

**Mothers, Men and Mind Control: An Analysis of Sheri S. Tepper's
Novels: *Grass* and *The Fresco***

by

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*Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
English Studies in the Faculty of Arts at Stellenbosch University*



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December 2011

Declaration

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Date: 1 September 2011

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Abstract

Sheri S. Tepper, one of the most prolific feminist science fiction writers, uses her novels to address humanity's ignorance about, and indifference towards, various social, gender and environmental issues, and in so doing, she attempts to rectify these issues by creating an awareness of them. Her novels generally focus on four main issues: motherhood, both as ideology and experience; the essentialized nature and acceptance of the superiority of masculinity; the influence of religions, traditions and ideologies; and an ever-increasing concern for environmental preservation. These issues are all interlinked in her novels. Though some of her works have received critical attention, most notably *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) and *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (1996), most have received little. I will present a critical analysis of Tepper's *Grass* (1989) – a novel which has received some critical attention – and *The Fresco* (2000) – a novel which has received very little critical attention. Although these novels deal with the same issues, they do so in different ways: *Grass* is a much more layered critique of modern society, whereas *The Fresco* is a rather blatant critique and the passionate voice of its author filters through more prominently than in *Grass*. I will be examining Tepper's portrayal of motherhood, masculinity and the influence of ideologies, religions and traditions in both of these novels. Although there will not be a section devoted to Tepper's environmental views, these will be highlighted within the other sections. Tepper ultimately stands for women's rights to opt for motherhood as a free choice. She also insists that ideologies, religions and traditions – society's oppressive straitjackets – should adapt to modernity, and that the acceptance of masculinity as the dominant gender be destabilized. Rectifying these problems, in Tepper's view, would also lead to the preservation of the environment for future generations. In my conclusion I address the most frequent critique directed against Tepper's work, namely that her novels are repetitive with regard to thematic content, by suggesting that her work is repetitive because she feels the need to reiterate the same issues in her novels, to indicate that the same societal problems of the past are still prevalent.

Opsomming

Sheri S. Teper, een van die vernaamste feminis-wetenskapfisksie skryfsters, gebruik haar romans om die mensdom se onkunde oor, en onverskilligheid teenoor, verskeie sosiale-, geslags- en omgewingskwessies aan te spreek in 'n poging om hierdie kwessies op te los deur mense meer bewus te maak van die kwessies. Haar romans fokus gewoonlik op vier hoof kwessies wat aan mekaar verbind is: moederskap, beide as ideologiese en fisiese ervaring; die genoodsaakte aanvaarding van manlikheid as die dominante geslag; die invloed van gelowe, tradisies, en ideologieë op die samelewing; en 'n toenemende besorgheid oor die bewaring van die omgewing. Alhoewel sommige van haar romans kritiese aandag ontvang het, in besonder *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) en *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (1996), het die meeste baie min kritiese aandag ontvang. Ek beoog dus om twee van Teper se romans, *Grass* (1989) en *The Fresco* (2000), krities te ontleed. Alhoewel *Grass* ietwat meer kritiese aandag ontvang het, het *The Fresco* byna geen kritiese aandag ontvang nie. Beide die romans spreek dieselfde kwessies aan, maar in verskillende maniere: *Grass* is a baie meer subtiele kritiek van die moderne samelewing, terwyl *The Fresco* 'n baie meer flagrante kritiek is en die passievolle stem van die outeur is baie meer opmerklik in dië roman. Ek beoog om Teper se uitbeelding van moederskap, manlikheid en die invloed van ideologieë, gelowe en tradisies in beide hierdie romans ondersoek. Hoewel daar nie 'n spesifieke seksie gaan wees wat opgedra is aan die ondersoek van Teper se omgewingsboodskap nie, sal dit tog uitgelig word in ander seksies. Daar sal gewys word dat Teper vir die regte van vroue staan om moederskap vrylik te kan kies. Sy beveel ook aan dat die ideologieë, gelowe en tradisies moet aan pas by die vereistes van moderne samelewing, en dat die aanvaarding van manlikheid as die dominante geslag omgekeer moet word. Deur hierdie probleme reg te maak, in Teper se opinie, sal dit lei tot die bewaring van die omgewing vir toekomstige generasies. In my gevolgtrekking spreek ek een van die algemeenste kritieke teen Teper se romans aan, naamlik dat die tematiese inhoud herhalend is. Ek voel dat die werklike probleem is dat Teper dit nodig ag om dieselfde kwessies uit te beeld, aangesien dit aan dui dat probleme van die verlede steeds voorkom in die huidige samelewing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people:

My supervisor, Dr. Ralph Goodman, for his guidance and patience

Dr. Shaun Viljoen, for his support

My various English lecturers and tutors, especially Mrs Elsa Winckler, who started it all

Mrs. Shirley Visser, who made me fall in love with the English language in high school

My various students, who have taught me much about writing

My family, and especially my mother, Ronel, and father, Carel, who encouraged me to do whatever I wanted

My friends and fellow students, in particular Jennifer Rees, Grace Kim, Grant Andrews and Kiki Kargaard

My cat, Obi, who reminded me that I have to take breaks every now and then

And, Deon, who gave me endless cups of love and support

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Introduction

According to Jenny Wolmark, feminist science fiction, like feminism “exists in a contradictory relationship to the hegemonic discourses to which it is opposed but on which it draws ... [and] open[s] up new spaces for alternative representations of gender” (24-25). As such, there is a traceable correlation between social-cultural discourses on gender and the genre. For instance, science fiction from the 1960’s, in accordance with second wave feminism – which focussed on obtaining social and legal equality for women through the women’s liberation movement (Krolokke and Sorensen 7) – “helped shift the gender focus away from the ‘Battle of the Sexes’ to more egalitarian solutions” (Merrick 247). Science fiction in the 1970’s focussed on the creation of ‘feminist utopias which destabilized gender norms through creating idealized spaces in which gender is non-existent. 1980’s science fiction moved away from this “‘androgyny’ to works which critiqued or explored gender through dystopian visions, role reversals and worlds which split men and women into separate societies” (Merrick 249). One of the writers that emerged from the 1980’s science fiction was Sheri S. Tepper. Like many of her contemporaries, such as Pamela Sargent, and in line with the re-emergence of socio-biological discourse on gender, Tepper’s early novels, such as *Gate to Women’s Country*, critiqued reproductive technologies (Merrick 249).

Tepper’s later novels combine a feminist agenda with a larger concern about the (mal)functioning of North American society; through her novels, Tepper addresses what she considers to be humanity’s ignorance about, and indifference towards, social issues. As such, Tepper actively encourages greater humanitarian, gender and environmental awareness in her novels, by presenting a dystopian vision of the present and potential futures, to highlight inherent flaws in the current functioning of society, with the specific intent to inspire change. Tepper herself considers writing to be a “social responsibility” (“Speaking to the Universe” n.pag.), whereby it is the writer’s responsibility to do more than just “write a good book” (“Speaking to the Universe” n.pag.) – writing has to benefit society in some way, which is why her novels encourage awareness and change.

In order to initiate change, Tepper’s novels focus more or less on the same issues, namely women’s (lack of) reproductive freedom, motherhood as a source of both oppression and liberation, the acceptance and normalization of masculine domination and patriarchy, the prevailing influence of religion, ideology, and tradition, and – ever-increasingly – concerns about the environment. The continual focus on the same issues over a career that spans more than thirty years has led to Tepper being accused of being “repetitive” (Clarke n.pag); an accusation that she does not deny. Rather,

Tepper admits to “continually pound[ing] on the same themes, because they’re things [she] care[s] about deeply. [They] are the soapboxes [from which she elucidates her views]” (“Speaking to the Universe” n.pag.). As I will argue further on, it is not the debatable repetitive nature of Tepper’s works that is problematic; rather, it is the necessity for repetition that is problematic.

The issues that Tepper’s novels address are all interlinked; by combining elements from radical feminism and eco-feminism, Tepper’s novels propose that men are the source and perpetrators of certain ideologies. This, in turn, leads to the constriction and social confinement of women and their bodies, which in turn is a contributing factor to over-population, which is detrimental to the environment. Tepper’s novels therefore advocate “environmentalism and the need for population control and similar measures to avoid destroying planetary ecosystems” (Vint n.pag.). In line with eco-feminism, Tepper thus draws a very direct and literal connection between “the oppression of women and the destruction and misuse of non-human nature within male-dominated cultures” (Armbruster 211).

Tepper’s strong views on these issues are easily detectable in her novels, and as such, she is often critiqued for her style of writing, a style that I like to think of as “finger-wagging”, because it creates the illusion that “by and large, we are being restrainedly dictated to” (Shoul n.pag.). Tepper is aware of the fact that in reviews of her works she is often “accused of being a writer who preaches” (Szpatura n.pag.); yet, she does not dispute this, but rather considers herself to be “a preacher who writes” (Szpatura n.pag.). Before Tepper became a full-time novelist, she was “a pamphleteer, a sermonizer, a speech-giver, a person who wagged her finger under people’s chins and said, ‘Now see here!’” (“Sheri S. Tepper” n.pag.). This quality permeates Tepper’s fictional writing – at times subtly and at other times, rather blatantly – emphasising the importance that she places on the issues raised in her novels.

In spite of these critiques against Tepper’s writing, I have chosen two of her novels to focus on, specifically because as a writer who is intent on inspiring change, Tepper’s narrative voice is distinctly accessible. The reason for this is that

she did not begin to write until the age of 50 in 1979, and she did not really develop an individual style as an author until after 1985. As a woman who had lived the reality of patriarchal conditions in the earlier part of the century, she was less likely to be influenced by post-feminist rhetoric than the new generation of young women in the '80s. ...This makes her books valuable for their ability to raise the consciousness of

young women. Her writing provides convincing evidence that the ideas feminism advocates should not go the way of the dinosaurs: there is more to be done before our society can rest on its post-feminist laurels. (Dentry 2)

Moreover, Tepper “continued to develop radical forms and techniques [of feminist science fiction] in order to deliver strong, critical, revolutionary messages about feminism and society” (Dentry 2).

This thesis will examine two of Tepper’s novels, *Grass* (1989) and *The Fresco* (2000), and will focus especially on the representation of the mother-figure and motherhood, masculinity, as well as the naturalized and uncontested influence of religion, tradition, and ideology (what Tepper considers to be the “oppressive straitjackets”¹ of society²) in these novels. I have purposefully not considered her more popular works such as *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1998), *Beauty* (1991) and *Gibbon’s Decline and Fall* (1996), precisely because they have received some critical attention. Moreover, these two novels have been chosen because they deal with the same issues, though in slightly different tones. *Grass* is often considered to be “one of the most significant works of 1980’s S[cience] F[iction] ... one of the most genuine classics of twentieth century SF” (Roberts, Review n.pag.). It deals with one woman’s quest for enlightenment and liberation from patriarchal oppression, which runs concurrently with the search for a cure for a deadly flesh-eating plague. The novel focuses very much on the negative and oppressive influence on women of both the so-called oppressive ideological straitjackets and men, especially through motherhood. Tepper’s finger-wagging style, though present, is less blatant here, and the novel’s critique is layered. *The Fresco*, on the other hand, though it focuses on the same issues, and also deals with a woman’s quest for independence from patriarchal oppression, has a slightly different tone. In this novel, Tepper essentially parodies her usual formula, by having her heroine defeat “the bad guys – along with the ills they represent, like patriarchal society and exclusive religion” (Clarke n.pag.) rather easily, leading to a “wish-fulfilment ending” (Clarke n.pag.) where all societal evils are magically set right. It, in essence, reads like an exaggerated version of her usual finger-wagging style, especially since Tepper’s subjectivity filters through the voice of the narrator and protagonist more clearly than in *Grass*, which means that it becomes almost impossible to determine who is saying what. This is

¹ Adapted from Freeden: Ideologies are considered to be “at the very least alien caricatures, if not oppressive ideological straitjackets that need to be debunked and dismantled to protect a society against brainwashing and dreaming false dreams” (3).

² Tepper admits that she believes that “any regime that defines truth as a set of beliefs and occurrences that cannot be questioned, that can neither be demonstrated nor proven is not only evil but ridiculous” (Szpatura n.pag.).

most likely done on purpose, for *The Fresco* in essence reads “like Tepper getting tired of waiting for the rest of the world to understand, but also like Tepper sending herself up” (Clarke n.pag.).

These novels have thus been chosen because of their thematic similarity, which highlights not only Tepper’s passion for the issues at hand, but also the fact that, although these two novels are separated by a decade, the same issues are still prevalent. This is in spite of the emergence of third wave feminism, with its emphasis on empowerment and assertiveness (Korlokke and Sorensen 15), and increased legislation in favour of women and their social, political and reproductive emancipation.

Though *Grass* has received some critical attention, from feminist scholars such as Marleen Barr, *The Fresco* – aside from reviews – has received very little. I aim to fill the void, so to speak, by doing a close reading of both texts, focusing specifically on Tepper’s representation of motherhood within a patriarchal society, the denaturalization of masculinity and patriarchy within such a society, and the influence of religions, traditions and ideologies on women and society in general.

As my thesis draws on various disciplines, Chapter One will be a brief overview of the key theoretical concepts which form the basis of Tepper’s criticism, and with which I will be dealing. It will examine some of the feminist discourses surrounding motherhood as a source of both oppression and liberation, which is explored in detail in Tepper’s novels. It will also give a brief overview of some relevant studies in masculinity, such as the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is central to Tepper’s critique of masculinity. Her novels always present masculinity in general, and hegemonic masculinity specifically, in direct contrast to femininity, in order to ultimately critique and destabilize the acceptance of masculinity as the dominant gender in society. Chapter One will also examine the fundamental classification of the three oppressive societal straitjackets named above: ideology, religion and tradition. Though all three play an integral role in Tepper’s novels, especially since she “detest[s] authoritarianism” of any kind (Szpatura n.pag.), the chapter (and the thesis) will focus more on the fundamentalist aspect of religion, as it is this particular quality that Tepper critiques, especially the influence that fundamentalism has on women.

Chapter Two will be an analysis of Tepper’s *Grass* and it will be divided into three sections. The first section will focus on the representation of motherhood within, and outside, the patriarchal context, through the depiction of four female characters: Marjorie Westriding, Rowena bon Damfels, Stella Yrarier, and Eugenie le Fevre. Motherhood is ultimately shown to be a source of both oppression and liberation for these women, and that it is always considered to be more

acceptable when it remains within the confines of the traditional family. The second section will focus specifically on the representation of the influence of tradition-as-ideology, through the hunting custom on the planet Grass, and religion (specifically Catholicism and Mormonism) in relation to the female characters. Ultimately, these are criticized because they are bound to an irrelevant past and therefore perpetuate outdated ideas on gender, and Tepper encourages especially younger generations to break free from these constraining concepts. The last section of the chapter will be an examination of the representation of masculinity as something that has to be constantly proven and reaffirmed by other men, by looking at the depiction of four male characters: Roderigo (Rigo) Yrarier, the Green Brothers, Stavenger and Sylvan bon Damfels. Prevailing myths about the importance of masculinity are shown to be destructive, and in so doing, Tepper subverts the essentialism of masculine domination in a patriarchal society.

Chapter Three of my thesis will be an examination of *The Fresco* and the variety of issues that Tepper highlights through two of her characters, an abused housewife named Benita and an alien called Chiddy, who both act as mouthpieces for Tepper. This chapter will also be divided into three sections; the first section will focus on the issue of motherhood and reproduction, which is portrayed as a personal and cultural experience, through six female characters, both human and alien, who are placed in opposition to each other throughout the novel, in an implied and subtle comparison between two characters who are almost polar opposites. The novel also emphasises that women should have greater reproductive freedom, and be allowed to have identities outside that of wife and mother and that legislation about women and their bodies should not be made by men. This section will also examine the aliens' critique of gender relations, which is not only shown to be influenced by religion, but also an underlying cause of overpopulation; this in essence becomes a plea for the preservation of the environment. Section two will examine Tepper's rather blatant critique of religion; not only due to its everyday influence, but more specifically due to its fallible foundation – the holy text. As such, this section will draw on translation studies and look at the fallible nature of religious texts. This section will also examine Tepper rejection of a simplistic utopian solution to Earth's problems, both interpersonal and environmental, in an attempt to encourage people to solve these problems from within, rather than waiting for a magical solution. Section three will be an examination of the caricature-like, superficially stereotypical representation of masculinity in the novel, especially in relation to the more rounded female characters, by examining the two types of masculinity found in the novel: threatening and non-threatening. Ultimately, it is shown that the one-dimensional male characters are not a flaw in Tepper's writing,

but are, rather, purposefully constructed in order to explore femininity in greater detail, and to subvert the essentialism of masculinity in a patriarchal society.

All of these issues and themes are interlinked with a growing concern with the environment. Though there will not be a section focusing specifically on Tepper's environmentalist message, her ideas in this regard will be highlighted in various sections throughout the thesis, as it is ultimately Tepper's aim to inspire social change in order for the environment to be preserved for future generations. For Tepper,

the expression of divinity is in variety, and the more variable the creation, the more variable creatures that surround us, botanical and zoological, the more chance we have to learn and to see into life itself, nature itself ... And when [she] see[s] that variety being first decimated, and then halved ... that makes [her] very sad, very despairing, because we *need* variety. ("Sheri S. Tepper" n.pag.)

Chapter 1: A Brief Overview of Key Theoretical Concepts

1.1 A Brief Definition of Religion, Tradition and Ideology

Ideologies are at the heart of Tepper's critique of society, not only those pertaining to motherhood and masculinity, but also societal and cultural ones, for ideologies are viewed as "oppressive straitjackets" from which people should be freed. Though her novels often specifically critique patriarchal ideology, the Tepperian definition of ideology encompasses tradition and religion – specifically fundamentalist religion – as well. These three are grouped together because of the way that they manage to influence people's everyday lives and to remain an uncontested part of their lives. Tepper's novels often advocate that these straitjackets, but especially religions and traditions, should either be rejected altogether, or adapt to a modern world – an idea which is emphasized by the fact that in her novels it is often the youth who are able to critique the systems of belief of older generations and who consequently try to break free from these ideologies. Tepper seems to imply that it is the duty of younger generations to break the hold of ideology, tradition and religion, in order to create a world in which people can co-exist peacefully. For the sake of clarity, I will briefly define ideology, religion and tradition separately, though the word ideology may at times encompass all three.

Ideology, at its simplest, can be defined as "a set of beliefs" (Poovey 3) that characterizes a particular group of people. Ideologies are given "concrete form in the practices and social institutions that govern people's social relations" (Poovey 3). As such, they provide frameworks within which people experience and evaluate individual and social events. Ideologies "map political and social worlds for us" (Freedman 2). In other words, ideologies help people to make sense of the world. Although I am aware that a larger, more complex discourse surrounding the meaning of the word 'ideology' exists, for the purpose of this thesis, a simple definition will suffice, as it is this simplistic definition and understanding that Tepper criticizes in her work. Tepper's specific critique against ideology is not only that it presents itself as an internalized, uncontested and limited truth, but also that this 'truth' is used to perpetuate what Tepper views as outdated notions on gender and power relations.

This could be due to the fact that ideologies are implicitly about power, for an "ideology has to do with legitimizing the power of a dominant social group or class" (Eagleton 5). Eagleton lists six strategies by which an ideology may legitimate itself: by "*promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it"; by "*naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable"; by "*denigrating* ideas which might challenge it"; by "*excluding* rival forms of

thought”; and lastly by “*obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself” (Eagleton 5-6; emphasis in original). It is especially when ideologies become interlinked with issues of power – attaining or maintaining a particular hold over society – that they can potentially be viewed as oppressive straitjackets that inhibit and confine people. This negative view of any ideology as something that constrains people is contrasted with the ever growing awareness that no-one is really free from the influence of ideologies, for the person who criticizes one ideology is often entrenched in another one. To be truly objective about any ideology, political or otherwise, is hardly possible.

Michael Freeden views ideologies as necessarily political, for the everyday influence of these is most tangible. A political ideology may manifest itself as a truth, as something that possesses “universal, rational validity” (Freeden 6). Freeden does not consider religions as being truly ideological in nature, for they do not always attempt to “compete over the control of public policy ... [or] attempt to influence the social arrangements of the entire political community” (101). In contrast to this, Eagleton considers religion to be “probably the most purely ideological of the various [hegemonic] institutions of civil society” (113). This discrepancy might be due to the fact that religions do not seem to have as overt an effect on everyday society as political ideologies. This, however, might not take into account that religions provide frameworks that are just as influential as political ideologies, and that religions influence political ideologies. In particular, religious ideologies have a profound influence on women’s lives. In certain kinds of Christianity, for instance, the subjugation of women is based on the fact that Eve is blamed for the fall of mankind into sin. In fact, most religions cast women as the weaker subject, who for the safety of all, should be kept in a subordinate position to men. There is thus an implicit connection between gender relations and ideologies.

Though Freeden does not consider religions to be as influential as political ideologies, religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, “may be heavily politicized and, conversely, *it*, can adopt some of the characteristics of totalitarian ideologies” (101). Fundamentalism shares many of the ‘oppressive straitjacket’ qualities that most people associate with political ideologies. This has made the word ‘fundamentalism’ become a forbidden word, laden with negative connotations. In spite of this, it “did not begin as a term of abuse or even criticism” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 6). Initially, it was a word that merely became associated with a breakaway Protestant group which upheld a very strict and literal interpretation of the Bible in the 1920s. Ruthven states that “[t]he original Protestant use of the word anchors it in the responses of individual or collective selfhoods, of personal and group identities, to the scandal or shock of the Other” (22). In modern day society,

‘fundamentalism’ has become a word laden with negative connotations, especially after the terrorist attacks on the United States of America on September 11, 2001, which Ruthven calls “the most spectacular fundamentalist atrocity of all” (2).

Although there is no one definition of fundamentalism, a potential one is that it is “a religious way of being that manifests itself in a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identities as individuals or groups in the face of modernity and secularization” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 5-6). Though ‘fundamentalism’ has come to be specifically associated with religion, it can also denote a strong adherence to any system of belief, in spite of criticism against it. Fundamentalism is for many people merely a way to cling to a golden age, a “mythical idea of a time when the problems and conflicts that beset modern society ... were deemed to be much less prevalent than they are today” (Ruthven 28). In the United States of America, for instance, fundamentalists are considered to be “rural ignoramuses [and] rural hillbillies out of touch with modern thought” (Ruthven 15).

Fundamentalism is the result of modernization, which opened people up to the possibility that there might be different religions and different ways of living, for “most people assumed that their own way of life or system of beliefs were the norm” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 30). By confronting another, different system of beliefs, people are forced to question their beliefs. Don Cupit calls this “religion shock”, which is what occurs “when someone who is a strong and sincere believer in his own faith confronts, without evasion and without being able to explain it away, the reality of an entirely different form of faith, and faces the consequent challenge to his own deepest assumptions” (qtd. in Ruthven 30). Once confronted with another system of beliefs, people either change their beliefs or they defend them. For most people it is easier, and more comforting, to cling to their old, accepted, ‘safe’ ways of life.

It is precisely this unwillingness to change that often leads to misconceptions about fundamentalists, and consequently, religions. A religion, such as Islam recently, has become associated with terrorist attacks, such as the one on September 11, which in turn leads to a general fear and critique of those religions. Yet, Jonathan Williams points out that what drives people to do things like suicide bombings is not the religion itself, but rather “the failure of [a] traditional religion to encompass modernity” (qtd. in Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 1).

Though fundamentalists cannot or do not want to adapt their religions to a modern way of living, they “have not been slow to embrace such aspects of modernity as they find congenial, especially

modern technologies (including radio, television, electronics, and armaments) [which] they consider [to be] helpful to their cause” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 31). One of the things about modernity that is rejected by fundamentalists is religious pluralism: “the policy of granting public recognition to more than one religious tradition” (Ruthven 33). The reason that religious pluralism is rejected by fundamentalists is that by accepting pluralism, truth becomes relative. “Once it is allowed that there are different paths to truth, a person’s religious allegiance becomes a matter of choice, and choice is the enemy of absolutism” (Ruthven 32-33). Absolutism and textual inerrancy are both characteristic beliefs of fundamentalists (Matheson 8). Fundamentalism can thus also be seen as “one response to the crisis of faith brought on by awareness of differences” (Ruthven 33).

There is generally a conflicting relationship between feminists and fundamentalists. On the one hand, feminists critique the way in which the literal interpretation of certain holy texts has led to the subjugation and oppression of women. Certain passages from the Christian Bible, for instance, are “understood as divinely inspired and without reference to the cultural context in which they were written, have served as powerful instruments for the reinforcement of the subjection of women in Western society” (Daly 524). Religious texts obtain their legitimacy from the fact that they are considered to be divinely inspired writings and, because “[f]undamentalists are nothing if not selective about the texts they use and their [innovative] mode of interpretation” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 9). This leads to the proliferation of outdated, negative views on women and gender relation, and consequently, serves as justification for the continual suppression of women in modern society.

On the other hand, “many different varieties of Christian fundamentalists [assert] that the current state of contemporary society – one they consider to be morally depraved – is a direct result of women’s emancipation” (Matheson 2). Fundamentalists are “patriarchal in nature” (Matheson 6). One of the characteristics of fundamentalism, according to Jones, is that fundamentalists “demonize their opponents”³ in the sense that they “portray their opponents as both wicked and threatening (qtd. in Matheson 6). Fundamentalists also oppose “all types of political and social reform or ‘progress’ that would either impede their own progress or bring into question their values and/or beliefs” (Matheson 6). As Laake points out, feminists advocating an anti-patriarchal world view are

³ Indeed, the evangelist SunMyung Moon, of the Unification Church, maintains that feminists are more or less agents of Satan, who spread “Satan’s biggest lie ... [which] is that men and women are the same and can interchange roles” (“Patriarchy” n.pag.). Feminism itself is considered to be the “diabolical thought” of Satan, merely meant to overthrow the divine institution of patriarchy (“Patriarchy” n.pag.).

deemed to be “the Pied Pipers of sin who have led women away from the divine role of womanhood down the pathway of error” (qtd. in Longlaker).

The anti-feminist thrust of certain fundamentalist religions is no doubt also spurred on by a growing concern to maintain the family as a unit. The family is often considered by feminists to be the source of women’s oppression in society, and feminists have encouraged women to move away from and out of the confining space of the home. This goes against many fundamentalists’ vision of the family unit, with its “entrenched patriarchal hierarchy: husband over wife, wife over children, boys over girls” (Matheson 9). Furthermore, the way in which discussions on sexuality have opened up the possibility of more than one kind of sexuality, along with the general acceptance of more varied forms of sexual behaviour, are both considered to be threats to the family unit. This is why the “fundamentalist concern to maintain the family as a social unit and transmitter of conservative values has been overtaken by a neurotic obsession with ‘correct’ sexual behaviour” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 79). Fundamentalism is thus also aimed at maintaining the patriarchal nuclear family, consisting of the breadwinner father, the homemaker wife and the children.

While fundamentalists are aware of the fact they are adhering to a clearly defined set of beliefs, traditionalists⁴ on the other hand often “do not know that they are traditionalists” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 11). According to Edward Shils, tradition “[i]n its barest, most elementary sense ... means simply a *traditum*; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (12). This includes material objects and customs. Traditions are extraordinary in the way that they are “simply what occurs unselfconsciously as part of the natural order of things, an unreflective or unconsidered *Weltanschauung* (world view)” (Ruthven 10-11). Traditions are, in a certain sense, the living embodiment of the past which occurs uncontested in the present. As Shils points out, under the guise of tradition “past practices persist while appearing as if their connection with the past, if noticed at all, is entirely secondary to their ‘naturalness’ and their ‘rightness’” (201).

Traditions are often embedded in religious ideologies, cultural institutions and any other kind of ideology. Religious traditions, for instance, convey “the sense of a cumulative body of ritual behaviour, and thought that reaches back to the time of origins” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 10). In Catholicism “tradition embodying the accumulated experience and knowledge of the Church is seen as a source of authority equal to scripture” (Ruthven 10). In Islam, tradition is the “accumulated

⁴ According to Ruthven, traditionalists are “people who live in a traditional culture” (Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 10).

body of interpretation, law, and practice as developed over the centuries by the *ulama*, the class of learned men who constitute Islam's professional class of religionists or clerics" (Ruthven 10). Traditions, and especially long-established traditions, add historical weight and legitimacy to any ideology. From a traditional perspective, "fundamentalism may be defined as a tradition made self-aware and consequently defensive" (Ruthven 11).

In Tepper's novels, tradition is viewed in the same light as ideologies and religions: as bound to an irrelevant past. Often, in her novels, the lines between tradition, religious fundamentalism and ideology become blurred, so that it is not always possible to distinguish which particular one is being critiqued. This is not to say that Tepper simplistically conflates these three, but rather to highlight the inherent connection and similarity among them. Since traditional customs and beliefs in Tepper's novels often guide and direct characters' behaviours as much as ideologies and religions do, references to the word "tradition" in this thesis should always be read as referring to a concept that has an ideological construction and influence.

1.2 A Brief Overview of Feminist Discourses on Motherhood

Just as Tepper's novels criticize ideologies in general, it also criticizes very specific ideologies, such as the ideology of motherhood. This section will be a brief and very broad overview of the ideological construction and importance of motherhood. As such, it will draw on a wide range of feminisms.

The patriarchal ideology of motherhood, according to Gerda Lerner, manifests itself in three ways. The first is the physical aspect of motherhood, which entails both the "ability to give birth and [the] practice of nurturance" (116). The second manifestation of motherhood is the institution of motherhood, or the "social construction of motherhood [which is the] legal, economic, and institutional means by which society defines the roles and rights and duties of mothers" (Lerner 116). These specifications are bound to historical contexts, and as such differ according to time and place. The third manifestation of motherhood is an ideology of motherhood, which is the "symbolic meaning [of motherhood] as defined in particular periods and under different circumstances" (117). The ideological importance of motherhood is what makes motherhood a site of contention in feminist discourses, for motherhood carries "both oppressive and fulfilling elements" (Rowbotham 82) for women. It is the ideology of motherhood that binds women inescapably to patriarchy.

In a patriarchal society, the ideology of motherhood not only defines motherhood as essential in upholding the patriarchal lineage, but also becomes the means by which women are controlled. In a

patriarchal society, children are “reckoned as being born to men, out of women” (Rothman 30). Women are merely “the nurturers of men’s seeds, the soil in which [these] seeds gr[o]w, the daughters who b[ear] men’s offspring” (Rothman 36). In order to maintain patriarchy, men must control women through motherhood. Women are controlled as the daughters of men and as “the mothers of men’s children” (Rothman 30). In order to maintain the “purity of the male kinship line” (Rothman 31), men have to control women’s sexuality and to ensure that women maintain their virginity until marriage, so that “no other man’s seed enter[s] her body” (Rothman 31). Once pregnant, women also have to be controlled – through methods such as confinement – so that they will not accidentally, or on purpose, destroy the seed of men.

It is because of the great ideological importance of motherhood that, in a patriarchal society, it is “promoted by spiritual leaders as the only worthwhile destiny for women” (Irigaray 99). By depicting it as natural, “a patriarchal ideology of motherhood locks women into biological reproduction, [which] denies them identities and selfhood outside of motherhood” (Glenn 9). Women become limited to the private space of the home and, as Tong points out, are made to believe that they are “not supposed to have personal needs but rather [that] they are supposed to be consumed by their passion for mothering” (qtd. in Kirkley 463). Women’s reproductive capabilities thus not only limits them to the private sphere of the home, but also limits their role in the patriarchal nuclear family to that of “homemaker” (Walby 61) and nurturer of children, while men are allowed to go outside and be the “breadwinner” (Walby 61) for the family. It is in this way that motherhood binds women to a patriarchal ideology of oppression and a life of passivity.

Furthermore, motherhood not only binds women to patriarchy but it also causes women to be complicit in their own oppression. Women became the perpetuators of patriarchy as they are the “reproducers of culture” (Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd 17) in their capacity as mothers. Traditionally, women spend more time with their children than anybody else, and they are therefore responsible for their children’s upbringing. This includes not only the childrearing aspect of motherhood, but also the transmission of cultural and ideological values to their children.

However, it is not only patriarchal ideology that oppresses women through motherhood. Barbara Katz Rothman has identified two other ideologies which define modern American motherhood: the ideologies of technology and capitalism. These two, along with patriarchy, are all interconnected in the way in which they dictate the experience of motherhood. According to Rothman, “the fundamental characteristic of a technological society is [the] rational pursuit of efficiency” (53). In such a society, ideas about machines are applied to people, who have “to be more efficient,

productive, rational and controlled” (Rothman 53). Within the ideology of technology, motherhood, and especially the physical act of giving birth, becomes a part of the high-tech medical world. Motherhood, pregnancy and the delivery of the baby are all systemized and controlled to ensure greater efficiency.

According to capitalist ideology, motherhood “is perceived as work, and children as a product produced by the labor of mothering” (Rothman 65), leading to the “commodification of children and the proletarianization of motherhood” (Rothman 66). Motherhood is now perceived as “an activity, as service, as work” (Rothman 23). In this way, mothers are literally the producers of children and culture. It can thus be seen how the ideological aspect of motherhood has turned it into a potentially negative experience for women. Motherhood is both a potential site of power for women and a means of subordinating women. Because women can (re)produce life and ways of life, they “have the power to threaten patriarchy, which explains both the fear of women and their oppression” (Roberts, *A New Species* 10), though Firestone argues that reproduction is also the reason for women’s subordination in society (qtd. in Walby 66); however, this does present a one-sided reason for patriarchy’s oppression of women.

One of the most important aspects of motherhood is the fact that it is a unifying experience, an experience that binds women together, for it is the “most basic and common experience of women” (Lerner 116). Lucy Irigaray emphasises this when she says that motherhood is “a way for [women] to renew their ties to their mothers and other women” (99). Lerner has also pointed out that “over many centuries ... women found their identities primarily in motherhood” (116). Motherhood became a unifying force because “as fate and experience [it] was something women could share with other women” (Lerner 122). Women’s collective unifying group identity developed around this shared experience, long before the possibility of a “sisterhood” emerged (Lerner 117).

Motherhood was also considered to be an empowering experience, not only because it connected women with other women, but also because it connected them to “the metaphysics of the ancient Mother-goddess religions in which the ability to give life ... was experientially and metaphorically fused” (Lerner 122). This presented itself especially in the importance that was placed on Mary, as the mother of Jesus Christ. Through her and because of her, mothers were revered for their ability to create “new life out of their bodies and [to] sustain it by nurturing and ... maternal care” (Lerner 122).

While mothers are still revered for their ability to create life, motherhood is no longer thought of as the only destiny for women. According to Rowbotham, “Woman’s Liberation as a movement created a political space in which women were able to consider the whys and wherefores of mothers ... Consequently feminists have insisted that motherhood must be freely chosen and socially transformed” (82). Though the oppressive history of motherhood is acknowledged, women need not abstain from becoming mothers, and should rather be able to choose to do so freely.

Opening up the discourse on motherhood also made it possible to start talking about the “most taboo” (Rowbotham 8) aspect of motherhood. From the 1960s onwards, more and more women divulged the “darker side of motherhood: depression, derangement, violence” (Rowbotham 8). The growing awareness of the harsh reality of motherhood was not meant to make motherhood unappealing to women, but rather to paint a more comprehensive picture of what motherhood entails than the romanticized ideas of motherhood as a wonderful, fulfilling, and all-encompassing experience.

However, in spite of the growing awareness of motherhood and the increasing demand that women should be able to choose to become mothers, women’s identities are still determined in relation to motherhood. In some cultures, the ideal prevails that if “a woman is not a mother, [then] she is not really a woman” (Kirkley 563). Even in a modern, twenty-first century, Western society, in which there is a more conscious effort towards gender equality with regard to occupational opportunities, motherhood is still “romanticized and idealized as the supreme physical and emotional achievement in women’s lives ... Regardless of whether women become mothers [or not], motherhood is [still] central to the ways in which they are defined by others and to their perceptions of themselves” (Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd 13). In a certain sense, in spite of all the changes, women still need to become mothers in order to be respected and acknowledged in today’s society.

The growing availability of reproductive technologies⁵, although meant to afford women greater choice in the matter of motherhood, ironically reinforces the societal importance given to motherhood, for it means that motherhood is now possible for all women, including those who previously could not become mothers. This is one of the reasons that reproductive technologies are considered to be “a double-edged sword” in feminist discourse (Stanworth 483). There are many feminists – especially radical feminists who are affiliated to the FINNRAGE group (The Feminist International Network against Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) – who argue that “the object

⁵ Referring not only to contraceptives, but also artificial insemination and the technological assistance during pregnancy and childbirth.

and the effect of the emergent [reproductive technologies] is to deconstruct motherhood and to destroy the claim to reproduction that is the foundation of women's identity" (Stanworth 484), that "the development of the new reproductive technologies is increasing rather than decreasing patriarchal power" and that there is a "a shift in power over the process of reproduction away from women towards a male-controlled medical profession" (Walby 77). For these feminists, reproductive technologies are thus merely the intrusive attempt of a male medical profession to take over a natural female process. This is in spite of the fact that reproductive technologies have helped childbirth to become a safer process, leading to fewer deaths of both mothers and infants, for as Walby states, "safer childbirth [comes] at the expense of male control" (79). The feminist group FINNRAGE is also against helping women with infertility, as it seen as a way in which male doctors attempt to steal "power over the process of reproduction which previously lay within women's control" (Walby 79). For most radical feminists, reproductive technologies cause more damage than help. However, these critiques are based on cultural assumptions that science is a male-dominated realm, which make these critiques problematic as they imply a division between male science and female pregnancy. Tepper's works strongly advocate the availability for and use of reproductive technologies by women, not only as a means of asserting agency over women's bodies, but as a necessary means to combat overpopulation.

Michelle Stanworth also challenges these simplistic assumptions that "unassisted pregnancy is 'natural' and 'good' and that technology is 'unnatural', 'artificial' and 'bad'" by pointing out that

we really cannot know what a 'natural' relationship to [women's] fertility would look like – or even whether women would find a more 'natural' situation desirable ... [Returning to] pre-technological patterns of reproduction [would mean] high birth rates with population control checked only by high infant and adult mortality, abstinence from intercourse for heterosexual women except when pregnancy [is] desired, [and] venereal diseases [would remain] unchecked by medical intervention. (qtd. in Donchin 139)

Stanworth makes a strong case for the acceptance of reproductive technologies, for they have allowed women greater freedom not only over their bodies' reproductive capabilities, but also in terms of their freedom to express their sexuality. More than that, it has become a social responsibility to make informed decisions about contraceptives. According to Rothman, "controlling fertility is now accepted as a moral good ... [and that] only immature, thoughtless, irresponsible people fail to use contraception" (112). The reason for this is that children "are

luxuries [one] shouldn't indulge in, especially not in quantity, if [one] can't afford the upkeep" (Rothman 112).

In spite of this, abortion is still not a favoured solution. According to Barbara Rothman, "abortion is not fundamentally different from contraception" (108). Culturally, however, abortion is much more contested than contraception, and a large part of the feminist movement has been concerned with legalizing abortions. Although abortions are legal in 54 countries, including France, Britain, the United States of America and China⁶, it is still not approved by all. Pro-life organizations are most concerned with the foetus, while the mother becomes forgotten in the quest to save the foetus's life. Ironically, as Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out, society "wants to protect the embryo, but doesn't care about the child once it is born" (502).

However, abortion is often recommended if the pre-natal screening tests reveal that the child will be born with a debilitating disability or illness. These are called "'medically indicated,' 'selective abortions' or 'therapeutic abortions'" (Rothman 115). The necessity for an abortion is determined by the doctor. However, the standards of necessity that doctors would apply are not necessarily the same that women would apply (Rothman 110). Once again, the decision lies not with the woman, but with forces outside of her.

A lot of the criticism against abortion comes from men, not only male doctors who feel that performing abortions turn them into butchers, but also male politicians, who use pro-life views for political gain. However, for many people – men included – abortion is a convenient solution. Simone de Beauvoir calls this "the hypocrisy of the masculine moral code" (509): although some men might publicly condemn abortion, privately it is seen as a convenient solution to an unplanned pregnancy.

Tepper's novels criticize dominant ideologies of motherhood and emphasise that women should be able to choose motherhood freely, by indicating that the inability to do so leads to women's oppression and subordination; as such, she advocates a more widespread use and availability of contraceptives. Tepper's views stem from her tenure with Planned Parenthood, the "world's oldest, largest and best-organized provider of abortion and birth control services" (Grant 23), which advocates that women should have the freedom "to choose if and when they will have children, without government interference" (Grant 25). This organization has received criticism, from various institutions, but especially religious ones, who contend that "as a generic movement [it] is in

⁶ This accounts for 61 percent of the global population ("World Abortion Statistics" n.pag.).

theological opposition to Biblical Truth as defined by historical orthodoxy” (Grant⁷ 356). In spite of this, Planned Parenthood remains an important institution aimed at assisting with family planning, sexual education, preventing sexually transmitted diseases and population control.

1.3 A Brief Overview of Relevant Concepts Pertaining to Masculinity Studies

As with motherhood, Tepper critiques dominant ideologies about masculinity, specifically the way in which these ideologies advocate masculinity as superior to femininity. Though the “sociology of masculinity is relatively recent, only coming into being in the latter half of the twentieth century” (Whitehead and Barrett 2), it has led to a growing awareness of what it means to be masculine. Masculinity is no longer something that is fixed, and men as a collective group are no longer considered to be the oppressors of women⁸.

Though there is no longer a fixed concept of masculinity, it is often relational, in the sense that it is defined in relation to femininity. According to Pierre Bourdieu, manliness is “an eminently *relational* notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity as a kind of *fear* of the female, firstly in oneself” (53). Whitehead and Barrett also define masculinity as “those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as *not feminine*” (15-16). Arthur Brittan further argues that masculinity “does not exist in isolation from femininity – it will always be an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in relation to women. And these images are often contradictory and ambivalent” (52). However, this relational aspect of masculinity does become contentious, especially since the definition of femininity – behaviours associated with women – is ever-changing and expanding. Connell and Messerschmidt point out that several theorists criticize the way in which masculinity is defined in relation to femininity, because in this way masculinity is “framed within a heteronormative conception of gender [which] essentializes male-female differences and ignores difference and exclusion within the gender categories” (836); though as Connell and Messerschmidt point out “[g]ender is *always* relational and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity ” (848; emphasis added).

⁷ Grant’s book, *Grand Illusions: The Legacy of Planned Parenthood*, is solely meant to be “an exploration, explanation, and exposition of the disease of Planned Parenthood” (3), to expose “The Myth of Planned Parenthood” (39).

⁸ Though, often in her novels, Tepper does present a rather simplistic dichotomous division between men and women, where men are seen as ‘bad’, selfish destroyers and women as ‘good’, sensible nurturers.

Furthermore, masculinity has to be obtained; Judith Butler defines gender in terms of performativity, whereby “[g]ender is [merely] the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). Masculinity is therefore not something that one just has or with which one is born, but rather something that is actively acquired. Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out that “almost all anthropologists and ethnographers agree that masculinity appears transculturally as something to be acquired, achieved, initiated into – a process involving painful or even mutilating rituals” (71). Proving one’s masculinity is tied up to traits such as sporting prowess and sexual virility. Yet, there is not one fixed definition of what it means to be a man; instead, as Barrett and Whitehead point out, masculinity merely “reflects social and cultural expectations of male behaviour rather than biology” (16). This means that the definition of what is considered to be appropriate masculine behaviour will differ not only “according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell and Messerschmidt 836), but also with the passing of time. This means that certain types of masculinities are seen as ‘less favourable’ or perhaps more self-destructive in current societies than they were before. As Whitehead and Barrett point out, “the displays of manhood considered appropriate prior to, say the 1950s, are socially stigmatized and debased 50 years on” (6).

An important part of becoming a man, so to speak, is to be recognized as one by other men. Pierre Bourdieu points out that, like honour, “manliness must be validated by other men” (52). Men’s need to affirm their masculinity, be it through violence or through daring deeds, arises ironically from “the *fear* of losing the respect and admiration of the group, of ‘losing face’ in front of one’s ‘mates’, and being relegated to the typically female category of ‘wimps’, ‘girlies’, ‘fairies’, etc.” (Bourdieu 52). Masculinity, in a certain sense, is not just acting in a way that is socially considered to be manly, but, more specifically, it means that a boy/man should not act like a woman.

Theorists such as Connell and Brittan have both pointed out that we cannot speak of masculinity, but only of *masculinities*, because what is considered to be masculine behaviour “fluctuate[s] over time” (Brittan 3), and even within different social settings. Though there is a common consensus that there is not a definitive definition of masculine behaviour, Connell, drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony⁹, points out that there are hegemonic masculinities whereby “[a]t any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted” (38). However,

⁹ Hegemony is the “cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life” (Connell 38).

even this hegemonic masculinity is not static and it will invariably change. Hegemonic masculinity is distinguishable from “other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities ... [by being] normative. It embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Connell and Messerschmidt also point out that hegemonic masculinities exist on three levels: Local, Regional and Global, and that they can be analyzed at these levels. Local hegemonic masculinities are “constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations and immediate communities” (849). Regional hegemonic masculinities are “constructed at the level of the culture or the nation state” (849) and global hegemonic masculinities are “constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media” (849).

The idea that there is a hegemonic masculinity in a society at any given time ensures that there will also be a subordinate masculinity. In European and American societies this means “the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men” (Connell 39). Homosexual men are placed at “the bottom of the gender hierarchy of men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideologies, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 40). Further criteria for the marginalization of different, non-hegemonic masculinities include race and class: the dominant, or hegemonic, definition of masculinity in the United States of America, for instance, is white, middle-class and heterosexual. Yet, not all men act according to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity and

hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires. They provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations. Furthermore, they articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances. (Connell and Messerschmidt 838)

The most important sites for transmitting appropriate masculine behaviours are educational systems and the household. The household, especially, is an important site for the formation of ‘correct’ masculine behaviour, for the family “shapes and reproduces gender identities through socialization and social reproduction and through the internal division of labour” (Morgan 225-226). A crucial development in early modern times was that male identity started revolving around the concept of the male as the breadwinner. However, with the movement of women into the workplace, and thus sharing, or taking over, the role of breadwinner, this identity became less stable and a “search for a

new authentic male identity” (Morgan 228) began. In postmodern times there was thus “a more self-conscious search for models of masculinity” (Morgan 230), as previous models were “simply either given or so dominant as to allow for few feasible alternatives” (Morgan 230). Tepper’s novels specifically critique the apparent essentialist nature of masculinity as the dominant gender, and of men being the default, accepted breadwinner, by destabilising a specific, contextualized, dominant ideology of masculinity.

Chapter Two: Splendour in the Grass: An Analysis of Tepper's *Grass*

Grass was first published in 1989 and ostensibly deals with one woman's quest for independence, while concurrently trying to save humanity from a flesh-eating plague. The novel critiques many aspects of contemporary American society through its futuristic dystopian vision. It focuses exclusively on the continuous and expanding influence of traditional, patriarchal religions, especially on women. It also focuses on American culture and its origins, and as such it perhaps not only examines the colonialist foundation of America, but it is also "intrinsically involved in question of lineage and descendance [*sic*]" (Roberts, Review n.pag.). Through its depiction of a society based on a feudal system, it questions contemporary democracy and its progress.

Previous analyses of this work have largely focused on the protagonist, Marjorie Westriding, who is seen by Marleen Barr as a heroine because of "an alliance between feminist fabulation and anti-patriarchal fabulation" (129). Others, such as Gwyneth Jones, have looked at the ecological construction of the planet Grass, to which the title of the novel refers, and how the construction of a real, recognisable ecology is combined with a "high degree of authorial meaning - purpose in the work, other than faux-verisimilitude" (170). In my study, I aim to examine three themes in the novel: the ideological construction and experience of motherhood, the influence of religion, as well as the construction, and the consequential deconstruction, of masculinity. In doing so, I hope to indicate how Tepper perceives these three issues to be closely interwoven. As such, Tepper's novel is a multi-faceted criticism of contemporary American society and its apparent failings.

2.1 Mothers and Others: Motherhood and the Patriarchal Nuclear Family

The feminist movement has argued that women should make "a conscious decision whether or not to have a child" (Rowbotham 83). In spite of the growing availability of contraceptives and the ever-increasing possibility of legal abortions, there is still a prevalent societal ideology of femininity which emphasises the importance of women becoming mothers. Even recent developments in reproductive technologies, especially those "aimed at enhancing the biologic[al] potential for motherhood among the subfertile and infertile" (Kirkley 463), only serve to reinforce the societal and ideological importance that is placed on motherhood. Yet many women, although they are mothers themselves, do not experience motherhood as "the supreme physical and emotional achievement in [their] lives" (Glenn 9). The dissatisfaction that motherhood sometimes brings is explored by Sheri S. Tepper in her novel, *Grass*. In *Grass*, the protagonist, Marjorie Westriding, represents those women who consider motherhood to be a distinctly unfulfilling

experience and who yearn for an identity unconnected with their status as mothers. Marjorie has become a wife and a mother, because it is what society expects of her, yet she is still driven by a need “to do something significant” (Tepper, *Grass*¹⁰ 47). The difficulty for women like Marjorie in many societies is that often there is no real escape for them from traditional female roles; by virtue of their being mothers, they are effectively trapped by and in patriarchal ideologies. Instead of motherhood being a potentially empowering experience for women, it relegates them to being subordinate societal subjects. The ideology of motherhood also means that women are complicit in their own subordination, for mothers are the “reproducers of culture” (Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd 17), and thus they perpetuate the idea of patriarchy through their children by raising them in such a discourse. Marjorie, however, is eventually able to find some form of fulfilment outside of motherhood. While Tepper’s novel encourages women to seek fulfilment outside of wifedom and motherhood, it does not imply that women should not be wives and mothers. Rather, through Marjorie and another minor character, Rowena bon Damfels, the novel emphasises the importance of women having a choice in the matter. Tepper also indicates and critiques, through the depiction of Eugenie le Fevre, that this choice is only available to women within the socially accepted parameters of the nuclear family¹¹, for the novel gives attention to the “other woman” (Michie 57), who is often-ignored in feminist discourses. This section will therefore be an analysis of the ways in which Tepper represents motherhood within the nuclear family and outside of it.

2.1.1. Marjorie, Stella, Rowena: the Many Faces of Patriarchal Motherhood

Marjorie can be seen as representative of those women who do not experience motherhood as all-encompassing, magical and fulfilling, for although she has become a wife and a mother – as society expects of her – it has left her feeling unsatisfied. Her feelings are influenced by her status as an “Old Catholic” (Tepper 44), Tepper’s narrative equivalent of modern-day Roman Catholicism, for as one of the oldest forms of patriarchal religions, Catholicism prescribes very specific roles for both women and men in the family environment. Women, for instance, are taught that they should get married and have children, and by doing so they remain in a subordinate position to their husbands and to the male religious state. For Marjorie, however, being a wife and a mother is not good enough and she is still driven by a need to have “something uniquely her own, some perfect achievement” (Tepper 45) that will mark her life as extraordinary. She is not content with being

¹⁰ For the remainder of this chapter, it should be understood that all citations of Tepper refer to the novel *Grass*, unless otherwise stated.

¹¹ According to Walby, the patriarchal nuclear family consists of the “husband [as] breadwinner, the wife [as] homemaker, and children” (61).

limited to socially defined roles for women. At the same time, she is all too aware of the inescapable nature of her duties as an Old Catholic woman. Even her charity work, which she does to give herself the impression that there is a higher purpose to her life, is merely an extension of her role as mother and care-giver: namely, looking after those people who are unable to do so themselves. Although the novel is set in an indeterminate future time, Marjorie is a kind of parody of the Victorian woman: she is expected by everyone, and especially her husband and the family priests, to be selfless and completely dependent on her husband. The only reason she is allowed to perform her charity work is because “philanthropy ... [does] not transgress the feminine ideal because it [does] not involve payment” (Walby 105). Therefore, although Marjorie’s charity work could be seen as slightly daring – she assists, unofficially¹², in arranging and procuring illegal abortions and contraceptives for less fortunate women in Breedertown, one of the most overpopulated towns on Terra – the fact that it is formally considered to be charity work, means that it is still situated within the realm of socially accepted activities for women. Marjorie’s charity work is made even more exclusively feminine by the fact that men are not allowed in Breedertown. This is due to the fact that many women had claimed that they had been impregnated by “certain respectable men” (Tepper 43) and therefore it had been decided that “only women [may] serve as guards in Breedertown. Only women were on the visitation committee” (Tepper 43).

Marjorie eventually feels that the charity work, like motherhood and wifedom, “[is]n’t working [for her] either” (Tepper 45) and it leaves her feeling even more dissatisfied with her life; yet she continues with it “out of the religious conviction that life at any price was worth living” (Tepper 42). Marjorie’s feelings are further influenced by her own sense of diminishment, for in becoming a wife and mother she has been reduced from being an active sportswoman – she is a former Olympic gold medallist in show jumping¹³ – to being “a mere adjunct to [her] husband” (Tepper 254). In becoming a less active woman, she has somehow, in her own eyes, becomes less of a woman and her potential for greatness has been diminished. Marjorie is left unfulfilled because her worth as a woman – as a person – is determined only in relation to her husband.

¹² Officially, Marjorie is a kind of guard: she has to monitor pregnancy in Breedertown. This includes determining who is pregnant, whether that person is allowed to be pregnant and to arrange transportation for any ‘illegal’ parent or child out of Breedertown and off of Terra (Earth). (This will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter.)

¹³ It is interesting to note that Marjorie’s chosen sport has rather implicit connotations, not only to sex, but also to power, for the act of riding is about controlling an animal with her legs – this is in contrast to her social (and sexual) status.

Marjorie's restlessness and sense of being unfulfilled are frowned upon by one of the family priests, Father Sandoval. As the upholder of a patriarchal religious ideology, he tries to control Marjorie's restless, "unfeminine" spirit through religious means "by giving her penance after penance of obedience and submission" (Tepper 127). Moreover, Marjorie's husband, Rigo Yrarier, in his attempt to mould her in to his perfect, idealized wife, makes her feel guilty about the fact that being a wife and a mother is not good enough for her and that she has aspirations of her own. Rigo's attempts are motivated by his realization that for her "being [his] wife [just] isn't enough" (Tepper 45), which causes him great fear, not only because he stands to lose her, but also because it is almost a personal insult to him, a form of personal humiliation, for it implies that he is not "man enough" for her. In order to alleviate his own fears, as well as to attempt to suppress her restlessness, he resorts to mocking her aspirations, and derides her charity work, by calling her "Saint Marjorie, [who] sacrifice[es] herself for the poor" (Tepper 45). In the end, Marjorie's self becomes torn between two options – acting according to "'love' – womanly, maternal love, altruistic love – [as] defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture – and egotism – a force directed by men, into creation, achievement, [and] ambition" (Rich 90-91), a choice that has in effect already been made for her by society.

Through the oppressive combination of religion and guilt, Marjorie becomes so trapped in a stranglehold – trying to perform the duties befitting a good wife and a good mother – that at "barely forty ... [she] want[ed] to die, so [that she] could quit going through all the motions" (Tepper 536). Marjorie's wish to die is nothing more than a wish to be free from the oppressive constraints and demands that are placed on her in her capacity as wife and mother. However, she continues trying to play the role of the perfect wife and mother, largely because she considers it to be her duty. It is for this reason that she not only stays with her openly adulterous husband, but also never embarks on an extra-marital affair herself. Marjorie is faithful to Rigo, "because it is [her] duty" (Tepper 536) and duty is bound to her religion: For Marjorie, it does not matter if her marriage is "happy or unhappy" because her marriage "is a fact in [her] religion, and that fact can't be changed" (Tepper 314). Moreover, Marjorie also continues playing these roles out of a sense of pride: to be a good wife and mother is still seen as some sort of societal accomplishment – albeit not the accomplishment she is longing for – and it might give her some form of self-worth. Her inability to be the ideal wife that Rigo wants her to be increases her need to be a good mother so as to be good at something. Yet, for Marjorie, because of her sense of duty, being a good mother means that she has to stay with Rigo. Marjorie is thus trapped in a self-perpetuating circle of unhappiness because of her unwavering sense of duty, not only to Rigo and her children, but also to her religion.

However, in spite of her socially and religiously subordinate position, Marjorie's restless nature cannot entirely be controlled. Through little acts of defiance, she is still able to retain some form of agency – most notably by retaining her maiden name. By not taking on her husband's name, she is in effect not allowing herself to completely become his property and in so doing she can keep a part of her identity separate from her identity as Rigo's wife, especially since, through naming, the male surname takes precedence and swallows up entire hereditary lines on the woman's side. As it is her public identity as Rigo's wife that keeps her in a subordinate societal position, keeping her maiden name is a way for her to stand, in some small way, on her own.

Marjorie is also able to retain some agency by taking control of her body's reproductive capabilities. She had a contraceptive device – or as it is called on Terra “an implant” (Tepper 44) – installed and she “hadn't told Father Sandoval ... [or] Rigo [about it] either” (Tepper 44). In this instance, by actively choosing not to have any more children than the two she already has, by having the contraceptive device installed, she is in effect defying both patriarchy and her religion. She defies patriarchy by disregarding the romanticized ideology of motherhood as the supreme emotional and physical achievement for women and, in so doing, avoids becoming merely another vessel reproducing patriarchal subjects and values; and she defies her religion by disregarding the fact that Catholicism “require[s] that sexual relations be open to reproduction, which ... [thus] means refraining from the use of artificial contraception” (Fox-Genovese n.pag.). Even though Marjorie's defiance is seemingly passive in that she does not make her reproductive status post-installation known, she is nevertheless able to retain some form of agency by taking control of her body's reproductive functions and effectively taking control away from those who seek to engage with the functioning of her body on any level.

The fact that Marjorie is able to do so, is a way in which Tepper addresses an important feminist debate, namely the relationship between science – in the form of reproductive technologies – and reproduction. As has previously been stated, for many feminists, science is still considered as “a double-edge sword” (Stanworth 483). There are many feminists – especially those who are affiliated with the FINNRAGE group (The Feminist International Network against Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) – who argue that “the development of the new reproductive technologies is increasing rather than decreasing patriarchal power ... [and that there is] a shift in power over the process of reproduction, away from women towards a male controlled medical profession” (Walby 77). These negative feelings towards science and technology arise out of assumptions that science and technology “are culturally defined as a masculine realm” (Connell 164). Other feminists have

been more positive, arguing that reproductive technologies have afforded women greater reproductive capabilities, and others, such as Shorter, have even argued that it has “rescued [women] from their biology” (qtd. in Walby 77). Be that as it may, reproductive technologies, especially in the form of contraceptive devices, have given women the opportunity to decide if and when they want to have children. They have thus given women more agency with regard to their bodies. However, the biggest concern is that contraceptive devices are not always available to all women, so that many of them have no control over their bodies’ reproductive capabilities – a problem that is still very much situated within social hierarchies. Marjorie Westriding in *Grass*, for instance, is able to have the contraceptive device installed that will keep her from having more children, but she is only able to have the “very illicit” (Tepper 44) implant installed because she is of a higher social standing and can thus afford it. The reason that contraceptive devices are not freely available to all is that the ruling Sanctity¹⁴ has prohibited the use of contraceptive devices, in spite of the fact that Terra is suffering from over-population. Sanctity – though it is based on Mormonism – mirrors Catholicism (in its incarnation as Old Catholicism in the novel), since both of these religions are against the use of contraception and they have the same attitude towards women. Like Old Catholicism, Sanctity decrees that a woman’s only duty is “to bear children for the population of the Galaxy” (Tepper 207).

The fact that the only available, highly illicit contraceptive device on Terra is called an ‘implant’ also indicates the negative discursive attitude towards contraceptive devices that Sanctity and Old Catholicism have, for it conjures up images of an unnatural object that is inserted into the female body. Sanctity’s attitude towards contraceptive devices is highly ironic as it has just passed a law decreeing that women are not allowed to have more than two children, in an attempt to control the over-populated state of Terra. The law decrees that if a woman does have a third child, that child will be called an “illegal” (Tepper 44) and the mother will be “stripped of her civil rights” (Tepper 43) and her older children will be made to publicly “repudiate” (Tepper 44) her. The ‘illegal’ child will be sent away “to live and die on the colony planet [called Repentance]” (Tepper 43). The name of the planet is in itself significant as it indicates that the mothers are made to feel guilty about the fact they have broken the law by having more than two children. It also implies that the children should repent for their existence – something which is out of their control – and for their parents’ actions. It is a problem that Marjorie realises mostly affects poor people, for “rich people [do not] get in that kind of mess ... [and that it is] [o]nly the poor [who get] trapped: by ignorance, by

¹⁴ Sanctity is the quasi-religious organization that governs all of mankind’s doings across the universe. It will be explored further in section 2.2 of this chapter.

religion, by self-righteous laws passed by people who [break] them with impunity” (Tepper 44). Marjorie attacks these inequalities by obtaining both contraceptive devices and abortions for underprivileged women, “risking her own freedom and possibly her marriage in the process” (Tepper 42). It is an attempt that Marjorie realises is futile, for “every week there [will] be a new girl [who is] pregnant, or about to be, on and on, forever. [Even] if Marjorie spent everything she had, money and blood, it would do no lasting good” (Tepper 46). And yet she continues doing it, either because this could give her some form of self-worth, or because she realises that it is a noble and necessary attempt.

While the novel does seem to imply that it is comparatively easy for women of a higher social standing to gain access to contraceptive devices, or even that they are more aware of the availability of them, it breaks down any automatic binary conclusions – that the underprivileged have no access to contraception and that privileged women always have access – by also indicating that even women of high social standing may have little choice in the matter of becoming pregnant. Rowena bon Damfels, for instance, one of the aristocratic Bons on the planet Grass, became “pregnant with the seven children [her husband] *made* [her] have when [she] only wanted one or two” (Tepper 17; emphasis added). Rowena, even though she is of higher social standing, has just as little control over her body’s reproductive capabilities as the underprivileged women on Terra. For Marjorie, the ability to have control over her body’s reproductive function is a privilege and it is a way for her to take control of her life. Although Marjorie is bound to the patriarchy, by defying it in little ways, she does retain some form of agency, and in this way, is at least able to avoid becoming a completely oppressed figure.

While it is on Terra that Marjorie is able to perform small acts of defiance against patriarchal oppression, it is on Grass that she is ultimately able to break free completely from oppression, for when her daughter, Stella, disappears during one of the hunts on Grass, Marjorie defies the patriarchal structures as dictated by the aristocratic Bons on Grass by going in search of Stella. The hunts are controlled and organised by the Hippae, vicious horse-like creatures whose necks “are spined with arm-long scimitars of pointed, knife-edged bone” (Tepper 105). The Hippae can be seen as agents of patriarchy, mostly because they seem to enforce a (metaphorical, if not literal) patriarchal way of life, especially among the Bons – the aristocratic, isolated, xenophobic ruling class on Grass.

Marjorie’s attempt to save Stella is also an attempt by her to salvage her relationship with Stella. According to Luce Irigaray, “patriarchy ... destroy[s] the most precious site of love and fertility: the

relationship between mother and daughter” (112). Patriarchy has seemingly already destroyed a mother and daughter relationship on Grass, namely that of Rowena and Dimity bon Damfels. They are separated by their inability to share their experiences under the rule of the patriarchal Hippae. After Dimity returns from her first hunt, she recounts the events of the hunt to her mother, Rowena. However, she is unable to tell her about the incident during the hunt where she, along with the other riders, experience a metaphorical sort of rape by the Hippae,¹⁵ and merely flushes deeply. Rowena recognises what the flush means and “turn[s] aside not to confront what she [sees] there ... She [Rowena] had not known until now whether it was her guilty secret or a secret shared” (Tepper 34). Rowena’s silence is indicative of the way that women often remain silent about their own (negative) experiences, and thereby, through their collective, and often generational silences, empower men – or in this case, the Hippae – even further. Dimity and Rowena’s silence is indicative of the self-silencing of women in patriarchal societies, which suggests that women have no voice, no agency in such societies.

Like Rowena and Dimity, whose relationship is fractured by their inability to talk about their shared experiences, so Marjorie and Stella’s relationship is also fraught with difficulties, not least because it is marred by an inability to communicate with each other properly, and an inability to truly understand each other. Essentially, both women want the same thing from their relationship: an intimate bond between mother and daughter. Marjorie wants a real relationship with Stella, one that is based on a mutual friendship. Stella wants Marjorie to provide “that indefinable something [that] Stella had always wanted ... the same thing [that] Rigo wanted – the thing called intimacy” (Tepper 250). And yet, Stella never gives “anything warm or gentle in return, never any simple affection ... [S]howing love to Stella was like showing meat to a half wild dog. Stella would seize it and swallow it and gnaw its bones. Showing love to Stella was opening oneself up to attack” (Tepper 128). Marjorie, in turn, does not need Stella’s affection as much as Stella (and her father) seems to need Marjorie’s affection. For while Marjorie is trapped in performing patriarchal duties, she is still independent in her own way, and therefore, while she may long for some form of affection from Stella, it is not an all-consuming need as it seems to be for Stella. And though Marjorie has a fierce maternal urge to protect her daughter at all costs, her greatest hope is that “[i]n time, [Marjorie and Stella] might be friends” (Tepper 131). Simone de Beauvoir states that the relationship between mother and daughter is “much more dramatic” (532) than that between mother and son. On the one hand, the daughter is always the “double” (Beauvoir 532) of the mother – just like the mother – but

¹⁵ This, as well as the influence of the Hippae on the Bons, will be explored further in section 2.2 of this chapter.

at the same time it she is also the other – nothing like the mother. The independence of one is to the detriment of the other, which is why Stella perceives Marjorie's independence not only as a lack of intimacy, but also as a threat to her own burgeoning independence – Marjorie has become the unreachable other, which is perhaps why Stella is constantly trying to emulate and impress her father, for she feels that he is able to provide the affection she has tried to get from her mother. This causes the relationship between mother and daughter to become more strained. Marjorie's quest to find Stella is therefore not only an attempt to save her from the Hippae, but also an attempt to repair their broken relationship.

The rift between mother and daughter is presented as something unnatural in the novel. Marjorie experiences Stella's disappearance as "spasm[s] of intimate agony. Like backward childbirth ... As obscene as it was impossible, despite the pain she felt" (Tepper 401). The pain that Marjorie feels is not just due to the fact that her daughter has disappeared and that Marjorie has thus somehow not been able to protect her adequately; but it is also the pain that she feels about their broken relationship. The fact that she experiences Stella's disappearance as 'backward childbirth,' is an inversion of the natural order of birth. However, it is not just the unnaturalness of the broken relationship that is signified by the feelings of backward childbirth. They also imply a need to protect her child from the horrors of the world by not 'expelling' the child, as such, but rather "tak[ing] the child back [in], [to] encompass it once again. [To] [k]eep it safe, [to] suck it back into the womb once more" (Tepper 401). To take the child back in would offer Marjorie a better possibility of protecting her child, but it would also be a way to go back to the primitive source of the mother-daughter relationship and in this way, to start anew. For Marjorie, then, the physical search becomes a way for her to try and repair the broken relationship between mother and daughter, as well as an attempt to protect her daughter.

However, when Stella is eventually found, the relationship between mother and daughter is not magically restored, but seems to be even more fragile than before, for Stella, who has been left in a docile, child-like state after her traumatic experience, goes "into frenzied spasms of screaming and weeping, her face contorted with guilt and pain and shame" (Tepper 403) every time anyone, but especially Marjorie, comes near her. In the end, it is Stella who rejects Marjorie's attempt at reconciliation, not because it comes too late, but because she is perhaps ashamed of having been abused. It is as though Stella is blaming herself for what happened and because of her shame she constructs another barrier around herself, which does not allow any reconciliation between herself and her mother. Marjorie's happiness and success in locating her daughter – which on its own is

still a small victory on Grass – is thus diminished by the knowledge that the relationship between mother and daughter is, at best, still only fragile. By finding Stella and defying patriarchy, she has proved herself to be a good mother; however, she and Stella have still not become friends as Marjorie had hoped they would.

Marjorie is ultimately still triumphant, for by defying patriarchy and breaking free from its constraints, she is able to become a fully independent, autonomous being. Marjorie's success lies in her rejection of what constitutes "the patriarchal definition of [a] good wife" (Barr 130), and it lies in her breaking away from her patriarchal duties in order to become "a [feminist] hero" (Barr 129). When faced with a situation of "manhood versus motherhood, [she] choos[es] to emphasise motherhood" (Barr 130). Marjorie does not try to emulate traditional masculine behaviour, but instead, she chooses to act and think like a woman. Marjorie chooses to act according to her maternal instincts, and thus she is not only able to find her daughter, but also able to discover the secret of Grass that is tantamount to finding and producing a cure for the plague that is threatening the galaxy. Marjorie is able to reveal that "Grassian master narratives about the importance of hunting (or manhood) are [merely] destructive myths" (Barr 131), and in so doing, she also critiques patriarchal definitions of masculine behaviour. By critiquing and rejecting patriarchal definitions of masculine behaviour, she also consequently rejects definitions of feminine behaviour. This allows her to break free from patriarchal constraints and demands.

For Marleen Barr, Marjorie's success in breaking free from patriarchy turns her into "a feminist separatist" (131), because Marjorie's ultimate triumph lies not only in her defying patriarchal constraints and demands, but also in her denouncing patriarchal society as a whole, and to a certain extent, man(kind). Marjorie is able to break completely free from the patriarchy by leaving her husband to go with one of the Foxen with whom she has seemingly fallen in love. The Foxen are the narrative equivalent of foxes, though they are larger in size, and are extremely intelligent. They are never seen, or explicitly described, in the novel; instead, they leave fragmented impressions in the minds of those characters that meet them. The Foxen's physical semi-absence could mirror the female voice in patriarchal society in the novel – semi-detectable, but not there. Marjorie's decision to go with one of the Foxen could thus be because they are both marginalised voices in the novel's society. In choosing not to fall in love with Sylvan bon Damfels, the handsome human alternative, Marjorie not only resists patriarchal (literary) conventions, but patriarchy itself. Barr points out that Marjorie "chooses to love a male Other to manhood whose species is persecuted in the name of proving manhood" (132). While Marjorie's secession is a victory for her, it does mean, however, that she has to relinquish her duties as wife and mother. Thus it is only by breaking all the bonds of motherhood that she is able to break

free from the patriarchal ideologies that have ruled her life. In essence then, Marjorie has to sacrifice her potential relationship with her daughter in order to be free, to become the ultimate independent woman. In a certain sense, Marjorie has to be selfish in order to be fulfilled; it is only when she starts thinking about herself more than others, and letting go of her duties, that she is able to be free.

What is interesting about Marjorie's choice of lover is that the Foxen explicitly symbolizes her releasing herself from all constraints and demands. The relationship between the Hippae and the Foxen is complex, because in spite of the fact that it is the Hippae who oppress the Foxen by killing them and forcing them to hide, the Hippae are lesser beings than the Foxen, for the Hippae mutate into Foxen, just as the Hounds transform into Hippae, but the Hippae have chosen to view the Foxen as the enemy because they "eat the peepers, the larvae of the Hippae" (Tepper 304) and consequently, to exterminate them. By trying to exterminate the Foxen, the Hippae are halting their own mutation into beings that are intellectually and spiritually superior, and condemning themselves to remain only half-developed beings¹⁶. The Hippae "don't want there to be another intelligent race [on Grass]. And they won't believe that they themselves become another intelligent race ... The Hippae don't know what they have in them to be. They've stopped themselves half-grown ... at adolescence, [which is a] brutal time, that. [A] [h]ateful time. Not a child. Not a grown. Full of strength and fury and no place to put it" (Tepper 458). The Hippae have thus limited themselves to being liminal beings, forever trapped in an in-between state. For Marjorie to embrace the Foxen way of life so to speak is thus a way in which she can embrace a superior, more enlightened way of life and in so doing, becoming a more enlightened, superior being. By going on a quest with one of the Foxen, Marjorie is embracing a transcendental state of being that frees her, further emphasising her position as a feminist separatist.

Marjorie's status as a feminist separatist does not imply that women should break off all ties with motherhood in order to be fulfilled, but rather that women should not be limited to just being mothers. For in spite of the fact that patriarchy seems to have won, Marjorie is still ultimately victorious – if only in her private capacity. By letting go of her duty as mother, she is able to transcend the constraints and demands that are placed on her in her capacity as a woman, to become an independent, free woman, which is clearly a victory for her. Marjorie herself, in a letter to Rigo, admits that she "did what duty required because [she] thought [that] God would be offended if [she]

¹⁶ This is also an interesting social commentary on how societies often stunt intellectual growth by refusing by steadfastly clinging to outdated beliefs; this will be explored in more detail in the next section of this chapter, when I look at the Grassian hunt as a metaphor for various ideologies.

didn't ... [In the end] duty simply was not enough [for her]. There had to be more than that" (Tepper 536). On Grass, Marjorie realises that she is like the Bons, for "as they rode the Hippae and were enslaved, so [she] rode custom and was enslaved" (Tepper 536). It is thus not that Marjorie has to give up motherhood, per se; rather, it is that she has to let go of her traditional motherly duties, for it is duty and performing her duty that is keeping her bound to the patriarchy.

While Marjorie is eventually able to break free from patriarchal constraints and demands by letting go of her duty as a mother, her daughter, Stella, is not able to do so. However, what Marjorie and Stella do have in common is the fact that both of them undergo a transformation of sorts. Marjorie evolves from a trapped, dutiful woman to a liberated, independent woman, and Stella goes from being a self-centred teenage daughter to a more mature young woman. Stella's transformation is not as profound as Marjorie's, but it is still a necessary transformation, for Stella, has to be saved from her own, potentially destructive behaviours. At the beginning of the novel, Stella does not conform to the image of the perfectly obedient daughter, for she is not a quiet, demure, young lady. Stella does not stay in the background, but instead seems to go through life with "maximum drama" (Tepper 79), trying to draw attention to herself and to her needs and furthermore, far from being passive, she is "[a]lways passionate. Always in the depths or on the heights" (Tepper 125). Unlike her mother, who seems to have been bullied into performing her duty, into being "a very good child and woman" (Tepper 536) by religious guilt, Stella cannot be bullied into being an obedient daughter. If Marjorie were to warn Stella "not to [do something, then, invariably] Stella would [do it]" (Tepper 99). Stella's disobedience is not an attempt to actively defy traditional acceptable forms of behaviour, but is rather the attempt of a child to get attention. For most of the novel, Stella is portrayed as a stereotypical, spoiled, self-centred teenage daughter. It is only after she has been kidnapped and partially dehumanized by the Hippae that she changes into the traditional patriarchal daughter.

Just like Anthony, her son, resembles Marjorie, so Stella resembles her father, Rigo. She is a "stunningly feminine version" (Tepper 127) of him, and "[l]ike him, she move[s] as a whip cracks, always seeming to arrive wherever she was going with considerable noise but without having bothered to travel the intervening distance" (Tepper 77). It is because Stella more closely resembles her father that she is a more obvious threat to the patriarchy, and must thus be compelled to remain in a subordinate societal position. It is for this reason that Father Sandoval, the family priest, is relieved that Stella's uncontrollable outbursts of anger will one day be subdued, for when she is

married she will “be instructed to be obedient to her husband, as she [is] now instructed to be obedient to her parents” (Tepper 250).

Like her mother, it is Stella’s biggest act of defiance that leads to her transformation. Stella defies her mother, who has forbidden the entire family from taking part in the hunt, by secretly learning how to ride the Hippae in order to be able to go on the hunt. She vows to learn how to ride the Hippae “more quickly than anyone had ever learned” (Tepper 197) on Grass before. In this instance, Stella’s disobedience is motivated purely by a need to impress Sylvan bon Damfels, with whom she has seemingly fallen in love. She hopes that by her learning to ride the Hippae and by being good at it, Sylvan will in turn fall in love with her. However, as it transpires, Stella has merely fallen in love with an image of Sylvan, for, when he, ironically perhaps, warns the Yrariers not to accept any invitation to ride in the hunt, because the “riding isn’t worth it, even though [he does] ride” (Tepper 116), Stella chooses to ignore his advice, as “it did not fit the picture of him; so she struck it from his image as she built him anew, according to her own needs – the gospel of St Sylvan, according to Stella his creator” (Tepper 251). It is this idealized Sylvan that Stella wishes to impress and which motivates her to learn to ride in the hunt and which is thus the reason that she defies her parents.

By wanting and learning to ride the Hippae in order to impress Sylvan, Stella in fact transgresses traditional gender behaviour, for wanting to impress the opposite sex with one’s physical prowess is a characteristic stereotypically associated with men. It is almost as though she wants to use the hunt – which seems to be for her father, Rigo, a test of courage, a way “to show off [his] manliness” (Tepper 509) to the Bons – to show her worth as equal to men, and consequently Sylvan’s equal, and thus worthy of his attention. Stella thus transgresses traditional gender roles in her attempt to impress Sylvan, and because of this, and because of the ease with which she is able to do so, Stella becomes an even greater threat to the patriarchy.

What is perhaps tragically ironic about her compulsion to impress Sylvan is that he in turn is in love with her mother, and in a moment of brilliant narrative irony, Stella and Sylvan profess their love at the same time, but not to each other. At the same time that Stella claims that in the very moment they had met ““he [Sylvan] had loved [her – Stella] as he had never loved anyone before”” Sylvan was saying much the same thing ““[he] had loved her in that moment ... [as] [he] had never loved before’ ... [However,] he was not speaking of Stella. He was speaking of Marjorie” (Tepper 252). Stella does not claim to love Sylvan, instead, she claims that he is in love with her, emphasising Stella’s need for love. Sylvan, as in love with Marjorie as he claims to be, does not even notice the existence of Stella and she in turn, chooses not to notice that Sylvan is not in love with her, but with

her mother. Thus, Stella, Sylvan and Marjorie (though she is only passively involved in comparison to the other two) become entangled in a bizarre love-triangle which is reminiscent of Freud's Elektra-complex. According to Freud, during the psychosexual development of a young girl, the realisation that she does not have a penis causes her to feel anger and resentment towards her mother, whom she blames for her sex. As a form of revenge, the daughter aims to take the place of the mother as the object of the father's affection. Stella's attempt to impress Sylvan – who becomes the substitute father figure – thus, also becomes an attempt to take her mother's place as the object of Sylvan's affection, to also become her mother in a certain sense. The effort by Stella to supplant her mother as the object of Sylvan's affection, leads to greater unconscious feelings of hostility in Stella toward her mother, which in turn only leads to a widening of the rift between mother and daughter.

Although Stella's defiance of traditional gender roles leads to the rift between mother and daughter widening, it is not the only negative consequence of her actions. The least of these is probably that Stella's efforts to impress Sylvan are in vain, for on the day of the hunt, Sylvan not only does not go on the hunt, as he is suffering from "a bit of indigestion" (Tepper 286), but he also spends the whole day in the company of her mother, the realization of which makes Stella tremble with "fury and shock" (Tepper 291). Furthermore, Stella also elicits the disapproval of her father, who is "furious that she had not told him she intended to ride, furious at her for having ridden at all without his permission" (Tepper 301). Her father is furious at her not only because she disobeyed him, but also because in so doing she has undermined his authority, and therefore his masculinity. After her very first hunt, Stella is punished for not being the perfect obedient daughter, not only, in a literal way, by eliciting her father's disapproval and disappointment, but also, in an emotional way, by the fact that her effort to impress Sylvan had been in vain.

However, instead of this punishment discouraging her from riding again, Stella still proceeds to go on a second hunt though this time she has her father's permission. Marjorie is still against it, for she does not want to "risk the children" (Tepper 311). Although it seems as though Rigo is giving Stella agency by allowing her to ride again, he is allowing her to do so for his own purposes, for Stella is seen as an asset to Rigo. Stavenger bon Damfels, Sylvan's father – and one of the men Rigo is hoping to impress with his riding skills – concedes that Stella "rode brilliantly" (Tepper 311) on her first hunt. For Rigo, this word of praise is like a personal "accolade" (Tepper 311), as Stella's proficiency almost becomes a good reflection of Rigo's own proficiency, a way for Rigo to look good by proxy. In spite of Rigo's justifications for allowing Stella to go on the hunt again, Marjorie

is still against the idea of her daughter taking part, as “she could die” (Tepper 311) and she continues (unsuccessfully) to try and dissuade both Rigo and Stella from letting Stella ride in the hunt. Marjorie’s concerns are not unwarranted, for it is during the second hunt that Stella disappears.

Stella’s eventual fate acts as a societal punishment for being a disobedient daughter, for she disobeys not only her mother by going on the hunt against her wishes, but she also disobeys traditional gender roles, by acting in a decidedly masculine way, and in so doing, destabilises traditional gender norms. Her punishment forces her into a subordinate societal position again, as she will now always have to be in the care of others. Stella disobeys her mother partially because she perceives her as being indifferent towards her and thus it is a way for her to draw attention to herself. Disobeying her mother is thus an indication of the greater, underlying rift between mother and daughter. However, Stella’s disobedience also seems to imply that she chooses to align herself with her father (who gives his permission the second time around), and not with her mother, because she has forbidden her from riding again. It is as though she chooses to align herself with masculinity – as represented by the hunt – and in so doing, she seems to reject femininity. Unlike Marjorie who triumphs because she chooses femininity – through motherhood – over masculinity, Stella instead chooses masculinity and is therefore not as successful as her mother. Stella’s disobedience against her mother could thus be seen as a form of betrayal against femininity – for, as well as being an affront to patriarchal gender norms, it is also an affront to femininity, for she implicitly claims that masculinity is superior to femininity.

Ultimately, Stella’s punishment serves as a reformatory experience, for the Stella who is found is a different Stella. When Marjorie eventually finds Stella, she is lying “beside the water ... in a nest of grass, curled up, barefooted, half-unclothed, with her thumb in her mouth” (Tepper 403). The image conjures up associations of birth and life-giving, for not only does Stella seem to resemble a baby in a womb, but she is also found next to water, which is traditionally considered to be a source of life. This symbolizes the birth of the “new” Stella, one who has been turned into a passive, controllable daughter, by the Hippae, agents of the patriarchy. Her transformation is mirrored in her face: before she was often depicted with a scowl on her face, whereas now her face is “open and childlike, yet it [is] not a child’s” (Tepper 530). Yet, Stella has not been robbed of her identity completely. Though Stella is seemingly like the other victims of the Hippae, she has not been completely dehumanized; in contrast to Janetta and Dimity who do not know what their own names are, Stella still “know[s] her name ... [and] could distinguish between those she knew and those she didn’t” (Tepper 403).

Moreover, when Marjorie finds her, Stella is “saying her name over and over, ‘Stella, I’m Stella, Stella’” (Tepper 403). Stella’s identity is tied up to her name, and it is only by repeating it throughout her ordeal that she is able to maintain her core self. It is this most basic self of Stella that has been saved from being taken over by the Hippae and thus patriarchy.

After Marjorie and her motley crew of male followers find Stella, there is a fight between the Commoners and the Bons, with the Commoners being aided by the Foxen and the Bons by the Hounds and the Hippae. The fight is “arranged and directed” (Tepper 367) by the Hippae, as a way to protect themselves, and to punish the foreigners and the Commoners who have aligned themselves with the foreigners for their interference and for disrupting Grassian ways. The fight is eventually won by the Commoners and the Foxen, and the Hippae, whose numbers have dwindled, being defeated, retreat into the woods, where the Foxen will keep an eye on them. The Hippae are thus no longer the controlling authority on Grass. Marjorie has, in effect, helped to disband the patriarchal rule of the Hippae on Grass, thus helping her daughter to become free.

Moreover, at the end of the novel, when Marjorie leaves Grass, Stella is pregnant with the child of one of Marjorie’s ‘followers’ Rillibee Chime. For Stella, becoming a mother is a way that she can reclaim herself, as it implies that she is embracing femininity, and that she no longer wants to act in a masculine way. For Marjorie, motherhood was what trapped her in a patriarchal society. For Stella, motherhood is symbolic of her new life on Grass, as a new woman in a new society in which motherhood is no longer used to control women. By freeing Grass from patriarchy, Marjorie has created an environment in which Stella can experience motherhood positively and be empowered by it, and not experience it as something that binds her to patriarchy. This echoes the notion of Simone de Beauvoir, that when a girl becomes a mother, she “takes the place of her own mother” (511). Stella is thus literally able to take her mother’s place in society, for she will experience motherhood and femininity in a different way than her mother. In effect, while the new docile, pregnant Stella may adhere to the idealized image of femininity in patriarchal society, she has become a new sort of woman, one who is not trapped and oppressed by the patriarchal ideology of motherhood, but one who can be fully empowered through the experience of motherhood. Stella has thus undergone a transformation, as she has become a more mature young lady, because Marjorie was able to free Stella from patriarchy, albeit in a different way than Marjorie herself had broken free from patriarchy.

However, in spite of what has happened between Marjorie and Stella, they are still not able to reconcile with each other. In fact, they might even be further apart than before. For while Marjorie

expresses the hope that they might be friends one day, perhaps when Stella “was older, middle-aged” (Tepper 131), by the end of the novel she has all but given up on this hope. The bond between mother and daughter has seemingly been too severely strained, not least because they will experience motherhood differently. This seems to indicate that in spite of the fact that both Marjorie and Stella have been freed from patriarchy in different ways, patriarchy has still succeeded in breaking the bond between mother and daughter.

2.1.2. “This pink lady for the lord’s bed”¹⁷: The (M)othered Mistress

Marjorie and Stella’s relationship and all the concerns which pertain to it, is still situated within the boundaries of the patriarchal nuclear family. Indeed, feminist discourse itself is situated within concerns about and critiques of the nuclear family, for as Helena Michie reminds us

the dominant metaphors of feminist critiques of society are familial in origin; the word ‘patriarchy’ itself, familiarly ensconced at the center of the feminist lexicon, locates power in a literal and metaphorical fatherhood and defines the family as the scene, if not the source, of women’s oppression. (55)

Tepper’s novel, however, is also concerned with the figure who is often situated outside the nuclear family, the “Other woman ... the mistress, the rival, the sexual threat” (Michie 57). Through the figure of Eugenie Le Fevre, Rigo’s mistress, the novel explores the position of the other woman, not only in relation to the nuclear family, but also in relation to issues of motherhood.

Eugenie Le Fevre is the latest in a long line of Rigo Yrarier’s mistresses. He makes no attempt at hiding the fact that he has mistresses, mainly because he uses them as a way to test Marjorie’s love for him and loyalty to him, and to see if she if she becomes jealous enough. Although Marjorie’s feelings towards Eugenie change, growing from her “original animosity” to “a hazy tolerance, almost indistinguishable from tentative acceptance” (Tepper 147), Marjorie’s children, on the other hand, “despise her” and their servants think of her as “a joke” (Tepper 147). Because she does not really have a place in the nuclear family, we find that for most of the novel she is kept mostly on the fringes of Tepper’s narrative – both literally, for in the context of the story, she has her own living quarters, away from the house in which the Yrariers stay, and literarily, for she has no real narrative function. And yet, through Eugenie, the novel voices its thoughts on the relationship between the Other woman and the nuclear family. And Eugenie is literally an Other woman, as to all intents and purposes, she is the exact opposite of Marjorie. Whereas Marjorie is an intelligent, passionate,

¹⁷ (Tepper 87)

independent woman, Eugenie is not. In fact, of all the female characters, Eugenie is perhaps drawn in the most stereotypical fashion: she is not represented as being either threatening to the family, or as particularly assertive; instead she is presented merely as a passive, objectified woman, with a hazy mist of superficiality surrounding her and “the floating [pink] chiffon of her life” (Tepper 148). Eugenie’s objectification is clear in the way that she merely “look[s] like [a] little porcelain woman [that is] kept on [a] table ... her eyes [are] an ageless blue, innocent of anything but pleasure and untroubled by thought” (Tepper 87). Anthony, Marjorie’s son, cannot understand his father’s need for her, and considers Eugenie to be unintelligent, saying that she “hasn’t the brains of a root peeper¹⁸ ... [She has] [n]o brains at all” (Tepper 249), a sentiment that Marjorie (and Rigo) share. Eugenie’s sole purpose seems to be making Rigo happy, to function as “necessary relief from the tiresome work [Rigo] [is] called upon to do” (Tepper 148-9). Eugenie claims to be in love with Rigo, because he had told her she “was important [and] [i]t was the nicest compliment she had ever received” (Tepper 149). Eugenie’s self-worth is determined only in relation to men, and Marjorie points out that Eugenie “is soft for [Rigo], like clay. She takes his impress and accepts it, like a reverse image, suiting herself to him” (Tepper 400). Eugenie is thus depicted as being nothing more than a vapid object of male sexual desire.

However, Eugenie eventually takes on another role. While on Grass, she becomes increasingly bored, mainly because Rigo is busy with his job as a representative of Sanctity, and there is thus nothing for her to do. One day, while she is in town (on the advice of Marjorie), she meets Roald Few, the man who is looking after the dehumanized Janetta bon Maukerden. Eugenie sees Janetta as herself – “a girl-sized walking doll, something with pretty hair to arrange, something to clothe and play with” (Tepper 151). Although she merely takes Janetta to be “her pet” (Tepper 188), something to alleviate “the blanketing boredom which [is] afflicting her” (Tepper 148), by doing so, she also becomes a surrogate mother of sorts for Janetta. Just like a mother, Eugenie plans to teach Janetta valuable things, such as dancing and how to sew “astonishing gowns” (Tepper 152). There is a satirical element to this, for what Eugenie plans to do might not be construed as “proper” instructive behaviour from mother to daughter. Eugenie, thus, (unintentionally perhaps) transgresses the societal definition of acceptable behaviour for a mistress by taking on the role of mother. By becoming a mother-figure of sorts to Janetta, she moves into the space reserved for the members of the nuclear family: the person standing apart from the family has thus moved into a space that is very much a part of the family.

¹⁸ The infant state of the Hounds, during which they resemble white, tube-like worms.

However, Eugenie is eventually punished, because she transgresses by moving into the space reserved for the mother. Thus, when she takes Janetta, all dressed up, to the Hunting ball held at the Yrariers' house on Grass, it causes a great uproar. Eugenie, not sure what has caused the uproar, weeps like "a child" (Tepper 188) and loses face with Rigo, who considers her to be an embarrassment. Further on in the novel, during the fight between the Commoners and the Bons, Eugenie is killed by "[t]he Hounds that had swept through the place ahead of the flames" (Tepper 378). Eugenie's violent fate, along with the fact that Rigo despises her (for a while at least), is thus a way that she is punished for transgressing into the forbidden realm of motherhood. Eugenie's fate also satirizes the hypocrisy surrounding the patriarchal ideology of motherhood, namely that although it is seen as the ultimate fate and occupation for women, it is only those women who are within the confines of the nuclear family who are allowed to become mothers.

Through these various female characters, Tepper explores the patriarchal implications of motherhood for women. Though motherhood is essentially an empowering and unique experience for women, it is also the means by which they get trapped in patriarchal ideologies, which limit them to being only wives and mothers. Ultimately, however, motherhood is shown to be both an oppressive and liberating experience for women, though according to traditional patriarchal societies, it should remain within the confines of the traditional nuclear family. In this novel, Tepper also touches on the way in which male discourses on motherhood affects the environment: the lack of general availability of contraceptives for women leads to an inability to control their bodies' reproductive capabilities, which leads to overpopulation, which is detrimental to the environment. In this way, Tepper's critique of patriarchal ideologies surrounding motherhood is also linked to an overarching concern with the environment.

2.2 "They rode the Hippae and were enslaved"¹⁹ – Tepper's Critique of Society's Oppressive Straitjackets: Ideologies, Religions and Traditions.

Traditions, religions and ideologies provide frameworks from which to perceive individual and societal experience, though the distinction between them is blurred. Sheri Tepper views ideologies, religions and traditions as oppressive straitjackets, from which people should try to free themselves; Tepper even goes as far as saying that certain religions, traditions, and ideologies are "evil" (Szapatura n.pag.), because they "discourage intelligence, language, and a continuing search for information ... [by defining] truth as a set of beliefs and occurrences that cannot be questioned" (Szapatura n.pag.). Moreover, Tepper is also opposed to the fact that certain traditions and religions are in opposition to modernity, and as

¹⁹ (Tepper 536)

such perpetuate out-dated notions. Consequently, her novels frequently critique the influence they have on humanity; for instance, Tepper's novel *Grass* is primarily a critique of tradition – which is depicted as similar to ideologies – and of religions.

Grass is divided into two specific critiques: on the one hand the novel critiques tradition-as-ideology in the form of the Grassian hunt, which is primarily a metaphorical satire of the ideological influence of certain traditional customs, and it implies that people are just as much enslaved by tradition as they are by ideologies. Moreover, it also indicates how tradition and ideology are connected to each other, for in the novel tradition is used to establish and maintain ideological power. On the other hand, the novel also critiques two specific patriarchal religions: one of the oldest patriarchal religions, Catholicism, is pitted against one of the newest patriarchal religions, Mormonism. Both of these religions are depicted as being bound to an irrelevant past from which people should break free. In this way, the novel advocates that both religion and tradition should adapt to a modern world, an idea which is emphasized by the fact that in Tepper's novels it is often the youth who are able to critique the ideologies of older generations and who consequently try to break free from these ideologies. Tepper seems to imply that it is the duty of younger generations to break the hold of tradition and religion, in order to create a world in which people can co-exist in freedom.

2.2.1 “It has a kind of hypnotic effect”²⁰ – The Grassian Hunt as Metaphor for Tradition-as-Ideology

In *Grass*, tradition is presented as an ideology, as something that not only frames experiences, but also directs them. Malise Ruthven's definition of tradition indicates its similarity to ideology; for Ruthven, tradition is “simply what occurs unselfconsciously as part of the natural order of things ... [It consist of] not being aware that how one believes or behaves is traditional, because alternative ways of thinking are simply not taken into consideration” (*Fundamentalism* 10-11). Tradition-as-ideology in *Grass* is represented by the Grassian Hunting custom. The Hunt is an integral part of the narrative, as it is the Hunt that sets the protagonist Marjorie Westriding on her quest to discover her full potential. Though no one on Grass is sure how and when the custom of the Hunt began, it has gone largely uncontested on Grass. It is a parody of the fox-and-hound hunt which is stereotypically associated with patriarchal England. However, instead of normal horses, the Bons have Hippae, which are gigantic, horse-like creatures with “long necks arching in an almost horse-

²⁰ (Tepper 36)

like curve, [their] necks spined with arm-long scimitars of pointed, knife-edged bone, longest on the head and midway down the neck, shorter at the lower neck and shoulders. [Their] eyes ... [are] burning orbs of red [and] their backs [are] armoured with great calluses of hard and glistening hide” (Tepper 105). The hounds, the Grassian equivalent of dogs, are “the size of Terran [Earth] horses, with broad, triangular heads and lips curled back to display jagged ridges of bone or tooth ... They ha[ve] reticulated hides, a network of lighter skin surrounding shapeless patches of darker skin” (Tepper 104). Their prey, the foxen, are never really seen by anyone in the novel; only impressions of the foxen are ever left in the mind’s eye of the viewer, such as “an expanse of trembling skin over eyes they could not quite see [with] fangs, or something like fangs, in a gleam of blued ivory [and] flaring wings of hair, doubly flaring violet auroras, like spurts of cold lightning” (Tepper 354). The lack of a proper physical description of the foxen, ironically perhaps, makes them appear more threatening and more alien than the almost familiar Hippae and hounds. Yet, in spite of this, throughout the novel, the foxen are portrayed in a more favourable light, especially since, for most of the novel, the Hippae and the Foxen are presented as exact opposites of each other. The Hippae, for instance, are represented as being decidedly malicious, whereas the Foxen come across as more nurturing and seemingly gentle. However, it is not possible to make a simplistic binary division of these two enemies, for the foxen are shown to be just as vicious as the Hippae, given the right opportunity.

In addition to these creatures with human-like intelligence, the population of Grass also consists of three other groups: the so-called Commoners – those people who are not Bons and who live in Commoner Town; the Bons – the aristocratic, xenophobic ruling class on Grass who remain isolated on their Estancias, and the Green Brothers – missionaries from Sanctity, the quasi-religious authority that is stationed on Terra (Earth), who are allowed to live on Grass only if they do not do any missionary work and who despite their best efforts, do remain completely isolated from the native population of Grass. The Hunting custom of the Bons affects everybody on Grass, albeit only indirectly. Although, as with most things on Grass, no-one really knows where this ritual comes from; it is considered to be a natural part of happenings on Grass, it is “merely” traditional. According to Shils, traditions may become normative in a society, until “past practices persist while appearing as if their connection with the past, if noticed at all, is entirely secondary to their ‘naturalness’ and their ‘rightness’” (201). This is also one of the strategies by which an ideology may legitimate itself: by “*naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable” (Eagleton 5).

However, the Bons' "tradition" is merely the Hippae's way of establishing and maintaining their power on Grass, for it is a means for the Hippae to gain control over the Bons. The Hunt is merely an illusion of a tradition, for it is actually instated by the Hippae as a way for them to gain control of the Bons' minds. During the Hunt, something works "inside [the person's] mind to wipe it clean, [like] an eraser" (Tepper 27), and in this way, the Bons' minds are wiped clean, reducing them to mindless slaves of the Hippae. It is for this reason that the Bons have a xenophobic, separatist nature – it is a manifestation of the Hippae's wish to retain absolute power and control on Grass. The isolation of the Bons is made possible not only by the fact that there is a clear division between Commoner Town, where most of Grass's inhabitants live, and the Bons' estancias, but also by the fact that "there are no roads on Grass except for the narrow trails linking each estancia to its own village" (Tepper 99). The transportation of people or material is done by air and the Bons are not allowed to have any other kind of contact with foreigners *outside* of Grass. Rowena bon Damfels, for instance, laments the fact that all the books in the bon Damfels' house have been removed, for they were "one of those 'foreign' things [her husband] Stavenger was forever inveighing against. As though a few fairy tales could hurt anything" (Tepper 16).

Though the Hippae are responsible for the Bons' xenophobic nature – which is an attempt to keep all foreign influences away – the Hippae are not averse to showing contempt to strangers themselves. Throughout the novel, the Hippae are described as being full of malice and contempt towards Marjorie and the other foreigners on Grass, since the Hippae despise strangers. The Hippae indicate their contempt for all things foreign through a symbol that, as part of a Hippaen ritual, is trampled onto the floor of a cavern. The symbol consists of three words: "one of them means death, and one means outsiders, or strangers, and one means joy ... [the symbol reads as] joy-to-kill-strangers" (Tepper 422). The Grassian word for foreigner, namely "fragras", is meant as "the ultimate [Grassian] insult" (Tepper 21), and most Bons hold the belief that "what foreigners did or said was both incomprehensible and contemptible" (Tepper 10). Foreigners, and all things foreign, are so frowned upon by the Bons that their living conditions are a lot less technologically advanced than those of the rest of the Grassian population, who reside in "Commoner Town" (Tepper 22). As a portside town, Commoner Town not only sees a regular influx and outflow of foreigners, but is also continuously influenced by them, and thus also by new technologies, which naturally improves their way of life. It is also common knowledge among the so-called "Commoners" that they are "better educated than the Bons ... though [they] don't let [the Bons] know that" (Tepper 91). The way the Bons are not allowed by the Hippae to come into contact – and consequently, be influenced by – outsiders, is indicative of how societies guard their ideologies. The vigilance with which the

Hippae guard their secret is linked with their being responsible for the plague that is riddling the galaxy. The plague is created and spread by them as a way to stop any influence coming in from the outside, for the Hippae “do not care if all the worlds die. They [merely] do not wish to be disturbed” (248). The plague is a flesh-eating disease, which starts out as a little scab on the person’s body and then slowly starts spreading across the entire body – an interesting metaphor for the way in which ideologies themselves can spread: becoming so completely ingrained in a person’s being, that it seems to take over that person. In this way, Tepper critiques the hold ideologies can have on people by pathologizing ideologies, thus equating them with diseases. Tepper’s criticism against ideologies is, however, problematic as it does assume a generalised, negative stance towards all ideologies.

The plague is utilized by the Hippae to preserve their customs, and consequently, to maintain absolute power on Grass, by getting rid of all other forms of life. Terry Eagleton points out that another strategy an ideology uses to legitimate itself is by “*excluding* rival forms of thought” (5). The Hippae thus literally try to exclude any and all thoughts that might negate their power on Grass by getting ‘rid of the competition’, so to speak. For while the Bons have “a compulsion to ride, [they have] an inability to think about riding, an inability to talk about riding” (Tepper 199), and whenever someone does try to speak critically about the Hunts or the Hippae, the person is physically unable to do so. Sylvan bon Damfels, for instance, when warning Marjorie and her family against taking part in the Hunt, not only starts looking “around the room to see who might be listening, [but] the cords of his throat [also] stand... out as though he struggled to speak at all” (Tepper 116)²¹. Similarly, his sister, Emmy, when she wants to talk about something the Hippae might have done, “struggle[s] for words, choking on them, [her] eyes bulging as she trie[s] to say what *she was not permitted to say* [emphasis added]” (Tepper 261).

Furthermore, those who do manage to question the Hippae’s customs often have an arm or a leg “bitten off” (Tepper 200) in punishment. Whenever someone does something to the Hippae, such as speaking out against them, or even speaking about “the mounts where they can hear you” (Tepper 27), they are also punished. For instance, the estancia of one of the other Bon families, the Darenfield’s, was burned [down] after somebody wounded a Hippae ... [A]ll the people in the village died” (Tepper 374). This is the Hippae’s way of ensuring that Grassians, but especially the Bons, do not question the Hippae or try to harm them. The Bons are also actively discouraged from discovering anything about the Hippae, for the Hippae also “kill anybody who spies on them” (Tepper 274), in an effort to retain absolute power on Grass. However, some of the “younger ones

²¹ It is interesting to note that voicelessness is not limited to women in this patriarchal society.

[like Sylvan] ... [are able to] talk about things” (Tepper 276) – up to a certain point at least. It is possible for them to criticize the Hunt only when the Hippae are absent, and even then, they still only have a limited ability to do so, for they do not have the strength of mind to break the hold the Hippae have over their minds. The older Bons, on the other hand, are simply too “hypnotized” (Tepper 276) by the Hippae to question any of the customs. Stavenger bon Damfels, for instance, one of the Bons on Grass, becomes just “like one of the Hippae, all shining eyes and sharp blades so you can’t come near him” (Tepper 261). He is so hypnotized by the Hippae that by the end of the novel he has no will left of his own, and he eventually dies a slave of the Hippae’s will. The way that especially the older Bons blindly follow their Hunting customs, without ever being able to, or even wanting to, question them, is a caricature of the way that patriarchal ideologies become an internalised norms that are left unquestioned, frequently by older generations. The fact that the only people able to speak out against the Hippae are foreigners, outsiders and younger people is indicative of the fact that Tepper proposes younger generations may be able to break free from any ideological influence, whether religious, traditional, or political.

2.2.2 Secrets about Girls, Men and Hippae: the Hunt as Metaphor for Patriarchy

Though the Hippaen ideology is not based on any one ideology, it does come close to critiquing patriarchal ideology, since the Hippae can be seen as agents of patriarchy, mainly because they seem to impose a (metaphorical, if not a literal) patriarchal way of life, especially among the Bons. Bon women are shown to have considerably fewer rights than both the women in Commoner Town and on Terra. The Bon women on Grass are depicted as living in a kind of a glass cage, for they are surrounded by wealth, and yet they are not allowed to have any freedom. As daughters and wives, they are solely the property of their fathers and husbands, mirroring an old-fashioned kind of patriarchal society, in which “women were structured into society as dependants, first of fathers, then of husbands” (Lerner 119). The Bon women do not even have any control over their own reproductive capabilities, while the women from the Commons have more freedom than that, most notably in the way that they are able to have a (better) education; ironically, the aristocratic women on Grass are less privileged than the poorer women on Grass.

This is in contrast to the situation on Terra, where the poorer women are less privileged in every way: not only do they have no control over their bodies’ reproductive capabilities, for the ruling Sanctity, the quasi-religious organization that governs humanity all across the galaxy, does not permit contraceptives and abortions to be freely available, but also because their financial situation is not sound. The ‘richer’ women on Terra, on the other hand, are able to stay out of trouble, for rich

people do not get into “that kind of mess” (Tepper 44). By contrasting the women on Terra with the women on Grass, Tepper avoids making any easy binary division between rich and poor women, instead showing that often rich women may be just as trapped as poor women, or that poor women, in spite of their financial situations, might be freer than rich women.

Male dominance is embedded in every little custom of the Bons, since “males are more worthy than females and should have more power and prestige than females” (Franklin 10). This can be seen on Grass by the fact that unlike in other patriarchal societies, where a woman takes her husband’s surname upon getting married, to signify that she now belongs to him, on Grass, “women do not take their husband’s name” (Tepper 74) at all, since Bon women are so beneath their husbands that they are not allowed to take their surnames. It is also interesting to note the commodification of women, as is indicated by the names of Stavenger bon Damfels’ daughters, which all bring to mind priceless gems: Emeraude (Emerald), Amethyste (Amethyst), and Diamante (Diamond). Male dominance is also indicated by the fact that the Bon husbands control the actions of their wives; Stavenger bon Damfels, for instance, made his wife, Rowena, “do so many things [she] didn’t want to” (Tepper 17). The Bon women seem to be completely unable to do anything for themselves; Rowena, at one stage, is beaten and locked up by her husband “with no food and no water” (Tepper 261) after he learns she has secretly been working with the foreigners. She eventually manages to escape from her husband’s oppressive clutches and joins Marjorie’s band of followers.

Another interesting difference between the Commoners and the Bons is that gender roles are clearly defined among the Bons, whereas they tend to be blurred among the commoners. The bon women, for instance, although they are allowed to partake in the hunt (but only with the permission of their fathers or husbands, and for the most part only those who are unmarried), are generally required to stay at home, while the men are more active, thus adhering to stereotypical patriarchal gender roles. In Commoner Town, there are no real clearly defined gender roles; in fact, it is often not even possible to distinguish between men and women. Using the pronouns “he” and “she” is as often wrong “as they’re right. They have he’s that look like she’s and she’s that look like he’s, and it’s that look like either” (Tepper 135). An example of this would be the characters Ducky Johns and Saint Teresa, “the madams of the two largest sensee [sic] houses in Portside” (Tepper 124). Yet, contrary to the associations of their names, Ducky Johns is a female and Saint Teresa is a male. Ducky Johns is portrayed as a figure from whom decadence and gaudiness seem to emanate; she is very overweight, for the “flounces of her tent-dress quiver in response to the mountain of shivering flesh beneath” (Tepper 124). Her eyebrows are “spangled” and her eyelids “tattooed” (Tepper 124).

Saint Teresa on the other hand, is portrayed as the exact physical opposite of Ducky Johns; he is described as “stalking beside her like a heron, long-legged and long-nosed to the point of caricature” (Tepper 379).

The contrast between Bon and Commoner women is a relatively subtle critique of the patriarchal attitudes the Hippae instil among the Bons. However, the Hippae’s relationship with the missing girls on Grass is also situated in another ideological metaphor, one that focuses on the way in which patriarchy treats young women. As has already been mentioned, on Grass “everyone pretends not to notice” (Tepper 329) when someone, usually young girls, go missing during a hunt. According to Luce Irigaray, “Patriarchy is founded upon the theft and violation of the daughter’s virginity and the use of her virginity for commerce between men, including religious commerce” (111). Although the young women on Grass are not taken by the Hippae for commercial use, they are nevertheless used and abused by them to spread the plague to other planets. The girls are programmed by the Hippae to stow away onboard outgoing spaceships and, by carrying dead bats to other planets, they spread the disease. The dead bats have a symbolic meaning on Grass, for the Hippae “kick dead bats at one another” (Tepper 192), as “a gesture of contempt ... [As] a way of saying ‘you’re vermin’” (Tepper 420). By using dead bats to spread the plague, the Hippae are thus in effect not only ‘killing the competition’, but in their manner of killing, they are also indicating their own contempt for all things foreign. The Hippae use the young women because they are less of an obvious threat to unsuspecting worlds and also because, to the Hippae, they have less use in Grassian society. Aside from child-bearing duties, the Bon women seem to have no real function in Grassian society, and even during hunts they are superfluous, only there as potential offerings to the Hippae. The Hippae thus seem to have a patriarchal attitude towards the girls, as they are treated merely as tools to further the Hippae’s own plans.

Before the young women become unwitting agents of patriarchy, they are first ‘dehumanized’. It is not clear precisely how this is done, but it is evident that something is done to the girls’ minds, “something in the pleasure centres of the brain and nervous system, in the sexual connection to it ... Something perverse. Sexual pleasure seems to result from obeying commands” (Tepper 442). The dehumanization of the missing girls is evident in Janetta bon Maukerden, a girl who mysteriously reappears months after she had gone missing during a hunt. Upon her return, it becomes evident that she has “no more memory than an egg” (Tepper 141) and “[n]othing in her face or glance spoke of a person being there” (Tepper 189). She is called “Goosegirl” (Tepper 150) by those who find her, because she has a “sidling, goose-eyed gaze ... [an] almost mindless, birdish stare” (Tepper 150).

The animalisation of Janetta is also reflected in Dimity bon Damfels, another girl who disappears and returns. She is described as a “naked girl with no expression on her face, wriggling like a fish on a spear, not saying anything at all” (Tepper 382). Both these girls have thus somehow not only been robbed of their humanity, but also of their sense of self. They have become no more than empty shells; they have been “wiped clean [by the Hippae] except for a certain *impetus* [to do] a certain programmed activity” (Tepper 520), wiped clean of everything but “that one circuit” (Tepper 443) – the compulsion to get on a ship with a dead bat. Janetta and the other girls like her – both those who never return and those who come back – can be read as an exaggerated metaphor for how patriarchal ideologies reduce women to nothing more than mindless servants of men. These women’s minds will figuratively be empty, devoid of all thoughts but those pertaining to household and motherly chores – unless they have some access to education. Consequently, the only way for women to define themselves is in relation to the only two occupational roles available to them, namely wife and mother.

The Hippae’s relationship with the disappearing girls is furthermore embedded in another metaphor and that is the way in which patriarchy violates and steals “the daughter’s virginity” (Irigaray 111) for its own use. While on one of the hunts, Dimity bon Damfels experiences “a welling of pleasure so deeply intimate [that] it makes her flush and draw her breath ... [it] makes her whole body rock in a spasm of ecstatic sensation” (Tepper 31) at the precise moment that the Hounds kill a Foxen. It is the Hippae’s perverse pleasure in seeing the Foxen being killed that is transferred to the riders, which creates in them a sexual experience. It is as though the riders have become an outlet for the Hippae’s perverse pleasure, while at the same time, the sexual pleasure is also the riders’ reward for obeying the command to join the hunt (Tepper 443). It is also possible to read this as a depiction of the way in which patriarchy violates and steals the daughters’ virginity, for Dimity, as a first-time rider is literally and figuratively raped while she is on the hunt. This is a metaphor for the way in which women’s bodies, and specifically the bodies of the virginal daughters, are appropriated for men’s own needs.

While Dimity is ‘raped’, her brother, Sylvan, “see[s] her body thrashing, her eyes closed. [However,] [i]n order not to see it, he turns his face away” (Tepper 31), just as her mother, Rowena, does later. That Sylvan does not want to see what happens to his sister, choosing in fact not to see what is happening to her, is indicative of the way that societies choose not to see what is happening to their ‘weaker’ members. When Dimity later recounts the events of the hunt to her mother, Rowena, she is unable to tell her about the incident, and merely flushes deeply. Rowena recognises

what the flush means, but chooses not to talk about it with her daughter, so that it remains a “secret shared” (Tepper 34). Rowena’s silence is indicative of the Grassians’ inability to talk about anything related to the hunt, as well as the way that women often remain silent about their own (negative) experiences, and thereby, through their collective, and often generational silences, empowering men, or in this case, the Hippae, even further. Dimity and Rowena’s silence is indicative of the self-silencing of women in patriarchal societies, which suggests that women have no voice, no agency in patriarchal societies. When Marjorie Westriding goes on a quest to find her daughter, Stella, it therefore becomes not only an attempt to save her daughter from the Hippae, but also an attempt to save her from the same kind of patriarchal oppression that Marjorie herself has had to endure.

2.2.3 Mormonism versus Catholicism and the Call for Modernization

Grass, however, is not just limited to a critique of tradition-as-ideology; it also critiques religions, especially in the way that religions, like ideologies, influence everyday life. Contrary to Michael Freedman who contends that religions are not as influential as ideologies, because they do not try to “compete over the control of public policy [or] attempt to influence the social arrangements of the entire political community” (101), Tepper aims to show in *Grass* that religions have the same kind of ideological influence as political ideologies. Tepper’s novels attempt to show that religion is very much influential in everyday life, for it provides a framework from which personal, social and cultural events are experienced and evaluated. More specifically, Tepper examines and critiques the way in which religion inhibits and confines women; thus not to consider religions influential is to look at them from a male, patriarchal perspective.

Tepper’s critique of religions is twofold. Firstly, religion, according to Tepper, is bound to an irrelevant past. Jonathan Williams has pointed out that one of the biggest problems of traditional religion is its failure “to encompass modernity” (qtd. in Ruthven, *Fundamentalism* 1). It is for this reason that Tepper’s novels advocate the abolition of organized religion or its adaptation to modernity. The second reason for Tepper’s critique against religion is related to the first, for the oppression of women is often done under religious pretexts, as it is the literal interpretation of certain holy texts that has led to the subjugation and oppression of women. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, the story of the Fall and the role that Eve played in the expulsion of people from paradise is used as “irrefutable evidence of women’s essentially inferior intellectual and moral

stature” (Daly 524). Moreover, certain passages in the Bible²², are “understood as divinely inspired and without reference to the cultural context in which they were written, have served as powerful instruments for the reinforcement of the subjection of women in Western society” (Daly 524). This is, of course, mirrored in the novel in the way that the tradition of the Hunt continues without contestation. Religious texts obtain their legitimacy from the fact that they are considered to be divinely inspired writings. In Tepper’s novels, it is religion’s inability to adapt that causes it to perpetuate outdated gender roles and customs. In *Grass*, two patriarchal religions are pitted against each other: Old Catholicism and Sanctity. Old Catholicism is based on Roman Catholicism, whereas Sanctity, the religious organization that rules the universe, is based on Mormonism. Both of these religions are in essence merely different forms of the Christian religion; it is only the specific religious text – the Bible and the Book of Mormon, respectively – that separates them.

From the beginning of the novel, Sanctity is portrayed as villainous, especially since it seems to stand in opposition to the attempt of the protagonist, Marjorie Westriding, to save the world from the flesh-eating and seemingly unstoppable plague. Sanctity, according to Adam Roberts, is “a rather clunking satire on Mormonism” (Review n.pag.). Mormonism is “one of the world’s fastest growing religions” (Givens 3), a fact that is represented in the novel, which is set in the future, by Sanctity literally having control over the entire universe. It is the “most distinctively American sect of Christianity” (Roberts, Review n.pag.) and it is based on the Book of Mormon, which was supposedly discovered and translated by Joseph Smith in the 1800s. The Book of Mormon, like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, “attests to the sovereignty of a living God ... A God entirely passible²³, accessible, and personal in his interactions with individuals” (Givens 5-6). Although it has a lot in common with both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, it also differs, rather radically at times, from them. Most notable, perhaps, is the way in which “the Fall is [seen] not as a catastrophe to be fixed or refixed, [but rather as] the necessary and glorious pathway to humanity’s eternal advancement” (Givens 76). The Fall, in a certain sense, becomes a necessary evil, in which Eve becomes “the bold heroine, rather than the weak vessel of the race’s founding story” (Givens 77). In spite of seemingly possessing aspects of gender correctness, Mormonism still propagates a traditional patriarchal view of women. Jessica Longlaker, citing McConkie, points out that “[t]he Mormon position on women has changed little since the early 1800s, when the official view was that ‘woman’s primary place is in the home, where she is to rear children and abide by the righteous

²² Such as the often-quoted Ephesians 5:24: “Therefore, just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (New King James Version).

²³ “(Theol.) capable of feeling or suffering” (“Passible” 749).

counsel of her husband” (n.pag.). She also points out that it is not “even possible for Mormonism to [consider] equaliz[ing] the roles of men and women, because the oppression of women is so integral to the religion” (Longlaker n.pag.). The Book of Mormon therefore “occupies the unusual position of invoking and affirming Biblical concepts and motifs, even as it rewrites them in fairly dramatic ways” (Givens 6). Some of the fundamental doctrines of Mormonism are a

[b]elief in human pre-mortality, in temples and temple worship, the eternity of the marriage covenant, the distinctive code of health (The Word of Wisdom), the law of tithing, the three-tiered heaven of the afterlife, church offices and organization. (Givens 107)

There is also a great emphasis on sexual morality, since chastity and fidelity are highly valued and encouraged. Yet, in spite of this, “the Mormon church is more tolerant of unwed mothers or pregnant brides than it is of divorced women ... [because] a pregnant woman is fulfilling God’s plan and her purpose in life” (Longlaker n.pag.). Some of these doctrines are visible in the novel, such as the eternity of the marriage covenant. Marjorie mentions that “Sanctity said marriage lasted forever. Especially in heaven. Which wasn’t what Old Catholics believed” (Tepper 130).

Sanctity/Mormonism is not presented particularly favourably²⁴, though it is depicted as a very powerful religion, for although it is situated on Terra, it is in fact in control of all human dealings in the galaxy and it has “at least one temple on virtually every occupied world. In the few places where there’s no temple, there’s at least a mission” (Tepper 110). It is part of Sanctity’s doctrine that every living person should become a follower, for it is only those who become Sanctified – those who get registered and pledged to Sanctity at birth – who are “saved for eternity” (Tepper 506). To encourage this, the name of every new baby is recorded in the depths of Sanctity, along with a cell sample of the child, thus “making an immortal place” (Tepper 52) for the individual²⁵. Moreover, those who have not been Sanctified are seen as inferior, and are even effectively rendered identity-less, as if to emphasise the power of Sanctity. Sanctity’s power is not only embodied by its name, which denotes it as an institution of absolute holiness, but is also created, legitimated and retained through the implied associations with holiness that its name suggests. The fact that Sanctity alone decrees who is holy and who is not, through the ritualistic act of being declared Sanctified, makes it the keeper of holiness, which acts as a way to further reiterate its power and legitimacy.

²⁴ A review of the novel notes that Mormon readers of *Grass* “will not be flattered [by Tepper’s depiction of Mormonism] – though Tepper has exaggerated for effect” (Tilman n.pag.).

²⁵

In spite of the fact that Sanctity wants to reach out to all the people in the universe, so to speak, it is a very elitist organization, as is represented by its headquarters. This building (also called Sanctity), situated on Terra, offers an extravagant sight, with its

one hundred golden angels [which] stand on the tower spires of Sanctity, wings wide, trumpets lifted, lit by internal fires which make them shine like a century of suns ... [functioning] both day and night ... [as] a lighthouse, a guide ... to the great diaspora of humanity. (Tepper 47)

It even serves as a tourist attraction of sorts; yet, no one is allowed to approach it, and so, although it is “impossible to see anything in detail ... Sanctity is never observed at closer range” (Tepper 48). Furthermore, to all the worlds, “Sanctity stands forever upon the Terran horizon, perceivable yet remote, holy and unapproachable, fully accessible only to its chosen ones, the Hierophants, the servitors, the acolytes” (Tepper 48). The building becomes a symbolic representation of the way in which Sanctity is viewed by its own followers, and those outside of the religion, for no one wants to, or rather is allowed to, look too closely at its doctrine. The building is thus a physical manifestation of the way in which Sanctity maintains a safe distance between those who institute doctrine and those who must follow it, and in so doing, maintaining a sense of awe, grandeur, and (undeserved) respect.

To add to its elitist status, it is a male-dominated and male-favouring religion. Women, for instance, are not allowed to enter the building. The only people allowed inside Sanctity are pledged males. Male outsiders are only allowed to go inside once they have proven they are in fact men. All of those who work within the ranks of Sanctity are men, too. In accordance with many patriarchal religions, women’s function is “to bear children for the population of the Galaxy” (Tepper 20). This is one of the reasons Sanctity is opposed to the use of contraceptives and the practice of abortions, even though Terra is suffering from over-population.

However, even within its ranks, there is a clear hierarchy, for there is a clear favouring of those few who are in a higher societal position, which further indicates its elitist nature. This is perhaps the reason why the identity of the so-called lower level individual is suppressed. For although the “doctrine teaches that the immortality of the person is the sole reason for Sanctity’s edificial existence, there is no personality allowed in its service” (Tepper 49). According to Sanctity, all (lower) individuals are merely parts, “interchangeable with any other part” (Tepper 51), which is why most of the lower level servitors, for instance, are not called by their names, but are merely numbered, if they are referred to at all. One of these, Rillibee Chime, who “had been taken, taken in, adopted, assigned to service” (Tepper 50) after his parents died of the plague, desperately tries to

cling to his identity, by saying “his name to himself, over and over, silently reminding himself who he is, clinging to himself, the self he had known, the self with memories and a past and people he loved once” (Tepper 49). The suppression of individuality makes it easier to control and manipulate an entire population, which would give Sanctity even greater power and authority. Furthermore, the exaltation of the few is also indicated by the fact that it “has never been Sanctity’s intention to resurrect many” (Tepper 222), but only a select few.

Moreover, Sanctity also looks down on those who do not accept their religion. It is for this reason that Sanctity considers the plague a useful implement, for in it they see “the Hand of God Almighty wiping out the heathen to leave worlds clean for Sanctity alone to populate” (Tepper 222). It is for this reason that Sanctity denies there is a plague, “and what Sanctity denie[s], the human worlds denie[s]” (Tepper 59). The plague is a “slow virus of the most insidious type and hideous aspect ... which emerged at last to make the body devour itself as in a spasm of biological self-hatred” (Tepper 58). Not only does Sanctity not admit that there is a plague, but it also will not distribute the cure, should one be found. It is part of Sanctity’s plan to take control over the entire universe, by eliminating all those who are not Sanctified. Through the plague, Sanctity becomes very much like the Hippae. Just like the Hippae erase the memories of the Bons for the purpose of xenophobic elitism, so Sanctity wants to erase the populations of worlds for the purpose of religious elitism, and just as the Hippae do not allow the Bons to speak against them, so Sanctity does not allow its followers to think or speak for themselves. In this way, Tepper depicts a rather negative image of people who follow certain religious ideologies without question and of those who promote these ideologies.

Sanctity’s secret encouragement of the continuation of the plague is helped on by the Moldies, an apocalyptic sect who “fervently desire the end of the world, the human world” (Tepper 112). The Moldies call themselves the Martyrs of the Last Days, and they “believe in an afterlife which will only commence when this one has ended, for everyone” (Tepper 113). They also believe in the New Creation, which will come after the end of mankind, in which all of the loyal Moldies will be born anew into different, better bodies. The Moldies, hoping to speed up the extermination of mankind in order for spiritual enlightenment to happen more quickly, help the plague by carrying “infected materials from one place to another” (Tepper 113). The Moldies are representative of the “ancient anarchists, destroying so that something better can come” (Tepper 113). Though the Moldies do not seem to be associated with any specific religion, they do indicate the danger of following any ideology, for theirs is portrayed as one that is dangerous to others. The Moldies’ ideology emphasizes destruction, for “the thought of anyone’s destruction pleased Moldies, for the more

gone, the fewer left to go, so Moldies said” (Tepper 388). It is an ideology which justifies the killing of others for the exaltation of a few.

On the other side of the religious coin in *Grass* is Old Catholicism, which, due to its association with the protagonist Marjorie, and because it is not as obvious a threat as Sanctity, instinctively makes the reader want to perceive it in a more favourable light. Yet, Marjorie’s Catholicism is shown to be just as controlling and restrictive as Sanctity, especially since it is “enslaved to an irrelevant past, misogynist, hidebound” (Roberts, Review n.pag.). The problem with Catholicism in the novel is that it is not able to change; it still perpetuates a way of life that is no longer applicable. Catholicism is one of the oldest European religions and its history can be traced back to the “first Pentecost (The Jewish Feast when the Holy Spirit descended upon 120 disciples of Jesus)” (O’Collins 1). The novel seems to suggest that it is an outdated religion – perhaps most notably by the fact that it is called *Old* Catholicism, implying that its teachings are no longer valid, that it has no place on Terra, the futuristic incarnation of Earth.

Part of the reason that Old Catholicism is considered to be outdated is that it still adheres to certain ritualistic behaviours. Catholicism has always been bound to its particular rituals, such as the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance or reconciliation of sinners, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony (O’Collins 40). These sacraments are “ritual action[s]” which “bless human beings with the saving life communicated through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit” (O’Collins 70). Rituals such as these have helped the Catholic Church to maintain “a tradition that [is] aimed at touching and blessing all dimensions of human life” (O’Collins 40). In spite of the fact that Old Catholicism has no real authority in the futuristic setting of *Grass*, and that it has clearly become outdated, it still maintains the appearance of power by giving weight to the ritual sacraments. Marjorie, for instance, is often given “penance after penance of obedience and submission” (Tepper 127) by Father Sandoval whenever she would rage against the fact that she could not be the wife and mother that is required of her. Eventually, Marjorie starts to feel so trapped between obedience and submission that “she could not ask for forgiveness any more” (Tepper 127). Seemingly, the once-comforting rituals have no real purpose in her life and are unable to give her the peace and freedom she longs for. It is this that Tepper critiques: the inability of religions to adapt to contemporary society, and to forego outdated view on issues such as gender in favour of a more egalitarian outlook.

It is part of Tepper’s view that it is necessary for religions to adapt to modern society, if they still want to retain their societal significance. The struggle of Old Catholicism to adapt is reflected in the

two family priests of the Yrarier family, Father James and Father Sandoval, and from the beginning of the novel, there is a clear distinction between the two. Of the two, Father Sandoval is the elder, and he is the one who clings to his (outdated) religious beliefs, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For instance, when confronted with the fact that the Hippae might be able to express “contempt ... [and] malice” (Tepper 243), Father Sandoval is the one that scoffs at this, for he “had always maintained the spiritual supremacy of man. He did not like discussion of other intelligence” (Tepper 243). Father Sandoval is limited by his inability to consider the possibility that there might be intelligent beings that are not human. This indicates the narrow-mindedness of his religion, which dictates that man is the supreme intellectual being, made in the image of God.

Father James, on the contrary, while also sceptical about the possible intellectual capacity of the Hippae, initially choosing to see them merely as “animal[s]” (Tepper 243), seems at the end of the novel to be more open to any sort of change and elects to stay on Grass, rather than go back to Terra with Father Sandoval. Though he “deeply regret[s] [that] [Father Sandoval] cannot see[his] point of view ... [His] conscience will not allow [him] to be swayed” (Tepper 527). For Father Sandoval, Father James’ “obedience” (Tepper 127) to an abstract set of rules is more important than obeying his conscience. It is significant that Obedience is considered to be more important than Conscience, and this signifies the difference between the two generations: the older generation is guided to do what is right by obeying an abstract set of rules, as defined by their religion, whereas the younger generation is guided to do what is right by a more internal, self-defined set of rules. This mirrors Marjorie’s realization that doing what duty required of her was not enough, she had to do what she felt was right, emphasising Tepper’s idea that people have to be free from the confines of religious ideologies.

2.3 “They will not think me a man unless I do”²⁶ – Masculinity Gained and Lost in Tepper’s *Grass*

In accordance with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory that masculinity, or manliness, is *relational* in the sense that it is “constructed in front of or for other men and against femininity in a kind of *fear* of the female, first in oneself” (53), masculinity in Tepper’s *Grass* is something that has to be achieved or proven to others, and especially to other men. The prevailing way of proving one’s masculinity in the novel is by demonstrating sporting prowess. Andrew Parker has pointed out that sport has traditionally been promoted as “a predominantly male concern” (127), and that it was especially in

²⁶ (Tepper 108)

the Victorian era that a commonsense cultural assumption emerged which “equat[ed] manliness with sporting prowess” (Parker 127), which has continued more or less until today. Messner, for instance, points out that modern sport was created “as an institution that affirms the categorical superiority of male bodies over female bodies, as well as men’s centrality in public life” (314). In the novel, the myth of what it means to be a man is tied up with physical prowess and it is a myth to which most of the men adhere. Part of the reason for men needing to have it validated by other men is that not being manly not only signifies a kind of deviance from societal expectations, but also causes men to be seen as a feminized version of themselves. Not being manly necessarily constitutes being feminine, for as Connell and Messerschmidt point out “[g]ender is always relational” (848) and according to Bourdieu, “the worst humiliation for a man is to be turned into a woman” (22): According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is a specific form of masculinity that, at any given time, is exalted above other forms of masculinity (38), while those who do not conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal are marginalized. On the planet Grass, hegemonic masculinity is embedded in the seasonal hunt, and participation becomes synonymous with masculinity. This section will examine the importance of the hunt as a synonym for masculinity by examining the character Rigo Yrarier, the husband of the protagonist, Marjorie Westriding, whose constant fear of being seen as not manly enough, causes him to take part in the hunt. This section will also look at the Green Brothers, a group of men, essentially missionaries for the ruling quasi-religious Sanctity on Grass: Within their ranks, sporting prowess, and therefore proving oneself worthy and masculine, becomes a kind of initiation rite that affirms not only membership of the Green Brothers, but also manliness. Whitehead and Barrett, paraphrasing Messner, point out that “sport provides a setting for men to powerfully bond, without, however, developing intimacy” (220), while not proving one’s masculinity through sport leads to a feminization of the masculine self, causing relegation to “the typically female category of ‘wimps’, ‘girlies’, ‘fairies’” (Bourdieu 52). The novel also explores how hegemonic masculinity intersects with class, for the masculine ideal that is held by those of a higher social standing is shown to be different from that of the lower class. The discrepancy between the two shows how tenuous the concept of a hegemonic masculinity is on Grass, but ultimately, the representation of masculinity in the novel shows that cultural definitions of masculinity are merely “destructive myths” (Barr 131).

2.3.1 “Death before dishonour”²⁷ – Masculinity and Cowardice

As part of the relational aspect of masculinity, certain acts of proving one’s masculinity often spring from “the fear of losing the respect or admiration of the group, or ‘losing face’” (Bourdieu 52). This is seen in *Grass* where Roderigo (Rigo) Yrarier, the husband of Marjorie Westriding is portrayed as being concerned with (re)affirming his masculinity, precisely because he is afraid of being perceived as not being manly enough. This is firstly, the reason for his affair with Eugenie le Fevre, and secondly, the reason that he competes in the Grassian hunt. For Rigo, these acts become a way for him to have his manliness validated by others, even as he himself doubts it. Rigo believes the reason he enters into multiple affairs with women, such as Eugenie le Fevre, is because of Marjorie’s perceived remoteness (Tepper 75). While jealously watching Marjorie dance with Sylvan bon Damfels, Rigo muses over Marjorie:

There was an expression on her face at certain times, an expression of unconscious joy which came from a part of her he had always coveted, a separate thing he never saw when he was with her. He had seen that being in the arena or the hunt ... winging on danger and delight, a bird soaring with a singing face. He wanted to hold that bird. He had wooed Marjorie and won Marjorie, but he had never gained possession of the thing he’d wanted. Seeking her soul, he had taken only her body, finding there a hollowness he had not expected, a vacant citadel he could storm again and again to no effect. (Tepper 185)

According to Bourdieu, the “sexual act is itself conceived in terms of the principle of male primacy ... [for it] is seen by men as a form of domination, appropriation, ‘possession’” (18, 20). Though Rigo had managed to possess Marjorie’s body, he had not been able to possess her being, had not been able to establish his supremacy over her through the sexual act. This leaves him with a feeling of inferiority, that he is somehow less of a man. This feeling is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that for Marjorie it is not enough to be just a wife and mother and that Marjorie has ambitions of her own, and therefore, in order to prove his manliness, perhaps more to himself than others, he embarks on multiple affairs. Marjorie herself notes that “if Roderigo hadn’t thought his wife remote, he wouldn’t have needed Eugenie” (Tepper 74). Eugenie is thus a necessary and useful tool, in a sense, for Rigo to prove his manliness.

Furthermore, in spite of the fact that he is the one who has been having successive affairs, he is constantly afraid that Marjorie is committing adultery. He even accuses her of having an affair with Brother Mainoa, one of the Green Brothers on Grass who is “short sighted and elderly, rotund and

²⁷ (Tepper 366)

half bald” (Tepper 302). Upon meeting Brother Mainoa, Rigo instantly becomes “aware that he has made himself ridiculous by his accusations” (Tepper 302). This is not an isolated case, for whenever Rigo accuses or merely suspects Marjorie of having an affair, he in effect makes a fool of himself by revealing his paranoia, and Marjorie reminds him that she had left the breaking of their marriage vows to him (Tepper 289). Ironically, perhaps, the more Marjorie does not embark on extra-marital affairs – and she has ample opportunity to do so – the more Rigo suspects her of having them.

Rigo is also compelled to prove his masculinity by competing in the Grassian hunt, which is a parody of traditional patriarchal hunting customs. The hunt is a central event in the novel, and it becomes synonymous with manliness, as is seen when Rigo first sees the Hippae, the Grassian equivalent of horses on which he is supposed to ride. Though he is appalled at the thought of having to ride one of the Hippae – they have blades protruding from their necks – he realises that the Bons, the aristocratic ruling class on Grass, will not consider him a man until he rides one of the beasts (Tepper 108). This is reaffirmed when one of the Bons, Gustave bon Smaerlok, accuses Rigo of not having the “courage” (Tepper 190) to participate in the hunt. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, courage and courageous acts become closely interlinked with masculinity because courageous acts spring from the need to have one’s masculinity validated by other men, because of the fear that one will not be seen as manly. “What is called ‘courage’ is thus often rooted in a kind of cowardice” (Bourdieu 52). Rigo, not wanting to be seen as un-manly, and consequently feminine, goes against the wishes of his wife, and hires a riding instructor to teach him the necessary skills to go on one of the Grassian hunts. Rigo’s need to prove himself manly enough, to be seen as ‘worthy’ by the bons, is also inspired by the fact that the Bons, a xenophobic group of people, automatically look down on Rigo, because he is a “*fragras*”, a foreigner, and this is “the ultimate [Grassian] insult” (Tepper 21). When he eventually goes on his first hunt, he is told that Gustave bon Smaerlok, his accuser, “hopes to find [Rigo] incapable ... [And that] [h]e would be gratified if [Rigo] proved unable” (Tepper 196), as this would no doubt not only re-affirm Gustave’s perception of foreigners, but also Rigo’s lack of masculinity, and this only further strengthens Rigo’s resolve. The importance that Rigo places on proving his masculinity to the Bons is in accordance with Bourdieu’s notion of masculinity being a relational construct.

On his first hunt, Rigo manages to perform admirably, though his success is slightly overshadowed by the fact that his daughter, Stella, had, unbeknownst to all, also been learning how to ride the Hippae and had secretly joined the hunt. Though Marjorie is appalled by this, Rigo sees it as

another way to raise his status. Rigo informs Marjorie that Stavenger bon Damfels, one of the Bons that Rigo had wanted to impress, had said that Stella had ridden “brilliantly” and that she should ride again (Tepper 311). The fact that Stavenger had declared that Stella had ridden ‘brilliantly’ is seen by Rigo as “an accolade” (Tepper 31). It is clear that from Rigo’s perspective it is not Stella who has received a great compliment, but rather it is he himself who has been complimented. Stella’s ability becomes a positive reflection on Rigo’s masculinity and he therefore encourages her to participate in the next hunt, even though Marjorie is against it.

However, it is during the second hunt that Stella disappears, taken by the Hippae for their own perverse needs and pleasures. Upon his return from the hunt, without Stella, Rigo does not go to Marjorie, and she knows that he is “too ashamed to do so, that he knows there [is] nothing he could ever say which would help at all” (Tepper 316). Rigo’s shame springs from the fact that it was essentially his selfish need to prove himself masculine enough that had led to his daughter’s disappearance. Later, when Stella is found, she has been changed by her experience. Marjorie accuses Rigo of excessive masculine pride, so that he had allowed his daughter “to be mentally and sexually crippled on Grass in order to show off [his] manliness to people who meant nothing to [him]” (Tepper 509). Stella’s disappearance acts as a way of punishing Rigo’s excessive masculine pride.

However, even right after her disappearance, Rigo is still more concerned with proving his manliness. After her disappearance is made known, he goes back to the bon Damfels’ estancia, “begging, pleading with them to help him find his daughter” (Tepper 325). The Bons refuse to help him, because it is customary on Grass not to do anything when someone disappears during a hunt; moreover, they accuse him of “undisciplined, un-Huntly behavior” and they suggest that he should go home and “mourn Stella in private and quit shouting about her” (Tepper 325-326). When Rigo thinks back on this, he flushes with embarrassment (Tepper 325); what is causing him shame is no doubt the accusation of being un-Huntly, and thus displaying un-manly behaviour. The fear of not being seen as manly, or not being accepted, is greater than the pain of losing his daughter.

There is another instance where pride spurs Rigo on to (re)affirm his masculinity to the Bons. After Marjorie goes to search for Stella, taking, among others, Sylvan bon Damfels with her, Rigo decides to still partake in the next hunt. When he arrives at the estancia, he finds that the Hippae are already there, though usually they only arrive after all the riders and hounds have assembled. When

Rigo sees the many pale faces looking up at him in aircar²⁸, he thinks of telling his aide, Sebastian Mechanic, to go back. However, he prevents himself from doing so, when he realizes that “that would seem [like] such arrant cowardice” (Tepper 366). For Rigo, death comes “before dishonour” (Tepper 366); Rigo would rather die than be seen as a coward.

At this hunt, Rigo is challenged, supposedly by Stavenger bon Damfels, to a Grassian kind of jousting duel, with the Hippae acting as both horses and lances, as punishment for Marjorie having ‘corrupted’ Sylvan. However, Rigo soon learns that the challenge had come from the Hippae, that it was they “who had arranged and directed this confrontation, they who had choreographed this movement of men and beasts” (Tepper 367). In spite of the obvious threat that the Hippae present, and even though his aides advise him to leave, Rigo chooses rather to compete in the duel. Rigo informs his aides that he “will not run ... Not from them, not from any of them” (Tepper 367). Running away is seen as cowardly and thus Rigo’s masculine pride overwhelms his common sense, causing him to fake courageousness rather than be seen as a coward. Rigo’s fear of losing face, of having his manliness questioned by the Bons, is so great that even as he advances toward the Hippae and sees “the impudence, the malice, [and] the arrogance in those eyes” (Tepper 367), even as he feels “a surge of panic” (Tepper 367), he still keeps on advancing, rather than retreating.

One of his aides, Persun Pollut, gives Rigo a laser knife, used for carving, in order to help him in the duel. Rigo decides to use the knife as a weapon once he realises that this challenge was meant to mock and humiliate him (Tepper 368). He uses the knife, a kind of laser switchblade²⁹, firstly to sever the barbs on the Hippae’s necks, because he realises that the Hippae “had no intention of hurting one another. The barbs were aimed at their riders’ legs” (Tepper 370); he secondly uses the knife to completely immobilize the Hippae, when he realises that the only way to stop the battle, would be by stopping the Hippae themselves (Tepper 371). The knife is a phallic symbol, having it imbues Rigo with a kind of superiority; Rigo proves his manliness by being ‘more’ manly. However, this has dire consequences, for Rigo not only causes the death of most of the Obermuns³⁰, but also a couple of Hippae in the process. The remaining Hippae, seeking to avenge the death of the other Hippae, launch a full scale attack not only on the Estancias, but also Commoner Town, which leads to the death of Eugenie le Fevre as well as countless others. Rigo’s need to prove his

²⁸ A kind of mechanical hot-air balloon, used to ferry Grassians between Commoner Town and the estancias, as well as between the estancias.

²⁹ From its description, it seems to resemble a smaller version of the lightsaber which was made popular in the *Star Wars* franchise.

³⁰ The male head of a bon family.

masculinity, or to have it validated by the Bons, is shown to be destructive – a thoroughgoing critique of the prevailing myth about masculinity on Grass.

2.3.2 Climbers, Peepers, and Deaders – Masculinity, Violence and Belonging

As has been seen in the previous section, masculinity is intrinsically linked to acts of courage which are motivated by a need to be recognized as a man by other men. This is in part also motivated by a need to be a part of the group, to be seen as one *them*, so that acts of courage are not only a way of testing manliness, but also serve as initiation rites, acts that lead to a person becoming manly. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out, masculinity is “something that has to be acquired, achieved, initiated into – a process involving painful or even mutilating rituals” (71). In Tepper’s *Grass* masculinity is also represented as something that has to be acquired or proven in order to belong to a group; not being able to perform in a manly way, not being able to acquire membership of the hegemonic group, necessarily leads to the marginalization of the un-manly ones. However, once a distinction between manly and unmanly men is established, it is also necessary to maintain this distinction. The novel explores the importance of belonging to a hegemonic masculine group, as well as how the hegemonic masculine group maintains its supremacy, through the representation of the Green Brothers.

The Green Brothers is the name of a group of male missionaries for Sanctity, stationed on Grass, under the pretext of being archaeologists. The xenophobic Bons have allowed the Green Brothers to live on Grass, as long as they continue “mak[ing] mud pies with their little shovels up there in the north” (Tepper 20) and not do any kind of actual missionary work. Over the years, the Brothers had become “[d]emented with boredom” (Tepper 203) and had started erecting towers, “grass-stalk steeples” (Tepper 203). Between the towers, slender rope bridges were built, connecting them and upon these platforms, the Brothers watched the immense Grassian plains. Climbing these towers became a way to escape the monotony of their lives, and consequently

[o]ver the decades the towers had been climbed by amateurs, then by enthusiasts, and finally by experts who had invented a cult with its own hierarchs and acolytes, its own rituals of baptism and burial, its own secrets shared among its own adherents. Each new acolyte was tested within days of his arrival to know whether he would be one of the climbers or not. (Tepper 204)

Climbing these phallic towers is equated with the hegemonic masculine ideal among the Green Brothers; being able to climb, and thus conquer the phallus, leads to the affirmation of one’s ability to conform to the masculine ideal, which in turn leads to membership of the hegemonic group.

Those who cannot become subordinated and marginalized within the ranks of the Green Brothers, where there are essentially three categories of classification: climbers, peepers, and deaders. Placement into these categories is determined during the initiation test, which requires the new acolytes to climb from one tower to another tower “and get down without begin caught” (Tepper 213). Those who are successful are classified as “climbers”, who are the hegemonic group among the Green Brothers. By successfully proving their climbing skills, these new acolytes not only conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal, but also instantly become a part of the group. Rillibee Chime, a new acolyte and future suitor of Rigo Yrarier’s and Marjorie Westriding’s daughter, Stella, upon completing the test successfully, is surrounded by half a dozen young Brothers who rub his head and congratulate him on doing “a good job of losing them ... He bec[o]me[s] one of them in that instant” (Tepper 220). Rillibee’s success automatically and immediately grants him an “easy friendship” (Tepper 220) with the rest of the climbers; conforming to the masculine ideal becomes a way to belong to the hegemonic group. Belonging to the group also constitutes attaining a new, masculine identity, for the climbers are all given names, such as Ropeknots, Highbones, and Topclinger, once they have passed the test. Rillibee Chime, for instance, is called Wily Climb, because he had “climbed better than any other peeper of their generation” (Tepper 220). The younger Brothers, both those who are climbers and those who are not, all call each other by their climber names. These names are a signifier of belonging to the hegemonic group, and are also a way of excluding those who are not part of the group.

The climbers differ from the peepers, the second category of classification for the Green Brothers. The peepers refer to two groups of Brothers, the undifferentiated ones, namely the new acolytes who have not yet been tested, and, the larger group, those who failed the test by getting caught by a climber or an elder Brother. On Grass, a peeper is the larva state of the hounds, which has no state of consciousness and serves as food for the foxen. It is thus appropriate that the climbers consider the peepers to be “the lowest possible form of life” (Tepper 210). Among the Green Brothers, the word ‘peeper’ serves as an insult (Tepper 209), as it indicates an inability to conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal. By being called peepers these brothers are completely emasculated, especially since the actual peepers are tube-like, helpless worms. Likening them to flaccid phallic symbols renders the peeper-Brothers unmanly, they are ostracized from the society of the Brothers, and their lives are “sheer misery, nothing but misery, nothing anyone would choose for himself” (Tepper 210). The peepers serve as a warning among the Green Brothers of what happens when one does not conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal.

However, striving to conform to the masculine ideal also has negative consequences, as can be seen by the third category, the deaders. The deaders are literally, as the name implies, those Brothers who do not manage to pass the test at all, because they have died in the process, either by accidentally falling down, or by being pushed from the towers. The deaders transcend the initiation test, in the sense that any climber or peeper who dies on the towers is relegated to the deader category. The deaders serve as a warning against pursuing an unattainable masculine ideal, by showing that the ultimate price to pay for this quest is death.

The hierarchy among the acolytes remains relatively stable, partially because the climbers maintain their supremacy through violence and intimidation. The peepers, for example, “get hung from the towers by their feet. [They] get knocked about by this one and that one” (Tepper 210). According to Connell, “violence is a part of the system of domination ... [for] members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance” (83, 84). Violence and intimidation, in this case, become inscribed within masculinity, for it is those who according to the hegemonic masculine ideal are seen as ‘more’ masculine who act violently towards the supposedly ‘less’ masculine men. Violence becomes a means to relegate the peepers to a position at the bottom of the male hierarchy among the acolytes of the Green Brothers, and thus re-affirm the supremacy of the climbers and the masculine ideal.

However, it is not all the climbers who condone the use of violence; rather, it is a select group of climbers, under the leadership of one Highbones, who uphold the violent tradition. Highbones, or Brother Flumzee as he is actually called, and his group of followers do not mind resorting to murder in order to maintain their position at the top of the male hierarchy of the Green Brothers. For instance, during Rillibee Chime’s test climb, Highbones bets Topclinger, another climber, that Rillibee will fail; however, when it appears that Rillibee will not fail, Highbones kills Topclinger rather than ‘losing face’ with the other climbers by having to respect the wager and having to admit defeat. Ironically, perhaps, Highbones is still “made a fool of” (Tepper 224), precisely because Rillibee had been able to confound Highbones, an ability which grants Rillibee status among the other climbers, who all “dislike” Highbones (Tepper 220). Highbones, however, does not consider what he did to Topclinger to be murder, for he feels that “[k]nocking someone off a tower or kicking them off ... d[oes]n’t seem like murder. It seem[s] more like a game” (Tepper 390). For Highbones, the pursuit of masculinity is nothing more than a game, and murder seems to be an acceptable part of it. When Highbones and his group are asked to kill Marjorie Westriding, Brother Mainoa and Rillibee Chime, they are “enthusiastic” (Tepper 390) about the prospect of killing

someone “directly ... with their hands” (Tepper 390). In the pursuit of attaining and maintaining the hegemonic masculine ideal, these men have become dangerous to society: In this way, Tepper indicates how myths about masculinity can be destructive.

2.3.3. “Useless as a third leg on a goose”³¹ – Masculinity and Class

Marginalization, according to Connell, is “the relation between the masculinities in dominant and subordinate classes or ethnic groups. Marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (80-81). In Tepper’s *Grass* the subordinate group, the so-called Commoners, those who are not Bons, have many masculinities; these are all marginalized in relation to the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group, the Bons, which is equated with participation in the Hunt. Yet, the hegemonic masculine ideal of the Bons is ultimately shown to be a destructive myth. This intersection between class and masculinity in the novel, is seen particularly in relation to one character, Sylvan bon Damfels.

On the planet Grass there is a clear class distinction between the aristocratic Bons and the Commoners, and because the Bons are “full of pretensions about [their noble blood]” (Tepper 112), they uphold the strict division between the classes. For instance, if a child results from a liaison between a Bon and a Commoner, “such a person would not live on an estancia except in a service capacity ... one without the ‘bon’ would not Hunt” (Tepper 72). Since the Hunt is equated with masculinity, not being able to participate in the Hunt would mean that one is not able to conform to the masculine ideal; a man might be marginalized by default as a result of his birth. However, as it eventually transpires, the hegemonic masculinity of the Bons is not in fact the hegemonic masculinity of Grass. The Bons assume the dominance of their masculinity because it is the masculinity of the dominant class; however, as Connell points out hegemonic masculinity is not always tied to “the most powerful people” (77).

One of the Bons who conforms to their masculine ideal is Sylvan bon Damfels, son of Stavenger and Rowena bon Damfels. At the beginning of the novel, Sylvan considers his dominant status in society as a natural, given thing: not only is he a Bon, which automatically elevates him to a higher social standing, but he also conforms to the hegemonic masculine ideal of the Bons because of his participation in the Hunt. However, Sylvan’s belief in his superiority and manliness is questioned when he meets Marjorie Westriding, with whom he professes to fall in love, and when his attempts at wooing Marjorie are unsuccessful. Sylvan is unable to understand this, for he had “never had

³¹ (Tepper 417)

trouble with any woman [he has] ever wanted [before]” (Tepper 457); his lack of success with Marjorie makes him feel like a “real fool” (Tepper 457). Not being able to seduce Marjorie makes him feel less masculine, especially since, culturally, sexual prowess – in this instance, attaining Marjorie – is correlated with masculinity. Bourdieu points out that

[m]anliness, virility, in its ethical aspect, i.e. as the essence of the *vir*, *virtus*, the point of honour ... the principle of conservation and increase of honour, remains indissociable, tacitly at least, from physical virility, in particular through the attestations of sexual potency ... which are expected of a ‘real’ man. (12)

Marjorie’s continuous rejection of Sylvan’s advances diminishes his masculinity, not least because she views him as “a boy” (Tepper 458). Marjorie also makes him question his supposed dominance, when he realizes that she might be looking down on him and that he had nothing “to offer her” (Tepper 418). This realization makes him feel “sick embarrassment” (Tepper 418).

Sylvan’s belief in his masculine superiority is further brought in to question when he finds himself in Common Town after he and the rest of Marjorie’s group find Stella and return with her. While Sylvan is among the Commoners³², he notices that

people were far more intelligent and far more affluent than he would have thought. They had things even the estancias didn’t have. Foods. Machines. More comfortable living arrangements. It made him feel insecure and foolish. Despite all his fury at [his father] Stavenger and the other members of the Obermun class, still he had accepted that the bons were superior to the commoners. Now he wondered if they really were – or if the bons were even equal to the commoners. (Tepper 418)

Sylvan, who had always accepted his dominant position in society, now finds himself marginalized, for the commoners consider a Bon in Commons to be as “[u]seless as a third leg on a goose” (Tepper 414). His feelings of inferiority are exacerbated by the fact that he is unable to help the Commoners plan their defence against the imminent attack by the Hippae, as well as the fact that “every one of them [knows] more than he [does]” (Tepper 419). Masculinity among the Commoner men is equated with having skills, being knowledgeable; for instance, Persun Pollut is considered to be “a great artist” (Tepper 533) among the Commoners. He makes carvings on wood panels; his masculinity is defined by the artistic skill of his hands. Other Commoner men study “things that ha[ve] nothing to do with their daily lives” (Tepper 419), as obtaining and furthering one’s knowledge is seen as a worthy, masculine pursuit. Looking at himself from their perspective,

³² The name originated no doubt from the bons who viewed those not of noble blood – such as themselves – to be common.

Sylvan realises that words such as “‘Parochial.’ ‘Provincial.’ ‘Narrow.’” (Tepper 419) were all accurate in describing him. The hegemonic masculine ideal of the Bons, which emphasises physical prowess, is thus destabilized and Sylvan’s definition of manliness is shown to be an unworthy construct.

The way in which his manliness becomes diminished – firstly because of Marjorie’s rejection and, secondly, because his definition of manliness is contested by the Commoners – leads to a visible change in Sylvan. At the beginning of the novel, Sylvan “spoke his mind even when it was unpopular – some said *because* it was unpopular” (Tepper 13); however, towards the end of the novel, Sylvan is muted, as his lack of useful information for the Commoners makes it unnecessary for him to speak, and in contrast to the beginning of the novel where he would voice his opinions even if he was not asked to do so, he now remains quiet. His silence indicates his awareness of the lack of dominance of his masculinity, for he has realized that the Bons’ definition of masculine behaviour is not the only one. It also indicates how the Bons’ sense importance is self-constructed and without value.

The novel shows how class and masculinity intersect, for the definition of what it means to be a man differs across different classes. There is no mobility between the classes, for although Sylvan realises that the hegemonic masculine ideal of the Bons is but one form of masculinity and not *the* definition of masculinity, and although he helps the Commoners, not only by eventually providing them with valuable information, but also by riding out against the Hippae, he cannot become one of them in life. It is only in death that Sylvan becomes “what he could not manage in life: one with the Commons” (Tepper 520). His death, caused by the Hippae, serves as a warning against strictly adhering to a hegemonic masculine ideal, without taking into account that other, equally legitimate, hegemonic masculinities exist.

2.3.4 “You unholy monster”³³ – Masculinity as Self-Destructive Myth

Whitehead and Barrett point out that traditional masculine behaviours, such as aggression, dominance and emotional repression, are “increasingly seen as (self)-destructive, if not derisible” (6). In Tepper’s *Grass*, the “Grassian master narratives about the importance of hunting (or manhood) are [revealed to be] destructive myths” (Barr 131), as this has been seen in the previous sections: Rigo Yrarier’s obsession with proving his masculinity not only destroys his marriage, but it also leads to countless deaths, including that of his mistress, Eugenie Le Fevre, and the maiming

³³ (Tepper 327)

of his daughter, Stella; the Green Brothers' pursuit of their hegemonic masculine ideal is also shown to be a potentially destructive one; and Sylvan bon Damfels' inability to consider alternative masculinities leads to his death. However, the character that best depicts the self-destructive nature of overtly masculine pursuits and behaviours is Sylvan's father, Stavenger bon Damfels.

Stavenger is depicted as the ultimate traditional patriarch, for he is the Obermun, the head, of the bon Damfels estate, who upholds a strict patriarchal gender hierarchy, whereby the women in his family are all seen as inferior to him and other men, and he assumes the authority to impose his will on them; for instance, he forces his wife, Rowena, to have seven children, even though she only wanted "one or two" (Tepper 17). Forcing Rowena to have so many children is not only a way in which he asserts his authority, but it is also an affirmation of his masculinity, of his virility, for as Pierre Bourdieu points out, traditional manliness is indistinguishable from physical virility, especially "attestations of sexual potency" (12), such as fathering many children, and especially male children.

Stavenger is also clearly used to considering women as inferior to men and not having his authority questioned, as can be seen when Marjorie verbally attacks him after Stella goes missing. Marjorie calls him "unholy monster", "despoiler of children" and "barbarian" (Tepper 327, 328) for allowing such things to happen to young girls. Stavenger is "more surprised by her attack than he would have been by any other tactic. He [is] not accustomed to either defiance or reproach" (Tepper 327-328). Stavenger also resorts to violence in order to maintain his masculine authority on the Estancia; for instance, when he learns that his wife, Rowena, had gone to talk to Marjorie after the miraculous re-appearance of Janette bon Maukerden – one of the girls who had disappeared just as Rowena's daughter, Dimity, had – Stavenger, who considers all foreigners and foreign things to be "incomprehensible and contemptible" (Tepper 10), becomes so angry that he hits Rowena and locks her in a room without food or water. His anger at her defiance renders him almost inhuman:

[Stavenger] seemed not to hear her, not to care whether she spoke. His eyes were red and his mouth was drawn into a lipless line. He moved like an automaton, one leg lurched forward, then the other drawn up to it, heaving at her with both hands as though he lifted a heavy sack. (Tepper 259)

One of his daughters, Emmy, describes him as being "like one of the Hippae, all shining and sharp blades so you can't come hear him" (Tepper 261).

Stavenger also asserts his masculinity by participating in the Hunt; however, as the Hunt is used by the Hippae to enslave the Bons, Stavenger becomes metaphorically enslaved to performing

masculine deeds. His continuous participation in the Hunt eventually leads to his destruction, and just before his death, Stavenger is as “empty as a hatched egg, only the shell which had once housed him [remains]” (Tepper 368). His excessive masculine behaviour leads to his losing all humanity, and death. During the jousting duel the Hippae arrange between Stavenger and Rigo Yrarier, both Stavenger’s feet are severed by the Hippae; yet, Stavenger still has “no expression on his face” (Tepper 370). After the duel, Figor bon Damfels, Stavenger’s brother, “unbuckled the strap that held the boots high and drew them off. Stavenger’s feet came with him ... [The boots] had filled with blood and overflowed. Stavenger had bled to death, without moving” (Tepper 372). Stavenger’s death, as well as the fate that befall the other male characters, indicates Tepper’s critique of excessive masculine behaviour, for it indicates how the dominance of hegemonic masculinity is ultimately merely a destructive myth. By demonstrating how masculine ideals have negative and destructive consequences, Tepper destabilizes normative notions about the dominance of masculinity over femininity, as well as destabilizing the essentialized nature of patriarchy.

Grass highlights Tepper’s views on the complex connection between various ideologies: the ideological construction of masculinity as the dominant gender gives men, as a rather generalised, homogenous group, the authority to legitimate and propagate certain ideologies, religions and traditions; these are in favour of men and often to the detriment of women. These ideologies, religions and traditions are further used to legitimate the inferior position of women in society. Tepper’s specific critique seems to be against the way in which women are seemingly robbed of agency in motherhood by men, not only by constructing motherhood as an essentialized, naturalized and inescapable fact of womanhood, but also by not allowing women any choice in the matter. It is the way in which these – in Tepper’s view – outdated ideologies remain interlinked that serves as the basis and reason for Tepper’s critique of contemporary society.

Chapter Three: Unhappy Mothers, Alien Saviours and Violent Men: an analysis of Tepper's

The Fresco

The Fresco is often considered to be Tepper's "most accessible novel to date" (DuMond n.pag.); however, in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, it is not often held in high esteem. This is due to its "flaw[s]" (Shoul n.pag.): it has an overly simplistic plot, repetitive themes and a very obvious underlying message. I feel, however, that these critiques against the novel overlook a basic problem: the *necessity* for repetition – that in the time between the publication of *Grass* and *The Fresco* the issues that Tepper feels strongly about have still not been, for lack of another word, solved. As such, the novel deals with the same issues as *Grass* – the ideological construction and experience of motherhood, the influence of religion, as well as the construction and influence of masculinity – but in a much more humorous, angry and desperate tone. Tepper's dim view of humanity is mirrored in her overly simplistic solution for humanity's problems, in the form of the fairy-godmother-like alien race, the Pistach. The absurdity of this solution is no doubt meant to highlight how imperative it is that humanity start solving its own problems.

Moreover, whereas *Grass* is set in an indeterminable future, *The Fresco* is more contemporary: "it's a barely disguised echo of the last days of Clinton's America" (Shoul n.pag.); thus making the critique all the more relevant. Through the analysis of *The Fresco*, I thus hope to show just how Tepper highlights the same issues, but more importantly, that it is the necessity for reiteration of the same themes that is problematic.

3.1 Benita the Housewife and Chiddy the Alien: Voices of Tepper's Feminist Reasoning

The Fresco is perhaps one of Sheri Tepper's more personal novels, in the sense that it is often difficult to distinguish between the voices of Tepper and the novel's protagonist, Benita Alvarez-Shipton, for Benita seems to be nothing more than a convenient mouthpiece through which Tepper voices her own concerns about a range of feminist issues. For instance, the novel deals with the issue of abortion, and although this is done in a slightly humorous manner, there is nevertheless a genuine undercurrent of anger directed at male discourses on abortion. This critique is situated within one of the larger focus areas of the novel: motherhood and reproduction. As with most of her novels, *The Fresco* encourages a more considered approach to reproduction, emphasising the importance of being able to make informed decisions about reproduction and motherhood, and actively encouraging family planning. Although *The Fresco* is far less subtle about this underlying message - "it rings out, loud and clear" (Shoul n.pag.) - than in other novels, and Tepper's distinctive "finger-wagging style" - the sense of being on the receiving end of a sermon - is most

prevalent here; at times, it feels as though in an attempt to convince her readers, Tepper purposefully exaggerates this style, and in so doing, she self-reflexively acknowledges this style. This no doubt stems from Tepper's personal views on the subject, which are influenced by her involvement with Planned Parenthood, an organization which promotes "a commonsense approach to women's health and well-being, based on respect for each individual's right to make informed, independent decisions about health, sex and family planning" ("Planned Parenthood" n.pag.). Tepper herself, in 1970, actively advocated the greater availability of contraceptives in rural areas of America, for it is those "who do need family planning [who] often live in areas which are remote, hard to reach, hard even to locate" (Tepper, "Family" 30). Though it is more than likely that, especially in America, contraceptives and information about family planning are more available today than they were in the 1970s, there are still some countries – especially third world countries – in which women have no way of protecting themselves from unplanned pregnancies or any one of the numerous sexually transmitted diseases. In this way, Tepper's concerns, voiced in 1970, retain their relevance in 2000, the year in which *The Fresco* was first published.

This section will therefore largely examine Tepper's portrayal of motherhood as cultural and personal experience, through the depiction of six female characters: the aforementioned Benita, her daughter, Angelica, Guadalupe Roybal, Janet Morse, Merilu Riley and the Inkleozese, another alien race. I will also examine Tepper's satirical, and rather humorous, critique of discourses on abortion and legislation about reproduction. This section will also focus on those issues that Tepper highlights through the Pistach, a benevolent alien race bent on bettering Earth. In their capacity as outsiders, they manage to highlight certain inherent problems around gender relations on Earth which are mostly due to certain religious ideologies and cultural assumptions about reproduction.

3.1.1 Aliens, Mothers and Exotic Others: Representing the (M)other

The depiction of *The Fresco*'s female characters flirts with stereotypes, creating a potential binary between two stereotypical representations of women, but ultimately abandons them. The novel explores these representations in relation to motherhood, as cultural and personal experience, not only to show that these stereotypes are superfluous, but also to encourage a space for women to form identities free from the expectations carried by specific cultures, religions and traditions. The novel specifically focuses on, and subverts, Latin-American female stereotypes: the main character, Benita Alvarez-Shipton, seems to represent abused, marginalized women in North America, who are trapped by poverty and motherhood. She is placed in opposition to Guadalupe Roybal, the wife of one of Benita's adversaries, who, because of her relative freedom and wealth, functions as

Benita's exotic other. Another potential binary is between Janet Morse and Merilu Riley, both of whom approach and experience motherhood in different ways. The other female characters of importance are Angelica Shipton, Benita's daughter, and the Inkleozese, another alien race. These latter characters present an alternative way of living for women, for they manage to transcend the stereotypes of femininity.

The protagonist in *The Fresco*, Benita Alvarez-Shipton, has a dual nature. On the one hand, she is portrayed in a stereotypical manner, as a slightly meek Hispanic woman, who is abused and oppressed by her husband. On the other hand, she subverts stereotypical gender roles and cultural norms by subtly defying her husband, and in spite of her meek exterior, is able to voice strong opinions on a variety of subjects. Benita is eventually able to fully embrace her stronger side, and in so doing, break free from her husband's oppression.

At the beginning of the novel, Benita is portrayed as a weak woman who bears the brunt of her husband's alcoholic rages with a kind of passive acceptance - the stereotypical victim of domestic violence. According to Connell, in most cases women who are "physically able to look after themselves ... have accepted the abusers' definitions of themselves as incompetent and helpless" (83). Although Benita wants "to get away from home" (Tepper, *Fresco*³⁴ 8) and away from her husband, she is never able to do so. She continually delays leaving him: she knows that "she would leave Bert [her husband] eventually, the time just hadn't come yet" (Tepper 19). For Benita, it is easier to accept her lot than to change it. This is due to a culturally induced sense of obligation – that it is part of her duty as a wife to look after Bert, especially as she is the sole provider of income for the family. Her husband, "a man of minor talents and major resentments" (Tepper 12), expects money, yet "prefers not to work" (Tepper 14). Whenever Bert does manage to obtain money – whether by borrowing it from friends or from his mother – it is spent on alcohol. Consequently, Benita is forced to live off the financial contribution of her mother and Bert's mother. Benita's mother eventually encourages her to go out and work herself, and after she starts working, she became "so busy [that] she had never had time to think" (Tepper 14). Benita reverses stereotypical patriarchal gender roles by becoming the breadwinner, but at the same time she still has to take care of her children and her household. Benita thus straddles the line between being a completely oppressed figure and a woman who subverts gender norms.

It is the fact that Benita is forever straddling the line between two extremes that causes her dual

³⁴ For the remainder of this chapter, it should be understood that all references to Tepper come from *The Fresco*, unless otherwise stated.

nature. For, although she is the breadwinner whose hard work allows both of her children to obtain a tertiary education, Benita is never actively able to take charge of her own life. She seems to be at the mercy of others who make decisions about her life for her, and although not all of these decisions have a negative consequence, some of them do. For instance, it is her father who forces her into marriage after she falls pregnant at the age of seventeen, for he wants her to be “married before the baby [is] born, or else” (Tepper 18). Her mother, however, had been against Benita’s getting married, because she realized that “Bert wouldn’t be a good husband” (Tepper 13) and that she did not have to get married to look after the baby, since they could “take care of it in the family” (Tepper 13). Benita is nevertheless forced into marriage not only as a negative consequence of her body’s reproductive capability, but also because her religion and culture demand it. Having a child out of wedlock – though being a common occurrence – brings shame not only to Benita, but also to her entire family. Benita’s fate is thus chosen for her to maintain her father’s pride and the family’s honour. Motherhood, it seems, is acceptable as long as it falls within the socially defined parameter of marriage: mothers who give birth within the confines of marriage are celebrated, revered even; those who do so out of wedlock, are cast aside. These views on motherhood are constructed by an ideology that perpetuates the idea that women have to be married before becoming mothers, as the woman is only then “subordinated to a husband” (De Beauvoir 541). It is significant that it is Benita’s father who adheres to this ideology and her mother who does not. The way in which Benita’s mother and father go against each other is repeated throughout the novel: women are portrayed as sensible advice-givers who are ignored by men, who choose to act according to pride and outdated gender norms.

Benita’s husband, Bert, is portrayed as a stereotypical male patriarchal subject and is “big on the worthlessness of women” (Tepper 17); he therefore asserts his masculinity by physically abusing Benita, and becoming “the predator she fear[s] most” (Tepper 5). Bert’s level of abuse is directly proportional to the amount that he drinks. Benita’s mother observes that “Alberto treats [her] like a servant when he is not drunk ... when he is drunk, he treats [her] like a slave” (Tepper 60). Possibly as a result of this dichotomy, Benita distinguishes between the “work Benita [who] is decisive, crisp, intelligent [and] capable” (Tepper 18) and the “home Benita [who] is tentative, common, an ignorant woman who used a small vocabulary and bad grammar” (Tepper 18) and who is always afraid of doing the wrong thing. At home she exists as “a sort of wife-mother sponge to soak up Bert’s rages and [her son] Carlos’s sulks” (Tepper 19). It becomes clear that the home is the site of Benita’s oppression, especially since her son, Carlos, is an exact copy of his father.

Benita's duality is also indicated by her surname. At the beginning of the novel, she is referred to as Benita Alvarez-Shipton. The fact that she uses both her maiden name and her husband's surname indicates the way in which she is both separate from, and tied to, her husband. Further on in the novel, when she is able to escape completely from her husband's oppression, she renames herself Benita Alvarez, and in so doing, reclaims her own self. Her discarding her husband's surname and claiming her maiden name back indicates how she has literally separated herself from her husband and from her weaker self. She does this with the help of the Pistach, the alien diplomats who visit Earth to determine its Neighbourliness, who help her not only by giving her the money she needs to start a life somewhere else, but also by taking away all the insecurities which have, hitherto, hindered her attempts at freeing herself. Benita is plagued with "continual doubts" (Tepper 4), especially about herself and her own abilities, and the aliens rid her of all these doubts by performing a "welcome reversal" (Tepper 24), a favour of some kind as a way to thank her for her willingness to be the intermediary between them and the people of Earth. This is something that the Pistach always perform when visiting new planets and establishing an intermediary. As Benita's welcome reversal they "banish her ghosts" (Tepper 24), making her mind increasingly "clearer" (Tepper 23), allowing her to make decisions and act more assertively. Instead of dissolving "into sludge, tears and whines, [and] attempt[ing] to dissuade [Bert]" (Tepper 21) when he wants to go for a drive – in spite of being both drunk and under the influence – she merely lets him be and calmly watches him go. It is at this moment that Benita starts letting go of her obligation to look after Bert.

Before the aliens' arrival, Benita's only source of encouragement is from her mother, who urges her to seek employment, and who, although Benita is "not qualified for anything" (Tepper 14), helps her to find a job. And it is her mother who encourages Benita not to give up, by constantly giving her advice, such as "*Hombres son duro, pero mujeres son durable*" [Men are tough, but women are durable] (Tepper 14). It is also her mother who encourages her to start a "secret bank account" (Tepper 14), meant solely for the purpose of supporting her children's tertiary education. It is her mother's opinion that "the mistake [Benita] made must stop with [her] ... [Her] children must go to school [and] to college" (Tepper 14), and therefore she starts encouraging Benita's children, Carlos and Angelica, to go to school. Without her mother's encouragement and forceful nature, Benita would have become a stereotypical "underpaid minority working mother with an alcoholic husband" (Tepper 95). The importance of the mother-daughter bond indicates the unifying aspect of motherhood, the way in which motherhood is a way for women "to renew their ties to their mothers" (Irigaray 99). Benita's mother is so important to her that, even after her mother's death,

Benita still imagines the advice her mother would have given her. While debating whether to take the Pistach's offer, she turns to her mother's litany: "Help yourself, Benita. You can if you will. Think for yourself, Benita. Make a life for yourself. Take a deep breath and figure out what needs to be done" (Tepper 19). The influence that her mother has, even after her death, is reflected in Benita's own relationship with her daughter, Angelica.

Angelica is Benita's second child, and as her name implies, she is shown to be the angel-child. Unlike her brother, Carlos, who is an exact copy of their father, Angelica represents the stronger side of Benita and, from the beginning of the novel, Angelica and Carlos are pitted against each other. Angelica is portrayed as the hard-working child who wants to go to college, and Carlos wants to become an artist without actually doing anything. Like his father, Carlos does not want "a steady job. He prefer[s] to sleep until noon, to take long showers, eat like a lion and to go out with his friends most nights" (Tepper 16). Benita, though having started the savings account for her children, waits for Carlos to make the decision to further his education, for her mother had advised Benita not to tell "him about the secret bank account, not until he, himself, was committed to going on" (Tepper 16). When Carlos eventually finds out about the bank account – Angelica accidentally tells him – he demands that he get half of it to start the gallery he and his father had been planning to do. Benita finds herself resenting her son, "hating his tone, his resentments, his pomposity ... the way he resent[s] anything she d[oes] for Angelica" (Tepper 17). Carlos's way of just wanting everything causes Benita to stop caring for him, and when she goes "inside herself looking for the love she'd always felt for both her children ... [she] wasn't able to find it for her son. He had done something to it, or she had, or it had dried up, all on its own" (Tepper 17). Carlos has thus pushed Benita beyond the limits of her motherly love.

Angelica, on the other hand, is always the angelic child, graduating from high school "not only with her diploma but also a letter from a California university granting her a scholarship" (Tepper 16). Angelica not only works "as a classroom assistant" (Tepper 105), but also puts in "a supper shift in the kitchen at the Union" (Tepper 105), while still studying. She becomes an image of what Benita would have been had she not become pregnant at seventeen. And unlike her mother, Angelica is able to stand up to Carlos and to evict him from the flat they share. Carlos's attitude towards sharing a flat with Angelica is very patriarchal, and although she does clean up behind him, it is not done without growing feelings of resentment. Carlos's hold on her is one that she will not allow to continue for as long as her father's hold continued on her mother: the faults of one generation are not given the chance to be repeated in the next. The way in which Carlos and Angelica are

juxtaposed against each other is slightly problematic, though, implying a simplistic binary division between men and women, one which occurs throughout the novel and is not only represented in Benita and Bert's marriage, and in the marriage of Benita's mother and father, but also in a more general way, as women are portrayed as being better men, and men are portrayed as the antagonists of women. However, this seems to have been done deliberately by Tepper, in order to explore femininity in all its facets against the foil of traditional, stereotypical, patriarchal masculinity³⁵.

Through Benita, Tepper is able to show that although motherhood is from a societal perspective central to women's definition of themselves, they need to develop identities outside those of wife and mother. Once Benita's children are out of the house, Benita is slowly but surely able to take better control of her life. She decides it is "time to make another plan" (Tepper 19), which is aimed at helping her improve herself and to rise above her situation. Part of this plan is to join a women's support group, to start doing exercise, to stay longer at work (and thus being less at home), and to put money away "for her own use this time" (Tepper 19). She also decides to educate herself further, but taking "adult, educational literature courses" and "computer courses" (Tepper 12), which are mostly aimed at improving her skills as a shop assistant in the book store where she works, called *The Written Word*. These courses, as well as other correspondence courses, books, the Internet and various television channels, allow her to soak up "a good bit of education, maybe even a hint of culture" (Tepper 12). For Benita, like her mother, education is the key to bettering oneself. Through this, Benita is able to rise above the cultural definition of motherhood as a women's inevitable, and only, destiny, and in so doing, she attacks the myth of motherhood as the only source of happiness and fulfilment for women and "which denies women a range of possibilities" (Rowbotham 82).

Benita's rise to independence and power is not met without resistance, however. When it is made known that Benita has been chosen to act as the intermediary between the alien Pistach and the population of Earth, it is criticized by many in power. Benita finds herself becoming "angry" (Tepper 95) when she is asked, by everyone from congressmen to generals, "even the president" (Tepper 95), why the Pistach chose her: "Why shouldn't they have chosen her!" (Tepper 95). Benita feels that she was chosen because the Pistach "wanted an ordinary person, with ordinary concerns and ordinary problems" (Tepper 95) and she, as a "thus-far underpaid minority working mother with an alcoholic husband" (Tepper 95), is as ordinary as can be found. However, Benita's status as an ordinary woman is made difficult because she effectively speaks from the position of two

³⁵ The simplistic depiction of masculinity will be explored further in a later section of this chapter.

marginalized subjects: a woman from a minority ethnic group in the United States of America, and an abused woman. However, this gives her more authority to speak about issues pertaining to marginalized people and it is because she is a marginalized figure that she is chosen by the Pistach, for they feel that “women may have a viewpoint that ... males may not have” (Tepper 77). Yet, as soon as it becomes publicly known that Benita is the intermediary she is no longer on the periphery of society, as she is now pushed onto the centre stage of world dealings, able to voice concerns to people in power, on behalf of those who cannot. At the same time, however, she still remains marginalized, as the direct link she has with the aliens makes her different from anybody else. At the end of the novel, Benita is employed as the Confederation link, which entails “making important export regulations, interspecies employment agreements, [and] passport restrictions” (Tepper 401). She is still somewhat of an outsider – especially, since as part of her job description she has to “align” herself with one of the aliens in a kind of inter-species marriage – yet, she has more authority than before.

Benita’s path to independence is contrasted with that of another female Hispanic character in the novel, Guadalupe (Lupé) Roybal, the second wife of Senator Byron Morse, a highly ambitious, unscrupulous man. In spite of seemingly being merely a political pawn, Guadalupe is able to retain some independence. Morse married her largely because having “a Hispanic wife might draw the voters” (Tepper 69); in addition, “her sociability, her elegance, her sleek body and her fantastic hair ... made him look good” (Tepper 66). She is portrayed as a strong woman who goes into the marriage knowing exactly “what was expected of her” (Tepper 70) and is in touch with the ugly reality of the world. As with Benita, it is possible to distinguish between two sides of Lupé. On the one hand, there is the public Lupé, who “was always dressed in perfect taste, [whose] accent [was] patrician, [whose] manners [were] impeccable” (Tepper 66). On the other hand, there is the private Lupé, who, in contrast to her passive public self, is characterized by excess. When she is at home, “basses thumped, brasses blared, drums roared and rhythm filled the silence” (Tepper 66). She also has her own private retreat, “her *nido*, her nest, [which had] [g]audy pillows and painted furniture, and scented candles ... everything ablaze with colour” (Tepper 67). Lupé’s “private life was [a] carnival in Rio” (Tepper 67), becoming a way for her to avoid becoming a completely passive figure.

As with Benita, Lupé’s name is also significant. According to Luis Leal: “the characterization of women throughout Mexican literature has been profoundly influenced by two archetypes present in the Mexican psyche: that of the woman who has kept her virginity and that of the one who has lost

it” (qtd. in Petty 119-120). These archetypes are “embodied in the stories of La Malinche, the violated woman, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, the Holy Mother” (Petty 120). Lupé’s name obviously recalls la Virgen de Guadalupe, “the Mexican manifestation of the Virgin Mary ... around which Mexican Catholicism centers” (Petty 120). It is even possible that Lupé was picked by Morse’s advisors precisely for this reason, for by bearing the name of the Holy Mother, Lupé could be constructed as the mother of the nation – in the form of First Lady – if Morse should become president (as is his ambition). The Virgen de Guadalupe is an important figure in Mexican culture, for as Octavia Paz points out, she is “the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed, in sum she is the mother of orphans” (qtd. in Petty 120).

However, in actuality, Lupé perhaps more closely resembles La Malinche, who is “the symbol of female sexuality that is ... denigrated ... in Mexican society” (Petty 122). Lupé does not believe in idly sitting at home when her husband is out, for she “believe[s] in fun. [And] [w]hen Byron was too busy to enjoy it, she found fun elsewhere, though carefully. There was always fun available” (Tepper 70). By going out and having discreet affairs, Lupé is not only taking control of her sexuality, but also challenging Morse’s male authority. She outwits her husband, for while Morse thinks that their relationship depends on what he does not tell her, Lupé knows that it depends “as much on things she didn’t tell him” (Tepper 71). Lupé is thus not a passive victim of politics, but is able not only to break stereotypical and cultural assumptions about the virgin/*malinche* dichotomy, but also to subvert her husband’s authority.

The ambiguity of Lupé's nature is further emphasised through the issue of reproduction. It is part of the contractual obligation of her marriage to Morse that “there would be no children” (Tepper 70). This is mostly due to the fact that Morse already has two sons from his previous marriage - “an heir and a spare” (Tepper 69) - and because he is opposed to pregnancy in general. Though this does seem as though Morse has indirect control over Lupé's reproductive capabilities, it should be remembered that Lupé consented to Morse's marriage specifications. Moreover, although Morse is publicly (at least) in favour of the Pro-life bill, Lupé had an abortion at some point, without her husband ever becoming aware of it. Thus, although her husband is under the impression that he controls her body, this is because Lupé allows him to think this –she is still very much in control of her own body. In this way, Lupé is able to subvert her husband's authority and remain independent.

The way in which Morse dictates the conditions of his marriage to Lupé more or less mirrors the way he approached his first marriage. He marries his first wife, Janet, because, like Lupé, she is able to bring his ambition to fruition, because she “came from a well-known political family and he

needed the support” (Tepper 68). For Morse, “finding a wife was just like filling any other staff position; it required a detailed job description” (Tepper 69), and what he also requires from his marriage to Janet is “a son” (Tepper 69). Motherhood, for Janet, is thus a kind of contractual obligation, and even though “there had been miscarriages, one after another, year after year [and] Janet had wanted to quit trying” (Tepper 69), she is forced to bring a child to life. She is never allowed to take control of her body's reproductive capabilities. For Morse, having children is a way in which he can prove his manliness, and fatherhood is more about the politics of legacy and masculinity, than about any sentimental consideration. Although he considers Janet merely as a “brood mare” (Tepper 69), who can also, conveniently, grant him access to the political world, he is “willing to take care of the brood mare and the colts” (Tepper 69). And though Morse “intended to found a dynasty” (Tepper 69) through his children, he intended to “do his part later on, when the time came for the right schools and meeting the right people” (Tepper 69). Motherhood is thus forced onto Janet in two ways: not only by her inability to control her reproductive capabilities, but also in the way that she is forced to raise her children without the help of her husband.

Morse also has a very misogynistic attitude, and according to his wife, Lupé, he is “almost psychotic on the subject of pregnancy. If anyone could be said to be phobic about anything, [then] Morse was phobic about parturition” (Tepper 274). It is part of the novel's humorous irony that Morse, along with several other prominent men, is chosen by the Inkleozese – another group of friendly, female aliens, who are in their reproductive stage – to become the bearers of the Inkleozese's larvae. These men have been chosen because, they, like Morse, “espouse the pro-life position which does not allow reproductive choice even in the case of rape ... [for] the infant is innocent and must therefore take precedence” (Tepper 262-263). However, the Inkleozese promise that although these men will have a few months of discomfort and will have to set their very public careers aside, this should not be a problem for them, for these men “have frequently decried the shallowness of women who attempted to avoid pregnancy for mere career convenience” (Tepper 263). These men will have “to put their careers on hold and their bodies on the line just as they have expected others to do” (Tepper 276) – an ironic twist since Morse himself has said that “motherhood and careers don't mix” (Tepper 394), and that for him, “pregnant women looked like a sack of shit” (Tepper 68) and the process of childbirth itself was “revolting” (Tepper 68). He still holds that pregnancy should be “handled ... somewhere else” (Tepper 68). This is exactly what happens to Morse, as he and the other impregnated men are taken away from Earth and spend “the last months of their confinement in idle luxury at a rest home, high in the hills of a lovely forested area on Inkleoza” (Tepper 393). It is here that he and the other men “awaited deliverance, which,

when it came, was far worse than anything they had ever experienced. Far, far worse, though it was over in a few hours” (Tepper 393). The birth of the baby Inkleozese is an exaggerated version of natural childbirth, for the baby Inkleozese, the Inklits, chew their way out of their hosts’ bodies.

Furthermore, these men are denied the option of abortion, for if “any attempt [is made] to remove [the larvae], [then it] end[s] up killing the host” (Tepper 76). Though most of these men claimed they were raped – and indeed “the impregnation is done without the hosts’ individual permission” (Tepper 263) – their cries fall on deaf ears. The Inkleozese themselves take “their permission from the stand which [these men] have taken upon the issue of rape” (Tepper 263): that women should not be allowed the choice of terminating the foetus as the infant’s life should “take precedence” (Tepper 263) over the mother’s. This incident satirizes what Simone de Beauvoir’s describes as the “hypocrisy of the masculine moral code: Men universally forbid abortion, but individually they accept it as a convenient solution of a problem” (509). The fact that the men in *The Fresco* are not allowed to have abortions might be seen as a kind of revenge fantasy in which men’s patriarchal views on motherhood are turned on them, in a humorous attack against patriarchal attitudes towards reproduction, while still conveying a genuine undercurrent of anger. The point of the satire is that women should have control over their bodies’ reproductive capabilities, and that this includes having access to legal abortions. It also suggests that men should not be in charge of legislation regarding reproduction for, as the novel implies, they have no idea what it entails.

Morse’s impregnation has a positive effect on his ex-wife Janet. Before his impregnation, she was “fifty pounds overweight with a face like a damp culler” (Tepper 67), resembling the stereotype of a woman who has let herself go, so to speak, when motherhood takes precedence. When she finds out about Morse’s situation, she “giggled for two solid days”, lost her appetite, “dropped fifty pounds”, “got a good job” and according to her sons, she “look[s] great” (Tepper 395). The Inkleozese have thus, inadvertently, performed a kind of ‘welcome reversal’ for Janet. Morse’s pregnancy is, according to Janet, a sort of punishment for his own view on pregnancy, and for the fact that she was never allowed to have any “rest between [pregnancies]” (Tepper 394) in his quest to produce an heir. Morse’s selfish quest to produce an heir rebounds on him, for the children look like Janet, not “anything like [Morse] at all” (Tepper 395), and the “horrible squirming thing on Inkleoza hadn’t looked like him either” (Tepper 395). For Morse, who wanted nothing more than to have progeny that could follow in his footsteps, the fact that none of his children look like him, or that his sons are so “embarrassed” (Tepper 395) about what happened to him that they do not really want to talk to him, is punishment for the selfish way in which he uses women to get what he wants.

The issue of motherhood is also explored through another character, Merilu Riley, who, in contrast to Janet who had motherhood forced onto her, has willingly given up her career to become a mother, and who later, when her children are in school, does not know what to do with herself. Before her marriage to Chad Riley, a secret service agent, Merilu had been a “spokesperson for a commuter airline” (Tepper 111) – a job that she had liked doing, because it “let her do the things she liked to do, like having her hair done, getting a manicure, having a makeup job, and being dressed in designer clothes so people could look at her” (Tepper 111). After the twins were born, “Merilu had decided to take a year off to be with the babies. The year had turned into six” (Tepper 111). As soon as her children started going to school, Merilu starts “bouncing off the walls, regretting that she’d given up her career for motherhood ... Even though she herself had said she’d have to find something else to do [eventually] because the job wouldn’t last forever” (Tepper 111). Merilu’s discontent causes her to want “to leave the corruption and clamor of Washington and go back to Montana” (Tepper 111), which would mean that her husband would have to request a transfer and give up his own career ambitions.

It is Merilu’s mother who wants Merilu to move back to Montana, presenting the move as something that will “magically create some kind of insta-ramp [that will lift Merilu] out of the pits and up to cheery-dom” (Tepper 111-112). After spending “thirty-six hours in a huddle with her mother” Merilu’s desire to leave Washington “had set in” (Tepper 142) and thereafter she presents Chad with the first of many ultimatums: he should find a job in Montana – thus giving up his career aspirations – or she would go there without him. Merilu’s mother is portrayed – especially from Chad’s perspective – as a negative influence on Merilu – a view that plays with popular views on men and their mothers-in-law, where the mother-in-law is always seen as a disruptive influence on everyday life.

Merilu is for the most part seen only in relation to her husband. Not only is she referred to for most of the novel as “Mrs. Chad Riley” (Tepper 142), but she is also mostly portrayed from her husband’s point of view, which leads to her being seen as a slightly unreasonable person. Chad considers it an indication of Merilu’s “typical inconsistency” (Tepper 112) that she expects him to give up his own career. She considers it to be “fair, since that’s what she’d done” (Tepper 112); however, Chad feels that it is not, since “she’d chosen to and he hadn’t” (Tepper 112). Chad and Merilu’s relationship is an inversion of the usual relationship expectations, as it is not Chad who is expecting Merilu to give up her career in favour of being a mother, but rather Merilu expects Chad to do so. However, Chad seems to reflect cultural stereotypical male views on women as irrational,

and though Merilu does very little to dissuade him from this view, he nevertheless still chooses to go back to her at the end of the novel, rather than have a relationship with the more sensible Benita.

Merilu is also portrayed as being slightly over-dramatic. When she finally learns about the aliens' visitation via the television – she and her sons have been luxuriating in hotel rooms while this had been happening – she is able to put “two and two together and to make five and a half” and come to the conclusion that because Chad is a government agent, he “was probably in up to his neck” (Tepper 142) in the drama. Merilu immediately rushes back home and prepares a romantic evening for the two of them. However, Chad only shows up at three in the morning, after she has given up on her idea of a romantic evening and gone to bed. When she realises that Chad has come home, she becomes “alert with astonishing speed, switche[s] on the light, and immediately grasp[s] at the idea that had floated to the top while she was dozing” (Tepper 143), which was that she would return to Montana, “taking the boys and going without [him]” (Tepper 143). She had meant that her threat would “make him think about things” (Tepper 143). Instead, to her astonishment, Chad replies that that is a “[g]ood idea” (Tepper 144), and he himself proceeds to pack a bag and leave the house. Merilu seems slightly taken aback that her threat has not worked. Merilu's representation borders on that of a stereotypically irrational woman, and although it does reaffirm stereotypical ideas about women and femininity, it also critiques them. Merilu's irrationality can be seen as a manifestation of her frustration which is caused by the fact that society in the novel does not expect women to be anything but mothers. Merilu's irrationality is thus a critique of the way in which society confines women.

Merilu's biggest problem seems to be that once she realises that her children do not need her all the time any more, she is left without anything constructive to do. It is perhaps for this reason that she insists on moving away, even though she knows that she cannot go back to the occupation that she once had. By the end of the novel, however, she has found a new goal, as she is planning to write a book about Chad's experiences on the home planet of the Pistach. However, Chad, slightly condescendingly perhaps, wants to discourage her from doing so, seeming to objectify Merilu. While they were dating, “Chad had liked looking at her. And being with her” (Tepper 111), and by the end of the novel, Chad decides to stay with Merilu merely because “she's a very beautiful woman” (Tepper 405). Although Merilu does not seem to mind being an object of the male gaze, it is not enough for her. Through Merilu the novel seems to suggest that women should be allowed to have their own ambitions, above and beyond culturally defined ones, such as motherhood.

This is reinforced by the Inkleozese, “an elder race”, with “an inborn love of order and correctness”

(Tepper 150). The Inkleozese act as “the traditional monitors and peacekeepers of the Confederation” (Tepper 236) and it is their duty to review “work done between two or more races to assure compliance with Neighborliness” (Tepper 151). The Inkleozese are “feared” (Tepper 236) even by predator alien races, such as the Xankatikitiki, the Fluiquosm and the Wulivery. Interestingly “all the Inkleozese monitors are receptors, that is, females” (Tepper 262), but also biological reproducers (receptor is the Pistach word for the carrier of sequential DNA). However, in contrast to the Inkleozese, the mixing of maternity and occupation is one that is still slightly contested in modern society and women are in some circles considered to be selfish if they choose to go back to work after giving birth, instead of taking care of their children all the time.

Through these various characters, Tepper highlights how motherhood, as an experience, is coloured by personal and cultural differences. As with most of her other novels, motherhood is shown to be an oppressive, limiting reality for women, if not chosen freely. By using certain female stereotypes to define her characters and by having the characters transcend these stereotypes, Tepper also indicates that women should be able to form identities free from cultural, religious and traditional expectations. Moreover, Tepper also indicates that in order for women to be able to choose motherhood freely, abortion and contraceptives should be available, legally, for all women, and that legislation about these issues should not be made by men.

3.1.2 Sexual Foolishness, Overpopulation and Ugly Women: The Aliens' Critique of Humanity

Tepper also uses the alien Pistach race, and specifically Chiddy, one of the first aliens³⁶ to land on Earth and make contact with Benita, as a mouthpiece to deliver a rather scathing, though at times also humorous, commentary on issues pertaining specifically to gender, religion and the intersection of the two. As outsiders to Earth, the Pistach are in the unique position of being able to look at its people and their customs in a relatively objective manner. They are naturally influenced by their own way of life, which emphasises equality between beings, and as such, they focus on the general inequality in social relations on Earth. The Pistach specifically critique social attitudes to reproduction and anti-woman legislation and ideologies. Humanity's attitudes towards reproduction are ultimately linked to overpopulation, which is viewed by the Pistach as the unnecessary consequence of both not allowing women to have access to contraceptives and, what the Pistach consider to be, a lack of proper selection during the mating process. This is in essence linked to

³⁶ The other alien who comes to Earth with Chiddy, is Vess; it does not feature as prominently as Chiddy.

Tepper's concern for the environment, for humanity, through overpopulation, is shown to have a detrimental influence on the environment. The Pistach also critique the treatment of women under Islamic rule, which they perceive as an oppressive state of being, though it has often been considered to be a site for contentious discourse. Malise Ruthven, for instance, has pointed out that

No subject is more fraught with controversy than the relation of women and Islam. On one side of the debate there exists the widespread perception that the faith oppresses and even persecutes women; at the other there are arguments about cultural authenticity about the fights of women to assert themselves in ways that differ from the modes of female self-assertion current in non-Muslim societies. The issue is complicated by the interaction of history, religion, culture, and politics. (*Islam* 91)

The Pistach have a way of life that is decidedly different from that of mankind: it emphasises that each Pistach should fulfill the role it³⁷ was meant to fulfill. The Pistach "are not supposed to want a specific role in life. Opinions of that kind are not considered useful. [Pistach] are selected to live as what [they] *are*, body and mind [emphasis added]" (Tepper 51). Examples of these are the receptors, inceptors and nootchi. The inceptors and receptors in essence correspond to human concepts of male and female though only at a reproductive level. On the planet of the Pistach, Pistach-Home, genetics plays an integral role in the mating process, and "receptors and inceptors [a]re picked for genetics alone, even when they ha[ve] no inclination for the task" (Tepper 47-48). A receptor is described as a "provider of sequential life with or without DNA introduced by another individual or individuals" (Tepper 9). While the inceptors (males) are not described in as much detail, there are certain characteristics that are ascribed to them. Being "inceptorish", means being "virile", "arbitrary, egocentric and often belligerent" (Tepper 375). The defining characteristic of the inceptors, chosen by Tepper, seems to suggest stereotypical, if not superficial, assumptions about men and masculinity. On the other hand, Tepper chooses to have two kinds of female Pistach: receptors and nootchi. While the receptors are the biological mothers of the Pistach children, the nootchi are the ones who take care of the children, since most receptors are not really inclined to look after Pistach children. Receptors are selected "for genetics alone" (Tepper 47), while the nootchi are chosen according to their caring, nurturing natures. Although the nootchi are an integral part of Pistach society, it is difficult "to be a good one" (Tepper 52). It is part of the Pistach culture

³⁷ Though the Pistach do have concepts that correspond to male and female, this distinction does not permeate their everyday language, especially since they also have classes which are genderless. Chiddy and Vess, for instance, because of their occupation are assigned to be genderless. In spite of this, Chiddy often comes across as slightly male, a notion which is reaffirmed later when it, in a male guise, aligns itself with Benita in a kind of marriage ceremony.

that the best Pistach be chosen for a specific task. It is for this reason that it is important to choose the correct genetic matching of Pistach during mating, which is done to prevent glusi from being born. According to Chiddy, Benita's friendly alien, glusi are

the not-very-able-ones, the perpetually undifferentiated, the ones who do not come to mind when one gives thanks ... While glusi eat no more and take no more than others, they use up space and resources without regenerating them. They tend to destroy in that way, by sucking energy, or through undirected energy of their own, or through ineptitude or even, sometimes, malice. (Tepper 137)

The glusi are considered to be the individuals who could lead to a society's decline, if there should be too many of them, in which case a society would suffer from "glusi glut" (Tepper 137). There are no real ways to cure "a glut of glusi except not to beget them in the first place" (Tepper 137).

It is because of the glusi that the Pistach, and especially Chiddy, critique humanity's attitudes towards reproduction. Most of Chiddy's observations seem to be centered on the fact that many people do not always consider that having sex could lead to having a (sometimes unwanted) baby. Chiddy seems to advocate either abstinence or that there should be greater availability and use of contraceptive devices, as Chiddy observes "[o]ne should not be sexual if one cannot enjoy both the process and the product and if there is no place for the product, one should stop being sexual" (Tepper 51). It continues to advocate abstinence, by pointing out that sex is much like communication:

Being celibate is often wise and prudent. People know this, but their inborn drive to reproduce makes their organs wag. Keeping silent is often wise and prudent. People know this, also, but the drive to question and tell makes their tongues wag. Sex spreads genetic material, good and bad; prying spreads information, true and false; natural selection takes over and both ethical failings contribute to continuing evolution. (Tepper 129)

For Chiddy, it is one of the "tragedies of [humanity's] biology that [the] men and women are insufficiently selective in the mating process" (Tepper 128). From a Pistachian point of view, this is simply unacceptable, for it means that people often reproduce without taking into account that the children will also have "the worst traits of either parent, often to a greater degree" (Tepper 128). For the Pistach, it is essential that only those whose genes are in some way of a superior quality should be allowed to reproduce.

Chiddy's concern is based on the fact that, from a Pistach perspective, humanity has a superfluous

amount of glusi; Earth is in fact suffering from glusi glut. The Pistach consider alcoholics, “nutters”, runaway children and “erotic stimulators for hire” (Tepper 404), among others, as glusi. Earth’s glusi are considered by the Pistach to be the reason for overpopulation, which consequently leads to the exploitation of natural resources. In essence, the Pistach feel that humanity’s careless³⁸ attitude towards sex is detrimental to the environment. One of the potential solutions that Chiddy presents is that women “who are under the age of thirty and who wish to mate should require the approval of a board of qualified geneticists and behaviourists” (Tepper 128). This is said by Chiddy in a tone that is both sympathetic and “so very superior and above it all” (Tepper 128-129), indicating the Pistach’s inherent belief in the rightness of their solutions, but also that such a solution, if one could call it that, is an over-simplified one. It is apparent, however, that the novel is not suggesting, through Chiddy, that women should not have sexual freedom, but rather that women who are too young to have children – especially for the mental aspect of mothering – should not be allowed to become mothers, for “adult liberties should not be entrusted to [youthful] ignoramuses” (Tepper 205).

Aside from critiquing humanity's inability to regulate population control, the Pistach also critique the oppression of women due to religion, more specifically the way in which they perceive that the Islamic religion oppresses women. It is important to note that this novel was published before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States of America. Since then, the term "fundamentalism", and especially Islamic fundamentalism, has become laden with negative connotations, largely in Western Society³⁹. Tepper's critique of the Islamic treatment of women seems to stem from a traditional feminist critique of this ideology and it is more than likely that Tepper uses this specific religion to point out the way in which religions, and not necessarily fundamentalism, have a direct impact on the everyday lives of women. Tepper herself has admitted that she finds certain religions

abhorrent, particularly those in which the authorities are almost invariably old men [as] they all have certain things in common: they rule women and children; they tend to sequester women; they focus to a great degree upon [the] "purity" of womenfolk; ... [and] they treat women as livestock. (Szapatura n.pag.)

Through the Pistach's critique of the Islamic treatment of women, Tepper is thus able to voice her

³⁸ This is of course an over-simplified deduction about humanity's attitude towards reproduction, as it does not take into consideration cultural, religious and traditional attitudes towards reproduction; in the context of the novel, however, which in itself is an over-simplified view of the world, it is not implausible.

³⁹ Fundamentalism, according to Ruthven, has become "just a dirty 14-letter word" (5).

own disdain for any patriarchal religion's treatment of women.

The aliens consider the fact that Islamic women in the novel have to wear the tent-like dress, the *burqa*, as a form of female oppression, especially since Islamic women are meant to hide themselves away in order for men not to be overcome by lustful desires. The Pistach make their deductions by observing a Muslim man living in Afghanistan, called Ben Shadouf, prior to making contact with Benita. The effect of his wife's oppression due to Islamic laws is represented from Shadouf's perspective. Though Shadouf had agreed to the Islamic laws, "he had not known how irritating and inconvenient these laws would be. He had not realized his wife would suffer from them ... [for his wife] Afaya, could not go in to the street without a male relative to protect her modesty, even though she would be covered from head to toe with only tiny mesh openings before her eyes" (Tepper 120). The reason that the women are hidden away is "[t]o protect [their] purity" (Tepper 314), by way of preventing men from lusting after them. This is seen as "the will of Allah" (Tepper 313)⁴⁰. Shadouf recalls the story of the wife of Mustapha, "his neighbor and commanding officer, [whose wife] had tripped on the pavement allowing her legs to be seen. She was then beaten by those who named themselves Guardians of Modesty. She had died of their beating" (Tepper 120).

The covering of clothes that Afaya wears is called the *hijab*, *ziy shari* or the *burqa* (Ruthven 108, 109). Wearing the hijab has come to be a contentious act in feminist discourse, for although the veil is seen as signifying the religious and political oppression of Islamic women, there are some theorists who argue that wearing the hijab

far from signalling the internalization by women of patriarchal attitudes, may actually represent the contrary, facilitating a new social and spatial mobility, allowing women to 'invade' public spaces previously reserved for men. By adopting Islamic dress - it is argued - a woman may even defy patriarchal authority while making it plain to the non-*mahran* males she encounters of necessity outside the home that she is not sexually available, and that harassing her is tantamount to a sacrilegious act. (Ruthven, *Islam* 109)

However, in the context of the novel, because the Pistach are determining Earth's Neighbourliness, which decrees that people should be treated equally, they perceive the treatment of women under

⁴⁰ The Quran speaks about women in slightly ambiguous terms, for although "no spiritual inequality is implied", legally, women are inferior to men (Ruthven, *Islam* 93).

Islamic rule to be oppressive and unequal, and thus they seek to rectify this imbalance⁴¹. To combat what the Pistach see as an oppressive state of being, they inflict an “Uglifying Plague” on all the Islam women, firstly in Afghanistan, and thereafter in other Muslim states. The Uglifying Plague causes the women to go bald, to grow “long noses and long chins and hairy moles ... [to] lose half their teeth” (Tepper 12), to become “ugly as sin” (Tepper 162). All of the women also have a tattoo on their foreheads, which says, in the local dialect, “*The lustful who punish beauty would be wiser to control lust*” (Tepper 162). The Uglifying Plague is effective, for now that the women are ugly, they have more freedom, for they can “go to the market or school or leave the house and get a job” (Tepper 162). There is also a direct correlation between beauty and freedom, for “the more freedom [that] [is] given [to] the women of Afghanistan, the prettier they will become. The more they are kept in seclusion, the uglier they will get and the worse they will smell” (Tepper 168). The Plague is a humorous, though over-simplified “solution” to a contentious topic that is perhaps centuries old, and it also serves to highlight that humanity, and especially, women, cannot wait on a (alien) saviour to rescue them, but that they should instigate change from within. However, the Plague, in the context of the novel, is also problematic, because women are still being punished for men's inability to control their lust: Islamic women in the novel are still bearers of men's weakness. Yet, through this, the aliens use beauty as a kind of currency to hold Muslim men ransom in a way and in so doing, the Pistach, and Tepper, subversively counter the commodification and abuse of beauty, as well as the abuse of women because of their looks. This shows up what Tepper portrays as the ridiculousness of a culture that condones confining women in order not to lead men to temptation.

The flaws in society that the Pistach point out are mainly to do with gender and sexual relations which are influenced by religion, as the imbalance between and within each of these is seen as an underlying cause of overpopulation. In this way, Tepper who is “obsessed ... [with] environmental issues” (“Speaking to the Universe” n.pag.), attempts to show that environmental problems, such as overpopulation, are not just the result of humanity's interaction with nature, but also of people's interaction with one another.

3.2 The Fresco of *The Fresco* – A Critique of the Fundamentals of Fundamentalism

Tepper continues her critique of society's oppressive straitjackets in *The Fresco*, by means of a critique against fundamentalist - literal - interpretations of holy texts and the influence such texts

⁴¹ It is arguable that this could be also be a metaphor for the Pistach's way of forcing their way of life onto nations and planets, for just as Islamic women are forced to wear the veil in the novel, so the Pistach also enforce what they consider to be the best for all on other civilizations; this will be explored in a later section of the chapter.

may have, focusing on the act of creating such texts and how these texts come to gain legitimacy and authority in society. Consequently, the novel focuses largely on what is perceived as the fragile nature of translation and instead of merely critiquing fundamentalism, Tepper instead critiques the fallibility of the texts on which fundamentalist beliefs are based. The Pistach's unquestioning belief in the legitimacy of their holy text, the fresco of the novel's title, and the effects thereof, satirizes any religious belief. This section will therefore draw on translation studies to contextualise the act of translation, which forms the basis of Tepper's critique against the fragility of religions based on texts of which the only available sources are copies of copies; as such she criticizes not only fundamentalism itself, but also the foundation of fundamentalism. This section will also examine how the Pistach, as a metaphor for colonialist missionaries, force their way of life onto others because they consider it to be better. This section will also draw briefly on utopian studies to ultimately show how Tepper's critique of fundamentalism is also a critique of society's waiting for some kind of saviour, such as alien intervention in this case, to magically solve all of humanity's problems; through this, Tepper seems to advocate that humanity should rather try and solve its own problems.

A translation, according to Koster,

is a strange phenomenon, because it is always two things [at the same time]: on the one hand the status of a translation is that of an independent text: once produced, a translation in its own cultural environment⁴² functions in a way similar to that of any other text in that environment; on the other hand its status is that of a derivative text: a translation is [merely] a representation, or a reconstruction, or a reproduction of another text. (25)

It is precisely because a translated text can never truly *be* the original, but can only ever be *like* the original that its legitimacy is doubted. Virginia Woolf for instance states that “[i]t is useless to read Greek in translations: translators can but offer us a vague equivalent” (qtd. in Savory 60). Juliane House emphasises this when she says that “[i]n translating, a text in one language is replaced by a *functionally equivalent* text in another language [emphasis added]” (9); a translation, according to Theo Hermans, cannot “be equivalent with its prototext, it can only be *declared* equivalent by means of a performative speech-act” (11). A part of this conundrum is that the purpose of a translation often determines how true to the original the translated text may be; as Savory puts it:

⁴² Indeed, Theodore Savory postulates that certain texts become "Integrated Immigrants" (46) - those texts which become so well-known in their translated language that they become part of that language's literary tradition.

“The translator faces the question as to whether his function is to record the words of his original author or to give their meaning” (18). It is for this reason that we may distinguish between two kinds of translations: “A literal, word-for-word translation ... [and] the idiomatic or free translation” (Savory 50). Savory defines a perfect translation as one that manages to convey “the spirit of the original author by giving us the words he would have used had his language been that into which his writings are about to be translated” (139). There is perhaps understandably a tendency to mistrust the act of translating one work into another one, for by its very nature, it is a tenuous and subjective process. Choosing the right word from a group of words, which, although being synonyms, differ in connotation, will affect the meaning of the end-product of translation. Lawrence Venuti, quoting William Weaver, states that “translating is a largely unreflective process, where the grounds for the translator’s choices remain not merely unarticulated, but unknown to him, ‘unconscious’, with decisions taken in ‘some corner of his mind’” (214) and it is inevitable that in the act of translation “something that the author has to offer to the reader is lost, and that loss mars the theoretical perfection of the translation” (Savory 76).

There is perhaps a greater reason to mistrust the process of translating, and that is that the translator may use a translation to sway his or her reader into thinking what the translator wants him or her to think. Indeed, Savory admits that “a translator may use, misuse, or distort the process of translating, treading the narrow path between *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*” [the suppression of the truth and the suggestion of a falsehood] (181), which would mean that the translator “could steer his readers towards an acceptance of the view that he [or she] would wish them to take” (Savory 183). It is this ability of translated texts to manipulate people into thinking and believing something that the author and the translator want them to think and believe that Tepper critiques, with a special emphasis on the influence of religious texts. As with Tepper's critique of gender relations, the critique of religious texts is also very much influenced by Tepper's own feelings on the matter. Tepper for instance states that although religious texts may “govern the lives of real people ... they have absolutely nothing to do with reality” (Szapatura n.pag.) and that any religion “that says, ‘This is the creed, you have to believe this, you have to accept it regardless of the fact that it makes no sense, or you are a heretic!’ is an evil religion” (Szapatura n.pag.). The Pistach's fresco, as the foundation of their religion, and the way it gained its legitimacy is a thinly disguised satire of the influence of religious texts in society.

The titular *Fresco* of the novel forms the basis of belief for the alien race, the Pistach, who follow the teachings of their great leader Mengantowhai. These teachings are presented in a series of

seventeen panels, which were painted by the Athyco Canthorel⁴³. Set out in the House of the Fresco on the planet of Pistach-Home, each of these paintings tell “the tale of Mengantowhai’s labors on behalf of the [Jaupati] people he had adopted, of their joy and progress, of their tragic overthrow by the envious Pokoti, and of Mengantowhai’s eventual martyrdom at their hands” (Tepper 53). The depiction of Mengantowhai’s life serves as a guide for the Pistach, not only informing them of how they should live their lives, but also infusing them with a sense of purpose. Chiddy, an athyco who works closely with the protagonist Benita, states that the Fresco gives them “legitimacy” (Tepper 340) in the same way that humanity’s “holy scriptures give [it] legitimacy” (Tepper 340). Unlike humanity’s Holy Scriptures, however, “the Fresco does not govern [their] belief about the universe ... but the Fresco does define [their] belief in themselves and [their] words” (Tepper 340). It is the Fresco that defines them as good people “who amend other worlds and bring them to peace” (Tepper 340), and Chiddy admits that they are peaceful people “only because the Fresco says so” (Tepper 340). The Fresco thus plays an integral role in the lives of the Pistach, for it provides a moral foundation according to which they live.

The Pistach, who consider their way of life to be better than others, mirror colonialist missionaries; they go from planet to planet and try to help the inhabitants improve their way of living, essentially by forcing them to adopt the Pistachian way of life. The Pistach consider it their sacred duty to spread Neighborliness to other planets, though it is especially the duty of the Pistach athyco who are bound by The Kasiwean Oath, named after the leader of the Jaupati, Kasiwees, who is an “exemplar” (Tepper 179) for all Pistach. This Oath commits them “to meeting the needs of others by bringing Mengantowhai’s help as set out in the Fresco of Canthorel” (Tepper 179). The Pistach missionaries spread the concept of “Tassifoduma” or “Neighborliness” (Tepper 93), which, according to the Pistach, is something all planets should have, for it promotes a way of living that makes all inhabitants live contentedly. Being a Neighborly planet means “to have a society in which almost all individuals achieve contentment, since discontented societies often explode over their borders into other people’s space, causing great trouble and woe” (Tepper 167). The Pistachian way of life is presented – from their perspective – as a utopian one. Goodman states that “[u]topias of any kind may be seen as the attempt to avoid ordinary human unhappiness” (“Problematics” 3) and it is part of the Pistachian way to be content in life, for they are taught from a young age “not to choose, not to want” (Tepper 351), but rather to be happy with what they are and have; dissatisfaction is not allowed on Pistach.

⁴³ Athyco are a Pistachian kind of spiritual leader, whose task it is “to design remedies” (Tepper 135) for those societies that do not function well.

Yet, in spite of the important role of the Fresco, no one on Pistach has ever actually seen the original panels, for they are covered in years of grime and dirt; they are almost “as dark as the metal doors” (Tepper 53) that lead to the Fresco room. The Pistach have only, what they consider to be, one detailed first-person account of what the original panels looked like, as well as several (re)interpretations of that account. Though the original panels had been cleaned from time to time, in “recent centuries, the curators had forbidden any further attempt to do so ... The danger of cleaning the panels far outweighed the pleasure of seeing them clearly” (Tepper 54). While the curators claim that the danger lies in the potential harm that might befall the Fresco should the panels be cleaned, the real danger, and the one that the curators actually try to hide, lies in the possibility that what the Fresco depicts might be different from what they are led to believe it depicts. Should the Fresco differ somehow from the accepted depiction, it could potentially upset the entire belief and social system of the Pistach, especially since it is presented as a kind of utopian society, and as Goodman points out, “[t]raditional utopias rely on stasis to safeguard their integrity, since any change – especially unplanned change – within the utopian system may cause it to re-inscribe itself as a dystopia” (“Privilege” 21).

The Pistach’s only first-person account of what the Fresco looks like was provided by the Pistachian scholar, Glumshalak, who had seen the work “when it was first done” (Tepper 56) and “had copied every detail of the Fresco when he wrote his great Compendium” (Tepper 54). Glumshalak is known as The Inceptor of Morality, for it was he “who [had] codified [their] beliefs and virtues; it was Glumshalak who taught [them] that the Fresco was too holy to be cleaned” (Tepper 198). Of the Compendium itself, there are at least three versions: Glumshalak’s Authorized Version, the Revised Pistach Version, and the Modernized Version in Contemporary Language (Tepper 54). These linguistically different versions of the same text (which is in itself only a copy of the original) seems to be a parody of the multitude of versions that are available of various religious texts, especially of the Christian Bible. One of the reasons that the Bible was first translated, and is still being translated today, is because there is a “uniform intention of making the book more freely read by the multitude” (Savory 115). The first English version of the Bible was produced by John Wycliffe, who translated it from the Latin version, the Vulgate; Wycliffe felt that “men could be expected to order their lives in accordance with the precepts of the bible only if they were able to read the book itself” (qtd. in Savory 107). The first printed version, on the other hand, was produced by William Tyndale, who translated it from the Greek version by Erasmus, and instead of focusing on a literal interpretation, “Tyndale believed that the quality of the English was of greater importance than literal faithfulness” (Savory 108). After these first two translations,

many others followed. Theodore Savory points out that “between 1902 and 1966 at least 28 versions of the bible, or at any rate of considerable parts of it, were produced in the English language [alone]” (112), and this has continued until today. According to the United Bible Societies, “the complete Bible has now been translated into 469 languages and the New Testament into 1,231” (“Bible Translation” n.pag.). With each “new”, more modern translation, something of the original inevitably gets lost; yet, each new translation carries weight and legitimacy with its readers. I will address this in more detail further in this section.

As most people do not question the validity of their holy texts, so the Pistach never seem to doubt the drawings of Glumshalak’s Compendium. Chiddy, for instance, many times throughout the novel, says that though it “had never seen” (Tepper 53) the actual Fresco, it does not doubt what lies underneath the grime and dirt, for the Compendium is considered to be undisputedly correct. The Pistach have thus blindly been following the teachings of the Fresco as passed on to them by the witness accounts of one Pistach and, for most of the time, this goes uncontested.

Whenever someone does try to question what might really be under all the grime, they are steered back to what is considered to be accepted doctrine by reminding them that it is enough to have “generations of observations written down in the sacred books” (Tepper 56), to well and truly know what is being portrayed on the panels. In spite of this, at one point in the novel, Chiddy discovers that there is a slight discrepancy between what is actually on a panel and what is purported to be on the panel when that particular section gets wet and the grime washes off. Yet, when it suggests to the other curators that they should perhaps “penetrate the coating of grime and get an image of the original Fresco” (Tepper 200) to solve the confusion, his suggestion is “ripped ... to shreds” (Tepper 200). The other curators “preferred preserving the current doctrine to changing doctrine” (Tepper 200). For the other curators, it is better to continue accepting the description of the Fresco, as set out in the Compendium, than to risk disrupting the entire social order of the Pistach people. During this episode, Chiddy is horrified to learn that this discrepancy might have been intentional, when one of his fellows suggests that this particular bit might be different because Glumshalak may have disposed of some material which did not accord with aiso⁴⁴’s view of Pistach purpose” (Tepper 200). This idea depresses Chiddy, for it had never even considered that “there had ever been any other side or opinion than those [it] had been taught” (Tepper 200) and thus he feels it would be prudent to find out what the discrepancy is and why it is there, rather than continuing to adhere to a false, one-sided interpretation.

⁴⁴ Genderless Pistach possessive pronoun

Chiddy's thoughts are naturally not shared by the other athyci, who prefer to continue thinking of Glumshalak's Compendium as the true version and who thus propagate adhering to it. Moreover, if a Pistach's interpretation of a certain panel should differ from the acceptable interpretation, the Pistach is always steered into accepting the 'right' interpretation. For instance, the first panel, *The Meeting*, which depicts the meeting between Mengantowhai and the Jaupati, also contains "three wine jars assaulted by amorphous figures" (Tepper 55) in the background. The standard interpretation of this image is that it is a lesson about "mastering intoxication" and that the Pistach should thus not use "wine during journeys" (Tepper 55). Yet, Chiddy is able to come up with its own – logical – explanation: that the three amorphous forms "could be the well-known trialur – frailty, futility, and forgetfulness – seeking to overturn the urns of knowledge" (Tepper 55). Chiddy is also convinced that "the things being assaulted or overturned were just as much urns as they were wine jars, for all one could see was shadowy shapes with a kind of yellow haze around them" (Tepper 55). When Chiddy voices its heretical interpretation of the function of the background figures, it is told to put its interpretation "out of mind ... [for] the Fresco of Canthorel is too sacred to run the risk of altering in any respect" (Tepper 56). While Chiddy does as it is told, it is still amazed at just how "impenetrable the depictions really were" (Tepper 55). The way in which the Pistach adhere to one interpretation of the Fresco is a parody of the way in which certain religions promote one interpretation of a sacred text, while many subsets of main religions are formed precisely because their interpretation differs from the standard one. The fact that Chiddy can interpret the panel in a way that is different from the acceptable definition is not only a reflection of the flexibility of religious texts, but is also a metaphor for the ways in which Tepper perceives different groups of people – inclined towards different ideologies – being able to choose to interpret certain passages in sacred texts in specific ways to suit their own purposes, as for instance, the way a given sacred text can be used to justify war, peace, acts of terrorism and acts of compassion, depending on the context.

When it is finally revealed what the panels actually depict, the depictions differ greatly from the accepted depictions. For instance, while panel number six, *The Offerings*, is supposed to show the Jaupati voluntarily offering gifts to King Mengantowhai during his coronation ceremony, instead it depicts the Jaupati being sacrificed to Mengantowhai (Tepper 344). Similarly, panel number seven, *The Adoration*, purports to show Mengantowhai hailed by the Jaupati "as their savior" (Tepper 137), but instead it depicts the Jaupati "being slain at Mengantowhai's feet" (Tepper 344). And the three contentious amorphous figures supposedly attacking wine jars in the first panel are actually "people, presumably Jaupati, being attacked by uniformed Pistach" (Tepper 343). Furthermore, the

so-called Pokoti race, thought to be neither Jaupati nor Pistach, is in fact rebel Jaupati who go against Mengantowhai's tyranny and who call themselves "*UmaPokoti* or Avengers" (Tepper 344). Kasiwees, instead of being the willing follower of Mengantowhai and future exemplar of all Pistach, is in actuality the leader of the rebel Jaupati who try to overthrow Mengantowhai. Perhaps most disturbing, from a Pistachian point of view, is that the supposedly benevolent Mengantowhai is in actual fact a bloodthirsty tyrant. The true fresco of Canthorel thus reveals that a violent section of Pistach history had been hidden away from them and that they had been misled into believing they were a purely benevolent race. It is heavily ironic that the Fresco has been used by the Pistach to promote peace and understanding between different races, when its true content reveals that the Pistach themselves have not always been peaceful and understanding. The unveiling of the true contents of the Fresco is Tepper's warning against blindly clinging to the accepted meaning of certain religious texts, without taking into consideration either the historical context in which the text was originally written, or the fact that the available copies are merely translated from other copies.

Furthermore, the fact that the entire history of the Pistach was re-written by a single Pistach who had wanted to erase this particular section of Pistachian history, also points to the fallibility of religious texts, not least because most of them are available only as translated texts, of which the original proto-texts are written in archaic, unused languages. With regard to the Bible, for instance, Savory points out that there is an "absence of any indisputably accurate original Hebrew or Greek versions [of the Bible]. The available sources are not 'original', they are copies, or copies of copies of copies, and all of them different and inaccurate and puzzling in various degrees" (113). Moreover, as has already been mentioned, with each 'new' translation, something of the original is lost, until the end result becomes far removed from the original text.

Yet, in spite of this, there is a hierarchization of translated texts, whereby those texts which are older are sometimes felt to have more validity than newer translations, because they are somehow closer to the original Hebrew, Greek and Latin texts. The King James Version of the Bible, for instance, is often felt to be 'better', more truthful, than more modern translations of the Bible due to a common misperception, embedded in sentimentality, which equates antiquity with validity, the older English seeming to make it more valid than modern translations. Savory points out that it is "the universal, fundamental and wholly natural tendency among all people to prefer the language in which they read Holy Writ to be slightly archaic, old-fashioned if it please you, slightly different

from the market-place or even the study, slightly mysterious in phrase and in image” (112).⁴⁵ A particular, older translation might also be preferred because people are familiar with it.

With usual translations, something of the original meaning will inevitably be lost, no matter how close to the original it is. In *The Fresco*, however, this change is brought about purposefully, for the depiction of the Fresco, and consequently its meaning, underwent a kind of mutation. Canthorel was the one who had originally painted the Fresco; he had actually been alive during the time of Mengantowhai and had seen what Mengantowhai had done, therefore the original Fresco was painted “as an accusation and a warning” (Tepper 345) against such actions. The historian, Glumshalak, however, had taken it one step further and in his *Compendium* he virtually reinvented the history of the Pistach, because he did not “want his people to be bound by the cruelty and violence in their history ... He wanted his people to *believe* they were good” (Tepper 349).

However, Glumshalak did not just try to hide the Pistach’s true history by falsifying it; he also made a contingency plan of sorts in case the Pistach might one day clean the Fresco. He wanted to make sure that, if the Pistach were ever to clean the Fresco, Mengantowhai’s deeds would not be repeated, so he painted a tree in every single panel of the Fresco. Glumshalak was depending on the (apparently) universal understanding that a tree, as a symbol, represents growth, and depending on the content of the panel, the tree is “either dead or leafing out or in flower or fruit” (Tepper 347), because the tree’s status is used by Glumshalak to indicate which “incidents were deadly and which ones were fruitful” (Tepper 350). There are only two trees that are in fruit and these two are “in the panels where Pistach people disdained Mengantowhai” (Tepper 347), thus implying that the Pistach should not follow Mengantowhai’s actions, but should rather disapprove of them, as his contemporaries did. Glumshalak wanted the Pistach to put their history behind them, “in order that they might grow and bear good fruit” (Tepper 350). It is thus Glumshalak’s *Compendium* that has turned the Pistach into the people they are: “A good people. Not perfect, but good, because they’ve been selecting goodness for generations and generations” (Tepper 349). It is therefore not Mengantowhai who is the great spiritual leader and exemplar of the Pistach people, but Glumshalak. It is of course questionable whether the Pistach would have copied the behaviour of Mengantowhai as set out in the Fresco – they would surely have been able to ascertain for

⁴⁵ Savory, himself, seems particularly partial towards what he perceives as the superiority of the King James Version, calling it a work of “unapproachable quality” and that people who grew up with it, “resent any suggestion to change its matchless words and phrases. [It is a] version so beloved, so enshrined in the hearts of [its] readers, [that translators] can hope to improve it, here and there, only in matters of editorial detail” (106).

themselves that they should not follow the violent example as set out by Mengantowhai – yet Glumshalak seems to have assumed that the example of history, as written down, would naturally act as a blueprint of behaviour for the Pistach. In this way, Tepper again satirizes people who blindly follow religion, by implying that because it is written down, and supposedly divinely inspired, a religious text has legitimacy and authority.

Yet, another question arises as to whether it is in fact ethical, a quality that the Pistach value above all, of Glumshalak to change their history, for Glumshalak had made this decision on behalf of his people, and it has affected not only their history but also their functioning as a society. This is reminiscent of Savory's view that a translator, such as Glumshalak in this case, may "steer his readers towards an acceptance of the view that he would wish them to take" (183), which is in itself dangerous to both the translator and the reader. The way that the Pistach are led to believe in the authenticity and legitimacy of the Fresco mirrors the way in which certain communities may adopt a single version of a religious texts, which is in turn presented and accepted as an absolute truth. There is an element of complicity involved, for just as the Pistach athyci choose to continue believing what the Compendium says about the Fresco, so many people choose to accept a view rather than question it. As Ruthven points out, "Before modern forms of travel and communication made people living in different cultural systems aware of each other, most people assumed that their way of life or system of beliefs were the norm" (*Fundamentalism* 30).

The Fresco is primarily a critique of the way in which people cling to the accepted meaning of Holy texts, and Benita herself comments that "many religious groups don't worship God, they worship the Scriptures" (Tepper 341). Part of the reason for Savory considering the translation of Holy texts such as the Bible to be of great importance, is that the subject matter

touches man's very existence ... Men have sought in its pages comfort, or inspiration, or strength and have found these blessings emotionally rather than logically offered them. This is what they have preferred, so that their religious attitude rests on an unshakeable faith [of] which they will permit no alteration. (105)

It is this unwillingness to accept, or even consider, alternative interpretations that Tepper critiques, and Benita, acting as Tepper's mouthpiece, mentions that when the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered there was a lot of "secrecy and tabooing [about it] ... [b]ecause the orthodox religions were scared to death the scrolls might say something contrary to accepted theology" (Tepper 335). Moreover, questioning the foundation of a religion, be it the actual text or an interpretation of that text, is often frowned upon by those who are in power. The many religious wars, not only between

different religions, but also between different subsets of an individual religion, attest to the fact that people do not easily tolerate interpretations of religious texts that differ from their own, accepted versions. The novel is also largely a critique of the way in which people are discouraged from questioning set beliefs and interpretations and are expected to merely adhere closely to and obey accepted interpretations of religious texts.

While the Pistach's devotion to the Fresco is an interesting commentary on religious fundamentalism, the Pistach themselves, ironically perhaps, feel free to criticize human religions and fundamentalism. The Pistach, for instance, are not able to understand why people who kill and torture other people are considered to be evil, but "gods who torture and kill people [are] called good" (Tepper 90). For the Pistach, concerned as they are with morality, "would hate worshipping a god [they] could not respect" (Tepper 90). There is an element of self-righteousness in the way the Pistach are condescending towards other religions and societies; yet, they themselves are not able to look at their own way of living in an objective manner. In this way the Pistach mirror colonialist missionaries, who "sought to transform indigenous communities into imperial archetypes of civility and modernity by remodeling the individual, the community, and the state through western, Christian philosophies" (Johnston 13).

One of the solutions that the Pistach present to Earth's problems, and one that I feel is necessary to discuss, is that they make Jerusalem disappear. Gone are "the Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock, El Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Via Dolorosa ... the Citadel and the Antonia Fortress, the Zion Gate, the Jaffa Gate ... the entire Old city: Arab Quarter, Jewish Quarter, Armenians, Greek Orthodox, odds and ends of varietal Christians" (Tepper 131). The Pistach's reasoning is that if there is no Jerusalem, the Holy city over which many religions have fought wars, then there will be no more wars. The Pistach have signs all around the hole that was Jerusalem, all of them say the same thing, "whether in Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Aramaic or various forms of ancient or modern Hebrew or Greek: 'Jerusalem was to be a city of holy peace. Without peace, it is not to be'" (Tepper 132). Jerusalem is a kind of trans-religious text, to which the three biggest patriarchal religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – all ascribe particular religious importance to it. Jerusalem, because of its association with patriarchal religion, becomes synonymous with female oppression, as all three of these religions advocate some kind of subjugation of women; part of Neighborliness means equality for all, which is perhaps why this particular site was chosen. Jerusalem, in the context of the novel, becomes a site not only of religious subjugation, but also female oppression. Furthermore, the fact that the aliens choose to make this site disappear signifies

a kind of un-awareness on their part, for the way in which meaning is given to Jerusalem mirrors the way in which the Pistach give meaning to the Fresco, though in reverse. Jerusalem is a site that promises peace, yet leads to war; the Fresco depicts a violent history, but, through misinterpretation, promotes peace. Yet, the Pistach are not willing to recognize the similarity between themselves and religious people.

In spite of this and the fact that the Pistach's Fresco is a satire on fundamental religions, making fun of the way in which people blindly follow sacred texts and prophets, at the end of the novel, the Pistach's Fresco is 'restored'. Benita and Chad take a group of painters from Earth to Pistach home, who proceed to re-paint the Fresco: all the weapons are "replaced by symbols of peaceful progress ... Mengantowhai become[s] a sage and guide instead of a bloodthirsty oppressor ... The wine jars that had turned into assaulted Jaupati turned back into wine jars being virtuously fractured by abstemious Pistach" (Tepper 380). When this process of restoration is finished, Benita declares, with heavy irony, that this is "The *True* Fresco of Canthorel [emphasis added]" (Tepper 382).

The reason that the Pistach can maintain their way of life is that it is seen as a utopian solution to Earth's problems, such as violence, crime, and pollution, for it is part of the Pistach's mission to enforce Neighborliness on the inhabitants of Earth, and the "Pistach systems are carefully designed to afford gainful, useful employment for all members, even the inevitable supply of glusi" (Tepper 73). Glusi, according to the Pistach, are "the not-very-able-ones ... [who] use up space and resources without regenerating them" (Tepper 137) and because they are the ones who are not content, they present the biggest threat to the smooth-running of a society. By the end of the novel, however, the biggest problems on Earth have been eradicated and Glusi Centers have been put in place all over the world, where they try to 'rehabilitate'⁴⁶ those people who do not seem to contribute anything positive to society. An example of this is Benita's ex-husband, Bert, who used to be an abusive, unemployed alcoholic, but who, having entered a Glusi Center, seems to spend the rest of his days feeling "contented" (Tepper 399). Goodman, citing Christopher Grey and Christina Garsten, states that "utopianism 'frequently entails presumptions of knowledge, about the world and about what is best for other people, which are not just distasteful in principle, but horrific in their consequences'" ("Privilege" 19). The Pistach may thus have solved all of Earth's problems, but they have effectively taken away the free-will of mankind. As Goodman points out, "[u]topias

⁴⁶ One of Tepper's more controversial opinions is that "every person born of human parents is not necessarily human ... Persons who look human but who are uncontrollable or who habitually hurt other people [should] no longer be defined as human" (Szapatura), a view that is very much reflected in Tepper's portrayal of the glusi.

traditionally promise to fulfill the needs of their citizens, but such freedom often comes at the cost of strict conformity and a hierarchical system which does not offer liberation for all” (“Problematics” 6-7).

Moreover, because Benita is the one who decides on behalf of the Pistach and humanity that it would be better if the Fresco were restored, she can be equated with Glumshalak. Both of them take it upon themselves to make a decision that will influence an entire society; both of them assume self-righteously that they know what is best for everyone. This means that utopia, as presented by the Pistachian way of life, is enforced, dictatorially. Goodman points out that “those who construct utopian worlds are among those who need to un-learn that privilege” (“Privilege” 20).

The Pistach, in spite of their good intentions, are just like fundamentalists, for they too cling to the legitimacy and authority of the Fresco, even in the face of critiques against it, maintaining that it is the only blueprint according to which people should live. In enforcing their so-called utopian way of life on mankind, the Pistach are like missionaries. However, as Goodman points out, “in practice, utopia is never attained or regained” (33), and as Tepper indicates through her tongue-in-cheek and rather blatant satire of the influence of religion, as well as the fallible foundations of many religions, any improvement in society - be it on an interpersonal level or at an environmental level - will only happen if humanity attempts to solve its own problems, rather than wait for a (alien) saviour.

3.3. Guts, Glory and Gallantry – Masculinity in Tepper’s *The Fresco*

One of the narrative themes of *The Fresco* is the way in which male and female characters are constantly placed in opposition to each other; husbands and wives, sons and daughters are all contrasted with each other. Throughout the novel, women are largely portrayed to be better and more sensible than their male equivalents. Men, in the novel, are reduced to caricatures of stereotypically negative assumptions about masculinity, for they are largely portrayed as being a collective and malicious threat to women. In this way, the novel has a radical feminist view of men, which reduces men, as a collective whole, to being the enemies of women. Radical feminists characterize gender inequality as the belief that “men as a group dominate women as a group and are the main beneficiaries of the subordination of women” (Walby 3). Consequently, the novel rather simplistically seems to assign women to the category “good” and men to the category “bad”. This is potentially problematic, as it implies a one-dimensional, totalizing, and negative view of masculinity, especially in relation to femininity, which is explored in all its various facets. I propose, however, that this is done deliberately, for by caricaturing masculinity and reducing its

seeming importance in this way, Tepper is able to destabilize the way in which patriarchy and masculine domination are considered to be normative in society, especially since the novel depicts a traditional patriarchal society. However, the novel does not represent all men to be the enemy of women, for there are certain male characters who help the female protagonist, Benita Alvarez-Shipton, though even these men merely serve to highlight the fallacy of gender hierarchies. This section will therefore be an examination of the representation of masculinity in *The Fresco*, by examining the two kinds of masculinity found in the novel – threatening (due to both physical violence and sexist and misogynist views) and non-threatening (those who merely help the female protagonist) – and also focusing on the way in which Tepper purposefully satirizes stereotypical assumptions about masculinity in order to destabilize notions of masculine domination in a patriarchal society.

3.3.1 Threateningly Masculine: Violence, Sexism and Misogyny

According to Arthur Brittan, the patriarchal ideology of masculinity “justifies and naturalizes male dominance ... [as it takes] for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women; it accepts without question the sexual division of labour, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private sphere” (4). *The Fresco* depicts a highly patriarchal society and male characters frequently attempt to assert the natural superiority of men over women, especially through violence. Violence is traditionally associated with men, though as Whitehead and Barrett point, in spite of the fact that acts of “[a]ggression and violence are more likely to be carried out by males... not all males are violent and aggressive” (16). Connell suggests that violence is often used to sustain domination and that “[m]ost men do not attack or harass women, but those who do are unlikely to think themselves deviant. On the contrary, they usually feel they are entirely justified; that they are exercising a right. They’re authorized by an ideology of supremacy” (83).

In the novel, violence is a means by which women are subordinated to men. Bert Shipton, for instance, husband of Benita Alvarez, is portrayed as a stereotypical abusive, unemployed, alcoholic man of Latin American origins. For Bert, violence, both physical and psychological, keeps Benita in a subordinate position, a strategy that seems to have worked, for prior to the Pistach’s intervention Benita is never able to gather enough courage to escape from Bert’s oppression. Bert seems to get malicious enjoyment out of belittling Benita. On weekends, for instance, rather than go to work, when he has employment, Bert chooses to stay home, for he knows Benita will be there and he can therefore “get some fun out of bedevilling her” (Tepper 11). Moreover, when Benita tries to talk to Bert when he is sober, he merely “grunt[s] or utter[s] a monosyllable, or he grin[s], that infuriating

grin that [tells] her he [is] teasing her” (Tepper 13). Bert thus seems to have a psychological hold over Benita, so that no matter what he does to her, she is left feeling guilty. Violence is also a way in which Bert can assert his masculinity, for he feels largely emasculated by Benita, who is the breadwinner of the family. Moreover, Bert is portrayed as “a man of minor talents and major resentments” (Tepper 12). The consequent feelings of inferiority serve as a motivation for him to assert himself through violence.

It is also interesting to note that although on a domestic level, Bert, as a man in a patriarchal society, has authority over Benita, in the larger, globalized context, Bert himself, as a Hispanic man, is marginalized. It has been shown that dominated groups often internalize “messages and representations of themselves that the dominant group convey” (de la Rey and Duncan 59). Often this leads not to an attack against “the source of distress”, but rather against “themselves and their communities” (de la Rey and Duncan 59). For marginalized men, this would mean attacking those who are even further marginalized than themselves, such as women. For Bert, then, abusing Benita is not only a way to (re)claim supremacy over her within their culture, and it is also a way for him to gain some sense of agency within a globalized context.

Violence, moreover, seems to be a part of Benita and Bert’s culture, and is embedded within regional level of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, regional masculinities are “constructed at the level of the culture and nation-state” (849). In the novel, violence and aggression are part of the accepted behaviour for men in New Mexico. This is very much in line with stereotypical views on Latin-American masculinity, which is often “characterized as uniformly macho by anthropologists, other scholars, and journalists” (Gutman and Vigoya 123). This typically Latin masculine behaviour, or machismo, includes “drunkenness, violence, and adultery” (Gutmann and Vigoya 123). According to Benita, in New Mexico, where she and Bert live, “at least a third of the male population considered getting drunk [to be] a recreation and driving drunk an exercise of manly skill, something like bull fighting” (Tepper 11). Equating drunk driving with bull fighting, implies that the activity is more dangerous to the doer, though Bert himself has been convicted for driving under the influence five times, “the last time killing somebody” (Tepper 11). Bert and his “drinking cronies” also make fun of other marginalized groups, such as “women, fags, foreigners, [and] any racial or religious group not their own” (Tepper 13). Though these men are not religious, “they ha[ve] a common acceptance of what they’d honor and what they wouldn’t. They wouldn’t spit on a cross or a flag or a Bible, but they’d kick a small dog or hit a sassy woman without blinking” (Tepper 13). The fact that the only acts of actual

violence are against stereotypically defenceless beings, such as women and animals, emphasises that Bert and his friends can only really assert their masculinity on a regional level by oppressing those who are even lower than themselves in the social hierarchy.

Bert and his friends are reduced to stereotypical assumptions of masculinity, in fact, to bullies and, in the novel, this stereotype is portrayed as pathetic. Bert himself is reduced in stature and importance, for at the beginning of the novel, he is a threatening “predator” (Tepper 5); by the end of the novel, he becomes completely pacified, for he lives in a Glusi Center⁴⁷ and appears to be “contented” (Tepper 399) and is reduced to a zombie-like victim of the Pistach’s utopia.

Sexism and misogyny are also stereotypical aspects of patriarchal masculinity; in the novel, this is considered to be a natural part of masculinity, and is carried over from one generation to the next. This is in line with Judith Butler’s notion of the performative nature of gender, whereby “gender is [merely] the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (33). According to Butler, “the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and a reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (140). In *The Fresco* misogyny becomes a natural part of masculine behaviour. For instance, Carlos, Benita’s son, considers his sister, Angelica, to be “negligible, not worth his investment” (Tepper 17). Most important, is the fact that Carlos gets this attitude “from his father” who is “big on the worthlessness of women” (Tepper 17). This sexist view of women that is carried over is also a cultural occurrence, for, according to Gutmann and Vigoya, there is a tendency in Latin American cultures “to reproduce relations grounded in hegemonic masculinity; that is, to ignore or subordinate women” (118). Therefore, because Carlos is an exact copy of his father, and because his father is his “role model” (Tepper 63), they share the same definition of what it means to be manly.

Carlos, like his father, is an artist, though only in name. It is his father who decides that Carlos should be an artist, that Carlos will be a miniature version of Bert; “Bert was an artist. Carlos would be an artist” (Tepper 15). The way in which Bert also forces a masculine way of being onto his son mirrors Judith Butler’s notion of the performative nature of gender, for Bert’s definition of masculinity becomes Carlos’s definition of masculinity. However, though Carlos is very much like his father, for they both exhibit the same lazy sense of entitlement, Carlos does not share his

⁴⁷ The so-called rehabilitation centers for people who had previously been ‘useless’ to society.

father's fate. Though Carlos is not reduced to the same extent as his father, he is changed. One of the Pistach performs "a little envy removal" on Carlos, so that he "did not measure everything against some other person. Plus just enough forgetting not to resent the world" (Tepper 388). After this Carlos becomes "charming" and "respectful" (Tepper 389) for the first time in his life, so that, although he is also technically a victim of the Pistach's utopia, he is not reduced to a pitiable figure; instead, he is forced to adopt a different definition of masculinity which emphasizes gallantry and equality.

Misogyny is also shown to be part of the masculine ideal of the group of government men in the novel, a group which includes generals and senators, such as Byron Morse, who was discussed in a previous section. These men largely revere excessive masculinity and all of them seem to have and promote misogynist tendencies. Byron Morse, for instance, is given advice by another senator as to how he should treat women: "Whup 'em in the bedroom ... but treat 'em like queens where the world can see. They'll forgive you the one out of gratefulness for the other" (Tepper 201). These men also seem to revere "traditional values", such as "guts and glory, defined as unquestioned patriotism, marital fidelity, defined as discretion in extramarital affairs, 'traditional' gender roles, that is excusing rape and abuse by blaming the victim" (Tepper 220). This group of men is portrayed in an especially negative way in the novel, and they are reduced to the most caricatured representations of masculinity. It is therefore significant that every time these men try to harm or undermine Benita in any way, she is able to foil their plans, rather easily at times. In this way, Tepper satirizes the way in which some men assume their importance and power over women in society by merely being male.

Furthermore, although the male characters all promote sexist and misogynist views, these are shown to be ironic, for all the men, in spite of viewing women as inferior to themselves, need these women in their lives. Bert, for instance, though insisting women are worthless, is dependent on Benita for his basic needs, such as food; similarly, Carlos, who also says that his sister has no worth, is also dependent on her when they share a flat. In addition, Byron Morse, as has been shown in the previous section, needs the women in his life to fulfil his political ambitions. The fact that these sexist men all need women in their lives is one way in which Tepper indicates that gender hierarchies are based on false assumptions about the dominance of one gender over another one, her novel seems to imply that there should be equality between the genders.

3.3.3 Non-Threatening Masculinity: Nice Guys Finish Last

The above-mentioned men all threaten femininity in some way, though there are other men in the novel who do not pose a threat to women, but who rather help them. For instance, Benita Alvarez is helped by various men, throughout her journey. Among the first of these are Walter Marsh and Rene (Goose) Legusier, who are the ones who first employ her. It is because of them that Benita is able to generate an income and look after her family. For Benita's mother, however, who found the job for Benita, the most important thing about Goose and Marsh is the fact that they are "homosexuals ... [which] means they will not trouble [Benita] at work" (Tepper 60). They are thus considered to be harmless, because they present no real sexual threat to Benita. It is interesting to note that Goose and Marsh remain on the margins of the narrative, for they never once speak directly, and they are only ever (re)presented from Benita and her mother's perspectives. This mirrors the way in which homosexuality is a marginalized form of masculinity.

Benita is helped by two other men as well, namely Simon de Greco and Chad Riley. Simon helps Benita by providing her with accommodation and a job while she is in Washington, acting as the intermediary between the aliens and the world. Chad Riley works for the secret service, and acts as Benita's bodyguard. Both of these men are potential love interests, but neither of these relationships are realised. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Benita has aligned herself with Chiddy, her alien friend, in a kind of diplomatic marriage. Benita thus rejects both potential male love-interests in favour of Chiddy. Embarking on a relationship with either Simon or Chad would mean that Benita is subordinating herself to another man; however, by aligning⁴⁸ herself with Chiddy, Benita is able to be completely free of patriarchy and masculine domination, and can develop a more independent state of being. Accepting the help of these men is thus not a sign of stereotypical female dependency, but rather a way for Benita to claim equality with them. In so doing, Tepper also breaks the stereotypical assumptions about gender relations, destabilizing the foundations of patriarchy and masculine domination. The caricature-like representation of masculinity does not serve to impose a binary division between male and female, but rather seeks to break such a division, by implying equal value for both.

Just as in *Grass*, Tepper thus successfully manages to bring her societal concerns across in the novel. The thematic similarities, as well as the difference in tone, between the two novels are an

⁴⁸ The word "aligning" also has more positive connotations to it than the concept "marriage" for it does not seem to have the same symbolic meaning of power, but rather suggests two people matching up with one another.

indication of Tepper's concern about the fact that the same issues are prevalent in society. As I will show in more detail in the next section, it is thus not this repetition that is problematic, but the necessity for it.

Conclusion

Sheri Tepper's worth as a feminist science fiction writer has often been overlooked by critics, due not only to the "repetitive" (Clarke n.pag.) nature of her works, but also because of the "didactic ham-fistedness" that "mars" (Tilman n.pag.) most of her later works. With the exception of *The Gate to Women's Country* (1998), *Beauty* (1991) and *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (1996)⁴⁹, and to a lesser extent *Grass*, her novels have not received as much critical attention as they perhaps deserve. Though both the repetitiveness and the sense of being lectured at are undeniable, especially in her later works, this does not mean her worth as a writer, and as a social commentator, should be ignored. Rather, the recurring nature of her dominant themes is indicative of society's seeming inability to address and resolve the issues in question. These issues include inequalities in gender relations, especially the way in which gender inequalities manifest through discourses on motherhood and reproduction, and the way in which these inequalities are influenced by religions, traditions and ideologies, which have an indirect effect on the environment. The repetitive nature of Tepper's novels is thus not a negative reflection on her abilities as a writer, but instead underscores the "failure of mankind to learn from its mistakes" (Vint n.pag.).

One of the issues which she raises that is still prevalent today is the question of reproductive freedom. In the United States of America, for instance, there has recently been a wide-ranging debate at the level of National and Federal Government on whether or not to cut funding for Planned Parenthood, the family planning, non-profit organization with which Tepper was also involved. The greatest proponents for this budget cut are conservative Americans and politicians, who are "convinced that Planned Parenthood is a taxpayer-financed abortion mill, even though taxpayer dollars cannot be used to pay for abortion services (performed at a handful of the state's 58 clinics) or counselling. In their minds, the clinics will always perpetuate evil, the great liberal evil" (Stile n.pag.). This is in spite of the fact that Planned Parenthood also provides "health services for women, particularly poor women, including birth control and other reproductive health services such as testing for cervical cancer and sexually transmitted diseases" ("Steps" n.pag.). Public opinion surrounding abortion and the legal, religious, and personal implications of these seem to have influenced many conservative politicians and people in such a manner that they are trying to

⁴⁹ I have purposefully avoided these novels, precisely because they have received much critical attention, especially *The Gate to Women's Country*, in essence a feminist utopian text in which gender roles are reversed, and which was one of the first feminist science fiction novels to be distributed as "mass market fiction rather than exclusively science fiction" (Roberts, *A New Species* 87) and is considered to be "a bit of a feminist sci-fi landmark" (Barnes n.pag.).

force women to adhere to outdated gender norms and are limiting women's control over their bodies. This is very much in line with Tepper's critique of the dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood and reproduction, and it goes against her argument that women should be given reproductive freedom. Planned Parenthood's distribution of contraceptives should, in fact, largely eliminate the need for abortions and, as Vera Peters points out, will also lead to fewer "unwanted babies being born only to be abused or even killed" (n.pag.).

Furthermore, Tepper has also argued in a number of her novels – and in *The Fresco* in particular – that women should be allowed the option of legal abortions without any kind of discrimination. This is something that is still a contentious site in modern society, since many religious and political groups regard abortions as immoral. Moreover, Planned Parenthood is currently facing a decrease in government sponsored funds because "some of its clinics perform abortions" ("Planned Parenthood Ban Unwise" n.pag.). In spite of this, if Planned Parenthood's funding is cut, then that could actually increase the number of abortions performed, both legally and illegally, "because access to family planning services would be restricted" ("Planned Parenthood Ban Unwise" n.pag.). For Tepper, abortion should not be denied as an option to women who need it, not only to avoid unwanted children being born, but also to break away from the view that women's bodies somehow belong to the government.

Moreover, the fact that women still do not have sufficient reproductive freedom is also a leading cause for overpopulation, which has a detrimental effect on the environment. This is a common theme in *Grass* and *The Fresco*, and in many of her other novels, such as *Singer from the Sea* (1999) – which is set in an indeterminate future in which humanity has used up all of Earth's resources many generations previously and settled on other planets – and *The Companions* (2003) – which is set in a much nearer dystopian present/future and in which Earth is again facing destruction due to overpopulation – there is a warning against allowing this to happen. Currently, however, there is not only a universal lack of reproductive freedom for women, but also a growing discourse arguing that overpopulation is merely a myth. Craven proposes that "one of the most persistent and pervasive myths that have shaped the thinking of many people and, subsequently, public policy is the myth that the world's population is spiralling out of control and that it will ultimately lead to catastrophic shortages of the essential resources necessary to sustain life" (n.pag.). The idea of overpopulation being a myth runs concurrently with the idea that family planning is not necessary and that women should therefore not be allowed to have access to contraceptives or abortion.

Tepper's chosen medium of writing – feminist science fiction – allows her to explore her dystopian vision of the future as a consequence of ignorance about, indifference towards and inaction against what she perceives as the prevailing problems in modern society. Feminist science fiction is more than just “an enormously fertile environment for [especially] the exploration of sociocultural understandings of gender” (Merrick 241) and a way to “teach us to rethink traditional, patriarchal notions about science reproduction, and gender” (Roberts, *A New Species* 2). It is also “a potent tool for feminist imaginative projects that are the necessary first steps in undertaking the cultural and social transformation that are the aims of the feminist political enterprise” (Hollinger 128). It is thus appropriate that Tepper's novels – in the way that they highlight social injustices and inequalities – are perhaps the first step towards realizing the changes that she desires.

Tepper's obvious frustration at the general lack of improvement in her focus areas are especially reflected in the way that later novels like *The Fresco* present easy, almost magical, solutions for a multitude of complex problems. As mentioned in Chapter Three, this is most likely done to highlight the idea that bringing about social and environmental change cannot be left to the “few [who are] clear-sighted enough to see what needs to be done” (Clarke n.pag.) or be the doing of the long-awaited alien fairy-godmother-saviours that will resolve all problems instantly by “simply forc[ing] people to ‘reform’ and behave” (Charnas 34). Rather, humanity should take responsibility and solve its own problems.

However, although Tepper does reiterate the same themes and underlying messages in her novels, this does not mean that her writing is repetitive, for the “full-bloodedness of her obsessions, and the creativity of her fertile imagination” (Barnes n.pag.) means that her novels remain “exciting” (Barnes n.pag.). She is able to “blend present-day mundane with the fantastical and the mythical and the historical and the adventurous and the beautiful” (Szpatura n.pag.). Tepper is able to create an accessible feminist genre uniquely her own by means of her engagement with the male/patriarchal literary history that has preceded her novels. Adam Roberts for instance states that in *Grass*, Tepper engages dialectically with “three strong texts by American authors, *Dune* [by Frank Herbert], *Leaves of Grass* [by Walt Whitman], and *Moby Dick* [by Herman Melville]” to create “a novel of unusual depth and subtlety” (Review n.pag.). It is Tepper's ability to combine elements traditionally associated with (feminist) science fiction and fantasy, as separate – though interlinked genres – into coherent and well-structured pieces of accessible literature, which allow her to speak to a wider audience.

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