MOTHERHOOD

OPPRESSION AND DELIGHT

A Literary Study Based on Poetry

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JASVEERA ANOOP MINHAS

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Most of all, they have enabled me to understand more deeply the sense of what Dickinson meant when she told a friend, "I find ecstasy in living – the mere sense of living is joy enough." I thank them for bringing me "ecstasy in living" and joy beyond measure.

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PREFACE

At times certain scenes touch and leave a disturbing imprint on one's mind, which later implore one to question the unjustifiable, in society. I share two such episodes here:

EPISODE ONE: I sit waiting outside the labour-room of a hospital, where a close friend of mine, a thirty-year-old woman has given birth to a healthy and beautiful daughter. The 'mother' still in post-operative agony as she has undergone a caesarean section; is deeply disappointed, and turns away, when we show her the child: it is only a girl!

EPISODE TWO: I am on my way to college. It is raining heavily. Walking in front of me is a childlike mother accompanied by her two children, a son and a daughter, on their way to school. She and her fragile daughter are thoroughly drenched. While her son, protects himself under the sole umbrella of the family and enjoys the privilege. Why is there no umbrella for the daughter and mother? Don't women deserve umbrellas!

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1

INTRODUCTION

MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood is a unique and universal gift bestowed upon woman by nature, conferring a great responsibility upon her. But is this 'gift of motherhood,' a boon or a bane, does motherhood elevate and empower or does it subjugate and enslave a mother? The answer - isn't simple because it is embedded in the intricacies that involve the various aspects and perspectives that influence motherhood. So complex is the issue that, even while defining motherhood one wonders where to begin? Should one begin to define it from pregnancy or does one begin to define it from the early childhood or adolescence – a stage which prepares the female body for motherhood? If one has to make a thorough study of the subject then perhaps it would be appropriate to define it from early childhood, adolescence, followed by late adolescence, conception and pregnancy, child-bearing and child-rearing. All the stages of motherhood have an impact on the life of a woman, but the last, which is child-rearing, saddles her with great responsibility. In order to, understand the impact of motherhood on a woman's life let us first study, the causes that are generally believed to affect motherhood.

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MOTHERHOOD AS INSTITUTION AND EXPERIENCE

Mothering which involves all the stages of motherhood is perhaps, the most beautiful and gratifying of all human experience. There is nothing in this world perhaps that can even be closely compared to the blissful arrival of a new life into the world of the parents. Though as a personal experience, motherhood can be explained as the spontaneous and instinctual love and care that a mother bestows upon her child. This relation is generally considered as one of celebration, solace, peace and harmony. This is so because, woman/mother is biologically and physiologically made for child-bearing and child-rearing; therefore it is generally believed to be perhaps, the most fulfilling experience! This is commonly understood, as the basic and the most fundamental concept that explains 'motherhood as experience'. The noted psychoanalyst and feminist, Nancy Chodorow, in her revolutionary book, *The Reproduction of Mothering,* which has influenced this thesis greatly, notes that parenting is biologically self-explanatory. This assumption holds that, "what seems universal is instinctual, and what is instinctual, or has instinctual components, is inevitable and unchanging" (Chodorow, 1978; 13-30). This perhaps, is another way to explain that, women are mothers because that is what they have been since times immemorial.

Until the early 1970's, there was the general assumption about motherhood, that women suffer because they are biologically destined to reproduce. "Motherhood therefore appears as a natural fact that is uninteresting in itself and self-explanatory." (Chodorow, 1978: 13-30) It is generally believed that such theories and analysis that drew the attention of the feminists to motherhood as something more complex than just being an instinctual and personal experience. As is generally

believed, it was only after the 1970's that women liberationists and feminine theorists, , blamed the reproductive capabilities of a woman as one of the major causes, that lands women in this predicament. One wonders, what took them so long to realise that reproduction was not just a natural and biological function, but also a major cause that, is generally believed to have, for centuries entrapped mothers in the various, so called political institutions. It was perhaps the dawning realisation that motherhood is, as is commonly understood to be the target of institutions like patriarchy, marriage, religion etc, which, it seems serve the vested interests of these institutions and the overall patriarchal design. This institutionalised form of motherhood, as is commonly understood, issued forth from the already well established institutions, with, as it is believed cater to a hidden political agenda that is to carve out a motherhood role, which would perhaps spell the ideology of motherhood.

The study of the ideology of motherhood shows that, for centuries a long history, of mother-goddesses, has lent legitimacy to women's glorification and deification as divine mothers. It is generally believed that with Sita , Savitri and Virgin Mother Mary as the pre-dominant role models, the glorification of women's roles as mothers, and their mother image as that, of a benevolent mother goddess was promoted. They were generally considered as symbols of fertility, energy and power. It was through these mythological and cultural symbols as is believed, that these role models served, as reference and instilled the concept that women were expected to be pure and faithful as wives and self-effacing and sacrificing as mothers. Therefore, even though motherhood is natural and universal it was entrapped in its glorification, which, as is generally considered, was promoted to serve institutions like patriarchy. The patriarchal design that aims to suppress women and

subjugate them, serves the agenda by setting high standards of motherhood and presenting the supreme sacrifice of the mother - goddess as role models. Through this it could, set the model of sacrifice and purity as the established norm for good mothering thus idealising motherhood. Anything short of the divine sacrifice was taken as bad mothering and therefore reduced the status of the woman. Under such social and ethical pressure women were reduced to mere sacrificial goats. Though there were generally speaking similarly high standards set for men, but there is no such thing as, 'good fathers' or 'bad fathers,' and in case a child did not come up to the mark a father was not blamed for it.

It is believed that the basic agenda set by the patriarchal forces is to ascertain the supremacy of man, and for this the suppression of women is mandatory. Therefore in a patriarchal kinship structure, a woman's status in the house was/is determined, as is commonly understood by her ability to produce male issues for her husband's lineage. As though her role as a procreator and reproducer isn't achievement enough, it is believed that she has also, to ensure that she gave birth to 'male issues' and only that would qualify her as a good mother. Her identity revolves around the wife/mother role beyond which, it is believed that, no individuality is required to be established or recognised, this leads to motherhood being reduced to a typical and pre-specified role as demanded by the society. Not only this as has been already discussed the social standard of motherhood was modelled by the creation of symbols and deities like 'earth mother' and 'supreme goddesses', which glorified the role of a mother to super-human levels of sacrifice and tolerance. Thus, as is generally understood, taking away the natural and instinctual element from motherhood, and using it as a weapon, to serve patriarchal interests. The society demanded only 'good mothers' and therefore all mothers were compelled

to follow the idealised role of motherhood as modelled out to them. The interference from the established institutions like patriarchy, religion and marriage, it is believed influenced maternal behaviour and attitudes. However, the 'how and why' of institutional motherhood, cannot be completely comprehended perhaps, without an overview of the historical background of motherhood. For centuries motherhood and its effect on women was, commonly understood as taken as the natural outcome of reproduction.

In her, *Historical Perspective on the Ideologies of Motherhood and its Impact on Social Work*, Dr. Vesna Leskošek, states that "Throughout history, motherhood was described as a woman's basic mission, profession, and an inseparable part of her nature. Women are supposedly drawn into motherhood by their inner instincts which at the same time guarantee their children's healthy growth and development. This natural ability makes woman the best possible educator. Motherhood was equated with femininity." But women are not just mothers they have to perform their kinship roles, where she has to perform her duty as a wife, daughter-in-law, daughter, sister, etc. And of all these roles motherhood was considered, "the most beautiful and the most natural profession for the woman, as were the relations within a heterosexual family which could not be avoided or concealed."(Mahniè, 1893: 317-321) It was within the structure of marriage that gender roles were defined. In all marriages whether it is Catholic, Hindu or Islamic the subordination of women is there because they rest on a strict dichotomy, whereby, it is believed that, women are the heart and men are the mind. Therefore marriage is essential because only the union of the two could create the whole. The traditional patriarchal marriage is based on the Catholic assumption that man and woman are two parts of a whole (Castelli, 2001).

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According to this conviction, it is believed that women are more attached to religion and more connected with God. They are the most loyal guardians, as is commonly understood, of religious ideas and life, and particularly so if they are mothers. "They are by nature weaker and feebler than men. Their intellectual and physical abilities are also weaker, and this is manifested as gullibility and intellectual inferiority. The man seeks and chooses intellectual and material goods, while the woman distributes those to others, which is proof of man's rationality and female emotionality. However, the woman is not only his substitute, 'a reservoir of his strength,' but she has her own autonomous task. The woman spontaneously feels that Christianity, with its principles of justice, love and freedom protects her rights against men's self-will, so her mission is to disseminate religion, and she can fulfil it only as a mother. Only motherhood awakens in her the supernatural feelings of love and justice" (Slovenka, 1919: 123). However, not even religion could save women from inferiority, so in some countries, after the separation or divorce the child is given to the father because the mother supposedly cannot raise it on her own (West, 2007: 26)." Dr. Vesna Leskošek's preview of the historical perspective on motherhood depicts how the institutions of patriarchy, marriage and religion, together combine by losing their fine distinction to create a social structure, and women/mothers are motivated to fit into the society as respectable women by performing the idealised maternal role and duty. But latter, the concept that men and women create a whole was altered and it was established that a man was able to survive on his own, but a woman was not! She could only keep her dignity as a married individual, where she was controlled and guided by her husband. "Marriage was constructed as the only refuge, a place where a woman was protected from the dangers that lurked outside the home. But this

protection came at a price: she had to obey her husband simply because she was the weaker half of the whole" (de Beauvoir, 1988: 445-500). It has been seen historically and is commonly understood that the age old convention, that nature and temperament were a woman's domain in contrast to culture which was ascribed to men, though 'nature' in women expresses itself as motherly instinct.

Such a patriarchal mental pattern, it is believed, debased the woman mentally and physically. Woman was generally speaking, seen as intellectually and emotionally inferior, physically weaker and therefore fully dependent. The only function that could perhaps, endow her with a certain value was her reproductive ability which consequently became an object of patriarchal ownership. The ownership of the "womb" and the prohibition of sexual intercourse with other men made possible that identity of the child, who at the time of the transition to individual economy had already assumed the role of an heir, was unequivocal. In this perspective, the woman is not essentially different from any other means of reproduction. Her womb is a "flower pot" (Rothman, 1989) into which a man plants his seed which then produces a child. According to the patriarchal mental pattern, children were the father's property because they came from his seed. Although the seed has no value on its own without a seed bed, woman is only a medium in this chain of events as the seed only passes through her body. The same pattern presupposes that individual characteristics are passed down from the father to the son. Accordingly, such a relationship was seen as the only one having a real value; it symbolized the continuation of the lineage and of the mankind as a whole. (Rothman, 1989) noted that a similar alienation of the womb is taking place today with the help of modern medical technologies. Medicine has established a direct connection with the foetus; it has been observing and studying it, enabling or preventing its coming into

being. The idea about being able to access a child without mother's participation is crucial for the explanation of the longevity and obstinacy of the myth of motherhood (Oakley, 2000). Prohibition of abortion is one of the most effective means of controlling women's reproduction. What is behind it is a denial of the woman's right to be in charge of her own body. The child's advocate is no longer the mother but the moralizing public in whose definition a mother is just a medium who can pose a danger for a child as much as anyone else, although, once the child is born, it is no longer anyone's concern but mother's.

Motherhood has been for very long considered synonymous with womanhood; it was historically equated with femininity. Motherhood perhaps, had been considered the most beautiful and the most natural profession ; something given by nature. It was against this background that the early feminists strongly revolted against, as is believed, the shackles of motherhood and fought to liberate women from the crutches of this bondage. The second wave feminists, who entertained and supported the view that institutionalisation of motherhood served the patriarchal design, influenced the feminist movement in the United States (after the 1960s) and brought these interrogations to centre stage. "Feminists argued that throughout human history, maternal experience has been defined and written by patriarchal culture. Religion, art, medicine, psychoanalysis, and other bastions of male power, as has been generally understood, have objectified motherhood, have disregarded female subjectivity, and have silenced the voice of the mother. Feminist activists insisted on middle-class women's right to work and participate in public life beyond the family (working class and poor women had been working all along, while also raising their families), and, along with this, that mothering was