

NAVIGATING ‘CARE’ AND ‘SEPARATION’ IN KRISTEVA’S *HERETHICS*: A STUDY ON MATERNAL LOVE AS ETHICAL PRACTICE

HIRUMONI KALITA¹, §

Abstract. Kristeva’s concept of *herethics* offers a rethinking of ethical practice by centering the maternal experience, particularly through the intricate dynamics of ‘maternal love’, ‘care’, and ‘separation’. This paper delves into how Kristeva’s *herethics* redefines ethical relationships by incorporating the semiotic dimensions of maternal experience, which emphasize the profound emotional and bodily connections integral to maternal care. By challenging the conventional Western ethical framework that often views individuals as isolated agents, Kristeva introduces an ethic of interdependence. *Herethics* highlights the maternal relationship as a model of ethical practice, where the mother’s love for the child, a being who is both an extension of and distinct from herself, replaces traditional binary oppositions such as self/other, nature/culture, and mind/body.

Keywords: Kristeva, Care, Separation, Maternal Love, Reliance, Ethics.

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam - 781014, India. e-mail: hironikalita0@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

“Julia Kristeva [is] one of the most brilliant feminist voices speaking today” (Zerilli, 1992, p. 111). Often grouped with Cixous and Irigaray as one of the three leading figures of ‘French feminism’¹, Kristeva’s relationship with feminism is nuanced and complex. Her ambivalent relationship with feminism stems from her critique of its totalizing tendencies, yet she values it as a framework for exploring issues like embodiment, motherhood, and social transformation. Kristeva proposes a ‘third way’ for feminist thought, one that values women’s embodied experiences — creativity, maternity, and caregiving without reducing these to fixed roles or identities. Oliver notes, “In spite of her dismissal of feminism, Kristeva’s analysis of the maternal function and women’s oppression is thought provoking” (Oliver, 1993b). As a prominent figure in French feminism, Kristeva argues that feminism should be distinguished from religious and political forms. She envisions a feminism that moves beyond prescriptive doctrines, focusing instead on personal and relational experiences without being bound by rigid ideologies. Kristeva notes, *I was very interested in the basic questions they were asking: the specificity of the feminine, the mother’s influence on her child’s development into an independent being, language acquisition, the child’s dependency on the mother, the mother’s role in language and symbolic processing, the nature of women’s writing and women’s art, and so forth.* (Guberman, 1996, p. 7)

From the beginning of her career, Kristeva has reintroduced the body into linguistics and philosophy. More specifically, she challenges the idea of the mother’s body as merely a reproductive organ, highlighting its deeper significance. Kristeva critically examines maternity within Christian and feminist frameworks, challenging certain feminist perspectives on motherhood. In a 1977 interview, she expressed that an intellectual woman might struggle to accept feminism unconditionally, as existential feminism often made women feel guilty for desiring motherhood (Kristeva, 1977, p. 106). She argues that one reason feminist movements fall short is their neglect of the question of motherhood and its effects on women (Kristeva, 1984, p. 23). She posits that “real female innovation (in whatever field) will only come about when maternity, female creation and the link between them are better understood” (Kristeva, 1985, p. 152).

¹The term ‘French feminism’ refers to a group of authors based in France who are broadly connected to psychoanalytic theory, particularly in its Lacanian form, and Derridean deconstruction. However, this label is highly contested, partly because the three thinkers most commonly linked to it, Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous were not born in France. Nevertheless, the debate surrounding ‘French feminism’ is less about national identity and more about the concept of feminism itself. It revolves around differing views on feminist politics, the interpretation of the feminine, and its relationship to the category of women.

For Kristeva, maternity is crucial because it challenges the Western tendency to equate motherhood with femininity. She emphasizes that not all women are mothers and that motherhood should not define womanhood. By separating the maternal role from femininity, she highlights the unique identities of mothers and fosters space for meaningful feminist progress. Moreover, Kristeva asserts that social problems are deeply rooted in representations, particularly those surrounding maternity. In Western culture, motherhood is often idealized and conflated with femininity, leading to the belief that a woman's identity is primarily defined by her ability to bear children. This view marginalizes the experiences of women who cannot or choose not to have children and fails to recognize that mothers are individuals with identities beyond their maternal roles. Kristeva argues that these prevailing representations not only harm women but also negatively impact all human relationships, as the mother-child bond is foundational to human interaction. To address these issues, she advocates for a reconceptualization of this relationship, emphasizing the need for ethics to incorporate mothers' experiences.

In this context, Kristeva introduces the idea of *herethics*, which is grounded in a revised understanding of the maternal bond. The paper examines Kristeva's perspective on the maternal concerning ethics. *Herethics* emerges from a new discourse on maternity, one that neither reduces *it to biology (science)* nor elevates *it to the sacred (religion)*, but rather combines a *phenomenology of maternity with the structure of maternity* that both logically and chronologically precedes and supports the child. Kristeva's *herethics* reimagines ethics through the lens of maternal love, asserting that ethical practice is inherently relational and dynamic. The maternal bond, characterized by both deep attachment and the necessary act of separation, provides an alternative to normative ethical frameworks that prioritize duty or law over love. This paper argues that Kristeva's approach advocates for a societal transformation that values care giving and relational bonds, suggesting that ethical renewal is rooted in the maternal experience. By navigating the complexities of maternal love and the act of letting go, *herethics* proposes a nuanced and inclusive model for ethical practice, opening new pathways for feminist thought and challenging the conventional dualisms of individualism and ethics. Ultimately, this exploration underscores how the maternal bond offers a transformative framework for understanding and practicing ethics in a more interconnected and relational manner.

The paper is structured into four sections: an introduction, a discussion on Kristeva's views on maternal love, an exploration of how her concept of *herethics* evolves from maternal love, and a conclusion. The introduction provides the context, while the second section explores Kristeva's reimagining of maternal love. The third section examines how

herethics, rooted in maternal love, challenges traditional ethical frameworks. The conclusion summarizes how Kristeva's ideas offer a new perspective on maternal love and its transformative potential in ethics.

2. Reimagining Motherhood: Rethinking Maternal Subjectivity

Kristeva's views on motherhood and maternity are central to her broader philosophical and psychoanalytic work, particularly her exploration of subjectivity, language, and the symbolic order. Motherhood, according to Kristeva, is a complicated, ambivalent experience that alters the mother's identity and challenges traditional understandings of autonomy, embodiment, and the maternal-feminine. Oliver notes, "For her, maternity is not merely a biological fact and women are not defined in terms of reproduction" (Oliver, 1993b, p. 103). Her discussion of the maternal is deeply embedded in her critique of how motherhood has been represented across various discourses. She is particularly concerned with how these dominant narratives have shaped societal conceptions of maternity in ways that limit and harm women. For Kristeva, maternity is not just a biological reality but a cultural and symbolic construct, defined and constrained by the discourses that surround it. These narratives often idealize motherhood as either sacred or sacrificial, reducing it to rigid roles that deny the complexity and ambivalence of maternal experience. Oliver notes, *Everyone has a mother-dead or alive, unknown or known-to reckon with qua mother. For Kristeva, the mother is not a woman. She says that the mother is "alone of her sex." Mothers are women apart from being mothers and not all women are mothers. Therefore, mothers and women are not identical. Kristeva suggests, however, that within Western culture, discourses on maternity do not separate the maternal function from women.* (Oliver, 1993b, p. 105)

Kristeva's insights into motherhood challenge the traditional conflation of women and femininity with maternal identity. She emphasizes that this association is reductive, ignoring the realities that many women spend much of their lives outside of motherhood, some cannot or choose not to bear children, and that mothers are complex individuals beyond their maternal roles. Kristeva argues that such a narrow understanding contributes to women's oppression, as it imposes restrictive roles and denies their full subjectivity.

Kristeva develops an alternative discourse of maternity in her essay *Stabat Mater*² (1985). Kristeva's argument diverges from other feminist positions that link women's oppression

²Stabat Mater was first published in the French intellectual journal *Tel Quel* under the title 'Herethique de l'amour' or 'Herethics of Love', in 1977, reprinted as 'Stabat Mater' in *Histoires d'Amour* in 1983 and then published in translation in *Poetics Today* in 1985. The title of the essay as we know it is taken from Jacopone da Todi's medieval Latin poem, which has been set to music by Pergolesi, Haydn, and Rossini.

to childbirth or compulsory maternity. In her more recent work, she emphasizes the need to distinguish between the feminine³, woman⁴, and maternity⁵. Her theory posits that the maternal function can be performed by both men and women, highlighting that neither womanhood nor femininity should be defined solely by maternity. Kristeva contends that women's oppression is partly a consequence of Western culture's tendency to reduce women to their reproductive roles, thereby limiting their identities and contributions beyond motherhood. Kristeva notes, "we live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity" (Kristeva, 1985, p. 133).

In *Stabat Mater*, Kristeva explores the complex role of maternity within cultural and feminist frameworks, revealing how traditional understandings of femininity are challenged by societal ideals. She highlights a paradox: *If, in speaking of a woman, it is impossible to say what she is - for to do so would risk abolishing her difference - might matters not stand differently with respect to the mother; motherhood being the sole function of the "other sex" to which we may confidently attribute existence? Yet here, too, we are caught in a paradox. To begin with, we live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity. Under close examination, however, this maternity turns out to be an adult (male and female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealized primitive mother as an idealization of the unlocalizable relationship between her and us, an idealization of primary narcissism.* (Kristeva, 1985, p. 133)

For Kristeva, this idealization poses challenges for feminist thought. When feminists reject this constructed image of maternity due to its symbolic constraints, they risk overlooking the real, diverse experiences of mothers and the potential liberatory aspects of motherhood. This creates a dichotomy: traditional representations of motherhood remain largely unchallenged, resonating with many individuals who unconsciously accept them, while some feminist thinkers advocate for distancing themselves from motherhood, associating it with a patriarchal ideal they wish to reject. Kristeva notes, *When feminists call*

³a set of traits, behaviours, and roles traditionally associated with women, often shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts.

⁴A female human being who participates in the complex and often precarious reality known as femininity.

⁵Maternity refers to the state of being a mother or the qualities and experiences associated with motherhood. It encompasses not only the biological process of bearing and nurturing children but also the social, emotional and psychological aspects of mothering. Maternity often involves roles, responsibilities and the bonds formed between a mother and her child, as well as the broader cultural and societal expectations placed on women in their maternal roles. In philosophical and feminist contexts, maternity can be examined as a dynamic experience that shapes identity, subjectivity and relationships.

for a new representation of femininity, they seem to identify maternity with this idealized misapprehension; and feminism, because it rejects this image and its abuses, sidesteps the real experience that this fantasy obscures. As a result, maternity is repudiated or denied by some avant-garde feminists, while its traditional representations are wittingly or unwittingly accepted by the “broad mass” of women and men. (Kristeva, 1985, p. 133)

When feminists reject this traditional idea of motherhood because of its limiting expectations, they might overlook the real and varied experience of motherhood. By maternal, Kristeva means *the ambivalent principle that derives on the one hand from the species and on the other hand from a catastrophe of identity which plunges the proper Name into that “unnameable” that somehow involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language, or the body. (Kristeva, 1985, p. 134)*

Kristeva’s theory carefully differentiates between the concepts of the feminine, woman, and maternity, emphasizing that none of these should be conflated or reduced to the others. She challenges the traditional Western cultural association of women solely with reproduction, arguing that this reduction has contributed to women’s oppression. For Kristeva, the issue lies not in maternity or reproduction themselves but in the representations of these phenomena. She advocates for a reconceptualization of the maternal function, one that separates it from individual mothers and women as a group. By working through the abjection⁶ of the maternal function, acknowledging and integrating its complex symbolic and social dimensions without stigmatizing women, Kristeva believes it is possible to transform how both women and motherhood are represented. While she does not call for the disassociation of women from reproduction, for her, “reproduction is not only an important

⁶Abjection refers to anything that blurs the boundary between self and other and disturbs our sense of identity and order. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva describes how a child’s rejection of something as simple as milk offered by a parent is more than just dislike, it marks the beginning of separating *from the parents’ desires and forming an independent identity*. This rejection of the maternal closeness is necessary for becoming a distinct subject. Kristeva writes, “I give birth to the other that was once myself” (1982, p. 11), showing that the subject is formed through the abjection of the maternal body, not because it is bad, but because it threatens the fragile boundary of the self. To enter the symbolic world associated with the father, the child must break from the mother’s nurturing, drive-based bond. However, Kristeva’s aim is not to devalue the maternal or uphold a male-dominated symbolic order. Rather, she wants to expose the instability of that order by showing how it depends on repressing the maternal and the semiotic. The semiotic chora, linked with the maternal body, is not biologically female or gendered; it is a universal, pre-verbal space that shapes subjectivity. By showing how subjectivity is built through the exclusion of the maternal, Kristeva’s theory helps us understand how social hierarchies are formed in the psyche, not just by external rules. While there is a risk that abjection could seem to marginalize the maternal, Kristeva seeks to *revalue the maternal as a site of creativity and ethical potential*, not to confine women to passive roles. Ultimately, the concept of abjection is critical, not exclusionary, it uncovers how dominant systems sustain power by casting certain identities and bodies, especially maternal and feminine ones, as *other*. [Kristeva, J. (1982): *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Translated by Leon S. Roudiez (12), New York: Columbia University Press.]

aspect of human survival but also a unique experience that women can enjoy. She suggests that we need to reconceptualize and rearticulate the relationship between women and reproduction" (Oliver, 1993b, p. 106). Kristeva's idea of the 'maternal' touches on subtle aspects of language, identity, and symbolic order that transcend conventional biological or social definitions. A representation of maternity, according to Kristeva, uniquely demonstrates "a model of alterity within identity" (Oliver, 1993b, p. 106). This highlights how maternity embodies the coexistence of self and other within a singular subject. Unlike representations of women, which often position femininity as an external or oppositional category to masculinity, maternity offers a dynamic interplay of identity and difference. The maternal experience, particularly during pregnancy, exemplifies this: the mother is simultaneously herself and host to an other (the child). Kristeva argues, "My body is no longer mine, it writhes, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, bites, slavers, coughs, breaks out in a rash, and laughs" (Kristeva, 1985, p. 138). Thus, during pregnancy, identity and difference mingle as the subject and object remain undifferentiated within the maternal body⁷. This condition, she contends, destabilizes fixed identities, presenting the pregnant body as a site of radical alterity within identity. Unlike other forms of alterity, pregnancy is not condemned by culture; instead, it is regulated and tamed. However, it resists complete subsumption by any philosophical system, moral code, or symbolic law. Kristeva posits that "the child must separate from the mother, but the mother proves that the other is within" (Oliver, 1993b, p. 106), thus making maternity a representation of alterity within identity. This relational dynamic, she argues, lays the foundation for ethics as an open system, where the recognition of internal otherness inspires respect and love for the external other. Kristeva proposes the maternal as a prototype for human relationships. According to Kristeva, the ideal human relationship consists of a strong emotional bond and respect for each person's individuality or singularity. According to this perspective, genuine ethical relationships need to be based on a deep connection that respects each person as unique, valuable, and irreplaceable. Instead of imposing expectations or assimilating them into one's own identity. Kristeva offers a model for relationships where individuals are profoundly connected while simultaneously embracing the other's uniqueness. Oliver notes, *The mother attends to her child's responses, especially encouraging its baby talk, which she enjoys. This joy in the very being of the other, is the basis for*

⁷Kristeva's concept of the maternal body refers not to a biological body but to the semiotic body, which she terms the *semiotic chora*. The chora is a pre-verbal, pre-symbolic space characterized by primary processes and drives, where the subject is still intertwined with the mother not yet differentiate from her. For Kristeva, the maternal body is "the ordering principle of the semiotic chora" (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, 27). She does not assign gender to the chora; rather, she uses the maternal metaphorically to describe a psychic space where form and meaning are not yet fixed (Söderbäck, 2011).

an other-directed ethics. The ideal mother's radical acceptance of the other becomes the model for all ethical relations. (Oliver, 2024, p. 78)

Kristeva's view of the mother-child relationship as "the beginning of this otherness" (Kristeva, 2010, p. 55) reflects her idea that maternal love introduces the first experience of loving someone as genuinely distinct from oneself. This 'enigmatic love of difference' points to a type of passion that embraces the child's individuality, seeing them as an other with their own unique identity and potential. She proposes an ethics rooted in the maternal experience, particularly the mother-child relationship, as a model for ethical practice. This maternal ethics, derived from her psychoanalytic framework, emphasizes care, vulnerability, and the navigation of separation⁸ and connection. For Kristeva, the relationship between mother and child exemplifies a dynamic of alterity within intimacy, where the other is simultaneously a part of oneself and a distinct, separate being. This ethical framework transcends traditional moral codes by foregrounding relationality, respect for difference, and the acknowledgment of the other within the self.

The next section of this paper will delve into Kristeva's broader ethical vision, examining her engagement with these pressing issues and their implications for feminist ethics and beyond.

3. Kristeva's Ethics on Maternal Love

In Kristeva's thought, maternal love emerges as a profound ethical model that transcends conventional boundaries of morality and law. Her ethics is deeply rooted in the dual metaphors of maternity and psychoanalysis, each offering a framework for engaging with otherness. The maternal metaphor, as Oliver notes, provides a model of love that embraces the other as part of oneself, embodying an ethics of care, attachment, and singular recognition. In contrast, the psychoanalytic metaphor emphasizes the acceptance of the stranger

⁸Kristeva's concept of 'separation' highlights the complex and emotionally charged process by which the infant detaches from the mother to become an autonomous subject. In the early stages of life, the child is in a pre-verbal, symbiotic union with the mother, a state Kristeva associates with the *semiotic chora*. Separation from this maternal space is necessary for the child to enter the symbolic order to become a speaking subject. The emotional cost of this separation can be significant. To achieve individuality, the child must abject the maternal body. This process of abjection, as Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror*, is painful and disruptive. The maternal function involves a delicate balance between attachment and separation, where the mother supports the infant while gradually allowing its independence through weaning. This equilibrium, ideally avoiding overprotection or neglect, requires providing just enough support, reassuring yet not suffocating, light yet not lax to ensure the well-being of both mother and child. For the mother, the act of letting go can provoke feelings of grief, emptiness, or ambivalence. Thus, 'separation' is not simply a developmental necessity, but also a site of potential emotional discord, where love and loss, connection and detachment coexist. In this way, Kristeva offers a profound insight into the maternal role not as static or naturalized, but as a dynamic and ethically charged process of care, sacrifice, and transformation (Olive, 2024).

within oneself, enabling an openness to the unfamiliar and the uncanny in both self and other. These dual metaphors converge in Kristeva's concept of *herethics*—an ethics that is neither dictated by external paternal authority nor reliant on rigid universal principles, but one that emerges from relational dynamics and affective connections (Jardine, 2020, p. 204).

Building on the dynamic interplay of the mother-child relationship, Kristeva envisions this bond as a prototype for rethinking difference and alterity within human relationships. Central to her notion of *herethics* is an ethics grounded in the fluidity of identity, rejecting static or fixed notions of selfhood. Kristeva's ethical philosophy is deeply rooted in the idea that human beings are not fixed, static entities, but rather, are always in a state of becoming. She challenges traditional ideas of morality that impose rigid rules about what is right and wrong, and instead proposes an ethics based on fluidity and complexity. For Kristeva, the human subject is heterogeneous, made up of various aspects such as thoughts, feelings, unconscious drives, and societal influences, which are constantly interacting and evolving. This fluid view of the self means that ethics must also be flexible and adaptable to the ever-changing nature of human experience. At the heart of Kristeva's ethical framework is the relationship with the other, those who are different from us. Ethical action, for Kristeva, is about how we engage with and respond to the other. Oliver notes, "herethics is not based on laws or principles, but rather on love and acceptance that found an ethics of response to the otherness of the other. This is an ethics of difference based on an asymmetrical responsibility to the response of the other". (Oliver, 2024, p. 78)

In this view, the ethical person is always evolving, constantly encountering differences, both in themselves and in others. This openness to the unknown, including aspects of themselves they don't fully understand, makes them more accepting of others. *Herethics* is about embracing complexity and diversity, creating a compassionate, inclusive way of relating to others. Kristeva portrays maternal progression as a transformative journey that she describes as the *miracle of love*. This process begins with the pregnant woman experiencing a destabilization of her sense of self, as she carries the literal *other* within her. This stage marks a profound inward turn, where passion is directed toward her own body as the site of instability and change. When the child is born, this inward-focused passion must shift outward. The mother redirects her passion onto the child, who, crucially, must be recognized as separate from herself. This detachment is essential for the child's autonomy and the mother's emotional evolution. Kristeva emphasizes that the process of

expulsion and detachment allows *maternal passion*⁹ to transform into tenderness, care, and benevolence. This shift, from self-absorption to the love of the child, and finally to the release or weaning of the child, is what Kristeva sees as the miraculous transformation of maternal passion into tenderness. The mother embodies both the intensity of passion and the working through of that passion, a dynamic Kristeva refers to as “passion and de-passion” (Oliver, 2024). Through this process, the eroticism inherent in the maternal bond gives way to a tender, ethical relation that respects the child’s individuality and autonomy (Oliver, 2024, p. 80).

At the end of *Stabat Mater*, Kristeva connects *herethics*, her heretical ethics to “flesh, language, jouissance,” and ultimately to objectless love (Kristeva, 1985, p. 151), emphasizing its detachment from traditional morality and law. Central to this ethical framework is her notion of *maternal reliance*, which extends the dynamics of the maternal bond. For Kristeva, *reliance* is central to the concept of motherhood. Kristeva defines *reliance* as an experience that applies to both genders and is not to be confused with mothering. Kristeva notes, *It is at the heart of humanization. It is about becoming conscious of the ambivalence of drives and passions: attachment and aggression, love and hate and to transfer them into a bond, into the possibility of relying, speaking and thinking. Reliance operates against maternal domination, on the contrary, it operates to make separation possible, and the autonomy that makes new encounters possible. (Kristeva, 2016, p. 139)*

Reliance forms a crucial link between maternal practice and her broader ethical vision, offering a framework for understanding human relationships through the maternal model. Defined as the act of linking, gathering, belonging, and trusting, *reliance* mirrors the dynamic of the maternal bond, where the mother balances attachment and separation to nurture her child’s autonomy while maintaining a connection. Drawing on Giovanni Bellini’s art, Kristeva interprets maternal reliance as an interplay of possession and separation, with the mother embodying both passion and de-passion, a process she terms maternal eroticism. This involves the mother holding on to the child while also letting go, ensuring a balance between reassurance and independence. Such maternal practice becomes a prototype for ethical relations, characterized by an affirmation of the singularity of the other and an openness to their difference. By extending this ideal to all human relationships, Kristeva envisions an ethics grounded in joy, care, and the radical acceptance of otherness, rooted

⁹Maternal passion, as described by Kristeva, is a complex and intense emotional experience that combines both affection and aggression toward a child, transforming biological instincts into conscious love. It involves the mother’s struggle with her identity and the challenge of allowing her child to become independent. This passion is marked by a hidden tension between attachment and the desire for autonomy, symbolizing both love and a repressed, darker side.

in the mother's ability to transform passion into tenderness. This maternal structure exemplifies *herethics*, an ethics of responsiveness and transformation that transcends fixed roles, emphasizing flexibility, individuality, and the affirmation of life as an ever-evolving relationship with others.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Kristeva's ethical framework provides a profound rethinking of traditional ethical structures by placing the maternal at the heart of her vision for a more inclusive, fluid, and dynamic ethics. Central to her thought is the idea that the maternal, far from being a limiting or reductive force for women, can instead be a source of liberation and transformation. Her critique of traditional views on motherhood and her call for an ethics that acknowledges both the embodied and emotional dimensions of human life challenge the conventional moral frameworks that often overlook the complexities of women's experiences. Söderbäck argues, *Kristeva by no means reduces woman to the function of motherhood but that, rather, she returns to the maternal body in part to free women from this very reduction. By bringing the mother out of the shadows she provides women with a past (a genealogy of their own, a community of women, a history hitherto repressed) and, simultaneously, with a future (in the sense of liberating them from pre-defined roles and positions – from motherhood as the only form of subjectivity available to them). It is exactly the future that is at stake when Kristeva speaks of the maternal, and more specifically it is the possibility of temporal change that depends on it. The maternal body to which she urges us to return must, as I see it, be understood qua temporalisation: that to which we return is temporal, moving, displacing, renewing. The return is neither nostalgic nor aimed at preserving some essential notion of motherhood; it makes possible new beginnings, allowing for a future pregnant with change and transformation.* (Söderbäck, 2011)

Kristeva's work makes a significant contribution to feminist theory by reconceptualizing the maternal, not as a biologically determined role, but as a fluid, temporal process that influences subjectivity and social interaction in intricate ways. Kristeva asserts, *If it is true that an ethics for the modern age is no longer to be confused with morality, and if confronting the problem of ethics means not avoiding the embarrassing and inevitable issue of the law but instead bringing to the law flesh, language, and jouissance, then the reformulation of the ethical tradition requires the participation of women.* (Kristeva, 1985, p. 15)

The involvement of women is crucial in reshaping ethics because women bring a distinctive understanding of the body, language, and *jouissance*. Their experience, particularly with the maternal, challenges the conventional, often abstract moral frameworks that dominate traditional ethics. By incorporating these elements, a more inclusive and nuanced ethical system can emerge—one that recognizes the embodied, emotional, and complex nature of human life. She advocates for a feminist ethics that goes beyond the simple opposition between patriarchal and matriarchal structures. Kristeva argues, “For the two thousand and five hundred years that ethics has existed, the feminine has been rejected from the sphere of ethics: it is not a *subject*, at most it is an *object* (if that!)”¹⁰. Oliver notes, *To say that the feminine falls outside of ethics is not to say that women are not the subjects of ethics. The feminine is not synonymous with women. And if Kristeva suggests that the feminine falls outside of ethics, she does so in order to bring it back to ethics.* (Oliver, 1993a, p. 186)

However, Kristeva argues that for women to truly be subjects of ethics, we must go beyond feminism. By separating the concept of the feminine from the category of women, Kristeva challenges us to think about the maternal and the feminine as forces that transcend socially constructed categories, instead of being confined to the roles that society imposes on women. This perspective allows for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of feminist ethics, one that is not limited to replacing patriarchy¹¹ with another form of rigid moralism but rather encourages a broader, more fluid conception of subjectivity. Kristeva is interested in creating an ethics that permits everyone to escape total social exclusion

¹⁰Prelude to an Ethics of the Feminine, London, Central Hall Westminster, 24/07/2019.

¹¹Some critics, such as Jones and Butler, misread Kristeva’s work by suggesting that she defines women primarily through biology and places them outside of culture, or the Symbolic order. Jones, for instance, claims that Kristeva links femininity with reproduction and equates the Symbolic with patriarchy. However, this interpretation oversimplifies Kristeva’s position. Kristeva’s notion of the *semiotic* does not lie outside the Symbolic order. Kristeva does not advocate escaping the Symbolic (which includes language, law, and social relations); rather, she calls for its transformation from within by introducing the dynamic energies of the semiotic. While some feminists argue that the Symbolic is inherently patriarchal and should be rejected, Kristeva strongly disagrees. She insists that without the Symbolic, there would be no possibility of meaning, love, or human connection. As she provocatively states in *Desire in Language* (1980): “If one says that it’s patriarchy which produces [love], long live patriarchy.” This is not an endorsement of patriarchy but a defense of the symbolic dimension as essential to human subjectivity. Kristeva warns against collapsing the entire symbolic system into patriarchy. She sees feminist change not in abandoning language and culture but in reworking them from within. That is why she encourages every woman to *find her own language* not by stepping outside the Symbolic, but by negotiating her singular relationship to both the symbolic and the semiotic. In short, Kristeva does not propose a return to biology or an essential feminine beyond culture. Instead, she offers a model of feminist engagement that uses the semiotic as a creative and disruptive force capable of reshaping the very structures that have historically constrained women (Oliver, 1993b, pp. 101-102).

on the one hand and strict adherence to the law on the other. She wants an ethics where women are neither outlaws nor merely conformists. (Oliver, 1993a, p. 189)

This new feminist ethics is encapsulated in Kristeva's concept of *herethics*, a term that emphasizes the importance of maternal care and reliance in shaping human relationships. *Herethics* is based on the idea that true ethical transformation occurs when we embrace the return of the repressed other, the foreigner, the outcast, and especially the maternal, which has been historically silenced and repressed within the dominant ethical frameworks. The maternal, in Kristeva's terms, is not simply a biological function but a relational process that involves both attachment and separation. The mother's role is to provide support, care, and guidance for the child, but also to allow the child to separate, grow, and become their individual. This balance between attachment and separation is vital to the well-being of both mother and child, as Kristeva reflects on her mother's motto, "I did not overprotect you; I gave you wings" (Kristeva, 2016, p. 280), as an expression of what she later termed *reliance*. She describes this as 'the mystery of maternal passion,' the ability to support the 'newly arrived one, the ephemeral stranger,' in developing their uniqueness (Kristeva, 2016, p. 280). Kristeva sees reliance, the concept of deep and supportive connection at the heart of motherhood, as under threat in contemporary society. She believes that feminism, in its critique of traditional roles, has often framed motherhood in negative terms, sometimes depicting it as a burden or even as something that limits women's freedom and potential. This, she argues, has led to a crisis in how society views and values maternal roles. For Kristeva, these views overlook the potential of motherhood to foster a positive, transformative relationship built on care, connection, and support. She believes that motherhood should not be seen solely as a restrictive role but as one that can be reimagined in ways that affirm both the mother's and child's individuality. Kristeva hopes for a new feminist perspective on motherhood, one that sees reliance as a dynamic, enriching bond rather than as a constraint, and that recognizes the value and depth of maternal care as part of an ethics of human connection. Jardine notes, *Kristeva hopes that besides working to make the lives of mothers more possible with adequate childcare, parental leaves, decent educational systems, and so on, feminist intellectuals will take the lead in rethinking maternity symbolically. This is important because she is convinced that there can be no freedom for women until there is a maternal ethics, a discourse and practice of reliance: The free woman is just being born,* wrote Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* (1949). *There will not be a free woman as long as we lack an ethics of the maternal. But this ethics is just being born; it will be a herethics of reliance.* (Jardine, 2020, pp. 166-167)

Kristeva's *herethics*, then, provides a new way forward for feminist thought, one that is grounded in the recognition of difference, the importance of reliance, and the complex, transformative nature of maternal relationships. It challenges us to think beyond fixed identities, to move away from restrictive moral frameworks, and to embrace an ethics that values connection, care, and the possibility of change. In this sense, Kristeva's work offers a vision for a feminist ethics that is not limited to opposition or conformity, but is open to the fluid, evolving nature of human relationships. She argues, "Ethics is not a matter of enforcing the Law. It is a matter of embracing the return of the repressed other, the foreigner, the outcast, the woman, the Unconscious, jouissance in all of its manifestations" (Oliver, 1993a, p. 189). By placing the maternal at the center of this ethical vision, Kristeva reimagines feminism as a force for transformation and inclusion, one that moves beyond rigid binaries to embrace the complexity and diversity of human experience¹².

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¹²Kristeva's ethics avoids essentializing motherhood by treating the maternal semiotic as a conceptual tool, not a biological or fixed essence. The semiotic, a pre-discursive realm of instinctual drives and affects, exists before the symbolic order's structured meanings and identities. The maternal chora, a key part of this framework, symbolizes a space of potentiality where subjectivity begins, not tied to literal motherhood but to relational and creative processes. By framing the maternal as a 'theoretical fiction', Kristeva highlights its role in revealing the unstable, dynamic nature of subjectivity under patriarchal systems. This approach reframes psychoanalysis to emphasize ethical and political dimensions, presenting motherhood as a model for engaging with alterity and difference, not as a gendered stereotype.