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Debunking the Maternal Myths and Re-Interpreting Motherhood

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Abstract

This paper interprets the fundamentals of motherhood with a particular emphasis on matricentric feminist viewpoints. It delves deeply into the complex aspects of motherhood, shedding light on its intricate structure with the help of feminist perspectives. Through a critical analysis of various viewpoints, the paper reveals how gender roles, cultural norms, and power dynamics interact to shape how mothers perceive and experience motherhood. It references the challenges mothers face in patriarchal systems and draws from the works of prominent feminist researchers. It also highlights how feminist ideas provide an alternative perspective for examining prevalent stereotypes and challenging binary notions of motherhood. Through this, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how feminist viewpoints influence conceptions of motherhood and reshape the discourse on women's roles and identities. The abstract underscores the importance of considering social roles and gender issues in this investigation, highlighting their pivotal roles in shaping mothers' experiences in society.

Keywords: construction, motherhood, feminist, gender roles, patriarchy, maternal

The Concept of Motherhood

The concept of motherhood has revolved around women for centuries, confining them to a specific space. Society has traditionally designated mothers as the protectors and primary caregivers of children, and while some changes are occurring, the status of mothers remains subordinate and dominant, with motherhood often considered their most significant achievement (Gailey, 2000). Even today, women are valued in the labor market and are pursuing economic independence and employment opportunities, but the label of "mothers" is still perceived as their most fitting and successful role.

In the current context, motherhood continues to be primarily associated with women and is considered the highest honor. The image of mothers is often idealized, and their mental, physical, or emotional needs, both before and after childbirth, are often overlooked (O'Reily, 2016). The concept of motherhood and mothering has evolved over time, but the sphere of care and nurturing remains predominantly assigned to women. Motherhood can be understood based on both biological and social definitions.

a) biological motherhood: This definition focuses on reproduction, with biological motherhood centered around a woman giving birth to an offspring and attaining motherhood.

b) social motherhood: Social motherhood defines motherhood as the act of mothering and nurturing the offspring. Cultural influences often shape social motherhood, prescribing specific conventional roles for mothers. A mother's performance is, therefore, recognized through her social motherhood rather than her biological role (Rich, 1995).

Delving deeper into the concept of motherhood, O'Reily suggests that motherhood can be viewed as "mothers as a group," "the state of being a mother," and "characteristics and qualities attributed by women to become a mother" (O'Reily, 2010). Motherhood can be considered an institution that serves as a component of the political and social order in communities. This institution establishes social mechanisms and cultural practices that regulate human behavior and activities in relation to the community rather than the individual. Therefore, motherhood can be intricately defined as a social institution rather than simply biological or innate. The process of motherhood requires women to conform to the social construction that predefines the "idealized mother" (Rich, 1995).

Motherhood is a transformative journey, but its impact varies widely, ranging from profound joy to emotional distress and physical strain (Tucker, 2005). This diversity includes mothers from various backgrounds, including those who give birth, have cesarean sections, adopt, use surrogates, or even single men and women as parents, all falling under the umbrella of motherhood (Hequembourg, 2013). A nuanced understanding of this concept can help mothers normalize their experiences, acknowledge the challenges, and amplify the joys. Traditional gender roles, unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities, and societal marginalization of non-traditional motherhood forms hinder women's pursuit of multifaceted identities and aspirations beyond motherhood. These factors portray motherhood as a socially constructed and often confining role, limiting women's autonomy and perpetuating gender inequalities. Inspired by feminist principles and the contemporary matricentric feminism movement (O'Reily, 2016), it is imperative to critically scrutinize and challenge existing notions of motherhood, aiming to create more inclusive and empowering environments that embrace women's diverse choices and experiences. It is essential to recognize that experiencing motherhood and having children do not universally define a "complete woman," and this article

explores the concept of mothers through a feminist lens. It further dissects its complexities and examines how feminist perspectives challenge traditional norms, including gender roles and cultural expectations. By referencing influential feminist scholars with a particular focus on the matricentric feminist lens, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how feminist viewpoints shape discussions about motherhood and women's societal roles, emphasizing the role of social roles and gender issues in this analysis.

The author prepared this article with the intention of exploring and shedding light on the construction of motherhood. Interpreting motherhood from a matricentric feminist perspective, the article aims to investigate the diverse experiences of motherhood. To achieve this, the author employed a purposive sampling strategy, deliberately selecting various groups of mothers, including single mothers, surrogate mothers, LGBTIQ mothers, mothers of differently-abled children, and adoptive mothers. This approach was chosen to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences within the sample, ultimately contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how motherhood is constructed in this context.

1.1. Social Construction of Motherhood

The social construction of motherhood expects women to be present for their children irrespective of culture, race, and class (Oakley, 2005). The seeking of maternal presence has remained a poignant dependency and necessity constructed, and women have been holding to the ideology then and now (Rich, 1995). The experiences and expectations of motherhood might vary; however, the essence of maternal presence has been embedded in the minds of mothers. Here, mothers are typically standardized as those who give birth, i.e., in biological terms. Sociologist Mausharat opines that the journey of motherhood has been captivated after experiencing motherhood, the observations written afterward, and the entire concept circulates thereafter (Maushart, 1999). Various theories of motherhood state that the social arrangement has constructed the essence of motherhood, thus depicting that it is completely related to the biological aspect. The social arrangement successfully labels and expresses mothers as the sole givers, nurturers, and bearers of children (Holmes, 2006). The nurturing of mothers is embedded when they are daughters; Chodrow's "Reproduction of Mothering" suggests that daughters tend to internalize their identities as mothers through their mothers. They are raised in such a way where "motherhood" and being a "mother" are glorified as their highest attainment and accomplishment, simply by being born as a "woman" (Chodrow, 1978). Meanwhile, sons are dispatched as "men" meant to take care of the females in their families, the sole protectors and providers for the family.

However, it is also understandable that "motherhood" changes the lives of women, as various empirical studies suggest that women tend to become morally responsible and adapt to

changes to guide the new lives they've borne. On the same note, it cannot be denied that social influences affect the way mothers think and expect women to be the ideal and "perfect mother" (O'Reily, 2010). Thus, mothers tend to ensure the needs of their children and act vitally as parents compared to fathers. Mothers are perceived as primary agents for the overall development of their children through prescribed roles and societal norms set by society (Hays, 1996).

If we explore the employment market and empowerment, it is easily suggested that mothers are expected to prioritize their duties as mothers. They are constantly on record of their children's upbringing and are also expected to excel in their respective employment fields. Thus, the burden of both roles has put mothers in a state of "guilt" for not being able to keep track of both and tagged as failures (Magnuson, 2009). Interestingly, fathers are never put on trial for parenting obligations and are not sought after for the care work of their children. Small acts by fathers towards their children yield multiple applause for their "balance of act" and they are often crowned as "perfect fathers," even for simple tasks like changing a diaper, for example (Jakes, 2006). Hence, the social construction of motherhood, which has long chained and influenced mothers to be "ideal and perfect," requires redefinition where it is not confined to biological definitions and expands the definition of "mothers" (Holmes, 2006).

1.2. Romanticization of Mother and Motherhood

While the gender lens views the distinct features of males and females, women who become mothers still believe they are doing "the most important job in the world" (Holmes, 2006). The faraway cry is that the care work performed mostly by women remains secondary. Hence, redefining care work as a priority over caring for children is a must (Tucker, 2003). Furthermore, although mothers are expected to care for their children, a closer look at the family setting reveals that women overall take care of the entire family, which includes not just their husbands but also other family members. The care work ascribed to women needs to be shared with men to minimize the distress experienced by women (Pederson, 2012).

Motherhood should not be limited to sociological theories; it needs to be explored from various disciplines, including mythology, history, politics, religion, anthropology, and literature. The romanticization of motherhood has been sustained not only through cultural values but also in literature and films. The glorification of mothers and motherhood positions women as the ultimate providers of care, love, and affection. They are fabricated as beings who are soft-hearted and nurturing, like nature itself (E. Rose, 1995). Religious and mythological texts assert that mothers have the power to shape their children and guide them through their childhood. Mythological literature that guides motherhood and beliefs tends to construct the position of women where Manusmriti states that women who bear children receive blessings from God and are positioned

no less than goddesses (Ganesh, 2010). Mythological literature even claims that for women, motherhood is the spiritually highest attainment and a mystical transformation of wifedom (Bhattacharji, 2010).

Nevertheless, societal construction and patriarchal nature confine women to domestic spheres. After experiencing motherhood, women are reinforced to take care of their children. Motherhood becomes more of an acquired role, passed down through generations, and subsequently the domestic roles are fortified and confined to women (Maushart, 1999). Society further enforces the importance of motherhood by urging women to aspire to be mothers. Young girls are conditioned to expect their roles as wives and mothers (Rich, 1995). Their upbringing is inculcated with teachings, norms, and values, which help to mold their expectations for future motherhood. This ideology not only confines mothers but also demands them to take up responsibilities as mothers. Hence, motherhood becomes intrinsic to who they are, surpassing other roles and ambitions that they might hold or aspire to (Walsh, 2005).

1.3. Realities and Challenges of Motherhood

The understanding of motherhood in literature, mythology, religion, and society is laden with expectations of women to be perfect mothers, nurturing, and ever-present caregivers for their children. While the construction of motherhood in these realms often idealizes it, the real-life experience of motherhood can be far more complex and challenging.

1.3.1. Multiple Responsibilities

Mothers are often expected to juggle multiple responsibilities, including child-rearing, domestic duties, and employment. The so-called "supermom" is portrayed as a woman who can effortlessly balance all these roles. However, the reality is that the burden of these responsibilities can be overwhelming and lead to stress and burnout (Hays, 1996).

1.3.2. Societal Expectations and Judgments

Mothers are often subjected to societal judgments and expectations, which can be harsh and unforgiving. The pressure to breastfeed, make homemade baby food, and engage in various forms of "helicopter parenting" can contribute to feelings of inadequacy (O'Reilly, 2010). Furthermore, the choices mothers make, whether to work outside the home or stay at home with their children, are often scrutinized and criticized.

1.3.3. Financial and Economic Pressures

Financial pressures are a significant challenge for many mothers. The cost of childcare, healthcare, and other child-related expenses can be substantial, and mothers may face economic difficulties when trying to provide for their families. The gender pay gap and lack of affordable childcare options can exacerbate these challenges (Magnuson, 2009).

1.3.4. Mental Health and Well-being

The emotional and mental well-being of mothers is also a critical concern. Postpartum depression and anxiety are common, but there can be a stigma associated with seeking help or admitting to these struggles (Tucker, 2003). The pressure to maintain a facade of perfect motherhood can hinder women from seeking the support they need.

1.3.5. Work-Life Balance

The struggle to achieve work-life balance is an ongoing issue for mothers. While many women want to pursue careers and fulfill personal goals, they also face expectations to be fully available to their children. This work-life balance challenge is exacerbated by limited parental leave policies in some countries (Pederson, 2012).

1.3.6. Relationship Dynamics

The dynamics within a relationship can change significantly after becoming parents. The division of labor in childcare and household responsibilities can lead to tension and conflicts between partners. Mothers often find themselves disproportionately responsible for childcare (Walsh, 2005). Thus, while the social construction of motherhood and its romanticization has led to certain ideals and expectations, the realities of motherhood are multifaceted and challenging. Mothers face various pressures and demands, and their experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of societal, cultural, and individual factors. It's crucial to recognize and address these challenges, support mothers in their diverse roles, and work towards a more equitable and compassionate understanding of motherhood that goes beyond traditional gender roles and expectations.

1.2 Redefining the Prescriptive Motherhood

If we unveil the traditional lens to motherhood, it provides that women are dominated and domesticated through the maternal aspects. However, Vivas explains that the few feminist circles reject the very aspect of biosocial notions that women as mothers remain under the veil of self-sacrificing mothers (Vivas, 2019). She argues that an anti-maternal and anti-reproductive discourse that emerged during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s does not necessarily apply to the present generation of women. Contemporary women do not necessarily view motherhood as the only possible path and are more critical of it. "But the real experience of motherhood often means

having to juggle your personal life, your relationship, and your career. This side is often kept quiet, which can make us feel like we are failing as mothers. The fact is, as mothers, we don't always do what we want, but we do what we can. Real motherhood means exhaustion, contradiction, and ambivalence," she concludes (Vivas, 2019). Jasodhara Bagochi, in her article "Motherhood Revisited," argues that motherhood, which is portrayed as infinite in variety, is one of the prime sites of reproduction and is reproduced to maintain the patriarchal structure of society. She presents the "mother-child relationship" as the oldest love story that has been constructed by patriarchal society and imposed on mothers to define themselves. However, she also contends that the paradox is that motherhood is an enforced aspect of women's subjugation (Bagochi, 2019).

On the same note, Deepa Gahlot, in her article "No Baby! No Cry!" questions the notion that motherhood is the greatest experience for a woman. If motherhood is pure bliss, why aren't women happier (Gahlot, 2019)? The society often presumes that maternal instinct is natural, and women are made to feel inadequate, selfish, guilty, and a whole gamut of negative things if they rebel against conventional roles. It is entirely agreeable with Judith Tucker when she argues that the "dominant ideology of motherhood" needs to be redefined in relation to the overall growth of children. The quality of maternal sensitivity and attachment she yearns for is not limited to the ideal growth and development of children. Mothers who challenge the traditional myths of motherhood and embrace the contemporary facets of motherhood, those who deviate from socially prescribed norms of mothering, are equally mothers (Tucker, 2002). The essence of motherhood needs to be viewed as a relationship, and redefining prescriptive motherhood means weaving a more mother-centric narrative to explain why one becomes a mother. Meanwhile, as we strive for mother-centric motherhood, we are building a new future of motherhood that must ensure the well-being not only of women but also of men and children, where motherhood is not solely the omnipresence of women (Green, 2015).

The contemporary perspectives on motherhood challenge traditional ideals. The evolving concept of motherhood encourages us to recognize its diversity and complexity. This shift aims for more inclusive and equitable roles for parents, fostering a compassionate vision of mothers and their identities.

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