

**“If We Could Learn to Learn from Pain”:
A Contemporary Literary Ethics of Women's Suffering and Self-Sacrifice**

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This dissertation explores suffering and self-sacrifice in literature and theory from 1950 to the present, highlighting the concern with suffering in numerous women writers' texts as well as the way several contemporary discussions of ethics—including feminisms, theologies, and poststructuralist theory—crystallize around redemptive sacrifice. Noting that the late-twentieth-century turn to ethics in literary studies participates in a problematic erasure of the gendered and religious histories of redemptive sacrifice, I argue that my project's literary texts correct this erasure through a dynamic interplay of what I call the “ethics of literary representation” and the “ethics of readerly attention,” an ongoing interaction of form and content, critique and embrace.

Chapter One traces a narrative of women's writing in English, beginning with Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love* (c. 1400) and running through the present, in order to highlight the long history of women's literary engagement with the Judeo-Christian cultural mandate that women suffer and sacrifice themselves for men and children. This first chapter also explicates the rhetorical role of suffering and sacrifice in contemporary understandings of literature and theories of ethics. In Chapter Two I argue that Adrienne Rich, famous for her critique of the institution of self-sacrificing motherhood and linked in the 1970s to radical feminist philosopher-theologian Mary Daly, paradoxically exemplifies an ethical practice of endless, self-giving reinterpretation. I locate this practice in her poetic exploration of language's risks and possibilities; her suggestion of an ethical paradigm rooted in mothering that accompanies the critique in *Of Woman Born*; and her self-revision, including her later texts' more hopeful outlook on religion and their shift away from separatist feminism to a stand against global injustices. Chapter Three reads Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved*, *Love*, and *A Mercy* together with the Black Liberation theology of redemptive suffering and womanist theologians' challenges to Black theology in light of gender. Here I assert that Morrison's texts perform a paradox in suggesting an ethical model of self-giving responsibility that is not unlike Christian redemption and, at the same time, subverting such generalizations through their specific representations of raced, gendered, and classed suffering and service. Chapter Four situates Ana Castillo's novels *So Far From God* and *The Guardians* within a narrative of Chicana activism and the Mexican-Catholic heritage of self-sacrificing mothers. I locate within her novels a hermeneutic of liberation that re-interprets religious stories through the lived experiences of the oppressed and suggests an ambivalence that does not quite abandon religion as a source of empowerment for women. Chapter Five examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *That Thing Around Your Neck*, all published since 2003. I argue that Adichie's exploration of injustice as arising from the post-colonial heritages of political turmoil as well as familial and religious patriarchy—and her suggestion of critical fidelity to those broken systems through a proliferation of particular stories— offers a brave critique of unjust suffering paradoxically accompanied by a creative and risky refusal to reject these specific histories altogether.

The dissertation concludes with a poetic meditation on the endless interplay of the ethics of literary representation and the ethics of readerly attention at work in these literary texts. By mediating my synthesis of a literary ethics of women's suffering and self-sacrifice through the inescapably particular details of the texts I study and through creative accounts of my own reading experience and critical desire, I perform in this last chapter one of the project's fundamental insights, namely, the paradoxical dance of critique and re-vision, textuality and materiality, the personal and the political.