Motherhood- A Social Construction

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Abstract: Motherhood is a social construction--the phrase refers to the fact that a woman becomes mother not just by giving birth to a child but because society grants her the status of a mother. Motherhood is a status which adheres to the social norms and expectations of a society. It is a normative status that a woman achieves after childbirth. The importance of progeny and the continuation of human generations to uphold in the society are manifested in motherhood. Analyzing the status of mothers in society we realize that attainment of motherhood is not merely biological. Had it been so, the status of mothers would have faded after the functional aspect of childbearing would have been complete. In fact a woman begins the new phase of motherhood in her life as she rears the child. Any society lays down some normative expectations from its members and in an ideal society such expectations are fulfilled by its members. Motherhood is such an expectation. Societal expectations are properly channelized through socialization. It is therefore normal for a woman to seek motherhood as a normal course of life. Any woman who is a conformist looks forward to get married and achieve the status of motherhood. She aspires for this status not only for individual gratification but also, very importantly by conforming to the micro level of personal aspiration, emotion and psychological adjustment is related to childbearing. Society continues to emphasize the importance of motherhood as a major female role. Thus childlessness faced by the individual becomes a Public Stigma. Society at large considers the woman who is unable to bear a child as abnormal, deviant and thereby suffer from spoiled identity. The body is a site of enormous symbolic work and symbolic production. Its deformities are stigmatizing. While at the same time its perfections, culturally defined are objects of praise and admiration’ (Erving Goffman,1963). In this context, motherhood is highly praised and admired while childless woman faces the stigma nurtured in society. The ideology of compulsory motherhood leads to structural stigma and legitimates childbearing as the main task for women.

Introduction:

Motherhood is an idealized status given to a woman from time immemorial. A woman becomes a mother not only by the biological act of delivering a child but also, very importantly by conforming to the expected role assigned by the society. Mothering may be viewed medically as giving birth to a newborn baby nurtured in the womb but sociologically it refers to an expression of culture and embodies a value system to what society assigns to a woman. The pronatalist ideology encourages reproduction and salutes motherhood.

The Social Conceptualization of Motherhood

Pronatalism refers to the ideology that implies encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family and social well-being.(De Sandre 1978:145) Pronatalism can be seen as operating in three levels: cultural-when childbearing and motherhood are perceived as "natural" and central to woman's identity; Ideological- when motherhood becomes patriotic, ethnic and eugenic obligation; psychological-when childbearing is identified with the micro level of personal aspiration, emotion and rational or irrational decision made by woman. Due to normative pronatalist ideology and discourses, woman, who do not have children challenge dominant social norms and rules (Carey, Graham& Shelley, 2009).

Social norm of reproducing after marriage have played a fundamental role in stigmatization of people. The negative impact of childlessness is related to the pronatalist view of marriage is prevalent in all societies. Endorsement of fertility norms of having and wanting children is a concept across the globe overcoming the barriers of age, sex, religion ethnic and social identity. Commitment to parenthood considers children as a blessing and barrenness as a punishment. Women's sexual and psychological adjustment is related to childbearing. Society continues to emphasize the importance of motherhood as a major female role. Thus childlessness faced by the individual becomes a Public Stigma. Society at large considers the woman who is unable to bear a child as abnormal, deviant and thereby suffer from spoiled identity. The body is a site of enormous symbolic work and symbolic production. Its deformities are stigmatizing. While at the same time its perfections, culturally defined are objects of praise and admiration’ (Erving Goffman,1963). In this context, motherhood is highly praised and admired while childless woman faces the stigma nurtured in society. The ideology of compulsory motherhood leads to structural stigma and legitimates childbearing as the main task for women.

Women who are unable to become mothers and thereby gain an ideal status of women are subjected to many social responses negative to the individual's wellness. Repeated responses to the childless woman develop in her the feeling of guilt, shame and self-blame. Remaining childless after marriage challenges strong cultural beliefs about the "ordinary and natural" life for Indian women. Woman's life revolves around the expectation of conceiving, bearing and rearin children. When a woman fails to meet the expected role, she develops self-stigma as she takes the responsibility of childlessness on herself. This stigma can be detrimental for the
psychological wellbeing of an individual when they are negatively treated by society at large. Howard S Becker (1928) claimed - deviant behavior is understood as a product of a generic learning process in which people gradually redefine their conception of the normal. What is deviant, Becker argued, is what powerful social groups call deviant; deviance does not in here in behaviors themselves, but is a product of a labeling process in which some activities are called "inappropriate", "sinful", "unlawful", or "sick". (Outsiders, Becker, 1973)

A woman's psyche is framed into the socially sanctioned and culturally coded norms that epitomizes motherhood. From the inception of womanhood, she frames her mind along with her body - to her destined role of motherhood. A woman is socialized to discipline herself as bearers of tradition, harmony, familial and social honors. Woman's biological destiny as mothers become a cultural vocation for her role as she socializes her children. She devotes her life in service to mankind by becoming a mother. Woman's capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it are strongly internalized and psychologically enforced which develops into a feminine psychic structure. This concept moulds the behavior of mothers. Social motivation for the increase of female fertility was thoroughly assimilated, imbibed and unconsciously internalized by women. Susan Shott, refers to the "construction of emotion by the actor"- a process that is "greatly influenced by situational definitions and social norms" (Shott, 1979:1318). The self- The mother is fundamentally sociological, and not biological. The interaction of the "I" and "Me" gives birth to the notion of self. The "I" is the response of an individual in a total fashion to a variety of attitudes of others; and the "me" is the organized attitude of others. The self is thus the complex union through interaction, symbol and gesture of the I and the Me (Strauss, 1964). In this view we find that woman attain their emotional state of becoming a mother not by the 'self' within her but greatly by the surrounding emotions that creates a social self in her, viewing her social existence in the context of the situations around her.

In any social institution, norms and values only when actors have a complete grasp of their own actions; an understanding and awareness of what they do. Actions are typically joint actions and it requires understandings, expectations and actions of others. Andrew Sayer's in his volume The Moral Significance of Class(2005) adds another aspect to the conception of the social actor, where he shows how powerful emotions and mixed feelings, such as 'envy, pride, resentment, anger and in extreme situations as a consequence-consternation' can be; arguing that they 'are not to be counter posed to reason but are evaluative judgments about circumstances beyond peoples control which are likely to affect their wellbeing and their commitments' (Sayer 2005:133).

Women in her value commitment sort out her various concerns, one of it being the attainment of motherhood. Relating to such commitments, there are some social factors that frames the woman's mind in becoming a mother. The needs may be briefly dealt:

- Achievement of adult status and social identity.
- Expansion of self to a larger entity and the achievement of immortality.
- Moral reasons like the opportunity for self sacrifice
- Emotional security of the family
- Stimulation and fun derived from children
- Opportunities for creativity, accomplishment and competence
- Opportunity for power and influence over children.
- Social comparison and competition in them as visible signs of prestige and potence (Hoffman and Hoffman 1973).

Women who are idealized as mothers are more conformist than their husbands. Society upholds mothers and women in general feel incomplete if they fail to become mothers. Eagly and Wendy Wood (1985) studied gender difference in terms of conformity to norms which may be due to product of a social role that men and women have to play in society. In everyday life, men occupy dominant position in terms of status and power and naturally women occupy the subservient position. This result in a relationship where men exert influence and woman accept influence. Thus we find that conformity to norms of society by women are more than men folk. Women being socially more sensitive and empathetic respond to environmental norms and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, even though childlessness is a shared feeling of the couple it is the women who are more influenced by the social values of motherhood.

Women are mothers in a social context. When a woman goes through the experience of having children, she enters into a new experience of developing a self image in the midst of others in a society. She enrols herself in the community of women who are mothers and shares with them values and cultures of a mother. For women, in general, bearing and rearing of children is extremely gratifying. In other words children give woman a social status which could not be achieved otherwise. Women who are socialized to become mothers from a very young age, find their achievement in life by becoming mothers. It is also noticed that women who fail to produce children, feel less in their identity. Society holds them responsible with the sanctified role of mothering a child. Attainment of motherhood is valued by women as a way of conforming to the value system that society upholds.
Mothering involves caring and nurturing children which is considered to be rooted in the genetic makeup of women. Women being the primary caretakers of children develop a natural emotional bond with their children. The emotion of a mother gets tied to the biological capacity of the woman to conceive and give birth to a child. This creates in the mind of a woman an achievement of becoming a biological mother. Bearing a child gives a sense of personal achievement of having physically produced a child. The woman develops in her a sense of pride and achievement in nurturing the children after giving birth to a child.

Although the bodies of both men and women change as they progress through life course, women's career are perceived as more intimately tied to their biology and reproductive cycles than are men's. Men are perceived as the universal rational beings and are defined in relation to their performance and action in labor market and public life, their reproductive functions and bodies are seldom referred to and are seen as unproblematic. Woman's bodies and reproductive functions on the other hand, are constantly discussed and seen in some ways determining their lives (Ussher, 1989).

Thus a woman finds herself best recognized in her social role of mothers and tries to gain her status as against the men by claiming their exclusive right of giving birth to children. The body of the woman and her biological capacity to become a mother acts as a vehicle for self performances in representing the self in social gathering. The woman gets her identity in society by her bodily function of satisfying male sexual demands and reproduction followed by the natural corollary - bearing and rearing of children. We may thus conclude that the woman’s body is a space where culturally coded norms are inscribed. A woman's body needs to perform the socially sanctioned norm of procreation and the woman's body is made to fit to the social requirement of producing children. Motherhood is inextricably tied to the perception of femininity. Therefore when a woman is struck by infertility, she develops in her a sense of failure-she starts to feel that her body has failed her and that she is incapable of performing what others are successful in doing. This leads to a devastating effect on self esteem. The cultural code of passing down tradition from one generation to another is manifested in motherhood since mothers hand over tradition from one gener...

Motherhood as a social construct has been explained from various theoretical perspectives. Talcott Parsons showed how values (actor's ideals) and norms (rules of conduct in social interaction) become institutionalized so that the goals of actors are regulated by the same normative standards of conduct. It was a small step from this sustained focus on the place of socialized values and regulative normative standards, both within the agent and within the external terrain, to a creeping sense of them as conditions "over which the actor has no control that is he cannot alter, or prevent from being altered." (Parsons 1949 cited in Hamilton 1985:74)

It is to be noticed that motherhood is a personality developed in a social context. The main component for any personality development is 'need-disposition'. Functionalist's like Parsons and Shils defined need-disposition as the most significant units of the motivations of actions". (Parsons and Shils, 1951:113) They differentiated need dispositions from drives, which are innate tendencies—"physiological energy that makes action possible" (Parsons and Shils, 1951:111). These needs and dispositions are drives when not innate requires process of action- in simple words, need-
dispositions are drives that shaped by a social setting. Thus the attainment of motherhood resulted from a social requirement rather than physiological need. Parson in his study differentiated three basic needs of man - first, need of love and approval; second, man internalizes values by observing cultural standards and third, in role expectations where the actors give and get in return appropriate response. Women in societies are guided by these needs and they discipline themselves to the social norms in order to fulfill the need- dispositions present in society. A woman realizes that by attaining motherhood she gets the love and approval of society and thus internalizes the cultural standards of marriage and childbirth. She attains the status of a mother and she expects appropriate normative responses from others in her social surrounding.

According to the Marxian perspective, in any advanced industrial society the amount of work that a woman does is considered marginal to the total economy. According to the Marxian's, class antagonism was first noticed when it "coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male." (Fredrick Engels, 1884). In Engels view, woman's oppression in society may be due to her physiological weakness. As long as women are confined at home- as wives and mothers and were not allowed to participate in any economically productive work- she would remain an object of oppression by men. Thus in Marxian perspective, women are placed in society as 'mothers' as a way of subordination by men. For many feminist, woman are subordinated and exploited because woman have children. This biological fact of "mothering" enabled men to subordinate women- with women being placed thereby under the protection of men.( Firestone 1974) However there are other feminists who refute this argument. It has been accepted that the centrality to women's lives of having children and rearing them up is an important aspect in a woman's life. Social norms assume that women will get married and have children. As against this, women who choose not to do so are seen as deviant and strange. Some Feminists have pointed out that there can be a distinction drawn between the biological capacity to have children and the social role of motherhood. Marian David (1985: 32) have pointed out that "motherhood is a social concept, fatherhood is barely recognized. To father a child refers only to the act of procreation." Motherhood is a social construct, as caring rearing of children is the chief vocation and primary identity of a woman. Mothering children is a vocation for women across the world- both the orient and the occident. Women are considered as naturally good at and being convinced by it, women derive great emotional satisfaction in caring and rearing of children.

The social location of woman's status is within the boundaries of her family where she achieves her status by procreating children. Family institutionalizes and legitimizes procreation. The cultural code of tradition passes down from one generation to another through children which gets manifested through motherhood. It is the mother’s responsibility to hand over to their children the values of tradition. Children are considered to be a thread to continue the generation and pass on the tradition of the family, carry the nomenclature, uphold the family business and perpetuate family property. Immortality is achieved through children. It is through procreation that a family contributes to the continuity of human race. In an Ideal Indian family, the father and the mother are expected to play specific roles- the 'Instrumental role' which involves the world outside concerned with the economic aspect of society is assigned to the father. The Expressive role is assigned to the mother which focuses on the relationships within the family where the mother is expected to shower love and affection to her children. It is the woman who is responsible to hold the strength of the family and nurture the love within the family. "Matri Devaya Bhava” a common phrase in Hindu philosophy which establishes the position of the mother with a religious tone and places motherhood as a divine status.

Conclusion

Motherhood is thus a social determinant. The social position that a woman gains by becoming a mother is motherhood. It is society that defines the concept of motherhood by the set normative social roles that it assigns to a woman. A woman becomes a mother not only biologically but socially. Even though the act of giving birth is not denied but the status that a woman achieves by becoming a mother is totally framed by society. The intrinsic meaning, the honor that the term holds and the respect that is related to the concept of motherhood is a social product. Thus the concept of motherhood is a social construction.

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