
UNIT 6 MOTHERHOOD

Structure

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

In most contemporary societies, since it is mostly women who mother, we tend to associate the terms ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’ primarily with women. Besides this, we usually have very fixed notions about who is an ‘ideal mother’, and how ‘ideal mothering’ should be carried out. While there is no doubt that women reproduce, why is it that the act of giving birth and the responsibility of childcare have become conflated to become associated only with women? What does motherhood involve and invoke and how does it impact the lives of women who are mothers? In this Unit, we will look at motherhood as an institution and examine its impact on women’s life choices, life styles and economic and social conditions, and also see how mothering is in turn often determined by these conditions. We will critically analyze the notion of motherhood in an attempt to understand its role in women’s lives. We will also specifically examine the implications of motherhood upon women from different class and caste backgrounds, and across the rural/urban divide. In doing so, we will attempt to identify the challenges presented by socially and culturally determined notions of mothering upon women, and seek out some affirmative possibilities for mothers in the future.

6.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you would be able to:

- Achieve a critical understanding of motherhood in the context of gender roles in India;
- Locate motherhood within the cross-cultural context of patriarchal and capitalist structures;

- Comprehend the relationship between motherhood and class and caste structures in urban and rural India;
- Discuss the issues of reproductive rights and surrogacy from the perspective of Indian women;
- Examine the notion of mothering as work from the perspective of urban and rural migrant women;
- And engage with the changes in women's lives within the context of contemporary transitions in culture and economy.

6.3 GENDER ROLES: MOTHERHOOD AND FATHERHOOD

We often hear that women are, by their very nature, more caring and nurturing and that motherhood is the most valuable gift that women enjoy. Such sentiments are usually accepted as compliments to women and their innate abilities to provide love and care, and to be able to sacrifice their own needs for those of others. However, such seemingly complementary assertions may very well conceal prevalent social biases against women. They may also work to the disadvantage of women. For instance, because of social and cultural expectations, those women who may not wish to see marriage and motherhood as their primary function in life may feel like social anomalies. In the field of education, girls may opt for certain disciplinary fields and careers rather than others (such as Mathematics or Science) which do not disturb their sense of internalized gender roles and abilities. Women may also feel the social pressure to live up to cultural ideals which associate self-sacrifice and self-abnegation primarily with one gender. Consequently, girls are often influenced by ingrained cultural values which tell them that it is their duty to sacrifice better nutrition, educational opportunities, financial resources and right to property to the male members of the family.

Due to such culturally ingrained values and gender biases, women who become mothers may often do so at the expense of other desires and ambitions. Motherhood may thus interrupt or interfere with women's ability and desire to work and follow professional careers. At the same time, the association of childcare responsibilities primarily with women can also place pressure on men to function only as providers and alienate them from a fuller realization of their roles as fathers. Prescribed gender roles for women and men consequently impact the level of freedom in terms of personal choices exerted by both genders. They also influence how women and men perceive their roles as mothers and fathers in a given culture. Owing to rigidly defined prescriptions, many women see marriage and motherhood as their life-goal. Some may become mothers without really questioning their preparation for this role or give up their professional ambitions completely once they become mothers. It is also true, of course, that many women may genuinely desire to become mothers, and may happily opt for domestic responsibilities over professional ones. However, an interrogation of gender roles in society shows us that freedom of self-determination is greatly influenced by cultural norms. Consequently, what one may believe to be a 'free' choice may actually reflect internalized perceptions of idealized roles, and the uninterrogated 'performance' of such roles by individuals. (For further reading on the notion of 'performativity' and gender, you may refer to work by Judith Butler.)

Women who become mothers of their own free will may also succumb to certain behaviors and traits that are expected of mothers. For instance, they may be compelled to abandon pursuit of higher education goals, not seek employment or give up established careers. Many women from the middle and upper-middle classes single-handedly shoulder the burden of domestic chores associated with mothering, such as preparing family meals, getting children ready for school, overseeing homework and other educational requirements. But it is not only women who are at a disadvantage as far as gender roles are concerned. Cultural stereotyping of parenting roles in patriarchal societies can also influence men in a detrimental way. For instance, fathers may feel obliged to limit their interaction with their children in terms of their prescribed functions – that is, primarily as breadwinners and providers, rather than as sources of emotional or intellectual support. This serves to restrict emotional bonding between fathers and children and could be counter-productive for the emotional growth of children. It can also limit men's perceptions of their roles as fathers and keep them from enjoying the pleasures of a more wholesome relationship with their children. An examination of motherhood in the context of gender roles thus helps us to take a serious look at the notion of freedom of choice, as well as how both motherhood and fatherhood get prescribed in pre-determined ways due to gender stereotyping.

6.4 PATRIARCHY, CAPITALISM AND THE MATERNAL BODY IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Although our main focus here will be to look at motherhood in Indian contexts, it would be useful to first locate Indian motherhood within a larger cross-cultural framework. Given the fact that most contemporary societies are influenced, to various extents, by patriarchal norms, mothering continues to be conceptualized from male-dominated perspectives across the world. Such perspectives influence the way mothering and the maternal body are understood and experienced as lived realities.

The objectification of women's bodies in patriarchal cultures can result in efforts to make the body conform to certain cultural expectations and beauty myths (such as the emphasis on being thin or light-skinned). In terms of maternal bodies, this has specific implications. Feminist scholars in the west have noted that maternal bodies are 'disciplined' into conforming with set patterns of behavior and appearance. In the US, for instance, some feminists, like **Eva Feder Kittay**, and **Jana Sawicki** have emphasized the impact of patriarchal control and power on women's bodies, pregnancy and childbirth. In contemporary times, these larger power systems may include capitalism, racism and other forces. These larger forces impact how relations and identities get defined at the micro level. For instance, the unpaid work performed by mothers (including childcare and housework) may benefit both patriarchy and capitalism. This is because women's unpaid housework sustains male dominance as well as provides economic benefits to one part of the population at the expense of the other. When seen from this perspective, it is not patriarchy alone that is responsible for the oppression of women and mothers; rather, patriarchy works together with other repressive forces, such as capitalism, racism and casteism. In each of these hierarchical systems, those with less power become the victims of various kinds of oppression. Based on our analysis, we could then say that women are one such category

victimized by the collusion between patriarchy and capitalism. This perspective helps us to see how motherhood is located within these larger structures of power. It also tells us that in order to question some of the negative ways in which mothering roles impact women, we would need to begin by interrogating the larger power structures to which women and men belong.

6.5 MOTHERHOOD IN INDIAN CONTEXTS: URBAN-RURAL, CLASS AND CASTE DIVIDES

As you have already seen, the way motherhood is conceptualized and experienced is very often impacted by larger forces such as class, caste and ethnicity. Due to the patriarchal nature of Indian society, motherhood in Indian contexts is determined to a large extent by the cross-section of these forces. The impact of globalization and economic liberalization has created a complex class hierarchy in contemporary urban India, with each class aspiring towards the ones above it. The coming together of patriarchy and capitalism results in a culture of consumerism which promotes a greater objectification of women's bodies. This may have specific consequences for the maternal body. For instance, the maternal body tends to be valued for what it offers the patriarchal culture – the promise of offspring, especially male, who will continue to ensure the sustenance of patrilineal society. It is thus reduced to its reproductive function and identified primarily with the idea of the 'womb' as vessel or container. While the reproductive function is overvalued in this process, the maternal body is also desexualized because of it. In other words, such a body is envisioned as the chaste mother but not as lover or sexual partner. Similarly, the non-maternal but sexualized female body may be devalued since it is perceived primarily as sexual object. In both these cases, the 'personhood' of the woman and the mother is diminished since her *function* as 'reproducer' or as 'sexual object' is given more importance than any other identity. Thus, women in patriarchal societies may find themselves struggling to exert agency in terms of life decisions – decisions whose hold is often in the hands of male members - husbands, fathers, brothers, or the larger patriarchal family.

These influences have significant effects on different classes and castes, and for women across the urban/rural divide. For instance, in the urban middle classes, women, in their roles as mothers, are expected to be the upholders of traditional family values and impart the same to their children, even when some of these values may reinforce sexist perceptions towards girls and women. These may include the subordination of wives and daughters to the husband, or the subservience of wives to the in-laws. Mothers are also often expected to instill in daughters a sense of compromise and the ability to 'adjust' to difficult circumstances, especially those which demand that they put their own welfare behind that of male members. This may be something as small as giving up the choicest share of the family meal to a brother or father, or as substantial as the giving up of property rights by sisters in a silent recognition of their brothers' first right over inherited property. When mothers instill such values as instances of 'ideal behaviour' in their daughters, they nurture future generations of women and mothers who remain trapped in gender hierarchies.

6.5.1 Rural and Migrant Mothers

In the case of rural women, motherhood often comes at the cost of extreme danger to the lives of both mothers and their offspring. Poverty and lack of adequate healthcare facilities result in unwanted pregnancies and high mortality rates for mothers and infants. According to 2011 census data, sex ratio in India is 943 per 1000 males. The Maternal Mortality Rate is 167 according to 2011-2013 data. Additionally, taking care of young children is often a responsibility which is undertaken in competition with the urgent need to perform labour in fields, households, or factories. Rural women continue to face challenges and struggle for basic necessities in terms of nutrition, health and education for themselves and for their children. Due to a lack of educational and economic resources, they may lack access to contraceptive measures and consequently suffer from unwanted pregnancies at a risk to their health, or be unable to take decisions regarding the number of children they produce. Many rural women working in the agricultural sector perform labour both outside and inside the home; however, much of this work goes unrecognized due to gender biases. According to 2011 census, working hours of rural women (both Private and Public Sphere- Home and Agriculture Sector) is 25.6 and men is 51.7.

Rural migrant women in particular face extreme conditions in fulfilling maternal responsibilities. You may have noticed such women working at construction sites, often with babies and very young children left to take care of their own safety in dangerous conditions nearby. The option of providing security, nutrition and educational facilities to their children is something not available to many poor women both in urban and rural settings. Many migrant rural women are employed by middle-class and upper-class urban households as maids. Even when childcare and ‘mothering’ work is performed by maids, caste and class divides are almost always upheld. In terms of raising their own children, many rural and poor women are restricted by severe economic considerations. As you can see, mothering continues to remain embedded within the complex caste and class generated oppressions which define the lives of these women.

Even a brief look at urban and rural women from different classes and castes thus shows us that while women continue to shoulder domestic and economic burdens across classes, motherhood as an institution is determined by patriarchal forces beyond the control of the majority of women.

6.6 REPRODUCTION AND SURROGACY

Reproductive rights, or the right to choose when, how and whether or not to bear a child, are an indicator of women’s personal freedoms in many societies. In many western countries, the antagonism between ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pro-life’ groups is marked by religious as well as cultural factors. For instance, in the United States, the women’s movement struggled for many decades for the right of women to choose whether or not to carry through a pregnancy. In 1973, the Roe vs. Wade case awarding a single woman from Texas the right to terminate her pregnancy became a landmark judgment in terms of women’s reproductive autonomy (see <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1971/70-18>). In India, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 legalized abortion for women over the age of 18 (with written consent from a guardian in the case of unmarried women). However, despite legal rights, many cultural restrictions continue to limit the

choices that women can exert in terms of their reproductive rights. For instance, both female foeticide (termination of the life of a female fetus) and infanticide (killing of an infant girl within one year of her birth) remain ongoing problems in a culture which privileges sons and sees the girl-child as a burden, if not a curse to be borne by the family. Tandon and Sharma describe female infanticide in the following words: “It is a deliberate and intentional act of killing a female child within one year of its birth either directly by using poisonous organic and inorganic chemicals or indirectly by deliberate neglect to feed the infant by either one of the parents or other family members or neighbours or by the midwife” (Tandon & Sharma, 2006, 3). Although sex selection procedures have been declared illegal in India, many young mothers are still forced to go through these illegal procedures and to abort female fetuses. Female infanticide also remains a persistent problem across urban and rural India. The Infant Mortality Rate is 40 according to 2013 data.

Moreover, as we have previously noted, many girl children, even when they do survive, continue to suffer disadvantages in terms of nutrition, education, financial resources and employment opportunities. Adoption practices still reflect a ‘son bias’ in our nation, with a larger number of parents preferring to adopt male children. According to 2014 data, around 6,750 girls and 4,460 boys were adopted in India. Maharashtra tops the adoption count with 1,465 girls and 1,208 boys. From April to June 2015, child adoption centres across India have received around 1,240 requests from couples to adopt a girl against 718 requests for a boy.

As you have seen above, capitalist and consumerist forces exert a vast influence on the ongoing objectification of the maternal body. Surrogacy, which involves providing one’s womb for gestational purposes, very often in return for monetary advantages, has become a contested and hotly debated institution in India. Surrogate mothers often tend to be poor/ rural women who choose to rent out their wombs in exchange for financial benefits. Surrogate mothers perform a kind of ‘work’ which is monitored and controlled by those with greater power and resources (see Amrita Pande for a detailed discussion of this issue). Based on a ‘contract’ between biological parents and surrogate mothers, surrogacy is now treated as an ‘industry’. As such, it is an indicator of the influence of commercial and capitalist forces on mothering practices. Surrogacy can also be misused. Women who are severely constrained by poverty may ‘choose’ surrogacy as a method of economic survival. In such cases, it can lead to the exploitation of poor women’s bodies by those with greater financial resources, especially by foreigners looking for ‘cheap’ surrogacy options in third world countries. Although the state has imposed many regulations on surrogacy in India, with recent restrictions on non-Indian parents attempting to hire Indian surrogate mothers, it still remains an area of concern (see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/28/india-bans-foreigners-from-hiring-surrogate-mothers>). Surrogacy practices continue to reveal to us the extent to which the female body is perceived and utilized as a reproductive vessel, with little concern regarding the personal agency of women who choose to become mothers.

As you have seen, reproductive rights and reproductive practices are a reflection of the extent to which mothering as an institution is still deeply marred by gender, class and caste biases.

6.7 MOTHER-INDIA: MOTHERING AS METAPHOR AND REALITY

You may wonder why, in a country where we have worshipped the female form in the shape of goddesses for so many centuries, and where we continue to revere our goddesses alongside gods, mortal women face so many difficulties and challenges, and are placed at a social disadvantage compared to men. It is a well-known fact that mother-goddess worship holds an important place in the religious and cultural fabric of our country. Mothers have been worshipped in the form of idealized goddesses such as Sita, Lakshmi and Durga in many parts of the country. Mother-goddess worship goes back to pre-Vedic times and evidence of the worship of fertility goddesses has been traced back to the Indus valley and Harappa civilization (see Mandakranta Bose; Sukumari Bhattacharjee; Liddle & Joshi). The association of fecundity with the female body and the early dependence of ancient civilizations on agriculture as the chief mode of survival solidified the idealization of fertility mother-goddesses over time.

Despite these ancient ties to mother goddess worship, it is astonishing to note that in today's society, women continue to be denigrated, sexually violated, raped and killed just for being women. How do we explain this apparent contradiction? Feminist scholars have suggested that there was a gradual denigration of the female goddess from pre-Vedic to Vedic times due to a growing caste hierarchy and increasingly rigid patriarchal social structures (see Bose; Liddle & Joshi). Both territory and the female body play a significant role in sustaining the rigidity of these structures, since 'ownership' of both can be claimed and secured by men in patriarchy. Equated with 'territory,' the female body is viewed in terms of its potential to uphold patriliney – that is – the tracing of descendency from fathers to their male progeny. Just as territory can be protected and safeguarded against invasions by foreign forces within patriarchal structures, the female body gets projected as a site to be controlled. The purity and chastity of the maternal body plays a significant role in terms of maintaining caste and ethnic 'purity' of future offspring. The objectification of women's bodies, as 'vessels' of reproduction, helps to sustain patriarchal control over class and caste structures. Symbolic representations which associate the maternal body with territorial land are consequently embedded in culture, as seen in common expressions such as 'mother-earth' and 'mother-nation'. The association of the mother's body with that of the nation is deeply embedded in Indian culture, as can be seen in the iconic Bollywood film 'Mother India'. While the male son is projected as the brave soldier who will lay down his life in order to defend the honour of the nation personified as mother, this leaves very little space for the mother as individual outside of the mother-son relationship. It further serves to desexualize the maternal body and leaves women struggling to attain their status as subjects. In other words, the emphasis on female bodies as wombs and as territory to be controlled upholds the worship of women in their role as mothers and goddesses. But the flip side of this equation is the denigration of the sexualized female body when she is not seen primarily in her mothering role. Today, many feminists (for instance, see works by **Hélène Cixous** (1975) and **Bracha Ettinger** (1995) are questioning such oppressive portrayals of mothering and exploring the maternal in a positive light by interpreting maternal energy with artistic creativity.

6.8 CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND BREAKTHROUGHS

In her well-known book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), **Nancy Chodorow** had argued in favour of the practice of shared parenting as the only way out of the conundrum in which the burden of mothering is placed squarely on the shoulders of women, and keeps them from achieving their full human potential. Since then, many feminist scholars have shown us the way forward in terms of transforming the perceptions and practice of motherhood from the perspective of gender equity. Much work has been done in this regard in the fields of mothering and psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, history, education and science, among others. Across the world, feminist scholarship and research on motherhood continues to generate new ways of re-examining and experiencing mothering.

Although we have seen how motherhood, as an institution, remains embroiled in age-old gender biases in India, it is also true that we are beginning to see many positive changes during contemporary times, such as availability of paternity leaves for single fathers. As more and more urban and rural women begin to gain educational capabilities, employment and economic independence, they are able to chart out their individual destinies as women and mothers with greater degrees of freedom. Traditional family and social structures still continue to limit the choices that women make in terms of marriage and motherhood; however, these structures are also adapting to the personal freedoms which women are acquiring through educational and professional opportunities. As an increasing number of men become active participants in parenting and childcare, gender relations begin to reflect a more equitable balance between genders, and both motherhood and fatherhood are re-defined. Public as well as private policies in favour of the girl child, education for girls, employment opportunities for women, improved maternal and child healthcare, and extended maternity as well as paternity leaves, all help to provide a more secure environment within which women can define their roles as mothers in more personally satisfactory ways. These are all promising signs for the future.

6.9 SUMMING UP

In this Unit, you have seen how motherhood is inextricably linked to gender roles in patriarchal societies such as ours. Through a critical analysis of the impact of patriarchy on mothering practices across urban and rural divides, and class and caste structures, we have attempted to unravel some of the detrimental effects of hierarchical social structures on women who mother. We have also seen the impact of increasing consumerism on the maternal body, especially in practices such as surrogacy. The impact of cultural legacies on the representation of maternal roles has also been examined. These discussions would have helped you to develop a critical insight on a very important aspect of women's lives, namely, mothering. An introduction to feminist perspectives would have also enabled you to identify some affirmative perceptions of mothering, both as lived reality and as metaphor.

(A few of the ideas discussed here have been adapted from the Unit “Maternal Bodies in Urban India”, MWG 004, Gendered Bodies & Sexualities, 193-208, MA in Women's & Gender Studies Programme, IGNOU, 2013).

6.10 KEY WORDS

Maternal Mortality Rate: Maternal Mortality Rate is number of women who die from pregnancy related causes while pregnant or within 42 days of pregnancy termination per 100000 live births.

Workers Participation rate: The participation rate refers to the number of people who are either employed or are actively looking for work.

Under Five Mortality rate: Under five mortality rate is the probability per 1000 that a new born will die before reaching age five, if subject to age-specific mortality rates of the specified year.

Infant Mortality Rate: The infant mortality rate (IMR) is the number of deaths of infants under one-year-old per 1,000 live births.

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6.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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6.13 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What impact do stereotypical gender roles have on motherhood practices in India? Discuss with the help of suitable examples from day to day life.
- 2) Do you think that caste and class differences matter in terms of motherhood? Explain with the help of examples that you may have come across.
- 3) Discuss some obvious links between patriarchy, capitalism and surrogacy in your own words.
- 4) What do you understand by the notion of the mother-nation as ‘maternal metaphor’? Explain in your own words.