

Motherhood in the Study of Women Writers

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Abstract – Motherhood, as defined here, is the cultural process of locating women's identities in their capacity to nurture infants and children. As a set of concepts it dates only from the late eighteenth century or the early nineteenth century in Europe. English dictionaries do not make these distinctions, yet "motherhood" can be differentiated from mothering, actually caring for children, and also from the biological events, pregnancy, birth, and lactation, associated with maternity. The panorama of changing discourses and practices offered by social history vividly demonstrates the error of conflating motherhood, mothering, and maternity. This paper reflects motherhood in the study of Women Writers

Key Words: Motherhood, Maternity, Knowledge, Mysterious, Female

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Male fascination with female reproduction is one of the most ancient and profound mysteries of the human civilization. Obsessively explored by almost all disciplines of knowledge-- myth, anthropology, science, medicine, philosophy, sociology, literature, politics and art-- motherhood is a wonderfully mysterious, an intransigently magical creation of life within the female body. Disciplines of human knowledge have all crossed each other's trajectories in their tryst with this intractable wonder.

From the ancient figurines of fertility goddesses to the latest findings in molecular biology, it has been 'mankind's ongoing love-hate affair with the Mother that has kept this arduous and elusive quest alive—the quest to make sense of a miracle that is as exquisitely beautiful as it is chillingly terrifying.

II. MOTHERHOOD IN THE STUDY OF WOMEN WRITERS

From the myth of Pygmalion to the latest body-snatcher film in Hollywood, from the omnipotent near-eastern goddesses to the enormously powerful cult of Kali in India, from the decapitation of the Medusa to the marginalization of real time mothers all across the world, in theory and in practice, what remains constant through all the deceptions, duplicities and defense- mechanisms of patriarchy, is a deep-seated anxiety over an inescapable natural process that is life- giving, and ipso facto, life-threatening. The mother who creates is also the one who castrates—the Mother's flip side is the Medusa. Decapitate (=castrate) her before she castrates you. Perseus must cut off her head, if patriarchy's

collective anxiety of dissolution is to be effectively assuaged.

Orestes must kill his mother if the order of Zeus, the Father, has to be successfully established, and it must be championed by the father-born Athena. With Zeus, comes the power of the logos, of language—it is humanity's entry into the Symbolic order. Jehovah is a mutation of this archetypal Father-god, subjugating with his rod of lightning the love, the darkness and the violence that define the mother as well as female sexuality.

Gerda Lerner thinks, '[t]he appropriation by men of women's sexual and reproductive capacity occurred prior to the formation of private property and class society' -- the crucial signposts of the logo centric-patriarchal civilization. It was with the burgeoning power of the polis that patriarchy needed to be enshrined as an institution, 'the archaic states were organized in the form of patriarchy: thus from its inception the state had an essential interest in the maintenance of the patriarchal'. The woman's co-option in the system was ensured by various ideological strategies pertaining to class, family, economy and religion.

And yet, there was the 'metaphysical' female power—the unique power to create life—to negotiate with. The mother-goddess cult remained as a residue of the ancient veneration of the woman- mother, long after the societal and political subordination of female sexuality becomes an established fact. And it is exactly here that we see the birth of a patriarchal schizophrenia.

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The Hebrew (by which I imply Judeo-Christian) monotheism's ascension to power happens to be the fatal blow to the diverse goddess cults dispersed across a vast region of the near-east, north Africa, the Mediterranean and the Greco-Roman world. Under its homogenizing influence (especially the Genesis account of the Creation) the fertility goddesses are all rendered illegitimate. Creation becomes decisively Father-born. Jehovah, the lord and king of 'light' (a logo centric obsession) becomes the fountainhead of Creation. The darkness of the female womb is banished and branded as evil. Eve, embodying aggressive female sexuality, becomes the originator of sin and mortality on earth.

Theorists from Plato to Freud have unanimously articulated this anxiety, this defensive urge to 'homogenize' human sexuality. The normative human subject, everywhere, is male; the female is the castrated male. She is always-already damaged and atrophied. Due to her subjectivity centred on a lack, a hole, the female subject is denied ontological 'wholeness' forever. If anatomy is her destiny, then even as mothers, they are at best accessories in the procreative endeavour: the passive receptacle of the all-important seed. This sort of a tendency culminated, in the nineteenth century, in the notoriously reactionary Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and Jean Emmanuel Gilibert. Since mothers have to have their bodies torn open to deliver offspring, they are more easily aligned with the animals, more powerfully governed by their instincts, by nature, and are far removed from the golden triangle of God-Reason-Man, worshipped by the Enlightenment.

One of the effects of this sort of thinking results in the construction of the woman as a breeding machine. It irredeemably condemns her to the hell of anatomy, to the tyranny of biology where a woman is synecdochically defined as a womb. Consequently the maternal body becomes a poisoned ground where myth, anthropology, psychology and politics meet the notorious female biology. The ultimate aim is to kill female sexuality, with its multi-faceted manifestation, and to nurture procreation—monolithic, predictable, manageable, hence noble and deified, enshrined by the phallic culture.

'Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters,' declares Luce Irigaray. But '[a]bout woman and her pleasure, this view of sexual relation has nothing to say. Her lot is that of "lack", "atrophy" (of the sexual organ) and "penis envy", the penis being the holy sexual organ of recognized value.' And therein lies the supreme cultural investment in procreation, the woman's hegemonic subjection to her biological generatively at the expense of her richer and more self-contained sexuality: 'woman lives her own desire only as the expectation that she may...come to possess an equivalent of the male organ—through her desire for the child's penis.' And at the cost of what? 'Woman "touches herself" all the time...no one can forbid her

to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus with herself she is already two—but not divisible into ones—that caress each other.'

It is a richly self-sufficient sexuality that is sacrificed to phallic violence to ensure procreation, patriarchy's enshrined institution for species propagation, for the continuation of the name and the line of the father that would legitimize patrilineal inheritance, forming the foundations of property and class. The fate of the beautiful female auto-eroticism is to be 'disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this self-caressing.'

Motherhood and phallocentric violence

It is a strange irony of liberal feminism that the truly enriching and laborious processes centered on female reproduction—pregnancy, childbirth and lactation—have become, for the Second Wave feminists, a taboo, as they are steeped in the patriarchal politics of biology. I feel it was due to the reductionist essentialization of the female body and biology during the high Victorian Social Darwinism that the reaction against it, during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, was so turbulent. And it took a costly toll on theory: biology itself became a no-go zone for the Second Wave theorists, a minefield to be avoided altogether—especially by the Anglophone liberal feminists. Liberal feminism of the 1970s, aspiring towards a radical equality, demanded to raze biology to the ground: hence all the agitpropism from the mythical bra-burning to the fierce campaigning for the abortion rights. The women of the 1970s began to feel ashamed of their biology—a neutering of the female body became the ultimate goal of the liberal activist, at the expense of the infinitely rich specificity of femaleness, retrieved at a later stage, by the French Radical feminists. This unfortunate occlusion has irredeemably affected the Anglophone theory and criticism for almost half a century.

The difficulty, fundamentally, is that of having a troubled relationship with our bodies in an essentially misogynistic culture. This is one of the primary reasons of motherhood's problematic position in patriarchy.

Awe and wonder, at the seemingly magical potential of female sexual generativity, have at their flip-side, terror, and even, disgust.

The maternal body as a seat of fertility is the most ancient taboo that evinces patriarchy's defensive misogyny. It is the primal taboo around which the patriarchal civilization organizes itself. Conversely, the fertile female body is a treasured resource, the control over which has to be secured through constant indoctrination,

surveillance, force and violence. This process is especially valued in cultures where female fertility is governed by phallic prerogatives—i.e. where procreation is defined and legitimized by paternity: e.g. the militant Islamic paranoia centered on enforcing the 'purdah' on Muslim women. I feel that feminism, essentially, should be concerned with the central question of what it means to have a female body in an inveterately male-oriented civilization and culture that renders female sexuality to a space of abrasive conflict. Feminism should primarily address female subjectivity with respect to these conflictual cultural determinants. Motherhood is one of the crucial instances of such a complex and difficult negotiation of the female body with a male culture. The cultural importance invested in fertility and motherhood (revered/ worshipped/fearred/tabooed) has a profound influence on the self-definition of women: Sylvia Plath's novel and poems are extremely relevant in this context, as is Ashapurna Debi's *The First Promise*. 'The personal meaning of fertility and its relationship to cultural variables has [different] resonances for each woman'. All discourses—scientific and popular—on hormones, genes, body-type, waist-hip ratio and beauty finally converge on 'patriarchal motherhood'—i.e. female procreation appropriated by patriarchy—an institution steeped in violence and oppression, that relegates women to chronic destitution.

Civilization and Motherhood

The Symbolic Order is brought into being by the primal repression of the desire for the mother. But ironically, its fate is to be forever haunted by the maternal nostalgia. Reason and sanity are instruments to contain the repressed—the nostalgic desire for the mother. Whenever they loosen their grip on the Symbolic subject, extraordinary things happen—neuroses/psychoses are born, and so is art. The Mother happens to be the original and repressed muse at the heart of all art, she is also the presiding deity of madness.

We do see such moments of rupture even in collective unconscious of patriarchal Christianity—fissures do appear in the logo centric / Symbolic fabric of Catholic Christianity when it nostalgically looks back to the repressed and forgotten mother goddess (Pagan in origin) and resurrects her in the form of Mary, embodying the oxymoronic impossibility of virgin conception, subservient totally to the [pro-]creative supremacy of the Father-God, His omni 'potent' virility. The Theotokos debate in early Christianity, The Black Madonna icons of the Medieval era, and the bloodshed ushered in by Reformation and Counter-reformation are all, finally, poised on the figure of the 'lost' Mother. The ambivalence of the creative/castrating mother has come oozing out over and over again, especially in the Black Madonna icons exhibiting an expressly dark and terrifying maternal power. One is reminded of the great Hindu mother goddess Kali in this

context, who is the unmitigated goddess of darkness, destruction and death as well as the ultimate seat of creation and life. These cults hark back to the dark unconscious of the human civilization when it was not yet enlightened by the 'Light' of the Father-God, of the Old Testament. It is also mandatory that these goddess-cults be repudiated by organized patriarchal religions—as heresy, as madness—since we have learnt that everything except the light of the logos is evil, that darkness is a departure from the life-giving light of Jehovah.

III. CONCLUSION:

In a situation where creation has been colonized by the male God /rarefied logos/male intellect, it is patently difficult for a woman to lay claim to creativity outside the blood and mire of female biology. On a philosophical level, if the pen is aligned with the penis, a woman is left only with a wound, an absence for her inspiration. She is doubly marginalized if she chooses to write from within the darkness of the womb—the godless chaos of insanity or the utterly irredeemable abyss of suicide. The patriarchal paradigm will relentlessly exact its vengeance for such irreverent departure of the woman artist—she will be routinely denied her legitimate place in the canon. Emily Bronte, Gilman, Plath, Ashapurna Debi (Arundhati Roy is an exception with her Booker prize in 1997; is it because she appeared in the Western literary scene in the gender-sensitive atmosphere of the 1990s?) have all endured this critical callousness for decades. The true success of feminist criticism, I feel, lies in the theoretical rehabilitation of these women creators who have written without the support of any academic discipline or theory, but whose conscious exploration of their feminine experiences have variously challenged the patriarchal paradigm and created a powerful discourse out of their lived lives and extraordinary work.

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