do not emerge from discrete personal experience but from the affective residue of her mother's suffering. Her body betrays Sarah's pain in a register beyond language, making Minnie the inheritor and interpreter of a grief that was never shared, only transmitted through silences and affective dissonances. This dynamic also resonates with Winnicott's notion of the "holding environment," which he describes as the early maternal matrix that allows the infant to develop a cohesive sense of self through affective attunement and reliable emotional containment (44). In Moore's narrative, Sarah fails to provide such an environment—not through neglect or malice, but through her own emotional incapacitation. Where Winnicott imagines maternal care as a kind of psychic envelope, Sarah's silence creates a void. Unlike Winnicott's "good enough mother," who absorbs and metabolizes the infant's distress, Sarah's psychic crypt seals her off, making Minnie's body the only available site for metabolizing unprocessed maternal grief. Thus, while Abraham and Torok emphasize the intergenerational haunting of the "phantom" (Abraham and Torok 1986), Winnicott helps frame the structural failure of maternal care that allows that phantom to take root.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" offers a valuable feminist lens through which to further understand this dynamic. Defined as the relationship of the second generation to the trauma of the first, it captures the sense in which descendants come to inhabit histories they have not lived but which saturate their psychic and emotional landscapes. Hirsch writes that "postmemory is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation … experienced by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (1997, 106). Minnie does not remember her mother's suffering, yet she lives its aftereffects. Her symptoms, both bodily and emotional, function as forms of postmemorial embodiment: echoes of trauma without origin, grief without a narrative. The absence of a coherent maternal narrative renders Minnie emotionally adrift, unable to make sense of her own experience. She becomes, to borrow Hirsch's terms, a vessel through which the unspeakable pain of the first generation is reanimated—not as recollection but as reenactment.

In *Sarah and Her Daughter*, Sarah's failure to articulate her trauma renders Minnie's emotional world illegible. One of the most poignant scenes in

the novel occurs when a charity official suggests that Sarah relinquish two of her younger children to an orphanage. Rather than responding verbally, Sarah's body breaks down: "Her fingers trembled … she shivered convulsively…her mind a dizzy jumble of disconnected thoughts" (Moore, *Sarah* 153, 156). This collapse exemplifies Cathy Caruth's claim that trauma entails "the overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996, 11). Sarah does not narrate her trauma; she enacts it, again and again, through bodily and cognitive disintegration. This repetition without representation becomes the haunting core of her maternal identity and leaves Minnie with no framework through which to understand her own disquiet. Minnie, in turn, experiences a form of what Dori Laub (1995) terms "the collapse of witnessing," in which the survivor of trauma, lacking an empathetic or dialogic space to process events, remains suspended in a state of psychic inarticulacy. "Without an empathic listener," Laub asserts, "the event cannot be fully known, and the trauma remains unclaimed" (65). For Minnie, Sarah's silence constitutes not only a personal void but an epistemological rupture. Her own emotions—sadness, confusion, yearning—are unmoored from context, becoming symptoms of an ungrieved legacy rather than responses to lived experience.

Sarah's disintegration is thus not simply an individual tragedy but a structural condition shaping the contours of Minnie's life. The silence that surrounds Sarah's suffering becomes an atmosphere, a psychic weather system that Minnie inhales. Yet Minnie's inheritance is not passive; it is constitutive. Her identity is formed in the absence of narrative, in the space where her mother's voice should have been. She does not merely receive trauma—she is the manifestation of its effects. The intergenerational transmission of trauma in Moore's work is therefore not a matter of content but of form, not a shared story but a shared silence. Minnie becomes a living symptom of Sarah's ungrieved grief, an echo of a pain that was never spoken aloud.

In *The Love Child*, Moore reimagines and deepens the motifs of maternal loss and exhaustion through the figure of Mira Cohen, whose experience of motherhood is shaped by relentless grief, poverty, and emotional depletion. Like Sarah in *Sarah and Her Daughter*, Mira begins with maternal hopes: dreams of Annie attaining a high level of education and upward mobility. Yet these aspirations are soon crushed by the harsh realities of immigrant life. Upon the family's arrival in America, Mira's surviving children were Gussie (twelve), Benjamin (eleven), Annie (four), and Libbie (one); as Moore tersely notes, "The five children who bridged the gap... had all died" (Moore, *Love* 24). The starkness of this enumeration signals the scale of Mira's ordeal—a grief so overwhelming that it resists full acknowledgment or mourning. Mira's love for Annie persists but is marked by deep internal contradictions. It is real but fractured, filtered through the exigencies of economic survival and the psychic wounds of repeated loss. Nancy Chodorow's concept of the "fractured maternal self" illuminates

Mira's predicament. As Chodorow argues, modern motherhood is structured by "incompatible needs for women as child-rearers and workers in the labor force" (22). Under conditions of economic hardship, this structural contradiction places mothers in a persistent bind between emotional availability and material provision. Mira becomes an embodiment of this tension: emotionally present in fleeting moments, yet chronically pulled away by necessity.

From a Winnicottian perspective, this chronic deferral destabilizes what Donald Winnicott terms the "facilitating environment"—the maternal surround that provides the child with the emotional containment necessary for early psychic integration (39). Mira's absences, though unintentional, gradually erode this environment, resulting not in a portrait of maternal neglect but in one of tragic insufficiency: a mother whose love, though sincere, cannot create the consistent emotional holding Annie needs. As with Minnie in *Sarah and Her Daughter*, Annie's emotional development unfolds in a household not marked by cruelty but by a painful instability—a home where love is ever-present but never sufficient to heal or contain.

Unlike Minnie, however, Annie exhibits a heightened verbal consciousness of her emotional predicament. Her articulation of despair does not relieve her suffering but rather intensifies it, highlighting her entrapment within a matrix of familial and social failure. Her father's powerlessness becomes emblematic of a broken social contract; her mother's silence forms the architecture of her own psychic instability. Annie's emotional register, like Minnie's, is saturated with anxiety, but hers is more sharply tinged with ambivalence and rage. While Minnie somatizes the trauma of silence, Annie intermittently verbalizes it, though without achieving resolution. Her expressions of anger and yearning do not lead to transformation but rather affirm her entrapment within a domestic and cultural system incapable of accommodating her emotional complexity. In the novel's closing pages, Moore writes: "She remained adrift, uncertain, filled with a sadness she couldn't explain" (Moore, Love 142). This refusal of narrative closure—of psychic resolution or maternal reconciliation—marks Moore's fiction as modern: it insists that trauma, particularly maternal trauma, cannot always be redeemed or resolved. Sometimes it can only be endured, transmitted, and—if not spoken—lived.

Conclusion: Reassessing Bertha Pearl Moore's Contribution to Jewish American Literature

Bertha Pearl Moore's fiction offers a vital, yet overlooked, contribution to the canon of Jewish American literature, reimagining the immigrant experience through the lens of emotional trauma, maternal silence, and the haunting presence of intergenerational loss. Her portrayals of mothers and daughters—characters who neither escape nor assimilate, but absorb and falter under the

weight of inherited trauma—force us to confront the complexities of immigrant life that often go unexamined in mainstream literary depictions.

Drawing on psychoanalytic, feminist, and trauma theory, this paper has positioned Moore's works within the broader context of Jewish American fiction, alongside contemporaries like Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska. Yet, where these writers often look toward assimilation, rebellion, or self-empowerment, Moore's work remains deeply rooted in the aftermath of survival, chronicling the emotional fractures and silences that remain long after the immigrant's story seems to have been told. In this way, Moore's characters become poignant representations of the trauma that persists beneath the surface of seemingly straightforward immigrant narratives. The daughters—Minnie and Annie—do not overcome their pasts; rather, they inherit them, absorbing their mothers' unresolved grief and living with the psychological scars that cannot be healed or spoken.

Furthermore, Moore's work challenges the idea of assimilation as a redemptive progression. As bell hooks pointed out, marginality can be a site of radical possibility, and Moore's position on the periphery of the Jewish American literary canon provides the opportunity to rethink what constitutes literary greatness (1990, 153). While writers like Antin were celebrated for their narratives of self-making, Moore's absence from the literary mainstream speaks to the ways in which class, gender, and aesthetics shape literary recognition. Moore's stories do not follow the neat arcs of progress and assimilation; instead, they insist on the persistence of emotional inheritance and the complexity of survival.

By recovering Moore's voice, we do more than restore an overlooked writer to the archive—we expand the conceptual boundaries of Jewish American literature itself. Her fiction offers an intimate, psychologically acute account of immigrant life shaped not by triumphant assimilation but by emotional inheritance, silence, and fracture. Moore insists that the costs of survival do not disappear with the first generation; they are carried forward, often wordlessly, into the bodies and psyches of their daughters. Her marginality, as bell hooks reminds us, becomes a site of radical possibility—a vantage point from which to interrogate which narratives the canon has privileged and which forms of suffering it has rendered illegible. Attending to Moore's work affirms the critical value of stories that resist closure and unsettle the celebratory myths of Americanization. Her fiction compels us to reconceive the immigrant novel not as a narrative of cultural ascent but as a form structured by maternal silence, somatic inheritance, and emotional nonsurvival, revealing that the costs of Americanization are not merely social or economic but psychically catastrophic.

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