



# The Pursuit of Work-Family Balance and the Crisis of Social Reproduction in Short Fiction by Helen Simpson and Tessa Hadley

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## Abstract

In this interdisciplinary paper I will embark on a feminist reading of contemporary short fiction by women writers focusing on the topic of work-life balance in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will show how the Friedanian dissatisfaction traced in the female characters by Hadley and Simpson is symptomatic of the infeasibility of work-life balance which has emerged as a new feminist ideal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through the writing of Angela McRobbie, Catherine Rottenberg and Nancy Fraser I will showcase how feminism has changed its goals and vocabulary and how it is being used in order to alleviate the ongoing crisis of social reproduction that has emerged in the neoliberal world. This paper will conclude that Helen Simpson's and Tessa Hadley's short fiction bring the crisis of social reproduction in the spotlight, expose the trap that the new ideal of work-life balance entails, showcase the challenges that women face when trying to reach an impossible ideal and question the contemporary face of mainstream feminism. In other words, I will show how Simpson and Hadley's writing contends that patriarchy is still in place and calls for resistance.

**Keywords:** balance, social reproduction, neoliberal feminism, care, short fiction

## 1. Introduction

Women writers' special relationship to the short story has been theorized in relation to its brevity that suits the nature of domestic tasks as well as its ephemeral nature and flexible publication that –together with the relative newness of the genre- favour experimentation. Feminist issues, therefore, have often been explored through the short story. Emma Young (2015) writes about a 'female tradition' (p.6) of the short story, Ellen Burton Harrington (2008) about a 'feminist form' (8) and Laura Ma Lojo Rodriguez and Jorge Sacido-Romero (2018) refer to the short story as 'a vehicle for the expression of female experience that is often critical with reality and with dominant patriarchal ideology'(p.2). Therefore, I consider the short story the ideal genre to study the theme of work-life balance.

## 2. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

In this paper I will focus on the literary depiction of the issue of balance as a new feminist goal in the short fiction of Helen Simpson and Tessa Hadley. I will analyze how these two writers deal with the change of the feminist landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how they portray the shift of feminist ideals from social equality, for instance equal pay and opportunities- to work-life balance and what their attitude towards this shift is. I will also show how Hadley and Simpson expose the ways that balance as an ideal is instrumentalised to alleviate the ongoing crisis of social reproduction and to perpetuate patriarchal structures.

The analysis of the literary depiction of balance as a new feminist ideal as well as its relation to the crisis of social reproduction is important because, as I will show, contemporary short fiction has managed to capture and reflect on the complexities of the contemporary feminist moment, which is admittedly elusive in its analysis, not only because it is ongoing but also because it is multifaceted and intricate. The portrayal of the infiltration of the lifestyle of neoliberal feminism's values in contemporary life and of a mostly silent crisis of social reproduction confirms the fact that the feminist landscape has been altered significantly. This paper then contributes to the understanding of the literary reception of the contemporary nuances of 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist ideals and their social and political consequences and communicates the urgency to rethink the feminist movement's orientation.

In the two decades of the twenty first century the short story has enjoyed a 'return to popularity' (Young and Bailey p.4) and issues of gender and genre have been discussed by a number of scholars. Emma Young and James Bailey have edited a collection of essays with the title *British Women Short Story Writers* and have tackled a wide range of writers and issues. Jorge Sacido-Romero and Laura Ma Lojo Rodriguez have also edited a collection named *Gender and Short Fiction* with a wide spectrum of writers and topics. Emma Young's book *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* studies issues such as motherhood, marriage, domesticity and the body. Ruth Robbins has also written a chapter titled 'Gender and Genre in the Short Story' in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Short Story in English* about marriage in the short story. All research so far traces the evolution of the short story and its relation to gender, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present moment.

This paper focuses on the two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Balance is a topic that is closely related to marriage and domesticity but it is very particular to the twenty-first century short story because it relates to the interplay of the private and the public world and because it is part of the new neoliberal feminist vocabulary. This paper then has a very specific scope in terms of time and topic. What is also significant in this paper is the fact that it draws from sociology and cultural studies in order to interpret the feminist literary critique of Hadley and Simpson. Because of the fact that this paper centers around the contemporary feminist moment for which the research conducted is relatively limited and because of the fact that my perspective is interdisciplinary, I believe that this paper will comprise not only an informed feminist reading of Simpson's and Hadley's short fiction but also a comprehensive literary analysis of one of the most popular terms of contemporary feminism, that of balance. Hopefully, this paper will point to a reading of my chosen writers that opens up the personal to the political and will point to the literary comment by Simpson and Hadley on the current state of feminism.

As I will show in this paper, thinkers such as Nancy Fraser, Angela McRobbie and Catherine Rottenberg claim that neoliberal feminism is instrumentalised in order to soften the critique on patriarchal structures. Simpson's and Hadley's stories, I will contend through this paper, are voices that fight against the silencing of a more authentic kind of feminism and that shed light to its unfinished work. In that sense, this paper is significant because it brings to light

Simpson's and Hadley's literary voices of resistance against the dominance of neoliberal feminism.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. From Postfeminism to Neoliberal Feminism

The first two decades of the century are characterized by a number of contradictions and are in no way homogeneous. The new millennium begins with feminism being considered irrelevant, since equality has supposedly been established. The backlash on feminism that began around the 80s, continued up to the end of the 00s. Susan Faludi analyzed this backlash in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* as springing from a belief that feminism has achieved its goals but its strict agenda had denied women the pleasures of love, marriage, and children. In the *Aftermath of Feminism* in 2008 Angela McRobbie writes that within postfeminism women are now relieved that they can enjoy the femininity that had somehow been prohibited by second wave feminism. Genz and Brabon, as well as Angela McRobbie and many other feminist thinkers, agree that within postfeminism the gains of feminism are celebrated but very quickly taken for granted and the need for collective mobilisation is dismissed in favour of an individualistic pursuit of 'female success' (McRobbie *Aftermath* p.14). McRobbie explains that the kind of feminism that is indeed taken into account is liberal feminism that does not seek to disrupt the social order but instead emphasizes equal opportunities, the chance for an education, work and equal participation in society. Radical feminism on the other hand is portrayed negatively in the media in the 2000s and the feminist has become a caricature in popular culture.

Enjoying feminist gains and taking advantage of the newly acquired rights for women is then a matter of personal responsibility, choice and hard work within postfeminism. Ascending the social ladder is also dependent on women's will for constant self-improvement. Social change, as it is understood within postfeminism, has already been established (McRobbie, 2008, p.17). Hence, social action is not required. McRobbie argues against this kind of simplistic optimism pointing to the persistence of gender hierarchies and 'the perhaps more subtle ways in which these are constantly reproduced' (2008, p.46). Genz and Brabon write that the freedom of women in the 2000s is actually nothing more than the freedom to purchase. McRobbie also writes about a new sexual contract that women have signed entailing the abandonment of feminism in favour of freedom and choice in participating in waged work that has given them the ticket to a consumer culture that favours continuous self-improvement. In this faux-feminist world (as McRobbie names it) the female subject is presented as an extremely capable person that is required to create a life plan and take responsibility for it.

Social mobility then is nothing but wishful thinking that dispenses with issues of class, ethnicity and race and is available only to an already privileged group that is very limited, notably white middle and upper class women. The dismantling of the welfare state, for example, has rendered a great number of jobs inaccessible for lower class women in need of childcare, not to mention single mothers.

A number of thinkers, then, challenged the idea that feminism has succeeded and is therefore not needed anymore. The relief that women have been allowed agency and freedom, though, took a rather unexpected turn for a great number of people. Women are free to choose, so they might as well choose to stay at home. This choice appears of course as a result of a shift towards the right in the western world that has reached a climax in the new millennium and has been encouraged by the rise of right governments in Europe and the US and the alt right

ideology. New traditionalism takes as its starting point the difficulties faced by women to achieve a work-life balance and as Susan Faludi has argued, it glosses over the return to the home with a consumer culture that has updated the image of the housewife and continues to enhance this image to the present moment. The hardships of domesticity that were brought to light by such feminist writers as Betty Friedan or Germaine Greer are now presented as part of a new lifestyle that is made all the more easier by the use of the right products and brands. The home becomes a haven, a place of autonomy, a new kingdom where women can reign.

Around the year 2012 and 2013, however, there is a change noted. The complex postfeminist landscape of the first decade has been characterized by the indecidability between playing the male game and ascending the professional ladder and the return to the pleasures of femininity. Rottenberg points to the green light that was given by the mainstream media to women to 'opt out' of the professional world for the benefit of their children and to how this encouragement has changed in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. '(o)ver the past ten years, this either/or discourse has been receding in the United States, and balance has come to fill its place....middle-class stay-at-home mothers are 'out' while self-identified feminist 'go-getters-' *with children* are 'in'' (2018, p.87). Balance, it seems, practically, means doing it all at a minimum cost.

This major unexpected shift in the attitude towards feminism takes place in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The word 'feminism' becomes a trend again and a great number of high profile women identify as feminists. Rottenberg locates that shift in 2012 and Mc Robbie considers 2013 the year that marked the resurfacing of the feminist lexicon, albeit not in opposition to the dominant culture but within the dominant culture (Rottenberg, 2018, p.79). This new feminism does not seek to subvert the status quo but rather is incorporated in the popular culture, validating the existing social structures and demanding that women become empowered enough to compete in equal terms.

The neoliberal female subject is entrepreneurial, consumerist, fit, fashionable and devoted to both work and family. This new feminist subject takes full responsibility for its own well-being and self-care and does not question existing hierarchies. It recognizes inequalities and is willing to do the hard work to rise above them. The neoliberal female subject lives in a world where the private and the public domain are both colonized by a market logic- as is everything else. Because everything is part of the market and potentially generates capital, Rottenberg uses the term 'generic human capital' to refer to women and the self as an enterprise (2018, p.79). The agony to increase one's value becomes a life's task that infiltrates every aspect of life.

With the new visibility of feminism, the idealization of motherhood and the rhetoric of family values that had been linked to new traditionalist right wing ideas in the beginning of the century, surprisingly expanded to the centre and the left. Angela McRobbie writes in a 2013 essay about the rise of a multi-mediated maternalism that substitutes the out of date right wing rhetoric of family values with 'a new more contemporary script 'dictating a 'style of affluent, feminine maternity' (2020, p.12-13), a 'professionalization of motherhood' (p.31) and a 'bombardment of images showing super-wealthy mothers enjoying their luxury lifestyles' (p.40) on social media. Using a pseudo feminist vocabulary the state expands the vocabulary of personal responsibility on the family and transforms the hard work of care into a lifestyle goal.

The complexities of the feminist landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the background against which the short fiction by Hadley and Simpson unfold. It is from this shifting landscape that the new feminist ideal of balance emerges.

### 3.2. Social Reproduction

Helen Simpson and Tessa Hadley eloquently portray the crisis of social reproduction which is defined as ‘(T)he work of birthing and socializing the young’, ‘maintaining households, building communities and sustaining the shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation’ (Fraser, 2023, p.74). Fraser claims that capitalism *free rides* on care and uses it as a precondition for profit –together with other conditions, such as colonization, nature and public services. While capitalism needs society to be reproduced in order for production to continue, it conveniently gets rid of the maintenance cost. While in the past capitalism has provided care in order to secure healthy workers, fit for production, this is no longer the case, partly because of the cheap labour brought about by globalization. Care that used to be provided by the welfare state is externalized ‘onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it’ (Fraser, 2016, p.112). In these stories we witness the very greediness of capitalism that feeds on care but at the same time belittles it and diminishes the capacity of carers to perform care stretching their psychological and physical resources to their limits. This is true not only for unpaid care but also for paid care. ‘The fact is, our social system is sapping energies needed to tend to families, maintain households, sustain communities, nourish friendships, build political networks, and forge solidarities. Often referred to as carework, these activities are indispensable to society: they replenish human beings, both daily and generationally, while also maintaining social bonds.’ (Fraser, 2023, p.72). The shrinking of the welfare state is ongoing and care is being more and more privatized. Public care is being dismantled by lack of funding which ultimately and despite the emotional commitment of most caregivers, lowers its quality. Fraser calls this an inherent contradiction of capitalism and both Simpson and Hadley portray female characters who have reached a point where their work as carers –paid or unpaid- is undervalued, their professional life –if any- is problematic, one way or another, their relationships suffer and their inner lives are at the very least turbulent. This is the terrain of Simpson’s and Hadley’s characters.

### 3.3. Care Crisis

The current care crisis has been described wonderfully by the Care Collective, a group of academics from different disciplines that was formed in 2017 to understand and address the multiple crises of care in their book *The Care Manifesto: The politics of Interdependence*. The Care Collective draws a dire picture of the world today in which ‘carelessness reigns’. They explain that the governments have ignored the care crisis and actively chose to invest in military hardware and other causes unrelated to the quality of life of their citizens. The pandemic has highlighted an already existing crisis. The Care Collective describes a world where care has been dismantled and handed to the private sector where it is only available to the wealthy. The dismantling of care provisions comes from the underfunding that is the result of policies of governments that do not consider care a fundamental right for everyone but a luxury for the few. The crisis of care, according to The Care Collective is more acute over the last forty years ‘as governments accepted neoliberal capitalism’s near-ubiquitous positioning of profit-making as the organizing principle of life’. They begin with the long history of devaluation of care, evident in the low pay and low social prestige of carework, attributing it to the association of care with the feminine and to the promotion of the archetypal neoliberal subject that is autonomous, entrepreneurial and resilient. Care is in crisis because ‘we have, for a long time, been rendered less capable of caring for others even in our most intimate spheres, while being energetically encouraged to restrict our care for strangers and distant others’. (p.4). As a result, they demand universal care which will only be possible if the organizing principle of life is not profit-making but the well-being of

citizens. Drawing on feminist thinkers they speak about acts of not caring which have allowed the engorgement of a non-caring society that turns a blind eye to phenomena such as femicides, the climate crisis or the drowning of refugees. They discuss the relation of the lack of care to the existence of a 'shadow state' that has replaced the welfare state, that is the corporate organizations to which care was been outsourced. They describe their perspective as queer-feminist-anti-racist-eco-socialist and, allying themselves with thinkers such as Joan Tronto and Nancy Fraser, they shed light on the ways that the care crisis has been accentuated today as the result of neoliberal policies.

Emma Dowling, in her book *The Care Crisis: What caused it and How Can We End it?*, places the Global Financial Crisis at the centre of her analysis. She clearly suggests that the world had been operating with debts and deficits in the past and that the 2008 economic collapse was used as a pretext to employ policies that had long been the dream of the forces of capital. The insecurity of upper classes was alleviated at the expense of the lower classes. According to Dowling, in order for the forces of capital to maintain the existing order of financial hierarchy, strict policies were inflicted onto the masses and care was the first to suffer- exactly at the moment when it was mostly needed. The two areas where the measures have been the most severe is the social security system and the local authority funding, used for social and community services. As a consequence, the social services are weakened at the very moment they are mostly needed. Dowling exemplifies how the disinvestment in the care factor that started in the 80s has led to even further cuts in funding that led to lower quality services and to privatization and outsourcing of social services.

Nancy Folbre writes about the 'care penalty' that is the financial disadvantage of caregivers within the family. The time and work offered by carers, who are usually women, contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Female characters by Simpson and Hadley are characteristic examples of the care penalty since most of them have to limit their working hours in order to care for their family. Care is also center stage in Judith Shulevitz' New York Times article 'How to Fix Feminism' that explains how care is becoming more and more challenging because of the expanding working hours.

Both Simpson and Hadley's stories have the care crisis as a social background and their characters suffer from lack of care and from the pressure to care in a world that limits their capacities for it.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. 'The problem that has no name'**

Strangely enough, Simpson's and Hadley's characters echo the suffocation that Betty Friedan described as the destiny of suburban housewives during the fifties' postwar backlash –despite the fact that women now enjoy the feminist gains of freedom and choice. Simpson's and Hadley's characters are loving mothers and wives who are, however, mentally and psychologically exhausted. Childcare and housework are taking their toll on them and it is almost impossible not to make the connection of these characters' concerns to the suffering described by Betty Friedan in her 1963 emblematic book *The Feminine Mystique* as 'the problem that has no name'.

Both writers portray mothers who are the primary caregivers in their family, and who experience a profound crisis of identity. Dorrie, for example, in Simpson's 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' starts waking up very early in the morning just to have the chance to think, since taking care of her children does not leave her time during the day. 'It was not in fact possible

to think under these conditions; no train of thought could ever leave the platform....the secret of motherhood being a frontal lobotomy or a bottle in front of me' (p.26). Janie and Rachel, in 'Sunstroke' by Hadley, 'have been, half involuntarily, absorbed into the warm vegetable soup of motherhood, which surprisingly resembles their own mothers' lives, thirty years ago'. In the next paragraph, Hadley clarifies 'Neither is exactly unhappy, but what has built up instead is a sense of surplus, of life un-lived' (p.4).

These characters feel that way despite the fact that they inhabit the postfeminist world. They are free to choose work or home. Life becomes a project, the product of careful planning for which women need to constantly invest in themselves. As McRobbie analyses in the *The Aftermath of Feminism*, life politics replaces feminism in the postfeminist era and women are required to enter a different struggle: the struggle of becoming their best selves, of constantly improving their performance as mothers and wives. Rottenberg uses the term 'generic human capital' to refer to the self as a site of investment that will pay off in multiple domains eg. a good job, marriage, class mobility (p.79). The struggle of Hadley's and Simpson's characters to increase their human capital as wives, mothers and professionals runs throughout the stories as I will show in the close reading that follows.

A teenage character by Simpson, Jade, from the story 'Lentils and Lillies' anticipates 'choice landscapes and triumphs and adventures' (p.4) in her future. So why does the problem that has no name persist despite all these choices?

## **4.2. Challenges in the Achievement of Work-Life Balance**

Simpson's and Hadley's characters inhabit a world where they are encouraged to believe that equality has been achieved and that feminism is no longer needed. Consequently, since men can have it all, careers and families all throughout history, women will be able to as well. That is what Simpson's and Hadley's female characters infer. Their stories are about what happens when these characters realize that things are not that simple: there are major challenges in the journey towards work-life balance.

### **4.2.1. Struggle for Perfection**

First of all, Simpson's and Hadley's characters realize a little too late that in order to have it all, they need to do it all -and not just do it all but do it to the point of perfection. This struggle for perfection is identified by McRobbie in her essay 'Notes on the Perfect'. The perfect becomes 'a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life' p.9), an expectation that evidently becomes oppressive. The main domains that Simpson and Hadley identify as the major domains that women are required to prove themselves as 'subjects of capacity' (McRobbie, 2008, p.58) are appearance and family.

**a. The 'postfeminist masquerade'.** McRobbie has written extensively on what she calls 'the postfeminist masquerade', a requirement to comply with the rules of the fashion and beauty industry. Dorrie in Simpson's 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' feels that she fails her husband because she does not manage to appear slim and well-dressed in their wedding anniversary. Her husband bluntly tells her that she has let herself go and that it is a 'matter of discipline'. 'Why couldn't she bloody well look after herself better? he wonders. Dorrie's face is described as 'worn, her hair as 'untended' and the application of her lipstick as 'unaccustomed and unflattering' (p.51) Dorrie herself is apologetic 'I'm sorry I didn't manage to make myself look nice' (p.49), while her husband perceives her appearance as 'total lack of respect' (p.49). Susan, in Hadley's story 'Flight', a woman who works as a carer for the elderly 'stopped bothering with her appearance' (p.136), whereas her successful sister looks much younger. In both Simpson and Hadley professionally successful women are

thinner and more sexually attractive than stay-at-home mothers. Both writers shed light to the new regulations imposed on women, creating a self-monitoring framework that is evolving into a new set of constraints.

**b. Intensive Mothering.** Mothering also falls under the logic of aiming for perfection. Simpson's and Hadley's characters are victims of the culture of intensive mothering. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels in their book on the idealization of motherhood identify the 'new momism' as a set of ideals, norms and practices, powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but in reality promulgates standards of perfection that are beyond anyone's reach. As Dorrie states in 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' mothers today need to 'love well' and children are 'incredibly quick to castigate any shortfall in the quality of attention paid to them' (2000, p.45). The new momism is the direct descendent and latest version of what Friedan famously labeled 'the feminine mystique' (1996, p.620). The new momism, or as Sharon Hays calls it 'intensive mothering' glorifies the 'unadulterated joy of motherhood' (Douglas, 2005, p.629). It insists that mothers are the ideal primary carers for their children and that in order to qualify as good mothers they should devote their entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being to their children (Douglas, 2005, p.619). 'Intensive mothering is the ultimate female Olympics' (Douglas, 2005, p.621). In other words, it is 'an ideological construction that functions as a backlash discourse, and like all backlash discourses, it functions to regulate women', writes Andrea O'Reilly and it emerges exactly at the moment when women had started gaining independence (2016, p.76). The result was that women would feel forever inadequate and that work and motherhood would become incompatible. This is exactly the case with our characters. O'Reilly compares the self-hate caused by the beauty industry to the guilt and self-doubt caused by the intensive mothering discourse that makes sure to undermine the confidence that women now gain from their education and career.

Dorrie is a real professional in childcare. She manages to prepare three kids under six for school, alone, managing all their little demands, take them to school, keep them calm and entertained and to chop onions 'finely as thread so that Martin would not be able to distinguish their texture in the meatballs and so spit them' ('Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' p. 40). She tried to be 'tender' and to 'offer them choices rather than just tell them what to do', to be patient, to 'hug them when they cried' 'never to hit them'. Dorrie mothers intentionally and intensively. Access to knowledge and the flourishing of parental experts has led her to endorse intensive mothering and she wants to perform ('she and her contemporaries') better than her parents did (p.45). She is a fully dedicated mother, setting her kids as a priority over everything else, attending to their needs, feeling guilty for even reading a book or leaving the kids with a babysitter to celebrate a wedding anniversary.

#### **4.2.2. Withdrawal of the Welfare State**

The second challenge on the achievement of work-family balance is the withdrawal of the welfare state, exactly at the moment families needed it the most, which is when women started establishing themselves in the professional world. The eighties marked the beginning of the end of welfare that is the support that was provided by the state for the citizens to be healthy and available for work. In contemporary short fiction by women writers, the shrinking of the state that goes hand in hand with the rise of neoliberalism is evident and it is understood as just another challenge to the herculean task of combining work and family. The consequences on the lives of short story characters from care being either outsourced to the private sector or externalized to the family and the community are a major topic in both Simpson and Hadley. Simpson's stories are mostly set in the suburbs that are a 'wasteland during the week...just nannies and women like Deborah Mahon...' (p.92) a stay at home

mom. Her daughter, Jade, who appears in other stories as well, complains that she ‘had been dragged up by a string of au pairs’ (Lentils and Lillies p.30). This is the world of the high salary women.

In her 2016 article ‘How to Fix Feminism’ in the New York Times, Judith Shulevitz wrote about the workweek that has ‘ballooned from 40 hours to 50 hours or more, not counting the email catch-up done after the kids’ bedtime’. Shulevitz also wrote about the decrease of salaries and the increase of the cost of childcare that leads parents ‘to stitch together multiple jobs’. Working mothers with young children in both writers’ stories have to modify their professional life unless they have a prestigious high salary job. Hadley’s character, Susan, in ‘Flight’ is the perfect character to document the shrinking of the welfare state and the consequences not only on the cared for but also on the caregivers. ‘Susan worked as a carer, visiting elderly and disabled people in their homes, helping them with washing and dressing.....because of the government’s austerity cuts, funding for social care had been cut to the bone –the carers were only allowed fifteen minutes for each visit – and weren’t even paid for the time it took to drive from one appointment to the next.’ (p.139). Emma Dowling writes extensively on the pressures that caregivers face and the impossibility to provide quality care because of the scarcity of time and resources (2022, Chapter 4: A Perfect Storm pp.113-145).

#### **4.2.3. Responsibility for Care Falls on Women**

As if aiming for perfection in a non-supportive society wasn’t enough, there is another challenge to the achievement of balance as it emerges from the stories read. Hadley’s and Simpson’ characters are not surprised to realize what Rottenberg clearly writes about in her book *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*: ‘all responsibility for reproduction falls squarely on the shoulders of individual women’ (p.17). Even in the dual income family when housework and childcare are shared by men and women, the responsibility for care is still on women. Dowling provides data to show that ‘The proportion of childcare done by mothers is decreasing, but it still stands at 74 per cent’ (p.93) and that ‘women carry out 60 per cent more unpaid domestic and care work than men. (p.81). Nancy Fobler, in her 2015 paper on the care penalty, showcases that the biggest part of carework is still done by women, even though men have increased their participation significantly. Women find it difficult to combine paid work with caring responsibilities and very often experience income loss. Also, because women are associated with care, they comprise the majority of paid care workers, like nurses, teachers, doctors, cleaners or babysitters.

In ‘Sunstroke’, Janie and Rachel are educated women who have limited themselves to working part-time and occasionally in order to care for their young children. Their husbands have been working full-time. ‘They don’t know quite how this happened; before the children were born, their relationships have shown every sign of being modern ones, built around the equal importance of two careers and the sharing of housework’(p.4). Simpson’s stories are like an anthology of characters who have made different choices in order to care for their children. Sometimes they work full time, hiring an au pair, sometimes they work part-time during nap times or they stay at home while their husbands work around the globe. Their choices are clearly determined by the financial state of the family and the cost of childcare, while the responsibility for the arrangements of childcare still falls on women.

In the story ‘Flight’ from the collection *Bad dreams* Hadley writes about two sisters: Claire who stayed in their hometown and took care of family members and Susan who left for London and focused on her career. It is always a woman that takes care of others, either aging parents or young children. In most of Hadley’s stories men are preoccupied with ideas, their

jobs, their dreams. In 'Sunstroke', Sam stays at home to 'get on with his writing' (p.3) while the women take the kids to the sea. He usually talks about literature or philosophy with his friend Kieran while women mostly do chores and take care of the children. In 'Flight' Susan is the main caregiver and sole breadwinner of the family, caring and providing for her daughter and boyfriend, her granddaughter and her son. It is no coincidence that she works as a carer for elderly people or that her older children are also into caring professions

In Simpson's story 'Burns and the Bankers', Nicola, a successful lawyer who works all day for a bank and is also a mother of four, is absolutely responsible for all the micromanagement in the home. She controls all care using her advanced managerial skills and is even responsible for her husband's alimony to his ex wife. In 'Lentils and Lillies', while Jade sees the suburb where she grew up as 'battery hens', row of identical hutches, so neat and tidy and narrow-minded. Imagine staying in all day, stewing in your juices' (pp.4-5). It is women who stay indoors all day while men are working. 'You'd think it was the fifties' says Jade (p.8). When childcare costs too much to allow women to work, it is their responsibility to stay at home. Unless they can afford a nanny. Simpson and Hadley point to the intersections of class and gender that Fraser and Rotteneberg have so extensively theorised.

However, as Dowling argues, care is 'undervalued and invisibilised' (pp.33). Even though it is a significant work that is a requirement for every other activity and though it is vital for the continuation of life, production and creativity or economic activity, it is not attributed the value it deserves. Paid care work is most often underpaid and unpaid care work goes relatively unseen. Normally, care work is carried out for children or for people who are in need of covering their physical needs because of sickness, disability or old age. It can, however, be undertaken for people who are physically capable but choose to spend their time on their careers or in other activities, such as their hobbies. Care, in this case, is passed down to care workers, with the purpose of leading a more carefree life. Motherhood is also a caring work that is taken for granted. Simpson and Hadley shed light to the complexities of carrying out an invisible work.

In this paper I have identified three challenges to work life balance, namely the culture of the perfect –in terms of both the 'postfeminist masquerade' and 'intensive mothering', the withdrawal of the welfare state and the responsibility for care that still falls on women despite multiple waves of feminism.

#### **4.3. The Crisis of Social Reproduction**

The impossibility of balance is tightly linked to what Nancy Fraser identifies as the crisis of social reproduction. Fraser defines social reproduction as a set of social capacities that include 'the birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally' (2016, p.99). Social reproduction, then, is the constant maintenance of a productive society by providing the 'social glue' for society to operate –a precondition for the accumulation of capital.

Social reproduction is a condition that is necessary for the accumulation of capital but it will always be in crisis in the capitalist society. However, for profit to be made social reproduction has to be free. And it is free because women undertake the responsibility for care or they outsource it to caregivers who are paid a minimum wage. Fraser writes about care as a precondition for profit –together with other conditions such as the exploitation of nature- but highlights the fact that social reproductive capacities are not infinite. They can be and they are indeed 'stretched to the breaking point' (p.105).

Simpson and Hadley's characters are at this exact breaking point and the narrative is one of despair and longing for mental, psychological and intellectual survival. Both writers are here to tell us that women at the workforce might be the biggest feminist gain but the new model presents new challenges and the price is more often than not still paid by women. The shrinking of wages and the increase of working hours has led to a silent crisis, namely the crisis of social reproduction. Fraser writes about 'state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare' and the recruitment of women 'into the paid workforce—externalizing carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it' (Fraser, 2016, p.112). Families who can afford paid care pay for it, whereas the rest struggle to juggle work and care, most often leaving their needs unmet. Paid care work, in its turn, creates what Fraser and other scholars before her, have named 'global care chains', a term that describes the gap of care that is left untended for in the countries where immigrant carers come from (2023 p. 167).

In Simpson and Hadley the crisis of social reproduction is not only evident in the dissatisfaction of women who are unable to achieve balance but also in the inability of their families to sustain social bonds with the community. The families seem isolated from other families. It is only mothers or nannies that care for children. The only relation with the world is the contact that mothers have with other mothers at the school gates or on prearranged playdates. There is an absence of family friends or social gatherings and everything revolves around the accumulation of capital to sustain the circle of consumption. In 'Sunstroke' by Hadley we have two families coming together in a cottage in Bristol but this is described as a rare treat. Hadley makes sure to note that the day the two mothers spend at the beach with their kids comes after days and years of domesticated life.

The question that is implied in the stories is how does the world go on despite these challenges caregivers face and despite the consequent result of the crisis of social reproduction? How come care is being taken care of even though caregivers today are at a breaking point? What is it that fuels the world to keep going?

#### **4.4. The Softening of Feminist Critique Through the Promotion of the Ideal of Balance**

Fraser and Rottenberg tell us that capitalism compensates for the very crisis it creates by promoting ideal lifestyles that are circulated around the media and become the goal towards which the masses aspire. Balance is emerging in the '10s as a new ideal that becomes part of the mainstream feminism vocabulary which has substituted feminist struggles for equal rights, equal pay and equal opportunities with a rhetoric of empowerment and well-roundedness. Thus, the two decades of the twenty first century are marked by a shift in the understanding of balance. Rottenberg points to the green light that was given in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the mainstream media to women to 'opt out' of the professional world for the benefit of their children and to how this encouragement has changed. '(O)ver the past ten years, this either/or discourse has been receding in the United States, and balance has come to fill its place....middle-class stay-at-home mothers are 'out' while self-identified feminist 'go-getters-*with children* are 'in'' (p.87). Balance, it seems, practically, means doing it all at a minimum cost. Reading Simpson's stories, collection after collection, opens a door to the dilemmas of the women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While in the beginning of the century the idealization of motherhood has been linked to new traditionalist right wing ideas, the rhetoric of family values surprisingly expanded to the centre and the left with the recent new visibility of feminism. McRobbie writes in a 2012 essay about the rise of a multi-mediated maternalism (2020, pp. 12-41) that substitutes the out of date right wing rhetoric of family values with 'a new more contemporary script 'dictating a

‘style of affluent, feminine maternity’ (pp.12-13), a ‘professionalization of motherhood’ (p.31) and a ‘bombardment of images showing super-wealthy mothers enjoying their luxury lifestyles’ (p.40) on social media. This kind of fashionable motherhood is absent from Simpson and Hadley. They make the real face of care in the contemporary world visible and this is what makes their writing so valuable. Their stories address a reality that is craftily being ignored. The pseudo feminist language that expands the vocabulary of personal responsibility on the family and transforms the hard work of care into a lifestyle goal is not adopted by Simpson and Hadley. On the contrary, it is obliquely ridiculed. There can be no empowerment for women who are struggling to juggle everything. While neoliberal feminism seems to be distracting attention from the need of social measures to support the family, Simpson and Hadley’s stories are unmasking the real needs and challenges of contemporary parenthood.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Simpson’s and Hadley’s Treatment of the Impossibility of Work-Life Balance

Both Simpson and Hadley portray contemporary female characters who feel nothing but liberated. They, thus, dispel the postfeminist illusion of emancipation. The contemporary redefinition of liberation is discussed by Catherine Rottenberg who claims that while emancipation in the past meant the ability to move away from domesticity and have a place in the professional world, today ‘women’s ‘progress’ and liberation’ is ‘reconceived as the ability to balance between the public and private aspects of the self’ (p.27). Simpson and Hadley have undertaken the task to show how this pursuit is hopeless despite the convergence of right and left in its promotion. The ‘feminist framing’ of balance (Rottenberg p.86) and the substitution of the goals of equal rights and social justice with the pursuit of happiness, balance, well-being and well-roundedness cannot disguise the reality of everyday motherhood

The marriage of feminism to neoliberalism and the attempt to reconcile the public and the private world through the ideal of balance is softening the feminist critique on patriarchy – as both Rottenberg and McRobbie claim. The revolt then that women feel against a system that requires them to work harder and harder both at home and at work to perform a hundred per cent at all times in order to care for the family while the welfare state is dismantled, is channeled into the pursuit of the new feminist ideal. Of course this ideal does not challenge the existing social order. It merely acts as a painkiller for women to continue undertaking the responsibility for care. Plus the responsibility for their happiness and the happiness of their family which becomes possible only when they manage to craft this much desired balance through the right choices. Simpson’s and Hadley’s writing is a literary critique on the patriarchy that resists the charm of neoliberal feminism.

More specifically, Simpson’s collection *Hey Yeah Right, Get a Life* is a real study on balance. She gives a literary report of a world of caregivers who are not appreciated, who lose themselves in motherhood and carework, who keep fighting for balance and keep failing. The relationship with the kids might be rewarding but all characters know that there could be other ways, less detrimental to their body and mind, for motherhood to be done. A man who shares carework is hard to find. Money is the only way out. But then again, not really.

In her later stories Simpson seems less angry and more pessimistic. In her 2015 collection *Cockfosters*, the story ‘Erewhom’ is written in reversed genders. It is the story of a man who has taken the role of a woman. This is a technique that serves in exposing the fact that feminism has not achieved its goals since it is still bizarre for a man to complain about the

burden of carework or lack of pleasure in sex. For Simpson, feminism has become ‘a pathetic attempt to fight back’ (‘Erewhom’, 19). Feminist solidarity has been reduced to mom groups where women often have nothing in common or are unable to communicate. It has been reduced to getting a sympathetic look from another woman when one admits that her husband beats her. Even after #metoo, Simpson says, there is silence and mere whispering. It has been reduced to women needing the pretence of a book club to find human connection. Women still do the second shift, women are still abused. They can still be silent—even in the Western world. Even though they are not just the person cooking dinner anymore but also paying for it. Simpson seems to be saying that despite the third wave, digital feminism and the #metoo movement, not much has changed. Not in the nuclear family. The narrator of ‘Erewhom’ wakes up in 2015, 7:10 am to find that ‘everything was exactly the same as it had been the night before. Of course it was; unimaginable that it wouldn’t have been .... Nothing was going to change. This was the way things were. This was the natural order.’ (p.25).

Tessa Hadley’s writing is less of a denouncement and more of a study of the subtle repercussions of the cultural and political landscape of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the family dynamics. ‘Sunstroke’, for instance, is the story of two families staying together for a weekend in a cottage near the Bristol Channel and having an unexpected visitor dropping by and spending the night. Like with Simpson, Hadley’s story focuses on one particular day. Janie and Rachel, two educated mothers with a sense of ‘life unlived’ take care of the practical details of their stay, make beds, buy ice cream and tend to the children while they are both half seduced by Kieran, the unexpected visitor. A potential affair creates the feeling of ‘glorious abundant tide of secret possibility flowing around the world, enough for everyone’ (p.18). While his interest towards the two women is mostly impersonal, disguising his need to dip into this other world that he feels he might have missed, both women, see him as symbol of the world of ideas, experiences and exhilaration—a world from which they are excluded, not because their husbands are less interesting than Kieran but because within the family system they have the very specific role of the carer who predominantly resides in the private sphere. ‘Somewhere else, while they are absorbed in pushchairs and fish fingers and wiping bottoms, there must be another world of intense experiences for grown-ups’ (p.4). Janie at last kisses Kieran, disturbing the family universe ‘vaguely’ thinking that her husband ‘owes her this’ (p.18). Both characters feel that raising kids sets their lives in a pause mode, a kind of hibernation from which they desperately need to break free and thus the private and the public sphere seem quite separate and in this paper I would like to argue that Hadley points to the fact that for this reason, balance is still a far-fetched dream.

‘Flight’, a story in her later 2017 collection *Bad dreams* builds on the idea of separate spheres and of choice. Susan and Claire inhabit two very different worlds. Susan has stayed in their hometown, working as a state carer for the elderly. She lives with her daughter’s family that she supports financially. She has taken care of her aging parents and is angry at Claire who left for America to pursue a successful career asking for her share of the family house, despite being well-off, totally dismissing the carework Susan was doing for their parents. Hadley creates two different worlds, the world of care, family and sacrifice and the world of work, success and selfishness. She is also careful to show that it is not always choice that allocates you to one of those worlds, but also chance and circumstances.

In both stories Hadley undermines the idea that balance is somehow possible or that women can now have foot on both the private and the public world. Men certainly cannot. In this paper I would like to argue that Hadley focuses on how family dynamics resist change and how the inequality in gender roles is mirrored on the responsibility for care within the family.

She is a master at depicting power struggles in which the weakest part does the invisible and undervalued work for care and the strongest part engages in work and the world of ideas.

Helen Simpson and Tessa Hadley place their characters in the midst of the pressures of choice, balance and perfection and the question that emerges again and again is: can their female characters juggle it all? How well? And at what cost? Female characters by Simpson and Hadley are not seduced by the ideals of a glamorized motherhood or by the neoliberal feminist ideal of balance and the tension between the private and the public world remains unresolved.

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