Contradictory Discourses of Motherhood as Institution and Experience

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Introduction

> *"We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood". (Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, 1986:275)*

Feminists agree that patriarchal discourses have subordinated mothers and constrained them to the private sphere by tying them to the domestic role of reproduction, by over-emphasizing the women's physical and biological capability of reproduction, nurturing and child rearing (with the two last features being falsely positioned as a purely female ability) through the notions of ideal and perfect mothering. Women's actual physical and mental capabilities and the biological difference between men and women are over-emphasized by patriarchal power relations to normalize false ideologies that women are naturally suited to domestic roles of mothering and reproduction. Judith Buler's theorization of gender and performativity after the Foucaldian model acts as a resistant discourse against dominant power structures, to challenge the way discourse enacts gender order and roles. Performativity forms identity through the reiterative practice of discourse produced by power relations (Butler, 2009, 2010). A focus on gendered identities is central to current theorizations of gender as socially and discursively constructed, a continual process of negotiation and modification.

Butlerian Gender and Motherhood

Gender as "socially constructed relationships and practices organized around the perceived differences between the sexes" (Glenn, 1994: 3) positions the female body as a site of oppression. The idea of gender as something conceptualized as 'performance' (deriving from speech act theory) where one 'performs', displays, or enacts one's gender, was developed by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), "to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating what kind of possibilities ought to be realized" (Butler, viii). She explains that: "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (ibid: xiv). When a woman is talking about her mothering activities, has she freely selected this role? Or in other words, does she knowingly create herself in a role of a good mother? Like other identities, gender can be mediated through both 'dominant' and 'subversive'/alternative discourses of, *inter alia*, femininity. For example, a woman who sees herself as a mother, who puts her children at the centre of her world, i.e. who adopts the dominant discourse and gives up work to look after a new baby on a full-time basis, may find it very

difficult to cope with a slowly but surely emerging identity as 'career woman.' Then if she returns to work, the baby will have to be looked after by someone else (the 'subversive' discourse). Rejecting essentialism, Butler suggests that doing gender involves a group of socio-culturally directed political activities as expressions of masculinity and femininity (2009, 2010) where people perform different gender identities in different contexts. In other words, gender is "a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Butler, 1990:277). Conceiving gender as a series of performative acts, Judith Butler regards maternity as a dynamic practice discursively constructed or performed though there are differences and diversities of mothering practices amongst women (Davis; Green; James; Kinser; Vincent). The discursive constructions of motherhood can be interrupted and disrupted because, as Butler notes, "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990: 25). Mielle Chandler posits that: "It is my position that mother is best understood as a verb, as something one does" and "To be a mother is to enact mothering" (1998: 273). According to Emily Jeremiah's "Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond," (2006) such an understanding of performing mothering rejects the normative ideal mother imagined in dominant discourses.

To problematize performativity as a way of liberating women from the dominant mothering discourse, Butler argues that agency can transform the ideology of gender performativity as a reiterative practice determined by power relations. Chandler proposes that mothers should "embrace mother selfhoods and ... demand social, economic, and political respect for mothering practices" (1998: 284). Many scholars challenge conceptualizations of gender by running a discourse analysis of particular texts which appear to contain stereotypical feminine behaviour to illuminate how gender identities are enacted, represented, performed, interpreted, and contested as a potential site of struggle. Butler's theories on gender identification attempt to challenge and contest female stereotypes by transforming their meaning or function (Butler "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics"; Butler "Performative Agency"; Butler and Weed). Discursively constituted gender norms can be traced and decoded through a social constructionist approach.

Institution or Experience? Congruity in the Concept of Motherhood

Rich argues that the dominant discourses in the institution of motherhood consist of the societal expectations, assumptions, laws and rules which govern woman's mothering. As Rich claims, the institution (the master narrative) of motherhood is a socio-cultural construct resulting in a patriarchal version of motherhood (Rich, McClatchy, 2013). This oppressive system is perpetuated by the contrasting patriarchal discourses of 'angelic' mothering (the glorified, ideal, omnipotent, utopian

mother), and 'monster' mothering (monster, dominant, controlling, interfering, distant, overprotective, guilty, abusive, vicious) (Buchanan, 2013). The dichotomous categorization of polarized images of mothers whether over- or undervalued are deeply rooted in powerful dominant discourses used as strategies by patriarchal institutions to maintain mothers at the bottom of the hierarchy and under constant oppression. Relationships based on myths and stereotypes have no chance of improving and should be eliminated as they only perpetuate the unequal distribution of power between men and women (Kaplan, 2007). The following contradictory mother-myths that Paula Kaplan discusses in her book *new mother blaming* reveal the conflicting oppression enacted on both stay-at-home mothers and mothers with paid work. In "New Thoughts on The Oldest Vocation: Mothers and Motherhood in Recent Feminist Scholarship", Ellen Ross also argues against a wider cultural background of pervasive mother-blaming and contempt for mothers.

Frizelle and Hayes in their study "Experiences of Motherhood: Challenging Ideals" explore how "ideal" images of motherhood have oppressively persuaded mothers to achieve the unachievable in their everyday experiences of motherhood as they interact with the tensions of good and bad mothering (1999; Frizelle, 2011). The discourse of developmental psychology and childcare manuals (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991) evaluate women's activity according to patriarchally defined and imposed measures of "good enough mothering." Susan C. Greenfield highlights a symbiotic relationship between the novel and mothering in *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance: Frances Burney to Jane Austen* (2003) and considers motherhood as "idealized and commonly represented as a full-time occupation" (14) where "women were defined by their maternity, and maternity was supposed to occupy a woman's perpetual interest" (14–15). Similarly, Sara Ruddick reminds us that the "idealized figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow on many actual mothers' lives" (1995:31; 2009). Ruddick's clear and straightforward exposition of the conceptual and emotional ways in which mothers approach their work frees motherhood and consequently mother-child relationships from mythic and psychoanalytic visions of maternal power and powerlessness that tend to obscure the more practical realities of the work involved in mothering. Ruddick looks forward to a world where children will be raised not only by their parents but those who share the parental care.

Flax (1993:154) asserts that people desire a " ... benign force or agent out there in the world looking out for us, attending to our needs, and ensuring their satisfaction." She continues that fantasy discourses about maternal possibilities and natural abilities that cause anxieties and discontents should be resisted (1993:154). These discourses are so rigorously established, widely approved, naturalized, and normalized that change is simply an impossible mission or a long-term struggle. Patriarchal discourse aims to engender perfect and praiseworthy mothers who are selflessly and unconditionally

ready to sacrifice their existence for the children and family (Welldon, 1988:10). However, it is contradictory to the lived experience of motherhood.

Adrienne Rich (1986) and Kitzinger (1978) confess that their own mothering experience does not cohere at all with the approved stereotypical discourses, and criticique the idea of motherhood as a thoroughly "natural phenomenon" intrinsically rooted in woman's nature. On her interaction with mothers as a therapist, Parker (1997) focuses on the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence and attachment of mothers to their children and questions the concepts of good and bad mothering and the refusal of "ideal" motherhood. These illusory, invented, and imagined representations of motherhood should be deconstructed, reconstructed and challenged. Woollett and Phoenix (1991) are also critical of the way patriarchy dominates women's experience of mothering; they criticize the assumptions of motherhood as 'natural' and 'instinctive', arguing that motherhood is a social, historical, and cultural construct rather than a natural consequence of the maternal instinct.

Chodorow analyzes Freudian record to solve the issue of "asymmetrical organization of parenting," and provides a model of dual parenting where both mother and father should be physically, mentally, and psychologically engaged in child growth and development – an arrangement that would be psychologically favorable to both parents (215-219). She repeatedly claims that sex-segregated roles oppressing White motherhood can negatively influence child identity formation.

Maternal Dilemma

The maternal dilemma of ambivalence about the maternal role occurs when the woman is confused about how to create a balance between her expected role of mothering and her own individuality as a woman. The need to make choice between motherhood or forms of self-realization is considered as the enemy of individual autonomy and self-determination, for the woman is enslaved by the laws of her body. Parker (1997) suggests that the guilt mothers feel owing to the contradictory feelings provoked by maternal ambivalence is rooted in cultural representations of the "perfect" mother, constantly loving, patient, and available towards her children. The double burden of bearing chief responsibility for the family as well as involvement in reproduction and child-rearing restricts her social public life, thus leading gender inequality. Rozsiska Parker in "The Production and Purposes of Maternal Ambivalence" (Podnieks & O'Reilley, 2010) holds that maternal ambivalence involves "not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side" (18). The concept of maternal ambivalence, as Parker notes, is well established within psychoanalytical theory. However, because cultural expectations and assumptions presume and demand that a mother loves her

child unconditionally and selflessly, the mother who exhibits or admits to maternal ambivalence is judged harshly and is rendered as the object of shame and disbelief by society, by other mothers, and by the mother herself. Parker declares a double standard informing approaches to ambivalence: for the developing child, the ability to feel both love and hate toward the mother is a sign of healthy individuation; for the mother, the same feelings are deemed unnatural in the mother and detrimental to the child.

Many feminists condemn the tendency to identify womanhood with motherhood. Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by the imposed, impossible, and idealized discourses of patriarchal mothering such as the symbolic resistant discourse of "the Angel at home," mothers do not enjoy their experience of mothering. Oppressively charged with impossible expectations and practices placed on mothers, these discourses do not fulfill mothers' wills, desires, and needs as they require selfless love, devotion, and self-sacrifice. Empowered mothering discourses aim to give mothers the agency, authority, subjectivity, and autonomy denied them by patriarchal motherhood as institution. As Davies discusses, "agency is the ability to recognize discursive constitutions of individual self and identity to resist, subvert, and change the discourses through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice … can capture and control one's identity" (1993: 51). As Amy Middleton notes, mothers take agency to "face and resist the pressure of other people's policing of their mothering, and, in fact, gain confidence in doing so" (2006:74). Resistant discourses of feminism demand the attribution of high social value to mothering by offering women subjectivity, agency, self-actualization, and autonomy without wholly involving them in the time-consuming task of motherhood (Buchanan; Butler and Weed; Chodorow; Featherstone and Hollway; FitzGerald; Green; James; Kinser; Schultheiss; Vincent; Wall). It also attempts to liberate women from their identification with motherhood and to construct empowering discourses around mothering by incorporating the voices of all mothers and collapsing the traditional 'good'/'bad' mother binary. Its core focus is the strengthening of motherhood by requiring the mother to gain agency and autonomy through self-navigation.

Conclusion

Recognizing the value of women's own interpretations of their lived experiences, the resisting feminist discourse struggles to shift motherhood from the private sphere to public space to empower mothers to make changes that meet their needs. Empowered mothering seeks fortified maternal identities through processes of social, political, and cultural change through possible and achievable resistant discourse of childrearing and maternal activism. It examines gender inequalities in patriarchal culture and other discriminatory practices in the miasma of race, gender, and class. The discriminatory

discourses label men as providers and liberate them from any responsibility attached to the private sphere regarding the psychological and intellectual growth of children; thus they can freely be absent from all the burdens put on mothers as the sole responsible agent of parenting. These discourses also cause serious maternal dilemmas and ambivalence as they cannot create a balance between their expected role of mothering and their individuality as a woman.

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