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## Rebellious Perspectives: Three Postwar American Texts about Motherhood

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Three Second Wave Feminist texts that are considered now as part of a wider rich American feminist heritage of the 1970s and 1980s revolve around motherhood and mothering to investigate the possibility of finding the female within the mother. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) by Adrienne Rich, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) by Nancy J. Chodorow and *The Mother/daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1986) by Marianne Hirsch, all analyze how motherhood is produced within a patriarchal system. Although their concentration on the female reproductive potential is controversial, all three texts turn to the patriarchal discourse reimagine the feminine subject outside essentialist traditional social structures.

As the earliest of the three, Rich's book lends a voice to females upon its publication in 1976. *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* pulses with life as Adrienne Rich gives the reader an opportunity to peer into her experience as a mother. Still, the book offers a wide scope that encompasses the experiences mothers of various cultures and ages. The book's many reprints (on 1979, 1981, 1984, 1986, 1991 and 1995) is proof of its impact on women's eagerness to readjust perceptions of their status as mothers. It succeeds to offer a glimpse at the social circumstances surrounding female rights in the 70s onwards.

The book's main argument lies within the title which weighs institutionalized "patriarchal motherhood"<sup>1</sup> against a natural experience of motherhood, unbridled by the stiff rules of patriarchy, freeing the mother as an individual (Rich 263). The author refers to primitive society in various chapters to illustrate a pre-patriarchal stage in human social development where mothers were physically and psychologically healthier and more in tune with themselves. The rigid grip of patriarchy is illustrated in each of these chapters to demonstrate both its causes and effects in deforming the experience of motherhood and womanhood. The author designates the incongruity between women's social reality and patriarchy's demands as the main reason for the rejection of motherhood.

The author adorns the 1991 reprint of the book with a new introduction entitled "Ten Years Later: a new Introduction"<sup>2</sup> to display the development in perceptions of the experience of motherhood (Rich 1). The new introduction,

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, (London: Virago, 1991), pp, 263.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp, 1.

pessimistically, reviews the hurdles in women's rights to abortion by arguing of the "personhood"<sup>3</sup> of the fetus while ignoring the "personhood" of the mother (Rich 8). The introduction also refers to an "exploitive"<sup>4</sup> child-care system that offers services to the few who can afford it (Rich 25). 'Ten years later', the author laments the persistence of a patriarchal system to frame the experience of motherhood in order to accommodate the system's rules and demands.

Rich is successful at exposing the role of patriarchy at distorting motherhood. The author points out that when females have the power to "choose the terms of their lives" they threaten patriarchal systems (Rich 43)<sup>5</sup>. These systems consequently need to regulate this power<sup>6</sup>. She provides a number of examples where patriarchy utilizes motherhood to render females as powerless. For instance, Femaleness is associated with impurity (Rich 102-7)<sup>7</sup>. The transference of midwifery to male doctors who are naturally unfamiliar with birth and treat it as an illness is another image of the regulated female power. It renders females passive<sup>8</sup> and alienates them to their bodies (Rich 139). Their choices and knowledge over their bodies is ignored and trivialized. Moreover, regulated motherhood is an integral part of the patriarchal "division of labor"<sup>9</sup> that secures power within a specific class (Rich 122).

The disfigured experience of motherhood bares itself in the constant feeling of "guilt" experienced by mothers who struggle to fit in the mold of patriarchal motherhood (Rich 25)<sup>10</sup>. It shows itself in the deformed relation with both the son and daughter. The son is branded if he is close with his mother. The mother is programmed to give him up to be an *other* and be in the "image of the father" (Rich 195)<sup>11</sup>. The daughter is exposed to experience "matrophobia"<sup>12</sup> because she will naturally be afraid to mother a child (Rich 235). The reason for this fear is imbedded in the stressed experience of motherhood passed on to her from her mother as an "affliction" (Rich 243-4)<sup>13</sup>. The book draws attention to the marginalization of social reality in patriarchal systems. The author points out Freudian psychoanalysis as an example of these social constructs where the philosopher refers to "penis envy" as a natural stage of development while ignoring the social circumstances that led to this envy<sup>14</sup> in which males are put on a pedestal because of their gender (Rich 198).

The rejection of motherhood within the current social reality of the seventies is carefully justified. It criticizes perceptions of the rejection of motherhood that might

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp 34

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp 102-7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp, 235.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp, 243-4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp, 198.

extend to infanticide as “pathological” (Rich 263)<sup>15</sup>. It brings new light to the case of females who choose to be ‘barren’ and resort to abortion or birth control only to be considered as less feminine (Rich 29)<sup>16</sup>. Rejection of motherhood is revealed as a last resort of resistance to patriarchy’s rules and regulations. It delineates the transformation of the bonds between mother and child into shackles.

One of the strengths of the book is its command in representing the necessity of a woman’s individuality and independence from her child. The author acknowledges that mothers are biologically responsive to their child’s needs (Rich 36)<sup>17</sup>. Yet, the convergence between the child and the self, stipulated by patriarchy, creates a state where the self disappears or changes its form. The idealistic demands of motherhood place mothers in a state of bondage. The author describes her need to be “salvaged” from motherhood, which is hardly natural from a social perspective (Rich 23)<sup>18</sup>. Natural motherhood is supposed to flow from a mother’s connection with her child. In a touching delineation of the author’s attempt to break away from the social rules of motherhood, she spends a summer with her children away from her husband. The author frees herself from the typical rules about care for her kids and her husband. Her children enjoy a stress free mother. More importantly, she manages to find time to write. She describes the experience as one of the most liberating experiences in her life as a mother (Rich 194)<sup>19</sup>. *Of Women Born* suggests saving the experience of motherhood from its patriarchal bondage to its natural state where the identity of the mother is nurtured along with her child. It hopes for a time when females can freely take choices that harmonize with their physical and psychological well-being.

Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* is more reliant on psychoanalysis than Rich’s book to analyze the environment in which mothering is attached to femaleness. The book starts by reviewing both the argument about the biological predisposition for mothering and the counter argument about the socially conscious training of girls for their roles as mothers.

The author then devotes the second part of her book by reviewing the argument from psychoanalysis that suggests that girls are psychologically predisposed to mothering because of their identification with their mothers. The author uses a wide range of psychoanalytic research in this section. She utilizes clinical cases and cultural research to prove that mothers-both consciously and unconsciously - rear their children differently because of the influence of social assumptions which influences her child’s gender identification process. This identification is analyzed starting with the process of “primary identification” or “oneness” with the mother

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp, 263.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp, 194.

when the child is unaware of his separateness or difference from her. This oneness, arguably, makes a female “regress” to that experience as an adult and repeat it to her own child(Rich 87)<sup>20</sup>.

The author then argues that a process of “learning” is involved which distinguishes boys from girls(Rich 89)<sup>21</sup>. Otherwise, both boys and girls will both be nurturers to their children. Both experienced a process of identification with their mother because “[a]ll people have the relational bases for parenting if they are themselves parented” (Rich 88)<sup>22</sup>. The conscious process of learning that takes place in a patriarchal social environment is revealed by a number of examples one of which is the different sleeping arrangements for boys and girls during early infancy. The mother “may push her son out of his preoedipal relationship to her” because she considers him to be a sexual “other”. The author reports the concerns of some psychoanalysts that if this separateness between mother and son does not take place as soon as possible, it will later affect the son’s “independence and masculine self-identification” (Rich 106-7)<sup>23</sup>. The preoedipal connection between mother and daughter however, is “prolonged” (Rich 108)<sup>24</sup>. This clearly points to what the author calls as the “gender differences in the preoedipal period, differences that are a product of the asymmetrical organization of parenting which founds our family structure”(Rich 109)<sup>25</sup>. Another case pointing towards the conscious process of mothering is the case of the ‘asymbiotic’ mothers who fail to experience oneness with their children. They do not respond to their children in their preoedipal period. The case reveals that when the daughter displayed signs of separation from their mothers. The mothers become ‘hypersymbiotic’. They “treated their daughters and cathected them as narcissistic physical and mental extensions of themselves” (Rich 100)<sup>26</sup>. When the need for mothering.

Both examples prove that mothering is linked to females in a conscious social process that assigns different roles to both boys and girls. The second example specifically brings to mind what Rich describes as a passing of the ‘affliction’ of femininity from mother to daughter. Mothering is socially reproduced in children by rearing them according to specific gender roles that makes them internalize their experiences differently and socially modifying their behavior according to their gender. The author presents the role of social reality in forming assumptions about gender and expectations of gender role.

The book is concluded by the author’s main argument that society plays a main role in the reproduction of mothering by arguing that a girl is ‘expected’ to

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp,87.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp,88.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp106-7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp108.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp109.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp,100.

identify with her mother in order to “learn her adult gender role”(Rich 177)<sup>27</sup>. The author, however, maintains that boys “are taught to be masculine more consciously than girls are taught to be feminine” because she thinks that the structure of the nuclear family absents the father, as a bread winner, and makes identification with him more difficult. The identification with the mother, because she is available, becomes easier. Masculine identification requires a process of conscious learning through the “cultural stereotype of the masculine” (Rich 176)<sup>28</sup>. Girls, the author maintains, learn “interpersonal” roles<sup>29</sup>. This refers to the process of mothering internalized within the daughter proving the repression of this same “interpersonal” role in boys and replacing it with a role of separateness. By denying their “affective relationship with their mothers”,<sup>30</sup> boys repress a role of child nurturing because they are socially programmed to do so (Rich 177).

Published two years later in 1978, the book poses similar issues to Rich’s book but uses different tools to analyze them. While it agrees with Rich’s hypothesis of the natural connection between mother and child specifically revealed in the biological reaction of lactation, Chodorow draws attention to the limit of this period in the human’s life (Chodorow 29)<sup>31</sup>. The author instead points that the relation between a mother and child is “strongly internalized and psychologically enforced” (Rich 39)<sup>32</sup>. This positions the process of motherhood as a social construct influencing females. The second similarity between Rich and Chodorow’s theory about motherhood is the environment in which motherhood is associated with femaleness. The author links the role of the division of labor within the family in reproducing gendered roles. She states that

the family division of labor in which women mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself. This engendering of men and women with particular personalities, needs, defenses and capacities creates the condition for and contributes to the reproduction of this same division of labor... Women’s mothering as an institutionalized feature of family life and of the sexual division of labor reproduces itself cyclically (Chodorow 38-9)<sup>33</sup>.

Patriarchal social systems are identified by both authors as the main source of the association between motherhood and females. Chodorow links it specifically to Capitalism and the structure of the nuclear family (180-90)<sup>34</sup>. One last similarity between concepts of mothering suggested in both books is the unrealistic demands of motherhood that “cannot be fulfilled”. These demands are described to create “strains” on women especially if they play the role of both the mother and member of the labor force. Chodorow however does not draw enough attention to main victim of

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp,177.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp, 176.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp, 177

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978-1979), pp, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp, 38-9

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pp, 180-90.

this strain as she includes both men and children as sufferers from this strain in the family structure<sup>35</sup>. More importantly, Chodorow does not refer to the effects of these strains on the reaction of females to the process of mothering that might display itself in the *rejection* of going through this process.

The book is particularly useful in supporting the argument about the possibility of rejection of motherhood through various points. First, if mothering is part of the learned role of females isn't there a possibility of a failure in the learning of that role? Does this learning process guarantee that all aspects of the social expectations of females will be conveyed and internalized by the female? A child who experiences preoedipal identification with the mother also experiences a "separateness" from her because she is unaware of her "individuated whole self" (Chodorow 69)<sup>36</sup>. The child will interpret this separateness with the mother as an "instinctual rejection by the mother" (Chodorow 69)<sup>37</sup>. This early rejection is likely to be part of the identification process because the identification with the mother is not limited to oneness. Separateness interpreted as rejection is also a pattern that is included in the process of identification with the mother. The author generally discusses this issue when she discusses how mothers re-experience their childhood in order to replicate the process of mothering. She maintains that any "unresolved" issues from the mother's own childhood will produce a "conflict" (Chodorow 90)<sup>38</sup>. Another point in support of the possibility of the rejection of motherhood is presented when the author revises the Freudian theory of girls who turn their desire from their mother to their father because he has a penis. The daughters will, later, "change from wanting a penis from their father to wanting a child from him through an unconscious symbolic equation of penis and child" (Chodorow 94)<sup>39</sup>. The revision lies within the author's hypothesis that object-relations with the father are not possible in a nuclear family in which the father is separated from his children as nurturer. The father, Chodorow maintains, "has never presented himself to a girl with the same force as her mother...he is not the same primary internal object as her mother and therefore, finally, counteract his daughter's primary identification with and attachment with her mother" (140)<sup>40</sup>. This consequently refutes Freud's theory of object-relation based on the father. If the daughter does not identify the absent father's penis as an object of desire because he is absent, then, she is most likely to be unable to be involved in the process of substituting her desire for her father's penis with a desire for a child. In other words, the desire for a child is not an integral part of the girl's psychic structure as suggested by Freud. The potentiality of the rejection of motherhood displays itself in the book again in the case of the "asymbiotic" mothers<sup>41</sup>. These mothers are "unable to participate empathetically in a relationship to their child" when it needed

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, pp, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pp, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp, 94

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp, 140.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp, 100.

symbioses and experienced oneness with them. The case is borrowed from a research that represents this case as “psychopathological”. These mothers become “hybersymbiotic” when their daughters “practice physical separateness”. This causes a “prolongation of the preoedipal relationship” between mother and daughter<sup>42</sup> in which the daughter will “duplicate many features of their mothers... psychotic symptoms” (Chodorow 100)<sup>43</sup>. The possibility of the rejection of mothering a child is clear in this case because the later empathy of the mother towards her child might be a result of her identification with her gender not an acceptance of her as a child that needs oneness.

What is noteworthy about the book is its critical stand point against Freudian analysis as what is described as “the obvious condescension, if not misogyny”<sup>44</sup> in the Freudian perception of females (Chodorow 143-55). The biological determinism in which Freud analyzes females adheres to the norms of a patriarchal culture that is exposed in the book as contradictory. This reactionary analysis to Freud points out an assumed correlation between a traditional gender role and a psychological development.

*The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* by Marianne Hirsch is another book that is critical of the Freudian psychoanalysis for its role in posing the mother as an object, in preoedipal and oedipal formations, and limiting the process of revealing her subjectivity in a patriarchal tradition<sup>45</sup>. The idea of “the institutionalization”<sup>46</sup> of motherhood is, also, discussed in this book to suggest a model according to which conventional motherhood is designed (Hirsch 14). Published seven years later, the book is especially critical of Chodorow’s approach in *The Reproduction of Mothering* because it limits the analysis of mothering to the perspective of the child and marginalizing the mother as subject (Hirsch 169)<sup>47</sup>.

The book attempts to find a maternal voice in the revised narration of the daughter. The author approaches realist, modernist and Post-modernist texts to identify two kinds of plots from the perspectives of daughters. The first found in both Realist and Modernist texts is the “family romance” which is centered on the elimination of the mother, attachment to males in the family and giving access to the daughter in the plot (Hirsch 129)<sup>48</sup>. The other kind is what she calls as ‘the feminine family romance’ in which the daughter still has access to the plot in the post-modernist text. Yet, the plot also depends on the elimination of the father in order to highlight the daughter’s independence the oedipal structures (Hirsch 129)<sup>49</sup>. The

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pp, 143-154-5.

<sup>45</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), Pp, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pp, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, Pp, 169.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp, 129.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

author identifies them as *romances* because she wants to highlight the element of “fantasy” and “wish-fulfilment”<sup>50</sup> in narration. The daughter in this case relates an idealistic situation in which she emerges as a subject. In the case of post-modernist plots, the mother/daughter plot is not narrated in a linear structure, narration is dependent on “opposition, interruption and contradiction” to avoid what the author describes as “self-defeating” linear traditional structures(Hirsch 10).

The book identifies two main reasons for the inaccessible maternal voice in narration through the psychological process of the subject formation of the mother. The first is the objectification of the mother in psychoanalysis. Thus, Hirsch identifies the failure of psychoanalysis in representing the objectified maternal subject. The author goes farther to identify Kristeva’s failure to represent the maternal experience represented through “Kristevan poetics” which “appropriates the maternal discourse” in a process of identified “otherness”. She asserts that this attempt at the “metonymization of the maternal- a deferral, postponement, putting off- is as she herself admits, not a significant departure from the posture traditionally imposed on women...Kristevan maternal discourse remains firmly embedded in structures of representation which places the mother outside or on the margin” (Hirsch 172-3)<sup>51</sup>.

The book explores representation of the mother’s anger from a psychoanalytic perspective. The author contrasts it to the anger of the father only to reveal the perceptions of a mother’s anger as perverse because she is the assumed sole provider of nurturing. It is almost criminalized (Hirsch 37)<sup>52</sup>. This anger is an assertion of her ‘self-interest’ which is a sign of her emerging subjectivity, a subjectivity that is forbidden in the domain of motherhood (Hirsch 170)<sup>53</sup>. The threatening perversion of the mother’s anger is contrasted with the father’s anger in which it appears as a source of power which highlights the patriarchal structures of psychoanalysis (Hirsch 38)<sup>54</sup>.

The inseparable experience of mothering from social and political context is another hurdle at the psychological representation of the maternal subject. The political domain in which the mother’s voice emerges does not apply to the desired psychological model in which the mother as subject is hoped to emerge. As a case in point, the author analyzes a number of texts by African-American novelists. The texts clearly reveal the voice of the African- American mother. However, that voice appears only as inspired by the resistance to slavery or racism (Hirsch 29)<sup>55</sup>. The psychological representation of the maternal subject outside of the political context resists representation (Hirsch 196)<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 172-3

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp,37.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp, 170.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pp,38.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pp, 29

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pp, 196

Having established the limitations of the psychological representation of the maternal subject, the author suggests the mother/daughter plot structure to highlight the daughter's role as a subject. This role revolves around a process of revision that is available to post-structuralist texts. The "open-endedness" gives way for a "transformation"<sup>57</sup> allowing the daughter to connect the past of the mother with her present to reveal both her story and her mother's story through an act of memory<sup>58</sup> and revision (Hirsch 149). The mother in this context is an object of exploration and not just identification (Hirsch 130)<sup>59</sup>. In fact, the author cites this process as revealed in French Feminist approach of Iriagaray. She discusses a "process of othering the mother" and being her at the same time in her concept of "parler-femme" (Hirsch 136)<sup>60</sup>. One way of negotiating this process of othering is by allowing the stories of mothers to be heard (Hirsch 167)<sup>61</sup>.

The issue of the voiceless objectified mother in this book can be contrasted with the potentiality of the narrative of a, former, mother. No longer an object, the, former, mother's subjectivity emerges unbridled by the social responsibility of motherhood. She relates her story through her own narrative. This experience can be related through the character of Sethe in *Beloved*. Aside from the political and social context of her story, her maternal discourse is only revealed when her murdered daughter is absent. The reader notices the absence of Sethe when *Beloved* appears. A rejection of motherhood, in that context, provides the license to relate the story from a mother's perspective. The book suggests that forms of the rejection of motherhood pave the way for a female subject that is capable of reviling itself by its own discourse rather than being marginalized by motherhood. The subject's existence in this case is not relational as in the mother/daughter plot. It is independent and capable of making its voice be heard.

In their own way, the three books highlight important points about female subjectivity and the role of society and history in creating the social reality leading to Second Wave Feminism. From Rich's institutionalized motherhood, Chodorow's internalized patriarchal structure to Hirsch's inquiry about the contradiction between the subject and mother, all three texts define how motherhood is produced with a patriarchal context and attempt to establish a feminine subjectivity outside the maternal subjectivity that is socially defined and structured.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, pp, 149.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp,130.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, pp136

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pp,167.

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