

Motherhood Rewritten

Post-feminist Representations of Grief in RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and PIECES OF A WOMAN (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020)

Abstract

Using a post-feminist lens, this article explores the cinematic depiction of maternal grief in RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and PIECES OF A WOMAN (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020). The study focuses on the visual and narrative techniques used in these films, conducting a thematic analysis centered on three key post-feminist themes: female agency in owning grief, autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery, and redefining motherhood beyond biological ties. Through detailed analysis of mise-en-scène, cinematography, silence, and embodied performance, the article examines how these films challenge traditional representations of maternal suffering and instead highlight complex, private, and nonlinear paths to healing. The analysis also engages with the spiritual and ethical dimensions of mourning, illustrating how both films transform loss into a quiet form of endurance, forgiveness, and inner renewal. Grounded in post-feminist thought, the study argues that contemporary cinema enables new expressions of maternal subjectivity that resist spectacle and closure, instead reimagining grief, memory, and identity as intertwined acts of resilience and transcendence.

Keywords

Post-feminism, Maternal Grief, Female Agency, Cinematic Mourning, Feminist Film Theory, Narrative Healing, Embodied Performance, RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010), PIECES OF A WOMAN (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020)

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Introduction

With the rise of television since the 1950s and 1960s, death and dead bodies have been remediated and returned to the private sphere, to our everyday lives. As Geoffrey Gorer observed in his influential essay “The Pornography of Death,” the spectacle of death has become a dominant theme in mass-media genres such as thrillers, war stories, science fiction, and horror, turning the demise of strangers or fictional characters into fleeting, flickering images on our screens.¹ While death is highly visible in these representations, the portrayal of personal grief, especially maternal grief, often remains emotionally flattened or sidelined.²

This article addresses that gap by examining through a post-feminist lens how two contemporary films – *RABBIT HOLE* (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020) – reimagine the emotional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of maternal grief. Both films delve into the intimate spaces of loss, portraying mothers who navigate mourning as an act of moral and emotional self-determination. Within these narratives, grief unfolds as a deeply human and spiritual journey that transcends institutional religion and instead locates meaning in endurance, empathy, and the quiet persistence of love.

This study explores how contemporary cinema translates maternal loss into ethical and emotional language through a post-feminist lens.

1 Gorer 1955.

2 Åström 2017.

The Cinematic and Cultural Context of Grief

Across religious and cultural tradition, suffering has long been associated with transformation. In Christianity, pain carries potential for redemption;³ in Buddhism, the truth of *dukkha* situates suffering as the first step towards enlightenment;⁴ and in Islam, *sabr*⁵ (patience) is praised as an act of faith and strength.⁶ These religious ideas frame loss as a process through which individuals cultivate resilience and insight. The notion of suffering as a moral and transformative experience resonates with contemporary portrayals of womanhood and maternal endurance in film. *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* explore the profound impact of child loss on bereaved parents, especially mothers. In *RABBIT HOLE*, a middle-class couple, Becca (Nicole Kidman) and Howie (Aaron Eckhart), navigate the aftermath of the death of their young son, Danny, in a car accident. The film traces the couple's deviating coping mechanisms in the months following the tragedy. Becca becomes emotionally withdrawn and seeks solace not in traditional support groups or family but through a quiet, unusual friendship with Jason (Miles Teller), the teenage boy who accidentally killed Danny. Their conversations are tender and philosophical, centring around guilt, forgiveness, and metaphysical questions about alternate universes, a motif that mirrors Becca's internal attempt to find meaning or parallel realities where her son might still be alive. In contrast, Howie clings to routines and memories,⁷ including watching old home videos, and becomes emotionally frustrated with Becca's detachment. Through these intimate domestic scenes, the film charts the couple's gradual emotional estrangement and fragile attempts at reconnection, allowing viewers to witness how grief reshapes love, faith in continuity, and everyday life.

The film resists any grand reconciliation. Instead, it explores how grief alters personal identities and relationships, and how silence and solitude

- 3 Lewis 2001, 90–92; Rahner 1967. Lewis argues that human suffering is not meaningless but serves as a divine instrument for moral purification and redemption, reflecting the Christian belief that pain draws individuals closer to God's will.
- 4 Rahula 1959.
- 5 *Sabr* is an Islamic ethical concept denoting patient endurance in the face of suffering and is regarded as both a moral virtue and a spiritual act of faith that transforms hardship into inner strength.
- 6 Nasr 2002.
- 7 Blocksidge/Wittkowski/Heazell/Smith 2025.

become tools of endurance. Becca's journey is one of emotional minimalism, where healing depends not on expressive catharsis but rather on the quiet reclaiming of life on her own terms, a distinctly post-feminist narrative of female resilience. The narrative concludes with a subdued reconciliation: Becca and Howie sit together in their backyard, quietly imagining an ordinary future in which pain remains but coexistence becomes possible. This understated ending replaces overt redemption with emotional endurance, showing that healing lies not in forgetting but in learning to live alongside loss.

Similarly, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* presents an interiorized, post-feminist vision of maternal grief, but with a more visceral opening act. Martha (Vanessa Kirby) and her partner Sean (Shia LaBeouf) prepare for a home birth, but the labour goes tragically wrong under the supervision of a midwife (Molly Parker). The baby is born but dies minutes later, leading to a profound rupture in Martha's life. The film's first thirty minutes – shot in a single take – capture the traumatic birth in harrowing real-time detail, immersing the viewer in the corporeality of labour and loss.⁸ What follows is a slow unravelling of Martha's relationship with Sean, her estrangement from her dominant mother (Ellen Burstyn), and her refusal to participate in the public or legal performance of grief. As her family pressures her to testify in court against the midwife, Martha increasingly distances herself from any socially sanctioned narrative of justice or closure.

Martha's grief is embodied through silence, physical stillness, and visual detachment.⁹ Rather than vocalizing her pain, the film portrays Martha's separation from Sean through quiet acts of detachment, as she gradually withdraws from the shared domestic space and the aspirations it once symbolized. In the closing scene, a girl who is about six years old is shown climbing an apple tree before Martha appears and gently takes her inside. Because the film provides no temporal marker or transition to indicate the passage of several years, this moment remains ambiguous. It may function as a literal flashforward that gestures towards Martha's future renewal or as a symbolic, imagined vision that expresses her internal longing for continuity and healing. Notably, this film is inspired by a true story of the script writer, Kata Wéber, and her husband, Kornél Mundruczó, lending the narrative an autobiographical depth that complicates its representation of grief.¹⁰

8 Landsberg 2004, 1–15.

9 Castillo 2020.

10 Kiliç 2023.

Both films position the maternal subject not as a victim of fate but as an emotionally self-regulating individual who resists the cultural imperative to either narrate suffering or resolve it publicly. This aligns with broader post-feminist tropes in media where female characters assert agency through self-discipline.

The cultural and political contexts in which these films were released inform their thematic concerns and cinematic strategies. *RABBIT HOLE* premiered during a decade marked by growing public attention to trauma and loss in post-9/11 American society, when cinema increasingly began to reflect nuanced psychological portrayals of domestic instability and emotional resilience.

By contrast, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* emerged in the wake of global events that shaped its cultural and political contexts. The #MeToo movement, which began in 2017, transformed global conversations about women's bodily autonomy, consent, and institutional accountability.¹¹ While the movement primarily exposed sexual harassment, its broader impact extended to how women's physical experiences, including childbirth, reproductive health, and loss are shaped by systems of control and silence. Both sexual harassment and reproductive trauma reveal how women's bodies are regulated and often denied agency within patriarchal structures.¹² As scholars of contemporary feminism note, these dynamics reflect broader post-feminist and neoliberal structures that regulate women's embodied experiences.¹³ Within this context, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* can be read as a post #MeToo narrative that translates these concerns into the intimate space of childbirth. Although the film never states Martha's reasons for choosing a homebirth, her decision can be interpreted as an assertion of bodily autonomy and a quiet resistance to institutional obstetric authority. This struggle over bodily autonomy continues after childbirth, as shown when Sean attempts sexual intimacy with Martha despite her emotional and physical trauma, a moment that mirrors the broader #MeToo critique of consent being overlooked even within intimate relationships. The traumatic outcome of her labour and the subsequent public scrutiny further expose how women's pain is medicalized, judged, and politicized, a form of what feminist scholars describe as obstetric violence.¹⁴ Set in a multicultural North American city,

11 Molyneux/Dey/Gatto/Rowden 2021.

12 Andersen 2018.

13 Banet-Weiser/Gill/Rottenberg 2020.

14 Sadler/Santos/Ruiz-Berdun/Leiva Rojas/Skoko/Gillen/Clausen 2016, 47–55.

the film implicitly critiques the failures of healthcare through its depiction of Martha's traumatic childbirth, the ensuing legal proceedings, and the public scrutiny of her private grief. These narrative choices echo real-world conversations about accountability, consent, and the right to grieve on one's own terms.

This article investigates the complex visualization of maternal mourning in a contemporary context, highlighting the intersections of female agency, autonomy in grieving, and the redefinition of motherhood within a post-feminist framework. In contrast to traditional narratives that depict female grief as either silent suffering or part of a collective ritual, these films foreground a woman's solitary and self-determined emotional process. Both films critique traditional family norms and present a poignant, introspective portrayal of loss that resonates with post-feminist ideals of emotional resilience, individualism, and moral complexity.

Theoretical Framework: Post-feminism, Emotion, and Post-Secular Spirituality

Over the past three decades, the concept of post-feminism has emerged as a complex and contested concept within feminist media and cultural theory. Building upon these theoretical positions, this study adopts post-feminism not as a historical shift but as a cultural sensibility that privileges emotion, autonomy, and self-reflexivity. As Rosalind Gill argues, post-feminism is characterized by a paradoxical fusion of feminist and anti-feminist values, where empowerment is closely tied to self-regulation and personal responsibility. Within this discourse, emotion becomes a site of agency as well as control. Women are invited to manage pain, reframe vulnerability as strength, and locate self-worth through their capacity for endurance and reflection.¹⁵

This sensibility extends beyond psychological resilience to encompass a moral and even spiritual dimension. The expectation to overcome loss, to reconstruct meaning through empathy and patience, echoes long-standing ethical and spiritual traditions that link suffering with transformation. In the context of post-feminist cinema, such narratives of grief and recovery

15 Brooks 1998; Coppock/Haydon/Richter 1995; Gamble 2004; Tasker/Negra 2007; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2008.

reconfigure faith as an inward process; a trust in one's own capacity to endure loss and reconstruct meaning, grounded in emotional intelligence and ethical consciousness rather than religious devotion.¹⁶

Post-feminist subjectivity thus becomes a space of quiet transcendence, where healing arises through affective strength, moral courage, and the redemptive power of love. Building on these conceptual understandings of post-feminist emotion and resilience, previous scholars have explored how cinema represents motherhood and grief as deeply affective and transformative experiences. According to Sarah Wright, in media the grieving mother is a powerful figure and often depicted as a “victim-hero” whose grief is both personal and public and whose suffering is leveraged for social change.¹⁷ This portrayal expands motherhood beyond biology into a symbolic and moral exertion, reinforcing ideals of maternal selflessness and perseverance. Drawing on this framework, the present analysis examines how *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* translate maternal loss into visual and emotional language. Both films portray mothers who carry the burden of grief in isolation, revealing how post-feminist culture redefines agency not through rebellion but through emotional resilience. Wright's notion of “extended motherhood,” in which the pursuit of justice and meaning becomes a continued act of care, provides a critical lens for understanding how these cinematic mothers negotiate vulnerability and strength within a post-feminist context.¹⁸

Martin Zelly highlights how news media often idealize or commercialize pregnancy loss through the “grieving mother” trope, restricting space for complex emotions like ambivalence or anger.¹⁹ This pattern of idealizing maternal grief while suppressing emotional complexity is reflected in *PIECES OF A WOMAN*, where Martha's refusal to perform socially acceptable grief isolates her but asserts her autonomy. The systematic review conducted by Sophie Mary et al. found that media representation continues to privilege the “good mother” archetypes, marginalizing portrayals of mothers who grieve in unconventional or emotionally restrained ways.²⁰ *RABBIT HOLE* complicates this narrative through Becca's emotional distance, marital disconnec-

16 Johnston 2006.

17 Wright 2016.

18 Wright 2016, 11–13.

19 Zelly 2022.

20 Mary/Duschinsky/Davis/Dunnett/Coughlan 2024, 169–186.

tion, and refusal to idealize her lost child, subtle acts of resistance against cultural expectations that equate maternal love with visible suffering.

As discussed earlier, post-feminist discourse positions the female body as both expressive and disciplined, revealing the tension between emotional authenticity and self-control. Both *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* translate this paradox into visual form, depicting grief that must remain visible yet contained. The sleek, restrained bodies of Becca and Martha function not merely as aesthetic ideals but also as emotionally coded surfaces, sites where restraint and composure become visual languages of endurance.²¹ Their grief is communicated through minimal gestures, silence, stillness, and controlled movement, allowing emotion to register on the surface of the body without overt expression. This visual grammar aligns with post-feminist ideals of self-mastery and emotional autonomy, suggesting that strength resides not in catharsis but in the disciplined containment of pain.

In this article, spirituality is used in a broad post-secular sense, referring to moral reflection, endurance, and empathy that are not rooted in any specific religious tradition. This aligns with Linda Woodhead's distinction between contemporary spirituality and institutional religion,²² and with Yusef Ogretici's account of spirituality as an ethical and experiential orientation rather than a latter doctrinal system.²³

Methodology

Building on these aesthetic readings, these theoretical perspectives collectively inform the present analysis, which explores how *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* visualize the emotional and spiritual dimensions of post-feminist grief through cinematic form. Both films are treated as cultural texts that materialize post-feminist ideals of endurance, empathy, and moral agency within the lived experiences of motherhood and loss. This analysis focuses on three core post-feminist themes that emerge through visual and thematic interpretation: (1) female agency and the ownership of grief, (2) autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery, and (3) redefinition of motherhood beyond biological reproduction.

21. Negra/Tasker 2007.

22. Woodhead 2013.

23. Ogretici 2018.

Using a qualitative interpretivist approach, the analysis combines thematic and visual methods to explore how composition, colour, silence, and gesture construct meaning around loss, endurance, and recovery. Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark's model of thematic analysis,²⁴ this study identifies recurring motifs such as domestic space, moral resilience, and affective strength that are examined through a post-feminist lens that views emotion as a site of self-discipline, reflection, and empowerment. Rather than seeking generalization, this study aims for contextual depth, showing how each of the selected films employs post-feminist aesthetics to frame mourning as a moral and spiritual process of self-reconstruction within its specific narrative context.

Analysis and Discussion

Both *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* depict maternal grief as an emotional and moral journey, transforming loss into a process of endurance and renewal. Becca in *RABBIT HOLE* and Martha in *PIECES OF A WOMAN* embody the post-feminist tension between vulnerability and self-mastery, revealing grief as both suffering and strength. Their restrained performances and intimate domestic settings reframe motherhood within the affective space of the home, where emotional recovery replaces religious consolation.

Building on the analytical framework outlined in the methodology, the following discussion applies this interpretive lens to examine how these emotional and moral dynamics unfold across the three interrelated post-feminist themes introduced earlier.

Female Agency and the Ownership of Grief

According to Beth Rodgers and Kathleen Cowles, suffering is profoundly personal and complex and is experienced uniquely by each individual, much like life itself.²⁵ This uniqueness is shaped by individual perspectives, making each person's experience of suffering and coping with death distinct. Similarly, Sheila Clark and Robert Goldney's study on grieving couples who lost children found that each parent's mourning process was unique, even

24 Braun/Clarke 2008, 77–101.

25 Rodgers/Cowles 1997.

though they faced the same loss.²⁶ This difference in grief experiences often led to challenges in communication and connection, as one partner might be intensely grieving while the other was trying to move forward with daily life. The loss of a newborn can have far-reaching consequences, extending beyond physical effects to impact social, emotional, spiritual, and psychosocial well-being.²⁷

Agency in cinematic grief narratives often arises through the disruption of conventional visual tropes. According to Joanna Bourke, women in mourning are typically depicted in mainstream cinema as passive victims of suffering, their emotional turmoil regulated or pathologized.²⁸ *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* centre on female agency and the ownership of grief, and they portray mourning as an active, embodied process rather than a condition of helplessness. From a post-feminist perspective, the protagonists reject traditional expectations of maternal grief, instead actively shaping their own unique and non-linear emotional journeys. *PIECES OF A WOMAN* employs a distinctive narrative approach to convey the protagonist's grief, beginning with an approximately 24-minute-long take that captures the traumatic experience of childbirth and newborn loss (fig. 1). Filmed with a gimbal-stabilized camera, the sequence maintains fluid, uninterrupted movement while creating the perceptual intimacy of handheld cinematography. As cinematographer Benjamin Loeb explained, the scene was conceived from the “eyes of the baby,”²⁹ a viewpoint that heightens the sensory and emotional intensity of the sequence by situating the audience within the intimate space of birth and loss. This hybrid visual technique transforms the physical act of childbirth into a visceral metaphor for trauma, endurance, and the fragile balance between control and surrender. As the narrative progresses, Martha's grief is portrayed through interior, often isolated, silent acts of resistance, which serve to underscore her increasing detachment from others, resonating with Janet Staiger's idea that *mise-en-scène* (setting, lighting, camera angles and movement, costumes and props, actor placement and movement) can serve as a “terrain of resistance.”³⁰ This

26 Clark/Goldney 2000, 467–484.

27 Cholette 2012.

28 Bourke 2014.

29 Go Creative Show 2021.

30 Staiger 2000; *Terrain of resistance* refers to a subtle space or mode where individuals, especially women, resist dominant social expectations not through open rebellion but through quiet everyday acts such as silence, withdrawal, or emotional control.

Fig. 1: From the unbroken 23 minute and 55 seconds delivery sequence (00:07:42–00:31:37), Martha holds her newborn for the first and only time, moments before the child's death. Film still, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020), 00:29:53.



feeling of isolation is reinforced by scenes showing Martha alone in stark environments or navigating barren cityscapes. A pivotal moment of agency is evident in Martha's silence during the courtroom testimony, where she resists the expectation of seeking justice and instead repositions herself as a subject of grief. This narrative choice reflects post-feminist sensibilities, as Martha prioritizes emotional sovereignty over institutional definitions of healing and closure.³¹

Similarly, *RABBIT HOLE* employs symbolic spatial contrasts between the cold, structured interiors of Becca's home and the warm, more disorderly spaces around her to underscore her emotional distance and growing detachment. The film's cinematography highlights her psychological withdrawal, often framing her through doorways or mirrors, symbolizing her disconnection from the surroundings (fig. 2). Counter to traditional mourning practices, Becca seeks a personal connection with the teenager responsible for her son's death, driven by a desire for empathetic understanding rather than justice or forgiveness, echoing Stella Bruzzi's concept of "performative mourning."³² This act exemplifies a post-feminist form of spiritual endurance: strength expressed through compassion rather than vengeance. Her rejection of support groups and communal grieving also resonates with Susannah Radstone's concept of melancholic agency,³³ where quiet refusal becomes a form of resistance.³⁴

31 Gill 2007.

32 Bruzzi 2013. *Performative mourning* is an active, self-defining practice, unlike passive suffering, where emotion is shaped through performance.

33 According to Radstone 1995, *melancholic agency* is the capacity to live with unresolved grief, where loss becomes an ongoing form of ethical self-awareness and emotional endurance.

34 Radstone 1995.



Fig. 2: Becca sees Jason for the first time. Her face is reflected in a mirror and framed, visually expressing her inner rupture and emotional uncertainty. Film still, RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010), 00:20:59.

Both films reject sentimental or religiously codified consolations, yet they evoke a post-secular spirituality,³⁵ a faith in human endurance and ethical consciousness that transcends institutional religion. Becca's quiet forgiveness and Martha's restrained defiance embody an inward moral transcendence that mirrors the theological ideals of *sabr* (patience)³⁶ and redemption reimagined in secular form.

In this way, their agency becomes both post-feminist and post-secularly spiritual: grounded in emotional self-mastery, yet illuminated by a silent ethics of empathy. The films' conclusions are notable for their subtlety, as neither protagonist achieves a traditional sense of triumph or healing. Instead, the endings suggest a quiet acceptance and coexistence with pain. Martha's final scene implies a possibility of renewal, while Becca's with her husband indicates a learning to live with grief, rather than resolving it. Both endings prioritize nuanced emotional complexity over dramatic resolution, constructing a post-feminist ethics of grief that embodies transcendence through restraint, empathy, and moral clarity.

Autonomy and Ethics in Emotional Recovery

Cinematic autonomy in grief is conveyed through silence, stillness, and visual simplicity.³⁷ According to Laura Mulvey, the "paused woman" in film – static, contemplative, and visually centred – can signify a departure from

35 Cauchi 2024.

36 Salleh/AB Rahman/Mohd Noor/Kashi/Long/Hasan/Ridzuan/Ismail/Hamjah/Abdul Kadir/Saari/Farid 2020.

37 Doane 2007.

narrative convention and linear emotional progressions.³⁸ In post-feminist cinema, the theme of autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery highlights women's internal, non-linear journey to reclaim control over their emotions after experiencing profound loss. This perspective is not concerned with reintegration into social norms or rituals. Instead, it prioritizes individual experience, emphasizing emotional healing as a personal act of agency that defies societal expectations around femininity, grief, and recovery. This autonomy also requires negotiating the ethical expectations placed on grieving women, norms that dictate what forms of grief are considered appropriate, acceptable, or legitimate.

In *PIECES OF A WOMAN*, Martha's emotional autonomy is constructed through silence, spatial isolation, and a muted visual palette. Following the trauma of childbirth loss, her movements are deliberate, her expressions minimal. The long, unbroken takes, particularly the bridge-crossing sequence, evoke a liminal passage from despair to endurance. Here, the bridge operates as a visual metaphor for moral transition, suggesting the passage between trauma and self-acceptance. By refusing to conform to legal or familial expectations of justice, Martha asserts her right to grieve on her own terms. Her silence becomes a form of moral eloquence, an embodiment of what Emma Wilson calls "affective opacity," where emotions resist legibility yet acquire spiritual resonance. In this way, Martha's recovery is not redemption through reconciliation, but self-reclamation through ethical stillness.³⁹

Similarly, *RABBIT HOLE* presents a unique yet powerful exploration of emotional self-reclamation. Becca's grief is visually represented through the domestic setting, often using tight framing and static shots. In subway scenes, her image is reflected in multiple windows, symbolizing her emotional disconnection and resistance to societal expectations of mourning. Her grief is mainly internalized, with occasional brief verbal expressions. The film focuses on Becca's deliberate choices to navigate her pain privately, rather than depicting dramatic outbursts or sentimental reconciliations. A notable example is her decision to connect with Jason, the teenager involved in her son's death, not to assign blame or seek resolution but to

38 Mulvey 2006, 113–118.

39 Wilson 2012. *Affective opacity* refers to the way emotion, especially grief, resists full expression or legibility on screen; its meaning emerges through silence, restraint, and texture rather than verbal articulation.

simply acknowledge him. These moments, captured in a detached style, portray a woman determined to find her own meaning, independent of conventional narratives of justice, blame, or forgiveness.

Together, *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* depict emotional recovery as a process of quiet resistance. The characters push back against external forces, whether familial, institutional, or societal, and create a path of healing defined by ambiguity and self-analysis. This rejection of externalized pain or conformity to traditional grief frameworks embodies a distinctly post-feminist reclamation of emotional agency. These women are not redeemed by motherhood, justice, or closure; instead, they assert their right to feel, to remain unresolved, and to survive without explanation.

This thematic structure aligns with other post-feminist films that portray women coping with loss outside traditional communal or moral frameworks. In *A GHOST STORY* (David Lowery, US 2017), the female protagonist's wordless grief manifests as temporal suspension rather than catharsis. Like Martha and Becca, she inhabits the duration and extended temporality of pain that becomes ethically productive. This refusal to "move on" articulates an alternative temporality of healing, suggesting that recovery is not about closure but about coexistence with loss. The parallel highlights how contemporary post-feminist cinema redefines autonomy as the ability to live with pain consciously and morally, without demanding narrative redemption.

Ultimately, *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* transform emotional recovery into an inward moral practice. In the absence of collective rituals or religious frameworks, the protagonists construct meaning through self-discipline, patience, and moral introspection. Their silences are not voids but vessels of strength, quiet affirmations of moral courage that align with spiritual endurance. In this light, autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery emerge as both a post-feminist and a spiritual act: an assertion of inner faith in one's capacity to endure, to feel, and to rebuild the self from within.

Redefinition of Motherhood beyond Biological Reproduction

Mainstream cultural stories often idealize motherhood, portraying it as a universal, instinct-driven experience marked by profound emotions and unconditional love, a narrative reinforced by mediated cultural discourses.⁴⁰

40 Johnston/Swanson 2006.

This portrayal suggests that motherhood is a natural state, triggered by biology and childbirth, and that mothers experience a depth of feeling that transcends limits, as captured in the phrase “a mother’s love knows no bounds.”⁴¹ According to E. Ann Kaplan, the loss of a child in film often thrusts the mother into a liminal space where conventional identities are redefined.⁴²

Using subtle cinematic elements, such as muted color palettes, reflective framing, and restrained gestures, these films show how motherhood can persist and evolve in unexpected forms, transcending traditional boundaries. Wright’s “concept of extended motherhood” highlights how cinematic representations of bereaved mothers continue to depict maternal care as extending beyond physical loss, expressed through symbolic acts, memory, and emotional labor within filmic narratives. This idea aligns with post-feminist ideas of identity reinvention, where motherhood transcends biological ties. As Wright notes, mothers may channel their grief into seeking justice, transforming their mothering role into a prolonged and expanded form of care and advocacy.⁴³

In *PIECES OF A WOMAN*, Martha’s decision to donate her baby’s body to medical research and her gesture of planting an apple seed signify a non-reproductive continuity, motherhood reimagined as nurturing, memory, and legacy. Her experience of motherhood is disrupted not only by the traumatic loss of her infant daughter during birth but also by the way others try to define her grief, including the gradual deterioration of her relationship with Sean, a secondary loss she is forced to bear in parallel. The camera often captures her in wide, desaturated shots, portraying her as physically present but emotionally adrift. In one moment, after her husband’s departure she walks alone through a vast, snow-covered landscape, her back turned to the camera. The framing and muted palette externalize her inner detachment, evoking a quiet visual metaphor for grief’s isolating aftermath (see fig. 3). Yet the following sequence, in which Martha runs through a dense wintry forest, introduces a subtle shift: the stillness that once immobilized her gives way to movement. Her breathless forward motion, cutting through branches and uneven terrain, gestures towards a fragile but emerging continuity, a visual articulation of grief that does not resolve but propels her toward a tentative sense of becoming.

41 Wright 2016.

42 Kaplan 1992.

43 Wright 2016.



Fig 3: The wide desaturated composition and rear-facing shot convey Martha's emotional detachment and isolation, while metaphorically suggesting a transition towards continuity and the quiet endurance of ongoing life. Film still, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020), 01:35:59.

The recurring image of an apple seed sprouting in the fridge serves as a potent metaphor for life's potential, even in interruption. This symbolic thread continues in the film's final scene, where a girl aged about six climbs an apple tree, extending the religious symbolism traditionally associated with the apple and rebirth into a broader metaphor of renewal and continuity. By transforming these traditional symbols into expressions of human endurance and ethical regeneration, the scene evokes a post-secular transcendence that conveys spiritual awareness and healing without evoking institutional religion or ritual.

The cinematic style, particularly in the childbirth scene, emphasizes Martha's bodily autonomy and agency. Rather than being defined solely by her loss, Martha's identity is reconstituted through her decision not to pursue legal action against the midwife. This moment signifies a quiet moral awakening rooted in empathy and restraint, evoking a spiritual sensibility of grace⁴⁴ and forgiveness.⁴⁵ Through this act, the film transforms suffering

44 *Grace* is used here not in a strictly theological sense but as a moral and emotional virtue associated with compassion, forgiveness, and self-restraint.

45 De Clercq/Martani/Vullemoz/Elger/Wangmo 2023.



Fig 4: Martha stands alone on the bridge, releasing her baby's ashes. Film still, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020), 01:56:02.

into an expression of ethical and emotional renewal, suggesting that healing may arise not from retribution but from empathy and human compassion.

Within a post-feminist context, Martha's refusal to conform to traditional maternal narratives challenges societal expectations of mothers as perpetual victims and also the need for closure (fig. 4). Her journey extends the earlier discussion of post-feminist identity formation, showing how individual agency, personal growth, and moral decision-making continue to shape her process of renewal beyond collective structures of support. By choosing emotional openness over bitterness, Martha emerges as a self-determined, autonomous maternal figure whose identity persists despite loss.

Becca's grief over her son's death creates a profound disconnection not only from her loved ones but also from social expectations of maternal mourning. The film visually captures her emotional isolation through reflective frames and distanced shots, highlighting the gap between her inner world and external reality. A poignant moment arises when Becca connects with Jason through a quiet exchange about his comic depicting an alternate universe. This interaction, tender yet restrained, allows Becca to extend empathy towards the source of her pain, transforming confrontation into care (see fig. 5). The act of listening, understanding, and acknowledging Jason's



Fig 5: Becca sits beside Jason on a park bench, listening empathetically as he confesses his guilt while discussing his comic about parallel universes. Film still, RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010), 00:53:47.

guilt becomes a form of symbolic mothering, a gesture of emotional labor that transcends biological ties. Through this affective exchange, the film reimagines motherhood as a moral practice grounded in compassion rather than possession. From a post-feminist perspective, Becca's agency lies in her refusal to perform grief according to prescribed maternal norms; instead, she reclaims emotional authorship, forging connection on her own terms.

Both films exemplify what Angela McRobbie identifies as the post-feminist paradox: the fusion of autonomy with traditional morality.⁴⁶ While Becca and Martha resist the normative expectations of maternal self-sacrifice, they embody an ethics of responsibility that bridges secular and spiritual registers. Their grief transforms motherhood into a post-secular vocation,⁴⁷ grounded in empathy and moral responsibility, a way of living ethically within loss.

In contrast to sentimental or religious depictions of maternal mourning, RABBIT HOLE and PIECES OF A WOMAN present motherhood as an ethical continuum, a space where moral action, emotional awareness, and spiritual endurance intertwine. In this final theme, the moral and spiritual dimensions of post-feminist grief become more visible, revealing motherhood as moral continuity beyond loss.

By redefining motherhood beyond biology, both films construct a post-feminist ethics rooted in empathy, patience, and moral resilience. Their protagonists' capacity to forgive, nurture, and endure transforms grief into

46 McRobbie 2008.

47 Habermas 2008, 17–29. *Post-secular vocation* is a moral calling that endures beyond institutional religion, with ethical action and compassion replacing formal faith as sources of transcendence.

an act of moral creation, suggesting that motherhood, even in its absence, is an ethical practice of resilience rather than an idealized state.

Conclusion

The depiction of maternal grief in *PIECES OF A WOMAN* and *RABBIT HOLE* challenges traditional cinematic conventions and reorients the viewer's understanding of motherhood, loss, and emotional recovery. Both films resist the narrative economy that privileges closure, redemption, and socially sanctioned performances of mourning. Instead, they foreground silence, fragmentation, and emotional opacity as legitimate and radical forms of grieving. This aesthetic strategy reconfigures grief from a passive state of suffering into a dynamic process of negotiation, memory, and refusal, reclaiming female subjectivity and agency.

Drawing on a three-themed interpretive process that bridges visual analysis and thematic reading, this study has traced how cinematic form, *mise-en-scène*, colour, and embodied stillness materialize post-feminist ideals of emotional self-regulation and moral resilience. Across the three inter-related concerns of female agency, autonomy in recovery, and the redefinition of motherhood, both Becca and Martha exemplify how contemporary post-feminist cinema reimagines grief as a transformative force that unites moral consciousness with affective strength.

The emphasis on silence as an expressive register in both films aligns with Saidiya Hartman's theory of "narrative restraint" and the refusal to sensationalize suffering.⁴⁸ Silence becomes a political gesture that withholds grief from the gaze of a voyeuristic audience. Mulvey's work on visual pleasure and narrative cinema also resonates with this approach, as films that disrupt traditional expectations offer a counter-cinematic practice that privileges subjectivity over spectacle.⁴⁹

In *RABBIT HOLE*, Becca's long silences and elliptical conversations with Jason dismantle the notion of grief as something to be explained or overcome. Her avoidance of typical support structures (group therapy, religious faith, familiar consolation) serves as a refusal to conform to cultural prescriptions of the "good grieving mother." Both films employ metaphoric and

48 Hartman 1997.

49 Mulvey 2006; 2016.

spatial coding to reconstruct motherhood as a nonlinear, affective identity rather than a biological function.

The films' refusal to locate reconciliation or replacement at the narrative center further complicates the redefinition of motherhood. Both protagonists of the films engage in what Judith Butler calls "grievability," the process through which life and loss are rendered publicly recognizable.⁵⁰ By resisting traditional maternal scripts, Martha and Becca insist on a form of motherhood that is legitimate in its unresolved, fragmented, and evolving. However, the films also reveal the limitations of the post-feminist ethos, highlighting the importance of intersectional analysis in understanding how race, class, and sexuality shape the experience of grief.⁵¹

At the broader spiritual level, the narratives evoke ethical and moral ideas commonly associated with religious traditions, where suffering becomes a means of confronting contingency and cultivating endurance. Rather than citing specific doctrines, both films engage with moral sensibility found across faith systems, the idea that pain and loss can lead to reflection, empathy, and renewal. In this sense, grief emerges as a post-secular spirituality rooted not in divine intervention but in the human capacity to feel, forgive, and endure.

Ultimately, these films challenge viewers to sit with discomfort, to accept ambiguity, and to acknowledge the quiet power of women who refuse to perform mourning as expected. They reveal how contemporary film, through the aesthetic of silence and moral clarity, creates a space for ethical reflection, a cinematic sanctuary where motherhood, loss, and faith in one's capacity to endure and find meaning intersect in quiet transcendence. Future research may build on this framework by exploring how post-feminist spirituality manifests in non-Western or intersectional narratives, expanding our understanding of how cinema visualizes moral endurance across diverse cultural and religious contexts.

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50 Butler 2004.

51 Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008.

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