MOTHERHOOD

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

A Literary Study Based on Poetry

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JASVEERA ANOOP MINHAS

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DEDICATED

To the memory of my beloved father
Shri. Balbir Singh Parmar*,*
who put a dream in my heart,
and whose life of integrity and faith
continues to inspire me.

JASVEERA ANOOP MINHAS

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PREFACE

Womanhood, motherhood and feminism are the major issues that this work deals with .My study consists of two parts. The first part will offer an overview of feminism's theory of difference and of its encounters with the theories of postmodernism and post-colonialism. It will look at feminism's different concepts of "mothering" and provide considerations on poetry and poetics. In the second part, I will deal with the textual analysis of poems about "mothering". This is a text-centred approach which concentrates on the representation of mothering in particular poems. It offers a close reading of the poems on the aesthetic level and takes into account detailed contextualisation. The focus is mainly on the political realities and everyday experiences of the poets. At places short biographies have been included to show the circumstances and intension of the artists. In this way,

The poems are located within the respective society, history and culture. It is not my intention to seek recourse to "mothering" in order to specify a universal and unique feminine characteristic. My aim is, first, to find out how these poems represent the complexity of motherhood and maternal activities as a cultural and political experience. Sometimes these poems tell about conflicts and sometimes about cohesion, but always about a main concern of women which could link knowledge and emotion, social responsibility and collective struggle. If feminism is based on two shared principles: first, the oppression of women and, second, the commitment to

social change, then it is time to concentrate on the second.

"A passion for difference" (Henrietta Moore 1994), "the difference impasse" (Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack 1994) and "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1984) seem to characterise and to dominate contemporary women's movements as well as present theory and politics of feminism. On the one hand, difference is celebrated because it transforms and enlarges knowledge and is regarded as a source of creative empowerment for feminism. On the other hand, endless discussions make it difficult or even impossible to find a common ground from which to organise social change. This work tries to integrate theory and politics of feminism. It approaches difference concerning the categories of gender, race and ethnicity historically, politically, culturally and socially.

JASVEERA ANOOP MINHAS

CONTENTS

	Preface	*vii*
1.	Introduction	1
2.	Motherhood : A Review	5
3.	Motherhood : Oppression and Delight	48
4.	Conclusion	89
	Appendix	106
	Works Cited	125

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INTRODUCTION

When does motherhood begin? As discussed earlier it isn't very clear. Perhaps for the purpose of this study, it would be right to begin from the initial formative years of a girl's growth, when she is perceived and groomed as a mother, because it is then that her psychological and social initiation into motherhood begins. Though biologically, it may be apt to begin from early adolescence followed by late adolescence, the stages in a girl's development because, even during these initial years when a woman's body is being prepared for motherhood, through a variety of changes, she is affected biologically, psychologically, socially, culturally and in a number of other ways. The biological aspect of motherhood deals with the changes that develop purely as an outcome of biological determinism. As defined by Wikipedia, Biological determinism is a term used in some literatures to describe the belief that human behaviour is controlled solely by an individual's genes or some component of physiology. Therefore the genetic prototype that a body contains prompts it to function in a pre-determined way and this is perhaps, the basic cause of gender dichotomy. The biological aspect of motherhood is concerned with the changes and their effect on a mother's body that develop during her

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biological growth and prepare her for motherhood and maternal role. The publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir was one of the major reasons that drew attention to the 'social construction of motherhood' it was Beauvoir , who posited that women were not so much limited and restricted by their physical body, as they were by the way it had been created and constructed by society. It was, after the publication of De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex, that* feminist theorising of the body and the self took centre stage. The role of the female body as a biological essential came in for sharp criticism. Beauvoir recognizes that "to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world" (Beauvoir 39). What is centrally implied here is the intertwining of the physical and cultural self that is, one may naturally exist as a male or a female but this mere fact that one is born a woman does not physically impose her to the type of limitations that have been culturally imposed on women. Therefore Beauvoir says, that "woman is a social construct". Nevertheless her account provides the starting point for contemporary work on the relation between bodies and selves, where bodies represents the biological aspect and self represents the psychological, socio-cultural, economic and various other aspects.

As the girl enters puberty Beauvoir describes the way in which her body becomes to her a source of horror and shame. "This new growth in her armpits transforms her into a kind of animal or algae" (333), her menstrual blood a source of disgust. At adolescence - a girl realises through the changes in her body that motherhood is her chosen destiny; this not only affects her biologically, but psychologically, socially and culturally – as in some cultures menstruation is announced publically through a ceremony. Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are

repeatedly told from infancy that they are "made" for childbearing. While the "splendours of maternity" are forever being sung to her, the drawbacks of her situation—menstruation, illnesses, and even the boredom of household drudgery—are all justified by this "marvellous privilege" she has of bringing children into the world. Beauvoir pointed out that such pervasive socialization shapes women's desire to "choose" motherhood.

Though De Beauvoir's, phenomenology of the maternal body has been especially controversial, "ensnared by nature the pregnant women is plant and animal … an incubator, a conscious and free individual who has become life's passive instrument … not so much mothers… as fertile organisms, like fowls with high egg production" (513). The woman during the period of gestation faces multiple issues—physically she undergoes bodily changes like weight gain, loss of shape and becomes inactive and restricted. She might in some situations suffer on account of her profession as well, she might have to forego it on account of her pregnancy, which leads her to financial and other insecurities, and makes her totally dependent on her husband. These accounts even though they cannot be rejected out rightly; have been a source of criticism, particularly when later feminists sought to celebrate the female body as a source of pleasure, fertility, and empowerment. However it is important to recognise that what Beauvoir was offering was a descriptive phenomenology of female bodies as lived in specific situations. As she explicitly says "if the biological condition of women does constitute a handicap, it is because of her general situation … It is in a total situation which leaves her few outlets that her peculiarities take on their importance" (356–7).

It is this situation which Beauvoir's writings hoped to highlight and change. Here Beauvoir could be

referring to the institutional perspective of motherhood. But when gestation and physical changes during pregnancy are viewed from the perspective of experience/ instinct – they are perhaps desired by the woman, and leads to the ultimate fruition and fulfilment of her desire. The desire to become a mother is an internal biological urge that women have and in case of infertility or a woman's inability to become a mother, she is helped through medical intervention techniques like IVF, surrogacy, adoption, etc to achieve motherhood. It is an established fact that women who are barren or for some reason cannot bear a child do have complications latter on in life. Therefore, motherhood is an essentialist part of a woman's biological self.

Pregnancy is followed by child-birth, which is accompanied by the next stage that is child - rearing. Initially it takes some adaptation for the new mother to tend to the new born and lactation as well imposes restrictions upon her, she has to change her sleep pattern and her daily routine as well at least for a while, this stage also demands adapting to by the mother. While instinctually a mother rejoices in bearing and rearing her child. To see her child well nurtured and nourished gives immense satisfaction to a mother. Though the biological changes that accompany motherhood affect a mother physically as well as psychologically, this aspect may also be considered as a form of the biological aspect, but it has greater impact on motherhood, and the mother-child relations, especially the mother – daughter relations that play a vital role in the understanding of maternal attitude.