

Mother Stereotype in Mary Gordon's *Pearl*

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Abstract: Stereotypes of women abound in literature. The mother stereotype is the most important of all other stereotypes. Mary Gordon, an Irish American writer has depicted a mother named Maria in her novel *Pearl*. The mother who did not mother her daughter properly and the retaliation showed by the daughter towards her mother is dealt in the light of the “mother” stereotype based on Mary Anne Ferguson's “Images of Women in Literature”. Various other interpretations are also dealt with, in the light of the concept of a mother.

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The stereotypes of women's roles in all literatures are not the same as one thinks them to be. A woman can be a creator or a destroyer. She can be the beginning or the end and bond or free. Everything depends on the role that she is accustomed to and the way she accumulates herself into the world she is brought up. A woman is generally depicted as docile, self sacrificing, an embodiment of patience and truth, trusting, loving, caring and care giving. When these are strictly adhered to, she falls into the traditional stereotype. If she deviates from any of these virtues, she is branded as one who is against the traditional set up. The American writer Mary Gordon has portrayed a fifty-year old single mother who is at the verge of losing her daughter Pearl. While discussing the role of mother in an essay on “Images of Women in Patriarchy: The Masculist-Defined Woman” Sheila Ruth mentions that “In the language of the women's movement, the mothering role is mystified, covered over with a whole set of myths, fantasies, and images that hide many realities of the role and the person who lives it” (Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies, 86). Therefore it is pertinent to focus on the mother and the motherly role played by women.

A woman as a mother holds a special place wherein rests a cloistered space more sophisticated and comfortable mother-daughter relationship. Though she is castrated and perceived to be betrayed or abandoned, she comes back with more loyalty to foster her children – here lies the greatness of a mother.

Mothers are the favourites of many. Mary Anne Ferguson, in *Images of Women in Literature* talks of several stereotypes of women. One among them is the mother stereotype. “The role of mother” she says is “ambiguous”. She adds that “myths about woman's dual nature are attempts to explain primordial reactions to her double role as the giver of life and death, of pleasure and pain.” (6,7) Literature gives various

instances of a mother on both the angles of study. She need not necessarily be an ideal super heroine, one who is capable of explicating only positive roles. There are mothers who never mother their children and who always show anger, bitterness and hatred. Yet the world down the ages and literatures of all era and country adore and appreciate the concept of the esteemed “motherhood” – a sort of a virtue or a quality exclusive only for her and not for any one. Hence the concept of motherhood is laced with various enormous and indefinite expectations of this indefinite role as a single human being. Mothers are respected and revered by all around the world. *The Bible* mentions that “...Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20). Mary, the mother of Jesus has been praised in this manner: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (Lk 1:28). These are traditional and well known examples of how mothers have been and have to be. But *The Bible* also talks of how a woman should be subjected to her husband. St. Paul says “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (I Tim 2:11,12)

This concept of a woman has also been dealt by Lord Tennyson in his poem “The Princess” which says:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
 Man for the sword and for the needle she:
 Man with the head and woman with the heart:
 Man to command and woman to obey;
 All else confusion.

Hence it has been justified that despite the hurdles women have crossed to reach the pinnacle of success, there are certain traits attributed exclusively to her. With a view of proclaiming the reverential greatness of a woman, it should also be noted that all Jezebels and Eves have to be rooted out. The novel under consideration revolves around Maria, the heroine's mother, trying to come to terms with herself, her life and her daughter's decision of sacrificing her life for a common cause. In a complex twist of unrelated events, she runs from pillar to post trying to get a suitable answer to her daughter's untoward sacrificial life. A mother's longing – a natural state for a woman when her daughter is in distress - makes Maria to take the next plane to Dublin. She calls Joseph (the surrogate father) in Rome to inform about the matter. Maria is in a fix, a very perplexed state since she has set a very bad example to her daughter. She has not mothered her daughter well. This bad precedent of her mother has sent Pearl a vehement emotion of going astray from the normal course of life. Having led an independent life until now, Maria decides to take the yoke of her daughter on herself – a scapegoat to carry the vices of her daughter.

The pangs of a mother are seen from the following words of Maria ““Where's my daughter? Is she all right?”“I want to see my daughter”.....Maria would like to scream, Just tell me which hospital.

Don't waste my time!"(181,182). The motherly love in time of crisis is clearly seen in Maria arranging to take the next plane to Dublin. She also telephones Joseph even before she leaves for Dublin. It is on her way to Dublin Maria relives her past and ponders over to find out the reason for her daughter's reaction. But towards the end she comes to term with herself, her family, her daughter and realises the potential of the multidimensional aspect of being a mother. She also comes to a point of realisation where she accepts that motherless nature punctures the smooth flow of not only her life but also that of the entire family and the society as well.

The response to her mother's love is seen from Pearl's words: "I want to see my mother now,I want to see her". Dr. Morrissey responds "She may have a strong response. There may be tears, reproaches. You need to be ready for a variety of things." "My mother's not like that" (306). Further down we read Dr. Morrissey's words which state "...you mother loves you very much. She very much wants you to get well." (306) These words will surely ring in the ears of Pearl – a daughter who once abandoned her mother but who now longs for motherly love – a true sign of Maria's reaction as a mother to her daughter. There are a few more instances to show when the characters in the novel question about the relationship between Maria and Pearl. We are introduced to Breeda who "... didn't understand Pearl and her mother ... Why had Pearl gone so far away from Maria, to study? This seemed unthinkable to Breeda, who would never have left Belfast if her mother had still been alive." (150) Moreover, when we analyse Maria's state, it is clear that she feels like screaming when she is not able to get the name of the hospital where Pearl has been admitted. She tries to be obedient, but not. The novelist aptly puts in saying "Obedience was something she gave up when she left the world of the Catholic Church for the secular universe". (182) If this is her case, how can she bring up her daughter?

Mothers may be good or bad. Good mothers are life producing, supporting, submissive, totally dependent, selfless and kind. Bad mothers are termed as those who are strict disciplinarians, dominating, harsh and of nagging type. Ruth Perry, in an article on "Mary Gordon's Mothers" says that "white middle class mothers lack ordinary role models and have to keep reinventing motherhood for themselves. Mothers are themselves, so to speak, motherless" (209). This is very apt for Gordon's mothers. Maria, so to say is too late to realise her role as a mother and the virtue of motherly role. "Prolonged and helpless human infancy creates the strong mother-child bond....Faced with new situations and changing environments, tribes and groups in which women did not mother well or which did not guard the health and survival not survive." says Gerda Lerner in "A Working Hypothesis" (Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies, 190). This is a veritable fact that mothers are empowered and inexplicable forces who can manifest themselves corresponding to the ever changing environment.

Gordon ends the novel saying “And we will leave Pearl and Maria to themselves”. (354) But is it not too late for a mother to change her determination, analyse her legitimate maternal virtue and be committed and recognised as a mother? With a shift in culture and day-to-day pattern in every household, the matriarchal frivolousness is eating away the pattern of existence curtailing the conventional family set up. Mahatma Gandhi's words in *Women and Social Injustice* is worth mentioning here:

The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active...She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infant of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct. (34)

According to Ferguson's concept of a mother, Maria, once a mother who did not mother her daughter, has realized the true nature of motherhood – of self-affirmation, submissive, a passage from let-me-alone state to one of I-am-with you and above all from from a nightmarish state to a state of happiness and contentment. Hence a mother can girdle or ungirdle the life of a person. Literatures of all ages have legends and myths regarding women. But what matters is the social stigma attached to her prescribed female role. The duty bound womanhood, conscious programming of the house, potential emotion-driven individual, muddled priorities shovering around her head, unbiased nurturing of all the children she has – they are idyllic yet constructive terms to redefine the symbolic experience of a woman. The values attached to motherhood is supreme, thereby giving an autonomy over the patriarchal set up and in turn to the entire human society. Her superiority over social, cultural, political, familial and individual turmoils is the result of annihilating the existing dogma that women are at the lower strata in any society.

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