

Runaway, Negligent and Abusive Mothers: Alternate Mother-Daughter Relationships in Australian Film

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Abstract

This paper examines three Australian films, *Fran* (1985), *High Tide* (1987), and *Radiance* (1998) which focus on the darker side of motherhood—flawed mothers who are deeply ambivalent about their roles. These films also feature difficult and distressed mother-daughter relationships which are characterized by estrangement, mistrust, and even child endangerment, but also love, devotion and commitment, all in a pressure cooker of personal, social and political forces. These films differ from other Australian mother-daughter dramas which, on the one hand examine loving, unproblematic mother and daughter bonds, and, on the other, explore the tensions and conflicts linked to the maturing daughter's need for independence from her mother's protection or control as she undergoes her rites of passage into womanhood.

The films examined in this paper are unusual because they broach the unthinkable--what if a mother abandons her daughter(s) and/or relinquishes her title and role as a stable, nurturing figure well before her daughter is an adult? These films also venture into taboo areas such as child molestation and rape (including a cover-up of the rape), and even attempted matricide. Yet, the mothers in these films are not entirely unsympathetic. They live in the "perfect storms" of the consequences of their own choices within situations and events often outside their control.

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Fran (1985), *High Tide* (1987), and *Radiance* (1998) break new ground in exploring a dark side of motherhood by featuring flawed mothers who are often deeply ambivalent about their roles. These films also focus on difficult and distressed mother-daughter relationships which are characterized by estrangement, mistrust, betrayal, even child endangerment, as well as love, devotion and commitment-- all in a pressure cooker of personal, social and/or political forces.

In *Fran*, a single suburban mother of three is torn between maternal responsibilities and her own need for a man to fulfill her sexual and emotional needs. Fran's character was based on the many welfare mothers writer/director Glenda Hambly met while researching a documentary for the Western Australian Department of Community Welfare. After the department decided against proceeding with the project, Hambly decided to make a feature, having developed a strong interest in this dynamic of Australian society. In *High Tide*, a mother meets her daughter by chance in a working class coastal caravan park north of Sydney, having given her over as a baby to the care of her paternal grandmother after the death of her husband. This film originally featured the father as the estranged parent, but director Gillian Armstrong (and writer Laura Jones) wanted to broach the riskier situation of a mother leaving her daughter. Armstrong had also read about changing adoption laws which enabled grown children to seek out their mothers. *Radiance* focuses on the troubled legacy of a recently deceased mother, an object of scorn as well as love by her two estranged daughters and granddaughter who convene for her funeral in the tropics in Northern Queensland. *Radiance* was based on the 1994 play by Louis Nowra, who wrote the screenplay with input from first time film director Rachel Perkins. This film had the distinction of being the first mainstream feature directed by an indigenous woman with three indigenous female leads.

How do these films fit into the context of other mother-daughter dramas? One group of maternal melodramas features loving mother and daughter relationships set in the past, including *Caddie*, *Celia*, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, and *One Night the Moon*; others are set in the present, such as *Soft Fruit*, *Amy*, and *Looking for Alibrandi*. Another category includes films such as *My Brilliant Career*, *The Getting of Wisdom* and *Muriel's Wedding* which explore the tensions and conflicts linked to the maturing daughter's need for independence from her mother's protection or control as she undergoes her rites of passage into womanhood.

The films examined in this paper are unusual because they broach the unthinkable--what if a mother abandons her daughter(s) and/or relinquishes her title and role as a stable, nurturing figure well before her daughter is an adult? Further, these films venture into taboo areas such as child molestation and rape (including a cover-up of the rape), and even attempted matricide. Yet, the mothers in these films are not entirely unsympathetic. They live in the "perfect storms" of the consequences of their own choices within situations and events often outside their control.

Viewed together, several dynamics emerge in *Fran*, *High Tide* and *Radiance*.

1. Mothers are part of incomplete or ruptured families without a committed husband (or father figure): he is deceased or chooses to live away from the family. Mothers are thus faced with double duty as parent. Yet, because the mother is unable to, or chooses not to take care of her daughter (s), a surrogate mother steps in and takes

responsibility as caretaker (temporarily or permanently), facilitating and/or complicating the child rearing process and the mother/daughter bond.

2. Further, mothers' lovers can be predatory or intrusive, "trespassers" into domestic space, threatening, (even harming) the mother and/or daughter and/or the mother-daughter bond.

3. For a various reasons, mothers also live on the margins of a community, town, housing development, and are regarded as outcasts.

4. The mother's house takes on a variety of connotations, ranging from safe to claustrophobic to dangerous: it can be a place of closeness, familial warmth and togetherness, or a place of contention and estrangement.

5. The mother can be associated with death, be regarded as dead, actually be dead, have a brush with death, be self-destructive or suicidal; further, she can be resurrected or a theme of maternal resurrection can underlie the film.

This paper addresses the following issues: What are the personal, social and political factors that impinge on a mother's willingness or ability to raise and nurture her daughter(s)? How do the daughters manage their lives with or without their mothers? What is the nature of the mother-daughter relationship? How do the settings -- the suburbs, ocean side in winter, or in the tropics -- enhance these melodramas?

Fran

Fran is situated in a sun baked suburb in Perth, which Anna Dzenis specifies as "the drab, uninspiring suburbia of housing commission estates... bland backyards, parched streets dotted with souped-up cars..." (Dzenis, 1993, p.170). Fran, a single mother living with her three children, leads a delusional life, rationalizing, "my kids come first," then acts on self-satisfying personal whims—primarily her obsessive pursuit of male company. She becomes increasingly alienated from her children through her own irresponsibility and bad decisions. Subsequently, Fran robs her eldest daughter Lisa (age 11) of her childhood by inadvertently setting her up as a victim of sexual abuse by Fran's live-in boyfriend. Along with her brother Tommy (9), and sister Cynthia (6), Lisa ultimately becomes a ward of the court, taken away from their abject mother. How could this happen to a woman who says she loves her children?

One of the central dynamics of the film is set up right away as it opens: the reversal of mother daughter roles. Fran is the flirty adolescent in tight pants and stiletto heels, parading down the street, like a "bubbly cheerful, coquettish young girl" (Byrnes, 1986, p. 62), spied by an unidentified man who is cruising the streets on the prowl for women. As Fran walks into a phone booth, he eases his body in closely behind her. Fran playfully pushes him away. At home, Lisa is introduced in the context of the kitchen in the maternal role, making dinner for her two younger siblings. With her high forehead and deep sad eyes, and an "old-before-her-time-look" (Byrnes, 1986, p 62), Lisa rarely smiles, suggesting a wary facade of fragile confidence. So eager is she to please her mother, that she has assumed Fran's responsibilities

and become the daily caretaker to Tommy and Cynthia, a role she will maintain throughout the film as she attempts to cope with Fran's unpredictable behavior.

The suburb setting is particularly apt for Fran's distress. Catherine Simpson, in her article, "Suburban Subversions: Women's Negotiation of Suburban Space in Australian Cinema," discusses late 80's and 90's films which feature women living in the suburbs that challenge prior representations of this setting as a "cultural and spiritual desert." According to Simpson, female protagonists "negotiate feelings of alienation in the suburban sphere by rendering subtle transformations within it, or escaping from the physical space itself" (Simpson, 2000b, p. 24). These processes can be creative and/or destructive. In Fran's case, she is bored, restless and insecure in her role as mother and homemaker. Though she attempts to busy herself while her children are at school by vacuuming and taking out the trash, she ends up wandering aimlessly from one cluttered room to another. For Fran, the house is a prison. As a solution to her claustrophobic and uninspiring domestic environment, Fran chooses to not only dramatically transform her living space, but also to break away from it more than once, generating serious and harmful consequences for her children as well as herself.

Fran's first change, which satisfies her compulsion for male company, is to encourage Jeff, the local barman, to move in after they meet and have a three-day fling. In a perverse way, she tries to create an "ideal" nuclear family. With this drastic shift, Fran disrupts and transforms the family home to an unsafe place. Fran's alteration of her domestic environment most profoundly impacts Lisa, who is preyed upon and molested by Jeff. Their relationship starts off congenially enough when Jeff, alone with Lisa, admires the puzzle she is working on, and they light-heartedly exchange jokes. We think that perhaps Jeff is earnestly trying to get along with one of Fran's children. Yet, as his friendly voice becomes more unctuous, and he sits closer to Lisa, the safe space between them disappears. Jeff drops down on the floor next to Lisa, wrapping his arms around her as he nuzzles her hair. "Don't the boys do that at school?" he "innocently" asks. Stuck in his embrace, her eyes belying fear, Lisa noticeably stiffens. Jeff's arms encircle her body like a lover, and his hands start to rub her abdomen. In a seductive voice, he comments, "You've got a hard little tummy. It will get soft when you grow up." The film suggests that this is one of several violations of Lisa.

Fran's second change in her life is to leave her house, following Jeff who accepts a job up North, uprooting and bringing along her children under the guise of a couple-of-days-holiday. However, she decides to leave them with her foster sister, but it is really Lisa who must again shoulder the burden and once again cover for Fran. "Don't worry Mom, I'll look after them," she cheerfully declares to Fran before she leaves. But a few days turns into four weeks. Fran's happiness turns into a crushing and alienating process for her children, as she inadvertently takes the first step in relinquishing and institutionalizing her children in the foster care system, ironically choosing the system in which she was raised.

She also regresses emotionally, becoming even more demanding of and dependent upon Lisa, who must bear the brunt of Fran's indignation and denial about Jeff as sexual abuser. When Fran first sees Lisa after returning, Fran behaves like an angry teenager who has lost her boyfriend, blaming Lisa, and treating *her* like the perpetrator. "Lisa, what in the hell have you told these [foster care] people?... You said you *liked* him [Jeff]!" Looking ashamed, Lisa casts her eyes downward and falls silent. Later, in a quieter frame of mind, Fran

inquires, “Jeff *didn't* do anything did he? They [the foster care officials] are lying aren't they?” Lisa dutifully gives Fran the answer she wants to hear: “Yes, Mum.”

Eternally forgiving, maternal Lisa comforts a weepy Fran smoothing her brow, updating Fran on the foster cottage where she, Tommy and Cynthia live, maintaining the stiff upper lip and veneer of calm she had when Fran took off for her holiday. But the message comes through, loud and clear when she reveals the devastation of Fran's absence to her younger siblings: “Cynthia and Tom cried all the time... but they got over it.”

Her children gone, Fran perceives her house as the same imprisoning environment she resented and escaped from earlier. This time, however, the house is eerily empty and silent: she is utterly alone. Yet her every activity is linked to her children. Fran sits on the stoop as the dutiful mother waiting for her children to come from school. She also lies down in Tommy's bed. She later works on a puzzle just as Lisa did. None of these activities satisfies her. Full of rage, Fran breaks apart the puzzle with her fist and hurls an ashtray into her bureau mirror. The last we see of Fran she lies in bed silently crying. We wonder if she is on her way to another nervous breakdown or another suicide attempt. Though she said earlier, “I'm a rotten mother; I've got to change,” she seems overwhelmed, without the psychic and emotional strength and maturity to make the leap and commitment into full motherhood without the distraction of men. The film leaves us wondering whether Fran will be able to resurrect herself this time as she did when Lisa was a toddler, and fully commit herself to motherhood for all three of her children. As she noted earlier, in a rare moment of self-awareness: “I'm a rotten mother... I've got to change.”

What about Lisa? In the film's haunting final shot, she is alone. We see her take on a new persona as she turns to the mirror: she stares at her reflection, slowly and carefully brushing her hair in a gesture similar to that of Fran before she took off to the pub at the beginning of the film. Lisa's gaze is a mixture of girlish self-fascination and a coy, newly discovered adolescent sensuality, a formidable change from the innocent 11 year old we met at the film's beginning. She is on the brink of following in her mother's footsteps.

High Tide

Whereas *Fran* dramatizes the increasing estrangement between mother and daughter, *High Tide* charts the growing ties between a mother and daughter who have never known each other. Rather than raising her daughter since birth, as Fran has with Lisa, Lilli left Ally in the permanent care of her paternal grandmother when she was an infant after her husband died in a surfing accident, a traumatic event which still haunts her. Since then, she has been a drifter, her most recent job a backup singer for an Elvis impersonator. Lilli's new relationship with Ally is problematized by Lilli's skiddishness about any family ties, as well as her testy relationship with her possessive and vindictive mother-in-law, Bet, who has raised Ally, a well-adjusted and happy girl on the brink of her teen-age years.

High Tide breaks new ground in several ways. Barbara Creed has argued that *High Tide* is a significant alternative to the usual female oedipal journey, the Freudian view that the daughter rejects the mother and directs her love towards the father. Rather than being held up as a “figure of abjection” (Creed, 1994, p. 22), the mother is held up as a figure of love for the daughter. Thus, as dramatized in the film, the mother daughter bond is not replaced by the one that the daughter develops with a male (initially the father, later a male partner) who

comes between them. *High Tide* extends this subversive dynamic even further, for Ally breaks away from her surrogate mother/grandmother to be with her biological mother.

High Tide is also a feminist melodrama in the best sense. First of all, the film resists female stereotypes, for Lilli is not demonized (Crofts, 1991, p. 18), Bet is not a monster (Kael 84), nor is Ally not sentimentalized as a “victim of parental absence...” (Crofts 18). Further, in a film where the men are secondary characters, *High Tide* is not “concerned with a patriarchal order’s stymieing of female desire” (Crofts, 1991, p. 18). Finally, the narrative defiantly takes place outside the home, the usual female space.

As opposed to the hot, dry suburbs in *Fran*, a site of urban distress and familial rupture, the coastal environment during winter in *High Tide* is a crucial setting for the development of the bond between mother and daughter. Lilli and Ally are both attracted to the ocean, which functions as a primal maternal site where they realize their blood ties. The filmmakers set up this dynamic right away at the film’s beginning when Lilli and Ally are introduced and linked through sea motifs and settings, one artificial, the other natural. Lilli appears in mermaid garb, a blond wig and green sequined form-fitting gown, performing on stage against a backdrop of shimmering blue streamers. This sequence is followed by Ally lying on her back in a wetsuit in a rock pool, suggesting, as Lucy Fischer notes, “...an intimation of fetal life in the amniotic...sea...” (Fischer, 1996, p. 221). (The caravan location where they stay and meet is aptly named Mermaid Park.) Further, the first time the two appear in same shot together is in the context of the ocean setting. As Crofts notes, “Lilli [is] ...in the shallows, while her daughter surfs the deep – as if to point doubly to the child in the woman: both Ally unborn in Lily, and also Lilli’s childishness, her own past acting on her present.” (Crofts, 1991, p. 20)

When Lilli and Ally first meet in the shower, a deft continuation of the water-mother-daughter motif, Lilli is drunk, sitting against the wall under the sink, and Ally has just come out of the shower stall. Ally isn’t frightened of Lilli, and Lilli heartily hails Ally right away, affectionately calling her “fish-feet.” Ally and her boyfriend help Lilli get up on her feet as she staggers about, unable to keep her balance. They guide her to her trailer, each holding one of Lilli’s hands. Lilli, loose and jolly, as if out of instinct, takes Ally’s hand and studies it, noting that she has a long life line in her palm. The next morning, when they happen to meet outside the caravan Laundromat, Ally is eager to have Lilli continue her palm reading, and they chat and carry on like old friends, even speaking in Italian when they start to compare their travels. Lilli’s fascination with Ally’s hands and feet suggests the loving care a mother bestows upon the body of her child.

How is the growing bond between Lilli and Ally challenged by the film’s more traditional couples or familial configurations, even threatening Lilli’s and Ally’s innate ties? Firstly, Bet’s boyfriend, Col, functions as an unofficial father for Ally. Like Bet, he is inclined to restrict Ally’s activities, and resents Lilli’s presence. The more Ally becomes enamored with Lilli, the more authoritarian and hostile Col is towards Ally. Secondly, Lilli herself takes on a lover, Mick, attracted to his decency and gentle company. Mick, the single parent of a toddler daughter, soon has plans to create a new family with Lilli, speaking warmly of the three of them leaving the area permanently, starting a business together, even having a child of their own. Lilli is adverse to any commitments, let alone with Mick; further, her perception of family as “entrapment” as Stephen Crofts notes, is dramatized by her subjective point of view shot of the rear window of the car as she and Mick pull away for a

holiday: Mick's daughter, mother and aunt are visible through the "bars of the rear window's sungrille..." (Crofts, 1991, p. 19)

Thirdly, Ally has a boyfriend her own age, in addition to her loose "nuclear family" with Bet and Col. After they surf together we see them kissing affectionately. Ally is just several years shy of the age of Lilli when she married and gave birth, and the innocent relationship between her and her boyfriend suggests a younger version of Lilli and John. Lastly, Ally is an emotionally stable young woman, a testament to Bet's skill and love in raising her. Clearly, she and Bet have a loving and warm comradeship. Yet, on the brink of adolescence, Ally wants to spend more time with kids her age, which puts strains on her relationship with Bet, who often treats her like a child, for example, giving her a teddy bear with which to sleep, while she entertains a cowboy performer in the next room.

Earlier, it was noted that the ocean is linked to new life and the reinforcement of mother-daughter bonds. But as the place where John perished, the ocean is also linked to death: at one point, Lilly tells Ally that she wanted to die after John was killed. This setting is further linked to an eerie form of reincarnation. Lilly's porcelain white face and long billowing black coat that she wears as she walks along the shoreline gives her a specter-like presence. At one point, Ally runs up to Lilly, after having just been told by Mick that Lilly is her mother (this after Lilly left him in the motel room as discussed earlier, his revelation suggesting Mick's subtle, even mean-spirited payback to Lilly for her abrupt departure). Ally asks, "Are you my mother?" Lilly, her face showing slight alarm, then composure, in a controlled voice utters, "No." Ally then shouts, "My mother's dead," as if to suggest that in Ally's eyes, Lilly is a mirage. This is a chilling scene. It's as if Ally thinks that Mick and Lilly are playing a trick on her. Clearly, she has trouble believing what she has been told, or believing what she sees: her mother incarnate after years of being told she was dead.

Along this line, Bet would prefer that Lilly were dead, and even threatens to kill Lilly if she continues to hang around Ally. Even Ally is linked to death. After Ally's intensely emotional and distraught conversation with Lilly in her car parked on a cliff overlooking the surf (which comes just after Ally confronts Lilly on the beach, and is discussed later), where Lilly tries to explain why she left Ally when she was an infant, we next see Ally lying face down in a rock pool in her wet suit, as if she is (or wishes she were?) dead. Given that Lilly put Ally out of her mind when she gave her away to Bet, and that Ally thinks her mother has been dead all these years, the film suggests that each has been resurrected for the other.

Which is why the scene in Lilly's car is so crucial. By giving Ally away, Lilly gave her life, even though Ally cannot yet fathom why Lilly left her. They sit in the front seat of

Lilly's car, Lilly, her face puffy and swollen from crying, Ally, sobbing, and alternately looking at Lilly quizzically and then turning her face away in pain. Ally declares, "I love you! Do you love me?... Did you ever try to find me? You loved me before he died?" Lilly explains: "After John died, I didn't want anything, nothing. I got used to that. I gave you away. It wasn't your fault. I wanted to die. I was so angry. I felt useless. I didn't choose to stop loving you. It just happened. I'd have hurt you. I'm sorry, I'M SORRY! With this climactic scene, Lilly finally understands her daughter's deep feelings of abandonment, as well as her own reawakened passionate and instinctive maternal love. From this point on, she is able to openly return her daughter's love.

Thus, Ally gives Lilli purpose in her rambling life, and Lilli gives Ally the roots she so desperately needs--unlike Fran who unable to see her daughter for whom she is, a pre-teen, like Ally, in need of a committed and mature mother. When Lilli and Ally take off on the road together at the film's end, it makes emotional, dramatic and visual sense that these two belong together. Ally chooses the high road with her rediscovered mother over the restrictive security with her grandmother (whom she also loves and leaves tearfully). In the final scene, when they stop for a bite to eat, Lilli retreats to her car, still indecisive, staring forward, hands clinging to the steering wheel for several minutes, while Ally patiently waits for her in the restaurant. Lilli *does* return, with her hands playfully covering Ally's eyes, then carefully sitting across from her, holding her hands, reinforcing the loving fascination she has for her new-found daughter. Lucy Fischer has commented that this is a tentative decision on Lilli's part, adding "...the film leaves us in limbo, without the moral or narrative assurance that the family circle has been permanently restored" (Fischer, 1996, p. 224). We are relieved that mother and daughter, so intricately bound, are together, but wonder if Lilli can stay the course she has chosen.

Radiance

Radiance, like *High Tide*, uses a coastal setting to dramatize the reunion between a mother and daughter long separated. Like *Fran*, *Radiance* features the aftermath of an abused mother putting her daughter in sexual danger, thus reinforcing the mother's carelessness in not protecting her daughter. *Radiance* differs, however, from *High Tide* and *Fran* in that the mother, Mary, has just died as the film begins, so we never know her directly, only through the perspectives of her adult daughters who convene for her funeral after several years of little or no contact. Mary is also the focus of hatred and resentment by her two daughters—a completely different scenario than in *Fran* and *High Tide*, where both daughters behave lovingly towards their mothers.

On the one hand, as Catharine Simpson argues, *Radiance* can be viewed metaphorically: the mother's house functions as a microcosm of the nation. (Simpson, 2000a, p. 29): Aboriginals living a degraded borderline existence under the thumb of the paternalistic white hierarchy. Mary was a kept woman: her white lover Harry owned the house where she lived and died. Dispossessed of her island birthplace across the channel, Mary lived in relative isolation in a white community. Thus, when Mae and Cressie burn down Harry's house at the climactic scene at the end of the film, this act functions as "...a symbolic overthrowing of the power relations manifested in this home [as well as]...an attempt to undermine the ...colonial hegemony manifested both symbolically and literally in the house....(Simpson, 2000a, p. 30).

On the other hand, *Radiance* is a rigorous and raging melodrama between mothers and daughters (and sisters), wherein traumatic events well up from the past to permeate and haunt the present -- acts of betrayal, deceit and physical harm, causing long-term psychic and emotional damage to all three daughters. For Cressy, this all-too-familiar house conjures up her abduction from an apparently uncaring mother by government officials (who also took Mae) under the policy of assimilation. Cressy also harbors horrific memories of being raped and beaten up by one of her mother's boyfriends under the house when she was only 12 years old. (Her child, Nona, the third "sister" was taken away from Cressy and raised by Mary as Mary's own, the identity of her real mother kept a secret.) Worse, Mary denied the rape when

Cressy told her of the incident. Like Fran, Mary failed to provide a safe home for her daughter.

Given her many acts of negligence, Mary is demonized by the filmmakers, who have created a “witch mother,” as Ceridwen Spark notes (Spark, 2001, p. 4). First of all, Mary’s maternal irresponsibility is linked to her apparent indifference to the kidnapping of Mae and Cressie. Spark comments, “Confirming rather than challenging the notion that Aboriginal women willingly gave away their children and suffered little emotion as a consequence, the film renders the notion of stolen-ness spurious, and simultaneously perpetrates a racist construction of Aboriginal women as unfeeling, bad mothers” (Spark, 2001, p. 6). Secondly, Mary’s string of lovers imply that she was a loose woman and never a respectable wife. Her bad example shaped Nona’s promiscuous behavior. As Nona declares to Cressy, “Mom and I were sluts; we fucked.” However, Nona harbors no resentment, but is comforted by many happy memories when she was growing up, as well as passionate and unconditional love for her “mum” – in stark contrast to Mae’s and Cressie’s bitterness and contempt. In fact, Nona had hoped to return home and live with Mary. Having just discovered that she is pregnant, she planned to raise her child in Mary’s house, essentially replaying her own idyllic early years.

Despite Nona’s perspective, Mary’s character is burdened with an abundance of negative characteristics, conforming to racist notions held historically by white patriarchy towards Aboriginal women. It’s as if she were created by Harry himself. However, Mary’s actions, which directly or indirectly influenced all her progeny, did not necessarily curtail her daughters and granddaughter’s life choices and growth. Despite her love for her mother, Nona moved away for a life of adventure on the rodeo circuit. Mae became a nurse. Cressy trained as an operatic soprano, achieving international renowned with her signature opera, *Madama Butterfly*.

Now that the three convene in their mother’s house, how will the three survivors relate to each other with the specter of Mary’s past? Given Nona’s re-entry into Cressy’s life, how will Cressy contend with and relate to a daughter she barely knows, given the agony and violence of Nona’s conception? And finally, how will Mae come to terms with her own abusive and monstrous abusive behavior of Mary when she cared for her during her last days?

As with *High Tide*, the ocean coastline setting plays a role as the primal site of reconnection between estranged mother and daughter (and later between Nona and her grandmother when she swims with Mary’s ashes to Mary’s birthplace island to scatter them). At first the coastline creates a similar medium in *Radiance*. Since Cressy first arrived, she has looked at Nona with affection, fascination, and even amusement. As is the case with Lilli with Ally, Cressy cannot take her eyes off Nona. As they stroll on the sand near Mary’s house, they loosen up and joke (whereas the house environs thus far have only made Cressy understandably anxious and uncomfortable). Their growing bond is reinforced even more when Nona also sings a country western song in order to impress Cressy (to whom she paid homage earlier when she lip-synched the theme song from *Madame Butterfly*). Further along the shoreline, Nona finds a large sea turtle on the sand, and excitedly hails Cressy, who is equally thrilled. They share the moment of discovery together, marveling at this magnificent creature.

However, the ocean setting is also linked to death, as in *High Tide*. Mae's drunken and guilt-ridden confessional details her shocking account of her near-killing of Mary, a culmination of her abusive behavior. The relationship between Mae and Mary, a complex one, needs further examination as it has not been fully addressed by other writers.

What went wrong with Mae and Mary? Rather than leaving home for good, the eldest daughter returned to be her mother's caretaker (on one level, an extension of her vocation as a nurse), just as Lisa became the maternal figure for Fran. Mary, however, needed much more hands-on care than Mae anticipated, as she sank deeper into dementia, more and more dependent on Mae. Rather than expressing her happiness with Mae's return and gratitude for her care, she lashed out continually at Mae.

Mae's return suggests that she desperately wished to rekindle their bond from childhood before she was taken away, and also, learn more about herself and her indigenous heritage through her mother. In contrast to Cressy, who perceives the house as one of horror (and Nona, one of pleasure), for Mae, in particular, the house took on a potentially new context: a place of family ties, comfort and learning, thus, a starting point for the rekindling of their relationship. Further, living with Mae in full view of Mary's ancestral island could give Mae, a child of the stolen generations, a sense of home.

Yet, as Mae tells Cressy and Nona, Mary, periodically used and abandoned by Harry, passed on her racial self-hate to Mae, refusing to tell Mae about her (Mary's) parents and why they were thrown off the island, thus thwarting Mae's efforts to build her own identity. Still an outcast, Mae remained alienated and isolated even in the company of her own mother from whom she expected so much. By repressing and disdaining her Aboriginality, Mary lived in a state of cultural amnesia, emblemized by her declining health and regressive mental state.

As Mary sunk further into dementia, her house turned into a creepy prison where a mother had a hold over daughter, and daughter, duty-bound, tried to serve her mother, yet turned abusive herself. (Mae's lingering hostility towards Mary after her death is demonstrated at the film's beginning when she aggressively and angrily tosses Mary's clothes into a large metal drum, vigorously burning them.) Rather than pity Mary, Mae's behavior worsened; she tied Mary to the chair "like an animal," (unconscious payback and punishment for sending Mae away?) and, at one point, grabbed her throat, and started to strangle her, almost committing matricide.

When Mae burns down the beach house there are two implications. For Mae, on the one hand, burning down the "mother's house" destroys any physical evidence of Mary, including her picture, her favorite chair, as well as haunting and ugly memories of the failed bonding between them. Burning down "Harry's house," as noted at the beginning of this section, not only overthrows the white paternal hold that Harry has over Mary and Mae, but also symbolically stops the cycles of abuse that began with Harry, who used Mary, who in turn abused Mae. For Cressy, on the other hand, incinerating her mother's house removes the horrid dark place under the house, exorcising the bogeyman of the past. Thus, from the ashes Cressy can be resurrected, free at last of this monster from her past. She is able to get on with her life through an act of "cleansing and rejuvenation," as Perkins has noted (Simpson 2000a, p. 34). By destroying the house, both women overthrow the tyranny of all their detested parents.

For Nona, this apparently senseless and cruel act is linked to the shocking loss of both parents, leaving her as an “orphan.” Gone is her pleasure palace and her familial fantasy, or “false family genealogy,” as Collins and Davis note. (Collins and Davis, 2004, 128). As Cressy succinctly puts it, Nona was not sired by a “black prince,” but “a filthy pig smelling of petrol....You were born from dirt. Your father was dirt.” Nona stands in disbelief when Cressy declares she is her biological mother. Threatened with the loss of mother Mary (and the sudden presentation of a “false” mother), no wonder she runs off, with the security of her Mary’s ashes with her.

The next morning, after traveling all night, Nona sets foot on the beach at Nora Island, and scatters Mary’s ashes through the air, re-establishing Mary’s spiritual link to her maternal island birthplace as she laid to rest. One life cycle ends, but there is the promise of new life, Nona’s soon-to-be-born child, as well as the rebirth of the mother-daughter bond between Cressy and Nona. Somewhat reluctantly, however, Nona gets into the car with Cressy and Mae, as they take off down the road.

The three commencing on a new journey together emphasizes the importance of family. What should be emphasized, however, is that this is a female family -- sisters, a mother and a daughter -- who find meaning in a “radiant assertion of self and life.” (Cromwell, 1995, p. 166). Like *High Tide*, *Radiance* is an unusual oedipal journey. Though the bond between Cressy and Nona is not as well defined and established as that between Lilli and Ally, Cressy is a potential figure of love for Nona. And she is certainly willing to take on this role. Nona, however, still reeling from the events the night before, is on the defensive, which gives an air of honesty to an ending which could have gone mawkish and false. Nona does have the slightest hint of a smile as she declares to Cressy, “There’s no fuckin’ way I’m calling you Mum!”

Significantly, the larger political dynamic of Reconciliation— the process of healing the wounds of the past inflicted by whites upon Aboriginals—applies *within* this Aboriginal family. Though the film begins with the legacy of a monstrous Aboriginal mother who failed to protect her daughters when they were growing up, who put her own pleasures first as an unhealthy and shameful role model for her daughters and granddaughter, in addition to deliberately depriving her eldest of her indigenous heritage, Mae, Cressy and Nona are tough, resilient and resourceful survivors.

However, this is not quite a comfortably, fully bonded family. As with *High Tide*, there is no narrative assurance this new female family will remain together. Yet, there is an excitement in both films on the part of mothers and daughters (and sisters) embarking on the high road together.

Conclusions

Fran, *High Tide* and *Radiance* are rich, rigorous and unsentimental films that explore the complexities and intricacies of blood ties between mothers and their daughters in the wake of mothers’ personal choices (from enlightened to questionable to bad) that alter the direction and shape of their daughters’ lives. These alternate stories stand resolutely in contrast to other Australian maternal melodramas, significantly expanding the range and diversity of mother-daughter stories in film.

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