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Travails with Motherhood: An Auto-ethnographic Exploration of Being a Mother

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Abstract: *Motherhood is as much as a sociological as a biological and physiological construct. Each and every human society has its values, ideas, duties and responsibilities attached to mothering and motherhood. Even though the concept of family is changing with the emergence of alternative forms to traditional patriarchal family, the raising of children is still perceived to be the sole responsibility of the mother. The expectation that women will become mothers, forms part of the normative discourses governing motherhood which construct women's sexuality and identity through their reproductive function. Cultural representations of the idealised and sometimes "yummy" mummy (middle class, attractive, healthy, sexy and heterosexual) contrast with depictions of 'bad' mothers proliferate in the popular press. The ideal mother is constructed as selfless, nurturing, subsuming their own needs to attend to their children's demands. The motherhood experience of the working mothers often deviates from the dominant model of motherhood. In their experience of alternative motherhood, they are often marginalised in their family and close kin circle which holds on to the patriarchal definition of motherhood. In this autoethnographic essay I have explored how my experience of motherhood has redefined my identity of mother while passing through a course of negotiations and conflicts with the idealized standards.*

Keywords: Autoethnography, motherhood, mothering, fatherhood, identity, reproduction.

Introduction

The past two and half years of my life have been filled with many changes, experiences and challenges as I became a mother to our wonderful child, Arani. My research uses auto-ethnographic methods to explore the dominant

cultural discourses and ideologies of motherhood. This research draws from my own experiences of becoming a mother and it examines the struggles and challenges I faced while trying to mediate between my expectations of motherhood, which were greatly shaped by dominant mothering ideologies and my actual lived experiences. My study creates meaning and elucidates greater understanding of one mother's journey and transition to motherhood while calling attention to dominant discourses that frame and shape mothering. The findings in this article illustrate the hegemonic power of discourses in my own life. This article shows that despite my attempts to challenge patriarchal ideologies of motherhood, the explanations of my decisions tend to reinstate the dominant discourse. This reflexive auto-ethnographic research is important because it seeks to disrupt the cultural hegemony by revealing the often-hidden experiences of motherhood. This article examines current dominant mothering ideologies and uses auto-ethnographic data including stories to explore the extent to which my own thoughts and experiences reflect, challenge, question and/or subscribe to the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood.

Auto-ethnography: What and why?

Auto ethnography is often described as a hybrid term as it combines the two words 'auto' and 'ethnography'. Different scholars have defined auto-ethnography in various ways that reflect different meanings associated with the term. Spry (2001) argued that "auto-ethnography can be defined as a narrative that can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (p.710). Reed-Danahay (1997) suggests that the "notion of auto-ethnography foregrounds the multiple nature of selfhood and opens up new ways of writing about social life (p.3). Auto-ethnography as both a text and a method grew out of two disciplines- ethnography and life history (Reed-Danahay 1997). Ellis (2004) argued that "auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" and as a method auto-ethnography is "both a process and a product (p.273). Hughes et al. (2012) claim that the term "auto-ethnography is intended to name a form a critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific and systematic view of personal experience in relation" to culture (p.209). Some auto-ethnographers view the writings based on these types of research as more authentic since the author's voice is synonymous with the subject. Denzin (1989) has labelled this type of writing the "biographical method"

which includes "autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography, biography, oral history, case history, case study, life history, life story, self-story and personal experience story" (p.27). Ellis (2004) argues that "auto-ethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture" (p.37). She maintains that it displays multiple layers of consciousness and is an autobiographical form of writing.

There are various approaches to auto-ethnography, each with its own goals and methods, but all most all approaches call for analytical analysis of personal narratives and comparing them and contrasting them with existing research findings. One form that auto-ethnography assumes is that of reflexive or narrative auto-ethnography which according to Ellis et.al. (2011) focus on a culture or subculture and authors use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interactions. Researchers are reflexive in their writing examining how their own positionality impacts the culture under study. I have used reflexive auto-ethnographic approach for a nuanced understanding of motherhood in Indian context in light of my lived experiences.

The transition to motherhood is experienced in diverse ways by women. New mothers coming from all backgrounds and walks of life have reported "shock" and ambivalence associated with having a baby in contemporary society (Buchanan, 2003). Dominant cultural discourses about motherhood include Hays' (1996) concept of the ideology of intensive mothering, discourses about natural child birth/motherhood, medical discourses and media discourses of the good mother, supermoms, the mommy wars and alpha moms (Miller 2007; O'Brien Hallstein 2010). These cultural discourses portray and institutionalize motherhood in ways that are oppressive to women. Kawash (2011) suggests that despite several decades of feminist critique it appears that new mothers continue to be surprised at the gap between idealized depictions of blissful maternity and more complicated and exhausting reality, akin to running a marathon every day.

New mothers are speaking out in the form of blogs and motherhood memoirs, sometimes called 'mommy memoirs' or 'mommy lit' and these contemporary mothers are very angry at the high standards, competitive parenting and impossible expectations of mothering that make them feel guilty or like failures when they fall short, which is always. There is always a gap between our expectations and our actual lived experiences but more is at stake when motherhood is socially constructed in certain ways that affect the actual experiences becoming a mother in negative and harmful ways. By examining the contradictions between socially constructed

expectations and depictions of motherhood in relation to lived experiences, the ideologies themselves can be challenged. In this way I am interested in how my personal expectations of motherhood were reconciled with my lived experiences of becoming mother and the ways in which I responded to the contradictions.

Prior to becoming a mother, I considered myself to be heavily influenced by feminism, if not a feminist. I had pushed back gendered expectations of household labour in my own home(s). But after having may baby I realized that my beliefs and expectations about motherhood remained largely unquestioned and unanalysed. Only after having my son I was forced to confront those patriarchal assumptions about motherhood that I had internalized. My personal experiences may not make connections to other new mothers' realities. But as personal realities and lived experiences are shaped by cultural discourse, I hope this article will speak about the larger cultural beliefs about motherhood.

Portrayal of motherhood in Indian Society

Before narrating my own experiences of motherhood, I would like to discuss in short, the portrayal of motherhood in Indian society. To begin with I would like to reiterate the fact that motherhood and mothering are two distinct phenomena. Mothering is normally related to certain activities or practices concerned with looking after helpless and dependent infant, nurturing them, taking care of their physical and emotional needs and socializing them for better future. Such activities are normally performed by women who may not necessarily be real mothers. Though a father, a gay or lesbian guardian may equally perform those tasks in patriarchal Indian society these are considered to be aberrations rather than the norm (Ghosh 2016). The issue of fathering has failed to gain much importance in Indian context. The father is portrayed to be masculine and authoritative; a bread winner for the family and an epitome of rationality (Sriram, 2019). In contrast, certain feminine values are attached to the practices of mothering. As compared to mothering, motherhood is a larger social institution and is characterized by specific meanings and ideologies (Ghosh 2016). By paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir, it can be said that, 'women do not become mothers simply by bearing a child. Women are made into mothers' (Woertman 1993). It is associated primarily with women since the state of motherhood has a direct impact on women's lives, regardless of whether or not they become mothers. Every society and culture have some stereotypes associated with motherhood. Donald Winnicott (1953: 49) has

developed the notion of the 'good-enough mother' whose "whole life is bound up with the needs of her child". In contrast, women who are 'masculine' or 'preoccupied with themselves' (p. 49) are singled out for criticism. Though women's role as 'child producer' is widely celebrated but women in general are relegated to a secondary position in a patriarchal society and the task of child rearing is assigned to women folk as these are not 'masculine' enough.

Auto-ethnographic stories &reflections: My journey towards becoming a mother

Now, I would like to share a few reflective auto-ethnographic stories about my experiences of becoming a mother. These stories are primarily descriptive in nature yet they point to several major key discoveries that were made in the process of becoming a mother.

Prelude to becoming a mother

Having a child seems for most people in India to be a 'natural' choice. In Indian society and culture marriage is depicted as a sexual union between male and female whose primary duty is to beget children, preferably male children. Unlike Western societies, majority of women in India `do not have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they want to become mothers (Woertman 1993). Motherhood is thus for most of the women in India a fate rather than a choice. For me, the choice translates into a simple question of desire: do I want to have a child? My answer to this question has changed over the course of time. Initially, I did not want to have any child but later on I deliberated on it and changed my mind and decided to have a child after I have settled down a bit (i.e., after getting a full-time job, completing my PhD etc.). For me, that child need not be a biological child. Me and my partner were open to the idea of adoption, as both of us were on the 'wrong' side of 30s when we decided to have a baby.

Finding out I was Pregnant with Arani: A Surreal Moment

After not really trying and not getting pregnant, it became a stressful thing so we stopped trying all together and just decided that it would happen and if not, we can always apply for adoption. I went for a trip to Ranchi-Netarhat with my colleagues at the end of January, 2017 and went back to Haldia after the trip as I teach in a college there. I started to feel very

exhausted quite easily and I thought that my blood sugar level has gone up. I am type 2 diabetic and at that time was taking oral medicines to lower my blood sugar levels. After a few days, I had a second thought and decided to do pregnancy test. So, I went to the drug store and bought two pregnancy test kits to be 100% sure with the test results. It appeared to be positive both the times. I was both excited and anxious. I felt overwhelmed. It was surreal. I called my husband and he was ecstatic. But I warned him not to disclose it to the parents before our visit to the gynaecologist as I was still worried that these tests may not be accurate. Next day I took a leave from college, went to my gynaecologist who prescribed an ultrasound which confirmed that I was pregnant for real. Our joy knew no bounds and we gave this news to our parents. They were also very happy for us. Both my mother and mother-in-law asked me not to disclose it to anyone else before at least three months had elapsed. But I told them this is not feasible. I have to disclose this to my colleagues and superiors in my college as I live alone in Haldia and only they can come to my rescue if there is any emergency situation. I really hoped that I am pregnant with a girl but as pre-birth sex determination is a punishable offence in India, I could not ask the doctors/technicians conducting the USGs about the sex of my child. The entire period of pregnancy was spent at Haldia where I looked after myself which raised a lot of eyebrows. Many female colleagues discouraged me to work so long and hard and asked me to take leave but my gynaecologist asked me to continue with normal life. My pregnancy was without any major complications barring the fact that I had a very high blood sugar level and had to take high doses of insulin to keep that within check. And ultimately, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy on 5thOcotober, 2017.

Breastfeeding: A love-hate activity

It was something that I loved and hated. I was sick and tired of breastfeeding by the time my son was 4months old. Breastfeeding restricted my freedom of movements. I was ready to wean him after 4 months but people were judgmental about this. Not only doctors but even friends and relatives would suggest and advise me to breastfeed my son until at least he is 6-8 months old. Even the parenting blogs would publish article after articles highlighting the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding and thereby painting a particular picture of an ideal mother. The underlying assumption was that one is not an ideal mother if she is not exclusively breastfeeding her child even at the cost of her own wellbeing. These would fill me with guilt and anxiety as I had to rely on top feed to feed my baby since he was two months old. The

paediatrician whom I was consulting was very supportive of my decision to wean him and being a doctor he knew that as a blood sugar patient and as someone who has undergone blood transfusion at the time of delivery it was really difficult to depend on exclusive breastfeeding both for me and my son. And since I was going to join my full-time job at Haldia in two months' time he even advised me to wean him gradually.

Writing a dissertation, joining a full-time job, raising a baby and being a new-mom

I was supposed to complete my Ph. D. by April, 2017. But because of my pregnancy and other issues I could not do so and had to re-register. But I was determined to submit my thesis before my maternity leave was over. Thus, I started writing and finalizing my thesis when my baby was only three months old. I appointed a professional care giver to look after him. The first day when she joined and took over many responsibilities of looking after my son, I felt a bit estranged and alienated. I also felt that I am neglecting my son as my primary duty during maternity leave should be looking after my child and not writing a dissertation.

In May 2018 my maternity leave was over and I had to join my workplace at Haldia. Earlier I used to spend whole week at Haldia and get back to Kolkata only on weekends. I used to stay at a rented flat that was a bit far from my college. Both these arrangements needed reconsideration. I shifted to teachers' hostel within college campus and instead of staying over at Haldia throughout the week I decided to take my preparatory day in the middle of the week so that I do not have to leave my son in Kolkata for whole of the week. Taking my son along with me to Haldia was not feasible due to logistical and other considerations. Thus, I became an 'absentee mother' — a concept and reality which was hard to be accepted by my family, wider society and even me. My colleagues and relatives constantly asked me who would look after my son during the nights that I was spending at Haldia. That the father of the baby is with him and the father can do everything that I as a mother can do, maybe even better, was not very acceptable to them. My father, who is more than 75 years old, became very concerned and out of his anxiety he keeps asking whether it is possible for me to get a transfer in a nearby college so that I could juggle between my roles as a mother and as a teacher more efficiently or without having to be separated from my child. I realized that the separation anxiety not only affects my son but I also suffer the same and my father's concern stresses me more as I have no immediate solution to this unpalatable situation.

One of my ex-colleagues even went to the extent of calling me a 'bad' mother who has failed to do her motherly duties properly. In a message sent over WhatsApp she asked me (I am quoting her verbatim): "And what will you do? You go away for the entire week leaving your son behind and even when you are in Kolkata, he is being taken care of by grandparents and aunts. Isn't that a shame? He will teach you a lesson when he grows up. Then only you will understand." She failed to understand that leaving my son behind is not a choice but a compulsion for me.

A 'Motherly' Father

I would also like to mention the role of my husband Sourav in 'mothering' our son. He has been very supportive thorough out from the very beginning of our journey to parenthood. He knows that it is a joint responsibility to nurture and care for our child. It was because of his support I could complete my Ph.D. thesis immediately after giving birth to our son. I could commute to Haldia leaving behind my son because he has taken over many of the chores associated with 'mothering' such as changing the nappies, putting the baby to sleep, feed him during night in addition to fatherly duties of taking him out to the park and so on. He is a 'motherly' father with lots of love and affection. But in a patriarchal society his efforts are not appreciated readily. He is sometimes ridiculed; sometimes his manliness is under scrutiny because the larger society thinks that it is the duty of the mother to look after the baby and to allow the mother to be away leaving the baby behind to be looked after by the father is not acceptable. Some of his colleagues, friends and relatives take it upon themselves to remind him that his only duty is to spend some time with the child after he gets back from work and that's it. He need not do anymore because fathers are not supposed to look after the babies. This is how patriarchy and its notion of fathering and mothering discriminates the male members of the society who dares to question those ideas and defies the rules set by the society.

Realizations

1. My expectations of motherhood were shaped by two factors: my own experiences of learning from my mother and elder sister and portrayals of mothers in popular culture.

2. Completing a Ph.D. thesis, getting back to a full-time job and becoming a mother is really hard to do.

3. Men who deviate from patriarchal model of manhood also have to face social exclusion, isolation and ridicule.

4. Throughout the process of narrating auto-ethnographic stories I remained silent about the intersectionality of gender, middle class privileges and power in my own experience.

In lieu of a conclusion

Writing this paper has been an emotional endeavour for me. I have learnt many things about myself and others through reflexively analysing my own experiences. Through writing this article I realized that I did not either subscribe to or challenge the dominant discourses of motherhood. In some cases, I deviated from the ideals projected by the society consciously. In other instances, this was involuntary and, in such cases, the internal conflict was more intense. It was really hard for me to write about the painful things that I have experienced. I struggled to make myself vulnerable. It was difficult for me to discuss conflicts with my family members knowing that they might read my work and misinterpret me. But my experiences highlight how powerful and discriminatory hidden hegemonic ideologies of motherhood can be. In my personal experience all the dominant discourses and the so-called modern interpretations of mothering and motherhood propagated through blogs, vlogs and other forms of social media are oppressive not only to the mother but to the father also.

The careful reading of these narratives reveals that the cultural values of a particular society affects the women even when they are conscious of its discriminatory nature. My experience shows that in Indian society a married woman's value lies in motherhood. A married woman who does not want children represents a threat to the patriarch (Leira&Krips 1993). It is almost a taboo for couple to not to have a baby. Being childless is still not considered to be a conscious choice of the couple. For a married woman to gain self-respect she has to bear children otherwise she is often shamed and ridiculed. Nurturing and caring for the child is primarily thought to be a feminine activity which has to be primarily performed by the mother and in her absence other female members of the family. When the father actively takes on the duty of 'mothering' and performs a non-conformist role he is often ridiculed and shamed and thought to be not 'man' enough.

The most challenging aspect of using auto ethnography as a research method is that it becomes difficult to be reflexive at times because we become so

wrapped up in our socialization that it is hard to see how our own positionality and subjectivity affects, shapes and derives the research process. Also, I did not talk much about joys of mothering. Though I experience an enormous amount of joy while mothering my son yet I really talked about it in my auto ethnographic stories. I did not do so because I really find it hard for me to put into words the love I feel for my child and easier to write about the challenges and responsibilities that comes with raising a child. To some extent this omission was deliberate as I wanted to highlight the hegemonic and oppressive construction of motherhood in our society.

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