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MOTHERING: A CONCEPT TO OVERPOWER WOMEN IN THE NOVEL CUSTODY

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**Abstract**

Mothering has been a topic of a debate for feminists who aim to transform it from a "necessity" to a "choice". Feminists seemed unsympathetic towards motherhood in the early phase of feminist movement. Radical feminists viewed childbearing and raising as hindrances to women's progress and advocated for women's liberation from the role of motherhood. However, over time, the feminine capacity for childbearing was reevaluated in the works of Baker Miller and others.

With the development of reproductive technologies such as IVF and HRT, the discussion surrounding motherhood has become a pressing issue for feminists. One international feminist group, the Feminist International Network of Resistance and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE), strongly opposes technologies like IVF. They fear that the scientific basis of conception technologies could ultimately lead to men taking control of the women's identity as mothers.

In the book *The Second Stage* (1981), writer delves into this issue by extensively exploring the lives of American women. It served as my inspiration for writing this paper. Here, I aim to explore the identity of women as mothers, which has traditionally been considered a "necessity" due to societal expectations, particularly in Indian society. The question of whether motherhood is a "necessity" or a "choice" is a significant point of debate between white feminists and black feminists. White feminists perceive motherhood as an obstacle that hinders their progress in the outside world, and they strive to overcome it.

Keywords: Mothering, Necessity, Choice, IVF, Black Feminist, White Feminist

Motherhood has long been a contentious topic for feminists, as they strive to transform it from a societal expectation into a personal choice. During the early years of the Women's Movement, some feminists seemed unsympathetic to the idea of motherhood, with radical feminists viewing it as a hindrance to women's advancement and advocating for women to be freed from the responsibilities of childbearing and rearing. However, over time, there has been a re-evaluation of the inherent feminine capacity for childbirth, as highlighted in the works of Baker Miller and other scholars. Miti Pandey, in her article "The Primacy of Motherhood," quotes Adrianna Rich, who emphasizes the importance of motherhood.

"According to Adrianna Rich motherhood is an arena of feminist struggle. She discusses motherhood in the context of sexual politics. She successfully brings about a clear distinction between motherhood, as the patriarchal society has constructed it and the real experience of motherhood. The patriarchal world has used motherhood as a tool for women's domination, whereas the true experience of motherhood, which is entirely the woman's province, is deemed with pleasure, satisfaction and self-fulfilment." (Pandey 98)

Satisfaction and self-fulfilment are two crucial aspects of a woman's life. However, in societies where women are confined by culturally dominant notions of femininity and imposed "rewomanization" (Stephens 82), particularly those that prioritize motherhood, there arises a need for a re-evaluation of childbirth. In today's scientific era, with the advent of reproductive technologies such as IVF (in vitro fertilization) and HRT (hormone replacement therapy), this topic has become a pressing concern for feminists to address.

One prominent international feminist group, the Feminist International Network of Resistance and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE) (Pilcher and Welham 142), strongly opposes technologies like IVF. According to this group of writers and activists, the scientific advancements behind conception technologies could potentially strip women of their control over the "last woman-centered process," thereby undermining their identity as mothers. Women do not wish to relinquish this identity; instead, they desire to embrace it as a choice rather than a necessity.

Betty Friedan's book, *The Second Stage* (1981), delves into this issue extensively, focusing primarily on the lives of American women. It is this very book that has inspired me to write this paper. Through my work, I aim to explore the identity of women as mothers, which has traditionally been viewed as a necessity imposed upon them by societal expectations, particularly in Indian society. However, the current struggle lies in transforming motherhood into a choice rather than an obligation.

The question of "necessity" and "choice" in motherhood is a significant point of contention between White feminists and black feminists. White feminists argue that motherhood hinders their progress in the outside world and advocate for giving it up. Conversely, black feminists do not view motherhood as a major obstacle to their freedom as women. They perceive mothering as a product of societal influences rather than solely a biological construct and they believe, "Black feminists accept "mothering as societally shaped rather than a mere biologically construct" (Hooks 130) . Therefore, for White feminists who associate motherhood with biological factors, it may be seen as a choice since they have control over their bodies. However, for black feminists, motherhood is an integral part of their societal and cultural existence, making it a necessity. Renowned Indian novelist Manju Kapur explores this issue of motherhood in her recently published book, *Custody* (2011), drawing from her extensive experiences of middle-class Indian life. She delves into how motherhood is viewed as a necessity for Indian women and their ongoing struggle to transform it into a choice.

The Women's Movement of the early twentieth century brought about significant changes, granting women suffrage and access to higher education. The subsequent wave of feminism, known as the second-wave feminism, shed light on the gender politics that perpetuated the inferior and weak portrayal of women in a male-dominated society and literature, as exemplified by Kate Millett in her book *Politics* (1970). This movement aimed to achieve equality for women, rejecting the notion that women should be segregated based on their biological differences from men. While acknowledging these biological distinctions, second-wave feminism argued against using them as a basis for discrimination.

In her groundbreaking work, "The Second Sex" (1949), Simone de Beauvoir delves into a comprehensive analysis of the inherent differences between men and women, exploring the realms of biology, psychology, sociology, and economics. Beauvoir acknowledges the biological dissimilarities between the sexes, particularly emphasizing the unique ability of women to bear children. However, she astutely observes that this very distinction has been exploited by men to subjugate women, convincing them of their supposed inferiority.

Beauvoir sheds light on the historical belittlement of women's capacity for childbearing, which has perpetuated their perceived inferior status. She boldly advocates for women to break free from the shackles of patriarchy by relinquishing their roles as mothers and asserting their individuality. In her own words, she states,

"It is through motherhood that women have been held in awe; it is through motherhood that they have been transfigured and subjugated."(Beauvoir 145)

Indu Swami echoes Beauvoir's sentiments, asserting that motherhood acts as a hindrance to women's successful and fulfilling careers. Swami argues that women are condemned to a restricted existence under the guise of their mammalian responsibilities. Indu says, "It is Mother that the woman was held in awe; through motherhood she has to be transfigured and subjugated"(Swami 85)

By examining the biological, psychological, sociological, and economic aspects of gender, Beauvoir's magnum opus challenges societal norms and calls for the liberation of women from the deeply ingrained patriarchy. Her thought-provoking analysis serves as a catalyst for women to reclaim their independence and assert their rightful place in society.

All white feminists began advocating that "motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and child care. Others simply identified motherhood and childrearing as the source of women's oppression."(Hooks 133) Now, with newfound freedom from responsibilities, women are becoming more career-oriented.

The issue of motherhood and mothering is one that divides white feminists and black feminists. While white women advocate for giving up their roles as mothers, black women long to embrace the role of motherhood. For white women, motherhood is seen as a source of oppression and a hindrance to their liberation. However, black women do not view it as a significant obstacle to their freedom. Bell Hooks attempts to understand the different perspectives on motherhood held by black and white women:

Following this thought-provoking advocacy, a wave of white feminists emerged, passionately arguing that "motherhood posed a serious impediment to women's liberation, a confining trap that shackled them to domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, and child care. Some even went as far as labelling motherhood and childrearing as the very epicentre of women's oppression." As a result, women, now unburdened by traditional responsibilities, began to shift their focus towards building successful careers.

However, the issue of motherhood and its significance in women's lives became a divisive topic between white feminists and their black counterparts. While white women advocated for relinquishing their roles as mothers, black women yearned to embrace the joys and responsibilities of motherhood. For white women, motherhood symbolized a source of oppression, a formidable barrier to their liberation. Conversely, black women did not perceive it as a substantial hindrance to their freedom. Seeking to comprehend the contrasting perspectives on motherhood, Bell Hooks delves into the intricate nuances experienced by black and white women.

Numerous black women expressed their desire for more quality time to spend with their families and their longing to escape the realm of disconnected work. On the other hand, many white women who advocated for liberation voiced their exhaustion with the seclusion of domestic life. They were weary of solely engaging with their children and husbands and being emotionally and financially reliant on them. These women yearned to break free and immerse themselves in the professional world. It is important to note that these perspectives did not represent the working-class white women who, similar to black women workers, were also fatigued by the dehumanizing nature of their jobs. Many white women's liberationists were saying "we are tired of the isolation of the home, tired of relating only to children and husband, tired of being emotionally and economically dependent; we want to liberate to enter the world of work."(Hooks 134)

But after the 1980s, with the rise of third-wave feminism, women's perception of their biological differences has changed. Instead of viewing their physiological structure as inferior to men's, women now see it as a source of power. They recognize that being a mother is not only a role of nurturing and caring, but also an integral part of their identity as women.

The struggle now lies in making others understand and appreciate the importance of women as providers of nurturing and shelter, which are essential for the formation of a happy family. However, women today do not

want to be confined to the role of a "full-time mother." They believe in having the choice to be a mother according to their own desires and aspirations.

Betty Friedan supports this perspective when she writes:

The point is that equality, the rights for which women have been fighting for over a century, is necessary for women to affirm their own personhood and have the fullest sense of choice, including the choice of motherhood. The movement towards equality and the recognition of women's personhood cannot be considered complete until motherhood becomes a fully free choice. ( Friedon 234)

This new perspective does not advocate for equality in inequality, but rather emphasizes the value and preservation of the unique qualities that differentiate women from men. Motherhood and the act of nurturing are inherent to women, and it is this power that allows them to establish their identity as mothers, granting them, "power in the family, over children, over sexuality and home." (Hooks 134)

In Manju Kapur's novel "Custody," the portrayal of women revolves around the concept of motherhood. The story revolves around two central female characters, Shagun and Ishita. Shagun sees her role as a mother as a personal choice, one that she fights to maintain until the very end. On the other hand, Ishita is forced into motherhood due to circumstances, and despite her struggles, she fails to fully satisfy this role. However, as a stepmother, she strives to uphold the identity of a mother.

Shagun's battle with her husband Raman for the custody of their two children, Arjun and Roohi, clearly demonstrates her determination to preserve her identity as a mother. She goes to great lengths to gain possession of her children, even while being involved with her lover, Ashok. Shagun's unwavering dedication to her children is evident throughout the story.

To enhance the professionalism and readability of this writing, we can make a few improvements: In Manju Kapur's novel "Custody," the portrayal of women revolves around the central theme of motherhood. The story focuses on two key female characters, Shagun and Ishita. Shagun views her role as a mother as a personal choice, one that she fiercely fights to maintain until the very end. In contrast, Ishita is thrust into motherhood by circumstances, and despite her struggles, she falls short of fulfilling this role. However, as a stepmother, she endeavours to embrace the identity of a mother.

Shagun's relentless battle with her husband Raman for the custody of their two children, Arjun and Roohi, serves as a poignant illustration of her unwavering determination to preserve her identity as a mother. She goes to great lengths to secure possession of her children, even while entangled in a romantic relationship with her lover, Ashok. Shagun's unwavering dedication to her children remains steadfast,

Against the word 'children' she had no defence. Drearly she thought yes, what about children? She couldn't leave them; she didn't see how she could take them. Ashok had a transferrable job: even if he got an extension, he would eventually go, and she, she would have to stay. (Kapoor 79-80)

She never considers leaving her children. She makes a quick decision to divorce her husband, but soon realizes that life without him is unacceptable. She continues to fight for custody of her son, Arjun, refusing to lose hope. However, her husband, Raman, wins custody of their daughter, Roohi, with the help of Ishita. Unlike a traditional mother, she does not want to be seen as just a producer of children with the father as the protector. When she is denied visitation rights, her heart aches as she feels helpless in claiming her own children, whom she gave birth to. She expresses her pain to Raman, saying, "Don't make this harder. I have left you the best part of our marriage. Surely my freedom is not too much to ask for in return" (p. 114).

Although she gives custody of the children to marry Ashok, she eagerly awaits the opportunity to see her children again, showing her love for them and her desire to maintain her identity as their mother. She continues to visit her children, exercising her visitation rights, even with her new husband, Ashok. This demonstrates her loyalty and love for her children. When she is denied the chance to visit Roohi, she becomes impatient. She knows that the medical certificates were fake, as Raman pretended Roohi was ill due to Ishita's love for her. She had done the same when she prevented Raman from visiting Roohi and Arjun. This selfish act may stem from

her fear of losing her children, as traditionally, fathers are given custody. As Mrs. Kaushik, Raman's mother, says, "And you will see them. God will not allow a father and his children to be separated" ( Kapoor 122).

She fights hard to challenge the stereotype of a mother solely as a child producer and the father as the protector. After about five years, she files another custody case and ultimately:

Oh, how far from the truth. At that moment Isitha thought it easier to commit suicide than to live. From the day of her wedding she thought of this family as hers; revelling in the togetherness, sharing and companionship. Now instead of love all around her, there would be rejection. ( Kapoor 64)

She undergoes all medical treatments for IVF in the hope of fulfilling her desire to become a mother. In addition, she accompanies her mother to visit an astrologer and reluctantly wears a stone, despite her lack of faith in it. However, all her efforts prove futile. She finds herself increasingly ignored by her husband and criticized by her mother-in-law, who labels her as a "shameless woman." She despises her own body, as it has become incapable of conceiving and fulfilling the essential role of motherhood.

Head buried in her pillow, she thought of the body that ha known so much love, and then so much punishment. Stubbornly it had remained barren despite the money spent, the hormones, the injections, the painful procedures. She could not conceive, whereupon SK had decided he could not love her. (Kapoor 127)

She is divorced and living a painful life. Her parents are pressuring her to remarry, causing her to feel torn between their expectations and her own desire for a fresh start. She meets the boy her mother has chosen for her, but her enthusiasm has vanished. To occupy herself, she becomes involved with Mrs. Hingorani in an NGO. Surrounded by slum children, she finds a sense of satisfaction. A motherly instinct awakens within her, making her indispensable to those children and later to Roohi. She yearns to have Roohi as her own and fulfil her longing for motherhood, despite her inability to conceive. She agrees to become Roohi's stepmother by marrying Raman. Is it her love for a child and the desire to assume the role of a mother that compels her to enter into marriage once again? The answer may be yes, as it is an integral part of her identity to want to be a mother, regardless of the obstacles her body presents. Her inclination towards adoption is also a manifestation of her instinctual longing for the identity of a mother, which has now become a conscious choice. The joy she experiences when Raman gains custody of Roohi allows her to momentarily forget the sorrows, she has endured due to her inability to conceive.

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