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Rethinking Motherhood: A Feminist
Exploration of Social Construction of
Motherhood in India

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Abstract

Motherhood is a social construction that rejects any assumption that involves practices of mothering, characteristics of mothers, and the multitudes of meanings of motherhood that are in any way biological, natural or essential. It implies that the ways of experiencing and perceiving motherhood in society are the result of social construction. Social Construction of reality or social constructionism is a theory of knowledge of sociology that examines the jointly constructed understanding of the world. Social constructionism is defined as a perspective that believes that human life exists the way it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985). Social Constructionism has been instrumental in trying to make sense of the social world, by viewing knowledge as constructed as opposed to created. Motherhood is seen as a status that adheres to the social norms and expectations of society. It is a normative status that a woman achieves after childbirth. The importance of offspring and the continuous need for reproduction to uphold in society is manifested in the idea of motherhood. Societies lay down few expectations from their members and in an ideal society, such expectations are fulfilled by its members. Motherhood is one such expectation from women. Societal expectations are channelized through socialisation, where the family, as agents of socialisation, has the most important role to play. The hypothesis of the paper is that motherhood is not natural, but is a binary social construct. It is, therefore, 'normal' for a woman to seek motherhood as the course of life. Any conventionalist woman looks forward to getting married and achieve the status of motherhood. She aspires for this status not only for individual gratification but for the happiness of her husband and her family. This status that a woman achieves by becoming a mother is framed by society. Where does that leave mothers who are trans women, queer mothers, adoptive mothers, mothers who are single & unmarried? Motherhood is by no means uniform & toppling of the ideal of the perfect mother deconstructs the inherent meaning, the glory that the term holds and the respect that is related to the concept of motherhood as a mere social product.

Keywords: *Motherhood, mothering, women, social construction, natural, gender, social norms.*

1.0 Introduction

Cultural and social forces play a significant role in constructing what womanhood means. In other words, the categories 'men' and 'women' are socially constructed and these social constructions characterise their social roles and activities. This varies cross-culturally in terms of expectations and values in individual cultures which are associated with being male or female. Females are biologically different from males because they reproduce. Even though males do not have the capacity to reproduce, females are considered inferior because of it. At the same time,

when one takes into consideration women who cannot reproduce and do not want to reproduce, and the social pressures they have to bear because of that, one is compelled to ask why motherhood is attached inseparably to femaleness and women? Why is reproducing a child so important? Why is fertility so important in our society? The author shall explore the answers to these questions in this paper. In the Indian context, the answers are located in the existence of patriarchal family structure in most families where motherhood is central to the structural configuration of the family.

It is crucial to understand the cultural construction of gender in society, to understand the ideology regarding womanhood which is eventually linked to motherhood. When people occupy social positions their behaviour is decided by what's expected of that respective position instead of their own individual characteristics. 'Roles' are socially defined attributes and there are expectations linked with social positions. 'Role' is sociologically important because it manifests how any individual activity is socially influenced.

Various cultural understandings of the now outdated binary categories 'man' and 'woman' have been considered by anthropologists like Sherry Ortner (Ortner, 1974). Her 'nature/culture' argument asserted that women's physiology and reproductive functions make her appear closer to nature and men seek cultural means of creation and are therefore related to the culture. Thus, women's social roles are restricted due to her reproductive capacities as she is mostly within the domestic sphere. Women's activities are organised in society based on the fact that women are restricted to the domestic sphere. Men are considered closer to culture because they move about more widely in social and geographical space and thus are more aware than women (MacCormack, 1980). So men were a part of the 'public sphere'. These divisions in social life by sex were due to a woman's role as the mother and therefore, the childrearer. This division between the two spheres resulted in according different rights to men and women. These rights further contributed to separating the domestic and public spheres for women and men respectively and formed the premise for ideas regarding motherhood, fatherhood and the family. According to Henrietta L. Moore, it is universally true that a mother-child unit is 'naturally' a part of all cultures. The 'naturalness' of motherhood has been criticised as motherhood is also a social and cultural construct. It depends on how the attributes of womanhood are linked to the attributes of motherhood like fertility, maternal love, nurturance, so on and so forth. When the categories 'woman' and 'mother' overlap, then attitudes towards women are linked to ideas about marriage, family, the home, children and work (Moore, 1988).

The 'good mother' discourse requires that mothers only present themselves in ways recognizable and acceptable by society, concerned with what is regarded as socially acceptable for mothers. A good mother is a happy mother, but an unhappy mother is a failed mother. This attributes responsibility for the conditions of motherhood to the individual and not the institution (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). The ambiguities around motherhood, including but not limited to regret, unhappiness, dissatisfaction or rejecting the idea of having children of one's own, remain an ignored and uncomfortable taboo. The sexuality, gender & marital status of the 'ideal type' of mothers has been drawn out. The good mother is fertile, female and heterosexual. She is married and monogamous. These are the claims against whom all others are measured, a moral element attached to entitlement- mothers who have to be seen as deserving of motherhood. Lesbian parents, who struggle with the singularity of the category 'mother' remain unthinkable in Indian households, workplaces, schools & even government policy. Adoptive mothers challenge fertility and biologism, fighting the question of being a 'real' mother. In the context of single mothers & unmarried mothers, it is the social expectations and norms rather than the biological necessity that matters. Transwomen, as mothers, continue their battle over the exclusive femaleness of motherhood. Sara Ahmed (2006) illustrates how some people 'flow' through any institution, while the ones who are outside institutional norms are seen to go against or block the flow. Ahmed maintains that it is those who don't inhabit the norms of an institution that shed light on the restrictions and blockages within the institution, in this context, motherhood.

2.0 The Context of the Problem

The idea of the social construction of reality is built on the thought that people interact by using symbols to interpret one another and assign meaning to the experience. For instance, when a person asks a married woman who is childless about when she is going to have a child, their words play a crucial role in what the married woman will experience as reality. The 'taken for granted' everyday interactions and events are what shape our society. After a construct is institutionalized a process of legitimization occurs which results in the maintenance of the understanding of the institutionalized dominant social construct truth. Therefore, trouble arises when constructs contain unattainable idealizations, for instance in the construct of motherhood, we forget that it is a social construction and go about to treat it as part of some pre-existent reality. (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The social construction of Indian motherhood was influenced by customs and practices in which motherhood was assigned a sacred space as a crucial determinant of the eventual identity and worth of Indian women. The identity of motherhood thus completely overshadowed all the other identities of Indian women and as a

result, the Indian woman was raised in a culture that trained her to be an ideal mother from early childhood. Examples of such glorification of motherhood can be traced through the discourse of Indian society from early history to the present. The ‘naturalness’ of motherhood is assigned to attributes of womanhood that are linked to the attributes of motherhood like fertility, maternal love, maternal instincts, nurturance and so on and so forth. Adrienne Rich talks about how some feminists critiqued motherhood as an institution, but not as an experience, which they considered even empowering. She expresses her view on how motherhood is oppressive because it is not a choice for most women in patriarchal structures, (Rich, 1976).

Does the concept of ‘naturalness’ or the biological narrative continue to overpower a woman’s choice to reproduce? How will women who don’t want to and those who can’t reproduce navigate their spaces in a society that has internalised the cultural, social and biological myths about motherhood constitute the critical analysis of the paper?

3.0 Literature Review

The following is a brief analysis of existing literature on motherhood and social construction:

***Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* Adrienne Rich** is an influential feminist text that dwells upon feminist perspectives on the institution of motherhood and her own experience of struggling with motherhood. The book talks about the disturbing side of motherhood and counters popular romanticized views on maternity. Rich maintains that the institution of motherhood is difficult to see and touch because it is not made up of concrete or bricks, rather it is defined in a way that most don’t view as an institution or a prison. To see motherhood as imprisonment is not a lens through which most would want to look upon the process of mothering. However, it is an institution and the women who choose it, do so because they have been socially conditioned to believe they have no value if they are not mothers.

***Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* by Sherry Ortner** deals with female subjugation which is universal to all cultures. Ortner believes that the universal devaluation of women stems from the fact that by the patriarchal logic, a woman is being identified with “nature”, which is perceived as less valuable when compared with culture.

Lori Walls, the author of ***The Social Construction of Motherhood: Implications And Interventions*** examines the social construction of motherhood in the North American culture, ‘mothering’ as a journey and its effects on women.

V. Geetha's *Patriarchy* gives us an insight into the nature, effect, and meanings of male authority and power which can only be understood through the concept of patriarchy. Geetha highlights the importance of notions of reproduction in a patriarchal setup and how patriarchal power "is not merely coercive, cultural and sexual norms constitute the everyday exercise of patriarchal power".

4.0 Critical Analysis: Motherhood Through the Tinted Lens of the Indian Society

To see what 21st-century women think about motherhood being a social construct, the researcher conducted a survey. There was a collection of data from 50 people who identified themselves as a woman (cis or trans), their age ranged from 18 years to 60 years. Respondents included university students, school teachers, social workers, corporate employees, self-employed and homemakers.

When asked **“Do you think motherhood is a natural state of womanhood?”**, **thirty (30) out of fifty (50) respondents replied ‘Yes’**. An Indian woman's psyche is framed into the culturally coded and socially sanctioned norms that epitomize motherhood. From the establishment of womanhood, she frames her mind along with her body - to her destined role to be a mother. A woman is socialized to discipline herself as bearers of ‘familial’ and traditions. This biological destiny of women as mothers become a cultural vocation for her role when she socializes her children. She gives up her life in service to mankind by becoming a mother. A woman's mothering function and the ability to get gratification from it are enforced and internalised which develops into a feminine psychic structure.

The next question asked to the respondents was, **“Do you think motherhood is attached inseparably to women?”** Here again, **thirty (30) respondents agreed that motherhood and women as identities are inseparable**. The social norm of women to reproduce after the marriage has played a fundamental role in the stigmatization of people. The negative impact of childlessness is related to the pronatalist approach of marriage which is prevalent in our society. The endorsement of fertility norms of having and wanting to have children is a concept spread across the globe overcoming the barriers of religion, ethnicity and social identity. The ‘allegiance’ to parenthood considers barrenness as a punishment and children as a blessing.

In reaction to the third question- **“As a woman, conforming to the role of a mother is 'natural' and it is noticed that any other woman unable to attain motherhood faces the prejudiced**

attitude of the society. Do you think it is true?" Forty-Eight (48) out of Fifty (50) respondents agreed with the statement. Society continues to highlight the importance of motherhood as a major female role. Thus, childlessness faced by the individual becomes a social stigma. At large, society paints the woman who is unwilling or unable to bear a child as deviant and even abnormal, thereby women suffer from their identity being spoiled. In this context, motherhood is highly admired and praised while on the other hand, the childless woman faces stigma nurtured in the society. The ideology of compulsory motherhood leads to the legitimisation of childbearing as the chief task for women.

The next question asked was- **"Do you think it is hard for women to escape the expectation to become a mother?" got an expected response; Forty-Eight (48) out of Fifty (50) respondents answered 'Yes'.** Women who do not want to or are unable to become mothers and gain an 'ideal' status of women are subjected to many negative social responses. These repeated responses to the childless woman over time develop in her feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame. Remaining childless after marriage comes off as a challenge to strong cultural beliefs regarding the 'natural' life for Indian women. A woman's life revolves and is expected to revolve around the expectations of conceiving, bearing and then rearing children. When a woman fails to meet this set and expected role, she often develops self-stigma and takes the responsibility of childlessness on herself.

To both questions- **"Do you think motherhood affects a woman's position in society?" and "Do you think women are socialised to become mothers from a very young age?" Respondents reacted in the same way- Forty-Five (45) respondents replied 'Yes' to both these questions respectively.** For women bearing and rearing children is supposed to be extremely gratifying. In layman terms, children help give a woman a social status that cannot be achieved otherwise. Women in India are socialized to become mothers from a very young age, they are given dolls to play with to practice their maternal love and nurturance. They are often taught to look for achievement in life by becoming mothers. It is also observed that women who fail to produce children generally feel less in their identity. The society holds them responsible for the sanctified role of mothering a child. Attainment of motherhood is valued by women as a way of conforming to the existing value system that Indian society upholds. A woman realizes after attaining motherhood that she gets the love and approval of society and thus internalizes the cultural and social standards of marriage and childbirth.

The social location of a woman's status is within the boundaries of her family where she achieves her status by procreating children. Family institutionalized and legitimizes procreation. Thus, the cultural code of tradition is passed down from one generation to another through children which get manifested through motherhood. It is the sole responsibility of mothers to hand down to their children values and traditions. Children are considered to be a thread to continue the generation and pass on the tradition of the family, uphold the family business and perpetuate family property. 'Immortality' is achieved through children. In an ideal Indian family setting, the father and the mother are expected to play specific roles- the 'Instrumental role' which involves the world outside concerned with the economic aspect of society is assigned to the father. The expressive role is assigned to the mother which focuses on the relationships within the family where the mother is expected to put her children before herself and shower love and affection to her children.

It has been widely accepted that the centrality to women's lives of having children and rearing them up is an important aspect of a woman's life. Social norms assume that women will get married and have children. As against this, women who choose not to do so are seen as deviant and strange.

5.0 Interview with Mona

The pressing importance of having a child for personal and family obligations sets into daily life. In the Indian context, a biological infant is considered to play a pivotal role in strengthening the marital relation between "husband" and "wife". A childless woman bears taunts and experiences hostile behaviour from her in-laws and others around them, while women with biological offspring experience respect and honour in the eyes of the in-laws. The following is the analysis of an interview with Mona, a cis-het woman who is childless.

Mona's Story

Mona is a 40-year homemaker married to a 44-year businessman for the last 20 years. They are Hindu Punjabis and live in a joint family with many "family problems". They are both graduates. They have been married for 20 years and have been trying to have a child since then. Mona has been taking treatment for infertility ever since she got married.

"Nobody told us that we had a problem but we have been trying for a child ever since we got married. We got to know that my eggs do not rupture a few years ago. All my husband's tests were okay, mine was okay too. I used to feel very sad if anyone used to say anything. When I got to know that my eggs are not okay I cried for days.

Even after undergoing treatment for my eggs, did not rupture. Then I used eggs donated by my sister; with whom I have very good relations. She donated them two times and the second time they froze the eggs. Her husband was not told about this as he would not have allowed it to happen. But these eggs were fertilised with my husband's semen. I wanted to take eggs from the family, I want a good child, a healthy child. We did not tell anyone because we were scared that word would spread. But I have not been for IVF going.... I did not feel like it, I was not feeling up to it. I will go again soon at least two or three times.

And as for my husband, he is quite supportive. He never made me feel that I was a problem. He even says that maybe it's for the better if we don't have a child, it is all God's wish."

Mona seemed very confident when the researcher first interacted with her but became nervous when she started talking about her infertility. Her life seems to centre around her feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

6.0 Conclusion

With the understanding of the concept of motherhood, it is clear that it is dependent on the way society constructs it. The ideology of motherhood differs in accordance with the socio-cultural context, ethnicity, class & caste. In the context of India, which is a patriarchal society, only the 'good mother' who fits into the institution of womanhood, motherhood, family & marriage is revered. A woman is considered 'complete' or 'real' only when she becomes a mother. She 'proves' her womanhood in this way. The ideology of motherhood attributes to the way families are structured. Ideas of womanhood and motherhood are inherently linked to family and marriage. Both, family organisation and marriage are crucial to understanding reproduction and motherhood. The way in which the patriarchal family is structured is one of the major causes of inequality among the genders and of the understanding that motherhood is one of the major roles of a woman in this society.

Most women in India internalise the value of motherhood which is considered the ultimate achievement for them, more so if they give birth to a son. The childless woman thus is miserable. Besides the ritual and religious importance given to motherhood, there are various myths around motherhood and the general social and economic importance, which makes motherhood a central feature of a woman's life to this day and age. Pregnancy brings relief from the doubts about fertility and the insecurity of childlessness. So, motherhood remains the main feature of her adult, highly female clouded identity. Mothers carry the ideological burden of glorification. Being a mother is considered a virtue solely because of its sacrificing character. The 'good

mother' discourse, exclusively female, is used in Indian society as an example of ideal behaviour and conduct. It is constructed to keep those who don't fit into the binary categories, that align with the societal norms, out of the conversations.

Motherhood in a society like India defines a woman's identity even before marriage because the preparations for a self-sacrificing life begin right from childhood. As mothers, both queer & cis folks find themselves operating within a limited range of choice of positions within the institution of motherhood- A mother may find herself exploring the options of a working mother, adoptive mother or single mother, each of which is constructed as a set of expectations about how she will act. The hoax and conditioned honour that the term holds and the respect that is related to the concept of motherhood is a social product. Thus the concept of motherhood is a social construction.

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