

Institution and Experience: A Study of Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' and Eunice De Souza's 'For Rita's Daughter Just Born'.

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Abstract: This paper is based on the two facets of motherhood, as postulated by the feminist theory. The first is the political facet, in which motherhood as an institution serves to enslave a woman. This opinion was entertained by the second wave feminists, who supported the view that institutionalisation of motherhood served the patriarchal design. The second is the personal facet, in which motherhood as an experience serves to empower a woman. This view is supported by the third wave feminists, who proposed 'maternal revivalism' to encourage women to empower themselves through motherhood. Sylvia Plath's poem 'Morning Song' and Eunice De Souza's poem, 'For Rita's Daughter Just Born' have been analysed to corroborate this assumption.

Keywords: Experience, Feminism, Facet, Institution, Motherhood.

I. Introduction

The feminist approaches, on the issue of motherhood, shows that in the late 1970s the feminist views regarding motherhood and mothering were totally anti- women and pro- patriarchy, it was only the attitude of the post 1970's feminists towards the traditional ideas regarding motherhood and mothering that forced them to put up powerful resistance against it. They firmly believed that even though motherhood was an exclusively female experience, it was patriarchy's most lethal and effective weapon to pin women down to an inferior status forever. The total responsibility of bearing and rearing children limited female potentialities and rendered them frustrated and powerless. Women's Liberationists before the late 70s questioned this politics of reproduction and asserted that motherhood was not the only destiny for women as it was made out to be, and the choice to be or not to be mothers must rest upon women exclusively. In the late 1970's and 80's women began to look at motherhood as something beyond the biological process or patriarchal construct. This led to a paradigm shift in opinion from the previous approach. The period saw a reinterpretation of the ideas on motherhood and mothering, which now came to be regarded as a fulfilling experience, providing immense pleasure and power. There was a reversal of the image that motherhood carried earlier, and now it came to be treated as a celebration rather than the 1960's image of indifference & contempt. Motherhood was now a role that enriched and ennobled a woman's being, rather than a socially enforced obligation.

II. Analysis

Plath's attitude to motherhood was not surprising. As a young writer who had high hopes from her poetic career, motherhood could, and did, place limitations on her. As she could not find time for her work her productivity suffered after the birth of her kids Frieda and Nicholas. Now she had little time for writing.

This predicament led to growing resentment. Plath's concept of motherhood is that it is a sacrificial act, which eventually exhausts the mother. The poem is a piece of deep internal conflict that a new mother faces. The speaker states:-

*I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills
a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.[1]*

The statement betrays the mood of the speaker, who is a new mother, and it reveals her negative attitude towards her duties as a mother. Here the speaker by referring to herself as a cloud imbues a touch of ephemerality, just like the cloud is transient and disappears in the same way the speaker's role in the child's life is temporary because once the child grows up and becomes independent the mother's role in his life diminishes. The speaker also, mentions here that on becoming a mother, she loses her identity which merges with the maternal self.

In a scene that pictures the maternal tasks of attending to a young infant, the speaker says:

*One cry, and I stumble from bed,
Cow heavy and floral.
In my Victorian night gown[2]*

Here the mother persona is not flattering herself. On the contrary she reveals a sense of disgust with her physical self, the typical gain of weight during pregnancy, and an apparent change in the speaker's life style. The poem is a satire. Its very title the 'Morning Song' is satirical. Here the mother persona is up early in the morning to the cries of her baby for whom she has mixed feelings of indifference and love! This situation is juxtaposed to an ideal situation, where the lover's celebrate after a whole night of love making. It is 'an aubade' and belongs to the genre of love songs. In the title of this poem, Plath sharply juxtaposes the contrast between the two situations, to satirize the predicament of a mother that begins from child birth. The feminists of the late 1970's, were also not impressed with the false aura with which motherhood was hallowed. They strongly blamed motherhood and the long years of child-rearing. Those who were mothers felt that motherhood became for them not a fulfilling experience, but a "baby-trap" [3]. The responsibilities that childcare brought along with it entrapped women. Plath's description of the night gown as 'Victorian' is not an accident, but, it reveals the Victorian era of staunch patriarchal values, which left no room for women to foster individuality or creativity because for women there was no hope for change from their role as wives and care takers of children. The crux of the poem is to show how change in life style which is necessitated by the labour of maternal love, leads to unavoidable and irrevocable modifications in the life of a woman. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, firmly posits that a woman's reproductive organs are peculiarities that imprison her in her subjectivity and circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature [4]. She illustrates on the basis of history and religion how the mother-figure has been shaped to suit the convenience of patriarchy, the deep impressions created by it with regard to the mother, makes her one who is subjected as well as cherished, at the same time. Beauvoir talks about how Virgin Mary is denied the status of a spouse or equal for the purpose of exalting the mother in her and the latter seems to be accepting her inferiority when she is pictured as kneeling before her son. "Respect haloes the mother, prohibitions surround her" [5]. The overall concept of motherhood as depicted by Plath's poem 'Morning Song' is one of loss: the loss of physical beauty, of quality time and one's individual identity. The concept of mothering runs counter to the widely, recognized perspective that it is a fulfilling and rewarding stage in a woman's life.

Plath's attitude toward's mothering finds expression in the opening lines of the poem, which states, "Love set you going like a fat gold watch." This oddly, compares the child to a pocket watch. The watch is fat and gold, implying, that it is exclusive and of the premium class, but is of course inanimate. The subsequent implication that an act of love -- leading to childbirth -- is comparable to the winding of a watch perhaps reveals the mother persona's attitude to the whole issue. The watch is granted life and utility only through another otherwise it is cold and lifeless. Like a child, it is given life: a beginning, a passage of time and aging. The absence of the happy feelings generally associated with childbirth, is also linked to the absence of any mention of the child's father, and also absent is any reference to the holding and cuddling of the newborn baby. The child was simply given birth, like the winding of the watch that marks the starting point, and now like the watch the child's life span begins ticking slowly, steadily and monotonously along.

In the next lines Plath writes that
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.[6]

Here, the cry of the child is considered to be the child itself, which implies that the speaker is unable to distinguish between the baby and the noise it makes. Therefore her role as a mother is defined not by her baby, but by her baby's cries. The cries of the baby are a major link between the mother and the child. She feels little attachment for the life she has brought into the world. This is evident, because, there is no mention of either the baby's name or its gender. If indeed the word 'bald' is used to describe the noise, rather than the child, it should be noted that the cry sounds naked or hollow. The baby's voice is described thus to show that it is neither musical and melodious, nor grating, but "bald": it lacks a personal appeal, perhaps the mother child bond is lacking, which if it had been there it could have made the cry whole. It is also interesting that the child's cry takes its place "among the elements," making it simply another part of the natural world, comparable to fire and wind.

The second stanza speaks of a museum:
Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness

Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.[7]

The baby over here is referred to as a 'statue' because just like a statue it is 'new' and 'exciting'. But one can just look at the statue. The eerie and surreal feeling is because of the timelessness of the statue, which is typical of a museum. In this stanza the infant is shown as the new attraction in a "drafty museum" where "voices echo." The child has been put into an enormous and never-ending realm; it could be a symbolic reference to earth itself. Just like the "new statue" the baby is also granted no apparent attention, it is simply a new addition to an old collection. There is in this stanza, no apparent distinction between the speaker herself -- as mother -- and the other onlookers. She is just another visitor, looking on "blankly as walls."

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.[8]

The third stanza is one run-on sentence it invokes the elements. The speaker invokes the elements of which the human body is made of. The body is a mere reflection of the mother; just like the still water of a lake reflects the sky or the clouds. Though the tone here is casual but it is rather confusing. The mother persona then goes on to speak of the child's "mouth-breath" which lands on "pink roses" in lines 10 and 11. The innocent images of the sleeping baby creates the requisite imagery of motherhood, that may be expected of the poem and it is in sharp contrast to the distance that the speaker has tried to create in the earlier part of the stanza. Where the speaker denies her own motherhood, and says that she and her child are both merely elements of nature. Plath in this poem draws an exquisite contrast between perception and reality, between the way motherhood has been glamorised as an institution, the way a new mother struggles to come to terms with her new found status and responsibility. A responsibility which she shoulders through the tedious years of child-rearing, a responsibility which becomes an imposition that motherhood as an institution is shaped by male expectations and requirements. Where to be a good mother is a duty and any delinquency is punishable. In sharp contrast to this reaction is the mother persona in De Souza's 'For Rita's Daughter Just Born' Here the motherhood experience is shown as unique in its own way, and nothing can be a close parallel to it. In Eunice De Souza's poem, 'For Rita's Daughter, Just Born' the experience and the emotional state of mind of the mother persona who has been blessed with a baby daughter is depicted, she addresses her daughter;

*Luminous new leaf
May the sun rise gently
On your unfurling in the court yard always linger... [9].*

As a 'luminous leaf.' The mother persona continues to display her sense of rapturous joy, she blesses the child and at the same time prays to god that her daughter's life be always filled with gentle sunshine and rain.

The persona implores the almighty to protect the child from natural calamities and problems when she says 'earth' and from the societal and cultural problems as well when she says, "stone of these steps."

The mother persona wants to safeguard her daughter from every and any danger, be it natural or environmental:

god in the niches.
Old brass on the wall.
Never the shrill cry of kites. [10]

may be understood as allegories of protection in Christian and traditional Indian culture. In Eunice De Souza's poem, the imagery reflects a mother's concern about the influence of nature and culture on human life with its promises and its dangers. The poet's solidarity with women and the maternal thinking of well being and health are addressed here.

The mother persona in the poem reflects the anxieties and apprehensions, of a new mother for her daughter, which are in sharp contrast to the feelings of the mother persona in Plath's 'Morning Song'. The overwhelming love and exalted concern for her well being are typical maternal reactions that cement the maternal bond between the mother and child, as depicted in De Souza's, 'For Rita's Daughter Just Born', which are sarcastically replaced by feelings of indifference and detachment in Plath's 'Morning Song'.

III. Conclusion

This ambivalence in maternal attitude is a vital feminist concern. Motherhood became a cause for concern for the feminists once its role became distinct as gender specific. It is not child bearing that is problematic; rather it is the long years of effort that go into child rearing that is responsible for the suffering that

women face. It forces women to sacrifice their career, financial security and social identity, and makes them absolutely dependent. Plath's mother persona in the, 'Morning Song' depicts this very aspect of motherhood. Motherhood as an institution places heavy demands upon the mother and so becomes a cause for female suppression and subjugation. This view was strongly supported by the 1970's feminists. But the late 1980's feminists revised this view about motherhood and inspired women to take interest in their role as mothers and draw satisfaction from this unique experience, which is an exclusive gift to them. It can actually empower a woman. According to Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, these views lead to the unfolding of fresh perspectives on motherhood it now came to be considered as a unique female experience that exalts and elevates a woman's mood and status rather than repudiating it as a patriarchal device meant to silence and subdue them.[11]. A similar mood is depicted in, 'For Rita's Daughter Just Born'. The overwhelming love of the mother for her child, in De Souza's poem shows how motherhood as an experience is unique and highly desirable. It provides the greatest gratification to a woman.

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