

## **Research Aims and Objectives**

At a time of changing family demographics across Europe as a consequence of changing family patterns, new reproductive technologies, mass migration, hybridisation of identities, and increasing precariousness of employment, it is imperative to explore the potential of a cross-disciplinary dialogue for the production of a new discourse on motherhood. Feminist analyses have shown that motherhood is best treated as an interdisciplinary field, and autobiographical and fictional writing by women offer distinctive perspectives, but, although literature specialists draw on work from a range of disciplines, the reverse is rare.

Literature is much more than a partial reflection of reality. It can open up new ways of thinking. Literary narratives and representations of motherhood – whether autobiographical or fictional (or varying degrees in between) – offer access to inner fears and fantasies, those of mothers themselves or those concerning them. Literary techniques offer ways of expressing intimate feelings and experiences, which may otherwise be inexpressible. For example, metaphor and fantasy may convey in a new way what it feels like to be pregnant, to give birth, or (as Trauma Studies have shown) to lose a child, or even to kill one. Literature can stimulate thinking; it may challenge or subvert normative discourse. It reflects upon issues of the day and it can provoke new ways of thinking about everyday problems. The kinds of insight gained from the study of literary representations and narratives of motherhood have the potential to inform understandings of motherhood and maternal subjectivity.

### ***Aims of Network***

- (i) to raise the profile of contemporary literature as a field of study of motherhood in an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural forum and to explore how insights from literary studies might contribute to studies of motherhood in other disciplines;
- (ii) to foster a better understanding of the relationship between literatures and societies;
- (iii) to develop and refine methodologies with a view to the development of a major pan-European cross-disciplinary funding application.

### ***Objectives***

- (i) to bring together UK and European researchers working on motherhood in a range of disciplines, and different languages and cultures;
- (ii) to explore insights offered by literature, aiming also to elucidate the social impact of the study of literary treatments of motherhood;
- (iii) to create and develop national and international institutional and individual links between researchers, between researchers and non-academic audiences and cultural practitioners, through discussion of a range of topical issues in 5 workshops, 2 author readings, a major conference and exhibition, and online activities over 21 months;
- (iv) to explore ways in which the study of representations and narratives of motherhood in European national literatures can inform, be integrated into, and impact on interdisciplinary discussions and practices in Europe;
- (v) to bring together PhD students and early career researchers with more senior academics and practitioners in an atmosphere of exchange and debate;
- (vi) to facilitate wide participation in and dissemination of discussions by means of open access web resources, including a blog, JISC-mail list, virtual reading group, social networking sites, postings of abstracts, author interviews, publication of papers and links to recordings of readings;
- (vii) to explore and refine a methodology for the development of a large cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary application for EU funding, in which the study of literature on motherhood is integrated.