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Shadow of Motherhood: Writing the Outlier Self

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In the Shadow of Motherhood: Writing the Outlier Self.

Wifehood, it is held, is always personal, but motherhood is the abandonment of personality, the core of renunciation (Advaita Ashrama, 1912).

Among all presuppositions that cultural imaginaries and social practices harbor about the female self, procreation has been seen as women's default and ultimate purpose. In the Indian ethos, motherhood is their a priori *dharma*, a term that also connotes righteous, moral duty. Social rhetoric is suffused with maternal tropes: "Every woman is a mother in embryo. That is her supreme function in life. That is her social mission", said Lala Lajpat Rai, a leader of India's independence movement (Kishwar 1999). Vivekananda, an acclaimed 19th century saint said "the ideal woman in India is the mother...marvellous, unselfish, all-suffering..." (Vivekananda 1951). A popular religious manual for Hindu women states "The word 'Ma' has an inexplicable purity...the foundation of true love requires forgoing self-interest and the supreme form of such love can be seen in mothers' love...(it) does not have the stench of sexual desire...she is not corrupted by selfishness..." (Dawar 1948: 202). Such idioms are not a relic of India's past but thrive contemporaneously as women continue to be seen and see themselves as mothers—imagined, symbolic and corporeal. The normative Woman-Mother animates its cinema, literature and even government programmesⁱ and policiesⁱⁱ. Of late, she has inspired India's multi-million dollar surrogacy industry and even state-funded IVF centres, a far cry from enforced sterilizations and the mass family planning drive of the 1970s. Such is the cultural clout of motherhood that it leaves women with little or no choice about their own identity and aspirations.

Clearly then, among all gendered roles, motherhood is a rich realm to understand what we have come to know and refer to as the 'self'ⁱⁱⁱ. Self-sacrifice, self-abnegation or simply selflessness are assumed, expected and extolled as inherently feminine and specifically maternal traits. Be it judges in the Bombay High Court who observed that "A wife should be like goddess Sita who left everything and followed her husband Lord Ram to a forest..."^{iv} or the Irish authorities who neglected a dying woman to save her unborn child^v, the principle of coverture or the refusal of law to recognize rape within marriage, women's selfhood is commonly negated through values that legitimize its surrender.

While women do not passively inhabit such pre-existing, hegemonic figurations that preordain their self-identities, the omnipotence of maternal prescription and the consequent heteronomy that women's lives are subject to cannot be denied. In these conditions of pervasive normativity, this paper asks if there is scope, however limited, for women to

envision their selves? Who has a self that is truly of her own making? Can women's selves be free of naturalization and its symbolic meaning and violence? Where and under what circumstances can such a self be staged? Is there a possibility of a complete or true account of this self?

This paper seeks to tweak these queries by focusing on what I refer to as the maternal outlier, the female self that is non-compliant with or defies social-imperatives and/or religious injunctions of motherhood. Given the performativity and staging involved in "good" mothering narratives (Pollock 1999), how do 'deviant' female subjects negotiate this terrain? Specifically, what about the self and narration of (a) the voluntary non-mother (henceforth childfree) and (b) the mother with counter-hegemonic models/experiences of mothering? Unlike in the West where the childfree are relatively more common, vocal and condoned if not accepted, in highly pronatalist India they are rare^{vi}, objectionable and therefore closeted.^{vii} Given the normalization of women's 'natural' identities, their counter-cultural ideas and practices often invite stigma, hence making narration difficult^{viii}. Thanks to their culturally unintelligible stance, they have to explain their "unnatural" selves because "non-reproductive sexuality is enough to constitute abnormality" (Thadani 1999: 151). Standing in sharp relief to endorsed visions of the female self, they are derided as "selfish" or "abnormal". This makes theorizing these maternal outliers' narration academically pertinent: their unspeakable or discomfiting testimonies offer rich epistemic subjectivities about envisioning their lives. Their narration about motherhood can furnish accounts of internalized gender regimes and, specifically, struggles against a biologically prescriptive 'self'.

Faced with an onslaught of dominant mothering discourse and surveillance, I am interested in exploring what "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988: 18) do maternal outliers employ to compose their alternate self and stage it publically? With the ontological mismatch between their own sense of self and 'imagined' subjects of proper womanhood, how do transgressive women speak and where? If the post structuralist account is agnostic about the 'self', how can a non-self proclaim agency? By raising these queries, I aim to showcase the discursive openings and constrictions of stigmatized selves as also the cultural work that narrations perform in creating alternate female ethics. Tied to wider feminist explorations that promote women's voices, I seek to foreground complexities in narration and contribute to the self-agency debate. My aim is to place the maternal self within theoretical debates so as to explore ways of making women's personhood fuller, their 'choices' authentic and 'self'-determined via freedom from biocentrism and the cultural compulsions it creates. It is a small attempt to

explore whether the maternal outlier can contribute to the self-theorization project from a feminist standpoint.

The following examples of self-narration suggest how narration can not only be a uniquely tricky experience for the non-compliant female subject, but that it even exposes its own exigencies, vulnerabilities and vagaries besides those of the so-called self.

It is easier to get sympathy by saying that I'm trying to start a family. Rather than declaring, I'm not interested (a childfree woman as quoted in *The Times of India*, 2008).

I did not know then that I had a choice. I thought that just like all other women, I too will have children someday. All women are supposed to have children, no? Married at 20 to an alcoholic...I was naïve and innocent. I did not even know I was pregnant till I fell very ill. Everyone around me said being a mother is the next big thing after marriage? (Yamini, 38 years old, during an interview)

...you do end up manufacturing your image...sort of...to convey that you are a decent human being, not a heartless person. There is this attack on your autonomy. But I do it when I feel like it. (Priya, a 46 year old childfree woman)

Terming lack of or deficit in maternal love as “the ultimate taboo in most societies”, a respondent on the blog *The Indian Homemaker* remarked:

I waited for maternal love to overcome me – it didn't. After my baby was born, I didn't feel anything...neither did my husband... all the stuff about how a mother falls in love with her child at first sight was rubbish...

Given the dissonance between disembodied maternal abstractions (“the symbol of altruism, love and self-sacrifice”; Ananda 1994: 7) and their antithetical embodied subjectivities, it is not surprising that I found these “discursive insurgents” (Meyers 2002) in greater numbers on the blogosphere than in flesh. Their often-anonymous or pseudonymized online exchanges convey the paradox of their struggles—to be silent, yet be heard and not misunderstood. The safety of online space allows them candid critique of biological essentialism, mocking of maternal protocols and taboos, questioning performativities, and vetting dissident experiences^{ix}. Their dialectics throw light on women's attempts to curate their identities, manage stigma as well as personal and public anxieties^x. They uncover an alternate ‘self’ as it were, besides diverse ways of imagining, appropriating and re-appropriating womanhood, both without and within motherhood. Yet, this is done while the narrator is either

camouflaged or camouflages her account to fit sanctioned speech. I posit that this has implications for the faith we place on narration.

My next point of focus is the nature of self. I find that it is in these transgressive self-portraits about choices and practices vis-à-vis motherhood that the myth of an original, definitive and autonomous self gets busted. Based on accounts that contest notions of ‘real’ (natural) womanhood, the self comes across as contingent, unsteady, resistant yet socio-culturally embedded, not autonomous but seeking autonomy. The childfree woman, for example, gets seen as “deviant” largely in pronatalist communities that mandate childbearing for women. Besides, every “no” to motherhood may not always be a “no” to the role *per se* but to its conditions and demands. It may also be vital to note that while self-meaning and identity are provisional and contextual, they are likely to be experienced as stable and fixed (Mouffe 1992). Located at the convergence of discursivities and gendered mandates, both the maternal and non-maternal subjects are constructed in narratives that simultaneously negotiate internalized roles, social imperatives, autonomy and incapacities. They expose subtle or overwhelming duress as well as degrees of agency that influence women along or against pre-existent yardsticks. By breaking barriers of cultural entrenchment and feminine imagery, they open up wider horizons and an array of imaginative possibilities for women to choose from, of course within the unchosen structures that nurture degrees of so-called ‘choice’.

Any analysis of the self is also bound to raise the old-but-vexing issue about socially or self-constituted subjects. Without rehearsing the larger (and voluminous) academic scholarship on the self^{xi} or its narrative construction (Ricoeur 1991, Somers 1994 among others), I restrict my comment to broad critiques of classical liberalism and post structuralism respectively. Seeing subjects as self-constituted has often meant evoking the archaic notions of Enlightenment, whereas emphasizing their socio-cultural foundations is understood to undermine the agentic self, the “deed without doer”. My argument is that the maternal outlier suggests that such a dichotomy is too neat for what seems to be more complex. From the post structuralist vantage point, the socially constituted self does not eradicate or cripple agency, since both agency and ‘self’ get configured within the same wellspring where self and culture co-constitute each other, and where norms and deviance are birthed and stalled. The resistant ‘self’ too takes shape in the simultaneously free and unfree circumstances of women’s lives; agency emerges in reaction to a denied opportunity. It is useful at this juncture to recall Butler’s clarification that a subject being constituted by discourse is not the same as being determined by discourse (Butler 1990). Despite the almost inescapable maternal phantasms that comprise our resexual human order, non-normative maternal voices signal that a

revision of the norm, the active and strategic creation of a 'self' and navigation of one's direction is possible. To make this navigational capacity a regular part of women's lives, I endorse Meyers' project about developing women's autonomy skills for self-envisioning (Meyers 2004) even though its practical feasibility remains questionable.

It must be said that even as one calls the self "shifty", it is embodied and situated (Code 2011), emerging during and within narration as it endeavors to constitute and/or reconstitute itself. Among others, Code (2011: 718) shifts the focus of self-theorists from the 'what' of self to the hitherto unthought 'who' so as to underline epistemologies that undergrid dominant constructions of self in the philosophical canon. Yet, this 'self' is more than Daniel Dennett's (1992) view of a fictional, abstract 'self' and less than the narrative self of the hermeneutics position^{xii}. This in-between view is articulated by Gallagher as, "Narrative is not simply a retrospective shadow that follows the self; rather it helps us to shape what we will become and thereby contribute to our self identity" (2011: 15). While theorists have rightly debated the degree of this "contribution", I find online narration on women's blogs to have a collective character that can be disruptive. Yet, does the self necessarily need the narrative to anchor itself, as claimed by narrative theorists? Dan Zahavi, among others, counters that it is not selfhood that needs narratives but the other way round—narratives need a self to begin themselves from (Zahavi 2007: 200).

Instead of drawing such causal relations, the feminist philosophical reconstructions of the self bring to light a heterogeneous and intersubjective picture that does away with explanations of linear causalities. Among the most influential theorizations on the issue is done by Kristeva (1987) who saw the self as rudimentary and work-in-progress, understood better through the feminine "semiotic" (unlike the masculine symbolic). She argued that semiotic expressions of language reveal the unspeakable and subjective, and are therefore ethical and suitable for feminist aims. For Chodorow (1981) too, feminine values deserve recognition though her view of the self is relational and essentially traced to maternal care. Even as these conceptualizations augment the feminine subject and self, they can also be seen to deepen gender identities, binaries and roles. Butler's explanations of the self, on the other hand, expose discursivities that first fabricate a gendered sense of self that is tethered to one's biology and then trigger a series of so-called suitable behaviours and identities. Not only is she suspicious of the 'self', her caveat about over-reliance on narration is particularly useful at this juncture "...the very terms by which we give an account...make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our

“singular” stories are told” (Butler 2003: 21). By arguing that one’s feminine self is anything but “one’s” “*feminine*” “*self*”, the maternal outlier enables us to see the pre-existent feminine mold of a self and thereby understand the difficulties of self-discovery, self-envisioning, self-determination or self-empowerment.

In conclusion, I would like to underline that as a public norm and a private value, motherhood is central to women’s lives and hence to their accounts. Yet, even though the self has been engendered by earlier theoretical and philosophical scholarship, we are yet to fully maternalize it. The maternally-overshadowed female self is currently an overlooked theoretical resource but one with substantive potential to plug an epistemological deficit in the debates on the self. Even though post structuralist and feminist positions deny the possibility of a sovereign, autonomous self, the post-humanist struggle for women’s fulsome lives as agentic subjects remains indispensable. As these insurgent accounts reveal, their counter-current disruptions or subversions can augur fuller currencies of what liberals will call “selfhood” and I will prefer to think of as robust agency.

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i See Rao 2000 and Kumar 2006.

ii The Indian government's Child Care Leave policy institutionalizes the socio-cultural role of women as mothers by letting *only* women avail the leave that is aimed at "...*taking care of up to two children whether for rearing or to look after any of their needs like examination, sickness etc*". It is the most unabashed compartmentalization of gendered childcare arrangements that enshrines sexual division of labour within families and "mommy tracks" female workers.

iii Normative philosophical understandings of the 'self' have broadly based themselves on two primary perspectives—Kant's ethical subject and the homo economicus. While both imagine the individual as rational and autonomous, this similarity is also the node for differences between the two; they employ reason for different ends. These two conceptions of the 'self' seem free from influences of larger socio-economic structures, human inter-connectedness as well as the messy dynamics of the unconscious, among others.

iv

These remarks were made by Justices P B Majmudar and Anoop Mohta during hearing an appeal filed by a man. He sought divorce from his wife because she refused to relocate with him to another state where he was being transferred by his employers. (Source: *The Times of India* 2012).

v

Savita Halappanavar died in an Irish hospital after being denied abortion because "Ireland is a Catholic country". (Waterfield 2013).

vi

There are no statistics to gauge the actual percentage of the childfree in India, even as it seems from news reports that their public visibility and numbers have increased over time. They do not seem to make a critical mass yet to count as a viable 'category' of data and may be enumerated

under the 'childless' in state records such as the Indian census.

vii

On the blog *Childfree Latha*, the author states: "I am in early 40s, married and childless. I haven't ever regretted not becoming a mother!...In India, the 'default' way of life is highly valued... grow up, study, get employed, get married, have kids...I have met a few people who chose to remain single, but *to date haven't met a single couple who said they chose not to have children. Not even in big cities...*so I have begun a 'research' project to identify, get connected with childfree couples". (Source: <http://childfreelatha.wordpress.com/author/childfreelatha/>).

viii

A news report refers to the childfree as "...a loose canon, a new class in urban India...with no social encouragement for such stands" (Source: Guha 2011).

Another newspaper article quotes a "senior gynecologist" as saying: "We even get cases where women who have accidentally conceived would come for MTPs. And it's amazing how they have no regrets". (Source: Divya 2008)

ix

"I think it is good news that we are coming together like this and speaking up. We need to support each other mentally. Reading this article has helped me...thank you because I was always worried and felt forced into giving in by relatives/in laws/ parents. I have also resolved NOT TO SUCCUMB EVER!! THANK YOU AGAIN for creating this wonderful blog..." (Blog: *Childfree by Choice India*)

"We are taught to be ashamed if we do not love the baby immediately but it would be much more helpful if people were to talk about all these things openly. We are so bent on keeping up a perfect image of motherhood that nobody wants to talk of the shit that goes behind it". (Blog: *The Indian Homemaker*)

x

"Every day I dodge bullets of suspicion...and canon balls of emotional blackmail. My reproductive system has become an exhibit.....examples of happy 'complete' families are being thrown on our

faces...” (Source: *Childfree by Choice India* blog)

xi

Philosophers and theoreticians have put forward a range of different explanations, interpretations and variations of the ontology of the self—from the no-self to multiple selves, minimal self to narrative self, embodied and socially-constructed self, among others. See Gallagher 2011.

xii

In Dennett’s view, the self is fictional abstraction, a product of the mind that acts as a centre of narrative gravity. The hermeneutics position, held by Schechtman and others, proposes that it is in narrative that the self and one’s life are formed. For more, see Gallagher 2011.