

To Grieve, or Not to Grieve

Reflections on Gil Anidjar's On the Sovereignty of Mothers

Zehra Shama Mehdi

Between Life and Death

Besides whatever else may be said about Chloé Zhao's 2025 cinematic adaptation of Maggie O' Farrell's pandemic novel *Hamnet* (2020),¹ there is little doubt that it lays bare one of the most elusive—when not entirely evasive—affective experiences: grief. In portraying what can be called the 'myth' (Shapiro, 2025) behind William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the movie narrates the specter of death that births the tragedy. Yet the movie, much like the novel itself, is not only about William's attempt to mourn the loss of his 11-year-old son, *Hamnet*, which allegedly inspired the eponymous play. It also intimately focuses on Agnes Hathaway and, consequently, the persistent and enduring trajectory of her maternal grief.² Muted in its salience. Deafening in its silence.

Even though the movie finds its ending in the first (ever) performance of the play that allows us to glean the haplessness of a father who can only reveal his agony by displacing the object of loss (Hamlet is, after all, struggling to come to terms with a dead father), it is the grief of the mother that lingers like a festering wound. Unwilling to speak. For there can be no language for grief. No Lacanian signification to grasp loss. Perhaps only paroxysms of speechless tears. Like the many that dripped from the dazed eyes of Jessie Buckley (actress who plays Agnes Shakespeare) every time she remembered her son. Every time he was alive. Every time he died. Every time was the first time. Life. Death.

But Agnes is not alone in grieving her dead child. She is like the innumerable mothers of Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, Iran, Kashmir, and the United States of America, who are struggling to come to terms with the abuse, hunger, imprisonment, and murder of their children. Since children, all over the globe, 'are always ours' (Baldwin, 1985), maybe we all need to be grieving the loss of life, living, and childhoods. Of children who were. Of children who are. And of those who will never be. If the political is, as Gil Anidjar's elucidates in *'On the Sovereignty of Mothers* (2024), a maternal contract that negotiates life and death, I ask, with sufficient hesitation (for when has one ever been certain about questions of loss), how can we understand grieving in this delicate arbitration. This is not a question that seeks to privilege the lived experience of grief over its articulation. Rather, it asks how the political might incorporate a phenomenology of grief as the

¹ While some film critics have described it as 'visual poetry' (Clyde, 2025), 'hauntingly beautiful' (Zeitsman, 2025), a 'sensory experience' with 'striking visual compositions, (Lemire, 2025), and profound and life-affirming (Ordōña, 2025), *Hamnet* has also been called 'exploitative than insightful' (Barber, 2025), a genre of 'grief porn' that is 'ruthlessly manipulative' of loss (Chang, 2025). None of these criticisms, however, ponder on the possible motives underlying this emotional coercion. Does the suffix *porn* itself reveal that there is a chance we might have lost touch with the experience of grief and find any suggestion of it as a pitiful simulation? I wonder if the rage is not a defense against a narrative that threatens to uncover our collective apathy to grief. Due to the constraints of time and space (even if not of relevance), I shall pause this line of reflection. The furious negation of grief demands its own essay. Elsewhere.

²Anguished by the 'poor treatment' of Agnes (Anne) Hathaway by the Shakespeare scholars, who repeatedly dismissed her as an illiterate peasant, casting her as an impediment to the intellectual forays of the playwright, O'Farrell decided to attend to the life of the Bard by recognizing the centrality of his wife and their life together as a premise of his work (*Creative Screenwriting*, 2026, January 7). She underscored it by highlighting the character of Agnes in the screenplay adaptation that she co-wrote with Chloé Zhao.

maternal. To unpack the stakes of my inquiry (yes, there are some), let me first offer a reading of Anidjar's maternal contract.

It's usually a good idea to start from Mothers. And all that they do.

The Maternal as the Political

In taking the "immeasurable measure" (p. xv) of mothering, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* speaks of the vast "maternal field" (p. 13) of inscriptions where mothers have labored across generational demands of time and space as one and many, writing us into the world, writing the world onto us, writing the world.³ In attending to this all-encompassing landscape of the maternal functions, the book draws upon a rich and exhaustive corpus of psychoanalytic theory, theology, religious studies, literary criticism, and feminist literature to propose the "maternal in the political, the maternal as the political" (p. xviii). It is important to note that in this proposition, Anidjar is not particularly interested in the politics of mothering. That is, he is not focused on the incessant ways in which mothers have navigated instructions of dominance repeatedly unfolding on bodies of gender, ordering their definitions and limits, deciding their capacities and abilities. On the ways in which rules, sanctions, conditions, and prohibitions of and on mothering have frequently never really been about mothers at all.⁴ This is not the drawback of the book but rather its theoretical stance. Away from prescriptive, redemptive, or celebratory arguments, Anidjar's aim is "descriptive" (p. xx). In other words, he explores the question: *What* is a Mother? Instead of *Who* is a Mother? A question that shifts the foreclosing of maternal identities around gender (Who can be a mother?), and instead invites us to consider the field (yes, it's a landscape indeed) of maternal labor (What all (do) mothers do?).

In framing the political as the maternal, Anidjar centers the practices of mothering. He asks us to recognize the ways maternal functions inform and unfold in the creation and sustenance of collectives, beginning with the child. If the central maternal function is to raise a child, and it takes a village to do it (a phrase Anidjar underscores as the opening line of each chapter), then considering the political as maternal is an invitation to recognize how villages raise their members like mothers: through conflicting desires and multiple bodies, in glory and servitude, perduring abundance and abandon. In reading the political through the interpersonal intimacy, generational labor, dual bodies, affective ties, and repetitive endurance of mothering, Anidjar not only blurs the discursive sphere of the political (forcing us to confront what is and what is not deemed political) but also illuminates the maternal commitment to the continuity of the communities. Life. Death. To the political itself.⁵

Reading the maternal configurations of politics, Anidjar writes the familiar intimacy of mothering not as nostalgia or gratitude but as a political practice, an adherence to the maternal contract: a contract of preservation and destruction between mothers and slaves, mothers and us, mothers and the world. In the

³Anidjar offers us somewhat of a definition of maternal field— 'it's a vast field of inscriptions' [of the maternal functions] (p. 13). It is the expanse of what all mothers have been doing, holding, undoing, re-doing in, across, through and for generations.

⁴The preoccupation with maternal bodies rests in their reproductive potential to raise children (largely sons) in service of the socio-political communities: nation, religion. See Das (1995)

⁵Anidjar explores this maternal commitment through three interrelated themes: slavery, the maternal contract, and the sovereignty of mothers. My responses attend to themes of maternal contract and mothers as sovereign.

“mothering of mothers” (p.67), this contract serves as the origin of polities that survive through the generational repetition of mothers who have borne us in bodies, through actions, in memories, and through absence.

But when has intimacy been without limits and contracts without conditions?

In the maternal contract, these limits and conditions emerge in Anidjar’s discussion on the sovereignty of mothers. It is here that he offers us a provocation: the sovereignty of mothers lies in their power to kill!

It is quite a provocation. Instead of locating the sovereignty of mothers solely in the acts of producing and raising new members of polities, Anidjar finds it in their capacity to take life. Consideration of this capacity challenges not only our narcissistic assumptions of what mothers are and what they should do (shouldn’t all mothers exist *only* to love children?) but also what sovereignty entails—the power to dictate life—and more critically what it demands: to resist the temptations of such power. Although political discourse has consistently articulated the sovereign as a parental entity that exercises absolute power,⁶ it has solely rested this power in paternal figures: Father (fathers, uncles, brothers, sons), Gods, Leaders, States. These sovereigns have righteously helmed the charge of death frequently enough for most of us to not only expect but also accommodate their devastation. The possibility of mothers as destructive is unsettling.

But where would the academic world—whatever is left of it—be without such unsettling?

Perhaps too comfortable trapping mothers in reverence and honor, leaving them alone and ashamed of their murderous impulses. The least we can do, perhaps, is acknowledge ‘maternal hate,’ (Winnicott, 1949), which is necessarily inseparable from ‘maternal care’ (Winnicott, 1960).⁷ Maybe we needed this book to remind us not only how villages are formed but also how villages survive—through multiple mothers who have repeatedly written the entire maternal field of functions that determine the trajectories of our life and death, and, well, more importantly, our living, by navigating and negotiating their own sovereignty: it’s inclinations, insistence, justifications, and compulsions to kill.

In highlighting this destructive maternal potential, Anidjar is not trying to terrify us (at least I hope he is not). His argument is not a caution to avoid the wrath of the maternal (though it’s a good caution) but to delineate the work of the maternal: the subtle and painstaking ways in which mothers have been working, and re-working, through their destructive power upholding the maternal contact. Writing and inscribing. Producing and reproducing. Creating and destroying. Making and re-making. Often alone, abandoned, isolated, and guilty. Polities have found ways to continue because mothers have remained invested in performing and practicing the work of the maternal. Worlds have survived. Worlds have perished. More importantly, worlds have always managed to *be* because mothers have found ways to mother them.

⁶ The theorists of the political—Hobbes (1651), Pufendorf (1672), Schmitt (1922), and Kantorowicz (1957)—have unequivocally described or defined it by invoking or alluding to paternal authority.

⁷ In *Hate in Countertransference* (1949), Winnicott lists 18 reasons for maternal hate. He develops this idea further in the *Theory of Parent-Infant Relationship* (1960), making it a critical part of maternal care. Maternal care, for Winnicott, emanates from the attunement a mother has with the child that allows her to provide for the child’s physiological and psychological needs, primarily of dependence, but at the same time opens her up to (maternal) hate, her rageful response against that dependence.

Written in elegant prose and sharing dazzling insights, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* is an ode to mothering-- all its impossibilities, repetitions, memories, dualities, exiles, and promises that make up the political. Yet I cannot help but ponder the interruptions in mothering. All the fractures, ruptures, gaps, and absences that not only undergird mothering but more crucially pose a challenge to its workings. The losses that struggle to translate in mourning and remain locked within the contours of the collective. It is through this pondering about the arrests in mothering and their political function that I return to grief.

Interruptions in Maternal Political

Unlike mourning, which attempts to establish a relationship with loss (through detachment or incorporation),⁸ grief is the affective response that struggles to acknowledge the occurrence of loss and tragically continues to remain trapped in it. Forever asking, always unsure: Did it really happen? No answer is convincing enough.

Unable to symbolize, grief becomes inassimilable in signification: language or meaning. This unintegrated grief unfolds like a psychic void that blocks all attempts at vitality, casting shadows like an eclipsed sun that can no longer radiate life.⁹ These shadows have long shrouded, one might say with unfortunate certainty, the being of mothers who have all known grief viscerally with painful, tragic, collective familiarity. Of death, devastation, displacement, brutality, incarceration, absence, and abduction. If the political is another term of the all-encompassing landscape of maternal labor, what can we understand about the political, and indeed about mothering, from mothers who more often than not find themselves in the throes of grief? Of grief that halts all maternal functions, ability, capacity, willingness, effort, interest, duty, and joy, rudely interrupting everything that is mothering.

In his evocative rendering of maternal inscriptions, Anidjar's sovereign mother is not only the Winnicottian mother who provides the facilitating environment (of her body, attention, presence, tolerance of hate) for the child to flourish but also the Bionian mother who absorbs the unformulated, unsignified, unbearable, and unknowable raw insistence of affect as a psychic container and transforms it into meaning.¹⁰ This

⁸ Freud (1917) described mourning as the psychological process of disinvesting (decatechizing the ego) from the lost object. This is often misread as a call to get over loss and move on. I receive this disinvestment as Freud's invitation to forge a detached relationship with the loss object, one where we acknowledge its existence (that loss indeed happened) but aren't necessarily consumed by it. Derrida (2001), in somewhat of a continuation of Freud's thesis, framed mourning as an interiorization of the lost object, where we carry it within us, preserving its alterity. The two thinkers differ in their characterization of mourning. For Freud, mourning is 'successful' when you have detached yourself from the lost object. For Derrida, such a success undoes the work of the mourning, which is to carry the loss within.

⁹ In her exploration of loss and language, Kristeva (1989) uses the metaphor of the 'black sun' to speak of melancholic (depressive) states, an experience of a psychic void where the world loses meaning, vitality, and symbolic coherence. If, for Freud (1917), melancholia is the *refusal* to grasp the reality of loss (the fact that it happened), for Kristeva it is *inability* to comprehend this reality. Her reading of melancholia as a psychic collapse of meaning finds company in the theorization of loss by Green (1986) who attends to profound emptiness, an unrepresentable absence at the core of the melancholic self (he calls it the 'Negative'). For both Kristeva and Green, melancholia is a response to the early maternal loss or withdrawal.

¹⁰ Freud was not interested in the "phenomenology of mothering" (Phillips, 1993, p. 110). Nor, for the most part, was psychoanalysis. Instead, it focused on the psychic representations of the mother. Mothers were all kinds of (psychic) objects.: Libidinal, (Freud 1917), Good/Bad (Klein 1946), Imaginary (Lacan 1949), Primary (Fairbairn 1952), Dead (Green 1986), Transformational (Bollas 1987), Semiotic (Kristeva 1989), Love (Ogden 1990). What mothers actually did--mothering--was never particularly important for psychoanalysts. Except for Winnicott (1960), who theorized mothers (and all that they did or did not do) as the psychic (holding) environment for the child that facilitated its growth; and Bion (1962), for whom mothers were responsible for 'containing' the unprocessed anxieties and primitive thoughts of the child and returning them back to them in a form they can comprehend. Mothers, one can therefore argue, with some conviction, were the first psychoanalyst for the child.

containing emerges not from intention or deliberation but a state of maternal reverie—the unselfconscious reflective and receptive state of mothering that is generational, shared and co-created, allowing mothers to carry all that the villages, polities, communities and children struggle to articulate. The maternal contract is etched within this holding and containing; where mothers forbear their hate of us (we should at least be able to admit to our intolerability) and from our primitive affective state of wordlessness create scripts of meanings: life itself. But what happens when their attempts are stalled by their own untranslatable affective intensity? When grief casts a pallor on all possibilities of translation? Though it would not be entirely unreasonable to accommodate mothers’ ability to mourn—with all its protracted, symptomatic, incomplete, and persistent modalities—to be a part of maternal functions (it’s a good argument). But I remain curious about the interruptions in the maternal political. About the unmitigated grief that challenges the mothering of mothers. Mothers themselves. I suspect (one can never really be sure, nor should one be), that I am asking how unmourned loss constitutes the political. Or those who compose it. Mothers. Us.

Let me conclude by returning to *Hamnet*’s Agnes, the mother whose intransigent grief informs my present reflections.

The Grieving Sovereign Mother

Raised by a herbalist mother, Agnes grows up to be a healer. She spends her time in the forest, hiding in tree trunks, swaying between plants and shrubs, preparing potions that alleviate all mysterious aches, fevers, and illnesses. Her mother is rumored to be a witch, because who else but God could relieve the human body of its ailments? Agnes carries the legacy of this rumor, but the embrace of the lush green forest is too encompassing to cause worry. She welcomes her children into the wilderness, who soon become extensions of their mother, unencumbered by any urgency of order and organization, inhabiting the world instead with a joyous presence. This lyrical maternal rhythm is jolted by the scourge of the black plague that seizes them in its grip. First her daughter Judith (who eventually recovers), then her son Hamnet. Trembling with panic, Agnes frantically prepares potion after potion to find a cure. In vain. Hamnet dies. Unable to fully register her failure to save him, it takes her a while to approach Hamnet’s dying body. When she finally does, she cradles the cold body of her son, unable to believe death. His death. Unable to believe that she, the healer, could not save him. Even when everyone else—the sisters, the father—are able to inch towards the painful realization of Hamnet’s departure, Agnes remains mired in her agony. How could she not have saved him? Wasn’t she the mother? The healer. The one who turned away death. The sovereign.

Agnes’s insistent grief interrupts the maternal contract of mothering, the promise mothers make to themselves, other mothers, and us. To not only raise us but more importantly to not let us die. To save us. Protect us. To keep us alive.

Unsurprisingly, psychoanalysts are often trying, in one way or another, to learn from mothers, be them, or at least, in somewhat sincerity in the words of Adam Phillips (1993, p. 108) “play” them.

The devastating visuals of these interrupted promises are embossed in the children who are maimed, starved, raped, tortured, murdered, bombed, incarcerated, and deported. In the grief of all their mothers. Of mothers who lost children to the regimes of violence (state, settler, police, and army). How does this collective grief alter the workings of the maternal contract? What becomes of the political—villages, communities, nations, religions, people—when vagaries of state power overwhelm the maternal capacities to mother? Perhaps, I am trying to ask is what becomes of us in a world that is not only furiously unmaking itself but doing it on the bodies of children.

To grieve or not to grieve.

It is not (at least I hope it's not) a question about the prophecy of the world that is ripping itself apart. Rather, it is a query about the palimpsest of grief that becomes the field of maternal inscriptions. Today.

It's an impossible question.

In need of some impossible answers.

Gil, kindly, do us the honor.

Author Note

Zehra Mehdi is a practicing psychoanalytic therapist with a doctorate in Religious Studies and advance certificates in Psychoanalysis and South Asian Studies from Columbia University. Her research interests lie at the blurred borders of psychoanalysis, religious/ theological ethics, and politics. She is particularly attentive of the arc of Muslim minority experiences, Hindu-Muslim relations, limits of secularism, and iterations and textures of violence and suffering.

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