

# Maternal Identities and Abject Equivalence in Biutiful

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### Maternal Identities and Abject Equivalence in *Biutiful*

Ensuuing his visit to Spain in 1952, Hugh Trevor Roper declared himself to be “fascinated by that extraordinary, incongruous, accidental, isolated appendage to Europe” (Sisman, 200). Regarded as a laggard in modernization, this “isolated appendage”, which had concealed and whitewashed its own painful past of emigration to Switzerland and Germany in the 1960s, became a host country to South American, Carribean, and Moroccan immigrants in the post-millennial period.<sup>1</sup> The economic boom necessitated a huge increase in menial workers to fuel the buoyant construction and service industries, and consequently, by 2000, five million immigrants were employed in these sectors (Encarnación 407). For the most part, the cultural representation of this social phenomenon did not diverge from stereotypical, orientalist, and implicitly derogatory envisionings of female immigrants as the sexualized other, whose voracious sexuality tantalized and satiated the sexual appetites of lustful, and frequently violent, Spanish men. In Icíar Bollaín’s 1999 film, *Flores de otro mundo*, the Cuban immigrant, Milady, is confined as the mistress of the local construction boss, Carmelo, while in Fernando León de Aranoa’s 2005 film, *Princesas*, the Dominican prostitute Zulema, is sexually brutalized by a Spanish *funcionario*, who promises to legalise her citizenship. The denigration of immigrant females is reinforced by the pejorative framing of them in non-agentic, passive, caring roles that confirm, rather than contest, extant prejudices in Spanish society (Ballesteros 3). Their caring capacity is invested with transnational sexual prowess: in Almudena Grandes’s 2007 novel, *El corazón helado*, the Carrión González’s family’s Dominican maid, Lisette, is the object of both the protagonist, Álvaro and his brother’s, lasciviousness, which she further provokes by wearing skimpy bikinis and coquettishness. In all these cultural texts, the immigrant female body is exoticised, transmuting into the focus of Spanish male

prurience, which, it is intimated, is incited by the promise of a primitive sexual euphoria, laden with colonial overtones. These hackneyed stereotypes elide female immigrant entrepreneurial success in sectors such as the beauty industry and catering in Spain, and, however unwittingly, convey a limiting vision of their human potential and their current and future contribution to Spanish society. In these films, the immigrant female's maternal qualities warrant the briefest of allusions, and their children only either briefly figure as angelic symbols of a harmonious transnational family in the Holy Communion scenes of *Flores de otro mundo*, or they are invoked as the object of remittances, and consequently, as the compellant of the mother's prostitution in films such as León de Aranoa's *Princesas*. Neither their own relationship with their children, nor their relationship with the children for whom they care, has been the subject of profound artistic attention.<sup>2</sup>

Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2010 film, *Biutiful* remedies this dearth of maternal representation by treating a large number of permutations of motherhood and some new variants as well. The film chronicles the redemptive quest of a dying fixer and spiritual medium named Uxbal to ensure his children, Ana and Mateo's welfare following his imminent demise.<sup>3</sup> The film constitutes an intense engagement with transnational maternal sexuality, the role of the immigrant childminder in Spanish society, and the influence of advanced capitalism on affective relationships.<sup>4</sup> The bipolarity of the Argentine biological mother, Marambra, renders her incapable of satisfactorily performing the maternal role, and consequently, her ex-husband Uxbal enters into primarily economic, and tangentially affective, relationships with two immigrant childminders, a Senegalese woman named Igé and a Chinese factory-worker named Lili, both of whom assume the role of quasi-mother figures. Innovatively, *Biutiful's* ostensible revalorisation of these female immigrants as a panacea to the

fragmentation and abjection of the transnational Spanish family accords primacy and respect to the experience of immigrant childminding. In *Biutiful*, immigrant female childminders transmute into a source of salvation for Uxbal's troubled transnational Spanish family, beset by mental and physical illness, and mired in poverty. Throughout the film, a spiritual mother named Bea provides the motherless Uxbal with warmth and consolation, and her figure illuminates the specifically national genesis of Iñárritu's attitude to motherhood.

This article analyses the representation of motherhood in the film, focusing on the liberal and conservative dimensions of Iñárritu's characterization of the biological Argentine mother, Marambra, the immigrant mothers, Igé and Lili, and Uxbal's spiritual mother, Bea. I posit that Iñárritu's characterisation of Marambra is both socially aware and regressive, paradoxically highlighting the predicaments of lower-class, mentally ill mothers while also reinstating a traditional self-abnegatory model of motherhood. I contend that his apparent reconsideration of the importance of immigrant women in Spanish society actually reaffirms prejudices against them. Moreover, I propose a new evaluatory concept for the current cultural representation of immigrants in Contemporary Spain. This concept is termed *abject equivalence*, which can be defined as the paralleling of both hosts and immigrants in corporeal, state and spatial spaces of debasement. I also establish the origins of Iñárritu's complex perspective on motherhood, which I argue, is illuminated by the quasi-maternal figure of Bea, who represents a conservative and uniquely Mexican attitude towards motherhood.

From the outset, *Biutiful* establishes and reifies a juxtaposition between morally superior immigrants and mercenary and disturbed hosts. María di Francesco contends that the profit motive supersedes affect in Uxbal's relationships with immigrants, a contention evidenced by his purchasing of fatally defective kerosene heaters for them

(25). Similarly, Marambra successfully wheedles money from Uxbal by manipulating his guilt for her evident distress ensuing his harsh chastisement of her behaviour. Marambra's foreignness dispenses with strict national migratory hierarchies, and her role of host situates her as a privileged foreign immigrant who initially enjoys superior status, which declines during the course of the film. In contrast to her venality, the immigrant female childminders are loving figures, nurturing and caring for Uxbal's children, Ana and Mateo. However, they serve as significantly more than contrastative figures, as their exploitative working conditions and poverty indict the Spanish state's abandonment of them. In her study of this film, Elizabeth Anker highlights its concern with the futility of liberal human rights ideas which do not punish the perpetrators of the mistreatment of undocumented migrants, who cannot combat their exploitation due to fear of deportation. She observes that "*Biutiful* simultaneously sheds light on the predatory, manipulative transactions that in fact incorporate those populations and their labor into the national body politic, although that labor remains undocumented and omitted from formal economic measures" (192). The immigrant female childminders in the film are nationless; they do not belong to the state, yet work and live within it, and therefore, they do not have the rights and protection afforded to legal citizens.

The film's focus on their sordid residences and working environments, unkempt and claustrophobic apartments, and dirty and cold warehouses, invokes filth, a primary signifier of abjection. The notion of abjection, symbolized by filth, decay, contamination and disease, is a recurrent motif in Spanish immigration cinema (Palardy 827). In her study of three key immigration films, *Princesas*, *Bwana* and *Flores de otro mundo*, Diana Palardy traces a genealogy of colonial Spanish attitudes to the immigrant other to prove that abjection manifests both repulsion and attraction to the immigrant other. For Palardy, the abject female immigrant body embodies fears of miscegenation

and the potential disruption of national identity (828). The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines abjection as “brought low, miserable; craven, degraded, despicable, self abasing”, and the process of abjection is described as a “state of misery or degradation.” The manifestations of the abject in society encompass religious abhorrence, incest, women’s bodies, human sacrifice, bodily waste, death, cannibalism, murder, decay, and perversion. Julia Kristeva theorises the abject as an ambivalent and indefinable figure, which upsets, disturbs, or undermines the established order and stable identity positions (3). According to her, it is the inherent liminality of the abject, its interstitial position, which blurs and destabilizes *a priori* dichotomies, such as life and death, or human and animal (4). The restoration of stability is contingent upon the expulsion of the abject from society, a task that is always left uncompleted. Rina Arya posits that “the expelled part does not disappear—it is the perpetual remainder—and continues to threaten the boundaries of the self, meaning that its presence disrupts the stability of self and society, thus activating the need for the operation of abjection” (72). In other words, the impossibility of a complete banishment of the abject from society entails the social marginalization of the immigrants, which proves to be insufficient because their mere physical presence is perceived as an insuperable obstacle to national and social cohesion.

In this film, Iñárritu extends and develops the theme of abjection by firstly associating it with the hosts, and then establishing a process of what I will term *abject equivalence*. This term denotes the sufferance and endurance of different forms of abjection by both the residents of the host country and the immigrants themselves. Abject equivalence levels and humanises both groups by demonstrating the inescapability of the abject in their lives, and their vulnerability to abjection by inhumane and economically more powerful individuals and social forces. Its invocation

of weakness and susceptibility ruptures the privileged sovereignty and subjectivity of the host and engenders a spectatorial identification and empathetic engagement with alterity. *Abject equivalence* is perceptible in much cultural production centering on immigrants: for example, in Fernando León de Aranoa's *Princesas*, the relatively privileged situation of the Spanish prostitute, Caye, is abjectified by a bullying client's forcing of her to perform *fellatio* in the bathrooms of a restaurant. The character of Miss Metadona, the junkie prostitute ostracised by the Spanish prostitutes, symbolises the abject within their own community, for she is not allowed to even use the bathroom, a prohibition that indicates her sub-abject status. Similarly, in Sergi Belbel's play, *Forasters*, the moral putridness of the upper-class Catalan bourgeoisie is manifested by the Spanish mother's cancer-induced vomit, which the South American maid has to clean up as part of her duties: thus, both host and immigrant confront the tangible and abject vestiges of illness. The commonality between host and immigrant implicit in the concept of *abject equivalence* undercuts class and national divides, and proves that the exclusive connotation of abjection with immigrants is reductive.

In *Biutiful*, physical and mental abjection is initially the preserve of both the female and male hosts. Uxbal is stricken with terminal prostate cancer which renders him sterile, and his ashen countenance, incontinence and vomiting mark him as a debilitated figure, who is undergoing a corporal expiation for his exploitation of the immigrants. Cancer can be defined medically as "a disease involving abnormal cell growth with the potential to invade or spread to other parts of the body" (Leshan et al 1112). The discursive abjectification of immigrants typically denormalises them as an unwelcome influx of parasites, who symbolically invade a pure and uncontaminated territory (Flesler 16). Iñárritu's close-up shots of Bardem's haggard face, his cancer-ridden body, and his visceral suffering forms part of his relentless focus on the

deterioration of Uxbal's body, which symbolizes an irredeemably damaged and rotten globalized Spanish neoliberal society. Uxbal's soiling of himself indicates the eminence of death, and the fragility of life, which can unexpectedly devolve into the endurance of decrepitude. For Kristeva, defecation is a pointed reminder of death: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (3). In a similar vein, mental illness distorts the behaviour of Maramba, the biological mother of Uxbal's children, who is a manic and impulsive woman suffering from bipolar disorder, which causes euphoric highs and extreme bouts of depression

The abjection of the hosts connotes them with an inassimilable difference that marks them as outsiders in their own host society. As critics such as Susan Sontag and Margaret Shildrick have illustrated, illness is imbued with negative connotations, and is regarded as an abnormal, irrational and asocial force. In his exegesis on the social meanings of illness in the urban setting of Paris, Jean Pierret contends that health is contingent upon an equal balance between the social and the physical, and that illness manifests an external, usually social, dysfunction (185). In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag reiterates that disease articulates concern for the stability of the social order, and "becomes the synonym of whatever is unnatural" (75). Interestingly, the juxtaposition between Uxbal's sterility and foreign mothers, Marambra, Igé and Lili, articulates the worrying demographic reality and future of current-day Spain. At the beginning of the millennium, Spain had the lowest birth-rate in the world, and it was categorized in the lowest-low classification as a source of concern for demographers and governments (Encarnación 407). Based on the premise that immigrant families have larger families, the incumbent president, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, ratified an amnesty for one



million illegal immigrants in 2005 (Linhard 417). Ironically, for a once homogeneous nation that had repudiated all forms of otherness, the reproductive future of Spain began to be heavily staked on a buoyant immigrant birth rate. Thus, in this film, exclusively foreign motherhood subverts gendered notions of nationhood and inclusivity by casting the immigrant female as the lynchpin of the future Spain.

During the course of the film, Iñárritu's imbuing of the immigrants with a moral superiority is substituted by a more pessimistic *abject equivalence*, which takes the form of the eradication of the immigrants from Barcelonese society. In his article on sinophobia in *Beautiful*, Paul Begin asserts that the homosexuality of the ruthless Chinese businessmen, Hai and Liwei, is symbolised by urine and semen in their encounter in the toilet, and blood following Hai's killing of Liwei (13). The association of abjection with homosexuality contains implicitly homophobic undertones, which chime with Iñárritu's conservatism (14). The Chinese immigrants suffer the ultimate form of abjection in death, poisoned by Uxbal's faulty heaters, and their corpses are then washed up on the shore, viscerally ejected from the sea. In death, they are what Bauman describes as "wasted lives", people whose unproductivity and inability to contribute to the neo-liberal economy warrants their expulsion from society (3). This tragedy posits the immigrants as the victims of an unforgiving and superficial economic system that sustains itself and thrives from the lack of protection for undocumented immigrants as a cheap work force.

The subjection of both groups, immigrants and hosts, to a regulatory and emotionally cold state gaze also acts as an equalizer. The local Barcelonese police force's constant hounding of the immigrants indicates the callousness of a state regulated by the profit motive: the immigrants are only left alone when Uxbal bribes a corrupt police officer, and provided that they do not sell their wares in the main tourist

zones. Uxbal's shuddering and recoilment from the intravenous extraction of blood, and the brusque treatment meted out to him by the attending nurse and doctor, in the opening scene of the film, cast him, in Foucauldian terms, as the object of a medical, regulatory gaze. His ex-wife, Marambra's eventual entry into a mental health clinic parallels the Senegalese immigrant, Ekweme's stay in a deportation centre, as both host and immigrant are objectified by the same gaze, which isolates and incarcerates subjects, who do not comply with gendered and neoliberal normativity. The constriction of both men and women transgresses gender roles, as it is usually *women* who are regulated.<sup>5</sup> Thus, abject equivalence erases gender differences, which are paradoxically reinforced later in the film.

*Abject equivalence* functions as a leveller by parenthesizing the legalized citizens of the nation and the immigrants in corporeal, state, and physical spaces of degradation and callousness. The afflictions of both the hosts and immigrants invalidate the idea of racial, moral, gender and even spatial differentiation, and sustain the idea of a flawed humanity who struggle in vain against sexual and venal temptations, the indifference of a neoliberal state, the ineluctable decay of the body, and the predatory actions of their fellow men. Thus, abject equivalence dispenses with the harmful hierarchies artificially constructed by globalisation, which is demonstrated to be a pitiless and uncaring economic and social phenomenon to which all mankind is vulnerable. The susceptibility of national and immigrant bodies challenge the Spanish State's neoliberal exclusionary politics, which renders both national citizens and immigrants utterly disposable.<sup>6</sup>

In *Biutiful*, the bipolar mother, Marambra's erratic behaviour and her inability to function as a credible maternal figure, marks her as the indisputable cause of her family's fragmentation, and eventually, as an unmanageable social element who must

be sectioned in a mental health clinic. The viewer is quickly made aware of the three pillars of Marambra's identity: mental illness, sexual promiscuity and her failure as a mother. Throughout the film, Iñárritu underscores the struggle of the modern transnational family, specifically Uxbal and Marambra as parents, and the affect that their behaviour and fighting has on their children. Marambra's bipolarity, frequent absenteeism and increasingly erratic actions means that their children have very uneven parental contact, and Mateo starts to present problematic behaviour such as wetting the bed. In the scene where Marambra and Uxbal physically struggle over Mateo, the camera pans to show an anxious Ana tearfully waiting in the next room listening to the fight. The focus on the children's anguish implicitly critiques Marambra's performance of motherhood, which it is inferred, impacts negatively on the children's development.

Marambra's inadequate motherhood has been construed as a critique of the neoliberal emphasis on consumption and pleasure. According to Victoria L. Garrett and Edward Chauca, she embodies the destructive urges created by the voracious drive for consumerist pleasure in an advanced capitalist society. They posit that capitalism creates a bipolar oscillation between a simulacra of fantasies and incompatible material conditions (214). The psychic and physical instability symptomatic of bipolarity is manifested by Marambra's obsession with sources of sensual pleasure in all its guises, alimentary, sexual, and peripatetic, which causes her to be a negligent and occasionally abusive mother. These maternal inconsistencies imply that the consumption drive has attenuated the maternal instinct, a line of thinking that certainly concords with Iñárritu's avowed abhorrence of the dehumanization wrought by neoliberalism. In another critical interpretation of the importance of Marambra, Ana Casas Aguilar opines that Marambra's negligence functions to bolster her former husband, Uxbal's new man credentials and to accentuate his paternal sense of responsibility (52). For this critic, the

young mother's evident ineffectiveness as a mother glorifies Uxbal's performance of his paternal role.

In my opinion, the intertwining of mental illness and motherhood is infinitely more complicated than a reduction to an uncontrollable consumerist impetus or a foil to Uxbal's new man identity. Iñárritu's treatment of Marambra's affliction is deeply complex and contradictory, displaying an acute awareness of the baleful consequences of social deprivation on Marambra, while also delegitimising maternal sexuality. I contend that the characterization of Marambra enables the film to produce an acute critique of the societal abandonment of mothers who do not confirm to the normative middle-class ideal, while concurrently affirming, by negative inference, the validity of the Judeo-Christian archetype of the mother as a sexless and selfless being. The exposition of Marambra's class positioning, and the subtle exposition of the etiology of her mental illness, form part of a multidimensional portrait of a troubled woman that militates against the sexual reductionism, decried by Toril Moi in her classic essay, "What is a Woman?": "All forms of sexual reductionism implicitly deny that a woman is a concrete, embodied human being (of a certain age, nationality, race, class, and with a wholly unique store of experiences)" (35-36). Indeed, an assessment of the relationship between Marambra's bipolarity and environmental pressures substantiates the view that this is a compassionate and sensitive characterization of an isolated and impecunious mother. In their study on the psychosomatic symptoms generated by poverty, Arthur and Joan Kleinman established that the continual experience of poverty, inadequate support, and social exclusion causes mental illness (109). Marambra's current plight demonstrates the detrimental affects of impoverishment and mental illness on the individual, and especially the individual mother, who must bear the emotional and physical brunt of childrearing. Limited social and legal possibilities

convey an alternative interpretation of her personality and her personal struggle: the failure of social services to intervene in the family is highlighted by the absence of concern in the primary school about Mateo's bruises, inflicted upon him by Marambra, and the dearth of interaction with caring professionals throughout the film. Tellingly, the young mother's faith in homeopathic medicines is caused by her inability to purchase tablets for her bipolarity, and her confinement to the flat makes her reliant on a supposedly therapeutic lamp for sunlight. As Uxbal relates to the ghost of his dead father, Marambra has never seen the sea, the democratic space *par excellence*. Importantly, her illness does not generate a greater sense of empathy and understanding between people, and is instead experienced as a solitary affliction, only palliated by paid services or the outright fictionalization of the past.

The film's focus on the prelude to the onset of female mental illness enables spectators to understand the plight of a lonely mother confronting a world that categorises her as "other" and classifies her into a monolithic and negative essence or definition. In the scene where Marambra attempts to rekindle her relationship with Uxbal, we see photos of their former and happier family life: a younger Marambra cradling her newly-born child, with Uxbal leaning over them proudly. The disparity between the past symbolised by the photos and Marambra's chaotic present could possibly chart the downfall of a marriage that was not edified on parity, but on the false and unequal construction of gender. Following this line of thought, Uxbal's rebuttal of her recollections of a united past could pinpoint a refusal to concede some of his ex-wife's laudable actions in the past. It is tenable that Marambra subverted the model of spousal subservience desired by Uxbal, and transformed into a female prototype who dared to live as a separate entity, apart from wife and mother. Accordingly, one could surmise that Marambra personifies the restrictiveness and possible psychic damage of a

controlling marriage, and on a more sanguine note, the evolution of the female self towards a self-determined female subjectivity in the context of a spatial shift from Argentina to the urban metropolis of Barcelona. Her abjection encourages a re-evaluation of contemporary motherhood, advocating the dissolution of stigmatizing dichotomies of what constitutes a “normal” mother and family. This portrayal incites the spectator to challenge normative definitions of motherhood and to engage with “other” mothers, who are excluded from mediatic discourse on the basis of mental and physical illness, as well as economic and educational level.

Although the film exposes a socially-induced maternal angst, it also mobilizes the censorious discourse of maternal perfection, which does not take into account the individual circumstances of the mother. Iñárritu’s ostensible progressiveness is paradoxically intertwined with a cogent conservative sensibility that delegitimises maternal sexuality, and concurs with Moi’s definition of sexual reductionism as the conceptualisation of women “as human beings sexed in a particular way” (35). The portrayal of a sexually liberated mother as mentally ill and abusive debunks the idea of a sexually active motherhood by conveying the absurdity and unacceptability of a mother’s sexual desire, which, in turn, reaffirms a regressive and asexual construction of motherhood that enjoins a mother’s total dedication to her husband and children. Marambra is having an affair with Uxbal’s brother, Tino, but her sexuality is configured throughout the film as a manifestation of her bipolarity, rather than a self-determined gender performance. In the very scene where she dances nude on top of Tino, she has a bipolar episode, which connotes sexual intercourse with madness. In contradistinction to her liberal sexuality, the immigrant childminders, Igé and Lili are sexless, docile and for the most part, silent, and ironically incarnate the traditional, Francoist Spanish model of motherhood, *el ángel del hogar*. At one stage, Marambra abandons Mateo for

an entire weekend to spend a sojourn in the Pyrenees with her daughter Ana. The film's association of maternal travel with child neglect implicitly critiques peripatetic mothers, who wander away from a stable home base with or without their children, and emphasizes the role of the mother as the fulcrum of the home. Maternal sexual freedom is identified with selfish destructive behaviours which jeopardise the children's security. When Uxbal enquires as to her nocturnal outings, Marambra responds with the line "¿no puedo divertirme un poco?". Uxbal responds by telling her that she cannot, because she left her two children alone in the apartment. The extremity of this case implies that the mother's maintenance of a personal life, independent of any children, is irresponsible and remiss.

The film represents Marambra as a flawed behavioural model for her children, and by extrapolation, as a failed neoliberal subject, who is needy and dependent. Her unstructured chattering invokes subtle social hierarchies that valorize emotional restraint over displays of strong feeling, and she seems to be aligning herself with Derridean poststructuralist theories which emphasises the slipperiness and instability of female language. Shildrick argues that, in scientific and medical discourse, the act of losing control of oneself is "quintessentially a feminine rather than masculine trait, sufficient to disqualify us women from the fundamental structures of human interaction" (26-7). Marambra's nonsensical ramblings removes her from a state of supposed "masculine" rationality, and contrasts with the silence and concision of the female immigrants, which, as I will later examine, is also problematic.

Marambra herself senses the familial and social opprobrium resulting from her unconventional gender performance, and asserts her right to idiosyncratic mothering, telling Uxbal that "no tengo que pedirte permiso para ser madre." Her challenging tone demonstrates that not all women rely on tradition to evaluate the extent of their familial

commitment, and also encodes a keen resolve to resist the reduction of her value as a woman to compliance with Uxbal's conservative vision of motherhood. This defiance is at odds with her careful and mendacious hiding of all signs of sexuality and valiant reimagining of her past as happier and family-oriented. She alleges that she shared the bottle of wine in her apartment with a friend, rather than during her drunken assignation with Tino. Her attempted seduction of Uxbal involves an elaborate and mendacious retelling of their meeting and romance, which differs from his recollections. Her fabrication of a fictional past is consistent with the consumerist argument advanced by Garrett and Chauca insofar as it indicates a propensity for fantasy, but can also be construed as a denial of her sexually active past to satisfy Uxbal's conservatism. Paradoxically, these babbled and barely audible utterances indicate Marambra's attunement to socially normative values, and a resignation to their importance for her social inclusion. Marambra's internalization of the social stigma attached to maternal sex is palpable in her candid discussion with Uxbal, whom she ashamedly tells that "quiero ser te fiel, pero también quiero gozar como una puta." The dual invocation of a mother's enjoyment and prostitution reinscribes the necessity of maternal selflessness, and invalidates the maternal right to sex and leisure.

Throughout the film, the prioritization of her own sexual and leisure needs is attributed to mental illness, rather than a desire for a more autonomous construction of motherhood, which would acknowledge the mother's right to a sex life and travel. Her organization of a family trip to the Pyrenees, a conciliatory measure, garners an unappreciative response, and all her attempts at mothering are subverted by her chronic illness. This conservative perspective on motherhood denotes an idealization of what Sharon Hays (1996) terms "intensive mothering", a child-centric, self-sacrificial form of motherhood that requires the totality of a mother's time and affections. Thus, ineffectual



motherhood is correlated with an uncontrollable and peripatetic sexuality, and proper childminding is the preserve of the sexless, poverty-stricken, and maternal immigrant. The children's innocence, the dualism of madness and maternal sexuality, and the female immigrants' serene maternal performance, reinstate a conservative, Christian vision of the intact family as a unit essential to the wellbeing of society, which concords with Michel Foucault's perspective on the family's regulation of sexuality. In his words:

It is [the family's] role to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support. It ensures the production of sexuality that is not homogeneous with the privileges of alliance, while making it possible for the systems of alliance to be imbued with a new tactic of power which they would otherwise be impervious to. The family is the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance. (108).

Iñárritu's conservatism is reinforced by his largely sympathetic treatment of Uxbal's fatherhood role, and his "new man" identity. Ana Casas Aguilar postulates that the father figure is a thematic and narrative thread, and that the film is particularly concerned with "la inestabilidad que supone la ausencia de esta figura y el desmembramiento de la familia unitaria en la sociedad contemporánea globalizada" (182). Marambra's paltry mothering leads to Uxbal's assumption of traditionally feminine tasks, such as cooking and minding the children, and he largely figures as the mainstay of this troubled family. In his first on-screen interaction with the children he plays a game with them to distract from the meagre meal they scraped together. However, Casas-Aguilar's assertion of Uxbal's new man status is undermined by his readiness to completely abandon any housekeeping or nurturing duties when Igé moves

into his apartment to take care of his children. Uxbal's easy abjuration of paternal duties indicates that he regarded his performance of both maternal and paternal roles as a temporary interim phase, and contests his new man identity. His return to a state of hypermasculinity is confirmed by his nocturnal outing with his brother, Tino, to a strip club where the brothers surround themselves with young, semi-clad girls. The disputability of Uxbal's new man credentials concords with Iñárritu's inherent conservatism, which also permeates his ambivalent treatment of immigrant mothers, and the exaltation of a universal, conservative mother, Bea, whom I will now examine.

Despite his status as a world-renowned transnational director, Iñárritu's conservative envisioning of motherhood derives from a specifically Mexican culture of motherhood, which is embodied in the character of Bea. Her character personifies an oblique homage to Iñárritu's Mexican origins in a film otherwise focused on the universal issues of globalisation, human rights, and immigration. Uxbal is motherless, his mother having died when he was very young and he retains no memory of her. He has sporadic contact with an older woman, Bea, a former neighbour, who performs as a surrogate mother figure, giving Uxbal medicine when he is sick, and also comforting him in the wake of the tragic deaths of the Chinese workers, for which he is responsible. It is significant that Uxbal and this surrogate mother figure are united by their possession of clairvoyance: "you too possess the gift".

The supernatural element constitutes a homage to Iñárritu's Mexican provenance, and the primacy accorded to the supernatural in religious observance and ritual. Mexican Christianity is an amalgam of a veneer of Christian beliefs and a substratum of Mayan and Aztec beliefs, and this hybrid religiosity is most evident in the Mexican Day of the Dead, 31st of October. Anthropologically, "the spiritual specialist," as John W. Roberts calls the conjurer figure, "was seen as a kind of generator of life-

force and his or her presence in the community as essential to the maintenance of the quality of life that allowed individuals to attain the fullest ontological being” (80). Bea is able to use her spiritual connection with the past and with others to help people in this life through life-enhancing acts, while Uxbal uses it for the profit motive. In pre-colonial Mexico, Mesoamerican cultures venerated mother goddesses, such as Chalchihtlicue, who was the patron saint of women in labor and the protector of children. The souls of mothers who died in childbirth were dedicated to Cihuacoatl, the serpent mother who embodied both birth and death (Hronis 499). Marianismo, a Mexican belief system deriving from the patriarchal colonial Spanish familial structure, casts the mother as self-abnegatory, in the mould of the Virgin Mary. It is important to note that women were regarded as spiritually surpassing men in their nurturing and supportive roles, and the proliferation of religious imagery throughout Mexico portrays the mythical and protective mother figure, whose power does not disrupt the patriarchal dominance of the family. The mother is encharged with the instilling of cultural values, and she is held in deferential respect by her children (502).

The figure of Bea references both the pre-Christian and Christian veneration of motherhood in Mexico. The Christian imagery in her flat, pictures of the Virgin Mary, and her dispensation of medicine to Uxbal, reaffirm the idea of a spiritual loving maternal figure, who has replaced Uxbal’s long-deceased mother. He is patently deferential to her, and she takes control of the situation; importantly, she is associated with death, as it is she who consoles him in the wake of the tragic deaths of the Chinese workers. She is the universal spirit mother, reassuring his doubts as to who will take care of his children by stating “el universo se hará cargo de ellos”, and giving him amulets to protect them. Therefore, she is the hybrid Aztec and Christian mother, a fusion of supernatural and Christian beliefs, who gives solace, and both scientifically

and spiritually based healing to Uxbal. This maternal figure's personification of science and spirituality, the Mexican heritage of folk-healing and superstitions with medicine, brings into relief the 19th century separation of spirituality and science, an era in which scientific discoveries questioned and to a certain extent, invalidated religious discourse. Bea encapsulates the spiritual and medical essence of Uxbal's redemption, and serves to implicitly critique the neoliberalist emphasis on materialism to the detriment of the spiritual. However, as much as Bea functions as an indictment of materialism, she also reinstates a conservative imagining of the mother as nurturing and endlessly giving.

Similarly, the immigrant mothers, Igé and Lili, are simultaneously privileged as the sustainers of the fragmented transnational Spanish family, and stereotyped as compliant minions who perform traditional and poorly remunerated caring roles. To the director's credit, he does not glamorize the female immigrant experience by endowing the female immigrants, Igé and Lili, with an alluring sexuality. The normalization of the female immigrant is sartorially reinforced through their dowdy, ill-fitting clothing and unkempt appearances, which convey the idea that survival, not their appearance, is to the foremost of their priorities in harsh, neoliberal Barcelona. Their hardscrabble existence reflects the dire labour conjuncture that confronts immigrant women: in the Spanish workforce; immigrant women are marginalized with 41.6% of them working in the domestic services as their first job in Spain. They often work in low-productivity and low-skilled occupations, thus resulting in an occupational downgrading following their migration (Vidal-Coso and Miret-Gamundi 349). Female immigrants are also more likely to send substantial proportions of their income home to support family dependents which leaves less money to improve their own meagre lifestyles (Vidal Coso and Miret-Gamundi 343).

Iñárritu's idealisation of the immigrant childminders as substitute mother figures engages with the separate, lived identity of these women, their quotidian struggles, and scant material resources. Igé survives in squalid living conditions, not even disposing of a washing machine, which forces her to wash the family's clothing by hand. Her impoverishment is ironically highlighted by a poster briefly shown in Uxbal's entry, which bears the anti-fur campaign slogan: "¿Tu madre tiene piel de abrigo?" In contrast to Western luxury, Igé is eking out a subsistence style existence, washing the family's clothing in a basin. Her substandard living conditions imply that her job in the chicken factory does not pay her an adequate wage with which to live with dignity. Moreover, the film successfully depicts Chinese and Senegalese forms of motherhood, non-Eurocentric maternal models that are invariably excluded from Western considerations of motherhood. Maria DiFrancesco avers that Igé "occupies a liminal position" as a guest in Uxbal's apartment, who, at times, is converted, by Uxbal's segregatory injunctions, into an unwanted outsider (33). While conceding the validity of her contention, Igé's sojourn in Uxbal's apartment can also be interpreted as a reaffirmation of her matriarchal heritage. Senegalese mothers enjoy collective mothering, a process in which all female kin participate in the mothering of the children, thereby allowing the biological mother some respite (Vives and Silva 12). Senegalese mothers in Spain attempt to replicate this situation either by recourse to Senegalese female friends or unofficial adoption situations with Spaniards (Vives and Silva 12). This cultural tradition means that Igé's move into Uxbal's apartment, and her caring for Uxbal's children, does not represent a merely economic activity, but, in fact, constitutes a recreation of her own maternal culture in Spain. In another vein, it completes the cycle of immigration within the film, evident in Uxbal's reconnection with his paternal Andalusian immigrant past, by evoking the communality of pre-industrialised,

agricultural Andalusia. Igé's promise to care for Uxbal's children, ensuing his death, will ensure that the solidaristic values of their Andalusian heritage, transmitted to them by their father during his nostalgic musings, will have continued relevance in their lives. In mainland China, Chinese mothers are relegated to the homeplace, with no intellectual or pedagogic functions (Nieto 165), and in *Beautiful*, Lili is inseparable from her baby, who is literally attached to her. She pointedly does not help Ana with her homework, leaving the young girl to do it in front of the television, while she tends to her baby, actions which may incite spectatorial condemnation of childminding that could be considered remiss in the Western world. Thus, these characters' childminding styles reveals the convergence and divergence of non-Eurocentric forms of motherhood with the normative construction of motherhood in Western Europe.

However, the ostensible valuation of the immigrant childminders as substitute mother figures and the recognition of their non-Western maternal identities is undermined by the Spanish ignorance and suspicion of it. The hostility towards the immigrant mothers is evident in Uxbal's callous reply to Igé's worries over Ekwebe's detention and the consequences for her children, "no lo sé". Uxbal's treatment of Lili and Igé is reflective of the devaluation of their caring role in Spanish society. While Uxbal thanks Lili for looking after Ana and Mateo, he later questions both children about their diet in the house, queries that reveal his distrust of the immigrant caretakers. When their diet is revealed to be daily offerings of chicken with rice, he later complains about the lack of variation. Ana defends Lili by pointing to the fact that Lili does not cook the dishes herself. His evaluation of their childminding does not factor in their exploitative work conditions and low pay, which probably do not allow them to spend freely on food.

The non-expressiveness of the immigrant females is another contentious issue, which casts doubt on the equitability of the representation of the immigrant females in this film. Katey De Gioia argues that immigrant mothers experience intense “dilemmas of emotions” due to the change in roles they experience after migration (667). She contends that migration is particularly difficult for women who are responsible for the integration of children and the establishment of a home in the host country (668). *Beautiful* downplays the emotional turbulence of female migration by characterising the immigrant women as caring automatons who remain largely mute or monosyllabic, an issue that maps itself onto the interplay between language and immigration. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva problematically classifies silence as a mode of dignification for the marginalized, a means of preserving their own dignity in the face of harassment and alienation. However, Kristeva reconsiders silence as a mode of empowerment, “the private property of your proud and mortified discretion” and as “imperious fullness: cold diamond, secret treasury, carefully projected, out of reach” (16). Silence here is reconceived as powerful, inferring control and possession of thought as well as a unique form of inner enrichment. The contentiousness of this theory resides in the possibility of silence to perpetuate inequality by impeding immigrant articulacy of their experience in the host country, inducing a resignation to systemic social and economic inequities, and a stoicism that is incompatible with the proaction required for upward social mobility in advanced capitalist societies. It is ironic that in this film, the most silent and passive female immigrant, Lili, is perhaps the most assimilated, and Igé’s assimilation is propitiated by her progressive silencing during the film. We rarely hear the immigrant females speak; they keep their comments to a minimum, unless they are required to, or if they are communicating with members of their own community, and their language and tone of voice is typically soft and slow. In

contrast, Marambra, Tito and Uxbal speak more rapidly and expressively. The female immigrants' body language, too is strikingly different from the Spaniards; they seem to be employing a form of reserve, a muted body language to try and distract attention, which contrasts with the flexibility and agility of the Spaniards, demonstrated by Mateo's constantly swinging legs. The muting of the immigrant females robs them of agency and anchors them in a subordinate position, thus allowing for the persistence of discriminatory behaviour toward them. Igé, for example, can never broach her exclusion in family events, such as Ana's birthday party, or the segregation to her own living quarters in the house, to Uxbal's family.

Maria DiFrancesco has alluded to the creation of an artificial family at the end of the film, when Igé moves into the apartment to look after the children (31). In my opinion, this artificial family reinstates a patriarchal male-dominated vision of the family, ensuing the eradication of Marambra's deviant maternal sexuality from the film. This artificial family is akin to a hierarchical, authoritarian unit which reproduces racial and class inequalities between Spaniards and immigrants. However, on a more sanguine note, the proximity of Uxbal's death increases his dependence on Igé's ministrations, an interdependence that can be construed as a metaphor for Europe's dependence on undocumented immigrants, particularly the female migrants in the domestic sphere.

Both mental and physical illnesses, prime signifiers of abjection, are re-associated with the hosts, a reversal of the normal hierarchy between host and immigrants that can be construed as part of their atonement for their uncompassionate treatment of the immigrants. The ceaseless invocation of the moral superiority of the immigrant childminders undermines the putatively civilizational superiority of the residents of the host country. However, *abject equivalence* levels the two groups, presenting them as the victims of an inhumane globalised economy that fosters



atomisation and exploitation. Iñárritu's critique of the modern transnational Spanish family is forgiving in one way due to the positive portrayal of the flexibility of Spanish fathers to adapt to more implicated familial roles, and his understanding of the role of poverty in causing Marambra's illness. Nevertheless, his seemingly progressive envisioning of this family is subverted by a disturbing and conservative imagining of the triad of motherhood, madness and sexuality, and the ephemerality of Uxbal's new man phase.

Iñárritu indicts the Argentine mother by symbolically connecting sexuality with madness, which crucially affects her ability to raise her own children and guarantee their well-being and happiness, an eroticized denigration of the independent woman which reproduces the universal negation of the possibility of a rational and healthy maternal sexuality, and instead substantiates the stereotype of the irrational and mad sexual mother. Marambra's downward trajectory conclusively proves the incompatibility of normative motherhood and sexuality, and disparages sexual motherhood as a form of madness, rather than a volitional choice. *Beautiful* captures the essence of non-Eurocentric forms of motherhood, while, at the same time, inscribing and legitimising patriarchal, Judeo-Christian, and racial privileges.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Moyano notes that Spaniards generally have a reluctance to talk about their past, and that only very few films, such as Carlos Iglesias's 2006 film, *Un peseta, catorce francos*, have broached the subject. He observes: "a partir de los años 90, todo aquello cambió y la inmigración que llegaba era rechazada sin que los españoles se acordaran de que también nosotros habíamos sido emigrantes" (7).

<sup>2</sup> Motherhood occurs in “specific historical contexts framed by intersecting structures of race, class, and gender” (Woollett et al 125). However Woollett *et al* argue that the dominant beliefs about parenthood are conceived by white, middle class parents, researchers and policy makers rather than from poor families or ethnic minority communities. Women who cannot be categorized within the dominant cultural subject positions are at risk of being pathologised as “other” mothers on distinctions of class, colour, ethnicity, race, sexual preference, education, employment, or disability (126).

<sup>3</sup> Thus far, *Biutiful* has been critically analysed in terms of its invocation of the Derridean concept of the specter (DiFrancesco; Honora Connolly); the space of Barcelona (Fraser); labour (Frahm); immigrant rights (Anker); and sinophobia (Begin). To date, no scholarly attention has been directed at the role of mothers within the film.

<sup>4</sup> Marambra is played by Argentine actress, Maricel Álvarez, and her accent is North Argentinean. Marambra’s nationality in the film is not clear. The actress is Argentinian and, if the nationality of the character is ever mentioned, it is definitely not Spanish. Deleyto and Lopez, in their article, “Catalan Beauty and the Transnational Beast: Barcelona on the Screen”, describe her as Argentinian. In their words: “It may be no coincidence that the ethnic makeup of the family of Uxbal (Javier Bardem) is never explained and remains puzzling: Mateo (Guillermo Estrella) and Ana (Hanaa Bouchaib) are children of the same mother and father, yet they appear to be racially different. Uxbal is Spanish, probably the son of immigrants to Catalonia from poorer Spanish regions, an inheritance which some Catalans describe through the ambiguous term ‘charnego’. His estranged wife Marambra is Argentinian although it is curious that Maricel Álvarez, the actor who plays her part, has a different accent in the film from what appears to be her ‘natural’ Buenos Aires accent in the short interview included in the DVD extras” (158).

<sup>5</sup> For example, during pregnancy and labour, women are forced to become an object of the medical gaze as it is considered unacceptable not to consult a midwife during pregnancy (Pylypa 31). As Pylypa states: “women’s bodies are represented as inherently defective and in need of external regulation, dependent on science and technology. Thus, the ideology of women as passive, subordinate, dependent, and inherently inferior is reinforced” (32).

<sup>6</sup> The more profound significance of abject equivalence is most cogently elucidated by Kristeva’s conceptualization of the foreigner. At the beginning of *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva defines the foreigner as a disruptive and incomprehensible element, whose potential for generating disharmony and rupturing the home space resides in the hidden part of our culture. In her words: “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder” (1). Refuting ethnic essentialism, Kristeva posits foreignness as a social construct of the host culture, engendered from the population’s awareness and excoriation of difference. She states: “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (1). The foreigner arises when we allow our cultural, social and racial differences to define us. In short, the sense of “strangeness” or “foreignness” manifests itself in relation to one’s own feelings of difference, and it is obliterated when we recognize our common and unifying differences. The logical corollary to Kristeva’s theorization of a socially constructed foreignness is that the diminishment of social bias regarding difference renders the term ‘foreigner’ meaningless. *Abject equivalence* identifies a commonality based on the experiences of varying forms of abjection, which are united by their debasement of human dignity, thus paving the way for a recognition of ‘the foreigner within’, the

acknowledgement of the existence of a common and nationless susceptibility to abjection.

<sup>7</sup> In a 2011 interview with Ben Hopkins, Iñárritu underscored the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism as follows:

“We’re all Uxbal and the system that we’re living in - capitalism, the money markets and all those things - is taking away our nature and our sense of intuition and emotion. It’s getting into a crazy ride of selfish survival. Everything is collapsing with that.”

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