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Motherhood as Enigma and Guilt

Motherhood has been held in the highest echelons of feminine achievement in all cultures across the world. Women from their very childhood are raised and prepared in a way to be ideal mothers. Especially in a country like India, encumbered with the burden of ancient heritage and culture, motherhood is usually placed in such a lofty pedestal that it becomes the be all and end all in a woman's life.

Motherhood is both a social and a biological phenomenon. The structural and cultural underpinning of representing women as mothers is so powerful that all women are regarded as potential mothers. The endearing reference to little girls as *mā* (mother) in many an Indian language is a case in the point. Chisholm points out in her book *Gender and Vocation* that the vocation of women is more often than not defined in terms of her reproductive function. Motherhood becomes a defining relation to all women including the childless ones who have to suffer from the negative consequences of their infertile state.

The identification of womanhood with motherhood is so strong that being a mother is considered normative or mandatory by most women. All women, who are married or are in a stable heterosexual relationship, consider motherhood as normal phenomena. Whatever else they do

with their lives, women are supposed to be mothers. This normative value of motherhood prompts women to be mothers as they generally think in the terms of 'everybody has children'.

Motherhood also bestows the adult identity on women. To be a mother is also to become an adult and more importantly in being regarded in that category. Women who fail to be mothers are often not recognized as grown-ups (Salmon, 1985). The maturity and mental build up of a woman is often connected to her becoming a mother (Antonucci and Mikus, 1988). Antonis (1981), have put forward psychological theories claiming motherhood as a major growth point in women's lives. Motherhood is important also because it confirms the feminine identity on a woman. It certifies their physical and psychological adequacy and provides them an elevated social identity for fulfilling their assigned role of procreation (Busfield, 1987). Women's commitment to motherhood as a central point of their adult female identity is demonstrated in the aspirations and plans of young women who are not yet mothers (Beckett, 1986; Sharpe 1976).

Finally, motherhood is seen in a very positive light because of the intimate relationships it is supposed to gel. Psychological studies show that children allow adults to express the warm, caring and selfless sides of their selves. Sharpe (1984) points out, 'Women's caring activities and their close relationships with their children mean that they have intense interaction with people they love, which can be very satisfying and meaningful' (222). The bearing of children not only allows one to be child like by identifying with her child but also results in a deeper bondage with one's partner and the greater family.

All these highlight the positive frame from which motherhood is viewed in all cultures. Oakley highlights motherhood as an achievement for women: 'Producing a baby is re-producing, looking differently at one's own body, one's identity, one's way of living in the society of which one is a part. And in becoming a mother a woman takes her place among all women, conscious in a new way of the divisions between men and women, more sharply aware both of the ties of human kinship and of the special solidarity of sisterhood. Motherhood is a handicap but also a strength; a trial and an error; an achievement and a prize (308).

The negative identity that is associated with childlessness acts as an added incentive to women to be mothers. Woollett points out, 'The terms for childlessness, like infertile, barren and sterile, are derogatory, implying a failure not merely in reproductive terms but as women. The lives of childless women are seen as empty, lacking the fulfillment and warmth motherhood brings' (59).

In a traditional society like India, the stigma associated with childlessness is much more pronounced. The traditional image of motherhood commands immense respect in the popular mindset. Not only the social ethos but also the religious sanctions place motherhood as the highest objective in a woman's life. The Hindu pantheon is noted for its mother-goddesses. The fertile mother is worshipped as she symbolizes the benevolent forces of nature.

The idolisation of the mother extends to the present day. The little girl is encouraged to play with her *gudia*, a rehearsal of a sort of her pre-destined role. The image of the self-effacing mother, sacrificing herself for the sake of the family is a motif that the Indian silver screen loves to immortalize. Hitler's call to the German women to return to the folds of 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' ('Children, Cooking, Church) exemplifies a similar effort to restrict women to the domestic

sphere. The Indian society performs an analogous function by elevating the status of the women within the private sphere, particularly in their roles as mothers. This heightened status attributed to a mother by the society coupled with the psychological desire to be a mother makes motherhood a cherished goal the appeal of which very few women can resist.

It is this normative value placed on motherhood, which makes it so precious, and any woman not preferring to be a mother appears before us as an aberration. Shashi Deshpande's work *The Binding Vine* remarkably makes this supposed aberration to be the law, as various women look at motherhood as not so cherishable an end. One has to keep in mind that these women are ordinary women belonging to different generations and different classes not at all influenced by the politics of sexual oppression. Yet all of them admit at some point of their life their uneasiness to be a mother. This obviously is not a one way passage, their rejection of motherhood at a point of their life does not go on to hamper their maternal instinct for the rest of their lives. Rather they carry a burden of guilt all through their lives for their apparent unwillingness to be mothers. This opens up the question whether their expressed unpreparedness for motherhood is actually a deviation or whether motherhood is not so blissful a phenomenon as it is made to be.

The mothers Shashi Deshpande portray date back to earlier generations. The first of the mothers in question is Mira, the long dead mother in law of the narrator Urmila. Involved in a loveless marriage Mira had a strong dislike for her husband and especially for the nightly ritual to which she was subjected. She is a poet with an intellectual capacity and sensibility unmatched by the women of her age. Her aversion to her husband's physical overtures finds expression in her poem:

*But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too
twist brocade tassels round her fingers
and tremble, fearing the coming
of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? (Deshpande, 66)*

The woman in question resists the attempts of her husband's forceful intimacy. This rebellion, however, is Mira's own. She too is brought up in a traditional way where she is taught to obey her husband's wish without any grudge:

*Don't tread paths barred to you
obey, never utter a 'no';
submit and your life will be
a paradise, she said and blessed me. (Deshpande, 83)*

But Mira outgrows the dictum. She learns to utter the dreaded 'no'. If she has to submit, it is not a willful submission; the tormentor has to achieve it by force. Her child is born out of her rape. Mira marks the occasion not as a joyful event but rather as a fetter being imposed on her. Her dislike for her coming baby is obvious:

*no, growing painfully within
like a monster child was born. (Deshpande, 83)*

This distaste for the child in her womb is again evident when Mira takes part in the childbearing ritual before her mother. Sporting radiant green, symbol of her fertility, Mira stands for the occasion her mind far from being joyous.

*Silver toe rings twinkle on my toes
silver anklets tinkle as I walk
but, oh mother, I stumble, I fall
my arms sink heavily by my sides. (Deshpande, 125)*

However, Mira is not alone. There are other women, women less extra-ordinary, who show their uneasiness towards motherhood. This feeling is demonstrated, for instance, by the mother of the narrator, Urmila. Inni, the mother, reveals at a ripe old age, how she was forced by her husband to part with her daughter as she neglected in looking after her. She had left her daughter with her servant Diwakar, which prompted her husband to send their daughter to his parents. Obviously, Inni, the young mother unprepared for her motherhood was heavily punished for her fault. But what is most amazing is that it has taken a whole lifetime for Inni to reveal her mistake to her daughter and all throughout this period she has suffered from a terrible guilt consciousness.

'I was frightened of you, Urmi,' it bursts out of her. 'I was too young, I was not prepared to have a child. And you were not easy, you used to cry all the time, I didn't know how to soothe you. Diwakar was good with you, he was better than me, but Papa said, "How could you leave her alone with a man!" Diwakar! He had been with us since I was a child, that's why Mummy sent him to help me, he was so gentle, but Papa said, "He's a man." Diwakar!' (Deshpande, 199)

The same admission is made by another mother, a woman belonging to an entirely different class. Shakutai, a peon in a school, confesses in the same mode. Her daughter Kalpana is raped and she fights a battle in the hospital to survive. The relationship between the mother and the daughter opens up as the mother reminiscences her relationship to Urmila who provides her a helping hand. During the revelation, Shakutai acknowledges her unwillingness to be the mother of Kalpana and is haunted by a strange fear that it is because of her hostility towards the daughter at one point of her life that she has to suffer now.

'...I didn't want the child, I didn't want Kalpana, I wanted her to die.'

She sees my face and flashes out at me. 'You can't understand, you won't understand, how will you? I took things, I used to hit myself hard – here – with the rolling pin, you understand, when making chapattis – but nothing happened. She was born' (Deshpande, 111).

This unwillingness on the part of the women to be mothers appears to be unique when considered against the background of the psycho-socio-cultural parameters that makes motherhood the most cherished goal in a woman's life. The revelation made by the three women in question points to the other face of motherhood, when it does not seem to be so blissful after all. There are various factors that lead to this apparent distortion from the norm.

In all the three cases, we find the decision of childbearing is somehow imposed on them. None of them is ready for motherhood when they become mothers. Obviously, they have different reasons for not being prepared for motherhood. Whereas for Mira, it is the violence within her

marriage that makes her hate her husband and her child in turn, for Inni it is the loss of her free self. In case of Shakutai, it is a case of survival; she is not properly fed or decently housed at the moment when Kalpana is born to her. The betrayal by her husband as she leaves with another woman makes her more vulnerable.

Mira suffers from the consequences of what can be easily described as ‘marital rape’ today. Yet, her silent rebellion is unique as she is brought up and placed in a tradition where the will of the husband must be the last word. It is her intellectual acumen and her fierce sense of individuality, which allows her to understand her true situation. The hatred for her husband turns into the hatred for her unborn child. This is nothing uncommon as Beauvoir explains when the relationship between the wife and her husband is not the ideal one the wife may either cling to her child fiercely or in extreme cases may even hate the child forever (Beauvoir, 510-511). But it is not only the hatred for the husband that drives Mira, it is her estranged relationship with her mother as well that compels her to look at motherhood from a far from common attitude. Being fiercely independent by nature, desiring an identity of her own when the women had no place outside their homes, Mira recoils from her identification with her own mother.

To make myself in your image

was never the goal I sought. (Deshpande, 124)

Mira fears the same entrapment that Irigaray speaks of: ‘I look at myself in you, you look at yourself in me’ (‘And the One Doesn’t Stir Without You, 61). The daughter fears of being caught in the mother’s image, of not being able to establish her individual identity. Mira too says in the same vein:

*Whose face is this I see in the mirror,
unsmiling, grave, bedewed with fear?*

The daughter? No, Mother, I am now your shadow. (Deshpande, 126)

It is not only the look that is alike but also the same life pattern. Mira frustrated at her mother's efforts to make her follow the same outline of being an ideal wife and mother wants her to ask a question:

*'Mother', I always wanted to ask, 'Why do you want me to repeat your history
when you so despair of your own?'* (Deshpande, 126)

Beauvoir also shows the link between a healthy mother-daughter relationship and a positive attitude towards childbirth. According to her, a woman emancipates herself from her mother during childbirth. 'If she at once wishes yet does not dare to free herself, she is apprehensive lest the child, instead of saving her, will bring her under the yoke, and this anxiety may even bring on a miscarriage' (Beauvoir, 510). Mira undergoes the same predicament, as she wishes to free herself from her mother and yet realizes the futility of doing so. Her belief that her mother's life was a despairing one stimulates her to be free and compels her to reject maternity as an end in itself. It is probably no accident that she has a miscarriage with her first child.

Inni on the other hand suffers because of her immaturity. She confesses before her daughter that she was unprepared for maternity when Urmila was born. She vehemently tries to pursue her

daughter that the decision to send Urmila away to Ranidurg was her father's own. Urmila though believes her mother is unable to convince herself of her mother fighting over her with her father. She is so used to see her mother play a submissive role that any rebellion or protest on her part seems to be impossibility. This also goes on to influence the mother-daughter relationship as well as we see Inni over protective of her daughter. Her dependence on her husband translates into an intruding relationship with her daughter. It is very clear from the circumstances that the decision to have a child was not Inni's but of her dominating husband. A traditional wife like Inni is expected to follow the familial norms to the core including the most desirable role of motherhood. Yet we see her resisting maternity, though unable to raise her voice against it. The imposition of motherhood on Inni is an intrusion into her private sphere. She loses the free space she is used to. Inni revolts against the intrusion by not taking enough care of her child.

The Problem of Shakuntala is much more economic than a psychological one. Her position compels her not to think of a child. Though she was married to a man, she was left at her parents' home. She decides to join her husband at Bombay. He cannot support her, as he is not ready to work. Shakuntala has no option but to provide for herself. She takes a job at a grocery shop. But before she can etch out a living for herself she becomes pregnant. She does not want to be burdened with a child at that stage. It is quite natural for her to try to get rid of her ensuing motherhood.

Though the reasons why these women do not want to be mothers is quite clear what is problematic is the burden of guilt they carry throughout their life for rejecting the ideal of motherhood at some point of their life. All these women can understand and explain the cause behind their not wanting to be mothers and yet they are perturbed by the very fact. The question

that emerges before us is why these women bear this burden of guilt. What makes motherhood so compelling?

The psychoanalytical theory provides us some insight into what goes on in the making of a mother. Chodorow (1978) explores how the maternal instinct in women creates the sexual division of labour upon which the distinction between the public and the private realm is made. Mothering pushes women into the private sphere allowing men to dominate over them. Mothering which is central to women's emotional life and provides it with meaning has, however, different influences upon sons and daughters. Chodorow questions the reason behind the daughters' inheritance of the desire and capacity to mother and the inability of the sons to do so. She emphasizes the role of the family structure to create a different psychological situation for men and women. Chodorow focuses on object-relational experiences to show how the Oedipal complex is resolved differently in boys and girls. Boys on their part have to repress their Oedipal attachment to their mother much more strongly than the girls who do not need to reject their mother totally. The girls generally remain in a bisexual triangle. They may resolve their sexual attraction in favour of men, but retain an internal emotional triangle. The masculine identity is formed by emphasizing the difference from others whereas the feminine one is generally defined in relational terms. Traditional concept about masculinity place men in non-familial roles but women are confined chiefly within the sex-gender system. So according to the psychological viewpoint propagated by Chodorow it is because of the daughter's retention of identity with the mother and her position defined by the sex-gender system, that she inherits the capacity and desire to mother. However, Chodorow also admits that the processes through which the will to mother is reproduced in the daughter is full of tensions and hence the sex-gender system is undermined at the time it is being reborn.

Segal (1987) criticises Chodorow for what she calls her 'psychic essentialism'. Segal is sceptic that the sexual division of labour is entirely a result of psychic orientation and points out to one of the omissions made by Chodorow. In Segal's opinion, men are stable not because of their personality characteristics born out of a different sort of resolution of the Oedipal complex, but because of the privilege and dominance that they enjoy in the society. Segal also suggests that to search for women's oppression in the psychic build up of mother-daughter relationship can be problematic. Her focus is thus on the social build up of motherhood.

Rich (1977) while emphasizing the radical possibilities of female biology concentrates on the social factors as well. She feels that women's body has long been under the shackles of patriarchy which has made women powerless vis-à-vis their male counterparts. The physicality of women in Rich's view is not simply a destiny but a resource, exploiting which they can be powerful. Rich defines motherhood in two ways – firstly, 'the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and children' and secondly, 'the *institution* which aims at ensuring that the potential shall remain under male control' (Rich 1977, 13). The first part is a biological process, the second a cultural one. Men in order to subjugate women try to control the very nature of women's reproductive power.

O'Brien (1981) echoes Rich in emphasizing that the control men exercise over women is primarily by controlling the reproductive process. Rich's solution of subordination of women through patriarchal control of reproduction is to destroy completely the very institution of motherhood. This is 'to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but

freely chosen work' (Rich, 280). Rich thus attempts to demystify motherhood and bring it down to the level of any other job performed by women.

Ruddick (1980) again emphasizes on the power of women in giving birth and powerlessness related to control of reproduction. Her focus is upon 'maternal thought' i.e. how a mother emphasizes on preservation, growth and acceptability of the child. The mothers try to protect, love and bring up their children in a very harsh condition creating difficulties, hardships, contradictions and ambiguities which result in their subordination and not at all beneficial for their children. Ruddick suggests that the therapy is in putting the 'maternal thought' out from a private realm on to a public one.

However, it is not possible to over emphasise the social factors without taking due consideration of the psychological ones. If we take seriously the conception transformational politics embedded in 'the personal is political', we do need to develop analyses that connect psychic structures with social structures, and we need to explore how the construction of subjectivities and constitution of desire affect the way in which we perceive structures and cultures and act within them, and the way in which we have internalized frameworks and practices we politically and ideologically criticise. Though psychoanalysis provides a step forward it has been difficult to combine psychoanalysis with Marxism and psychoanalysis with feminism to provide a theory for motherhood that would take into account both the psychic and social attributes. Chodorow's theory, in spite of its shortcomings makes an attempt to take into account both the psychic and social dimensions:

The reproduction of women's mothering is the basis for the reproduction of women's location and responsibility in the domestic sphere. This mothering and its generalization to women's structural location in the domestic sphere, links the contemporary social organization of gender and social organization of production and contribution to the reproduction of each (Chodorow, 208).

Therefore, we find that both psychic and social factors are at work in the making of a mother. Though a woman may not want to be a mother due to certain compelling factors, the psychological and social factors influence her nevertheless to stick to the norm. This puts her in an enigmatic situation. Though she understands the practical difficulties that she faces as a mother, she has no glimpse of the internal and external factors that play a vital role in preparing her for motherhood. Motherhood is a biological and psychological phenomenon. A woman desires to be a mother because of these aspects of her make up. However, maternity is also influenced by the social issues; it is controlled by patriarchy as well. The demand of the patriarchal norms may not always conform to the physical and psychic needs of a woman. When such a situation arises, a woman is torn between the two forces making her motherhood an enigmatic one. The guilt feeling is a result of the failure to match the demands of all these factors. This provides motherhood its ambivalent nature; it becomes a dilemma because of its psychic demands coupled with its social construction.

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