

Motherhood in An Indian Context: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract: This article discusses motherhood as a site of patriarchal control and regulation of female sexuality and agency. Failure to be a biological mother exiles the woman from her body. In Indian culture, infertility considerably changes the course of life of married couples. Bearing and rearing children serve cultural roles and bestows privileges on women in Indian hierarchical society. Manju Kapur in her novel 'Custody' negotiates motherhood. Ishita, an infertile woman experiences a pervasive sense of failure and alienation vis-à-vis her body. But she decodes and de-stigmatizes infertility by being a caring stepmother. She assumes social identity and recognition as a mother.

Keywords: Motherhood, Infertility, body, woman

Female sexuality and maternity are entrenched in the physical, biological, sexed body. They are historically/culturally/socially defined, created, and talked about. They are sites in which power vacillates relentlessly. Maternity is not only a site of "special" dominion for women, but also a site of patriarchal control and regulation of female sexuality and agency. Patriarchal ideology, in appraisal of motherhood, paradoxically restrains and restricts women. Female lives are governed by expectation and accomplishment of motherhood. Womanhood associated with motherhood, results in tense and catastrophic situations for women who are not mothers because of infertility. Failure to be a biological mother exiles the woman from her body. She is regarded as a failure, not a complete woman; infertility is considered unfortunate, sometimes even a curse. Such views persist even among educated classes in post-colonial societies. Motherhood is considered a source of power for a woman, one that determines the strength of her conjugal relationship. Significantly, a woman's status is determined by whether she fulfils her responsibilities towards family and society through her role of reproduction. Even the unborn child in the womb of the mother plays a role in a woman finding acceptance and acquiring a higher status in the community. She is recognized as complete in the true sense on attaining motherhood. She receives token of affections from in-laws and other relatives, and experiences a sense of personal growth. Within marriage the role of a woman is that of a carrier - a vehicle for offspring of the man. Infertility is often experienced as the inability to accomplish role expectation. In Indian culture much importance is accorded to motherhood and infertility causes interminable problems. When a woman fails to conceive, she is stigmatized and rebuked by family and society which imposes manifold psychological pain by branding them 'incomplete' and 'valueless'. Infertility is considered as deviance from the cultural norm, rendering a woman vulnerable; it is also a base for divorce. So,

childlessness is to be implicit not only in terms of reproductive health in a physical sense, but more so as a social matter. The French writer Simone de Beauvoir contended that women are repeatedly told from infancy that they are “made” for childbearing. While the “splendors of maternity” are forever being sung to her, the drawbacks of her situation — menstruation, illnesses, and even the boredom of household drudgery — are all justified by this “marvelous privilege” she has of bringing children into the world. Beauvoir pointed out that such pervasive socialization shapes women's desire to choose motherhood. The second-wave feminist movement in the United States (after the 1960s) brought these interrogations to center stage. Feminists argued that throughout human history, maternal experience has been defined and written by patriarchal culture. Religion, art, medicine, psychoanalysis, and other bastions of male power have objectified motherhood, have disregarded female subjectivity, and have silenced the voice of the mother. Feminist activists insisted that mothering was not essential to woman's fulfillment or necessary to every woman's life. Feminists challenged the overemphasis on fertility, insisting that the link between childbearing and childrearing is socially manipulative and serves to exclude women from other productive roles. Feminist theorists debunked the social pressures of a mothering role that seeks to control women's bodies and energy. They argued that such notions limit women's possibilities to the domestic sphere and restrict their entry into the public domain, thus vitally feeding into patriarchal agendas. The institutionalization of the female body is seen to alienate women from their experiences of the body.

Motherhood is seen as an institution of patriarchy that ensures the control of women by their imprisonment in domesticity. It is seen to relegate women to the private world of child-bearing and rearing apart from the public world of wage-earning and decision-making and the intellectual and academic world of creative thinking and writing. Woman's status as child-bearer having been made into a major fact of her life and terms like “barren” or “childless” serve as markers of negation with no male analogue like “non-father”. The bodies of women become sites for hi-tech reproductive technology. Adrienne Rich concludes that the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the “human condition” any more than rape. The idealization of women as mothers, the romanticization of motherhood and the attribution of normative quality to motherhood are seen to be dictated by patriarchal power relations. According to Adrienne Rich, “Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men” (216). In their article “Experiences of Childlessness in an Indian Context: A Gender Perspective” Bhamini Mehta and Shagufa Kapadia state that in Indian culture the role of motherhood is imprint in the personality of a girl child from early childhood by encouraging her to play maternal roles by caring for younger siblings and by allowing her to play only with dolls around the house. The reproductive role of women is highly recognized in these settings and the onset of puberty is joyously marked, often accompanied by celebrations that declare the girl's fertility and announce her capability

for future motherhood. The second stage, one that further determines the initiation of the girl's role as a mother is marriage. The ritual of marriage is seen as a pathway for the creation of offspring. The rites of marriage and some of its customs are also geared towards fulfillment of this end. Post-colonial women writers do recognize motherhood as a significant part of cultural tradition, a role that is personally sustaining, that carries enormous social status and prestige but they advocate the need to extend femaleness beyond breast and womb and integration of body with the mind by uncluttering the mind of patriarchal domestic demands. They exhort women to live, control and enjoy their bodies, their gender, their sexuality and their reproductive potential and challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over their bodies. This paper discusses the novel *Custody* by Manju Kapur and focuses on the gendered experiences of childlessness and the societal perceptions of motherhood.

Ishita, the protagonist in the novel, is a product of middle class values, who wants to pursue her career as a teacher but her parents give preference to marriage over career, as in Indian traditional society it is marriage that gives identity to a woman. "Ishita had begun to apply for teaching posts when a proposal was received. Should a good offer come, insisted her parents, you have to answer its call. Everything else can wait not this" (53). So, Ishita starts off in a subordinate role as daughter; a position that is transferred to her husband in marriage. Her marriage has a functional role with rights and obligations that are legitimized by the production of offspring. Demonstrable fertility has therefore, vital importance for her. "Suryakanta was their only son, and grandchildren were expected within a year" (53). Ishita wants to take a teaching job and be independent but "stubbornness was not prized in daughters in law" (53). As the months goes on, there is no sign of pregnancy and so Ishita's mother, Mrs. Rajora becomes uneasy because Ishita must bear children as a gateway to property assess. Even though property inheritance is through the male line, it is women as mothers who are custodians of property before it is passed to their children. She knows that her daughter will only belong in her in-laws family if she bears a child. Her mother views reproduction not an isolated episode but an event which is integrated with other aspects of her daughter's life. Reproduction is not only the one unique gender-related asset for Ishita, but also the only power base that she in marital relationship can more or less control. She is hopeful that a child will designate a new status and identity and as well as define a new role for her daughter. Her helplessness is so extreme that she no longer enjoys the sleep, follows scriptures and redoubles her prayers. The boy's family becomes critical of Ishita as she is not able to conceive in 18 months of her marriage. So it's only Ishita who has to leave no stone unturned to get conceived, as in Indian culture, infertility is perceived as woman's fault and not the problem of the couple. It is the woman who assumes that she is the one who has an infertility problem in marriage, before the couple even goes for medical investigation. Reber defines a woman's role as, "what is expected of her by others and ultimately, after a particular role has been thoroughly learned and internalized by the person herself" (674). Once her mother-in-law realizes that Ishita could

be faced with an infertility problem, what ensues is a frantic search for a causal explanation and a diagnosis. Ishita moves from healer to prophet, herbalist to hospital desperately seeking some resolution, driven by hope, uncertainty and despair. So, the best part of her youth is wasted in the quest to attain motherhood. A gynecologist investigates her and "severe blockage of her fallopian tubes" is announced and she is confirmed "an infertile woman". Ishita "thought it easier to commit suicide than to live" (63). Her childless marriage is plagued with tension, social stigma, emotional exploitation and psychological pressure.

Child bearing has been viewed as a valuable gender-specific role to women. Therefore, women who are unable to bear children, experience a pervasive sense of personal failure. Ishita as an infertile woman undergoes negative, individual experiences regarding her infertility. The emotional turmoil characterized by constant worrying, increased stress and heartache makes this an unbearable experience for her. She experiences a lack of identity and feels that she is not fulfilling her role as a woman. For her, it represents significant loss of family's desire of a child, genetic continuity, a life goal, parenthood and control over her body. Her body is a physical site which has failed its function. Destiny is against her as she fails in her function as a 'woman'. Her mother-in-law does not want to waste more money on her. She contemplates painfully: "Had there been something wrong with S.K, they would have moved heaven and earth to get a son's defect corrected. In an ideal world the same resources would have been put at the disposal of a daughter in law. But this was not an ideal world" (68). There is both a loss of health and self-esteem. Infertility denies Ishita recognition, "hadn't they valued her for herself? Being childless, relegate her to the status of a 'nobody' as she has failed to prove her femininity through child bearing. This is my karma, nothing will break it" (68). She experiences marital discord as the couple does not share their anxiety with each other and this leads to a break-down of communication and an increase in marital problem. Sex with the husband becomes an activity with the definite role of pregnancy. Sex no longer is spontaneous and pleasurable as a pregnancy is desperately sought. Their sexual life is affected and her husband moves to his parent's bedroom. "She felt degraded, a non-person, certainly a non-woman. The thought of being expelled from it was heart breaking" (71). Ishita's body makes her vulnerable to society. "She thought of the body that had known so much love and then so much punishment. She hated her body, hated it. Tyranny of biology is what's wrong with the society" (183). She experiences a sense of alienation vis-à-vis her body as she subjects it to rigorous scrutiny. She is haunted by the feelings of self-hatred and inadequacy. She experiences relentless process of deterioration which marginalizes her and hardly ever views it in its positive aspects. "Hatred towards her body filled her. It had let her down in this most basic function and she had to live with the knowledge for the rest of her life" (63).

The oppression exerts itself in and through her body. The body becomes "the battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works, reifying her. Her physicality is a medium for others to work on; her job is to act as their viceroy, presenting her body for their ministrations, and applying to her body the treatment that have been

ordained” (Greer 106). Her body reaches a state of exile, including self-exile and self-censorship, and unbelonging to itself within indigenous patriarchy. Ishita undergoes ‘internalized exile’ where the body feels disconnected from it as though it does not belong to her and she has no agency. She is considered a failure by her culture, and worse, since this failure is internalized, she believes it herself. She is doubly exiled from her body - once as a woman, an outsider to patriarchal power, and next as an infertile woman who cannot fulfill her biological destiny. So, this problematic ‘natural and essentialized assumptions of motherhood’ is imposed on her body. A different aspect of mothering is revealed, i.e. mothering- as m-othering, when the experience of not being mother is alienating and destructive to her psychic state. There is no space for her in her husband's house because her body has betrayed her. “Everybody in the building must know why she has come back. Return to sender. Receipt for 5 lakhs attached” (127). So embodiment is a source of discontent for Ishita. Ishita is disempowered due to her barren body and becomes a prey to unaccountable depression. When she is thrown out of S.K's house she feels disembodied as she is punished for her substandard body. Divorce fills her life with angst, misery, depression, dejection, gloominess and sense of failure. After losing intimacy with her partner there is a feeling of solitude, sorrow and annoyance. After the stressful and negative life experiences, with the support and care of her natal family, Ishita builds her self-esteem and despite her feelings of inadequacy starts a new life. She resumes her life from where she has left off five years ago. She takes her maiden name and embarks on a new journey. Though Ishita could not be a biological mother but her heart is full of love and compassion for the children. To give meaning to her life, she joins Jeevan, an NGO for slum children with the search for a groom continuing alongside by her parents. She has broken wings but she longs to fly. Working for under-privileged children gives a purpose to her purposeless life. “It was a new world for Ishita, every day she woke up with a purpose. For of course she volunteered; face to face with eager children, so obviously in need. Here, who cares if she had a broken marriage, who cares if her tubes were fused together” (135). She drowns her sorrow in the sea of Mandavili and again gains self-confidence and works for a social cause. Along with Mrs. Hingorani she marches to parliament house to protest the nuclear device tested in Pokhran desert. Her father comments, “His daughter has grown more in the NGO than in her years of marriage” (136). She raises funds and feels valued for the first time by the outside world. She marries herself to her work as no suitor can give her a similar satisfaction. So Ishita is empowered, gets agency and gives a new direction to her insignificant life.

Ishita is prey to the tyranny of biology but she overpowers her inability and showers her motherly love on Roohi, a motherless and abandoned girl. When she encounters divorced Raman, a rapport is established between the two broken hearts. Raman satisfies the physical needs of her female body and his daughter Roohi satiates Ishita's motherly instincts. She marries the divorcee Raman and enjoys the marital and motherly bliss in her new home. Her motherly instincts fructifies into love, care and affection for Roohi. Her well-being is Ishita's first priority. Raman

acknowledges her wife's concern for his daughter, "He looked at his wife. earnestness, sincerity, hope, tension, anxiety, a willingness to feel excluded, a readiness to fight for her rights, all this shown from her large intense eyes" (405). Though Roohi is a minor but her custody is given not to her biological, but to her stepmother. So, Ishita negotiates infertility, decodes its very meaning and de-stigmatizes it by being the caring stepmother. She prepares to view the infertility problem separate from her identity by externalizing it rather than internalizing it. She no longer defines herself as inadequate or incomplete woman. She resolves the feelings of hopelessness and loss and attains an acceptance of life as an individual. She as a childless woman fills her empty space in company with Roohi and achieves motherhood though not biological and negotiates new meanings of motherhood. She reconstructs a different reality in which motherhood is achieved through alternative ways of parenting - step mothering. This is a huge step towards eradicating the negative image of biological - childlessness and most importantly, allows for alternative ways in which mothering practices creates possibilities to assume the social identity of 'a mother' and she enjoys experiential and emotional benefits of motherhood. She now has the opportunity to enjoy her body, her relationship, her individual development. To conclude, the paper expounds how a childless woman is subjected to physical violence, severe isolation and stigmatization. The cultural motherhood dictate coerces a woman to ascertain her fertility, and the occurrence of childlessness becomes more of a personal catastrophe for a woman, relegating her to a pariah. She has to face harassment by the family, and refutation and exclusion by the society. She is sometimes divorced and hence becomes a victim of psychological trauma. But now the notions about motherhood are being contested in the course of women's education, employment, exposure to information and knowledge about infertility. Women now espouse new ways of psychological fulfillment by adopting children or by remarrying and becoming caring stepmother. They decode the institution of motherhood and enjoy the bliss of maternity in a newer and fulfilling way.

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