



Deconstructing Motherhood: From Myth to Self-realization

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Abstract

This paper attempts to demystify the notions of motherhood defined by the patriarchal society. Through its readings of Helene Deutsche, Simone de Beauvoir, Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich among others, it tries to dismantle the accepted role of the mother as 'selfless nurturer' and 'devoted caregiver'. It explains how patriarchy has systematically established gender defining roles for women that keep them away from exploring other possibilities.

Further, the paper discusses how motherhood could be a ‘liberating’ experience when seen in relation to concepts like *jouissance* as defined by French feminist, Helene Cixous which explores the connection between motherhood and a feminine practice of writing. Finally, the paper implores its readers to not only understand the inherent exploitation that motherhood could force on women through the obligation of reproduction as well as historically and culturally defined roles but towards redefining the role of the ‘mother’ that also includes acceptance, participation and sharing of responsibilities by the male members in the upbringing of the child.

Keywords: Motherhood, Dominant thought, Intensive Mothering, Jouissance, Ecriture Feminine.

Since time immemorial, mother has been considered the most revered figure in any society. She has been attributed with exceptional qualities that range from compassion, love, nurturance to selfless devotion and sacrifice. The mother figure is projected as someone having extraordinary powers that could overcome any challenges or difficulties threatening her children. There are several myths, legends and stories that strengthen this belief in the mother’s role as a caregiver and nurturer *extraordinaire*. Patriarchy circulates these legends and stories to not only maintain status quo in the society but to protect its own dominance. The paper is an attempt to bring forth the prevalent beliefs or myths or assumptions related to motherhood and to understand how these have systematically kept women away from exploring their individual freedom and using their artistic abilities. It doesn’t limit itself to exposing these myths that patriarchy has used as a tool to control women, but it tries to discuss how motherhood can be seen as a liberating experience. While trying to draw a connection between motherhood and artistic creation, the paper intends to study motherhood not in relation to and as perceived by the dominant discourse but as it would be defined by women themselves. It would thus be an attempt at both a ‘recovering of motherhood’ from the regressive discourses made

available by patriarchy and a ‘rewriting of motherhood’ through a feminine practice of writing purely defined by women themselves.

The paper in order to support its formulations, takes Helene Deutsch’s famous statement as its central premise. “Mothers don’t write, they are written.” This statement by Helene Deutsch from her seminal work *The Psychology Of Women* (Vol. II) provides a relevant starting point in understanding the concept of motherhood and how it has been appropriated in the patriarchal discourse to not only channelise women’s sexuality but also to control both women and children and therefore, the economic production of labor as well. The historicization of motherhood by patriarchy does not take into account the experiences of women as mothers rather it is based on a set of myths that patriarchy itself has circulated and promoted. So, the mothers have been unable to write not because they didn’t want to, but because patriarchy ensured no freedom to them at all from the responsibilities of motherhood and domestic life. Patriarchy has consistently denied any platform to women mothers to describe their feelings and emotions related to their experiences of motherhood. Instead what we have is a version provided by patriarchy itself that is biased and parochial in its understanding of motherhood. The paper would discuss some important texts that define motherhood in its various nuances to not only come to an understanding of motherhood but also to help demystify or dismantle the cult of motherhood as defined by patriarchy.

The patriarchal discourse operates through what French Feminist, Monique Wittig calls “the dominant thought”. In her essay “The Category of Sex” (1976), she defines it as “a thought which affirms an “already there” of the sexes, something which is supposed to have come before all thought, before all society. This thought is the thought of those who rule over women” (4). This thought based on the ‘primacy of difference’ is reinforced on all levels of social reality and gradually gets internalized by women through their thought processes. Wittig argues:

Dominance provides women with a body of data, of givens, of a prioris, which, all the more for being questionable, form

a huge political construct, a tight network that affects everything, our thoughts, our gestures, our acts, our work, our feelings, our relationships. (4)

Through this dominant thought women are “heterosexualized” and the rigid obligation of reproduction, which is a system of exploitation, is imposed on them. Reproduction is a form of work that leads to appropriation of all kinds of work done by women and is seen as one of the chief reasons of their oppression. With the beginning of the process of reproduction, the simultaneous role of the mother begins. Patriarchy not only considers the heterosexual marriage a norm but gives preference to motherhood that is clearly a result of it and not outside of it. Just as marriage, according to Wittig, is ‘a contract that binds a woman to a man for life and demands both physical and sexual obligations as well as submission/subjugation to the man’s will’, motherhood can also be perceived as contract that entails whole set of responsibilities and commitments binding a woman to a child.

In almost every society, the mother is a revered being not only for giving life but for showering unconditional love on her child. The more selfless the devotion and dedication, the better the mother is considered to be. It is through the denial of the self, that the mother achieves the status of a ‘good’ mother. The qualities usually associated with motherhood such as tenderness, compassion, sacrifice and selflessness (to name just a few) which are considered to be a ‘given’ when it comes to defining the mother further help patriarchy both to assert itself and to deny the woman her identity. The mother does not have an identity of her own rather it is through the child that she is defined. The mother therefore, is defined as the eternal object that gives birth to a subject and then returns again to objecthood. Subjectivity passes from her to the child. She is supposed to enjoy her condition and prepare herself for the new role. In this regard, Deutsch says that pregnancy permits woman to rationalise performances which otherwise would appear absurd. One realises how throughout the period of her pregnancy, the woman gets a lot of respect and attention, her eccentricities or cravings

suddenly have a meaning, her mood swings are justified and not questioned, her strange experiences are heard with lot of patience. But soon this gives way to loss of freedom and movement and further confinement to a limited space.

The debates that originated around the idea of motherhood had its precedents in the works of one of the earliest woman psychoanalyst, Helene Deutsch. Deutsch was both a pupil and assistant to Sigmund Freud and borrows heavily from his theories only to modify and expand them in order to reach her theory on feminine psychology. Her seminal work The Psychology of Women that appeared in two volumes in the year 1944 and 1945 respectively discusses the psychological development of women and tries to deal with the problems of feminine psychology. The important point that Deutsch makes in her work is that there is an inherent connection between social milieu, biological factors and psychological manifestations and that these together have a determining role to play in the development of woman's psychological character.

In the second volume of her book *The Psychology of Women* which is fully devoted to motherhood, Helene Deutsch writes:

the sine qua non (means the essential thing) of normal motherhood is "the masochistic feminine willingness to sacrifice" – a sacrifice made easy by the impulse of maternal love, whose "chief characteristic is tenderness. All the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman's personality are suppressed and diverted by the central emotional expression of motherliness. (411-412)

It is through a systematic manipulation of the position of the gendered woman that the patriarchal order circulates the myths related to motherhood for its autonomy.

One of the important texts that try to lay bare the hypocrisy of patriarchy and the limitation of women in relation to motherhood is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). In her book, Beauvoir discusses some of the important myths about motherhood circulated by patriarchy in order to perpetuate its control over women. The act of reproduction which defines a woman is itself the

biggest myth that she tries to expose. Her work which comes a few years after Deutsch's, takes up the debate on motherhood further. In the chapter titled "The Mother", Beauvoir states:

Indeed, from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung; the disadvantages of her condition – periods, illness, and such – the boredom of household tasks, all this is justified by this marvellous privilege she holds, that of bringing children into this world. And in an instant, the man, to keep his freedom and not to handicap his future, in the interest of his job, asks the woman to renounce her female triumph. (545)

Two points are clearly evident from the above statement. One, the act of reproduction is seen as an essential part of woman's biological/physical development and second, it expects woman to sacrifice her 'freedom' or 'female triumph' in order to facilitate the interests of the male order and subsequently, the heterosexual society.

The mother-child relationship is seen to be clearly exploitative in nature like most of the relations because of the inherent need for dependency and coexistence but the difference being that it is the woman who is getting exploited in the whole process of nurturing. Beauvoir writes, "... what makes maternal love difficult and great is that it implies no reciprocity; [...] she expects no compensation in exchange for her gifts, she justifies them with her own freedom" (570). These acts of self-sacrifice are applauded and thus, lead to a further mystification of motherhood.

Beauvoir exposes the myth about 'maternal instinct' by suggesting that there is no such thing as maternal instinct and that the word does not in any case apply to the human species. Further, she states, "The mother's attitude is defined by her total situation and by the way she accepts it" (567). She cites enough examples of women who have shared their innermost fears relating to motherhood, which according to them not only demands time and commitment but "he seems to be sucking their strength, life and happiness from them" and "threatens her flesh, her freedom, her whole self" (565).

The society recognizes her sacrifice and endows her with a sacred quality attributing to her the status of Virgin Mary. Her sacrifice of freedom and desire is seen as inconsequential to the greater need for serving posterity. She is happy to have this “pacifying illusion of feeling she is a being *in itself*, a ready-made *value*” (553).

She therefore, demystifies the ‘haloed’ position of the mother by pointing at two preconceived ideas about motherhood. First, that motherhood is enough in all cases to fulfill a woman. On the contrary, there are many mothers who are unhappy, bitter and unsatisfied. For instance, she gives Sophia Tolstoy’s example who gave birth more than twelve times only to realize that ‘everything seems useless and empty in the world and in herself’ (579). Second, the child is sure to find happiness in his mother’s arms. Beauvoir again contests this idea by suggesting that there is no such thing as ‘unnatural mother’, since maternal love has nothing natural about it. Just as the act of giving birth can be a controlled or programmed activity, the child can be reared by someone other than the natural mother. To believe that only natural or biological mothers can shower love and compassion on their children is to again fall in the trap of the patriarchal discourse that tries to labelise women as good/bad or natural/unnatural mothers. Beauvoir also debunks the claim of Psychoanalysis that tries hard to prove that the child provides the equivalent for the penis that defines the ‘lack’ in woman. This assumption or belief does not ensure any equality to woman nor does it provide her with any special status. The idea that woman becomes a man’s equal through motherhood is also devoid of any truth since it is only in marriage that the mother is glorified. The unwed mother is scorned at and can never serve as a good example of motherhood.

Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1977) is recognized as the first and arguably still the best feminist book on mothering and motherhood. Rich’s book that draws from the disciplines of anthropology, feminist theory, psychology, literature and narratives of her personal experiences of mothering is a meditation on the meaning and experience of

motherhood. Most importantly, Rich makes a clear distinction between the two meanings of motherhood – one, the relationship of a woman to her powers of reproduction and to her children and the other, the institution that aims to control women. The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering that is female-defined and centered and potentially empowering for women. She believes that the reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. Rich validates Beauvoir’s point when she says that motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. It “has a history, has an ideology” that undermines female potentialities and ensures male dominance.

In her book, Rich highlights two features of modern patriarchal motherhood that are particularly harmful to mothers. First, the assumption that mothering is natural to women and that child rearing is the sole responsibility of the biological mother and that it should be performed as the feminist writer, Sharon Hayes has called “intensive mothering” (8). Second, is the practice that assigns mothers sole responsibility for motherwork, but gives them no power to determine the conditions under which they mother. ‘Intensive mothering’ is defined by three themes: “first, the mother is the central caregiver”; second, such mothering requires “lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child”; and finally, “the mother regards mothering as more important than her paid work” (8). This discourse becomes oppressive for mothers not because children have these needs but because, it is the culture, the ideology or the dominant thought (according to Wittig) that dictates that only biological mother is capable of fulfilling them. Mothers do not make the rules, she reminds us, they simply enforce them. Motherhood in Rich’s words

is an experience of “powerless responsibility”. Mother raises her children in accordance with the values and expectations of the dominant culture. Mothers are *policed* by what Sara Ruddick calls the “gaze of the others”. Under the gaze of the others, mothers, relinquish authority to others, and lose confidence in their own values” (111). She is relegated the responsibility of ensuring that the children follow what the father or grandparents or for that matter, the teacher wishes the child to do. Patriarchal motherhood is predicated upon such abdication of maternal authority and inauthentic mothering. Thus, these two features of modern ideology of motherhood – “intensive mothering” and “powerless responsibility” are found to be oppressive because one, denies the mother any selfhood while the other, denies any authority and agency to her to determine her own experiences of mothering.

Through her book, Rich provides a critical analysis of the concept of patriarchal motherhood by engaging in the debate that sees motherhood in relation to both *experience* and *institution*. She also tries to discuss writing and motherhood through a narration of her personal experiences of motherhood. Her statement, “For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself” is a clear indication that as a poet and a mother Rich also struggled in keeping a balance between her responsibilities of a mother and the creative aspirations of a poet. She seems to suggest that a temporary dissociation with motherhood should not lead to any guilt rather it could be considered as a moment of “intensive writing” (as opposed to intensive mothering) that is both empowering as well as enriching.

Susan Rubin Suleiman’s essay “Writing and Motherhood” (1985) adds a whole new dimension to the existing debate on motherhood. Her focus, as the title suggests, is to discuss the connection between writing and motherhood and to explore how psychoanalysis sees motherhood and artistic creation. It tries to show how psychoanalysis has worked as an impediment in the way of mothers and their desire to write or express. The psychoanalytical viewpoint of motherhood as present in the traditional literature characterizes

the mother “not only by tenderness and the “masochistic feminine willingness to sacrifice” but above all by her exclusive and total involvement with her child” (623). She quotes Nancy Chodorow to substantiate her point. In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Chodorow writes, “Good mothering, in other words, “requires both a constant delicate assessment of the infantile needs and wants and an extreme selflessness” (623). The mother’s desire for self-realization (that has nothing to do with her being a mother) and the child’s need for her selflessness create a conflict which psychoanalysis does not seem to address. The emphasis is only on the child while the feelings of the mother are completely ignored. This ‘neglect’ of the mother’s feelings and her existence itself then, as Suleiman suggests, becomes instrumental for the mothers to speak for themselves. Thus, the mother-child relationship does offer a discourse but a flawed discourse that is purely dependent on the child for its postulations and treats the mother as a ‘given’, a non-entity and something that is on the periphery, *outside* of the centre.

Psychoanalysis derives much of its theory on the basis of childhood experiences and through this conjunction it defines artistic creation also in relation to childhood. It locates artistic creativity, as it does every other aspect of adult personality, in the child the adult once was. This child-centric theory of artistic creation thus, takes for granted the fact that mothers do not create any works of art as their creative energies find an outlet in the production of children. Suleiman uses the phrase “menopausal theory of artistic creation” to explain Deutsch’s point that “a motherly woman can give up her other interests in favor of the reproductive function, and she returns to the former when she feels the biological restriction approaching” (625). This “either/or” theory as defined by Deutsch ensured that woman did not neglect her domestic duties in order to fulfil her artistic desires. For her the responsibility of the mother should not only be of foremost importance but it should provide her with enough creative stimuli so as to not demand any artistic freedom. To qualify as a ‘good’ or a ‘good-enough’ mother (as an English paediatrician and psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott defines it in his

book *Playing and Reality*), the woman will choose motherhood as her first preference over writing but never the two at the same time. The either/or theory that predates psychoanalysis was used by it “to transform moral obligation into a psychological “law”, equating the creative impulse with the procreative one and decreeing that she who has a child feels no need to write books” (626). If a mother chose to write she was considered ‘abnormal’ while the childless woman who treated books as substitutes for children was equally attacked and her creation was considered ‘unnatural’. Thus psychoanalysis promoted this cultural prejudice as a “natural” law in order to discourage women from writing.

The challenge that the feminists faced was how to protest against this ‘motherhood myth’? How does one work towards providing space to mothers to be able to express themselves? How does one recover the stories of motherhood (if there are any) narrated by mothers themselves? Or, is it possible to build an alternate literary tradition that has its roots in motherhood and provides a powerful substitute to the dominant literary tradition? Simply put, how does one hear the mother’s voice?

Suleiman suggests that through access to various memoirs, essays, interviews, diaries or reminiscences written by mothers themselves one can explore the themes that draw a link between writing and motherhood. These themes based on opposition and integration could explore the different nuances of motherhood as an obstacle or source of conflict and motherhood as a link, a connection to work and world. So, these contrary themes could be about guilt or love, mother’s creative self or child’s needs and isolation or commitment. The stories or memoirs could also celebrate pregnancy and childbirth not as a painful memory but a life-changing experience. A look at the literary history reveals that writing mothers have worked in different genres that allow them to express their roles as educators, as conveyors of social mores as well as other kinds of wisdom. These genres could include advice manuals, polemics, didactic poetry and letters. They have explored various discursive strategies to discuss both the inherent tension between writing and

motherhood as well as the inner conflict that becomes apparent when making a choice between the two.

French feminists like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva tried to deal with some of these questions in their works. French Feminism mainly grew out of two closely connected but quite different disciplines: Linguistics and Psychoanalysis. Through Saussurean linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis, these theorists have tried to deal with language and how it gets represented in women's writing. Their quest is for a feminist critical practice that would liberate the theorists from competing ideologies of establishment versus feminist practises, moving in the direction of a subjectivity that is no longer dependent on a specific sexual identity: one that transcends the gender principle. These theorists reject the Lacanian model of language acquisition that defines the Symbolic Order as the rational, normative, patriarchal order dominated by the 'Law of the Father' or *nom-du-pere*. It is marked by the division of the Self from the Other (specifically the mother), the acquisition of language and the creation of desire. Contrary to this, the Imaginary can be equated with the pre-Oedipal stage, in which the child is less aware of any consistent distinction between him and others, has no language, and has no sense of loss and thus, no sense of desire. It is at the level of the Imaginary that the French Feminists locate the feminine.

Helene Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) attempts to confront the oppressive phallogocentric western culture and suggests that resistance does take place in the form of what she calls *jouissance*. The term is explained as the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed by the 'Law of the Father'. She begins her essay with the claim:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (257-58)

She encourages women to discover an *écriture féminine* – a feminine practice of writing that would liberate women from the clutches of patriarchy. The essay links the female body and its possibilities of pleasure and power with the possibilities available through female writing which have been denied to women since ages by the dominant phallogentric culture. She rejects Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of female sexuality as a ‘Dark Continent’ by suggesting, “The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. It is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (266-67). Because of the prejudices prevalent in the society women have repressed their desires to express. Women have written a little but only in secret as they masturbate in secret because writing appear to women like masturbation, as something associated with the feeling of guilt and shame.

According to Cixous, the feminine practice of writing has to be based on a very different order of meaning to that of the phallogentric Symbolic Order. The masculine value system is structured according to an economy of property signalling an emphasis on self-identity, self- aggrandizement and arrogant dominance. While masculinity associates itself with the ‘Realm of the Property’ and also, ownership and economy of exchange, femininity associates itself with the ‘Realm of the Gift’. The feminine gives of herself continually without losing herself in the exchange, and hers is not an exploitative desire, but a desire that gives. She characterizes *écriture féminine* as a way of writing that embodies a giving without taking back and without the expectation of return. The ‘mother’ metaphor is linked to the ‘Realm of the Gift’ for it is characterized by generosity that flows out from the self and from the body. Her metaphor for writing comes from the maternal body: the feminine text is written in white ink, the mother’s milk, a gift given from the body to the body without hope or expectation of return. In this context, she adds:

The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by

another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was "born" to her. Touch me, caress me, you the living no-name, give me my self as myself. (262-263)

Unlike Freud and Lacan's theories of sexuality that depends heavily on the sense of sight for registering the Lack, Cixous links language to voice where the pre-Oedipal relation between the mother and child is based on sound and rhythm rather than on the visual. This she defines as the 'song' of the unconscious, giving access to desire, to a repressed memory of the first sensuous knowledge of the body as erotic delight. It is this 'song' coded into the body's materiality that must shape a feminine practice of writing.

This feminine practice of writing thus, would give woman a chance to not only communicate with her own body and her self, it would give an outlet to the frustrations that she might be associating with child birth. This writing would assimilate the mother's self with the Other, it would be a synthesis of the two selves that would provide an impetus to woman's creative abilities. The voice of the mother and that of the child would create a 'song' that would penetrate into the realms of the Dark Continent and conquer it by giving a new meaning to the mother's desire. It would help them rewrite the history of motherhood from their own perspective, devoid of the false representations of motherhood by patriarchy.

Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* writes:

Women's capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it are strongly internalized and psychologically enforced, and are built developmentally into the feminine psychic structure. Women are prepared psychologically for mothering through the developmental situation in which they grow up, and in which they have mothered them. (39)

Her statement very aptly puts forward the real challenge that women mothers are facing and have to struggle against. Their exploitation functions at two levels: the social and the psychological. Through their texts, both Beauvoir and Chodorow seem to suggest that the

fact that motherhood is an exploitative form of relationship can only be challenged if there is participation on part of the male members as well, especially the father of the child. Beauvoir suggests that “a woman needs masculine support to accept her new responsibilities; she will only devote herself joyously to a newborn if a man devotes himself to her” (550). Clearly, the sentence is suggestive of the fact that not only is there a need for sharing responsibilities and work related to the child equally among the couple, but there is equally a need to understand and acknowledge the demands of free space and time made by women mothers. Chodorow argues for a radical change in the modes of parenting, so that fathers and men also “mother”, that can effect a change in the feminine psyche. In simple words of a Marxist Feminist, it would be an equal division of labour that ensures freedom to both the parents. It is only when this space and time is ensured can the feminine practice of writing that the French Feminists promote could be realistically possible.

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