



The submerged plot and the mother's pleasure from Jane Austen to Arundhati Roy

Brianna Beehler

To cite this article: Brianna Beehler (2017) The submerged plot and the mother's pleasure from Jane Austen to Arundhati Roy, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26:5, 598-599, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2017.1353778](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1353778)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1353778>



Published online: 13 Jul 2017.



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The submerged plot and the mother's pleasure from Jane Austen to Arundhati

Roy, by Kelly A. Marsh, Columbus, The Ohio State University Press, 2016, 296 pp., \$84.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8142-1297-4; \$19.95 (ebook), ISBN 978-0-8141-7429-3

How can the daughter discover her mother's story? The answer, argues Kelly A. Marsh in *The submerged plot and the mother's pleasure from Jane Austen to Arundhati Roy*, will enable the daughter to progress into a story of her own – in fact, the daughter's progress depends upon her success in discovering this story. In reconsidering novels with motherless daughters, Marsh overturns conventional interpretations of the Victorian courtship novel and its afterlife and asserts that only after the daughter gains knowledge of her mother's pleasure can she experience pleasure herself. This search for knowledge of the mother's story takes place in what Marsh identifies as the 'submerged plot', in which the daughter repeats her mother's experiences. Marsh visualizes the novel in spatialized terms, with the submerged and surface plots running along horizontal axes that intersect with vertical literary, historical, and psychic axes. However, while the submerged plot runs beneath the surface plot, it does not always remain parallel; at times, the submerged plot will rise or otherwise influence the surface plot. These surfacings, Marsh claims, are where readers may begin to recover the mother's story.

Marsh thus underscores the importance of the mother's story, building on criticism by Carolyn Dever, Margaret Homans and Marianne Hirsch. However, she asks that instead of readers assuming the daughter must reject her mother's story to successfully progress into her own, they must instead trace the submerged plot to see how the daughter searches for her mother's pleasure, which, because it is taboo and therefore unnarratable, is not easily found. This approach, which combines narratology, feminist theory and rhetorical analysis, aligns Marsh's book with work by Robyn Warhol and James Phelan. The result is a far-reaching recuperative methodology that provides a new way into novels of motherless daughters – and eventually, as Marsh shows in chapter five, sons. The texts Marsh considers cover a wide geographical and historical range: Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens's *Bleak house* (1853), Wilkie Collins's *The woman in white* (1860), Edith Wharton's *The house of mirth* (1905), Elizabeth Bowen's *The last September* (1929), Alice Walker's *The color purple* (1982), Jane Smiley's *A thousand acres* (1991), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), Helen Dunmore's *Talking to the dead* (1996) and Arundhati Roy's *The god of small things* (1997). The large scope of these texts demonstrates the persistence of silenced mothers (even as they gain mobility and opportunity in the twentieth century) across time, place, class and race.

While *The submerged plot* is wide in reach, one of its pleasures is Marsh's attention to her individual texts. In moving from *Persuasion* to *The god of small things*, Marsh gives nuanced and original close readings. Transitioning from the completeness of her opening texts to the relative openness and ambiguity of later ones, Marsh suggests that the inability for submerged and surface plot to meet or find closure contributes greatly to the relative completeness of the novel and the marriage plot. This alternative progression leads Marsh to offer novel explanations for seemingly inexplicable delays (such as Anne Elliot's postponed marriage to Wentworth in *Persuasion*), surprising genre shifts (the intrusion of Nettie's letters in *The color purple*) and puzzling endings (the return of Rahel and Estha to Ayemenem in *The god of small things*).

Marsh is strongest, however, when discussing novels from the nineteenth century. Her first chapter, which analyses *Persuasion* and *Jane Eyre*, introduces the book's most compelling argument on character. In emphasising the importance of the mother's pleasure, Marsh makes a significant claim: minor – and sometimes entirely absent – characters deeply influence both the submerged (and, in turn, surface) plot and the protagonist's progression towards happiness and a successful relationship. This revision of Alex Woloch's seminal *The one vs. the many: minor characters and the space of the protagonist in the novel* (2003) and of what he terms the 'character-system' of the novel makes Marsh's work of considerable interest to the field of novel studies.

The widespread applicability of Marsh's methodology raises many questions for how it may play out in other works featuring motherless daughters and, perhaps, sons. Can sons only find a way to the

mother's pleasure through a sister figure? Are there other, deeper submerged plots and how might they be recovered? What other plots may be working against the daughter's search for the mother's pleasure? How might the submerged plot contribute to critical discussions on the novel form? With its provocative close readings, this thoughtful, researched and meticulously supported book will be of interest to critics of sexuality and gender studies, feminism and the novel. *The submerged plot* makes a substantial contribution to the field, one which will continue to trouble and reshape critical assumptions for years to come.

Reference

Woloch, A. (2003). *The one vs. the many: Minor characters and the space of the protagonist in the novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

Brianna Beehler
University of Southern California, USA

 beehler@usc.edu

This book review was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected. Please see Corrigendum (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1363981>)

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1353778>



Japanese feminist debates: a century of contention on sex, love, and labor,

Ayako Kano, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2016, 336 pp., \$ 68.00, £ 55.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 8248 5580 2

Ayako Kano is a rare example of a scholar possessing good command of both Japanese and English and well embedded in both scholarly communities. Her book, *Japanese feminist debates: a century of contention on sex, love, and labor* presents the depth of debate engaged in by feminists in Japan to the English-speaking world. The book covers a wide range of topics, such as sexuality, reproduction, labour and state policy on gender equality, spanning from the early twentieth century to the present. By going through the book, the reader is certainly informed about the central issues/problems of Japanese feminists and how they envision alternatives to build a better society. The lens of the 'debate' helps us to grasp the heterogeneity of views and insights within the feminist intellectual circle in Japan, underscoring its rich and fertile potential for future developments. The book is also accompanied by detailed and informative endnotes. With all these qualities, the book is certainly a very useful resource for those who would wish to acquire a basic knowledge of the development of feminist ideas in Japan.

As someone who has been working in the 'social science' environment and now teaches politics at a department specialized in law and political studies, nonetheless, I feel that reading Kano's new book raises some questions over the purpose of scholarship of interdisciplinary Area Studies. The introduction suggests that Kano's project was motivated by problems concerning public policy-making in Japan: in particular, the reorganization of the welfare state system has had profound gender implications, as discussed in Gøsta Esping-Andersen's 2009 book, *Incomplete revolution*, which Kano unfortunately does not cite in the book. Given Japan's oft-cited demographic problems and low rankings in gender-related international indicators, this is one of the most active scholarly fields in which many noteworthy publications in English have been produced in recent years, often by those who are not necessarily categorized as 'Japan' experts but specialized in politics, sociology and social policy. While, Kano's book tries to make important contributions by clarifying the intellectual backgrounds to the issue of welfare