



## MOTHERHOOD IN INDIA: MYTHS, THEORIES AND LITERATURE

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### Abstract

The concept of motherhood as a pre-social reality and its varied manifestation in constructing the archetypal mother figure underwent a myriad of transformation, fitting seamlessly into various notions and narrations and is a central question in the history of feminist theory and ideology. The rich legacy of the western feminist thoughts on motherhood focusses on the retrieval of the women's experience as mothers while dislocating it from the institutionalised hegemony and contesting the theoretical positing of women's eternal relegation to 'otherness.' In the Indian context, the ideology of motherhood permeates the process of nation-building and the mothers are ideologically glorified as the *Matr Shakti*. But this exalted realm of the mothers often becomes the site of neglect and disrespect, which they face in their everyday lived reality. The wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century offers us a different worldview of motherhood in India where mothering is as diverse as mothers themselves. The number of working mothers, single mothers, divorced and widowed mothers in India is on the rise. Since motherhood often becomes the cornerstone of women's confinement to the private sphere of life and everyday domesticity, it becomes necessary to scrutinize the supposedly natural phenomenon from women's viewpoint. This paper aims at interrogating the patriarchal myths surrounding the mothers and motherhood in India while establishing the profound importance of women's mothering for family structure and mapping out a terrain of their own as mothers.

**Key words:** motherhood, myth, patriarchy, feminism.

### Introduction

...the problem of maternity cannot be dismissed as a zoological fact...the theory of cultural motherhood should have been made the foundation of the general theory of kinship- *Bronislaw Malinowski*

The birthing capacity of females of the species and the inevitability of the accorded status of being 'mothers' on fulfilling this capacity endows

the females with an elaborate, dimensional and gendered hierarchical status. The physical capacity of birthing, therefore, gets embroiled into layers of gendered significations around the concept of motherhood. Motherhood being one of the most naturalised of highly gendered terms becomes an agency of patriarchal hegemonic power. As Nancy Chodorow writes about the ambiguity of societal and reproductive roles in which women's maternity is trapped, she fathoms the essentialism of women's

maternal power to the construction of social reproduction. She writes,

Women's mothering is central to the sexual division of labor. Women's maternal role has profound effects on women's lives, on ideology about women, on the reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality, and on the reproduction of patriarchal forms of labor power. Women as mothers are pivotal actors in the sphere of social reproduction. (Chodorow 11)

The term "motherhood" implies a nuanced concept with various meanings and interpretations about which differing, often conflicting ideologies exist. American sociologist and noted feminist scholar Jessie Bernard defines "motherhood" in her seminal work *The Future of Motherhood* as "more than the biological process of reproduction." (Bernard 2) The metaphorical representation of motherhood often forms the basis of social and cultural archetypes and thus remains problematic for feminist scholarship. It constructs the nurturing and caretaking qualities, private realm, emotion and intuition as inherently maternal, whereas the public sphere, logic and symbolic meditation are projected as masculine. Unearthing the uncharted significance of the appraisal of the maternal in the socio-political and the literary world is the need of the hour, as is summarised by Ellen Moss in *New Thoughts on "the Oldest Vocation": Mothers and Motherhood in Recent Feminist Scholarship*,

Just as any public identity has to be claimed and actively created rather than merely assumed to exist, mothers of all kinds (welfare mothers, black mothers, white mothers, women giving birth, single mothers, rural mothers, mothers of disabled children, lesbian mothers, child-care workers, mothers with AIDS, working mothers and so on) need to claim civic spaces, resources and recognition. (Moss 413)

Motherhood is a unique experience profoundly shaped by social and cultural context. The process of procreation and of nurturing new life whether biologically or otherwise has produced different religion and culture specific definitions of

the words "feminine," "maternal," and "feminine spirituality." Religions like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam accord very important place to motherhood and its glorification process is idealised and sentimentalized by different religious traditions. The mother figure in Indian tradition is worshipped and respected as the *devi-ma* and is often associated with source of energy, fertility and power.

Although maternal ideals are worshipped and eulogised in all cultures, patriarchal societies often present a woman's central purpose to be her reproductive function and motherhood and mothering remain interwoven with issues of a woman's identity. Motherhood's existence as a pre-social reality and its apparent political and cultural institutionalization has always been a fundamental question in the history of feminist theory and ideology. Adrienne Rich's analysis of motherhood as an "institution" and as an "experience" in her influential book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution* has led to the re-examination of the idea of motherhood as well as the supposed gap between the idea of the mother and the chore work of mothering. Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* argues that mothering is reproduced both at the level of social organisation and of individual subjectivity by a complex system that depends upon family for its development.

#### Feminist Interrogation of Motherhood in India

Feminism in India has been preoccupied with the significations of motherhood and its apparent mythical reality. The Indian feminists are exposed to a precarious as well as systematic reality on the concept of motherhood as mothers and motherhood occupy a central position in our colonial and post-colonial consciousness. Motherhood has garnered a mythical and iconic presence in the Indian social and literary domain. The dichotomous reality of motherhood in the Indian social terrain has been baffling to the feminist theorizing of motherhood in India. As Jasodhara Bagchi writes in her introduction to *Interrogating Motherhood*,

The paradox of motherhood in the context of feminist theorizing in India was the potent contradiction between ideological

glorification of motherhood as *Shakti* (power) and the powerlessness faced by mothers in their everyday lived reality. Hence Indian feminist theorizing has had to take on board the complex process of the ideological use of motherhood to keep the family as the regulating or regulated social order, therefore confining women to reproductive domain of 'home' and denying them access to the 'world'.(Bagchi 2)

Bagchi's insight into the binaries and oppositions characterising the social organisation of motherhood in India foregrounds the necessity of unravelling the various juxtaposed mythical realities which adorn the maternal psyche of Indian women. There is no denying of the fact that Indian feminist perspectives on motherhood and its vanguard has been meticulously influenced by the insightful agency of western feminist ideologies.

Intrigued by the fascinating investigation into the maternal dilemma and assertion, the Indian feminist outlook on motherhood devises its own creative and critical navigation into the heart of maternal instincts. The next part of the paper will explore the critical feminist interrogations of some of the prevalent heterosexual and patriarchal ideologies associated with the concept of motherhood in India.

### **Mothers and Daughters**

In India's multi-cultural and multi-ethnic context, the traditional and patriarchal social norms tend to burden the mothers with the expectation of a male heir. In certain sections of the society, the mother is glorified and deified if she gives birth to a male heir for her husband's lineage. The ideological glorification of mother-son relationship which follows often results in the devaluation of mother-daughter relationship. As the birth of a male child is still highly anticipated and longed for, this results in the rise of what Geeta Aravamudan describes as the "disappearing daughters" syndrome. The obscurity and the void in the literary representations of the mother-daughter bond has prompted the feminists to term it as the "lost tradition." (Broner 58) Rich observes in her book *Of Woman Born*: "The cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted,

misused - is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other." (Rich 258)

The deconstruction of the orthodoxy and overrated glorification of mother-son relationship and the emergence of mother-daughter dyad in literature and society is the urgent need of the hour. But this dismantling of the prevalent dyad and emergence of the new is a laborious task as it is submerged under different hegemonic and hierarchical layers involving patriarchy, colonialism, social stratification, categorization and the variables in these categories are often prone to alter our perspectives on the complex issue. "Virtually every popular depiction of mothers and sons-in art, popular fiction in various Indian languages, the autobiographies of famous Indian men, mainstream cinema, folk tales, legends and proverbs-corroborates the mother's sentimental prevalence." (Kakar and Kakar 96) Kakars also point at the troublesome continuity of excess emotional involvement surrounding the mother-son relationship since ages and the resultant mystification of the mother-daughter relationship quotient in society and literature.

Although the mother's presence is a constant in the daughter's life but she is never valued as the adored and adoring element. Literature has been a witness to the association of malignancy with the mothers in the daughters' lives. Radhika Manoharam, for instance, dwells on the scarcity of the available resources for building up a strong theoretical premise for decoding layers of misappropriation that a mother-daughter relation has endured in the face of patriarchy. While there is abundance of mythical, historical and societal examples of mother-son glorification with heaps of theoretical and textual evidences, there is a "curious silence on the thematic of mother-daughter relationship." (Manoharan 20) She attributes the reason of such marginalization of mother-daughter relationship to the age-old and persistent over-indulgence with heterosexuality and the denial of anything other than the prescribed codes and

conduct of heterosexuality. Manoharam also recognises the fact that it is the absence of a standard precedence or lack of insight into the female experiences that has caused the literal and social apathy regarding this thematic concern. As she states,

Not a skeletal blueprint exists for the narrative of mother-daughter relationships within the master discourse of Indian fiction. This is not to say that there are no significant female characters in Indian mythology—rather, this particular relationship is not valorised. (Manoharam, 20)

This interlude in Indian feminist concern regarding the mother-daughter relationship is, however, apprehended and approached with a cautious and careful detail in the 90s decade and resulted in the publication of a considerable number of Indian novels written by women writers. This emergence of notoriety and variety regarding the varied and multiple nuances of Indian womanhood and its associated defiance and impeachment of long established traditional patriarchal culture in carving a niche for themselves in the socio-political culture of the country became a trademark of the feminist concern of the emerging women writers. It is, however, very fascinating to note that the women writers of the 90s apart from being engrossed in deciphering the multi-layered modes of violence unleashed by patriarchy and bringing them into forefront, were also actively engaged in exploring the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship in their texts. Their conviction regarding the misappropriation of the long-established social and cultural norms and tradition, mythology and folklores in unleashing violence on women and unnerving their vulnerable self in justifying the atrocities directed against them, engaged them in scripting an alternate reality of womanhood and expatiate on modes of protest based on mother-daughter relationship in their texts.

#### **Motherhood and Nation-Building:**

The cultural artefact of *Deshmata*, the nation as the mother-earth which gained strong legitimacy during the nationalist movement has been often put under feminist scrutiny. The human mother-figure in

the model of *deshmata* is heavily burdened to legitimise the diffused ideology which indicates society's and nation's expectations from her as Tharu and Lalitha exclaims, "the reform movement's image of women as uneducated, ill-bred victims of atrocity and burdens on a nation's self-respect shifted and women became a part of the struggle, indeed the real guardian of nation's spiritual essence." (Tharu and Lalitha 173) Motherhood which should be a liberating and enriching experience thus becomes a captivating one for the human mother.

A traditional society's conceptualization and visualization of motherhood as a symbol of the nation-state garnered mass acknowledgement and popularity during its colonial existence. Our country witnessed the rise and simultaneous growth of the idea of nation as a mother during the period of freedom struggle. The symbolical enslavement and exploitation of motherland prompted the freedom fighters of anti-colonial India to free her from the shackles of domination. The concept became popular and its multifarious and arrayed demonstrations took place in the form of Goddess worship among the social reformers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda. Although their objectives behind the clarion call to the sons of *Bharat Mata*, was to rupture the visible inefficacious attitude among the common mass and immerse into the Swadeshi movement to free the enchained mother goddess/land, the concept got twisted in the hands of patriarchal ideologies. Jasodhara Bagchi's *Interrogating Motherhood* re-examines how these notions became popular and were firmly entrenched in human psyche and pervaded the public and private realms of the bourgeois consciousness to justify the contradiction in the projected and practised images of mother/woman.

#### **Motherhood and Modernity**

The Gandhian era and the decades after independence have witnessed tremendous change in the status of women in Indian society. Women's mothering is also not an exception. Although motherhood may, at times, seem oppressive, women tend to find other meanings to motherhood,

meanings that are liberating and empowering. Mothers, apart from being the sole care giver and nurturer seek more meaning into their lives and they do so by breaking away from the traditional matriarchal norms. There is no dearth of working mothers in Indian society, mothers who try to secure a place for themselves juggling the home and work front single-handedly.

Although the trend of working mothers is much popular in the urban India, the mothers in their rural counterpart also set examples of mothering the children efficiently and contributing to the family income. Again, single mothers in today's Indian society are a growing number and the society has, to some extent, efficiently eradicated the burden of societal norms in accepting them. Many of the mothers are divorcees while some have lost their husbands but chose to stay single to bring up their children. And they are efficiently coping up and adjust themselves in juggling high pressure jobs with the challenges of being the only parent. In the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, medical intervention has given a new dimension to the concept of motherhood. There is a rising trend of unmarried single mothers in India who dare to tread the brave new path through IVF or adoption. Many famous personalities from Indian Cinema have taken the path of becoming a single mother and are setting examples before the mass braving this new dimension of motherhood.

Indian women in 21<sup>st</sup> century are determined to secure a place for themselves amidst this constantly shifting traditional ideologies and societal expectations of motherhood. This brings women into the public sphere where they try to strike a balance between their lives as mothers and working women. However, instead of being assisted in their efforts, these women are often snubbed and their agency often curtailed by an upper-class and upper-caste prejudice of mother-glorification which thrashes working women as ignorant, unsanitary, negligent mothers who fail to perform their role in bringing up 'quality' sons for the nation.

Contraception was introduced in India in the mid-twentieth century and it reaffirmed and recycled the process of oppressing women as the

modes of biological experimentation at the hands of professionals in collaboration with corporate capitalists. Jasodhara Bagchi in *Interrogating Motherhood* states,

Genetic mothering is the new language of female oppression while surrogacy, being promoted by public figures, easily becomes exploitative of underprivileged women. While it promises happiness – this commodification of the birthing process tends to become more exploitative in the hands of patriarchy for which women have to dearly pay.” (Bagchi 92)

These changing perspectives towards the notion of motherhood have been encapsulated in the literary texts of different countries (or cultures). Mothers are omnipresent in literatures, especially if not exclusively, in the works of women writers. In the era of scarcity of acknowledgement regarding the grievances of women in India, notable contributions have been made by women writers which has changed our perspectives regarding women's question. Krupabai Sathianadhan, Cornelia Sorabji and Toru Dutt advocated for the women's freedom in India and tried to integrate the female subjectivity into their writing. Contributing to this tradition of empowerment of women in the mid-twentieth century were writers like Ashapura Devi whose protagonists bear witness to the emancipation of Indian women during the period of India's freedom struggle. Amrita Pritam became a pioneer in post-independence women's writing and tried to establish a voice in the voiceless through her fictional endeavours. To speak of the mother figures as presented in Indian writing, as Tharu asserts, “is to question and expose the twin structuring of the ideology as it exists in society and is confirmed by literature.” (Tharu and Lalitha 265)

Indian literary terrain offers the readers multifarious exemplifications of the new found motherhood/independence wrapped with capitalist overtones. But what these portrayals of the sanctioned autonomy of motherhood simply devalues is the maternal anguish and the confused female subjectivity within the digressive strategies

of the historical ambiguity and the bewildering insights of the new socio-political obscurity.

The resultant ambivalence in the maternal psyche expresses itself in two ways: one being the loss of individuality in transgressing the self and the conflicted embracing of maternity and the other being the overtly powerful play of guilt cocooning into the maternal psyche with the overwhelming desire to negate the long forgotten and frequently resurfacing trauma of lost social recognition, with the inner urge playing overboard to fulfil the internalized social expectation of being a competent and self-sufficient mother. These strong associations of a twenty-first century motherhood across the globe with guilt and empathy is reminiscent of the “maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic” (Kristeva 12).

### Conclusion

Literature has always been a reflecting medium of social ambivalences, of the attempted ruptures through the ambiguities, of the revolts against the orthodoxies and of the imminent closures/continuance of the changes sought. Motherhood in Indian society and literature has been subjected to numerous myths, theories and societal perceptions and gazes according to the demands of the ages in questions. As in society, so in literature, there has not been any gradual shift of perspectives regarding the mythical historicity of motherhood, with some strains of thought regarding the same even scathing the modernity in the twenty-first century. There has been changes in the perspective regarding motherhood and mothering, erratic and unsteady in most of the times. The status of the mothers has experienced exaltation in one age, underwent severe and traumatic suppression in the next, presumed dominance in the other and anticipated silence in the next. In all the ages, the ‘mother’ in question and her experience of motherhood has remained elusive.

Nevertheless, though uphill and troublesome task, the successive and continuing attempts of literature in bringing a continual shift of perspectives regarding mothering and motherhood has been promising and rewarding. As our hopes about a better tomorrow as women and mothers are

skyrocketing, the deviance from the patricentric literature and the shift to a matricentric feminism offers us glimpses of a motherhood, with mothers celebrating the tribe of their own, rejoicing and basking in the warmth of their own unique glory. As Andrea O’Railley puts it succinctly in her speech into the Motherhood Hall of Fame at the Museum of Motherhood in NYC,

To render real and personal that argument I was making in my keynote: that motherhood matters; that it changes forever and always who we are and who we become. And thus we need a feminism for and about mothers. In my talk I said that matricentric feminism needed a room of its own in the house of feminism. I would like to suggest as I end these words that while we may not yet have this room of our own....and for all you that has made that happen I am so very grateful. (Railley 2014)

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