

## EQUALITY IN DIFFERENCE: AN ANALYSIS WITH REFERENCE TO 'MOTHERHOOD'

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### **Abstract**

*Gender discrimination is one of the important topics of Practical Ethics. Any kind of discrimination hinders the growth of society. All human beings deserve equal rights and opportunities irrespective of race, caste, religion, sex. Biological differences of individuals could never be taken as criteria of gender discrimination. Motherhood is considered as glorified aspect of women's life, but this is a patriarchal ploy to keep women in a cage. Now this is the time when we should re-think our traditional theories in order to assure equality to women.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, Discrimination, Equality, Maternal Instinct, Super-ego*

Philosophy introduces new areas of study to discuss social issues from ethical perspective. Any kind of discrimination hinders justice / equity. Differences from any aspect (race, class, sex, religion) should not be taken as the cause of inequality which in turn results inequity or injustice. Here I try to analyse how could we be able to assert equality amidst differences with reference to 'motherhood'.

Motherhood is a significant phase of a woman's life. It is an institution which includes certain responsibilities and duties. It is usually a wonderful experience for most women. But to sustain the uniqueness of motherhood women should not be discriminated by their gender characteristics that are related to motherhood.

There are biological differences between females and males, but the fact that gender roles vary so much between cultures indicate that they cannot be based on or explained away by 'sex' alone. We should remember a simple rule of science-- Variables (gender roles) cannot be explained by Constants (chromosomes, genitalia or sex)<sup>1</sup>. Inequality between women and men are (hu)man-made. Inequality is constructed and can be questioned, challenged and changed. Motherhood of a woman should not be the reason of her subordination, job opportunities, education. To have equal rights, equal opportunities one should not possess identical biological characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> Kamala Bhasin, *Understanding Gender*, 2000, Kali for Women, New Delhi, p.11;

A new born baby is not only classified by sex, but also assigned by gender. The specific process of socialization teaches children their gender roles. Different social mechanisms teach children masculinity and femininity of personality and make them 'internalise' behaviour, attitudes and roles. According to Ruth Hartley, socialization takes place through four processes, namely, 1) manipulation, 2) canalization, 3) verbal appellation, and 4) activity exposure. All these are normally differentiated by sex and all are features of the child's socialization from birth on<sup>2</sup>. 'Manipulation' means the way we handle a child. Boys are treated as strong, autonomous beings right from the beginning. On the other hand, girls are dressed in a feminine fashion to look pretty. These physical experiences of early childhood are very important in shaping the self-perception of girls and boys.

The second process, i.e. 'canalisation' involves directing the attention of male and female children to object or aspects of objects, for example, girls' play-objects are dolls, kitchen-sets and the like, whereas boys are given balls, guns, cars to play. Thus familiarity with certain objects directs the choices of women and men in future.

'Verbal appellations' are also different for girls and boys. For example, girls are told 'how pretty you look' but we often say, "you are looking big and strong" to boys. Research studies show that such remarks construct the self-identity of girls and boys.

Female and male children exposed to traditional feminine, masculine activities from their early childhood. Their process is known as 'activity exposure'. Girls are usually asked to assist their mothers in household chores, but boys are asked to accompany their fathers outside. All these processes contribute in constructing femininity and masculinity which girls /women and boys/men internalize almost unconsciously.

'Motherhood' is regarded as the success of femaleness. It introduces meaning and purpose into the life of women since child-rearing brings power, responsibility, satisfaction and independence. 'Maternal instinct' is taken as natural to women. This instinct is supposed to have two manifestations—1) to bear children, 2) to care for them<sup>3</sup> and by extension to care for others. The traditional view holds that the mindset as well as the social expectations have been guided and determined by the presence of

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<sup>2</sup> Oakley Ann, 1985, *Sex, Gender, and Society*, England Gower Pub Comp.p.174-175;

<sup>3</sup> Paula Nicolson, "Motherhood and Women's Lives" in *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist theory and Practice*, (ed) Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson, The MacMillan Press Ltd, London,1993; p.208;

this biological instinct in women. 'Femininity' can be characterized in the following way—

- a) All women have a biological drive towards conceiving and bearing children,
- b) Nurturing the children
- c) The skills /capacities required to care for infants or children emerge or evolve immediately after the birth without the need for training.

Elisabeth Badinter<sup>4</sup> distinguishes the 'maternal instinct' from 'maternal love'. According to her, maternal love is a human feeling and like other feelings this feeling is also uncertain, fragile and imperfect. Such feelings are not deeply rooted in femaleness. As soon as women experience motherhood, they develop a 'special way' of explaining and perceiving the world. This special way is termed as 'maternal thinking' by Sarah Ruddick<sup>5</sup>. By thinking in this way, women get involved in culturally approved activities which are necessary for nurturing the infants. These activities do not greatly differ from culture to culture and therefore 'maternal love' that generates those activities can be called 'universal, but not 'instinctual'.

A child is considered to be an extension of the mother's body, her 'Self' and therefore the mother becomes the sole care-taker of the baby. Motherhood gives women an agency through which she 'possesses' the child. According to Simone De Beauvoir, a woman can find her independence through the child. A woman considers motherhood as something which justifies her femaleness or gives her a feeling of being a complete woman<sup>6</sup>. Beauvoir says in her book, The Second Sex, women experience pregnancy as an enrichment and also an injury. The foetus is a part of her body which she possesses<sup>7</sup>. This concept of possession becomes greater if the child is a male child. Hence, many women prefer sons, since through the son, the mother can possess the world only if she can possess the son<sup>8</sup>. In a patriarchal society only the male-gendered individuals have an agentic role. Hence, mothers perceive themselves as acquiring 'agentic-role' through sons, even though this 'agency' is indirect and mediated through sons.

Women learns to consider motherhood as the ultimate destiny of her life, thus she feels guilty if she fails to become (biological) mother. Custom, culture and history

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<sup>4</sup> Mother Love: Myth And Reality: motherhood in modern history, 1981;

<sup>5</sup> Maternal Thinking; Philosophy, Politics, Practice (ed. By Andrea O'Reilly), 1982;

<sup>6</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, (translated and edited by H.M Parshley), Jonathan Cape Ltd., Great Britain, 1953; p.501;

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.512;

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.531-32;

influence the perception as well as the experience of a woman in relation to motherhood. Like other social institutions, motherhood also has specific social meanings and in most cases women cannot separate their experiences of motherhood from the special meanings given to it. Women get an agency by being mothers, a function that they could not fulfil through any other socially acceptable role, like daughterhood/sisterhood. Moreover, motherhood enhances the position of women in social as well as familial sphere. Till today, mother of a son gets much importance in most Indian families. The glorification of motherhood could be a ploy to maintain the gender division of patriarchy.

The concept of motherhood has been glorified in India to a great extent. In ancient India, motherhood had a significant position in society although it does not imply that at that time women occupied a high status in society. Hindu scriptures considered the ordinary woman to be sinful, but in religious texts the mother goddesses were regarded as powerful and wrathful. In a real life situation, the 'mother' was expected to be self-sacrificing, heroic, and noble. It seems that as mother's women were glorified, since procreation had been taken as a 'power' of women in early human history. The socio-economic condition of ancient India determined the treatment to women and their role as mothers. As agriculturists they prayed for sons to handover their property (land), and women were meant for producing heirs. In this way women acquired social recognition of 'motherhood'. By 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the Aryans had become an agricultural people and as a result they were very much motivated by agricultural concepts; for example, their view of 'parenthood' was male chauvinistic—they considered woman as a 'field' and man sowed seed in her. Moreover, as the seed and the field belonged to the man in this patriarchal society, so the son belonged to the father.<sup>9</sup> At that time, men considered themselves to be active participants in the matter of production and procreation. Subsequently women were given a subordinate role. From the discriminatory perspective ancient Indian society applied those agricultural concepts to motherhood which established women's passivity in the productive procedure; for example, it was held that women who were considered as equivalent to fields, carried the seed passively and the foetus grew in-itself just as after sowing, the seed grew automatically without any active effort of the field. Here it is to be noted that in conventional biology, which was mainly dominated by male scientists, the '**sperm**' was considered to be the active factor for pregnancy but in recent days, as women start researching on this issue, they have come to know about the equally active

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<sup>9</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India*, Basumati Corporation Ltd., Calcutta, January, 1994; p.28;

role played by the ‘egg’ in pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> It seems that in order to control women’s reproductive labour and sexuality, men try to devalue women as inferior in every respect, procreation and birthing being no exception. Women had no freedom to choose their pregnancy and their role had been considered as ‘passive’ since the role of ‘egg’ had been devalued in the context of pregnancy. At the same time a mother was blamed for delayed pregnancy or any abnormal syndrome of the child. It means, the attitude of society towards women was oppressive.

Various rituals were performed in ancient India for the welfare of children and their fathers. Some of these rituals are still observed, namely ‘*Shasthi-Puja*’ (for the welfare of children), ‘*Korwa-Chawth*’ (for the welfare of husbands), etc. Besides there are other kinds of rituals, such as ‘*Sādh*’ (offering favourite dishes to a pregnant woman) to celebrate the occasion of pregnancy. Moreover, if the pregnancy is delayed, women have to carry out different vows for conception. If women fail to conceive or to deliver normally then the whole blame is directed towards them; for example, in recent days, the movie, ‘*Paromitar Ekdin*’ (A day of Paromita), directed by Aparna Sen (released in 1999) portrays the character of Paromita’s husband who throws all the blame on Paromita for their spastic child, although his own sister is mentally retarded.

Ancient Indians being agriculturists very well knew that a dead seed can never produce crops in a fully fertile field; but their treatment towards the female sex did not correspond to their agricultural concepts. An impotent husband was never stigmatised, rather his wife was stigmatised as ‘barren’. The problem in the ‘sperm’ could hamper pregnancy of a woman. But their agricultural concept was not applied in the case of child-birth. Consequently, women had to carry all stigmas which indicated the discriminatory attitude of the society. Not only ordinary people, Hindu scriptures also expressed discrimination between men and women; for example, Manu said (Manusamhitā IX:35), “of the seed and the womb, the seed is superior. All creatures of life assume the qualities of the seed.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he opined (Manusamhitā IX:26), that women were created for the purpose of giving birth and for this they were worshipped.<sup>12</sup> Women were treated as the mediums to produce legitimate heirs to the family; so motherhood had been considered as successful only with the birth of a male child.

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<sup>10</sup> V. Geetha, (Series editor Maithreyi Krishnaraj), *Theorizing Feminism: Gender*, Stree Pub., Calcutta 2002; p.18;

<sup>11</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India*, Basumati Corporation Ltd., Calcutta, January, 1994, p.28;

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.28-29;

The glorification of motherhood does not signify the enhanced status of women in the patriarchal society; for example, a single mother in spite of being a mother does not get any respect rather she is stigmatised in society. She has to face hurdles in course of upbringing the child. Glorification is a patriarchal ploy to cover-up the exploitation of the society towards women, otherwise 'motherhood' obtains equal respect irrespective of the status of women in the society. In ancient India, children were controlled, supervised and trained by the father. The decisions regarding the education of children were guided by patriarchal values under the supervision of the father. Without attributing any role to mothers for instilling values in the life of their children, the concept of 'motherhood' had been glorified to a great extent in order to make women susceptible to exploitation. Even in present-day, fatherhood has both a familial as well as a social status; for example, most of the official application forms in India require the name of the father of the applicant to be stated. In most families, fathers get preference in comparison to mothers. Till today it is a common practice to mention father's name as the guardian of a child, no matter whether the father fulfils his responsibilities or not. Thus, glorification of motherhood does not assure equal treatment to women.

According to scriptures, (Aitareya Brāhmaṇa III:24:27, Āpastamba Dharmasutra 1:10:51-53), a good woman was "one who pleases her husband, gives birth to male children and never talks back to her husband"<sup>13</sup>. So the life of a woman become successful only with the birth of a male child and she had no separate entity as a social being or an intelligent individual who could have her own desires, emotions besides being the mother of a (male) child. Even women themselves considered motherhood as the ultimate end of their lives, and condemned barrenness. Women themselves perceived motherhood as their 'power' because in a polygamic family a mother enjoyed more privileges than a barren woman. In order to perform motherly duties women became imprisoned within the house which made them completely dependent on men for their livelihood.

If we look back to history, it is found that in the ancient period there was no division of work for men and women. History tells us that in pre-agricultural period women took part in expeditions. The Ṛgveda states that women in the Vedic Age (the period between Ṛgveda and Vedāngasutras) fought in the battle field; for example, Mudgalini won a battle (RVX;102:2). The early Vedic family was the patriarchal type, although patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. From 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. girls were given education. A change occurred in the socio-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.531-32;

economic and political life of Vedic people--Instead of remaining as nomadic people, they began their agricultural life. Consequently men liked to handover the property which they acquired from agriculture to their legitimate heirs. Due to this, wives were forbidden to meet other unrelated males, to ensure that a wife could not cohabit with any male other than her husband. In this way they were imprisoned within the house and completely dependent on their husbands for their livelihood. Slowly and steadily household chores became the primary duty of women, but their labour was not considered as 'productive' in the economic sense, rather it was taken as reproductive and supportive<sup>14</sup>. Such a division of work between men and women ultimately paved the way for the suppression of women under patriarchy. It is known from scriptures that women had no control over her sexuality. The tragedy of 'motherhood' in ancient India was the compulsion which was imposed on women without paying any interest to their will.<sup>15</sup> Even in recent days women have very little control over their bodies and reproduction—the vast instances of marital rape establish this point. Although contraceptives technology helped women to distance sexual love from marriage and motherhood, still mainly men take decisions regarding the number of children to be had. The Indian family reserves the authority to control woman's reproductive labour. Separating reproduction and sexuality is a rare phenomenon among Indian women. Most of the cases women don't have any freedom of taking decisions regarding the number of children to have. Sometimes women are deprived of motherhood as they are forced by men to go through abortion. It becomes clear that women are treated as 'objects', not as 'subjects' even in the context of 'motherhood'.

If we look back to history it is found that at the time of the freedom movement in India the nation was symbolised as 'mother'. This tribute to the nation as the 'mother' did not imply the referred condition of women in society at that time, since such honour could not free women from the oppression under the patriarchal system. At that time our Nation was worshipped as our 'mother', but this could not change the treatment of society towards women.

The oppressive status of women was reflected in the literature, for example, the novel "*Yogayog*" written by Rabindranath Tagore (published in 1929) depicted a character named Kumudini who became pregnant through marital rape, but she did not accept her motherhood as a bliss, rather she said: "**liberation of oneself in the true sense of the term cannot be neglected at any cost even for the sake of a child**"

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<sup>14</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India*, Basumati Corporation Ltd., Calcutta, January, 1994, p.10-11;

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.32-33;

(translation mine).<sup>16</sup> This novel was written at the time when the nation was worshipped as the “mother”. Thus, it seems that the oppression of women within the patriarchal structure remained under the veil of glorification of the concept of motherhood. The movement to free our mother- Nation could not improve the condition of women and failed to emancipate them from the cage of patriarchy.

Women’s dissatisfaction towards the patriarchal system became prominent in the twentieth century and women revolutionaries began to express their discontent regarding the social (patriarchal) treatment to the female sex. Pritilata Waddedar who took part in the Chittagong armoury raid, committed suicide due to the failure of the mission and wrote: “If women still lag behind men, it is because they were deliberately left behind”.

The discussion reveals that at the time of freedom movement, i.e. when the nation was worshipped as the ‘mother’, women experienced oppression in various forms. This oppressive state of women still persists in our contemporary society. Hence, glorification of motherhood cannot abolish discriminatory attitude of the society towards women. Generally women like their motherly roles and where women deviate from this role are considered as ‘abnormal’ or ‘unnatural’. Previously women suffered from depression for their barrenness. But in our modern society there are women who choose to not being ‘a mother’ and there are also other women who feel depressed after being ‘a mother’. There are some factors which make them unhappy rather than feel ‘complete’. This is much applicable for working women. Lack of support system in the family make her nervous regarding the upbringing of the child, since she has to maintain her job simultaneously. Moreover there are other women who are very conscious of their physical beauty and become very upset as they are disfigured after being ‘a mother’. There are other cases where a mother suffers from *Postpartum depression*. According to gynaecologists, biological as well as psychological factors are responsible for this state. After delivery some hormonal disorders happen in a woman’s body which result such type of depression.<sup>17</sup> All these women are not kind to their new-born babies and ‘motherhood’ cannot glorify their womanhood. There are other women who in spite of physical discomforts, loves nurturing her child. In recent days, many fathers also take equal part in rearing the child. But paternal role is taken as optional, whereas mother’s role is considered as **essential** till today. Here a question automatically arises: are the gender specific roles

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<sup>16</sup> “..এম্ব কিছু আছে যা ছেলের জন্য খোয়ানো যায় না”

<sup>17</sup> Anandabazar Patrika, 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2013;

necessary outcome of biology or are they interpreted as ‘essential’ by the society to satisfy the interest of patriarchy?

The values of patriarchal system influence us to such an extent that we internalise them as the essence of our lives. Therefore, we do not even bother to question the essential relationship between sex and gender, i.e. whether the gender attributes are in reality essentially related to sexual characteristics. Patriarchy is omnipresent in all the social institutions. Each institution is supported, rationalised or justified by an accompanying theory; for example, scientific institutions are justified by scientific theories, medical institutions are justified by medical theories and religious institutions are supported as well as justified by theological doctrines. What the individual experiences at the concrete level of practice is endorsed by patriarchal institutions; these in turn are justified by theories with a patriarchal bias. A good example of the correlation between theories, institutions and practice is instantiated in the Freudian theory of Selfhood construction and the institutions that are formed on those principles. These institutions in turn give rise to a form of practice.

In the context of equality, it is necessary to know the actual relation between sex and gender, because the prescription for equity is closely related to how one perceives the sex-gender relationship.

According to Freud, anatomical or sexual factors determine the psychological aspects of an individual which in turn affect the roles played by them. In other words, gender characteristics ‘essentially’ follow from biological factors.

Simone de Beauvoir (a liberal thinker.) in her book The Second Sex<sup>18</sup> maintains unlike Freud that biology together with societal factors give birth to gender attributes.

Chodorow states that, at birth the infant cannot differentiate between subject/self and object/other. The child experiences itself as continuous with its mother or caretaker.<sup>19</sup> Here Bowlby refers to the ‘**primary object clinging theory**’ according to which, “there is in infants an in-built propensity to be in touch with and to cling to a human being. In this sense there is a need for an object independent of food which is as primary as the ‘need’ for food and warmth.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> First published in French, 1949; this translation (translated and edited by H.M. Parshley) first published in Great Britain by Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1953; Published by Vintage, London, 1997;

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Chodorow, “Early Psychological Development” in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, London, England, 1978; p.61;

<sup>20</sup> John Bowlby, (1969) *Attachment and Loss, Vol.1: Attachment*; London, Penguin Books, 1971; p.222;

Michael Rutter, a child psychiatrist and Rudolph Schaffer, a psychologist mention the studies which assess the variations in parenting<sup>21</sup>. It can be known from the studies that children do not suffer in the following situation:-

- a) When a person who mothers the infant shares her duties with a small but stable number of surrogated mothers, for example, when the biological mother leaves for a job ;<sup>22</sup>
- b) When societies extend households and share the responsibility of child-care.<sup>23</sup>

Children generally face problems in the following cases:

- i. Multiple parenting situations and if the child is separated from its primary caretaker;
- ii. Insufficient interaction with the care taker and
- iii. Disturbance in the children's lives due to family crisis or for any other reason<sup>24</sup>.

It can be said that human body is a product of interaction between bio-mechanism and socio-environmental factors in which it usually participates. Actually patriarchal society and the institutions that are governed by patriarchy, endorse essentialist thoughts since this theory places male-gender virtues, e.g. **objectivity, neutrality, separateness, rationality** over female-gender traits i.e. **passivity, relatedness, emotionality** etc.

Liberation never comes without complications. Motherhood in twenty- first century recognises maternal desire in its own rights and exists independently of sexual desire. Now we get the opportunity to re-evaluate traditional theories of motherhood. Instead of taking motherhood as the ultimate end of womanhood, women can consider it as a function which they may/ may not embrace. To attain equity we should not restrict ourselves to essentialism, and at the same time we have to focus on Freud's

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Rutter, *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*; Baltimore, Penguin Books,1972; Rudolph H. Schaffer, *Mothering*, Cambridge, Harvard University Pres,1977;

<sup>22</sup> Yudkin and Holme, 1963, cited in Michael Rutter, *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*; Baltimore, Penguin Books,1972; p.61; and Rudolph H. Schaffer *Mothering*, Cambridge, Harvard University Pres, 1977, p.10;

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Mead, "Some Theoretical Considerations on the Problem of Mother-child Separation", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol.24, Pub.by AmericanOrthopsychiatry Assn., New York, 1954, p.471-483;

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Chodorow, "Early Psychological Development" in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, London, England,1978; p.75;

view regarding Super-ego, i.e. Freud's conception of Conscience, which admits the role of societal, cultural factors in gender construction. We should separate sex from gender and should not restrict any category(women/men) in a particular frame--feminine/masculine. Therefore, 'differences' of gender characteristics could not pose obstruction to attain 'equality'.

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