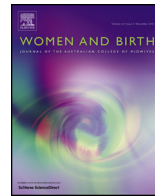




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women and Birth

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wombi



ORIGINAL RESEARCH – QUALITATIVE

Blurring reality with fiction: Exploring the stories of women, madness, and infanticide

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 March 2016

Received in revised form 30 June 2016

Accepted 1 July 2016

Keywords:

Infanticide

Postnatal psychosis

Childbirth

Stigma

Marginalisation

ABSTRACT

Problem: Often, there is a sense of shock and disbelief when a mother murders her child.

Background: Yet, literary texts (plays, poems and novels) contain depictions of women experiencing mental illness or feelings of desperation after childbirth who murder their children.

Aim: To further understand why a woman may harm her child we examine seven literary texts ranging in time and place from fifth century BCE Greece to twenty-first century Australia.

Methods: A textual analysis approach examined how the author positioned the woman in the text, how other characters in the text reacted to the woman before, during, and after the mental illness or infanticide, and how the literary or historical critical literature sees the woman.

Findings: Three important points about the woman's experience were revealed: she is represented as morally ambiguous and becomes marginalised and isolated; she is depicted as murdering or abandoning her child because she is experiencing mental illness and/or she is living in desperate circumstances; and she believes there is no other option.

Conclusion: Literary texts can shed light on socio-psychological struggles women experience and can be used to stimulate discussion by healthcare professionals about the development of preventative or early intervention strategies to identify women at risk.

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Summary of relevance:

Problem

Often there is a sense of shock and bewilderment in the community when a mother murders her child.

What is already known

Women are reluctant to discuss their feelings of failure, shame and desperation or early symptoms of mental illness that can lead to harming their babies because they fear losing their babies.

What this paper adds

An analysis of literary texts which contain depictions of women who murder their babies is an opportunity to understand why a

woman may take such actions and to consider how the barriers she faced may have prevented her from seeking assistance from healthcare professionals.

1. Introduction

There is a general belief that the period after childbirth is a time of great happiness as women bond with their babies. However, this dominant narrative can silence the reality that many women find the increasing stress of caring for a newborn makes them vulnerable to the development of serious mental illness such as postnatal psychosis.¹ We present an examination of the literary record as an opportunity to examine how women make meaning of their experience of serious mental illness or feelings of desperation following childbirth. This experience is further analysed by examining how others have viewed the woman and how this has contributed to the woman's decision to harm her child. This

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examination demonstrates that the women in the literary texts are isolated and marginalised from their communities making it very difficult for them to receive support and assistance. Better understandings of these experiences will inform the future development of prevention or early intervention strategies. This is important because the community often reacts with shock and disbelief when a woman experiences the symptoms of psychosis or mania, or a mother reacts to increasing stress by committing suicide or infanticide. Infanticide is defined as the act of killing a child under the age of 12 months by one of the child's parents.² Even though these events are met with disbelief in everyday life, motifs such as serious mental illness or feelings of desperation following childbirth and infanticide are explored in literary texts from the Classical to the postmodern period. Often the stories are based on factual or historical events.

Stories transmit fundamental understandings and experiences from the writer to the reader in a way that can be lost in more academic or scientific forms of writing. In a literary text, such as a novel, a play, or a poem, the reader is more likely to empathise with the characters and thus become emotionally involved with their story.³ The stories of women analysed in this paper are an opportunity to learn how women make meaning of the difficulties they face after childbirth.⁴ Sometimes, the story takes a tragic turn and the woman abandons her child or commits infanticide. In this paper, we define abandonment as a mother leaving her child in a position that will result in death if the child is not found in a timely manner. However, the stories contain the woman's explanation for her actions, which is often shaped by societal attitudes and a lack of community support that leads her to believe that she has no other option. We argue that these insights could assist the new mother, healthcare professionals working with new mothers or relatives and carers to better understand how women at risk are identified and supported to prevent harm to herself or to her child.

1.1. Current real life examples

We were prompted to write this paper after a newborn baby was found in a stormwater drain by two passing cyclists in Sydney Australia in November 2014. The baby was taken to hospital and later placed in state care.⁵ In this case, the mother was charged with attempted murder after she admitted to leaving her baby in the drain, and to knowing that this would likely cause the death of her child.⁶ This discovery of a baby abandoned by his mother produced a number of Australian newspaper articles explaining that mothers could only abandon their newborn infants if they were either mentally ill or desperate.⁵ Other similar incidents reported in newspapers have also assumed that the mother is mentally ill or desperate.⁷

Another high profile case in Texas demonstrates that community attitudes do not necessarily assume any mitigating circumstances. Such circumstances include a diagnosis of postnatal psychosis, which is a serious psychiatric emergency affecting one to two women in every 1000 after childbirth. Women diagnosed with this condition develop hallucinations, delusions and confused thinking in the first four weeks after childbirth. There is an estimated 4% risk of infanticide if postnatal psychosis remains untreated.⁸ However, in the case of Andrea Yates who drowned her five children aged from six months to seven years in the bath in June 2001, this diagnosis was not taken into account during her trial for murder. Even though Andrea had a previous diagnosis of postnatal psychosis and said that she drowned her children because she was Satan and that her children would burn in hell if she did not kill them, she was convicted of murder. This conviction was not overturned until her appeal in 2006 when her mental illness was recognised. Her conviction was overturned and she was committed to a mental hospital. Both the baby in the storm water

drain and the case of Andrea Yates demonstrate the polarity that exists in community attitudes towards women who abandon or murder their children. In both cases, the women are seen as either experiencing mental illness or they are dealt with in the legal system and judged as murderers.

Media reports following the case of the baby in the drain investigated local health services to discover why the woman was not identified as being at risk. Midwifery services responded by explaining that throughout New South Wales (NSW), Australia, all women undergo routine psychosocial assessment and depression screening programme in pregnancy and after birth to ensure that they receive adequate support both before and after birth.^{9,10} However, women may not disclose information pointing to symptoms of mental illness or feelings of desperation, thus not receiving the support they require.^{11,12} Two recent qualitative meta-syntheses report that feelings of shame, failure and the fear of losing their children create barriers to seeking assistance compelling women to conceal their illness in an attempt to appear normal.¹ Moreover, many women reported feeling isolated and marginalised because healthcare professionals were hesitant to ask questions about the woman's symptoms resulting in delays in diagnosis and treatment.¹ Often, women who murder their neonates within twenty-four hours of birth are experiencing feelings of desperation because they are single, alone, and facing significant psychosocial or economic difficulties.¹³

It is noteworthy that the discourse of child abandonment and murder in literary texts from Classical Greece to the present day depict the social and cultural forces that keep women silent. Our purpose in this paper is to investigate how women make meaning in such texts of their experiences of mental illness, or acute desperation, and their situations. We also investigate how community attitudes may make it difficult for the woman to seek help. These attitudes can, potentially, lead a woman to believe that killing her child is the only option available to her. This investigation is relevant to contemporary midwifery practice because it presents a method to understand why women may not disclose symptoms or feelings of desperation after childbirth.

2. Methods

We identified literary texts that included plotlines of a woman experiencing psychotic symptoms after childbirth or infanticide by asking 243 people on an expert literary analysis site on social media the following question:

Do you know of any story, whether a novel, play, poem that describes a woman who has a period of either psychosis or delirium after childbirth or a story of infanticide?

There were thirty responses identifying twelve texts and after reviewing each text, we selected seven that contained significant motifs of a woman experiencing serious mental illness after childbirth or a woman committing infanticide (See [Table 1](#)). Four further texts identified on social media were excluded from the study because they did not describe psychotic symptoms after childbirth or because their focus was not primarily with the woman. (see [Table 2](#)).

We used a textual analysis approach to understand how serious mental illness following childbirth or infanticide is positioned by the author.¹⁴ First the descriptions of mental illness after childbirth or infanticide were read to understand how the author situated the woman in her textual community. Second, they were read to explore how other characters reacted to the woman before, during, and after her illness or when the infanticide was exposed. Finally, literary and historical literature was read to understand how these motifs were received.¹⁵ The texts show that child abandonment or

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