Matrilineage, Migration and Memory:
A Feminist Literary Critique of Judy Budnitz’ *If I Told You Once* and Jane Urquhart’s *Away*

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Abstract

In this thesis I perform a feminist literary critique of Judy Budnitz’ *If I Told You Once* (1999) and Jane Urquhart’s *Away* (1993). The research question is: can these novels be read as feminist or as anti-feminist novels? The novels are categorized as matrilineal narratives: narratives which represent multiple generations of women. I start from the observation that despite this mode – which lends itself to feminist fiction – the novels contain anti-feminist elements. The function of the matrilineal narrative in these novels is analysed. Furthermore I analyse how the themes of ‘migration’ and ‘memory’ intersect with gender in *Away* and *If I Told You Once*. I conclude that these novels cannot be read as one-sidedly feminist or antifeminist. Their feminist potential is not carried all the way through. We should be careful about establishing a direct link between matrilineal narratives and feminist writing.
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1. Introduction

In this thesis I will be performing a feminist literary critique of two novels, Judy Budnitz’ *If I Told You Once* (1999) and Jane Urquhart’s *Away* (1993). Both of these novels were written by women writers and both portray the lives of several generations of women. That does not necessarily mean that these novels are feminist novels; as Ellen Rose noted, “not all women’s novels are feminist” (Rose 1988: 87). Upon reading *If I Told You Once* and *Away* neither of these novels appear to be convincingly feminist. Indeed, the determinism that is present in the portrayal of the women’s lives is just one element which appears as non-feminist, or perhaps even as antifeminist. *If I Told You Once* has been categorized in previous research as an “antifeminist family romance” (Yu 2005: 193). At the same time these novels contain themes and characteristics which frequently occur in novels that are deemed feminist. So starting from this observation I will research how these novels relate to feminism and feminist literature.

When researching feminist fiction it became clear that what many researchers define as ‘feminist fiction’ are novels that were written in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Gayle Greene asserts that “the feminist fiction that flourished in the late sixties and early seventies came out of the liberation movement, the so-called Second Wave of feminism in this century” (Greene 1991: 292). According to some researchers this feminist fiction “must perform a systemic critique of patriarchy” (Hogeland 1994: 288) and “draw subject, theme and style from an imaginative collectivity of women writers and readers” (Miner 1981: 26). A direct connection between feminist fiction and the women’s movement of the sixties and seventies is frequently made by critics and researchers (Crain 1974, Miner 1981). Based on these interpretations of what feminist fiction is we are led to believe that fiction which originated after the so-called Second Wave\(^1\) could no longer be feminist in this strict sense.

There are however also researchers who use broader definitions of feminist fiction. With respect to form in feminist fiction Gayle Greene concludes that “whatever the relation of these writers to the women’s movement […] they may be termed feminist in that they offer a critique of

\(^1\) There are researchers who critique this division in ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ wave feminism, since it seems to imply that the women’s movement disappeared in between these peak moments. It also creates contrast between these different periods whereas in reality activists and researchers still interacted with the ideas of previous movements. (Julie Carlier, “Feminisme en Diversiteit in Transnationaal Historisch Perspectief” 2018, lecture notes)
culture that […] seeks to ‘change the rules of the old game’” (Greene 1990: 87). Some novels are also considered to be “honorary feminist novels”, not because they were published in relation to women’s movements, but because they “[chart] the experience of women’s oppression” (Coward 1980: 58). According to author Roxane Gay a feminist novel is “a novel where the concerns of women and womanhood are the alpha and the omega of the narrative but it also deals explicitly with stories, with the lives of women” (Gay 2014: 45, original emphasis). Therefore Gay considers novels such as Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985) and Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games (2008) – both written after the seventies – as feminist fiction (Gay 2014).

Both novels discussed in this thesis were published in the 1990’s, two decades after the Second Wave of feminism – a period often characterized as postfeminist. According to Greene this meant a departure from feminist fiction as it was written in the seventies: “Unfortunately, feminist fiction of the sort I have described has passed with the seventies, as white women’s fiction has participated in postfeminist retrenchments of the eighties” (Greene 1991: 320). Here Greene shows a negative appreciation of postfeminist fiction in which she seems to imply that a kind of golden era of feminist fiction has come to an end. Based on Roxane Gay’s (2014) insights on feminist novels, Greene’s vision can be nuanced. A novel such as The Hunger Games may not explicitly or consistently critique patriarchy – as would have been the case in the seventies – but it can still be considered feminist. Away and If I Told You Once, as novels from the postfeminist nineties, form an interesting case study to research how feminism was incorporated – if it was at all incorporated – in novels from this decade. So the research question developed in this thesis is: Can Away and If I Told You Once be read as feminist or as anti-feminist novels?

Away was written by Canadian author Jane Urquhart and was published in 1993. The novel tells the story of the O’Malley family and covers four generations of Irish migrant women. The story begins with the first generation in Ireland in 1842 when Mary meets a drowned sailor whom she falls in love with. The sailor dies within one night of the meeting but Mary’s infatuation with him persists and leads to an escape into her imagination. The state she is in is described by her community as being ‘away’; the Irish community believes Mary was taken away by ‘the others’: faeries who had placed someone else in Mary’s body. In order to bring Mary back it is decided that she has to marry. She marries Brian O’Malley, a teacher, and soon

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2 I have used the 1995 Penguin Books publication.
after they have a son named Liam. The family is forced to migrate to Canada as a consequence of the Irish Potato Famine. After the family have arrived in Canada, a second child is born: Eileen. Soon after Eileen’s birth Mary leaves her family to once again be closer to her ghostly lover. She lives by Moira Lake in Canada where she dies after seven years. Her daughter Eileen is raised by Brian and Liam. She takes after Mary, both physically and mentally. After Brian’s death gold is discovered in the family plot. The plot is sold to the O’Malleys’ former English landlord and Liam and Eileen move away. During a stay at an inn Eileen falls in love with Aidan Lanighan, a fellow Irish immigrant. Liam then moves the entire inn to a new location at the shore of the Great Lake, Loughbreeze Beach, where he starts a farm. Eileen travels to Montréal to find Aidan and accidentally becomes involved in a murder. Eileen allows herself to be transported by her imagination, only to be disappointed by Aidan. She moves back to the farm, alone, where she lives out the rest of her life. Eileen and Aidan have a daughter, Deirdre, who was raised by Brian and his wife Molly as their own child. Deirdre does not take after her mother and grandmother so the novel skips her generation. The fourth generation consists of Esther who shows an uncanny likeness to Mary and Eileen. In order to prevent Esther from being carried ‘away’ by her imagination Eileen tells the family story to Esther. Eileen succeeds in her intention and Esther runs the family farm until her death.

Most of the research on Away involves the novel’s problematic relation to postcolonialism and its representation of the Irish and Canadian collective past. Cynthia Sugars has published on the ambiguities and contradictions in Away’s depiction of the Canadian colonial past (2001) and on the use of ghosts in the romanticized reconstruction of this past (2003). Herb Wyile (1999) has analysed how the Irish and Canadian past have been historicized through the use of myths in Away. There has also been research on the novel’s use of magical realism (Goldman, 2002 & 2012), its issues with authenticity (Omhovère 2007) and its use of water symbolism (Loreto 1998) and name symbolism (Robitaillié 2016). Some of the research also takes the representation of femininity in the novel as its focus (Birch 1997, Loreto 1998).

If I Told You Once, by Jewish-American author Judy Budnitz, was published in 1999. The novel traces four generations of Jewish-European migrant women. The story begins with Ilana who grows up in an unspecified place in Eastern-Europe. As a teenager Ilana leaves her home and eventually moves to the United States following a pogrom which leaves her village and her family obliterated. On her journey Ilana meets Shmuel. She migrates to New York with him

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3 I have used the 2001 edition published by Flamingo.
where they live as husband and wife. Ilana and Shmuel have three children: the twins Wolf and Eli and their daughter Sashie. The boys die during the Second World War in Europe; Shmuel dies around the same time. This leaves Ilana and Sashie alone in their flat, a mother and daughter who do not get along. Sashie marries Joe; together they have two children: Jonathan and Mara. Joe, however, is an adulterer which leads to Ilana and Sashie arranging his murder. Mara feels a deep, incestuous love for her brother Jonathan. Out of jealousy she burns his girlfriend Chloe who gives birth to a baby girl before dying of her injuries. At this point Jonathan has already disappeared from the story. Now there are four women living in the same flat without any men around: Ilana, Sashie, Mara and the youngest, Jonathan’s daughter Nomie. The first three generations of women all live very limited, domestic lives. The women dislike each other; they each try to distance themselves from their mother and daughter. Nomie, however, represents change for the family. She is treated by Ilana, Sashie and Mara as their own daughter. As a teenager Nomie becomes pregnant. Consequently she travels away from home to get an abortion. When she comes back home afterwards Ilana disappears, leaving the novel with an open ending.

There has not been a lot of research on *If I Told You Once*. Philippe Codde (2009) compared the novel to Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* in its use of myth and fairy tales in the transmission of trauma. The novel was also analysed in a master’s thesis by Ellen Claeys (2009) at Ghent University; she explored the fairy tale motifs in the novel. The most exhaustive analysis of this novel was written by Yi-Lin Yu in her book on matrilineal narratives (2005). She categorizes *If I Told You Once* as a matrilineal narrative and concludes that the novel is an “antifeminist family romance” (Yu 2005: 193). It is Yu’s exploration of matrilineal narratives and her evaluation of *If I Told You Once* as anti-feminist which inspired my own analysis. Although I mostly agreed with her analysis I had reservations about classifying the novel as one-sidedly antifeminist. This led me to perform a feminist analysis of the novel in which I take up topics which were not explored by Yu in order to arrive at a more nuanced analysis. Furthermore, *Away* had not yet been gauged from a feminist perspective since the novel has mostly been analysed from a postcolonial perspective. It is this gap in the research on both novels that I address in this thesis. Additionally, *Away* and *If I Told You Once* had not yet been compared to one another.

Budnitz’ and Urquhart’s novels have three major themes in common: matrilineage, migration and memory. These allow for a comparative analysis between the two novels and each of these themes are connected to gender in both works. These themes have led to the three sub-questions
which will be discussed in this thesis; the first one being: how is matrilineage related to feminism in *If I Told You Once* and *Away*? Both of these novels are matrilineal narratives, Yu (2005) concludes that matrilinealism in literature often is a feminist endeavour. At the same time she characterizes the matrilineal narrative in *IITYO* as antifeminist. So how does the matrilineal narrative function in the two works? Migration is the second theme that leads to a sub-question: how does the identity of the characters as migrant women function in *IITYO* and *Away*? The characters’ experiences as migrant women lead to an intersectional perspective through which I will explore how gender and migration interact in the novels. These first two themes are also connected to each other, as Yu shows that there is an “inseparable link among female identification, matrilineage and motherland” (Yu 2005: 203). The third theme which is prominent in the novels is memory. Memories are passed on from one generation of women to the next. They establish a familial connection between the women but memory is also problematized in the novels. So the last sub-question is: how does memory function in these diasporic matrilineal narratives? The memories are passed on through the act of storytelling which “perpetuates the continuity and creativity of one particular cultural heritage” which is “vital to the survival of immigrant minorities” (Yu 2005:208). Memory and storytelling are thus also connected to migration. Apart from these major themes I will also analyse the function of male characters in these novels by taking a closer look at the plot structure.

The conclusion of the analysis is that these novels cannot be read as either one-sidedly feminist or anti-feminist. The ambiguity of this outcome reflects the complexity of *Away* and *IITYO*. As matrilineal narratives they carry feminist potential but it is not carried through throughout the novels. We have to be careful about establishing a direct connection between matrilineal narratives and feminist writing.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Frame

2.1 Methodology

In my thesis, I will conduct a comparative close reading informed by critical theories and definitions. I will look at the definitions and characteristics of matrilineal narratives and how they tie in with feminist thought on motherhood. The critical theories which I will be using are postcolonialism and memory studies. Apart from that narratology will also be used to examine the plot structure of the novels. In the rest of this chapter I will discuss the theoretical frame.

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4 Throughout my thesis I will be using the abbreviation *IITYO* to refer to *If I Told You Once*. In subsequent chapters I will introduce the novel’s title in full before switching to the abbreviation for the sake of brevity.
2.2 Matrilineal Narratives
Both novels discussed in this thesis can be categorized as matrilineal narratives. Yu (2005) asserts that mother-daughter relationships have always been an important theme in women’s writing. In matrilineal narratives the mother-daughter relationship is expanded to include a third generation of women, forming a “grandmother-mother-daughter-triad” (Yu 2005: 2). More specifically, a matrilineal narrative is a narrative “which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors” (Tess Coslett qtd. in Yu 2005: 2). According to Yu matrilineal narratives form “a distinct mode of women’s writing” (Yu 2005: 2). Yu also identifies a number of features that are typical of how matrilinealism is presented in this mode. The first feature is “a sense of strong identification between mothers and daughters” (Yu 2005: 3). Secondly, because of the focus on female family relationships in matrilineal narratives father figures tend to be absent from these narratives (Yu 2005). A third feature is that matrilinealism in matrilineal narratives serves as “the lifeline and the family line that sustain[s] and safeguard[s] the continuation of marginalized, endangered cultures or subcultures” (Yu 2005: 3). Furthermore, Yu’s definition of matrilinealism also includes “nonbiological [sic] aspects of motherhood” (Yu 2005: 3) so that matrilinealism is not necessarily an essentialist notion. In presenting narratives about women, female relationships and motherhood matrilineal narratives share topics of interest with feminism. In order to be able to discuss how matrilineal narratives are related to feminism it is necessary to briefly discuss the different conceptions of motherhood within feminism.

During the nineteenth century women were increasingly defined by physicians based on their reproductive function which was used to justify their subordinate position in society (Ross 2016: 12). The idea of the ‘maternal instinct’ was borne out of this construction; the maternal instinct suggests that women are naturally nurturing and therefore also more “submissive, and passive compared to men” (Ross 2016: 12). Thus motherhood was constructed as a biological and natural imperative in order to fit a patriarchal discourse. This particular construction of motherhood was carried into the twentieth century and persists to this day. Ross states that in contemporary Western societies “the wonders of birth and the joys of motherhood are ideals [that are] celebrated” (Ross 2016: 2). A “motherhood mystique” (Ross 2016: 3) surrounds the notion of motherhood today. This is “the shared cultural belief that motherhood provides ultimate fulfilment for all women” (Ross 2016: 3). This patriarchal construction of motherhood is oppressive and harmful to women, warranting criticism from feminists. In particular, criticism of motherhood was mainly formed by Second Wave feminists. Andrea O’Reilly writes
that some Second Wave feminists saw motherhood as “naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive” (O’Reilly 2008: 3).

Another stance was, however, also present during the 1970’s. Adrienne Rich made one of the most impactful contributions to the study of motherhood in feminism. She made a distinction between the concepts ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’. As Ross explains “Rich (1976/1979) used the term ‘motherhood’ specifically to refer to a patriarchal institution that was male-defined, male-controlled, and oppressive to women; by contrast, the word ‘mothering’ was identified as female-defined and focused on women’s interests” (Ross 2016: 5). As such, mothering could be a source of empowerment for women (Ross 2016: 5). Thus from the 1970’s onwards feminist maternal scholars criticized motherhood as an oppressive, patriarchal institution while allowing space for female empowerment through mothering. Ross, however, posits that this more positive stance towards mothering could be misinterpreted as presenting “women as essentially maternal” (Ross 2016: 32).

The evolution towards a more positive feminist stance towards mothering during the 1970’s is important in the context of matrilineal narratives. According to Tess Cosslett matrilineal narratives are “‘a part of the feminist movement’s recovery of the mother/daughter bond’” (Tess Cosslett qtd. in Yu 2005: 3). As mentioned above, this recovery of relationality holds a potential risk of essentializing motherhood. Consequently this relationality is now being questioned in the most recent stage of feminist thinking on motherhood. Yu posits that matrilineal narratives can “contribute to reconceptualizing and retheorizing feminist thinking on motherhood and mothering in ‘the latest and most difficult stage.’” (Yu 2005: 6). One way in which matrilineal narratives do this is by expanding the mother-daughter dyad into a triad by adding the figure of the grandmother (Yu 2005). This prevents the emergence of an image of essential motherhood because the grandmother is simultaneously “a mother and a nonmother (or even better, an othermother […]”) (Yu 2005: 6). Another way in which matrilineal narratives can help to reconceptualise current feminist thinking on motherhood is by reconciling the repudiation and recuperation of motherhood. Yu writes that “in an analogous fashion to feminist development of motherhood, most mothers and daughters, as represented in contemporary matrilineal narratives, go through a similar process of repudiation and recuperation in their interactions with their mother” (Yu 2005: 7-8). Rather than presenting either repudiation or recuperation matrilineal narratives feature both; conflict between mothers and daughters is present in matrilineal narratives but the conflict leads to a process of reconnection (Yu 2005).
2.3 Postcolonialism

*Away* and *If I Told You Once* are not just matrilineal narratives, they are diasporic matrilineal narratives. This means that the theme of migration intersects with the theme of motherhood in these novels. This intersection leads to particular relationships between the characters which can be explored from a postcolonial perspective. Postcolonial theory is “a form of critique that exposes colonial hierarchies and power relationships between the center (the dominant cultures in Europe and the United States) and the margins (minority voices in the center and cultures described as ‘third world’ and ‘developing’)” (Jones 2011: 24). Rachel Bailey Jones succinctly defines postcolonialism as “the term generally used to describe the work of scholars and artists who explore the legacy of colonialism” (Jones 2011: 23).

There are two concepts in postcolonial studies which warrant some explanation since they are useful in the analysis of the novels. These concepts are settler-colonialism and diaspora. Canada, the second major location after Ireland in *Away*, experienced a particular type of colonial rule, namely settler-colonialism. This means that immigrants from Britain and other European countries settled in Canada. Consequently “the settlers became the predominant population, dominating the indigenous population” (Bowers 2004: 98). This is different from colonialism in which not many people from the colonialist countries actually migrated to the colonized countries, leaving the indigenous population in the majority (Bowers 2004). Earlier I have called *Away* and *If I Told You Once* diasporic matrilineal narratives. The term ‘diaspora’ “refer[s] to the forced and voluntary migrations set in motion by empire” (Procter 2007: 151). Diaspora is “associated with movements through and between locations, and even with dislocation” (Procter 2007: 151). As migration and settlement from Europe to colonized territories formed a significant part of colonialism, colonialism is regarded as a diasporic movement (Procter 2007). Diasporas are taken up in cultural production, leading to diasporic writing which focuses “on stories of mobility and identity construction” (Nyman 2009: 10).

*Away* can be categorized as a postcolonial novel more clearly than *IITYO*. From England’s power over Ireland to the settler-colonialism in Canada, *Away* portrays the effects of colonial rule and the ambiguities and complexity of the colonizer-colonized relationship. *IITYO* does not take place in a colonial context as such but the representation and imagery that characterizes colonialist discourse is reflected in the novel. Thus, a colonialist discourse is present in *IITYO*, making postcolonialism a framework which is applicable to both novels.

The postcolonial includes “the hybrid and multiple identities of those both physically and metaphorically in motion” (Jones 2011: 25); Budnitz and Urquhart show these complex hybrid
identities in their multigenerational diasporic narratives. Hybridity was explored by Homi Bhabha as a characteristic of postcolonialism, in opposition to the fixity of colonial discourse (Jones 2011). Jones describes the latter as the representation of identities as fixed, essentialized and naturalized which changed to hybridity – the notion that identities are socially constructed and therefore are constantly in flux – in postcolonial discourse (Jones 2011: 30). As a consequence “postcolonial identity formation begins to occur based not on fixity but on movement, migration, and negotiation” (Jones 2011: 30).

The colonial discourse was based on an imagined difference between the colonizers and the colonized (McLeod 2007): “If the colonizers were deemed civilized, then the colonized were declared barbaric; if the colonizers were thought of as rational, reasonable, cultured, learned, then the colonized were dismissed as illogical, awkward, naïve, ignorant” (McLeod 2007: 2). For those familiar with gender studies this will sound familiar. Gender was implicated in the colonial discourse: the colonized were framed in oppressive feminine terms, whereas the colonizers presented themselves in masculine terms: “As the less rational, less developed, and more mystical culture, the native culture was thought as feminine and in need of masculine control and protection” (Jones 2011: 28). In Away and IITYO the first protagonists, respectively Mary and Ilana, are connected to the mystical, a move which can be regarded as part of a patriarchal discourse (women equal the irrational and the natural, men equal rational disembodiment). A significant part of this dichotomy is the value judgment attached to the opposite sides of the binary: the feminine side is always framed as negative in this patriarchal discourse (this is also reflected in the reiteration of this discourse in colonialism). In this sense there is an overlap between colonial and patriarchal discourses, making postcolonial theory a relevant source for my analysis.

2.4 Memory Studies
Memory studies is a broad field which cannot be entirely covered here due to limited space. I will, however, briefly discuss one of the topics of memory studies, namely the transmission of trauma since it is of importance to my analysis. Philippe Codde (2009) discusses Judy Budnitz as a third generation Jewish-American author who “seek[s] to access, recreate and artistically represent […] a traumatic past that is by definition inaccessible” (Codde 2009: 62). The intergenerational transmission of trauma is relevant to Budnitz as a third generation author but it is also a process which occurs within the narratives of If I Told You Once and Away. One way in which trauma can be transmitted from one generation to the next is through “the mere act of listening to witness testimony about devastating events” which can make “the secondary
witness [...] take over some of the traumatic burden” (Codde 2009: 62). Because of the listener’s empathy which can arise in this process the listener can have “a ‘vicarious’ experience of trauma” (Codde 2009: 63) in which the listener imagines that they experienced the trauma themselves (Codde 2009). The transmission of trauma becomes problematic in the third generation which does not have direct access to the trauma (Codde 2009). Therefore ‘postmemory’ is used to refer to the third generation. Codde defines postmemory as “an obsession with the opaque and inaccessible past of one’s parents or grandparents” (Codde 2009: 64). Because of the nature of trauma “witness testimony [...] tends to be extremely circuitous, avoiding those elements that are too painful to tell” (Codde 2009: 67). The ambiguities of the intergenerational transmission of trauma are illustrated in the novels.

3. Literary analysis

3.1 Genre, Plot and Gender

For the analysis of the novels genre and plot form important levels of analysis. In terms of genre Away and If I Told You Once can be described as (family) romances. Linda J. Lee (2008) presents the characteristics of romances as follows: they “are highly formulaic; invoke a fantasy realm; focus on the creation or reconciliation of a romantic pair” and they have “prototypical marriage endings” (Lee 2008: 52). The romance novel is “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (Pamela Regis qtd. in Lee 2008: 53). It is mainly the development of the love stories in Away and IITYO that leads to their classification as romances. The novels do, however, not correspond to all of the characteristics mentioned above, nor are the love stories necessarily the focus of the novels. They do however often play a central role in the novels, and failed or successful relationships often drive the plot. One characteristic of the romance novel which neither of the novels contain is the happy (or satisfactory) ending (Ramsdell 2012). The romance genre has received feminist criticism, viewing it as a genre which “uphold[s] the existing patriarchal structure [...] because they end with the establishment or reunion of a heterosexual married pair” (Lee 2008: 54). Others, however, see romances as novels that can challenge this structure (Lee 2008). A number of scholars assert that “romances, especially those published since the 1990s, reflect a variety of feminist concerns” (Lee 2008: 54). As I will discuss, Away and IITYO, both originally published in the 1990’s, reflect this question of romances as conservative or emancipatory novels. For example, both novels present romantic unions but more often than not they fail.
Moreover, in order to analyse whether *Away* and *IITYO* hold feminist or anti-feminist potential, I will be exploring the plot structure of these novels in relation to gender. Gender and plot structure are interrelated, leading feminist literary critics to explore how gender has traditionally been implicated in plot structure and how feminist authors have revised this tradition. As Susan Knutson asserts: “narrative structure at its most abstract is a cultural producer of gender” (Knutson 1989: 11) since traditionally “in western culture the narrative hero is generically male and the obstacles or matrix he encounters and crosses are generically female” (Knutson 1989: 11). One form of feminist revision of this tradition has been to make women the protagonists in their own narratives which are “focalized by characters who draw on what women have collectively learned” (Knutson 1989: 13).

One of the plot elements which feminist researchers have focused on is narrative closure. A change can be noted between the narrative closure for women in nineteenth century novels and in twentieth century feminist novels:

> In the nineteenth century female writers were only able to conceive of and construct two types of narrative endings for their gender: heterosexual love and marriage, or death. In response to this dichotomy many feminist writers of the twentieth century attempted to construct stories that transcend the interaction and interconnection between gender, heterosexual love and narrative closure. (Rogers 2015: 67)

As a consequence women writers of the twentieth century have rewritten this narrative closure of the romance plot and they have provided alternatives for romantic happy endings (Rogers 2015: 68). In my research on the (anti-)feminist nature of *Away* and *IITYO* this begs the question what the narrative closure for different characters in these novels looks like and how it can interpreted. Do the women have other options besides marriage or death? Do the women receive romantic happy endings or do the authors provide alternative – and therefore potentially feminist – endings?

Even though women writers increasingly gave voice to the maternal, feminist family romances of the 1970’s still contained an imbalance between mother and daughter. In this imbalance the woman as *daughter* […] occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as *mother* remains in the position of *other*, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repeated process of *othering* the mother. (Hirsch 1989: 136, original emphases)
Because of this othering of the mother and the simultaneous disidentification and continuity between daughter and mother, the “feminist family romance […] moves only with extreme ambivalence toward the position of mother” (Hirsch 1989: 138). This ambivalence is characteristic of *Away* and *If I Told You Once*, raising the question whether these novels qualify as feminist family romances or not.

Feminist fiction of the 1970’s “feature[s] mothers prominently, and displace[s] fathers, brothers, husbands and male lovers” (Hirsch 1989: 15). This displacement is figured in the “death or elimination” (Hirsch 1989: 129) of these male characters “from the fictional heroine’s developmental course” (Hirsch 1989: 129). As a consequence mother-daughter plots “leave only a secondary role to men” (Hirsch 1989: 133). In my analysis of *Away* and *IITYO* I will elaborate on the complexity of this secondary role in these novels. Even though their focus is on women and their mutual bonds – indeed, making men secondary in this sense – I will argue that it is the male characters who move the plot forward – providing them with a significant role which confuses their secondariness. The absence of father figures does not necessarily lead to a positive representation of the mother. In mother-daughter plots mothers often function as “the primary negative models for the daughter” (Hirsch 1989:11) in the daughter’s “process of disidentification” (Hirsch 1989: 11) from the mother “who did succumb to convention” (Hirsch 1989: 11) since she became a mother and entered “the conventional heterosexual romance and marriage plot[…]” (Hirsch 1989:10). However, feminist revisionist texts from the 1970’s and 1980’s “allow for a continued inter-relation” (Hirsch 1989: 132). For these women writers “the content of plot […] is a struggle with a bond that is powerful and painful, that threatens engulfment and self-loss even while it offers the very basis for self-consciousness” (Hirsch 1989: 133). This struggle is also present in *Away* and *If I Told You Once*.

In the last part of her book, Hirsch discusses a few characteristics which a number of novels by women writers from the 1970’s and 1980’s have in common:

>[The] texts are structured around the motif of return, the process of memory, and the desire to come to terms with the past by integrating it with the protagonist’s present self-representation [...], the effort to connect past and present […], is frustrated and ultimately redefined as the stories they try to sell seem more and more unnarratable […] requiring a language and narrative form that might accommodate the unspeakable. (Hirsch 1989: 139)
These characteristics are familiar when one has read *Away* and *IITYO*; the attempt to make this unspeakable past narratable is what leads to some of these novels’ most striking features, such as their use of mythology and fairy tales and the magical realist mode in which they are written. As such this suggests a continuation between some feminist novels from the 1970’s and 1980’s and Urquhart’s and Budnitz’ works.

**3.2 Away and If I Told You Once as Matrilineal Narratives**

Following Tess Cosslett’s definition of matrilineal narratives mentioned earlier, Urquhart’s and Budnitz’ novels are both matrilineal narratives since they tell “the stories of several generations of women at once” (Tess Cosslett qtd. in Yu 2005: 2). One characteristic of matrilineal narratives according to Yu is “a sense of strong identification between mothers and daughters” (Yu 2005: 3). This strong identification is symbolized in both novels by an uncanny physical likeness between the women; physically speaking every generation appears to be a reincarnation of the next. Furthermore, these women experience similar fates. Consequently a central theme in both novels is the (im)possibility of breaking with a family heritage which is often oppressive. Despite a strong identification in this sense - or perhaps rather because of it - daughters do not always want to identify with their mothers in these matrilineal narratives, as we will see here and in later chapters. Some of them will define themselves in opposition to their foremother(s), resisting the family heritage that comes with their matrilineal line.

Yu argues that because of this strong identification between mothers and daughters matrilineal narratives tend to relegate father figures to the background (Yu 2005: 3). If we extend father figures to male characters in general this characteristic does not hold true for *Away* nor for *If I Told You Once*. The action in the novels often actually centres around men. This ambivalence will be explained later in the thesis, but it does call into question a characteristic of matrilineal narratives: their connection to feminism (Yu 2005: 3). Matrilineal narratives written from the 1980’s onwards are described as “an alternative mother-daughter narrative scripted for empowerment as opposed to estrangement” (Andrea O’Reilly quoted in Yu 2005: 3). The empowerment aspect of matrilineal narratives is very ambivalent in *Away* and *IITYO* which is one of the features which led to my research question. Furthermore, there is a connection between matrilineage and marginalized cultures (Yu 2005: 3). This is very much the case in the novels discussed here: they present generations of migrant women who struggle to find their place in their new homes. In this struggle mothers are perceived as providing either a connection
to their descendants’ cultural heritage or as a hindrance to their absorption into the new culture. The matrilineal line is also crucial to the transmission of memories from one generation to the next. Thus the matrilineal narrative is the mode which connects the three themes in this research which is why it makes a good point of departure.

a. Away: Deterministic Matrilinealism

There is a dual sense of identification between mothers and daughters in Away: first there is identification in a very literal sense through an uncanny physical likeness; second there is their shared desire to be near water and their tendency to be ‘away’ which is fuelled by their lovers. The matrilinealism is made clear from the very start of the novel:

The women of this family leaned towards extremes. [...] They kept their youth – if they survived – well past their childbearing years until, overnight at sixty, they became stiff old ladies. [...] They inhabited northern latitudes near icy waters. They were plagued by revenants. [...] There was always water involved, exaggerated youth or exaggerated age. [...] It was part of their destiny. (Urquhart 1995: 3)

This destiny is passed on through four generations of women, only one generation escapes it. Each generation, though, has a different way of dealing with this destiny. The story starts with Mary who allows herself to be ‘away’ twice: the first time she comes back and enters marital life. The second time she does not return, abandoning her family in the process and consequently she dies. Because of Mary’s departure, her daughter Eileen does not know her mother. Despite this discontinuity in the matrilineal line – mother and daughter are not physically present in each other’s lives – there is continuity in the traits inherited from the mother. Eileen also has the tell-tale red hair of the O’Malley women and she also has a tendency to be ‘away’. Much like her mother she is swept of her feet by a young man.

Eileen does not, however, inherit the exact same destiny as Mary. Eileen claims that she has been ‘away’ all her life (Urquhart 1995: 351) but unlike her mother, she survives. Then the matrilinealism takes an interesting turn: Eileen has a daughter with her lover Aidan. The daughter, Deirdre, was raised by Eileen’s brother Liam and his wife Molly. So physically speaking there is matrilinealism, but it remains unacknowledged by mother and daughter. The

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5 In this respect the novel is also clearly gendered: it is only the women who run the risk of being ‘away’, i.e. of getting lost in their imagination. The opposite of this state is to be grounded in reality, to be rational, which is typical of the men in the novel. In this sense the novel follows the gendered rational/irrational dichotomy.
O’Malley women’s destiny also skips a generation, Deirdre is more grounded than her predecessors. As a consequence Eileen hoped “that the past was finished, settled” (Urquhart 1995: 355). This implies a negative evaluation of the matrilineal heritage: Eileen does not want a similar life path for her descendants. The discontinuity does not last: Eileen’s granddaughter Esther has inherited the same physical traits and tendencies. Consequently Eileen feels that she needs to tell Esther the family story to protect her from this destiny:

She carried with her the same red curtain of hair and the same disturbing necessity for water, for passion and pain, as had the girl in the north of Ireland. Esther, however, was learning her lesson early from an old woman who had herself been silenced by passion before the age of twenty, and who had only now chosen to speak of the past. (Urquhart 1995: 8)

Eileen succeeds: Esther stays more grounded and she becomes an independent woman. She does, however, also have a nautical lover; this combined with her red hair seems to suggest that a matrilineal connection is inevitable. But with the help of her grandmother’s advice Esther manages to create a different life in spite of her heritage.

The similar fates of the O’Malley women suggest an oppressive determinism: these women seem doomed to chase unattainable lovers and to lose touch with reality in the process. This female destiny is one with a bleak outlook. It suggests the impossibility of progress, something which clashes with feminist thinking. However, the fact that Esther does not give in to this destiny nuances the determinism. Furthermore, the daughters do not refuse this connection to their mothers. Eileen, especially, seems to embrace the inherited characteristics. Possibly the inherited traits provide a connection to a mother she never knew, imbuing the matrilineal narrative with a more positive meaning. *If I Told You Once* presents a different story.

b. *If I Told You Once*: Footprints in the Snow

In this novel matrilinealism is symbolized by the motif of footprints in the snow. This begins with Ilana who is literally walking on a path cleared by her mother and grandmother: “When I went out with them I walked behind my mother, stepping in the footprints that my grandmother had made and my mother deepened” (Budnitz 2001: 20). When Ilana leaves her home she imagines she is putting distance between herself and “a life like my mother’s, a path worn deep in the dirt, a path packed so hard no grass could ever grow there, much less flowers” (Budnitz 2001: 27). Ilana wants to avoid leading a similar life to her mother, a life which – as symbolized
by the impossibility of growing flowers on the path – does not leave room for personal growth. In several ways, however, Ilana becomes similar to her mother. Ilana also feels a very strong love for her children, notably her sons, and she also lives a very domestic life. Much like her mother never left the village, Ilana never really gets out of her neighbourhood in New York after her journey there. Her daughter Sashie will also lead a similar life which is mostly focused around children and the home. Subsequently, the image of the footprints in the snow returns in a dream that Sashie has: “I dreamed of a line of women walking in the snow, each one stepping in the footprints of the one before. All around them lay vast stretches of smooth snow, unmarked, unexplored” (Budnitz 2001: 197). From this version of the image the lives led by these women are contrasted with life experience they could have had. The motif fits into the determinism which is present in this novel: the similar fate of Ilana and her descendants appears to be inescapable, leading them to live quite limited lives in which they are cast in traditional female roles as mothers and home keepers. This is confirmed by Yu who writes that the repetition of this motif “serve[s] as a linking image to portray the nuances of matrilineal relation, but they are also presented as a negative presentation of matrilineage in which generations of women are trapped in their meaningless repetition” (Yu 2005: 194-195).

The second motif which emphasises the matrilineal connection is the physical resemblance between the women in the family. The resemblance inspires ambivalent feelings in Sashie:

I had grown to be slight and wiry and dark haired like my mother. [...] Still, when I studied myself in the mirror and saw my mother’s eyes staring back, I felt a twinge of power, the potential in me. But I did not want to be like my mother. (Budnitz 2001: 142)

With the inherited looks comes a sense of power which is, however, rejected by Sashie. The potential empowerment found in matrilinealism is being turned down. Like Ilana before her Sashie does not want to be like her mother. Based on the footprints and physical resemblance motifs the likeness seems to be inescapable. Mara notices the similarity in Nomie: “Her looks developed into a familiar pattern, the long black hair and dark eyes and lips a shade to wide for her face. Just like me. Just like all of us, in fact” (Budnitz 2001: 233-234).

Nomie, as the youngest member of the family, can clearly observe the similarities between her and her family members. Nomie also envisions “the pattern repeating. An endless procession of women following a single set of footprints in the snow” (Budnitz 2001: 266). Thus Nomie
seems to be set up to experience a similar fate to her foremothers. However, Nomie breaks with the two motifs. First she cuts her hair, refusing the physical resemblance:

I stood in the bathroom and looked at my face in the mirror, at my birthright [sic] hair, this hair that had been passed down from generation to generation, binding us all together. Suddenly I did not want to be like them anymore. I took the scissors and cut. And cut again. Like severing an umbilical cord. (Budnitz 2001: 261)

This is the first step in Nomie’s emancipation from her family. The cutting of hair symbolizes a cutting free of a seemingly predetermined fate. Nomie’s journey at the end of the novel actually mirrors Ilana’s journey away from home: Nomie travels in order to get an abortion – an act which she dresses up in indirect language like Ilana did. She travels through snow and on water and meets a number of interesting figures, some of whom mirror characters we met before (IITYO 284). On this journey the motif of footprints in the snow is broken as well. When Nomie travels to the abortion clinic at the end of the novel it is snowing in the middle of summer (IITYO 276). The snow symbolically covers up the path made by her foremothers and then the snow melts, the path melting away with it. Nomie is making her own path, this time in the sand: “I ran and my footprints followed behind me in curving and dancing lines, helter-skelter in branching patterns all over the beach” (Budnitz 2001: 284). Instead of seeing footprints made by others before her, she now only sees her own footprints behind her. The line is also not straight, it branches out, which suggests that Nomie will get to experience more of life than the others. And finally, when Ilana disappears at the end of the novel there is more summer snow which can be interpreted as the matrilineal narrative coming full circle when the final descendant has learned something from her heritage. Ilana’s stories have empowered Nomie to change the direction of her life. Initially, Nomie is framed within the two motifs but she breaks free from them. The matrilineal heritage is perhaps unavoidable but not inescapable.

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6 The novel repeatedly references the Three Fates or the Moirai, Greek goddesses of destiny. One spins the thread of life, one measures it and the third cuts it. They represent determinism: your life path is chosen for you. (https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moirai) Nomie cutting her hair can be interpreted as Nomie cutting her own thread, breaking with determinism.

7 I will use this reference (IITYO [p.]) to refer to the source when I am not using a specific quote. The shorter reference is used when the full reference has been mentioned before and when it is clear from the context that it is the same source I am referring to.
c. Subconclusion

The novels present the possibilities of variation within the mode of matrilineal narratives. *Away* is characterized by the distance between female descendants and a subsequent embrace of the matrilineal connection. *If I Told You Once*, on the contrary, represents a stifling proximity between the female relatives which leads to a rejection of the matrilineal connection. Initially, both novels present a determinism which is strongly linked to matrilinealism: a shared fate for the women in the family is passed down through the matrilineal line. Refusing the possibility of change is a decidedly anti-feminist stance. Determinism hinders progress. At the same time the novels are not wholly deterministic. Both matrilineal lines end with a final descendant who has learned from the past. Conscious efforts are made by Eileen and Ilana to warn their youngest descendants so they can break the chain.

The possibility of change is presented in the characters of Esther and Nomie. This is, however, not the same as actual progress since the matrilineal line ends with them. Esther dies without having any descendants of her own; progress is cut short. Nomie is still a teenager at the end of *If I Told You Once* which leaves her future open but she had an abortion so it is not clear whether the matrilineal line ends or continues with her. The possibility of change and emancipation is present but it is not carried through. The novels move from an oppressive determinism to cautious change, presenting the feminist potential of matrilineal narratives without being convincingly feminist on the whole. Motherhood is, naturally, a central theme in matrilineal narratives. The portrayal of motherhood in the novels further complicates their feminist potential.

3.2.1 Bad Mothers?

Motherhood and the maternal are topics which are central to feminist critique. Feminism does not necessarily problematize the experience of motherhood itself, but rather the institution of motherhood (Ross 2016) and the accompanying ideology. One of the definitions of ‘mother’ in the *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary* is “maternal tenderness or affection” (Merriam Webster). Western society has constructed an ideal of motherhood in which mothers are expected to be “protective, nurturing, and self-sacrificing” (Ross 2016: 4); the notion of the ‘maternal instinct’ suggests that women “possess an inborn desire […] to nurture and care for others” (Ross 2016: 12). The women who are mothers in *Away* and *If I Told You Once* do not always live up to this ideal; the novels present women who can be constructed either as bad mothers – who do not fulfil their expected roles and possibly harm the relationship with their
children – or as women through whom this ideal is exposed as a construction which does not answer to the protagonists’ experiences of motherhood. The latter option aligns with feminism in its mission to deconstruct gendered ideologies.

a. Away: Absent mothers

Gendered ideologies are present in Away where Mary is expected to follow patriarchal ideology. After Mary’s encounter with her sailor/demon lover, Father Quinn suggests marriage to a sceptic as a way to bring Mary back from her state of ‘awayness’. Her mental state is accompanied by an awakened sexuality which distracts the men on Rathlin Island: “The men, when they gathered round their turf fires at night, never mentioned Mary’s name at all, but a mental picture of her stirred their thoughts and sometimes their groins” (Urquhart 1995: 23). This kind of sexuality is considered to be transgressive and warrants containment through marriage. As Cynthia Sugars argues this leads to a second meaning of Mary’s ‘awayness’: “In this sense, Mary is ostracised or ‘awayed’ by the community as much as by her demon lover” (Sugars 2001: 107). In the words of Father Quinn, there are only two possible solutions for Mary’s ‘awayness’: “Death or marriage” (Urquhart 1995: 27). In this way Mary enters the traditional script for women in the nineteenth century which was to marry, a typical feature of the romance plot. Father Quinn serves as a representative of both patriarchy and male religious authority, deciding over the life of a young woman who ‘needs’ to be controlled or rescued.

Brian O’Malley wants to marry Mary; his proposal is not so much a question as a statement: “‘I’ve come,’ he said, ‘because I am certain that you must be my wife. It will be good so. We will have children and I will be kind to you.’” (Urquhart 1995:56). Although Mary and Brian’s relationship is portrayed as a loving one, the proposal does not seem to offer Mary a lot of choice. The assertion that she must become his wife and the mother of his children presents a limited role for her and raises the question whether this actually ‘will be good so’ for Mary. She consents to the marriage but warns Brian from the start: “I am here but I am not here,’ she said. ‘I will be your wife but I will not be your wife.’” (Urquhart 1995: 57). Their marriage does in fact help to ground Mary again. As it turns out Mary is perfect ‘wife material’ for Brian with “her quiet good nature, her domestic skills, her cleverness”: she ticks the stereotypical boxes.

Pregnancy is described as a positive, grounding experience: “During her pregnancy her longing for beaches diminished, her mind turned inland” (Urquhart 1995: 58). Despite her continuing search for her spectral lover in Ireland Mary takes care of her son Liam and she functions as a present parent. Initially, after the family’s arrival in Canada, Mary “had lifted him [Liam] out
of the bed. He had scarcely been out of her arms since” (Urquhart 1995: 138). Mother and son seem to be closely connected. After the family’s migration to Canada, Mary becomes pregnant for the second time. Once again her pregnancy is portrayed as a positive experience: “She was powerful and resplendent, the child turning in her womb […]” (Urquhart 1995: 154). The feeling of power connected to her pregnancy is reminiscent of maternalist thinking in feminism. This feeling, however, does not seem to last. Mary cries for weeks after her daughter, Eileen, is born (A1558). When Eileen is still an infant, Mary once again feels the desire for the demon lover who is represented by Moira Lake in the Canadian landscape. She abandons her family to go and live on the shores of the lake. Liam clearly misses her, he imagines that he can see her after she has gone (A158). However, it is only when Mary’s frozen body is returned to the family that the full extent of Liam’s feelings is made clear. He cannot believe his mother left them for a spirit lover, for the first time he really expresses anger towards Mary:

He placed tracts of impenetrable wilderness between these pockets of civilization so that her journey away from him would be difficult; in places barely manageable. He invented huge fallen trees that blocked the way and boggy areas that slowed her footsteps. […] Sap was running through her veins, the blood that she shared with Liam forgotten in favour of a view of a lake. (Urquhart 1995: 186)

The bitterness of the last sentence illustrates the impact of Mary’s abandonment on Liam.

After an initial satisfaction – or perhaps rather acquiescence - with her life as a wife and mother, she chooses her own needs (or wants) over those of her family, abandoning her maternal duties. According to Libby Birch Mary’s departure is also inspired by Mary’s connection to nature and her fascination with an imagined Irish past:

Mary […] seems to be at one with some elemental force […]; houses, domesticity, and maternal duties cannot hold Mary and so she roams the Canadian forest searching for some link with a culture which is disappearing from her homeland. (Birch 1997: 117)

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8 I will use this reference (A [p.]) to refer to the source when I am not using a specific quote. The shorter reference is used when the full reference has been mentioned before and when it is clear from the context that it is the same source I am referring to.
For a while she can be contained in the patriarchal institution of marriage, but as she predicted herself, she would never fully be Brian’s wife and neither marriage nor motherhood can satisfy her. Mary takes several actions which can be interpreted within a feminist framework: at that moment she actively decides over the path her life is going to take, she refuses to be captured by society’s expectations of women and goes to live outside of society – and by extension patriarchy. Her actions are transgressive, challenging the gender norms of her time. However, after several years of living on her own terms her lifestyle kills her. Mary’s death can have several functions. It can be a part of the novel’s warning against living in the past and abandoning reality for escapist imagination: this mental state is not productive and eventually even leads to death. I would like to propose two more interpretations which can serve as a supplement to the first.

The second interpretation being that Mary’s death symbolizes the impossibility for women in this historical context to live outside the bounds of patriarchy. The novel presents a historically accurate representation\(^9\) of women’s limited options in the nineteenth century rather than opting for a revisionist, unlikely happy ending for Mary. The ‘marriage or death’-plot is very much present here: this twentieth-century novel reflects the possibilities female characters had in nineteenth-century romances (Rogers 2015: 67). So even though this is a more recent novel, as a nineteenth-century woman Mary is portrayed as having only these two options. She seems on her way to fulfil the first option: to marry and consequently to live. But then she abandons that marriage, her subsequent lifestyle eventually leading to her death. And so Mary’s narrative closure consists of death: is this a historically accurate representation which serves as a commentary on the historical toll of patriarchy – providing women with limited options – or is Urquhart inserting Mary in a traditional, patriarchal literary script? The latter option leads to the third interpretation.

The third interpretation is that Mary’s death functions as a form of punishment for the abandonment of her family, which can be interpreted within the frame of poetic justice, i.e. “the idea that the evil are punished appropriately and the good rewarded as they should be” (Cuddon 2013: 544). As Libby Birch asserts “as Moira, she moves away from Mary the Virgin, the ultimate icon of unselfish motherhood” (Birch 1997: 119). Perhaps she is being punished for this selfishness which presents the opposite type of mother to Mary’s holy namesake. Her death can be interpreted as poetic justice which reinforces patriarchal norms: Mary does not fulfil her

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\(^9\) This is not to say that nineteenth-century women who did not enter a marriage necessarily had to die. Reality would have been more nuanced than the ‘marriage or death’ extremes offered by fiction.
marital nor maternal duties, leaving her young children behind and subsequently being punished for this transgression of societal norms. There is a possible mitigating factor: at least she was able to live on her own terms for a few years. This does however not lead to a happy ending, on the contrary she dies alone in the wild. Freezing to death can hardly be considered a happy ending, however, Mary did get to live outside of patriarchal bounds for seven years. When her body returns to her family “her lips were frozen into the shape of a faint smile” (Urquhart 1995: 173). I would argue that her death was peaceful rather than violent, the suggestion of her smiling indicating that she died feeling content\textsuperscript{10}. In my view this makes her death ambivalent: either as part of a ‘marriage or death’-plot or as poetic justice she gets the short end of the stick but a distinction should be made between the fact of her dying and the circumstances of her death. We do not learn much about her years at the lake, but this is where she really wanted to be, probably leading her to a peaceful state-of-mind which is then reflected in her countenance after death. Her death is not immediate, she lives by the lake for seven years – a situation which is presented as untenable but not entirely unfavourable to Mary. She was the only one of the O’Malley women to not stay ‘in her place’ or to not stay grounded and to fully give in to the imaginative, escapist desire, allowing her to break norms but it leads to her death. A potentially emancipatory endeavour which leads to death: a feminist failure or success?

Mary is not the only absent mother in Away: an O’Malley family secret is that Eileen, and not Molly, is Esther’s grandmother. Despite her not raising Molly as her daughter, Eileen does take up a maternal task by telling the history of the O’Malley women to Esther as a warning for her not to repeat this history. The storytelling leaves Esther empowered to take control over her life. Esther herself remains childless.

b. \textit{If I Told You Once}: Stifling and Detached Mothers with a Son Preference?

In \textit{If I Told You Once} we find ever-present, oppressive mothers with positive feelings towards sons and negative feelings towards daughters, leading to dysfunctional mother-daughter relations, and even matrophobia. The first mother-daughter connection the reader learns of is that between Ilana and her mother. Ilana comes from a large family with nine children (\textit{IITYO} 7). Ilana’s mother shows a fierce love for her children which Ilana experiences fearfully:

\begin{quote}
and for the first time I saw that I was not of that country, I did not have my mother’s fierceness in me. […] It was a blind devotion, a vicious bloody animal love, and I wanted
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} This may also be a part of the romanticization of Mary.
no part of it; for the first time I knew that I would leave. I feared my mother, who pushed out child after child with her athletic loins, and seemed to grow stronger with each one, and clung to her children more tightly with each passing year. (Budnitz 2001: 14)

The mother protects her children – she avenges the bandit who raped Ilana in the forest, she defends her son Ari’s actions (IITYO 13, 17). The mother’s fierce and stifling love is part of Ilana’s motivation to leave her home. She gains freedom and autonomy when she leaves her home: “I was free of my mother at last. The threads snapped. I had beaten her. My body was my own; […] I would never have to feel her eyes again” (Budnitz 2001: 27). Yet Ilana also admits that if her mother were to call her, she would run back home “to bury [her] face in her lap” (Budnitz 2001: 26). On the one hand her mother provides love and protection for Ilana, on the other hand her presence seems to deny Ilana autonomy.

At first motherhood is portrayed as a positive experience when she gives birth to twin boys, Eli and Wolf. She loves her sons dearly and is presented as a caring mother; she does however not want more children:

I did not want another child. You see, I did not want to have to share my attentions. I wanted to give all I had to my sons. […] I wanted to know my children. I did not want a faceless litter. (Budnitz 2001: 99)

This fear of having a big family is a remnant of her own upbringing. She does however match her mother in her love for Eli and Wolf: “I would have smothered them if they had let me” (Budnitz 2001: 101), showing that Ilana has not entirely managed to shake loose her mother’s heritage. Ilana is described as possessing maternal instinct (IITYO 137), a concept meant to naturalize motherhood in women. Her maternal instinct is, however, not infallible. She uses her mother’s contraceptive mixture but to her disappointment it fails and she falls pregnant again – to her husband Shmuel’s delight and to her dismay. She actually keeps the baby for her husband, an act in which she relinquishes her autonomy:

I discovered I was pregnant. […] I did not want it. I could have gotten rid of it, but I did not. I did not want to have the baby, but I wanted to be able to tell Shmuel and see his face light up. (Budnitz 2001: 101)
Her reluctance is reflected in the future relationship between Ilana and her daughter. Before Sashie is born Ilana experiences a number of events which she perceives as a bad omen (IITYO 104-105). The bad omen results in a baby daughter. From the start Ilana and Sashie fail to connect: “I held the baby and she spat at me. Her thin hair, her beaky nose, her hands curled like claws. She seemed tainted to me, the past had touched her and dirtied her somehow” (Budnitz 2001: 105). This description stands in stark contrast to how Ilana describes her sons: “I still looked at my sons sometimes with awe and wonder; to think that I made these amazing creatures, they came out of my body” (Budnitz 2001: 100). Where there is awe for her sons, there is repulsion for her daughter. Ilana does not understand Sashie. This will be the start of a difficult relationship between the two. Ilana “kept forgetting about Sashie. She lived in the shadow of her brothers” (Budnitz 2001: 107). Ilana’s mother-love fails to envelop her daughter. Ilana experiences heartbreak when Eli and Wolf leave to fight in the Second World War in Europe and she fashions them already dead even before they die in the war. She loses her favourite children and – after Shmuel dies as well – she is left with her unwanted daughter.

Sashie also misses the presence of her father and her brother: “We had only each other. There was not much to say. We circled each other like suspicious dogs” (Budnitz 2001: 124). There are however small signs of connection: when Eli and Wolf die Ilana comforts Sashie by holding her (IITYO 127), a physical connection which is not self-evident between two people who are not that close, but Ilana is there for Sashie anyway. In a reaction that mirrors Ilana’s feelings towards her own mother Sashie want to keep her distance:

I did not want to get too close to her. [...] I was only a child then but I could sense what my mother was like; she was capable of anything if provoked, she was like a wild animal, fury-driven and ferocious. (Budnitz 2001: 133)

Sashie does not have Ilana’s maternal instinct. The care for her young son does not come easily:

Jonathan was a beautiful baby, as I kept telling myself and everyone kept telling me. But I was tired and listless in the weeks following and the grayness of the apartment oppressed me. His screams, the odor of him, his needs, they oppressed me. (Budnitz 2001: 168)

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11 Favouritism is not appreciated in parents; mothers are supposed to feel equal amounts of love for all of their children. In this respect the ideal of motherhood is problematized here.
It is not entirely clear whether Sashie wanted a child in the first place; when she is pregnant 
“[she] was glad that he [Joe] was glad” (Budnitz 2001: 167), implying that her happiness is not a direct result of her having a baby. She appears to be detached, a state not usually associated with the societal myth of an instant and natural connection between mother and baby, as demonstrated by Ilana: “It is not natural, […]. Your child needs you” (Budnitz 2001: 169). Sashie does come around after a while (“Suddenly Jonathan seemed more important than anything” (Budnitz 2001: 172)). At the same time that Sashie discovers Joe has cheated on her, she discovers she is pregnant again. Her reaction is almost a replica of Ilana’s during her second pregnancy: “And then, in this time of strife, I discovered I was pregnant. I was furious. I did not want another child. I wanted to concentrate all my energies on raising Jonathan” (Budnitz 2001: 180). Sashie makes a gender difference, implying that she would much rather have a son than a daughter: “I thought of the child inside me, and it occurred to me that it might be a boy, […], and in that case I would have to raise him perfectly as well. If it was a girl, I wouldn’t bother” (Budnitz 2001: 181). She gives birth to a daughter, Mara, but she does not mention how she feels about this. At a certain point she even denies to a potential love interest that Mara is her daughter:

Mother, Mara said again. Is she yours? the man said but I was already walking ahead. […] Do you know that girl? he said. I took his arm and said: I must have reminded her of someone. (Budnitz 2001: 199, original emphasis)

When Mara confronts her mother, Sashie lies and says she did not see her (IITYO 199), framing Sashie as a reluctant and dishonest mother – at least towards her daughter. In another parallel with Ilana, Sashie’s son Jonathan disappears from the narrative. This leaves mother, daughter and granddaughter – neither of whom likes the others- living together in a confined space. They are always present in each other’s space, leading to an oppressive experience for all three of them. The fourth generation of women in this family arrives when Jonathan’s heavily injured girlfriend Chloe gives birth to a daughter. In the absence of Jonathan, Sashie adopts the baby, Nomie, and takes her home with her. Now there is another female presence in the flat, however, this time all three women see this new child as an opportunity. This daughter is wanted and Ilana, Sashie and Mara compete for the role of Nomie’s mother. This is a stifling experience for Nomie who only really accepts Ilana. In an attempt to prevent Nomie from going down a
similar path as herself and her descendants, Ilana begins to tell her story. This is one of the only times a female ancestor does right by her descendant in the novel. Nomie’s teenage pregnancy might cause her to end up in a similar status quo as her foremothers. However, she refuses motherhood and has an abortion. Except for Ilana when she was younger, the unwanted pregnancies in the novel are carried to term leading to unwanted children. Nomie ends this pattern by ending her own unwanted pregnancy. This clashes with traditional, gendered concepts such as ‘maternal instinct’ and represents a young woman taking charge of her own body, much like Ilana did before her. Ilana, however, does become a mother in the end; because of the novel’s open ending we do not know whether this will also be the case for Nomie or not. The novel seems to suggest that the only way for Nomie to lead a different kind of life is to refuse motherhood for now.

c. Subconclusion

The novels represent different types of mothering: from absent mothers in Away to ever-present yet selective and reluctant mothers in IITYO. In all cases the protagonists are transgressive in the sense that they do not live up to Western society’s ideal of selfless, nurturing motherhood. The point is not to judge whether these women are good or bad mothers but rather to examine how the constructions of motherhood in Away and IITYO relate to societal ideals concerning motherhood. I argue that the way in which motherhood is presented by Urquhart and Budnitz fits within a feminist framework. They challenge the ideal, the “motherhood mystique” (Ross 2016: 3). Motherhood does not offer ultimate fulfilment for the protagonists (Mary), it does not come naturally to them (Sashie) or they display favouritism. Mothering is not self-evident for these women. There are, however, a number of issues in the novels that can refute this feminist interpretation. Mary’s death is problematic when put in a framework of poetic justice and the ‘marriage or death’ plot. In IITYO a gender preference is shown: Ilana and Sashie both favour their sons over their daughters. This complicates the feminist potential offered by the deconstruction of the ideal. Once again the novels present an ambivalent feminist position. One thing they certainly achieve is to challenge the reader’s conception and expectations of motherhood, possibly opening up a discussion which can lead to a negotiation or a revision of what constitutes (good or bad) motherhood.

3.2.2 Present and Absent Men and Their Narrative Functions

The main focus of Away and If I Told You Once is on the lives of the different generations of women featured in the novels. The women take centre stage in varying degrees: Away traces
the O’Malley family history starting with Mary and ending with Esther, while also sharing men’s perspectives such as Brian’s and Liam’s. *IITYO* not only tells the story of four generations of women, the story is told exclusively from these women’s perspectives. This appears to be a good set up for a feminist narrative. However, when one looks at other formal features of the novel, such as plot structure, a number of questions arise. Which characters make things happen, who initiates the plot and who drives the plot forward? In answering these questions it becomes clear that a lot of the action in the novels is either initiated by men or by the women’s encounters with men. It is also striking that a lot of the men in these novels end up disappearing from the narrative – in *IITYO* every single male character disappears. Despite their absence they still exercise a significant influence on these women’s lives.

3.2.2.1 The Presence and Absence of Men

a. *Away*: Present Family Members vs. Absent Lovers

In *Away* there are both male characters who are present throughout the narrative and who are marked by their absence. On the one hand the men in the O’Malley family – Brian and Liam – stay present in the women’s lives until their death, on the other hand the three lovers are marked by their absence more so than by their presence. Firstly there are the familial bonds which remain intact. Brian functions as a present husband for Mary and as a present father for his children. In this parental unit it is the mother who is absent rather than the father. This is an interesting development since one of the characteristics of matrilineal narratives identified by Yu was the absence of father figures in favour of focusing on mother-daughter bonds (Yu 2005). In this sense *Away* changes the script of the matrilineal narrative. Furthermore, one of the strongest bonds in the novel is that between a brother and a sister: Liam and Eileen. At first Liam rejects his baby sister but in the absence of Mary they start bonding: “She had become his, they would always be connected” (Urquhart 1995: 162). Liam functions as an othermother; when Brian is off to work it is Liam who teaches Eileen languages and who cares for her. By featuring a male character in an othermothering function, *Away* does fit in Yu’s (2005) broader definition of matrilineal narratives in which she leaves space for non-biological care relationships. This is also another example of how the novel decouples the traditional connection between motherhood and womanhood. After Brian’s death Liam and Eileen move away together and Liam will stay with Eileen for the rest of his life; he dies only a few years before her (A353).
The presence of the male family members is contrasted with the absence of the male lovers who disappear from the narrative. The first lover, Mary’s dead sailor, is never really present from the start. Mary only sees his dead body and after his burial she is left with his ghostly remains. His presence is quite literally marked by his absence. In his spectral form, though, he stays with Mary. She regularly encounters his spirit when she still lives in Ireland. When the family migrates, she fears his absence: “There was some hope in her mind that the beloved other would follow her there, and there was fear that he would not” (Urquhart 1995: 126). In Canada Mary is still drawn to bodies of water since this is where she would meet ‘the other’. In the end this is what prompts her to move to Moira Lake. This is part of her state of ‘awayness’: she allows herself to be carried away by her imagination and loses touch with reality and the people who are really present in her life.

Another limited appearance is made by Eileen’s lover Aidan Lanighan. Aidan bears a physical resemblance to Mary’s lover and he is described as “ephemeral” (Urquhart 1995: 247). Already this suggests that his presence will be fleeting but Eileen falls in love with him nonetheless. After a very brief encounter Eileen awaits Aidan’s return. He visits her for a few days at Liam’s farm before disappearing once again. He moves in and out her life, suggesting that she is not as important to him as he is to her. This imbalanced relationship results in Eileen spending much of her time waiting for him. Like her mother Eileen eventually decides to leave so she can find her lover. A permanent union becomes an option but once again their relationship does not last. After Eileen ruins Aidan’s plans and he is revealed as a spy Aidan leaves her for good (A343).

At this point Eileen is not even twenty years old yet, but the memory of Aidan will stay with her throughout her life (A351). Esther also has a lover who resembles the dead sailor and Aidan (A354). He is mentioned briefly but we learn that he is characterized by “the unpredictability of his arrivals and the certainty of his departures” (Urquhart 1995: 354). Esther finds herself waiting for him and “she knew it was a kind of completion – his absence from, not his presence in her life” (A354). She does not, however, allow herself to be carried away by him; he does not seem to dominate her life as much as the dead sailor or Aidan dominated the lives of her foremothers.

In the absence of their lovers the O’Malley women find themselves waiting for them. This passive waiting for a man to come to them paints a very traditional, gendered picture. Both Mary and Eileen do, in the end, flip this gendered script by chasing their lovers. This demonstration of action is, however, futile since they are chasing unattainable men. In doing so Mary and Eileen (temporarily) leave behind people who are present in their lives. Despite their
absence the lovers have a significant impact on Mary and Eileen. They provide a romantic alternative for a bleak reality but at the same time they prevent the women from moving on. So what is the function of these absent male characters? Do they provide a romantic escape from an oppressive or uneventful life or do they provide a form of escapism which prevents the women from progressing in their real lives? Through Eileen’s stories Esther knows what to expect and she seems to find a balance. She still finds herself waiting for her lover but she has learned that it is his absence rather than his presence which gives her completion. She knows not to chase him and she runs a thriving farm, suggesting that she has learned to move on from lost love.

b. *If I Told You Once: No Man Left Standing*

As mentioned before, the women in this family seem to prefer men over women. Ilana, Sashie and Mara enter in profound relationships with the men in their lives and experience masculine presence as positive, while at the same time failing to connect with the women in their lives. This pattern begins with Ilana’s close bond with her brother Ari – who is supernaturally animal-like (*IITYO* 6). Ilana takes care of Ari, comforting her brother who is regarded as an outsider in society. After she leaves her village they meet each other again on several occasions, magically finding their way to each other; but when Ilana leaves for the U.S. she has to leave Ari behind. Another close bond between Ilana and a male character is that between her and her husband Shmuel. Except for a brief moment of separation they stay at each other’s side from the moment they meet. Ilana’s relationship with Shmuel is a positive one, making it the only successful romantic relationship in the novel. After Shmuel’s death, Ilana keeps feeling (or is haunted by) his presence for the rest of her life, which is one of the magical realist elements of the novel. Then there is also the love for her sons, which is not matched by a similar love for her daughter. Like Ilana, both Sashie and Mara have a deep connection to their brothers, which in Mara’s case even borders on incest. Sashie enjoys the presence of men. She wants to start a model family with her husband Joe, whom she is initially delighted with. Mara goes through a lot of trouble for her brother Jonathan: she discovers and covers up what appears to be his drug addiction (in a fuzzy and confusing scene), she helps him get admitted to medical school and helps him study. So these men’s presence is significant in the protagonists’ lives, but perhaps more so than by their presence, they are marked by their absence.

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12 Mary’s and Eileen’s lovers also provide a connection to Ireland and Irish national identity.
All of the men disappear from the plot in one way or another, often through death. As important as Ilana, Sashie and Mara may perceive these men to be, none of them actually stay in their lives. Ari is left behind, Eli and Wolf die during the Second World War not long after Shmuel passes away at home. Sashie’s husband Joe mysteriously disappears—when reading between the lines it becomes clear that Ilana and Sashie worked together to have him killed. Jonathan, the last man in the household, also disappears inexplicably. Sashie even points out this trend in the novel: “It seemed inevitable that Jonathan would leave us and never return, that Mara would be with us forever” (Budnitz 2001: 197). These women’s lives are marked by loss and absence—absences that weigh heavily, as illustrated by Ilana’s haunting and Mara’s desire to keep Jonathan’s room unchanged in case he should return. The women are forced to live without those they love the most (with the exception of Joe) which is contrasted with the inescapable presence of female relatives. In the end, all that is left is four women from the same family who only seem to have each other.

This culminates in the last descendant, Nomie, whose life is especially marked by the absence of men. She is an only child whose father, Jonathan, is not in the picture. For a short while she has a boyfriend, Vito, who impacts her life by getting her pregnant. As soon as she has had her abortion he also disappears from the narrative. Nomie summarizes the fate of the male characters in IITYO as follows: “all men died or disappeared and left you alone” (Budnitz 2001: 267). This paints a negative picture of some of the men as cheaters (Joe) or as people who do not want to take responsibility for their actions (Jonathan, Vito). Despite this the women in this family mostly cherish negative feelings for other women, not for men. In the absence of men the hovering presence of Ilana, Sashie and Mara is highlighted. With the absence of not only father figures but also other male characters the novel adheres to one of the characteristics of matrilineal narratives as identified by Yu (2005).

3.2.2.2 Men as Catalysts

The absence of male characters in the novels becomes complicated because these same characters have a disproportionate influence on the female characters’ lives. Here I will argue that most of the male characters in Away and IITYO serve as catalysts, coming into the women’s lives and causing change, often making the plot move forward, before disappearing. Even though these novels feature female protagonists—who also make choices of their own—the prevalence of male catalysts raises questions about the novels’ feminist potential.
a. *Away*: Dependence on Men: A Sign of the Times?

The first instance of a male catalyst in *Away* is the wounded sailor. Mary’s encounter with him changes her forever despite him passing away after only one night. The fact that this is where the narrative starts implies that this encounter is the first noteworthy event in Mary’s life, the beginning of her story. Much like the bandit who rapes Ilana in the woods, the demon-sailor offers Mary a new perspective on the world: “And then the pictures he had shown her: distant harbours, far shores, rivers penetrating foreign continents, a glimpse of a strange dome or monument […]” (Urquhart 1995: 37). This description is reminiscent of the picture Ilana sees in the egg offered to her by the bandit: “I peered into the peephole at the small end of the egg and saw a walled city with turnip-shaped towers, a garden, a sparkling frozen fountain, a domed sky full of stars” (Budnitz 2001: 11). With these encounters both Mary and Ilana gain knowledge resp. of their national past and of a world abroad. With both of the experiences being sensual or sexual in nature when reading between the lines, it appears that this knowledge accompanies (traumatic) experiences which force the then teenage girls into adulthood. It is Mary’s meeting and her subsequent state of ‘awayness’ (or sexual awakening, as discussed earlier) that leads to her marriage to Brian which will come to direct her life until she leaves her family. Even when she leaves her family, she is motivated by her connection to the ghostly lover; a decision she makes on her own but informed by desire.

After Mary’s departure the plot remains male-driven. A clear catalyst in *Away* is Exodus Crow whose relatively short appearance in the novel has great consequences. He takes Mary’s body back to her family and fills in the narrative of Mary’s absence, allowing Liam to finally come to terms with his feelings about his mother. Eileen establishes a magical connection with Exodus’ spirit guide – a crow which visits Eileen and provides her with visions. This crow provides Eileen with a nugget of gold, catapulting the narrative towards the first big change since the family’s arrival in Canada. Mary and Brian’s former landlord Osbert Sedgewick, who at this point was staying with Liam and Eileen, buys their land, providing them with enough money to leave and start a new life. However, this change is only really beneficial for Liam. He will get his own land to farm, providing him with a purpose and money. Eileen on the other hand remains dependent on her brother, a position which leaves her without a vision for a future, as demonstrated in the following quote:
‘[…] Soon we’ll be living on the new farm and I’ll [Liam] have a wife, some sons, a hundred cows.’ ‘And what will I have, Liam?’ He smiled indulgently at his sister. ‘You’ll have a large room of your own with a wonderful view of the lake.’ (Urquhart 1995: 256-257)

Since Eileen is dependent on her brother, she is forced to follow him everywhere – from the family cabin to the inn by the Great Lake and their final destination at Loughbreeze Beach. The novel gives Eileen two options: she either marries and becomes dependent on a husband, or remains unmarried but dependent on her brother. The former is not an option for Eileen as demonstrated by her reluctance to Liam’s suggesting she should get married:

‘[…] You’re seventeen years old and it’s time you got married.’ Eileen laughed again. ‘I’m not going,’ she said. ‘Not ever!’ […] ‘So you’re going to make something of yourself. You are going to marry a gentleman. No farmers, no teachers, and no, no poets!’ […] ‘Then I’m [Eileen] not going to church. You get married. I’m never getting married.’ (Urquhart 1995: 210-211, original emphases)

In Liam’s worldview, in order to make something of herself Eileen needs to get married. Since she does not agree to this, she depends on her brother and consequently his life decisions cause the action in her narrative. Either way – through marriage or family ties – she would be dependent on a man which, historically speaking, was the only option most women had in the mid-nineteenth century. In Eileen’s reluctance to get married and her objections to her options for the future the novel forms a critique on this historical situation.

In line with the men-as-catalysts argument Eileen’s life has been guided by men: her father, brother and the Native Canadian Exodus Crow. The biggest event to happen in her life, is also triggered by a man: Aidan Lanighan. Eileen falls in love with the dancing Fenian rebel who is Eileen’s version of the spectral lover. Unlike her mother’s lover, Aidan is real and tangible. He is however almost as unattainable: Eileen and Aidan only experience a brief encounter, with the time in-between spent by Eileen waiting for him to reappear. He causes a change in her – a romantic and sexual awakening similar to Mary’s encounter with the sailor. When he is not with her, Eileen draws herself back into her imagination, a state which could be described as ‘awayness’. Whenever Aidan is with her, Eileen’s life becomes exciting but in-between those brief moments her life is inert, with her waiting for him. Eileen
sensed her own story unfolding without her as she cooked, or slept or built fires, trapped by winter in a house from which all action had fled. Powerless, she had not even the ownership of her sorrows, they being attached inexorably to that which was absent. She wanted the power, the collusion, the potential for tragedy. (Urquhart 1995: 298)

This observation implies frustration with the lack of control over her own life, the daily household chores not satisfying her. She experiences a fundamental lack of agency due to her dependence on men. One day, however, she decides not to wait for Aidan to come to her. Fuelled by desire for him, and by a growing (romantic) political awareness, Eileen travels to Montréal to look for Aidan. As mentioned earlier her reunion with Aidan only leads to disappointment. In the end she has to move back home. Eileen’s dependence on men may be a sign of the times, reflected in the novels’ use of men as catalysts in the plot structure. The critique remains just that – there is no emancipatory action, Eileen is trapped in her historical situation. Despite the magical realism in the novel, this appears to be historically accurate. The novel reflects this situation without giving her a satisfactory way out.

Esther’s life, despite also having an ephemeral lover in it, does not seem directed by men. That she stays grounded, not losing herself in an obsessive love, and that she runs a successful farm suggests that Esther breaks free from the pattern. Esther tells her story as an old woman in 1982 (A6). During the course of the twentieth century steps were taken towards women’s emancipation. Esther finds herself in a different societal context than Mary and Eileen. She can make her own money and consequently she does not have to depend on a man. Notably, it was Eileen who passed down the farm to Esther, securing her descendant with a livelihood.

b. “Men make things happen”: Men Driving the Plot Forward in If I Told You Once

As previously mentioned, the men in If I Told You Once all end up dead or missing, leaving the women to cope with each other’s stifling company. Despite their absence the husbands, sons and brothers play an important part in the action of the novel. As Sashie observes after her father and brothers have died:

With no men in the house, there was nothing to do. No one to please. […] What is there to tell about a mother, a daughter? My mother’s life had stopped when her husband died. I’ve figured out that interesting things happen only when men are around. Men make life interesting. Men make things happen. (Budnitz 2001: 138)
As it turns out, there is quite a lot to tell about a mother and a daughter as the novel itself illustrates, however, Sashie does point to an interesting feature of the novel: a lot of the time the narrative of the women is structured around the men in their lives. It is Ilana’s encounter with the bandit which starts the action in the novel. The way he talks to her shows Ilana “that there is more than one way of seeing the world” (Budnitz 2001: 11). The bandit presents her with a Fabergé egg in which Ilana sees a vision of a foreign city (Budnitz 2001: 11), providing her with an image of a world entirely different from the cold, harsh environment she is growing up in. Later, it is this imaginary city she has in mind when she leaves her country. First, though, and more importantly, her encounter with the bandit leads to rape. The rape is not mentioned by Ilana, and as is often the case in this novel, has to be read between the lines (Codde 2009). Philippe Codde (2009) assumes that following the rape, Ilana falls pregnant which once again is not explicitly mentioned in the novel. Ilana does however mention that she “grew in secret” (Budnitz 2001: 14). Sixteen year-old Ilana then leaves her home and ‘accidentally’ arrives at the hut of a woman who performs abortions. Reading between the lines I would argue that it is indeed the encounter with the bandit which initiates the action in the novel, both through showing Ilana the egg and by raping her, leading to Ilana leaving home. Ilana shows agency by choosing to have the abortion and to leave her home.

Ilana’s concern for her brother Ari leads her to a second rape, this time by an army officer who had promised her he would free Ari in exchange for sex – a promise he does not keep. In the meantime Ilana’s village has been erased during a pogrom so she starts travelling. She has heard people talk about America but she does not really know how to get there. It is her future husband Shmuel who takes her along with him overseas; however, that she wanted to travel to the U.S. was a decision Ilana made on her own, she was aided by Shmuel in reaching that goal. In the U.S. she begins a domestic life with Shmuel as a married\(^{13}\) couple. After her sons are born Ilana remarks that “Shmuel and Eli and Wolf were my whole world then, and it was all I wanted” (Budnitz 2001: 100). This remark, paired with Sashie’s observation quoted at the beginning of this chapter, leads to the assumption that Ilana’s world does indeed revolve around the three men in her life. The next big decision that Ilana makes informed by a man is to keep the baby when she is pregnant for the second time.

\(^{13}\) They never officially married since Ilana travelled to the U.S. with Shmuel’s sister’s papers, but they lived as husband and wife. She also does not tell her children that they are not officially married.
Shmuel, Eli and Wolf die in quick succession, suddenly leaving the women without men in their lives and therefore – according to Sashie – leaving them with nothing to do. After her father’s and brothers’ deaths, Sashie says “I was waiting, waiting, in those years, I did not know what for, but I expected it any moment to come and knock at the door” (Budnitz 2001: 138), “the months and years passed like a monotonous dream, like stitching an endless seam” (Budnitz 2001: 138). The novel skips over the years when it is just Ilana and Sashie, providing an ellipsis, implying that indeed nothing special happens and life remains stagnant without men. Important in this respect is that the novel’s action is picked back up again when Ilana tells eighteen year-old Sashie that she is going to find her a husband. Sashie meets her husband Joe through a matchmaker, Anya. After Sashie chooses Joe as the right candidate things move swiftly: through Anya and Ilana’s meddling Joe falls in love with Sashie, after a very short engagement they get married. Then Sashie is pregnant with her first baby, Jonathan. Still, Sashie feels unhappy and she blames her unhappiness on the apartment – instead of on her disillusion with her ‘perfect’ life. They move to a different neighbourhood; Ilana moves with them, her first journey in over twenty years. Clearly, when Joe arrives their lives are no longer at a standstill. Joe’s arrival causes a lot of change, but perhaps more important than his arrival, is Joe’s departure. After finding out that Joe cheated on Sashie, Ilana and her daughter make arrangements to get rid of him. As with many events in the novel it is glossed over, but earlier remarks about a butcher with whom Anya “[has] a special arrangement” (Budnitz 2001: 155) imply that they plotted to have Joe killed.

With Joe’s murder, yet another man is eliminated from these women’s lives. As a consequence Ilana and Sashie move back to their old neighbourhood, making undone some of the changes Joe’s arrival had initiated. This time however, there are two new children for them to take care of. Once again Sashie alludes to the boredom caused by the absence of (adult) men:

> Even with the two small children squalling at all hours, the apartment seemed dull, barren, quiet. By now I knew to attribute this to the absence of any men. Men bring life into a place. Without them there is only working and waiting. There is no story worth telling. (Budnitz 2001: 183)

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14 During the matchmaking process Sashie has the power, changing the usual script. This gives Sashie control over her future husband – Anya and Ilana even ‘make’ Joe fall in love with Sashie – but she chooses the wrong person. She basically goes window shopping for a husband. Anya mentions that “your Joe will be delivered to your doorstep promptly on Wednesday evening” (Budnitz 2001:155). One could even say that Joe is part of a forced marriage (IITYO 159).
As if to prove Sashie’s point, the novel then moves on to a new narrator: Sashie’s daughter Mara. Mara mentions her brother Jonathan a lot in her narrative; she talks about how they used to play together and she dedicates a long sequence of her narrative to Jonathan’s implied drug addiction. “I had thought about leaving home when I turned eighteen” (Budnitz 2001: 209), Mara says, “but eighteen came and went, and I was still at home” (Budnitz 2001: 209). This is another indication of how these women’s lives seem to pass them by when there are no men around (at this point Jonathan is in medical school and he has a girlfriend). It is Mara’s love for her brother which leads her to commit one the most impactful actions in the novel. She lethally injures Jonathan’s girlfriend Chloe out of jealousy. After hearing what happened to Chloe, Jonathan disappears from the narrative: “The next day he ran away to sea” (Budnitz 2001: 221).

Mara’s actions, committed out of her fierce, possibly incestuous, love for her brother end up driving him away. Jonathan does however provide the next big change in the women’s lives: before she dies Chloe gives birth to her and Jonathan’s child. Even though this child is a girl, all three women – great-grandmother, grandmother and aunt – turn their focus on her. As a teenager Nomie has the by now expected similar experience with men: her boyfriend drastically changes her life by getting her pregnant and he disappears soon after. Nomie’s pregnancy leads her to getting an abortion, an impactful experience, but one that makes undone the permanent influence that her and her boyfriend’s actions could have had on her life. The story comes full circle: just like Ilana she becomes pregnant as a teenager and has an abortion. She has the same experience of men impacting her life and then disappearing but by taking her life in her own hands – combined with the novel’s open ending – the novel seems to suggests that with Nomie this pattern might be broken. She is the only one who listened to Ilana’s stories and though at first she did not realize that Ilana was warning her against leading a similar life, she does seem to learn in the end. To have the abortion was her own decision and it possibly sets her up for a life in which men’s actions are less decisive for herself. Initially Ilana also held this potential by getting an abortion but it is not fulfilled in the end. The open ending means that we do not know what happens to Nomie in the years after the abortion but I interpret the open ending as an ending which suggests that the pattern, including the influence of men, is broken.

3.2.2.3 Subconclusion

I want to argue that the absence of male characters and their role in the plot as catalysts form two sides of the same anti-feminist coin. The absence of male characters would presumably serve to redirect the focus to the female characters, as suggested by Yu (2005) and the absence
of father figures in matrilineal narratives. This would allow the female characters room to grow but instead the men’s absence mostly leads to passivity and inertia. For both novels Sashie’s observation can serve as meta-commentary: indeed, not much happens without men around. This is not necessarily anti-feminist: it can be a historically accurate reflection of the times the female protagonists live in. Historically speaking, women were dependent on men in most of the time period covered by the novels. This would have made them dependent on the actions of men. In this way, the function of men as catalysts partly reflects the historical context the novels are situated in. But paired with the at times almost complete inertia in their absence the novels mainly seem to present the idea that women live in function of men which is a fundamentally patriarchal logic. In the absence of male characters the novels answer to one of the characteristics of matrilineal narratives but with the opposite effect. The role of men in Away and IITYO counteracts the feminist potential provided by the mode of matrilineal narratives. Furthermore, the central role of men in the narratives can be traced back to the fact that these novels are romances – a genre which typically revolves around heterosexual relationships (Lee 2008: 52-53), supporting the observation that the romance is not a feminist genre (Lee 2008: 54).

3.3 Migration and Matrilineage: (Dis)Connection

In the introduction I established that Away and If I Told You Once are diasporic matrilineal narratives. Both novels present the lives of several generations of migrant women; the first generation being the one that made the move and the following generations being the ones who grapple with the meaning of their migrant identities. The mother-daughter relationships in the novels are mediated by the migrant experience. In Away the O’Malley family’s Irish background establishes a connection between the different generations of women – although the novel also warns against romanticizing and mythologizing a collective past (Sugars 2003). In IITYO the opposite is shown: the contradiction between the Old World and the New World causes the rift between the different generations to grow, this is specifically illustrated through Ilana and Sashie. In diasporic matrilineal narratives the “themes of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship […] are compounded by issues of migration and dispersal and the politics of gender, racial, and cultural identities within their particular diasporic (con)texts” (Yu 2005: 10). The novels present different ways in which these themes intersect, but the connection between mothers and the motherland is made in both narratives.
a. *Away*: Settler-colonialism and Maternal Connection

The O’Malley family’s migration to Canada is a consequence of the nineteenth-century famine caused by the potato blight in Ireland. The family’s journey is made possible by their landlords, Osbert and Granville Sedgewick. The landlords, who for the most part are unaware of the hardships their tenants are facing, realize that the famine leaves the families with nothing. And so they decide to hire a ship and they handpick the families who get to travel to Canada. So the Irish inhabitants of Rathlin Island do not have a say in their fate, there are only two options: to migrate or to starve and they do not get to decide on an option for themselves. The O’Malleys get to make the journey and become a part of the wave of migration from Ireland to North-America. When they leave Mary’s spectral lover provides her with a vision of different instances of displacement throughout history:

‘And when you go, this is what you become part of.’ Then she saw the world’s great leavetakings, invasions and migrations, landscapes torn from beneath the feet of tribes, the Danae pushed out by the Celts, the Celts eventually smothered by the English, warriors in the night depopulating villages, boatloads of groaning African slaves. Lost forests. The children of the mountain on the plain, the children of the plain adrift on the sea. And all the mourning for abandoned geographies. (Urquhart 1995: 128)

Here it is suggested that Mary and her family will now become a part of this history, placing their single journey in a greater historical context. Both Mary and Brian feel quite homesick in Canada. Brian for example tells Irish stories to his children. Cynthia Sugars (2001) asserts that this is another sense of being ‘away’: “The notion of the settler subject as being torn between two worlds […] is therefore also evinced in the psychic state of being ‘away’” (Sugars 2001: 109).

When the Irish arrive in Canada they have made a move from one British colonial territory to another. In Ireland they were the colonized people but in Canada the situation becomes more complicated. They are still living under British rule which additionally was anti-Catholic so in this way the Irish still experience oppression and discrimination. However, the Irish in Canada are settler-colonizers which means that they settle on lands on which Native Canadian peoples live, displacing and therefore oppressing these tribes. This makes for a tripartite power structure with the British on top, the Irish settlers underneath as both oppressed and oppressors, and the Native Canadian peoples at the bottom. In *Away* this moment in history is romanticized, which
makes it a problematic novel from a postcolonial perspective. As Cynthia Sugars (2001) argues, *Away* is “a text that enacts a conflict between an oppositional postcolonial revisionism and a form of nostalgic neo-colonial revival” (Sugars 2001: 102).

With Exodus Crow the novel actually features a Native Canadian (Ojibway) character. When we are first introduced to him “the cut of his coat was exactly like that of an English gentleman, but made of buckskin, and beautifully [...] decorated with beads” (Urquhart 1995: 172), furthermore he is wearing a top hat decorated with crow feathers. This clothing suggests an integration of the native with the colonizers’ culture, with Exodus apparently having accepted British customs while also maintaining his own cultural heritage. It is an appearance that disguises the history of violence and oppression experienced by the Natives while presenting a kind of ideal of integration. In the novel a connection is established between Mary and Exodus, and consequently more generally between the fate of the Irish and that of Native Canadians. Mary met Exodus at Moira Lake after she left her family. When they share the history of their peoples Mary draws a parallel between them, she says “that the same trouble stayed in the hearts of both our people” (Urquhart 1995: 185). This parallel between the two is partly justified – indeed both the Irish and the Native Canadians experienced oppression at the hands of the British – but it simultaneously erases the complicity of the Irish settlers in taking land away from the Natives. As Cynthia Sugars argues: “To link Irish oppression prior to their arrival in Canada with the near genocide of Canadian aboriginal peoples is to mix contexts in such a way that Native oppression within Canada becomes obliterated” (Sugars 2001: 111, original emphasis). This tendency in the novel is carried further in the union of Molly and Liam. Through the marriage of Irish-Canadian Liam to the Irish-Native Canadian Molly and subsequently through their mixed-heritage children, the two populations become one in a romanticized ideal union.

The O’Malley family takes their Irish heritage with them to the new country. Especially the women in the family, Mary and Eileen, carry Irish culture within them. The mythological connection to Ireland in the novel is passed down from Mary to Eileen, down the matrilineal line. The fact that it is the women in the family who carry this connection is exemplified by the Canadian-born Eileen who imagines the ideal Irish homeland, whereas her brother who was actually born in Ireland is fully focussed on Canada. This female connection is striking since Eileen never even knew her mother. It is something they have in common and although their escape to this mythological Irish space does not bring them a happy ending it does establish a matrilineal connection between a daughter and her absent mother. One of the functions of
matrilinealism in matrilineal narratives is to “sustain and safeguard the continuation of marginalized, endangered cultures or subcultures” (Yu 2005: 3). This is illustrated in Away by the transmission of the Irish heritage from mother to daughter. Not only Eileen but also Esther establishes a connection to Ireland, a country which she had never visited, through retelling Mary’s story. For Away this reasoning also works the other way around: it is Eileen’s preoccupation with the Irish heritage that establishes a connection, a continuity between Eileen and her mother. The matrilineal connection is made stronger through the shared Irish background which is preserved in the process of migration.

b. If I Told You Once: Cultural Difference, Maternal Disconnection

Whereas the migrant experience establishes a positive connection between mothers and daughters in Away, If I Told You Once offers the opposite: a disconnection in the matrilineal line caused by cultural difference. As mentioned above, Ilana is prompted to leave her village by her desire to cut the connection with her mother and to pursue a different life (Budnitz 1995: 14, 27). It is Ilana’s relationship with her mother that inspires her to leave home:

Ilana’s act of leaving home symbolizes her proclaimed independence from her mother and motherland […]. Ilana’s intention to break away from her mother and motherland foreshadows her upcoming fate as an immigrant mother in relation to her Americanized daughters. (Yu 2005: 196)

First she leaves her mother, then she leaves her motherland. Ilana wants to migrate to the United States because she has heard stories about this ‘promised’ land:

I had heard people talking of a place, far away and across an ocean, where people stayed young forever and there was room to breathe and everything was hopeful and new and run by machines. They said the streets were paved with gold. I wanted to go there. (Budnitz 2001: 65)

Like many people before her she sets out with hope for a better life in the New World, but immediately upon arrival Ilana is faced with the reality of the migrant experience:

There were no golden gates to welcome us. […] There were long lines in which we waited endlessly, only to be told to wait in other lines. People assigned numbers to us, pinned paper tags to us as if we were animals or packages. (Budnitz 2001: 89)
The migrants are dehumanized and subjected to strict inspections. Afterwards Ilana and Shmuel move into an apartment in a building where only other immigrants live: “Everyone in the building had come here from elsewhere, like us. [...] Where are the Americans?” (Budnitz 2001: 90). In answer to that question Shmuel tells her to look around her (91). Indeed, all Americans except for Native Americans have a migratory background. But Ilana expected to break free from her home and start afresh in this promised land, instead she is once again surrounded by her own people. Her imagined ideal clashes with reality. Still she needs a connection to her motherland which she finds in plays that are staged in her language. Even though she seeks out this connection, she does not want to be reminded of the old country too much. When Ilana meets Anya in New York she is extremely disturbed: a person from her old home has followed her there (IITYO 103). Anya serves as a metaphor: Ilana may have geographically moved away from Eastern-Europe but her culture and her past will remain with her. The journey away from home was not a clean break as she had expected.

Ilana is still firmly placed in the culture of her motherland which becomes all the more clear when her daughter Sashie is growing up. Sashie is Americanized: she looks up to Hollywood glamour (IITYO 106) and she wants to be called Shirley. She thinks the name Sashie is old-fashioned: “I’m American, mother, I want an American-sounding name. Call me Shirley” (Budnitz 2001: 119). She has a desire to pass as American. This is expressed not only in the name change, but also in Sashie obsessively washing her hair thinking that the black colour – inherited from her mother – will wash away to reveal the blonde of American actresses (Budnitz 2001: 107). In her desire to be American Sashie places herself in opposition to her mother who for her represents the Old World. Sashie “did not like to go out in the street with her, she did not look like other women. She wore her skirts long, dragging on the ground, no brassiere or girdle. […] It was as if she had never left the old country at all” (Budnitz 2001: 125). According to Yu “Ilana […] does not assimilate into American culture as a whole. […] regarded by her daughter as unknown, remote, outlandish, and incompatible to their adopted life in the new world” (Yu 2005: 197). Postcolonial theory can serve as a framework with which to interpret Sashie’s attitude towards her mother. Yu argues that in diasporic matrilineal narratives “the great division drawn between mothers and daughters is cast in the form of that between American imperialists and subjugated subalterns as those immigrant mothers are very often perceived by their daughters as racialized others” (Yu 2005: 205). The relationship between
Ilana and Sashie – which was difficult already – is complicated even more by the cultural differences between these two women.

Sashie often dreams that she is Cinderella. Cinderella is a fairy tale which symbolizes comeuppance in the world with a heroine who starts with nothing and magically improves her station. Echoes of this journey are to be found in the American dream. Sashie fashions herself as Cinderella, made for greater things than living in the small, old apartment with her mother. Through her marriage with Joe Sashie’s dream becomes actualized: she moves to a new neighbourhood which enables her to physically distance herself from her migrant roots. However, Ilana has already warned her that one cannot escape one’s roots: “And you can’t ever get away from where you’re from. Your past stays with you, you can’t make it go away by dressing up in a fancy name and pretending to be someone else” (Budnitz 2001: 119). After Joe’s death Sashie is forced to move back to the old neighbourhood. This showcases Sashie’s position as a migrant woman: she is dependent on her husband’s money so that when he is gone she has to move back to an affordable space. This affordable space is located in a multicultural neighbourhood, a place which reminds Sashie of her cultural heritage. The novel sends the message that you cannot escape your roots and this is emphasized through difficult mother-daughter relationships which are likewise inescapable.

Sashie’s desire to pass as American is reflected in the naming process of her daughter: “[...] my mother was determined to give me an American name. The most American-sounding name she could think of. Mary” (Budnitz 2001: 221). Once again Sashie does not succeed in severing her roots: Ilana objects to the Christian name and they settle on Mara. A compromise between the Old World and the New World is made. Mara showcases a similar longing to be perceived as American. She does not want to be like her grandmother: “I wanted to belong here” (Budnitz 2001: 193). So Mara also denounces her roots, although she does it less adamantly than her mother. Nomie\(^{15}\) does not show this desire to be seen as American, but she is a fourth-generation migrant. It is likely that she is perceived more as American than as an immigrant. So migration seems to mainly influence the first and second generations of women in this family. Sashie’s rejection of her Jewish-European heritage complicates her relationship with her mother. Both

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\(^{15}\) Nomie’s actual name is Naomi. Naomi is a name of Hebrew origin ([https://www.behindthename.com/name/naomi-1](https://www.behindthename.com/name/naomi-1)). In this way another connection to the Jewish heritage is made. Naomi is also a biblical character who changed her name from Naomi to Mara; Naomi means ‘pleasantness’, whereas Mara means ‘bitterness’ ([https://www.behindthename.com/name/naomi-1](https://www.behindthename.com/name/naomi-1), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naomi_(biblical_figure)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naomi_(biblical_figure)). In IIYO the opposite change is made: first there is Mara, then the next descendant is Nomie. Nomie represents hope; she is also a kinder, more pleasant character than Mara who is indeed bitter and envious.
Sashie and Mara cast Ilana as the cultural other. By the fourth generation the cultural conflict seems to be resolved. This is facilitated by the close bond between Ilana and Nomie: since she does not feel the need to distance herself from her grandmother she probably also does not feel the need to reject her roots.

c. Subconclusion

By representing the plight of migrant women the novels fulfil an important feminist endeavour, namely to portray the experience of a subgroup who have traditionally been left out of the narrative. The female characters’ gendered oppression is compounded with their position as migrants. In *If I Told You Once* most of the judgement based on racial differences happens within the family. Sashie has adopted an imperial ideal of racial superiority which causes a rift between mother and daughter. The mother is seen as a racialized other. Consequently, the disconnection which already existed in the mother-daughter relationship becomes even more profound. In *ITYO* matrilinealism and migration are intertwined because “the disruption of the motherline in conjunction with the disillusionment of an ideal homeland, be it a motherland or a mother country, asserts, in a converse manner, the inseparable link among female identification, matrilineage, and motherland” (Yu 2005: 203). Whereas *ITYO* establishes this link in a converse manner, *Away* establishes it in a straightforward manner. Here the family’s origins actually connect a mother and a daughter who have been separated. The connection to the motherland, Ireland, is transmitted through matrilineage; it is given a positive meaning. The novel’s tendency to romanticize the Irish settlers’ past is, however, problematic. In *Away* the connection to the motherland is romanticized, in *ITYO* this connection is demonized. With respect to migration the two novels are situated at opposite ends of the spectrum. By combining the themes of migration and matrilinealism *Away* and *ITYO* correspond to the defining characteristic of diasporic matrilineal narratives (Yu 2005). In the novels cultural origins are either embraced or rejected but either way these processes are connected to matrilineage. It is an important achievement of Budnitz and Urquhart to have written novels about marginalized groups who have traditionally been excluded from works of fiction.

3.4 The Function of Memory in Matrilineal Narratives

At the centre of both novels is the act of storytelling. Both Ilana and Eileen are prompted to pass on their memories to the following generations of women. For the both of them this is a cautionary tale: the storytelling serves as a warning not to repeat the actions, or mistakes, made by them (or their mothers). The memories that are being passed on are, however, problematic.
In both novels they are interlaced with mythologies and fairy tales, placing the memories with one foot in reality and the other in fantasy. Ilana and Eileen remember events which they never witnessed, raising questions about their reliability as storytellers and the truth value of the stories that they are telling. What is the function of memory in these novels? Many of the memories that are transmitted to the following generation pertain to specific female experiences such as pregnancy and abortion or allowing oneself to be carried away by (heterosexual) love for a man. The transmission of memories through the act of storytelling also carries a feminist potential: by sharing memories of the female experience women can pass on their knowledge to the next generations in order to protect their descendants from certain negative experiences stemming from the oppression of women in western society. However, in order to learn from the past, one has to listen. This does not always happen in these novels.

a. *Away: A Warning to Stay Grounded*

The specific function of storytelling in *Away* is made clear from the beginning: “Esther O’Malley Robertson is the last and the most subdued of the extreme women. She was told a story at twelve that calmed her down and put her in her place” (Urquhart 1995: 3). Esther’s grandmother Eileen told her the story of the O’Malley family’s women to keep her grounded, to avoid Esther being caught up in the mythological romance that distanced Mary and Eileen from reality. The storytelling also serves as a way to connect the matrilineal line in the family:

She [Esther] also knows that by giving her this story all those years ago her grandmother Eileen had caused one circle of experience to edge into the territory of another. The child that Esther had been had drawn circles like this with her compass when she was in school, had shaded with her pencil the place where the two circles intersected; [...] a partial, a fractional eclipse. (Urquhart 1995: 133)

This image of a Venn diagram illustrates how the storytelling shows where Mary, Eileen and Esther connect and where they are separated. The place where the circles intersect represents the experiences and tendencies that the O’Malley women have in common: the desire to be near water and their tendency to fall for handsome, mysterious and unavailable strangers. However, the white spaces in the diagram where their experiences do not overlap show that there is room for manoeuvring. These women have similar experiences but they handle them differently. Eileen’s story does not prevent Esther from romance but it does prevent her from being carried away by it. Eileen’s transmission of memories to Esther establishes a meaningful family
connection – it gives Esther a place in the family history alongside Mary and Eileen – and at the same time causes Esther to choose a different path from that of her predecessors.

The novel also immediately tackles the question of truth by suggesting that the audience might ask for proof or might question the narrator’s reliability. Esther, however, dismisses potential doubt by calling these questions “the wrong questions” (Urquhart 1995: 3). Esther is a third generation witness of Mary’s story, she is not a direct witness. Consequently the story she relates to the audience can be called postmemory. Despite the suggestion that truth is not what matters in the storytelling Esther shows a desire to tell the story as detailed as possible: “Nothing should escape. Line after line must be circulated by memory among the folds of the brain” (Urquhart 1995: 133). This almost obsessive preoccupation with the transmission of memory emphasizes the power and importance of memory to Esther. She challenges established views about the primacy of written sources over oral tradition: “Esther sees herself as a child recognizing the strength of memory, putting aside ephemeral, destroyable books as old Eileen’s voice built a story within the closed rectangle of a room” (Urquhart 1995: 134).

In general, Western society favours written text as this is perceived as everlasting whereas oral traditions are threatened with extinction when no-one is left to pass on the tradition. For Esther, however, the opposite holds true: she thinks of written text as perishable whereas there is strength in memory instead. What is written in Western society is often presented as the truth, however western culture has a history of writing marginalized groups such as women and minorities out of the text. Oral tradition, memories passed on down the generations, may function as alternative narratives which tell the stories which would be silenced by the dominant culture.

However, the passing down of memories from one generation to another can result in muddled memories. The story Esther tells has been transmitted to her through several people’s memories. Eileen constructs Mary’s story through what her father and Exodus Crow tell her. When Exodus Crow tells Mary’s story to her family, the story is already second-hand to Eileen and she then relates it to Esther. Just like the Telephone game in which a sentence is passed down from one person to the next, it can be expected that the resulting story will contain lapses or be significantly changed. Nonetheless, the characters in Away assure the reader either that accurate representation is unimportant (Esther) or that the stories are passed on in their entirety: “Her story will move through me [Exodus Crow] as easily as a wind through the pines of the forest” (Urquhart 1995: 175). Perhaps it is not so much the truthfulness of the memories that matters as the message that is transmitted through them. In the end Eileen’s cautionary tale is effective, Esther does not repeat her predecessors’ tendency to be ‘away’.
Eileen prefaces her story by telling Esther that “If I were you […] I would stay in this house all my life. If I were you, I would never go away” (Urquhart 1995: 350). Following her grandmother’s advice Esther indeed stays and after Eileen hands the farm down to Esther, she turns it into a thriving business. Esther’s capacity to not get lost in her imagination is possibly what allows her to turn the farm into a successful business (A354). Because of this Esther becomes the first woman in the matrilineal succession to make her own money and therefore depend on herself. This is something that Eileen never got to do; her dependence on Liam led her to frustration, as mentioned earlier. In sharing her memories with her granddaughter Eileen manages to set Esther up for a life in which she can experience more agency and independence.

b. The Transmission of Trauma Through Memories in *If I Told You Once*

In *If I Told You Once* Ilana shares her story with her great-granddaughter Nomie. Ilana’s storytelling incorporates Greek and Eastern-European mythologies as well as fairy tales so that her memories are not transparent. She also remembers events that she did not witness herself (*IITYO* 251) and that she only heard of, illustrating the power of the transmission of trauma. Furthermore, Ilana’s descendants Sashie and Mara create their own versions of the truth, not trusting Ilana’s fantastical stories. Each of them are fighting over the truth and want Nomie to believe only their own narrative. What Ilana is attempting to do is to warn her descendants by talking to them about her past in order to enable Sashie, Mara and Nomie to make different life choices. However, the lack of connection between Ilana, Sashie and Mara prevents this transmission of knowledge through memories. Nomie is the only one who is prepared to listen. This leads to hopefulness in Ilana:

> I thought suddenly of that girl who listens, that girl with my face, the only one who listens to me now. I was afraid for you [Nomie]. I feared they [the three old women] would notice you […]. They will drag you back with them and force you to repeat it all, go through the motions over and over, a treadmill life. The only way to protect you is to warn you. […] Please listen. […] Mara and Sashie have already failed without knowing, they have fallen into the ruts long ago; they are treading in circles in their in-looking lives […]. But you, I want to teach you to break away. (Budnitz 2001: 239-240)

When Nomie is born Ilana thinks she is being followed by the three old women from her village; this is likely a metaphor for the three women she is living with. Ilana feels that her past has returned to her – presumably including all the traumatic experiences she went through – and feels compelled to tell her story (Budnitz 2001: 239). I think her intention with telling her story
is two-fold: firstly she still needs to deal with her past experiences, she needs to work through the trauma and stop the past from haunting her, and secondly, this will not only allow Ilana to let the past rest but it could also prevent the past from repeating itself in Nomie’s life.

Ilana feels that Sashie and Mara are stuck in their lives, treading in Ilana’s – and her mother’s before her – footsteps in the snow. Ilana tells her story as a warning, she wants to prevent her descendants from making similar life decisions. She wants to make Sashie aware of the importance of having official papers: “I did not want her to repeat my mistakes, I wanted to tell her to get the official papers when the time came […]” (Budnitz 2001: 139), but Sashie is not open to listening, she closes herself of from her mother (IITYO 139). Mara does not get her grandmother’s intentions: “She wanted someone to tell all her horrible secrets to. I would not do it. I would not let her” (Budnitz 2001: 195). Rather than horrible Ilana’s stories are meant to be helpful but her daughter and granddaughter are not listening. So when Nomie is born, Ilana sees a new opportunity to tell Nomie what she could not tell Sashie or Mara (IITYO 231).

However, at first it appears that Nomie has not been listening properly either. As a teenager she falls pregnant with her boyfriend Vito’s child and she feels that no one has prepared her for the potential consequences of sex: “Why hadn’t anyone warned me? I felt so angry at all of them: Mara, Sashie, Ilana. Why hadn’t they prepared me for this?” (Budnitz 2001: 267). Ilana may have failed at warning Nomie, a teenage pregnancy possibly leading to a future already determined for her. But Nomie does eventually realize that someone had warned her: “Ilana had warned me, I realized. But I had not been paying attention in the right way. I had thought her stories were only about her; I had not thought they had anything to do with me” (Budnitz 2001: 267, original emphases). The fact that Nomie is pregnant could suggest that this realization came too late. However, Ilana’s stories also included memories of abortion practices, providing Nomie with a new option.

One of the reasons why Sashie and Mara distrust Ilana’s storytelling is because the stories have a fairy tale quality to them, making it hard to believe that these are actual memories. The mythological and fantastical are a part of Ilana’s background. Ilana grows up in an Eastern-European village where fantastical stories are a part of the local culture. Stories are told about a couple whose bodies had grown together, becoming one person (Budnitz 2001: 5); Ilana’s brother Ari seems more mythical than human, the locals fear that he is a changeling (Budnitz 2001: 6). Ilana grows up in a place characterized by harshness and irrationality which is distinguished from the New World in the U.S. Still Ilana takes her mythological past with her overseas so that when she tells her story to Nomie reality is blurred with fairy tales and
mythology, with figures reminiscent of Baba Yaga, Bluebeard and the Moirai (Three Fates) making an appearance. As argued above, the function of the actual storytelling is to inspire change in the lives of Ilana’s descendants. However, the fantastical mode of Ilana’s stories also has a specific function: it is a way of conveying the trauma that Ilana experienced. Codde (2009) has analysed the use of fairy tale motifs in *IITYO*. He establishes that “witness testimony, Dori Laub has argued, tends to be extremely circuitous, avoiding those elements that are too painful to tell” (Codde 2009: 67). He argues that Ilana uses fairy tales in order to be able to communicate about her past, painful traumas (Codde 2009: 67). Ilana has the tendency to embellish certain experiences (such as the rape by the bandit and her subsequent abortion), while she feels that a number of other experiences should be conveyed directly: “I ought to skip the next part of the story, you are too young to hear it. But I won’t” (Budnitz 2001: 45). Here Ilana is telling Nomie about the rape by the army officer, a memory which she conveys without resorting to fairy tale motifs. Still, Ilana uses a lot of indirect storytelling which results in a narrative that can be hard to decipher:

[…] the great-grandmother is indeed telling her great-granddaughter a fairy tale, but at the same time she is testifying about the traumas that have stained her life, as can only be read between the lines. She has experienced blow after blow, trauma after trauma in Eastern Europe (including a double rape, an abortion, prostitution and a pogrom), and she is unable to give a rational voice to her suffering. It is, in other words, an extreme feat of circumlocution, of an oblique but shattering testimony. (Codde 2009: 69)

Keeping this knowledge in mind it is not surprising that Nomie cannot immediately figure out that Ilana is warning her. Though in the end Nomie manages to read between the lines and garners important information from the story.

Just like Eileen’s storytelling, Ilana’s serves as a warning, an attempt at breaking the familial pattern which seems to be inherited from mother to daughter. Ilana makes an observation which can tie the storytelling in *If I Told You Once* and *Away* together: “It is a paradox, isn’t it? To make you learn about history and its patterns in the hope that you will rebel against the lesson, escape those patterns and go your own way” (Budnitz 2001: 240). Many of these patterns are specific to the lives of women: pregnancy, childbirth, childrearing, homemaking …; activities which in the past (e.g. before contraception) often determined women’s lives for them. Much

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16 Codde argues that Ilana had to pay Baba for the abortion by working in Baba’s small brothel, another instance which has to be read between the lines (Codde 2009).
like the Venn diagram imagery used in *Away* there are certain experiences in the characters’ lives which intersect and overlap. The Venn diagram also leaves white spaces where experiences diverge. Both novels start out as deterministic narratives: the women in these families all appear to have similar destinies awaiting them; the circles in the diagram overlap almost completely. However, Eileen and Ilana seek to impart knowledge on their (great-)granddaughters so they can lead different lives. I argue that this is crucial knowledge which in the novels is passed on from one woman to another because it was knowledge which was not available to them in any other way, there was no sex education or information leaflets that women could learn from.

c. Subconclusion

To be aware of these kinds of impactful experiences is crucial in order to be able to take control of one’s life (varying in degrees according to the societal context). I argue that in this way the novels fulfil their feminist potential. The imparting of female specific knowledge through the transmission of memories allows the youngest generations in these families to make a change, to break away from patterns which are initially presented as inescapable. In *IITYO* Mara reacts negatively to Ilana’s storytelling, remarking that she is repeating herself: “That story? Again? If you’ve told that story once, you’ve told it a thousand times” (Budnitz 2001: 240, original emphasis). Indeed, the stories told by Budnitz and Urquhart are not new; similar stories have been presented in other women’s writing. So why keep telling them? The novels illustrate the importance of knowledge of the past, so that we can first place ourselves in that past – and obtain a sense of continuity – to then move forward – like Esther and Nomie – resulting in discontinuity. Eileen and Ilana feel that these stories need to be told in the hope that a following generation can change the course, a transformative endeavour which I interpret as feminist.

4. Conclusion

I have analysed *Away* and *If I Told You Once* in order to be able to answer the question: Can *Away* and *If I Told You Once* be read as feminist or as anti-feminist novels? My analysis has shown that the answer is not as clear-cut as simply ‘feminist’ or ‘anti-feminist’. The mode of the matrilineal narrative lends itself to feminist writing. The focus on female characters and their experiences creates a space for women and their stories in the literary field. To a certain degree the novels fulfil their feminist potential. They give voice to a marginalized group in society: (settler-)migrant women. As these women are building their new homes their migratory background either facilitates a connection with the mother or severs difficult connections even further. Either way the novels offer an illuminating insight into the experiences of migrant
women. I have argued that there is feminist potential in the cautionary and emancipatory function of memory in the novels.

These are, however, the only instances in which the novels are decidedly feminist. For the most part the feminist potential is there but the novels fail to carry it all the way through. Budnitz and Urquhart both construct matrilinealism as the transmission of a deterministic fate. At the same time they both provide the potential of change in the last descendants, Esther and Nomie. Esther is a representative of change but as she has no descendants this change cannot be carried further. I interpret the open ending of IITYO as a bit more optimistic about the future: Nomie has learned from the past and she is shown as someone who makes a conscious effort not to be determined by fate. The way in which motherhood is presented by Budnitz and Urquhart breaks with the Western ideal. It raises questions about the construction of motherhood in our society. At the same time Mary’s untimely death can be interpreted as a patriarchal recuperation: after abandoning her family the only possible narrative closure for Mary is death. Feminist potential is stopped short leading to ambiguous interpretations.

Then there is the role of men in these matrilineal narratives which I argue problematizes their feminist potential. In a literary mode which was practically designed to accommodate the stories of women and give female characters space for growth the function of male characters as catalysts casts the female characters in limited roles in function of the male characters. This is emphasized by the passivity and inertia that follow in their absence.

Thus my analysis has led to ambivalent interpretations; the novels are almost never wholly feminist or wholly anti-feminist. This reflects the complexity of the novels as a whole. They each cover over a century of family history with different generations of women blending into each other. With novels this detailed and intricate answers are never going to be straightforward. I would not call these novels feminist. Their feminist potential never fully comes to fruition. At the same time Budnitz and Urquhart present realistic, historical situations for women. This may not lead to satisfactory endings but it does leave the reader with food for (feminist) thought.

What does this analysis mean for matrilineal narratives? The novels support Yu’s (2005) argument that matrilineal narratives can help to reconceptualise current feminist thinking on motherhood. Neither Away nor IITYO feature either repudiation or recuperation of motherhood, they present a combination of both. Both of these novels were published in the 1990’s. A next step in the research would be to analyse other matrilineal narratives which have been published since then to determine whether it still counts as a relevant mode with feminist potential or
whether feminist authors have moved on from this mode in the thirty years since in their
devours to write down women’s stories and call attention to inequality. Most importantly,
my analysis has shown that we should be careful about establishing a direct link between
matrilineal narratives and feminist writing. They may be novels written by women about
women but this does not guarantee a feminist narrative.
5. Bibliography

*Bibliography*


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