

‘Motherhood is romanticised and idealised as the supreme physical and emotional achievement in woman’s lives...but when women become mothers ...they find that everyday tasks of mothering are socially devalued’ (Phoenix, 1991:13). Examine the contradictions in the ideologies and experiences of motherhood.

Motherhood is defined to women by society even if they do not become mothers; it is the way society view women. However, Motherhood is also very important to women over the world. ”For example, in 1994 there were 6.7 million women with children under 16 in the UK: that is, 29 per cent of all women” (Robinson and Richardson, 1997:375).

Majority of women are mothers despite the fact that the number of women who are not mothers has gone up. Conversely, there is a problem of what societies expect women to do and what women do. Although the relationship of motherhood and womanhood seems to be shifting in the contemporary society it still remains complicated and opposing each other. Some women are choosing not to be mother and are therefore, rejecting society’s expectations of them.

Although the core identity of women is motherhood there are also other factors that are also important to women’s lives and it is not only motherhood so therefore, not all women want to be mothers. In patriarchal society motherhood has a powerful position and it is only given to women so therefore, they are all expected to be mothers and to be good at it. However, some find motherhood difficult and stressful, as it is a challenge and it can be pleasurable at the same time. So being a mother can be empowering for women but at the same time be disempowering for them as it may mean having to be relying on the state or somebody else to support them as well as affecting their personal life style (Robinson and Richardson, 1997:376)

In the day to day experiences of women as mothers it can be seen that motherhood is like a social institution which includes specific guidelines and duties and motherhood is thought of as powerful but in actual fact this power is restricted as it is patriarchy which rules. However, psychologists argue that mothers have power of their children because of their unique relationship between them and the children but this argument

is challenged by patriarchy as it is the power held by the legal system over them by men.

Motherhood is devalued because often when problems occurs in the family with the children they are blamed this is because it is expected of them to be perfect. 'Mother blaming occurs on a number of levels, from individuals attributions to mothers as the cause of psychological insecurities, to the portrayal of the cold ,rejecting ,neurotic or inadequate mother in popular culture' (Robinsons and Richardson 1997:377)

Furthermore in motherhood there is also racism. For example the experiences of white motherhood is different to that of a black mother because of racism. So a black woman would not only suffer from racism but she may also suffer from sexism.

Roberts (1995) argues that: "racism is patriarchal. Patriarchy is racist" and "racism and patriarchy interact in the social constructions of motherhood" (Rogers, 1998:308). Moreover, Adrienne Rich describes the experiences of motherhood as the relationships between the mother and child as well as noting that motherhood is a political institution and an identity that is forced upon them.

The experiences of motherhood between a black mother and a white mother could be different in the sense that a black teenager who is not married is seen as a deviant by society: "Unwed black teenager, for example, may experience motherhood as rare source of self-affirmation, while society deems her motherhood to be illegitimate and deviant" (Rogers, 1998:308).

Since motherhood is a social construction, so too is the view of when women should become mothers. For example, if a woman chooses to have children in her forties then society views her as being too old, however, when a young woman for instance, a teenager chooses to become a mother she is seen as a problem because she is considered too young. However, the question should be who decides when a woman should become a mother. Many teenage mothers do not see themselves as too young to become mothers. Some state that the reason teenagers become mothers are so they could obtain a good house from the authorities although this claim lacks much evidence. Here it could be seen that young mothers are a devalued group: "young women are in a devalued group of mother" (Phoenix 1991:100)

Furthermore, the experience of mothering may differ, some may find mothering unbearable and meddling despite patriarchal believe which labels it as a female's natural profession. However, on the other hand some may feel that motherhood gives them meaning to life and find enjoyment in it despite the fact that some feminist argue that it is oppressive. Therefore, although mothers may share similar experiences there are some that they do not which is due to race for instance a pain that a white mother could not share with a black mother is that of bringing up a black child in a environment that is racist.

The social construction of society expects women to be mothers and strain is put on them furthermore, in a patriarchal society this is almost compulsory although it is made difficult by racism. In modern societies the childbearing of white mothers are more valued than black or other ethnic minority mothers and they are not encouraged from this. For example, in the United States black African Americans are sterilised without their permission:"Similarly French pronatalist policies, which provide financial benefits to women who have children as an inducement to increase the French birth rate, are not denied to black French women, but are really aimed at whit women....some groups of mothers are less valued than others in western societies" (Phoenix 1991:17). These are interventions used by the State to decrease the amount of childbearing to ethnic minorities because they believe that certain groups have too many children.

The case of poverty and single motherhood has its deep roots in racism. The number of poor families looked after by women has increased including all races but this number is greatly higher in the number of black families, which is headed by women. The history of single black motherhood could be traced back to slavery where the slave owners would separate husbands from their wives and children. Therefore, even until now the myth of black matriarch exists.

The way motherhood ought to be is socially constructed as well as being contradictory, and patriarchy uses so called 'scientific knowledge' to use this and therefore not allowing women as mothers to have the power to make the alteration in the present structures. The methods, which are used to control the position of motherhood, are combination of social and psychological. In the modern society

certain 'scientific' or expert psychological knowledge is used to identify what makes good mothering and some are given precedence above others. These theorists views who are mostly men and powerful is used as expectable truth to give explanation. Therefore it is created here what makes up good mothering by patriarchy using the views of popular scientist to meet their needs. One form of this knowledge is that which surrounds medical discourses. For instance, clinicians describe the post-natal experiences of women in this way if they feel fine after then they are good mothers however, if they feel stressed or unhappy then they are not well, this they defined as post-natal depression. In addition post natal depression has been differentiated from other types of depression due to childbirth: "the concept 'postnatal depression' potentially represents a means of positioning women as potentially vulnerable solely as a consequences of female biology" (Robinson and Richardson, 1997:379). The medical concept of postnatal depression has been challenged by social sciences who argue that this may occur due to the mother having further responsibilities which may make her stressed: "postnatal depression as a realistic response to the tasks surrounding motherhood". (Robinson and Richardson, 1997:380)

The mother also being the centre of the blame when something has gone wrong within the family could be seen when sexual abuse takes place within the family. Often the mother is the first to be blamed because society expects her to know when something like this is taking place and called a mother's instinct, although this is socially constructed, this myth is also used to identify mothers as failures in cases of child abuse: "the notion of the maternal instinct underpins the contemporary construction of motherhood. It underlies notions of femininity and required maternal behaviour, and its 'absence is used to explain women's maternal 'failures', such as not protecting children from child abuse" (Robinson and Richardson 1997:383). There is also a contradiction in how much of childrearing is private business because often the state legally becomes involved in abuse or neglect of children: "this contradiction is, however, illusory rather than real. State institutions in their attempt to oversee how children are reared, intervene in the privacy of families, making mothers the targets of surveillance" (Phoenix 1991:15).

Mothering has also caused some problems for feminist for instance, in 1960s and 1970s feminist knew undoubtedly what they wanted which was equal rights for

women as well as more independence for women however, the main obstruction was motherhood. they claimed that the reason why subordination existed was due to childbearing and in order to obtain equality then motherhood needed to be decreased a bit if not at all of it. Feminist during this period took motherhood as the key to women's independence. Feminist had to then move from their vocal point of their argument which rested on the experience of the child to the experience of the mother; they argued that mothers also had needs which allowed them to examine the psychological approaches of child development. This gave them the opportunity to show how child development and psychological approaches oppress women by not taking into contemplation the needs of the mother. However, second wave feminism were challenged by radical feminist thought, which had come about then. They questioned if all this was a male construct: "questions were raised as to whether the pursuit of autonomy by women reinforced the traditional male values associated with possessive individualism at the expense of the values of nurturance and connectedness associated with mothering". (Everingham, 1994:1). However, despite the fact that even now there are differences of opinion between feminist writers about the nature of motherhood many do take into consideration to an extent the views of radical feminism.

although liberal feminist have long been campaigning for women to go out to work in order to be liberated from the private sphere however, many now after working outside of the home in contrast feel not liberated but oppressed because they now not only have to work but they also have to manage the family too. In addition, for those who choose the option to stay at home to bring up their children many of them begrudge the insinuation that this is not identified a proper work. Maureen Freely who is a writer and journalist has gone as far as saying: "that feminism had failed mothers by devaluing motherhood and treating children simply as an obstacle to fulfilment" (Bryson, 1999: 126).

Motherhood is a social construction and it seems that not only is motherhood devalued by society but also certain groups within the society are more devalued than others for example, teenage mothers and ethnic minorities. Finally feminist thought is also criticised by some, for example, Freely who suggests that feminism also devalues motherhood.

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