

Unnatural Mothers: Queering Motherhood in Helen Elaine Lee's *Pomegranate*

By Olaitan Olanrewaju¹

¹Department of English, University of Minnesota

Abstract: Inspired by the tenets of queer studies, this paper explores Helen Elaine Lee's novel *Pomegranate* as a reimagining of established norms surrounding motherhood. The dissonance of protagonist Ranita Atwater's post-incarceration journey as a mother, especially when juxtaposed with Eldora's revolutionary form of motherhood within the prison setting, serves as a focal point for critically examining how Lee's *Pomegranate* challenges conventional concepts related to intimacy, lesbianism, and kinship. Drawing from the insights of scholars such as Shelley M. Park, Jennifer C. Nash, and Steven Ruggles, this literary analysis delves into the profound relationship between prison and motherhood. The dissonance in Ranita's experiences becomes a powerful tool for dismantling the United States' myth of the nuclear mother, and unraveling contradictions and conflicts embedded in conventional ideas. By juxtaposing these contrasting narratives, this paper aims to offer a radical vision of motherhood—one that transcends heteropatriarchal societal norms. This interdisciplinary approach extends beyond traditional boundaries, fostering a comprehensive understanding of how the queered mother dynamic within the walls of the prison challenges and disrupts heteronormative standards imposed by the state. In embracing the spirit of queer studies, this exploration not only contributes to a broader discourse on motherhood but also actively engages in reshaping our understanding of familial constructs. Through this lens, this paper aspires to offer a fresh and provocative perspective that not only explores the narrative intricacies of Lee's novel but also advocates for an embrace of the possibilities of the prison, queerness, and queer utopias.

Helen Elaine Lee's 2023 novel, *Pomegranate*, chronicles the journey of protagonist Ranita Atwater, a Black woman, as she attempts to navigate life after incarceration. After three years of sobriety in

prison, Ranita embarks on a quest to remain clean and regain custody of her children, Amara and Theo. Lee's narrative intertwines Ranita's pursuit of sobriety and parental rights with her internal turmoil surrounding

her sexuality; she grapples with the complexities of her relationship with Maxine, a fellow woman and former inmate, as she seeks to reconcile her past with her present. In this narrative framework, Lee strategically employs the prison as a vehicle for reimaginings of intimacy, lesbianism, kinship, and, most prominently, motherhood. In Lee's novel, the inmate Eldora subverts traditional motherhood roles within the prison, which juxtaposes Ranita's struggle against the state's heteronormative and oppressive surveillance of her motherhood post-incarceration. These contrasts serve as vehicles for an exploration of motherhood: through these characters' experiences, Lee critiques conventional notions of motherhood, highlighting the prison as a site for troubling and cultivating a vision of motherhood beyond the confines of the heteronormative nuclear family.

Lee's novel begins with Ranita preparing for her release. In honor of this release, Ranita's fellow inmates throw her a party:

[Ranita] drifted over to the corner where Eldora and her family were braiding hair, defying the rule against outside-of-the-cell grooming that even the COs overlooked. Eldora was dropping some plant world knowledge. Mothering. Binding them together with a story about how trees have to bend to survive. She had reached out to Ranita when she first got there to try and bring her into the fold (Lee 6).

As Eldora claims the status of mother, she subverts conventional notions of

motherhood, challenging what Shelley M. Park describes as "various interlocking systems of privilege and oppression [that] shape our claims about who has the right to claim the social and legal status of mother stems, in part, from biocentric theories of motherhood" (Park 4). Eldora's subversion of the interlocking systems presented by Park begins as she assumes the role of gatekeeper; Eldora's motherhood is not relegated to the private sphere because she embodies the mother, not as a passive homemaker, but rather as the public-facing figure of the family. Thus, motherhood becomes a deliberate, conscious choice for both potential mothers and those seeking to be mothered. This conception of motherhood affords agency to individuals within this redefined familial construct. Notably, despite her womanhood, Eldora can assume the role of a mother without undergoing the birthing process. This form of motherhood within the prison does not necessitate the presence of female reproductive organs nor a gestational period.

In these ways, Eldora can be likened to an adoptive mother. Expanding on this notion reveals a critical perspective on adoptive maternal bodies, as highlighted in Park's *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*: "[T]here is something queer about any adoptive maternal body—a body that poses as, yet is not a "real" mother; a body that presupposes, yet is defined in opposition to, procreative activity; a body that is marked as defective, yet is chosen as capable" (Park 58). By refusing to present motherhood as a right granted by corporality, Lee's vision of mothering resembles the concept of "revolutionary mothering," as

defined by Jennifer C. Nash in “The Political Life of Black Motherhood”. Revolutionary mothering “refers to acts of care, tenderness, love, and political-dreaming that include and also exceed reproductive mothering” (Nash 703). Eldora’s mothering, as depicted in the act of braiding hair and sharing wisdom about the resilience of trees, embodies acts of care, tenderness, and love. The care shown in Eldora’s narrative transcends the prison, transforming the seemingly restricted act of hair braiding into a powerful declaration—a collective assertion of resilience and defiance among the inmates. In Eldora’s care, mothering and kinship become revolutionary.

Following release from prison, Ranita meets with her caseworker to discuss her reintegration into the world and her desire to regain custody of her children. Frustrated with the progression of the conversation, Ranita reflects: “The law says you’re not a parent anymore. Your kids are orphans and you’ve got no rights. As a mother, you’re finished” (Lee 39). Ranita’s thoughts starkly grapple with motherhood within the legal and political framework of the state. Ranita’s struggles with motherhood following her incarceration recall Nash’s theory that “black mothers continue to be subjected to state scrutiny and biopolitical surveillance, sometimes cast in the guise of marking black women’s alterity and sometimes cast in the guise of compassionate help” (701). Ranita’s incarceration and lack of a male partner render her motherhood unnatural, which calls for the surveillance of the state on her family. Ranita’s motherhood has now become a political site—she may never be granted motherhood again if she fails to adhere to the

regulations of the state to make herself legible. A formerly incarcerated woman such as Ranita ultimately troubles the project of the nuclear family, which Steven Ruggles defines as “a married couple and their children residing together, with or without nonrelatives” (103). Both Eldora and Ranita’s experiences of motherhood disavow the nuclear family paradigm, challenging its traditional structure and dynamics. While Eldora chose to embody the role of a mother within the prison community and her children were granted personhood through their ability to consent to being mothered by her, Ranita’s experience of motherhood becomes a political battleground imposed upon her by the intervention of the state. As Ranita struggles to navigate the complex web of legal and societal expectations surrounding her maternal rights, her children are stripped of their personhood and reduced to mere pawns in the state’s bureaucratic machinery. This conception of kinship and motherhood is in direct opposition with the organic and consensual motherhood found within the prison community—in Ranita’s post-incarceration world, mothers and motherhood are prescribed by external forces, robbing both her and her children of agency and autonomy.

To regain custody of her children, Ranita is mandated to attend therapy sessions. When Ranita decides not to attend a therapy session, she considers her motivations: “My thing with Maxine is my business. It’ll just sound like jail talk. It’s one more minus, one more way I’m an unfit mother, one more reason Auntie Val will do a better job with my kids” (Lee 126). Ranita’s acknowledgment of her relationship with

Maxine as central to her identity and her rejection of institutional demands signify a departure from conventional temporal markers, recalling Jack Halberstam's theorizing of queer time: "Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience--namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (Halberstam 2). In Ranita's narrative, her incarceration, her lesbian identity, and her relationship with Maxine disrupt the linear progression of life as prescribed by heteronormative society. By asserting her autonomy and failing to conform to the progressive markers of life, Ranita's existence embodies the fluidity and non-linear nature of queer time. Conversely, Aunt Val, who is caring for Ranita's children, represents an adherence to traditional heterosexual conceptions of time, where life must progress from birth to education, then to a career, and finally to heterosexual marriage in order to be deemed fit for motherhood. Aunt Val's adherence to this linear trajectory makes her an acceptable mother in the eyes of the state.

Amidst her own struggles and insecurities, Ranita views Auntie Val as a paragon of motherhood. As Ranita considers the kind of mother Auntie Val is to her children, she thinks, "What I can picture is Val, mothering my kids. On her worst day, she's probably a better caregiver than me, and I'm sure she takes them on outings like the ones we had when she visited, and to museums. She's involved with their homework, and I'm sure her cookies are

never store-bought, or even from a mix" (Lee 105). In Ranita's eyes, Auntie Val, characterized by domestic proficiency and a nurturing disposition, embodies an ideal mother. However, Ranita's idealization of Auntie Val also exemplifies the limitations imposed by societal norms and expectations surrounding motherhood. By attributing Auntie Val with qualities that align with traditional notions of ideal motherhood, Ranita inadvertently perpetuates the rigid standards that define maternal worth within the confines of straight time. In Ranita's idealization of Auntie Val lies a yearning for acceptance and validation within the societal construct of motherhood. The prevalence of straight time compels individuals such as Ranita to aspire towards conformity with its dictates in order to attain recognition as legitimate mothers. Despite her recognition of the limitations inherent in conforming to traditional notions of ideal motherhood, Ranita feels compelled to uphold these standards as the only viable route to reclaiming her maternal identity. Ranita's ultimate idealization of Auntie Val functions as a form of self-management, through which she internalizes and reproduces the same disciplinary mechanisms employed by the state to regulate her behavior. The state, through mandates such as therapy sessions, imposes a set of norms and expectations upon Ranita, dictating what constitutes acceptable motherhood. In turn, Ranita begins to internalize these norms, adopting them as her own criteria for evaluating her worth as a mother.

Despite the pervasiveness of the unnatural, or queered, mother, this figure is only fully realized within the prison. Eldora,

unlike Ranita, in her embodiment of motherhood within the prison, operates within a framework of queer time. Someone such as Eldora, who hasn't followed the temporal markers of straight time, challenges the straight logic of what makes a mother. Eldora's motherhood, as depicted in the act of braiding hair and sharing wisdom about the resilience of trees, embodies acts of care, tenderness, and love that are accepted by the members of the prison. In Eldora's nurturing of her fellow inmates and the creation of a supportive community, she embodies the fluidity and non-linearity of queer time, offering a deeply radical vision of motherhood that transcends conventional boundaries. In contrast, Ranita's struggles with motherhood post-incarceration highlight the oppressive scrutiny of the state, which imposes a rigid, heteronormative understanding of family structure. In this clash of ideologies, Lee's novel underscores how the prison, with its embrace of unconventional dynamics, serves as a catalyst for troubling traditional concepts of motherhood, offering a provocative lens—a lens that can be used to imagine life and kinship beyond a nuclear family.

References

Halberstam, J. Jack, and Judith Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. NYU Press, 2005. Accessed 18 February 2024.

Lee, Helen Elaine. *Pomegranate: A Novel*. Atria Books, 2023.

Nash, Jennifer C. "The Political Life of Black Motherhood." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 44 no. 3, 2018, p. 699-712. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2018.0035>.

Park, Shelley M. *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families*. *State University of New York Press*, 2013.

Ruggles, Steven. "The Transformation of American Family Structure." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 99, no. 1, 1994, pp. 103-28. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2166164>. (7)