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RESEARCH ARTICLE

On Motherhood: An Ethical and Social Perspective

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Abstract: The ongoing discussions in contemporary times revolve around the ethical considerations surrounding the utilization of the wombs of brain-dead women as surrogates to assist women who are unable to conceive. These debates coexist with arguments advocating for the mother's free will and consent during maternity, while also cautioning against the potential denial of such rights. Additionally, various philosophical debates inquire about the classification of the relationship between the foetus and the maternal organism, as well as the definition of the connection between the latter and the baby being carried in her womb.

This paper aims to examine the ethical dimensions of the journey of motherhood. While the baby typically receives significant attention, the same cannot be said for the mother. This raises inquiries such as whether the mother is merely a means to an end, merely a vessel carrying the baby. While many individuals are eager to embrace the baby, where are those who are willing to support the mother? This paper seeks to address these questions through the lens of Simone De Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" as presented in her book, "The Second Sex."

Keywords: Motherhood, Ethical Life, Mother-Child Relationship, Beauvoir

Conventionally, parenting is seen to be the sole purview of women since it is they who traditionally undertake the role of a caregiver. To be a mother is to be feminine, it is commonly believed. Since as early as the 1900s, when motherhood has been viewed as the primary identity of a woman, the former working as a reinforcement of the latter, and the multitudes that women possess and their complex experiences have been ignored in the process (Arendell 2000: 1192).

A consequence of such beliefs is the consistently observed and reported occurrence of women having their careers hindered or ceasing to work altogether after having a baby. Even though it is said that it takes a village to raise a baby, the entire responsibility eventually lands on the mother of the baby in some way or the other, considerably diminishing or altogether eliminating any bandwidth the woman might have to pursue a career. Furthermore, studies have shown that mothering is a full-time job and the amount of stress it generates in the mother is comparable to if not more than, a 9 to 5 job (Daley 1983: 138). It is not the case that this reality has been ignored or missed, rather the role of a mother has been glorified as a form of self-sacrifice which normalises a woman being robbed of a fulfilling purpose outside of motherhood. Quite often, care, empathy and compassion are considered to be synonymous with being a mother. In the process, a mother's need for care, empathy and compassion, particularly in relation to her plans outside of motherhood, is ignored.

In current times, when ongoing philosophical debates raise questions such as: How do we categorise the relationship between the foetus and the maternal organism? How do we define the relationship between the latter and the baby she is carrying in her womb? And when does one person or organism become two? (Kingma:2016).

The question which this paper considers to explore is the ethical aspect of the journey of motherhood. The baby is rarely bereft of attention, but the same can't be said of the mother. This gives rise to questions such as: Is the mother just a means to an end, a vessel carrying the baby? While there are several people eager to hold the baby, where are the ones ready to hold the mother? This paper attempts to address these questions, under the lens of the "Other" theory by Simone De Beauvoir as presented in her book, "The Second Sex".

'Is femininity secreted in the ovaries?' (1974:3) asks Beauvoir right at the beginning of the introduction to her book, "The Second Sex", referring to the unease in society regarding the 'lost women'. She asks the above question referring to a well-defined secondary position that women seem to hold in a context where the whole idea of humanity revolves around the male or man-hood and the woman is treated as an *Other*.

Simone de Beauvoir points out that it is this construction of a woman as the '*Other*' that lays the foundation, in a significant way, for her understanding of womanhood. She emphasises that 'the category of *Other* is fundamental in the formation of all human subjectivity since our sense of self can be produced only in opposition to something which is not self. But men have claimed the category of self or the subject exclusively for themselves, and have relegated women to the status of the eternal *Other* (1974:34). Thus, she concludes that 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman'.

Beauvoir makes it categorically clear in her book, *The Second Sex*, that she believes women are othered because motherhood is seen as their primary role in society. The form of this oppression is not entirely the traditional definition of a more powerful group enforcing certain subjugative rules on the weaker sections of society, according to de Beauvoir. It is a well-established notion in society that, "It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her

physiological destiny; that is her “natural” vocation since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species” (1974:524).

Furthermore, Beauvoir says that “the traditional family relationships touted as ideal by contemporary society could be devastating both for the mothers locked into their maternal molds and for the children whose supervision often became their sole *raison d'etre*” (Patterson 1986:87). The ideals of societal motherhood do more harm than good to both mothers and children. The fact that a woman can bear a child does not imply that all women want to be mothers, however, society, at a certain level, puts pressure on a woman to become a mother by portraying it as her ultimate destiny. Beauvoir does not agree with the societal maternal norms and suggests that motherhood should always be a 'conscious choice' (Patterson 1986:105) rather than a 'passive yielding to tradition' (Patterson 1986:105).

A common, long-standing argument made by both social scientists and the general public alike has been that the mother and her children share a bond that builds naturally. They perceive an innate quality in women to understand their children and their needs, and to respond appropriately. Beauvoir questioned the validity of the concept of this maternal instinct, quote: “There is no such thing as maternal “instinct”: the word does not, in any case, apply to the human species. The mother's attitude is defined by her total situation and by the way she accepts it”. (1974:554). Women, she believes, do not possess an inherent instinct which allows them innately to perform in a particular way to cater to their offspring. On the contrary, according to Beauvoir, maternal instinct is not the reason why a woman assumes responsibility to become the primary caregiver of offspring, rather it can be attributed to the social systems and beliefs that set expectations on women to undertake that role.

Beauvoir also refutes the pre-existing belief that it is only in a mother's arms that a child finds comfort and happiness. She asserts that the concept of an “unnatural mother” is flawed because 'maternal love has nothing natural about it: but precisely because of that, there are bad mothers' (1974:567). Thus, as per Beauvoir, maternal affection is not a response of nature, but societal expectations (1974:567). She further states that between women and their freedom lies the societal definition of a perfect mother. When women begin to defy this abstract, romanticised concept, Beauvoir believes that women will be able to liberate themselves from the shackles of this role earmarked for them by society.

Moreover, Beauvoir discusses the relationship between the foetus and the woman carrying it, to quote: “But pregnancy is above all a drama playing itself out in a woman between her and herself. She experiences it both as an enrichment and mutilation; the foetus is part of her body and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it and is possessed by it; it encapsulates the whole future and in carrying it, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness annihilates her, she has the impression of not being anything else” (1974:538). In this excerpt, de Beauvoir articulates the contradictory experiences that a woman goes through during pregnancy and that to view the foetus only as an entity that feeds off the pregnant woman's reservoir of nourishment is a very superficial view of the relationship between the two.

Beauvoir elucidates that the foetus, being simultaneously within her body as well as an independent entity, breeds a sense of ambiguity within the pregnant woman who has to grapple with the complex reality of being enriched by the pregnancy while at the same time feeling burdened by the foetus's need of her. There is a conflict within her, between the optimism of becoming a mother as well as eventually being seen as nothing but a mother.

A woman's agency lies in her body, according to Beauvoir, as it is her "grasp on the world". The pregnancy, however, compromises her agency since she shares her body with another entity and the resulting ambiguity leads to her being "decentred, split, or doubled in several ways" (2009:540). She puts forward that women often are conditioned to believe that being a mother is the be-all and end-all of being a woman and as a consequence, they straightjacket themselves. Hence, de Beauvoir thinks that no woman chooses to become a mother independently, but is only behaving as she is conditioned to (2009:549).

Beauvoir calls attention to the number of occasions a woman is forced to give birth against her will, and she goes on to assert that "pregnancy and motherhood are experienced in very different ways depending on whether they take place in revolt, resignation, satisfaction, or enthusiasm" (2009:533). "Enforced maternity" are the words she uses to describe motherhood (2009:534). It would not be sufficient to repeal or modify certain laws, institutes and stipulations to usher in a new attitude towards motherhood, Beauvoir is of the opinion. She says that only "overcoming immanence" and "otherness" through transcendence is what will achieve that change (2009:540). Taking that into consideration, it can be said that de Beauvoir believes that only by choosing to eschew the choice of becoming a mother can women achieve liberation.

Thus, through the above discussion, it could be concluded that Beauvoir feels that women are being treated as empty vessels by a society whose only purpose is to bear offspring and once she is done being a bearer of children she is to become their primary rearer as well. That is seen to be the natural order and her wellbeing is never a question of discussion.

In society, a woman bearing and rearing children has no one to focus on her mental, physical or emotional needs. Childbearing and rearing are rather seen as a duty of a woman for which she is to expect nothing in return. She is supposed to hold, caress and look after the baby but there is no mention of how she also needs to be held. According to Beauvoir, the longer that belief is maintained and the role of motherhood is romanticised, the longer will women be oppressed and relegated to playing a supporting role in society.

Conclusion

We can say that, through this paper, we have undertaken an in-depth examination of Simone de Beauvoir's views on motherhood, which has also enabled a discussion on the questions surrounding maternal instinct, as well the distinguishing aspects of biological and social definitions of motherhood. Beauvoir somewhere breaks the myth that motherhood is an

elemental quality of a woman. She points out that not only does society believe so but women themselves have that notion so deeply ingrained within their psyche, that they form the belief that it is her primary role to carry and tend for a baby.

When we tried to analyse Beauvoir's understanding of motherhood under the lens of questions raised in this paper, we found that Beauvoir explicates that social belief systems work to exploit women and extract the work of childbearing and rearing from women without adequately assisting them in the process. This belief system ends up treating women as a means to an end. She blames the maternal societal norms which treat women as a means to carry the baby. Thus, one can clearly say that Beauvoir's understanding of motherhood explicates that a woman is being treated as a means to an end during pregnancy. Beauvoir elucidates that if a woman can biologically become a mother, it does not mean that she wishes to be one.

Further, Beauvoir also raised questions around the notion of maternal instinct and deduced that there is no such thing as innate maternal instinct which makes women better than men at child-rearing as claimed by society. She is of the opinion that these notions do nothing but strengthen the false beliefs that women have an innate urge to become mothers and that they also possess an inherent quality that enables them to be ideal caregivers. When such beliefs are so widely and strongly held, any woman who chooses not to become a mother or is not naturally good at raising children is viewed as nothing but an objectionable but rare exception. That the baby ought to be the centre of the mother's life and other such societal expectations leave the mother exhausted with no one to focus on her wellbeing, but the entire attention is always on the care of the baby which the mother is largely held responsible for.

We can say that Beauvoir is pointing out that the mother is completely raided of her freedom, energy and physical strength in the process of bearing and rearing a baby. While all the responsibility is laid squarely on the shoulders of the mother by society, there does not seem to be any discussion about the mother's needs and her well-being. Beauvoir does not approve of it and urges women to understand that motherhood is a choice that they should not forcefully give into but should decide for themselves.

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