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Mediating the Mommy Wars in Contemporary Germany

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INTRODUCTION

In a *New York Times* article published in 2006, appropriately entitled: “Chick Lit: The Sequel”, columnist Lizzie Skurnick drew attention to a new phenomenon in popular fiction for women. Skurnick pointed out that many of the best-loved and most widely-read authors of chick lit had grown up and graduated to a new kind of women’s fiction popularly referred to as ‘mommy lit’. Helen Fielding’s romantic heroine Bridget Jones had just given birth to a son in the British newspaper *The Independent*; the protagonist of Sophie Kinsella’s bestselling shopaholic series was all set to reappear on bookshelves in *Shopaholic and Baby* (2007); and other big names from the chick lit Hall of Fame, including Jennifer Weiner, Jane Green and even *Sex and the City*-creator Candice Bushnell had all apparently decided that motherhood was cool. It was time for their heroines to ‘settle [...] down with Mr Right and swap [...] their stilettos for Bugaboo strollers’. Accordingly, Skurnick summarizes the new heroine of popular women’s fiction as follows: ‘Mom lit’s prevailing aesthetic is Carrie Bradshaw, with a carriage’ (Skurnick 2006).

It is interesting to note that these authors, many of whom used to write about sisters and best friends, have taken to writing about mothers; it suggests a trajectory through their own lives and possibly also those of their

readers. At any rate, mommy lit has begun to play an important role in popular perceptions of contemporary motherhood. In bookshops, mommy-lit is often shelved next to parenting manuals, and as Heather Hewitt points out in her analysis of the emerging genre, it can often offer more guidance and comfort to the new mother than they can (2006: 120). Contemporary mommy lit is popular because it reflects the balancing act that defines many women's lives: the difficulty of combining a career and motherhood and of doing both reasonably well; the impossibility of living up to a media-conceived and media-fuelled ideal of what makes a good mother; and the difficulty of hanging on to some sense of one's own identity in the process.

Opinions are divided on whether mommy lit is a step forward for women's writing. While Kate Arosteguy praises mommy lit for providing "a lens through which we can study the intense anxiety that contemporary pressures of motherhood produce in women" (2010: 409), other critics have raised questions about the extent to which mommy lit can actually help mothers to deal with those pressures. In her analysis of Alison Pearson's bestseller *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002), for example – a novel which incidentally was made into a movie in 2011, starring, ironically, Sarah Jessica Parker of *Sex and the City* fame, who is now herself a mother of three – Heather Hewitt points out that though Pearson's novel 'effectively mirrors the anxieties many middle-class women experience surrounding motherhood, [...] it does not provide any answers or get us closer to thinking about work and family in new ways' (2006: 130). It might even be argued that mommy lit exacerbates those anxieties by caricaturing new mothers and making light of their genuine struggles. And yet, the popularity of the genre among its target audience would suggest that that is not how it is read.

This chapter seeks to look more closely at the emerging genre of mommy lit and to interrogate the question of where it fits in, how it relates to contemporary anxieties about motherhood and what it can say and do for mothers. Focussing its attention on German author Kerstin Gier's bestselling *Mütter-Mafia-Trilogie* and its place within the German popular fiction market, it will consider in particular how mommy lit both enacts and subverts media-driven debates about motherhood. A key question that it will seek to answer is whether mommy lit can represent a subversive space that allows us to contemplate other ways of looking at motherhood and alternative strategies for coping with the anxieties associated with it.

'MOMMY LIT' IN GERMANY

Given the omnipresence in the German media landscape of debates about motherhood, it is surprising that mommy lit has not made a bigger impression on the popular fiction market. The media obsession with motherhood is rooted in the worryingly low birth rates in the country; since the early 1990s, Germany's birth rate has hovered around a total fertility rate of 1.3, a rate that implies a halving of the stable population every 45 years (Kohler et al. 2002: 642). Researchers, policy makers and media pundits alike have sought to understand the reasons why Germans are not having babies, and it is not unusual for them to refer to the correlation between the low birth rate and the high level of female employment in Germany. In an attempt to encourage German men and women to produce more children and stay home to raise them, the German government has sought to make family-friendly policies a priority. Between 2007 and 2013, the conservative Christian Democratic Union party, spearheaded by the former Minister for Family Affairs, Ursula von der Leyen, introduced a number of new initiatives to improve parental leave, to increase financial support for new parents and to broaden access to state-sponsored childcare. Although these measures have improved the situation for stay-at-home mothers significantly, they have not as yet had their desired impact on the low birth rates in Germany.

Legislation in the political arena has been matched by a large volume of popular and critical publications on the topic of demography more generally and motherhood and feminism in particular. Two of the more divisive contributions to the debate came in 2006 and 2007, with the publication of Eva Herman's bestselling *Das Eva-Prinzip* [The Eve/Eva Principle] and Alice Schwarzer's *Die Antwort* [The Answer]. Herman's book, labeled anti-feminist by the media, laid the blame for the decline of the German population and the dissolution of the nuclear family in Germany squarely at the feet of working women. The book's subtitle, 'For a new femininity', highlights its call to German women to remember their femininity and return to a traditional family structure, focusing on looking after the home and raising children. Within a year of its publication, well-known German feminist and public figure Alice Schwarzer responded to Herman's claims with a book in which she advocated that men are just as capable of looking after children as women. Unsurprisingly, both books provoked controversy and debate across the media and amongst all strata of the German population. The fact that both also spent weeks on the bestseller list indicates the divided views amongst the German public on this contentious issue.

Despite this widespread interest in mothers, mothering and motherhood, mommy lit has not yet had the same impact on the German literary market as it has in other countries. Popular writer Kerstin Gier, however, is an exception to this rule; Gier is a prime example of the kind of chick-lit-turned-mommy-lit novelist that Skurnick refers to in her article. She began writing in 1995 and now has a long list of popular bestsellers. Virtually all of her novels – and there are over twenty, some published under pseudonyms – have had high sales figures, establishing Gier as one of the foremost writers of women’s popular fiction in contemporary Germany. The three volumes of her *Mütter-Mafia* [mother mafia] trilogy were published in 2005, 2006 and 2009 respectively, and between them, they have sold over a million copies.

Gier’s mother mafia trilogy tells the story of Constanze, who at the beginning of the first novel is a 35-year old mother of two whose lawyer husband Lorenz has decided after 15 years of marriage to replace her with a younger model. While Lorenz stays on in the family’s trendy loft apartment in the city, he sends Constanze and the children to live in the suburban house of his recently-deceased mother. The move to the suburbs brings Constanze into contact with the Mother Society, a group of mothers living in the housing estate where Constanze’s new home is located. This elitist group, which comprises both high-powered working mothers and even more high-powered stay-at-home mothers, rules the roost in the residential area. The Mother Society is very protective of its territory and very choosy about who it invites into the group and who is excluded from membership. Constanze is intimidated and ultimately repulsed by these über-mothers, who seem to care more about appearance than the realities of mothering. Despite her initial shock at Lorenz’s betrayal and some initial difficulties adjusting to her new circumstances, Constanze soon finds her feet, a new set of friends, and even a love interest in the shape of her divorce lawyer, the gorgeous Anton.

At first glance, Kerstin Gier’s novels do not seem to offer much more than a distraction and a bit of comic relief from the trials and tribulations of motherhood. However, I would argue that they feed into debates about the meaning of motherhood in contemporary German society in important ways. As the following analysis will show, Gier’s popular mother mafia trilogy both enacts and subverts media-driven debates about motherhood in Germany.

CHARACTERS, CARICATURES AND CLICHÉS OF MOTHERS

The various mothers in Gier's mother mafia novels are one-dimensional caricatures who are more notable for their entertainment value than for their psychological depth. Constanze, for example, is clearly an exaggerated representation of a stay-at-home mother: She fell pregnant with her first child while still at university, and she was quite content to give up her studies and her chance of a career to stay home and care for her child. For 14 years, she has been a full-time wife and mother; thus, her confidence and self-perception are closely linked to this role. Constanze's friend and neighbor Mimi, on the other hand, is representative of many contemporary would-be mothers, who, having spent their twenties focusing on their studies and their thirties focusing on their careers, suddenly find when they decide to have children that nature is no longer willing to play ball. 'It just won't work', Mimi sobs. 'Although I'm not stressed any more, it just won't work! I'm not used to that: I'm famous for the fact that my plans always work out. But this just isn't working out!' (Gier 2005: 96). On the other side of the divide is Sabine, the bitchy, hard-nosed working mother who heads up the Mother Society. Sabine is the stereotypical absentee mother whose commitment to her job means that her two children see far more of their Eastern European nanny than they do of her; notably, Sabine goes to great pains to justify her life choices by undermining everyone else's. And then there is Mama Gitti, the token single mother in the Mother Society. Gitti is caricatured throughout the trilogy as silly, naïve and generally a little bit flaky; she doesn't have a full-time job, but tries to make some extra money by convincing the other mothers in the Mother Society to sign their children up for her arts and crafts classes. The other mothers make no effort to hide the fact that they only tolerate her out of sympathy for her circumstances, and their general attitude towards her is one of disdain and mild annoyance.

These are only a few of the assortment of mother-figures presented in Gier's novels, and it is evident even from those mentioned here that they are all based on stereotypes that have become common currency in media-driven discussions about contemporary mothers. In the introduction to her book *Mediating Moms*, Elizabeth Podnieks offers an overview of just a few of the overwhelming array of images of motherhood that confront us:

They [moms] are alpha, beta, slacker, slummy, and yummy, as well as being martyr mommies and sanctomomies; they are summed up in acronyms like MILF (Mothers I'd Like

to Fuck), SMUMs (Smart, Middle-Class, Uninvolved Mothers), SCAMs (Smart, Child-Centered, Active Moms), SMCs (Single Mothers by Choice), and WAHMs (Work at Home Moms). (2012b: 4)

A glance at the German media landscape confirms that it too has a tendency to classify mothers according to stereotypes. For example, a 2009 study carried out by the Germany's future institute, the *Zukunftsinstitut*, analyzed lifestyle trends amongst mothers in Germany today and found that nine distinct 'types of mothers' emerged. These included the predictable Professional Mom, but also "new" types such as the Pippi-Longstocking-Mother, the Latte-Macchiato-Mother and the Mommaddy (Horx 2009: 24).

On the one hand, the fictional world of the mother mafia trilogy can serve as a lens through which to view the anxieties that underlie contemporary visions of motherhood in Germany. Constanze's plight, for example, and her struggles to regain her financial and emotional stability after her husband leaves her may cause us to reflect on the vulnerable position that many full-time mothers find themselves in. Similarly, Gitti's precarious financial situation and her dependence on her parents for help with her daughter may well represent the reality of life for many single mothers who do not receive support from the fathers of their children. Furthermore, Mimi's miscarriage and her struggle with infertility across the three novels no doubt strike a chord with many contemporary readers.

On the other, the overt stylization and caricaturing of the mothers in the novels undermines any possibility that the reader might identify with them or take them as genuine reflections of "real" mothers. Rather, they are obviously reflections of stereotypes of mothers similar to those propagated by the media. The fact that they are so obviously caricatures, distorted representations that bear little or no relation to the lived reality of mothers' lives, offers the writer and her readers space to poke fun at them. Thus, the very one-dimensionality of the mothers depicted in Gier's novels in fact enables the subversion of these stereotypes.

CHALLENGING THE MOMMY FORUM

Current theoretical literature on contemporary motherhood activism highlights the enormous importance of online networks and support communities. As Elizabeth Podnieks notes, 'mothers have taken to blogging

auto/biographical narratives to a staggering degree, with personal blogs complementing and often accompanying networking sites' (2012b: 4). Modern-day mommy blogs and online forums that claim to offer women advice and companionship have replaced the community of female family members and female friends that, according to nostalgic accounts of time past, used to rally round the new mother. As Rachel Cusk remarks, 'In those days, the story goes, mothers were told what to do by their mothers ... Like the great library of Alexandria, a world of knowledge has gone up in flames' (2004: 117-8). For the new mother in particular, but also for the more experienced mother, online communities can offer support and assistance, a chance to share experiences and learn what worked for others in a similar situation. Moreover, online forums such as those offered by Babycenter.com, EUMom.com and others are often divided into sub-forums – 'moms of preemies', 'toddler moms', 'TTC', and so on, making it even easier for browsers to connect with other moms who are dealing with similar issues. Certainly, the simplicity of being able to get a rapid answer to any question, as well as the temporary relief offered through the feeling that we are not alone in this, have no doubt contributed to the popularity of online forums.

This is not to suggest that online communities and forums are always a positive influence. In fact, the possibility of being able to compare her child's progress, to evaluate how her child measures up to others of a similar age, can often cause anxiety for the mother who would otherwise have gone on with her life in blissful ignorance. In addition, quarrels can often break out between mothers who have opted for different choices in matters of, for example, breast or bottle feeding, home birth versus hospital birth and so on. The competition between mothers that seems an integral part of contemporary mothering can often be exacerbated when mothers take to the internet.

The mommy forum of the Mother Society is a case in point. The group claims to represent "a network of joyful, open and tolerant women" and proclaims: "Here, we talk about topics of relevance to the modern woman and mother and support each other with love" (Gier 2005: 7). The mommy forum is actually an integral part of the text, and the chapters of all three novels are interspersed with excerpts from the Mother Society's forum. The mothers' posts to one another on the forum comment on the events in the narrative and offer an insight into how the other mothers view Constanze and her situation. However, alongside this, their posts reveal the rivalry and antagonism within the group, and we see plenty of snide comments and

examples of subtle one-upmanship. This particular forum is clearly driven more by competition than by support.

What is noteworthy, however, is that the language of the Mother Society's forum mirrors the language of many online forums. It might be argued that Gier uses her novels as a vehicle to pose a challenge to the mommy forum and the assumption of its cultural value. Sure, the mothers in this group are a especially insidious bunch, and in line with the caricaturing of the mothers, their website is exaggerated and ridiculous. However, as the following section will show, Gier's novels privilege a more tradition type of bond amongst women that, I argue, reveals the synthetic quality of many online forums.

BAND OF MOTHERS

In the black and white mediated images of mothers, there is a line drawn in the sand between those mothers who choose to go back to work – and the question of the extent to which this actually constitutes a choice is seldom debated – and those that opt to give up work, either temporarily or permanently, and stay home to devote themselves to the business of raising children. This dissection of all mothers into two neat categories is particularly popular in the media; talk shows in particular are very fond of pitting the stay-at-home mothers against the working mothers, each group sitting on opposite sides of the TV studio, and watching them fight over the issue of which group make the better moms. Miriam Peskowitz, author of *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* takes issue with this neat division of women into two categories:

Nowadays, all over the media it's the Mommy Wars: Mothers are either working full-time and are uninvolved, absentee parents, or full-time homemakers, non-intellectual, hovering, and provincial. In the Mommy Wars version of motherhood, the women in each group have nothing in common with the women in the other; they share no values. Instead, battles rage. (2005: 20)

As Peskowitz is keen to point out, mothers today often belong to neither group; they work part-time or full-time or stay home part-time or full-time at various junctures of their lives, and their decisions are often made for them by their financial situation or their families' needs at any given time.

Far from helping us understand the social and political stakes of motherhood, the media's Mommy Wars obscure the issues facing us. They transform parenting into a style war. [...] They prevent mothers from feeling empathy for each other. They diminish the parent problem by expressing it in the trivial terms of catfights. (2005: 6)

The division between mothers that is so present in the media has moreover made its way into literature. In time with the increased pressure on mothers to parent their children excessively, a trend identified by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels as the 'new momism' (2004: 4), Imelda Whelehan argues that the antagonism between mothers is more evident in contemporary mommy lit than in previous incarnations of the genre. Comparing it for example to mommy lit from the 1970s, where mothers banded together to form a collective, she finds that, 'The mothers of contemporary mum lit are depicted as oppressed by their peers – other moms who seem to be succeeding where they fail' (Whelehan 2012: 149-50).

This oppression by one's peers, fuelled by competition between mothers, is also given exaggerated expression in Gier's mother mafia novels, both in the criminal imagery behind the titles of the three novels and in the hostile confrontations between the mothers in the Mother Society and those of mother mafia, a group conceived to compete with it. One run-in is described in particularly evocative terms: 'Frauke and Sabine also quickened their pace when they saw us coming. When we pulled up alongside each other, it was a little bit like the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. The only thing that was missing was for us to start snorting and neighing and shaking our manes' (Gier 2005: 297).

However, there is one aspect of the conception of the mother mafia group that is particularly significant and which opens up a space for exploring alternative ways of looking at contemporary mothers and mothering. The decision to form the group is certainly instigated by the idea of creating a counter-group to the Mother Society; however, it is noteworthy that of the four members of the group, only two are actually mothers. 'We're our own Mother Mafia. You and I and Mimi. She'll make a great mother. And your friend Trudi belongs as well, of course. She told me yesterday that's she's already had a bunch of kids in her past lives. The four of us make a really great network!' (Gier 2005: 273). Rather than motherhood per se, the membership of this group is focused on a model of mothering that emphasizes practice rather than status. In other words, to return to a distinction

proposed by Adrienne Rich, mothering as practice is understood as separate from motherhood as institution. In proposing an alternative to media-conceived ways of dividing and classifying mothers, Gier's novels refuse to subscribe to their categories and thus take back control of mothering.

CONCLUSION

As emphasized by Heather Hewitt in her analysis of various incarnations of mommy lit since the 1950s, the genre has a long history of irreverent humor that can be linked to subversive attempts to rewrite the script of motherhood. As this chapter has shown, Kerstin Gier's novels continue that tradition. To return to Hewitt's assertion that '[mommy lit] does not provide any answers or get us closer to thinking about work and family in new ways' (2006: 130), one might argue that it can offer a space for the subversion of cultural and media-driven images of mothers. In laughing at the absurdity of the stereotypes and divisions that pervade cultural visions of mothering, our laughter represents a challenge to those norms.

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