



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PATHOLOGISING THE MATERNAL BODY: MEDICAL PATRIARCHY AND POSTPARTUM IDENTITY IN RACHEL YODER'S *NIGHTBITCH*

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021) dissects the pathologisation of the maternal body under medical patriarchy, exposing how postpartum identity is fragmented and policed through clinical discourse. The novel's protagonist, transforming into a canine hybrid amid motherhood's corporeal demands, embodies feminist critiques of gynaecology as an extension of patriarchal control, where lactation, rage and bodily rebellion are recast as psychotic symptoms rather than valid responses to isolation and erasure. Drawing on theorists like Adrienne Rich and Susan Bordo, this analysis reveals how medical interventions such as therapy and pharmaceuticals reinforce normative femininity, stripping agency from the maternal subject while ignoring structural inequities like spousal detachment. Yoder subverts this through the narrator's feral reclamation, asserting a hybrid postpartum self that defies pathologisation. Ultimately, *Nightbitch* challenges the medical gaze, advocating embodied maternal knowledge beyond diagnostic confines.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood, in its raw corporeal reality, has long been a battleground where women's bodies are dissected, diagnosed and diminished under the gaze of medical authority. Rachel Yoder's 2021 novel *Nightbitch* lays bare this visceral conflict, chronicling an unnamed protagonist who is a former artist turned stay-at-home mother and whose postpartum transformation into a snarling, fur-sprouting canine hybrid exposes the pathologising mechanisms of medical patriarchy. As her body rebels against the drudgery of intensive motherhood, manifesting lactation leaks, feral rages and literal metamorphosis, the narrative interrogates how institutional medicine reduces these experiences to symptoms of mental illness, enforcing a normative postpartum identity that prioritises docility over defiance. This pathologisation is not merely a plot device but a feminist allegory for the systemic erasure of maternal agency, where the female body becomes a site of surveillance, pharmaceutical intervention and patriarchal control. Yoder's protagonist, dubbed "Nightbitch" by her own reckoning, embodies the tension between monstrous maternity and medical normalization, challenging readers to reconsider the postpartum self not as pathological but as a radical site of resistance. Published amid a surge of postpartum literature, from Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* to the viral discourse around "mom

rage" in the early 2020s, *Nightbitch* draws from Yoder's own Mennonite upbringing and experiences of motherhood, thereby infusing the fantastical with unflinching realism. The novel's structure mirrors the protagonist's unravelling: fragmented journal entries interspersed with scholarly annotations on canine behaviour and motherhood manuals, parodying the academic impulse to rationalise the irrational. At its core, the story pivots on the protagonist's isolation in a nameless suburb, her husband's corporate detachment and her encounters with a paediatrician, therapist and self-help guru who collectively frame her changes as postpartum psychosis or delusional disorder. "You're not turning into a dog," the therapist assures her, prescribing antidepressants that dull her instincts rather than validating her embodied fury (Yoder 145). This medical dismissal echoes historical precedents, from the 19th-century diagnosis of "puerperal insanity" to contemporary over-prescription of SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) for new mothers, where bodily autonomy is sacrificed for social conformity (Appignanesi 156; American Psychiatric Association 186). Feminist theory provides the lens to unpack this dynamic. Adrienne Rich's seminal *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) distinguishes between the biological imperatives of mothering and the institutional forces that weaponise them, arguing that "the institution of motherhood... has isolated women and locked them into a unit where they have no meaningful

connections" (Rich 112). Yoder extends this to the postpartum body, where the protagonist's physicality, that is, her swollen breasts, insatiable hunger, pack-like bonds with neighbourhood dogs disrupts the myth of the selfless "good mother" perpetuated by patriarchal medicine. Similarly, Emily Martin's *Perfect Bodies, Perfect Babies* (1999) critiques gynaecology's role in pathologising female reproduction, portraying the uterus and lactating body as malfunctioning machines requiring expert repair (Martin 45). In *Nightbitch*, the protagonist's refusal to conform manifests as literal pathology in medical eyes: her snarls diagnosed as dissociation, her fur as trichotillomania or body dysmorphia. This aligns with Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993), which posits femininity itself as a cultural artefact enforced through bodily discipline, where deviation invites medical correction to restore "normalcy" (Bordo 27). Moreover, the novel engages second-wave feminist concerns with hysteria, a term historically deployed against women whose symptoms eluded male science, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" to Freud's Dora case (Gilman 5). The protagonist's therapist embodies this legacy, interpreting her canine traits as repressed trauma rather than legitimate rage against marital inequity and capitalist motherhood. "The problem was not with her," Yoder writes, "but with a world that expected her to be both everything and nothing" (Yoder 89). Postcolonial and queer extensions of this critique, such as in Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), further illuminate how emotions like maternal anger are pathologised in white, middle-class contexts, rendering *Nightbitch*'s hybridity a queer disruption of heteronormative family structures (Ahmed 45). Her eventual embrace of the dog pack subverts this, reclaiming a feral postpartum identity that prioritises instinct over institution.

Interestingly, *Nightbitch* pathologises the maternal body to expose medical patriarchy's role in eroding postpartum identity, thereby, transforming embodied rebellion into treatable illness while suppressing women's subversive potential. Through close reading of key scenes like the doctor's visit, the "Mothering Book" critique and the climactic pack ritual, the analysis reveals how Yoder critiques surveillance medicine by drawing on feminist scholarship to advocate for a postpartum subjectivity that honours the monstrous over the medicated. By weaving corporeal horror with cultural critique, the novel not only diagnoses patriarchal motherhood but prescribes a feral antidote, urging a re-evaluation of the maternal body as agentic rather than aberrant. To elaborate, the protagonist's postpartum transformation in *Nightbitch* begins subtly, with leaking breasts and sleepless nights that escalate into fur patches and sharpened canines, marking the maternal body as a site ripe for medical dissection. These corporeal shifts are not fantastical anomalies but amplifications of real postpartum experiences such as hormonal crashes, chronic pain, identity dissolution that patriarchal medicine routinely pathologises as individual failures rather than systemic burdens. Yoder renders this through the narrator's journal: "My nipples wept without cease... and beneath my arms, dark hairs sprouted like accusations" (Yoder 23), a vivid corporeal lexicon that medicine hastens to diagnose as delusion, erasing the body's protest against intensive motherhood's toll. This pathologisation unfolds in the novel's early medical encounters, where the paediatrician's office becomes a confessional under fluorescent lights. The doctor, embodying institutional authority, scrutinises the narrator's fatigue and "odd posture" not as responses to solo childcare amid her

husband's globe-trotting, but as red flags for postpartum depression which is a catch-all that conflates exhaustion with illness (Yoder 67). Such framing aligns with feminist medical critiques, where conditions like diastasis recti or mastitis are minimised unless they disrupt productivity, while emotional turmoil is medicated to restore the compliant mother (Martin 67). The narrator's body, leaking and sprouting, resists this reduction. Her lactation becomes a grotesque abundance, parodying the "milkmaid" ideal that demands women's fluids serve others while pathologising overflow as dysfunction. Yoder draws on the historical medical gaze, from Victorian "lactation psychosis" to modern DSM-5 expansions of perinatal mood disorders, where the maternal body is surveilled quarterly and its deviations from normativity flagged for intervention (Appignanesi 189; American Psychiatric Association 186).

Patriarchal medicine's grip tightens as the protagonist consults a therapist, whose sessions dissect her "delusions" of canine heritage, for example, the fur samples dismissed as self-harm and snarls as auditory hallucinations. "It's common after birth," the therapist intones, prescribing SSRIs that blunt her rage without addressing the husband's emotional void or societal mandates for "attachment parenting" (Yoder 112). This mirrors Bordo's analysis of femininity as enforced through bodily regimes, where postpartum "bounce-back" culture positions recovery as moral duty, pathologising prolonged embodiment as vanity or instability (Bordo 165). In *Nightbitch*, the narrator's feral traits signify not madness but maternal excess: teeth elongating during teething solidarity with her son, instincts honing a protective vigilance that medicine brands as paranoia. Yoder critiques this via intertextual nods to werewolf lore, subverting male monstrous transformations, for example, Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves*, into female reclamations, where pathology becomes potency.

The novel further exposes pathologisation through parodic artefacts like the "Mothering Book," a stand-in for Lamaze manuals and What-to-Expect guides that normalize motherhood via checklists while rendering deviations aberrant. The protagonist annotates its platitudes of "Bonding is effortless if you try" with canine ethology, contrasting human isolation against pack interdependence (Yoder 156). Medical patriarchy thrives here, allying with consumer capitalism to commodify the postpartum body: supplements for milk supply, apps tracking moods, all presuming deviance requires correction. Yet Yoder inverts this. The narrator's shedding skin symbolizes shedding docility and her body is pathologised precisely because it demands recognition beyond clinical charts. Drawing on Rich, whose "arms of the mother" metaphor captures institutional strangulation, the novel posits the postpartum form as insurgent and leaks and growls as legible scripts against erasure. As the transformation accelerates, neighbourhood encounters amplify surveillance. A busybody mother flags her "unkempt" state to child services, invoking medical reports of neglect rooted in appearance rather than care quality (Yoder 201). This echoes Martin's *Perfect Bodies*, where gynaecology polices racialised and classed maternities, but Yoder universalises it through suburban whiteness, thereby, exposing how even privileged bodies fall under scrutiny. The protagonist's riposte of embracing "Nightbitch" moniker from misogynist forums, reclaims pathology as power, her howls disrupting PTA silences. Medical discourse falters against this. Pills suppress symptoms but not the underlying fury at a patriarchy that demands

women's bodies to give birth, nurture and vanish. Thus, Yoder's maternal body emerges not as patient but pathogen to the system, its pathologisation revealing medicine's patriarchal scaffolding. The protagonist's hybridity, for example, the human hands kneading bread and paws clawing earth embodies postpartum multiplicity, defying binary diagnoses of sane/insane, mother/monster. This corporeal rebellion sets the stage for deeper erosion of identity, where institutional forces strive to medicate away the self that motherhood both devours and births anew. To elaborate, medical patriarchy in *Nightbitch* operates through a trifecta of dismissal, drugging and domestication, systematically undermining the protagonist's postpartum agency to enforce a compliant maternal identity. The husband, a cipher for absentee father, defers to experts, amplifying institutional power: "Let the doctor handle it," he urges, absolving himself while the narrator's pleas for partnership are recast as symptoms (Yoder 78). These dynamics exemplify patriarchal medicine's alliance with familial norms where women's embodied distress is outsourced to professionals who prioritise foetal/infant welfare over maternal subjectivity, as critiqued in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, where motherhood's "institution" isolates women under male-defined expertise (Rich 112). Yoder's narrator internalises this, thus, questioning her sanity amid hormonal rhetoric that blames biology alone, ignoring structural inequities like unequal domestic labour.

The therapist's regime epitomises this control, pathologising feral instincts as "dissociative episodes" and prescribing Zoloft to "stabilize mood," dulling the protagonist's rage without interrogating its sources that may have been marital neglect or career sacrifice or worse, both (Yoder 134). Such interventions echo Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, where disciplinary medicine normalises female bodies through pharmacology and by framing deviation as disorder to sustain productivity (Bordo 139). It may be noted how *Nightbitch*'s sleep deprivation and isolation exacerbate psychological strain under "intense standards" of patriarchal motherhood, aligning Yoder with critiques of over-medicalisation. Similarly, the notion of "Feral and Free" invokes Rich alongside Audre Lorde to argue that Yoder queers motherhood by defying controls via popular culture and politics, thus, positioning *Nightbitch*'s rebellion against institutional isolation. The novel parodies this via the "Mothering Book," whose checklists prioritise "Smile through the pain", mirror DSM criteria, reducing complex postpartum realities to pathologies treatable by compliance. Patriarchal medicine further entrenches via gendered surveillance, as seen in the pediatrician's fixation on the son's milestones while ignoring the mother's fur-shedding exhaustion: "Focus on bonding," he advises while eliding her pleas (Yoder 92). This selective gaze perpetuates Emily Martin's thesis in *Perfect Bodies, Perfect Babies*, where gynaecology prioritises reproductive efficiency at the cost of pathologising maternal dissent as risk to offspring (Martin 99). Yoder amplifies the absurdity to expose how patriarchy medicalises resistance which ties transformation to rage against "impossible motherhood standards" set by psychosocial family structures. The protagonist's partial relief from medicines, as she states "clarity returned, but so did despair" (Yoder 167) underscores the trade-off: symptom suppression for self-erasure. Even self-help gurus reinforce this, with the "Mothering Expert" preaching evolutionary psychology that essentialises women as nurturers and dismisses *Nightbitch*'s howls as "unprocessed trauma" (Yoder 210). This pseudoscience bolsters patriarchy like Butler's performativity (191) in "The Power of Female

Rage" analysis shows domesticity as constructed identity challenged by rage, redefining motherhood on *Nightbitch*'s terms. Yoder critiques via the husband's complicity. He administers pills, embodying medical proxy and mirroring real inequities where the fathers evade labour. The narrative pivots here. Medicines fail against pack bonds revealing patriarchy's fragility when women collectivise beyond clinical isolation. Ultimately, medical patriarchy's mechanisms such as diagnosis as domination and pharmacology as pacification erode postpartum identity. But Yoder exposes their seams. The protagonist's escalating metamorphosis resists, snarling at a system that demands medicated maternity. It can be observed that this friction confronts patriarchal fragility by birthing revolt from abjection. The protagonist's reclamation subverts the gaze by transforming pathology into communal power. To further emphasise, postpartum identity in *Nightbitch* fractures under medical patriarchy's weight. It devours the protagonist's pre-maternal self of an artist, a lover and an individual by leaving a husk reshaped by monstrous embodiment. Initially "the Mother," her journal laments lost passions: "Where had the vitriolic emotions and sweeping gestures of her twenties disappeared to?" (Yoder 178), a void filled by canine rebirth that medicine deems erosion rather than evolution. This mirrors insights on monstrous motherhood, where transformation signals dissatisfaction with psychosocial family structures, as the Bad Mother trope points to disillusionment. Yoder charts erosion through bodily grotesquery. The elongated spine, extra nipples evoke motherhood's bloody, sweaty and dirty parts per analyses of identity under pressure. The husband's indifference accelerates this further. His "weaponised incompetence" reduces her to just a caregiver pathologising resistance as relational discord.

Research may affirm Yoder's Mennonite roots to bodily control rebellion and rewilding domesticity. Rage, suppressed medically, catalyses reclamation of "maternal power reclaimed" (O'Reilly), transforming erosion into radical subjectivity. In other terms, *Nightbitch*'s pack disrupts suburbia. Her snarls script feral maternity beyond diagnosis by echoing "Power of Female Rage" on challenging mystique. Thus, postpartum identity in *Nightbitch* erodes via patriarchal medicalisation but reclaims through monstrosity, thereby, affirming embodied resistance over normalised erasure.

To conclude, Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* compellingly elucidates the pathologisation of the maternal body as a cornerstone of medical patriarchy, systematically eroding postpartum identity while simultaneously furnishing the grounds for its radical reclamation. Through the protagonist's corporeal metamorphosis, that is, from a leaking, exhausted mother to feral pack leader, the novel dismantles the clinical imperative to normalise deviation, exposing institutional medicine's complicity in perpetuating gendered subjugation. This trajectory not only reaffirms foundational feminist critiques, such as Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as lived experience and its institutional codification, but extends them into contemporary discourses on reproductive governance, where the postpartum subject is interpellated as both patient and perpetrator (Rich 112). Yoder's narrative thus, intervenes in ongoing scholarly conversations, aligning with analyses of monstrous maternity that reposition abjection as a locus of subversive potential, wherein the "bad mother" archetype disrupts psychosocial norms of intensive parenting and emotional containment. The broader ramifications of this critique resonate profoundly

within literary and cultural studies, particularly amid the proliferation of perinatal mental health diagnostics in the post-2020 era. As postpartum mood disorders have ballooned into a diagnostic category encompassing an ever-widening array of embodied states, from lactation distress to maternal ambivalence, institutional responses privilege pharmaceutical and therapeutic modulation over structural reform, thereby, sustaining patriarchal asymmetries in domestic labour and bodily autonomy. Emily Martin's ethnographic dissections of gynaecological discourse further illuminate this dynamic by portraying the female reproductive body as a site of perpetual malfunction that demands expert remediation, a paradigm Yoder parodies through the therapist's futile prescriptions and the "Mothering Book's" 'reductivism' (Martin 139). In resisting such normalisation, *Nightbitch's* hybridity evokes Sara Ahmed's framework of affective politics, where "sticky" emotions like rage adhere to non-normative bodies by rendering them culturally unintelligible yet politically incendiary (Ahmed 90). The protagonist's howls, in this vein, constitute wilful acts of world-unmaking and remaking, forging communal solidarities beyond the nuclear family. Moreover, Yoder's integration of canine ethology with maternal horror refracts historical precedents of female pathologisation, from nineteenth-century puerperal insanity to Freudian hysteria, through a postmodern lens, queering motherhood's teleology and challenging the heteronormative imperatives enshrined in medical literature. Scholarly precedents, including Susan Bordo's excavations of disciplinary femininity, underscore how postpartum "bounce-back" imperatives function as technologies of the self and discipline the maternal form to align with neoliberal productivity (Bordo 165). Yet *Nightbitch* pivots triumphantly toward reclamation: the pack ritual, catalysing collective transformation among the Book Mommies, embodies a pre-oedipal maternal ethic of interdependence, subversive of isolationist ideologies. This denouement posits feral maternity not as devolution but as evolutionary rupture, thereby, advocating an embodied epistemology that privileges instinctual knowledge over diagnostic authority.

In synthesising pathologisation's violences with reclamation's triumphs, Yoder's novel thus models a feminist literary praxis that diagnoses the intersections of medicine, patriarchy and maternity while prescribing feral agency as prophylaxis.

By rendering the postpartum body legible as insurgent rather than aberrant, *Nightbitch* compels a re-evaluation of scholarly and clinical paradigms, urging future enquiries into how monstrous narratives might dismantle enduring architectures of control. Ultimately, the text stands as both an indictment and invitation- to heed the maternal snarl as clarion call for systemic upheaval while birthing anew the possibilities of un-pathologised and unapologetic womanhood.

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