

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF ‘MOTHERHOOD’

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INTRODUCTION

As the times change, so does feminism. It is of common knowledge that the goals and objectives have changed over the years to reflect the dynamic nature of society. Feminists have succeeded in some ways with women now enjoying more of a role in the political and social sphere, but certain stereotypes and generalisations seem to persist regardless.

But even with the so-called progressiveness that has permeated into society over the years, a problem that exists within feminism as a pertinent movement is its fragmentation. Excessive fragmentation, at that. Now, while you may hear how this fragmentation helps the faction of women who are continually subjugated and shunned by society regardless of how women are perceived on the whole, that doesn't necessarily hold true.

The scope of the movement has become so vast that we now have sub-groups within the movement fighting amongst themselves. This is seen in areas such as the feminist porn movement, where the two respective groups of feminists for and against the aforementioned subject matter are constantly at each other's throats. Those critical of pornography argue that the way sex is portrayed in the sex industry depict women as being subservient to male desires and impulses, and no more than a tool for these men to achieve climax. This in turn leads to a situation where men begin to believe that they can sexually do with women as they please (leading to a rape culture amongst other atrocities).

On the other hand, we have feminists who believe that pornography can be a form of feminist expression which leads to a woman understanding their sexual desires and, to an extent, a means to 'take control' of it. This leads to a so-called sexual liberation.

Motherhood, rather, the way motherhood has come to almost be another form of gender specific subjugation, is a topic that finds the various feminist groups at an impasse of sorts. We

can trace the instigation of this conversation to some of the more recognizable second-wave feminists, like Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan.

They seemed to think that women's oppression and subjugation bore a strong relation with their role as mothers in the household. Essentially, as an extension of the 'gender roles', they find that since women are almost obligated to raise the children and cater to their primal emotional needs, they can never truly be 'autonomous', as Immanuel Kant put it.

As Nancy Chodorow put it, the sexual division of labour is based on the fact that women are led to believe that it is their duty to possess these so-called maternal instincts, often to the detriment to their participation in the social sphere. In her works, Chodorow says:

"Women's maternal role has a profound effect on women's lives, on ideology about women, on reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality, and on the reproduction of a particular form of labour power. Women find their primary social location within the sphere of social reproduction."

It has been observed that under certain facets of the modern feminist movement, a sort of pressure is being applied on mothers to be able to properly 'mother' their children. This is seen in the breast-feeding movement, which will be touched upon later.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The basis for the aforementioned subjugation can be found in history when we look at how motherhood was commonly construed by women. It was their fundamental mission, their primary focus, their profession to an extent, and was inherently rooted in her nature and psyche. Women were born with a presumed innate desire to mother, and to ensure the holistic and healthy development of their child. The problem really started taking shape when motherhood started being synonymous with femininity. It was seen as beautiful, natural, and even attractive for a woman to possess these traits.

One of the earliest institutions that created a strict dichotomy between the sexes is the Catholic Church in their depictions of certain roles, leading to a situation of subordination. Women were the 'heart' of the two, while men served as the 'brains' (as stated by Catholic Bishop Anton Manič). Men were the rational, socially-aware of the two free from biological complications that regulate the mood like oestrogen and menstrual duress, while women were the overly-

sensitive and credulous kind. While a man could live his life without companionship of this variety, women were thought to be weak and overly reliant on their male companions, starting with their fathers until they are given away to their husbands-to-be.

Marriage was another social construct that sought to regulate her sexuality, and her purity and decency could only be ensured if she were married. Marriage in this regard was created as the sole refuge for these poor souls, where women could be rest assured that they were protected from any potential dangers that the big bad world held out there. Of course, a woman's piece of mind came at a gratuitous cost: she was to submit to her husband's wishes and desires simply because she was ascertained to be the weaker of the two figurative halves. Simone de Beauvoir corroborated these claims in her works.

Shifting back to the modern day and age, we see the repercussions of these institutions, which has engrained itself into the moral compass of women all over. It manifests itself in an instinct that all mothers apparently possess. Nancy Chodrow sheds some light on the biological aspects of these behavioural patterns, noting:

“This assumption holds that what seems universal is instinctual, and what is instinctual, or has instinctual components, is inevitable and unchanging.”

The harsh reality is that, even with the progressive developments of the societal perceptions of women, mothering is their only reality. Breast-feeding and child rearing is all they seem to be earmarked for. This could serve as a nice segue into the maternity leave debate as well, but that could end up being too vast a deviation.

Most of the faults attributed to patriarchy and its psychological impact on women come to the forefront at this point though, while affecting her physically as well. They are now deemed to be emotionally inferior, physiologically and physically weaker, and as mentioned before, overly reliant on their male overlords for protection. Not to mention intellectually at a lower level to an extent.

Her only escape or retribution in this regard was her reproductive prowess. Sadly, this reinstated the dominant position of men again by propagating patriarchal ownership. As we know, marriage was essentially set up to determine property and inheritance rights, and therefore by regulating the sexuality of the woman, the father of the child never had to be

draped in doubt. The identification was of utmost importance, and therefore the sanctity of the womb had to be preserved.

This belief almost dehumanizes women to the extent that there lacks any meaningful differentiation between them and any other organisms that partake in reproduction, such as a plant. A seed is planted in her by a man, and with enough care and nurture, a child emerges from her. And since this stems from the predominantly patriarchal presuppositions, these children were also the man's property since they emerged from his seed. While it can be argued that these seeds are quite useless on their own and without the body to nurture them in, the body in this context was only a medium by which it could take shape.

This is furthered in that regard with also presupposes that desirable mental and physical characteristics are passed down from father to son, while undesirable traits were brushed away without giving it a second thought. Since the preservation of our species is the duty of man, this was also glorified and venerated to the point that man seemed like a hero for procreating to his heart's content. Mankind had to be preserved, after all.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The modern feminist movement serves as a vehicle for the subjugated among the subjugated to voice their concerns. The Black Feminist movement, the Lesbian Feminist movement, and so on have furthered the agenda of feminism to the extent that, as mentioned earlier, the movement finds itself in a bit of a limbo on how to move beyond their current status quo.

Sure, you have your incessant demonstrations scattered around the world that we hear about from time to time, like the protest by women of the United States after Trump got elected president. But these are becoming few and far between, with feminists constantly failing to recognize the need of the hour.

This can be especially seen in the onset of the breast-feeding movement that was mentioned earlier. The proponents of this movement have recognized themselves as feminists, which is completely justified given the incessant fragmentation. They claim that it is the duty of a mother to breastfeed her child, adding on to the patriarchal beliefs of old. They cite questionable medical statistical data to back up their claims, stating that children are healthier and less likely to develop diseases if they are breastfed.

There are some pretty glaring issues with these claims. Firstly, it once again completely undermines a woman's autonomy, the autonomy they had been working towards for the better part of the last two centuries. Secondly, it undermines a generation of women that have become the modern working class by tying them down and forcing them to inculcate within themselves these apparently essential maternal impulses. Also, it leads to a situation where a woman may begin to question her competency as a mother.

Radical feminists often used males as their barometer for equality, which is why their methods were often put under severe scrutiny. Given the evolution of women in the last 80 years or so, with the increase in the number of single, working mothers, there is an air of independence that a woman has acquired.

Given how anti-motherhood some of the second wave feminists were, this marks a pretty drastic shift. Instead of finding a fine balance between the two, being a mother and being a woman are once again being used interchangeably.

With technological developments making surrogacy a pertinent area of discussion, this is once again an important part of modern feminist discourse. Are they going to impose obligations on women?

Has feminism come full circle to the point where they are the ones imposing standards on themselves instead of their patriarchal brethren? It certainly appears to be so. Maternity leave was also something that the aforementioned feminist argued against, claiming that it somehow reinstates female inferiority. Now, we have feminists telling women that they have to give in to gender roles, which they so vehemently opposed.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the concept of motherhood was looked into. It was essentially propaganda; which sought to subjugate women and make them fall further under the patriarchal spell. Feminists retaliated and asked for autonomy, freedom from this age-old oppression. Now they find themselves in a bit of a conundrum, without any clear way out of it.

The movement has reached a stage where the fight is not against societal sub-structures anymore and conflict now lies between the various factions of feminists claiming that their issue is the more pertinent one.

The historical background was explored to further shed light on the current scenario and instead of finding useful juxtapositions, we find a similar path being tread once again. Feminists fundamentally fail to agree with one another, when the earlier feminist movements had a clear goal in mind. Gradually, with the struggles of those women finally bearing fruit today, the ever expanding impasse seems to undermine the movement from a neutral perspective.

As touched upon earlier, the entire construct of motherhood was a means by which men could control her sexuality and reproduction to ensure the child was a legitimate heir or heiress. This has obviously had so profound an impact on the female mind that she feels the need to strengthen these misconceptions and create a farce of a subset of the feminist movement in the push for mandatory breastfeeding.

These ideologies are so deeply ingrained that it has carried forward to various fields of study, such as science. This is also prevalent in the field of medicine, where the power to explore the human body exists.

Thus, the effects of all that has been discussed above can be summed up by looking at two key effects that these ingrained ideologies have had on women. First, you have the voluntary motherhood paradigm, where women know that they have the choice of not being involved in their child's life as much as her ancestors used to, but does so anyway for the sheer love of parenting (this could also be an effect of a false sense of freedom, but that is beyond the scope of this paper). This paradigm also allows them to not have children at all if they do not think that they are fit to do so (Again, the stipulated standard of being an ideal parent is highly arbitrary).

On the other hand, you have the women who feel the need to have children as they were biologically designed to do so, and then follow arbitrary ideals given to her by her peers to be a good parent, failing which she is made to feel incompetent. Fathers have historically been absent in the emotional development of their children, having almost been encouraged to be emotionally distant. If women are the designated emotional support for their children, this places further pressure on them to be mothers, again failing to celebrate their gradual rise to a relative position of autonomy.

Until the feminist movement fails to prioritize their need of the hour, they will continue to find scapegoats to blame for their lack of progress.

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