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Maternal Dissonance and the Crisis of Choice: Postfeminist Negotiations of Motherhood in Percival Everett's *Cutting Lisa*

Shelly Virdi[1] and Madhumita Purkayastha[2]

Abstract

Percival Everett's *Cutting Lisa* (1986) interrogates the contradictions of postfeminist discourse by staging a moral and emotional crisis around reproduction, agency, and care. Through the Livesey family's domestic space, the novel exposes how postfeminist "choice" operates as both empowerment and constraint. Drawing on Angela McRobbie's critique of postfeminist autonomy, Adrienne Rich's theorisation of the institution of motherhood, and Lisa Baraitser's concept of maternal dissonance, this paper argues that Everett reframes reproductive choice not as freedom but as a site of anxiety in which patriarchal care masks coercion. Lisa's silence and erasure dramatise the postfeminist tension between autonomy and regulation, while Dr John Livesey embodies a paternal authority that conflates protection with possession. Lisa's muted subjectivity embodies the postfeminist condition of self-surveillance: she internalises the neoliberal demand to choose while being denied emotional or social validation for that choice. As a writer often situated beyond the traditional boundaries of African American Literature, Everett brings a post-Civil Rights sensibility to gender politics, blending the moral, the bodily, and the existential. By integrating maternal ethics from Sara Ruddick and Nel Noddings, the paper reveals how the novel transforms care into a mode of disciplinary power. Through this analysis, *Cutting Lisa* emerges as a critical intervention into postfeminist narratives, highlighting the fragility of

1 Shelly Virdi is a PhD Research Scholar (PhD) at the Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, India. Email ID: shellyvirdi1201@gmail.com

2 Dr. Madhumita Purkayastha, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Head at the Department of English, DHSK College (Autonomous), Dibrugarh, India. Email ID: madhupurgang@email.com

agency within structures that conflate moral responsibility with patriarchal control.

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Introduction

Percival Everett's early novel *Cutting Lisa* situates reproductive politics at the intersection of moral psychology, domestic space, and postfeminist discourse. Set in the 1980s, an era marked by heightened cultural anxiety around gender roles, the narrative follows Dr. John Livesey, a widowed and retired obstetrician, who travels west to rekindle ties with his son Elgin and daughter-in-law Lisa, only to become obsessed with what he perceives as Lisa's moral corruption. The novel culminates in a shocking act when Dr. Livesey decides to perform an abortion on Lisa above the kitchen table, without consent, rendering the domestic space a site of clinical control and patriarchal violence. In this context, Dr. Livesey's assertion of control over Lisa's body can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to reassert paternal power. Yet Everett complicates this crisis in the narrative. Dr. Livesey's masculinity is not traditionally heroic or virile; it is fragile, melancholic, and self-reflective. His moral collapse stems not from ignorance but from the internalization of patriarchal logic as moral duty. While the novel is often read as an exploration of paternal authority and moral breakdown, it also anticipates postfeminist debates about freedom, responsibility, and self-regulation. This paper interrogates the question of how does *Cutting Lisa* expose the contradictions of postfeminist choice and reveal the fragility of maternal subjectivity within patriarchal systems of care? The answer is- Everett reveals reproductive agency as an affective and ethical crisis rather than a stable marker of autonomy. Through theories of postfeminism (McRobbie), the institution of motherhood (Rich), maternal dissonance (Baraitser), and maternal ethics (Ruddick; Noddings), the novel dramatizes how care transforms into control and how women's silence becomes the condition for patriarchal action. The novel reflects a world where a woman's freedom of choice is both praised and closely controlled, where motherhood is idealised and commercialised, and where men continue to hold authority over women's reproductive decisions. The following sections restructure these ideas to present a coherent argument that foregrounds *Cutting Lisa* as a critique of neoliberal femininity and paternal violence.

Postfeminist Choice and Neoliberal Autonomy

Postfeminism frames choice as the ultimate marker of female empowerment, yet this autonomy is circumscribed by expectations of emotional composure, domestic responsibility, and self-surveillance. Angela McRobbie's theorisation of postfeminism as an "undoing of feminism" (11) provides the conceptual foundation for understanding Everett's exploration of reproductive autonomy. She argues that postfeminism presents itself as a progressive celebration of female autonomy and empowerment, yet it subtly reinstates patriarchal values by demanding that women self-regulate through ideals of choice, confidence and personal responsibility: "there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, women are not being pushed back into home, but instead there is a process which says that feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something that young women can do without" (8). Rosalind Gill similarly argues that postfeminist discourse privatises political pressures by transforming them into matters of personal responsibility: "Intimately related to the stress upon personal choice is the new emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture" (158). Within this framework, freedom appears abundant while its conditions are tightly regulated.

Cutting Lisa dramatises these contradictions through Lisa's pregnancy, which is met with discomfort rather than celebration. Her muted responses and constrained emotional space mark the paradox of postfeminist agency: she possesses autonomy in theory, yet the narrative denies her voice, interiority, and validation. When Dr Livesey discovers that Elgin's vasectomy renders the pregnancy illegitimate within the marriage, Everett exposes what McRobbie identifies as the "new sexual contract": "the new sexual contract requires compromise in work as well as within the home. Despite the rhetoric of heroism in the combining of primary responsibility for children with maintaining a career,… entails the scaling down of ambition in favour of a discourse of managing following the onset of motherhood" (80). It is a conditional autonomy that women must navigate through self-discipline and affective management. She argues that postfeminism offers women conditional autonomy: they

may pursue education, sexuality, or pleasure, but only if they remain compliant with traditional respectability and emotional decorum. Lisa's affair transgresses this contract; her desire becomes illegible within the moral grammar of domestic virtue. Lisa's act does exactly that – it refuses to perform guilt or restraint. Dr Livesey's outrage thus reinstates patriarchal order not through punishment but through pity; his moral injury allows him to reclaim authority as caregiver and judge. As McRobbie writes in "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" "The new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom" (260). Therefore, in a culture that equates choice with empowerment yet demands emotional propriety, Lisa's silence becomes a precondition for patriarchal correction. Everett's novel thus challenges the ideological coherence of postfeminist choice, revealing it as a fragile construct easily overridden by paternal care.

McRobbie extends this argument through her concept of the "double entanglement" (13) wherein women are invited to experience empowerment through choice, sexuality, and domestic success, even as they are disciplined by constant self-surveillance internalising patriarchal norms of beauty, domesticity and moral conduct. The consequence is a new form of gendered power in which freedom and regulation coexist: the rhetoric of choice conceals the persistence of control. Everett dramatises this entanglement through the figure of Lisa, whose pregnancy, ostensibly a private act of autonomy, is surrounded by discomfort, judgment, and silence. Her body becomes a contested site where freedom and control intersect. Through Dr Livesey's paternalistic intrusion, Everett dramatises McRobbie's "undoing" of feminist agency where care is weaponised as control. When Dr Livesey looks at his son's wife and says, "Lisa, you're still beautiful" (Everett 12). Everett condenses the entire moral pathology of *Cutting Lisa* into one line. What sounds like tenderness is in fact an aestheticisation of empathy, a gesture that transforms moral responsibility into visual reassurance.

Motherhood as Institution vs Experience: Adrienne Rich

Having traced the ideological framework of postfeminism, the study now turns to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), who defined the

"institution of motherhood" (42) as distinct from the lived experience of mothering – a site of both love and oppression. Rich draws a powerful distinction between motherhood as experience – a potentially empowering, bodily, and emotional act of nurturing – and motherhood as institution – a patriarchal mechanism that disciplines women's reproductive and emotional lives. She observes that "institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (42), thereby converting care into an ideology of submission.

In *Cutting Lisa*, the rhetoric of choice is turned inside out. Lisa's pregnancy is surrounded by silence: her desires, ambivalence, or consent are absent from the narrative. The novel denies her the subject position that postfeminism promises, showing instead how her body becomes the site of other people's moral performances – her husband's passivity, her father-in-law's self-righteousness, and the reader's uneasy complicity. The domestic setting amplifies this institutional control; the home, sterilised and orderly, resembles a clinic more than a dwelling where reproductive decisions become matters of moral order rather than personal choice. When Everett describes Lisa "sitting at the kitchen table" (79), offering polite greetings while Dr Livesey withdraws, the scene reveals the asymmetry of emotional labour. Lisa performs sociability while Livesey enacts detachment, embodying the patriarchal expectation that women sustain relational warmth even in hostile conditions. Rich's insight that "the loss of the daughter to the institution of motherhood is the essential female tragedy" (240) resonates deeply here. Lisa's potential subjectivity is absorbed into patriarchal scripts of guilt, obligation, and silence. The institution of motherhood demands that she embody maternal virtue even when her pregnancy results from transgression.

Sharon Hays's concept of "intensive mothering" (97) deepens the reading of Lisa's position within the domestic and ideological pressures of *Cutting Lisa*. Hays describes intensive motherhood as a powerful cultural script that demands that women be primary caregivers, morally selfless, emotionally available, and constantly attentive, regardless of their own desires or circumstances. This script

insists that good motherhood requires total devotion, even as it leaves little room for women's ambivalence or agency. Lisa's pregnancy becomes a site where these expectations crystallise: she is silently positioned as the moral centre of the family, yet she is afforded no narrative space to express uncertainty or discontent. Hays's theory helps explain why Lisa's ambivalence cannot be voiced within the novel's world – the institution of motherhood demands self-sacrifice and compliance, and any deviation from this ideal becomes grounds for patriarchal intervention. Through this lens, Everett exposes how cultural ideals of motherhood mask systems of control that silence women even before violence occurs.

Maternal Dissonance and the Ethics of Care

Dr Livesey's eruption of hatred – his mind "wandering to Lisa and the life developing inside her" (107) and his longing "for a place to direct it" – marks the psychic breakdown of what Lisa Baraitser calls the "ethics of care" (22). In *Maternal Encounters*, Baraitser suggests that genuine care demands a tolerance of interruption: the willingness to have one's sense of order unsettled by another's need or difference. Dr. Livesey's hatred is born precisely from his inability to endure that interruption. Hatred becomes the inverse of care – the moment where the affective labour of sustaining others collapses into the desire to annihilate difference. In Everett's narrative, this dissonance is displaced onto Dr. Livesey, who embodies a distorted version of care that fuses tenderness with violence.

Cutting Lisa thus extends Baraitser's insights into a broader ethical critique, suggesting that dissonance is not only the maternal condition but also the psychic residue of a culture where care and control are fatally entwined. Dr Livesey and Lisa's brief exchange: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him paint the moon. Of course, you can, Lisa said" (57). For Baraitser, the maternal relation is defined by the capacity to be interrupted by another, by the willingness to let one's certainty be unsettled. Dr. Livesey's distorted proverb expresses his resistance to such interruption: he values order and predictability, seeing imagination as futile or absurd. His voice carries the authority of reason – the belief that care must follow logic. Lisa's soft contradiction, "Of course you can," enacts the very dissonance Baraitser describes. Her response is not

argumentative but imaginative; it breaks through the rational frame with a flash of creative possibility. This is the maternal voice as ethical interruption – brief, gentle, but destabilising. Scenes such as the exchange – "Am I the only one excited about this child?" (56) and Lisa's quiet plea, "Please listen to me" – reveal a clash between paternal certainty and maternal hesitation. Baraitser's "interruption" becomes visible in Lisa's attempts to articulate ambivalence, yet her interruptions are systematically ignored. Instead, Livesey's rational, clinical disposition frames his violent act as an ethical duty.

The novel's ending refuses catharsis. There is no punishment, no revelation, only an unsettling calm. This absence of narrative justice is not moral indifference; it is a formal critique of the very structures that demand resolution. By withholding closure, Everett resists the sentimental logic that often redeems patriarchal violence through guilt or redemption. The title itself, "Cutting Lisa", encapsulates the novel's dual register of violence and intimacy. "Cutting" signifies both surgical precision and emotional rupture; it is an act of dissection that reveals the anatomy of power relations. The possessive structure of the title (Lisa as object) foregrounds how the female body becomes the text upon which masculine ethics inscribe themselves. Everett thus enacts what Baraitser calls the temporal dissonance of motherhood – the way maternal experiences unfold across conflicting temporalities of continuity and rupture, life and loss. When Everett writes, "Lisa was trying to gain her legs. She held her hand to her head and tried to take a step. Dr. Livesey rushed forward and caught her, let her down onto the sofa. 'Okay?' he said. 'Okay.' He switched on the overhead light in the kitchen and cleared the table" (147), he transforms the language of care into a performance of control. Lisa Baraitser's theory of care's ambivalence – that caring acts can conceal domination – illuminates this subtle shift. Dr. Livesey's gesture appears protective, but it immediately transitions into the preparation of a space for intervention, as if care must culminate in order, cleanliness, and authority. Baraitser insists that care can become violent when it refuses interruption, when it transforms the other into an object of maintenance. Dr. Livesey's care operates precisely through this refusal: he will not tolerate Lisa's frailty as an interruption to his moral system. Instead, he restores coherence through action. Everett's minimal narration exposes this

collapse of intimacy into ritual; care becomes a method of restoring moral symmetry rather than responding to suffering. Lisa's quiet "Okay" signals resignation, not comfort. This brief domestic moment, tender on the surface, thus inaugurates the novel's most chilling truth: that care, stripped of reciprocity, is indistinguishable from violence. In *Cutting Lisa*, this dissonance manifests not in a mother's psyche but in the narrative itself, which oscillates between tenderness and horror, intimacy and alienation. The result is a postfeminist tragedy without resolution.

Narrative Silence, Patriarchal Control, and Domestic Space

Lisa's near-total absence from the novel's interior narrative constitutes both an ethical void and a critical statement. Everett's decision to withhold her voice dramatises how women's reproductive subjectivity is continually displaced by masculine narration. Within postfeminist culture, female silence often masquerades as "choice" – a woman who does not speak is presumed to consent, to prefer privacy, to exercise agency through passivity. Everett subverts this trope by showing how Lisa's silence becomes the condition for violence. When Livesey performs the abortion, Lisa is unconscious. Her silence literalizes the postfeminist paradox: the rhetoric of "choice" culminates in the obliteration of the chooser. The act collapses motherhood and death into one gesture, producing what this paper calls maternal dissonance at the level of narrative form. The reader is forced to confront the moral abyss of a world where reproductive decisions are made for, rather than by, women. Moreover, Lisa's erasure challenges the reader's interpretive complicity. Everett structures the text as a confession without resolution. Dr Livesey's calm tone, his paternal guilt, and the domestic setting of the final act, the kitchen table, the sleeping child, generate a false sense of intimacy. The reader, positioned within his consciousness, experiences the same moral sedation that precedes the violence. Everett thus transforms the reader into a witness who must navigate the same ethical contradictions that structure postfeminist discourse. Sara Ruddick's article "Maternal Thinking" offers another way to understand the moral collapse in *Cutting Lisa*. Ruddick defines "maternal thinking" (347) as a disciplined and reflective mode of reasoning that arises from the daily practice of caring, a way

of knowing grounded in attention, preservation, and nonviolence. In contrast to patriarchal rationality, which seeks mastery and order, maternal thinking values responsiveness and humility. Everett's novel dramatises the destruction of this maternal epistemology. Dr John Livesey's medical rationality displaces the ethical intelligence that Ruddick associates with care; his logic of protection converts reflection into moral procedure. Lisa's silence, often read as passivity, can thus be reinterpreted as the suppression of maternal thought – an unarticulated awareness that resists Dr Livesey's instrumental morality. In this light, *Cutting Lisa* becomes not only a critique of patriarchal ethics but of the epistemic hierarchy that privileges masculine knowledge over maternal understanding, exposing how violence is sustained by the denial of care as a form of thought.

One major but often overlooked feature of postfeminism is its dependence on constant surveillance, where women's lives are monitored, assessed, and disciplined under the guise of empowerment. Anita Harris argues that contemporary postfeminist culture constructs young women as "at-risk subjects" (14) who must continually regulate their behaviour, sexuality, and choices to maintain respectability. This surveillance is not only social but internalised; women learn to watch themselves as if from the outside, performing an ever-corrected version of femininity. *Cutting Lisa* exposes this postfeminist regulatory gaze through Dr Livesey, who assumes the right to evaluate Lisa's morality, sexuality, and reproductive choices. Lisa's failure to narrate her choice, perform remorse, or conform to expected emotional scripts places her outside this regulatory ideal. Her silence becomes read as deviance – not because of what she says, but because of how she fails to embody the surveilled norms of the ideal postfeminist woman: articulate, controlled, morally legible. This angle reframes *Cutting Lisa* not only as a crisis of choice but as a critique of the postfeminist culture of monitoring, where women's bodies and decisions are disciplined through judgment, visibility, and the male gaze disguised as moral protection.

The domestic space in *Cutting Lisa* mirrors the contradictions of postfeminist domesticity: the home as both haven and site of control. The setting – a comfortable Oregon house, complete with kitchen

rituals and family games – appears to fulfil the ideal of balanced, self-regulating domestic life. Yet Everett subtly infuses this space with unease: under the surface civility lies repression, boredom, and moral decay. Ruth Spencer, the young woman with whom Livesey has an affair, functions as a counterpoint to Lisa. Where Lisa is silent and reproductive, Ruth is vocal and sexual. Yet both women are subjected to Livesey's interpretive control. His affair with Ruth momentarily reanimates his sense of agency, but it is also driven by his desire to assert mastery over the feminine. Ruth's independence threatens his authority; Lisa's pregnancy provokes his moral panic. The two women thus represent the bifurcated female subjectivity of postfeminist culture – the sexually autonomous woman and the maternal caretaker – neither of whom escapes patriarchal discipline. The "ethics of care" (xiii), as theorised by Nel Noddings, rests on relationality and empathy. Everett's novel perverts this ethic by revealing how care can be weaponised. Dr Livesey's self-appointed role as moral caretaker transforms empathy into coercion. In performing the abortion, he enacts a grotesque parody of care: he cleans, medicates, sutures – all in the service of erasure. This perverse logic of protection – protecting the family's honour, his son's fragility, the unborn child's "purity" – exposes the dark underside of postfeminist domestic ethics. Everett frames Dr Livesey's narration in the voice of rational expertise. As a retired obstetrician, he sees himself as the ultimate arbiter of birth and death, equating medical authority with moral legitimacy. Yvonne Tasker's analysis of postfeminist "makeover" culture (10) introduces a crucial angle for understanding how *Cutting Lisa* critiques the discipline of the female body. Tasker argues that postfeminist narratives frequently centre on the "transformation, the yearning to achieve perfection in one's physical self and/ or domestic environment" (10). Within this framework, women's bodies become projects to be corrected, perfected, or morally purified through regimes of discipline. Everett's representation of Lisa exposes the violence underlying such transformation narratives: instead of a voluntary makeover sanctioned by postfeminist culture, Lisa undergoes an involuntary and brutal "correction" at the hands of Dr Livesey, who assumes the authority to reshape her reproductive identity. His surgical violation functions as the dark inversion of postfeminist self-improvement

rhetoric, revealing how the pressure to conform to ideal femininity can be enforced not only through cultural messaging but through literal bodily intervention. Tasker's framework underscores how postfeminism repackages patriarchal regulation as empowerment, and Everett exposes this contradiction by showing that the promise of transformation becomes a justification for control. Through Tasker's lens, *Cutting Lisa* critiques the cultural obsession with the optimised female body, revealing how the discourse of improvement can easily mask coercion, punishment, and patriarchal possession.

The Prologue, in which Mr Thompson performs an unauthorised C-section on his wife, Gertrude Thompson, foreshadows Livesey's own act. The scene becomes an allegory of masculine intrusion into the reproductive body under the guise of love and protection as he simply explains that: "I wanted to bring my child into the world. It's as simple as that" (5). Everett deliberately constructs a mirrored structure: the first unauthorised operation horrifies Livesey, while the second, his own, appears to him as justice. The fact that Dr John Livesey was "finding Thompson's action somehow beautiful" (7), reveals the self-deception at the heart of patriarchal moralism. Livesey's professional background grants him the authority to transgress bodily boundaries. He invokes medical precision to rationalise his act, yet Everett's clinical language gradually turns gothic – needles, threads, blood, silence – underscoring the violence of medical paternalism. In this sense, *Cutting Lisa* exposes the undercurrents of postfeminist discourse: the way care, protection, and medical rationality mask systems of control.

Conclusion

Through its unsettling portrayal of paternal care, narrative silence, and reproductive violence, *Cutting Lisa* exposes the inherent contradictions of postfeminist discourse. Everett demonstrates that the rhetoric of choice – central to neoliberal femininity – collapses when confronted with patriarchal interpretations of care and responsibility. By reading the novel through McRobbie's postfeminism, Rich's institution of motherhood, Baraitser's maternal dissonance, and maternal ethics from Ruddick and Noddings et al., this paper finds that Everett reframes reproduction as a moral crisis shaped by gendered power. Lisa's erasure reveals how agency

becomes fragile within systems that conflate protection with possession. *Cutting Lisa* ultimately challenges readers to reconsider the ethics of care and autonomy within structures where violence is easily rationalised under the guise of responsibility. The silence that concludes the novel stands as an indictment of postfeminist promises – exposing choice as meaningful only when accompanied by justice, recognition, and genuine relational care. By situating *Cutting Lisa* at the crossroads of postfeminist ethics, Everett broadens the landscape of African American fiction beyond racial discourse alone.

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