

Adoptive Motherhood: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract:

The journey of adoptive mothering is under the constant scanner of social mores of mothering and often gets intertwined with the complex triad of the birth mother, the adoptive mother, and the child. The narratives featuring the experiences of adoptive mothering often explore the nuanced, layered, and complicated edges of mothering capabilities and highlight the tensions generated in/through the expectations of adoptive/birth mothering. This research paper follows the theoretical trajectory of adoptive and birth mothering with its attendant notions of desirability and authenticity to comply with the impression of real motherhood.

Keywords: Adoption, Mothering, Motherhood, Patriarchy.

Introduction

The very nature of adoption explores the potentiality of humankind by enhancing their choices to incorporate value to human identity formation. To be more precise, articulating about this innate human potentiality for adoption is to plummet oneself into the reconnoitering of the possibilities that mothering capacities of a woman can hold in its premise. As Andrea O'Reilly elaborates in *Rocking the Cradle* about

the innate latency of motherhood to transcend beyond the biological, "...feminist historians agree that motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice ... [and] its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood" (Reilly 37).

If we agree with O'Reilly's proposition regarding the transcending capacity of motherhood from the biological to the domain of non-biological, then the primordial linking of motherhood to the biological or genetic disturbs the false hierarchical positioning of the biological motherhood (Greenway 150). Moreover, the precarious continuity of body as the emblem of motherhood with its problematic identification of pregnancy, labour, childbirth and breastfeeding as the maternal symbols heightens the complexity of any other moral and aesthetical revisioning of motherhood as a concept.

There is a consensus regarding the mysterious haziness around the concept of adoptive mothering in the traditional literary, feminist, and theoretical terrain and this obliteration is significant enough to fathom the necessity behind the much-needed emergent awakening of our

concern and consciousness regarding motherhood and adoption. Firstly, although much critical attention has been given to the issue of surrogate motherhood, adoptive motherhood may also heighten the bar of inquisitiveness among the women scholars who are genuinely interested to explore the various facets of motherhood. Secondly, adoption traverses the affinity that co-exists with motherhood and involves the much deeper questions about the welfare of children who are stranded on the perils of life. And finally, as mothering instincts are regarded innate to women, and the women have greatly contributed to the literature of adoption, there is a greater possibility of creating a bond of womanhood through the articulation of experiences that adoption on the national and international platform can build up.

While apprehending the immense possibilities associated with the unfurling of literature on the issue of adoptive mothering, the contemplation on the multifarious intricacies regarding adoptive and birth mothering become crucial to underpin the controversies engulfing the conflicting scenario regarding the same. As women's lives and their mothering capacities have always been an enigmatic presence in the history of patriarchy, the vicious cycle of exploitation and appropriation of women's motherhood meeting the heterosexual standard of society makes it even more compulsory to look at the diverse issues embracing the concept of adoptive mothering.

Interpreting the complexities of adoption hasn't been easy either for the writers writing on adoption. The anecdotes behind the decisions to adopt a child varies multifariously and influences the writers' understanding regardless of their ideologies as feminists or not. Sometimes, adoption remains the first preference for women seeking motherhood outside the terrain of biological and for some women, it appears to be the last resort. Some women while perceiving the troubling issues regarding adoption may nullify the viability of adoption altogether and some may even suffer from guilt after detesting adoption altogether. All these factors contribute as the sub-texts to the complex decision-making processes surrounding the agency of adoption for attaining motherhood.

Many women develop a feeling of nurturance in their hearts, awaiting fulfilment of the same through the embracing of motherhood. And all women cannot/do not become biological mothers and when some choose to give up their child for adoption, it is not always a willful choice and is often backed by multitude of societal and familial pressures. Adoption is not a new phenomenon and has its root in the ancient society (Howe 173). Humanity has traversed through many phases of civilization which has been a witness to the abolishment of children out of freewill. Ancient case scenarios also bear a testimony to the graceful benevolence which has caressed such children.

However, the feminist interpretations of adoptive mothering have often been accused of steering its concerns from a vantage ground of middle and upper-class adoptive women, totally oblivious of the relinquishing pains that the birth mothers withstand for the rest of their lives. Liz Latty writes in this connection:

Mainstream feminism—feminism by and for middle and upper-middle-class white women—has historically gotten behind adoption. Feminists have supported the rights of single people and same-gendered families to adopt, the rights of adoptive families in contested adoptions, and policies intended to get children into adoptive homes faster. What's missing from mainstream feminism is any explicit support for families of origin: the parents who have to lose their children, the families that must be dismantled in order for adoptive families to be built. (2017)

Latty's complex and astute observation about the mainstream feminism and its preference for adoptive families in prioritizing them on the grounds of societal, and racial issues also brings to the forefront the issues of economic differentiation that exists between the birthing and adoptive families. The relinquishment of babies by the underprivileged families ensues a further debate regarding the class and racial supremacy which the privileged adoptive parents often exhibit. As Perry amplifies the concern in her work:

Was there a disparity in status between the two women involved in these adoptions? In other words, did adoption in fact involve the transfer of babies from disadvantaged white women to more advantaged white women? As a factual matter, we do not know the answer to this question because there does not appear to be any systematic research on the social and economic status of the women who surrendered their children. (Perry 110)

Perry's concern directs our focus to the transracial adoption, a globally occurring adoption phenomenon which supposedly centers more on the demands of the privileged adoptive parents and less on the needs of the underprivileged children.

The famous psychologist Carol Gilligan argues that the uplifting of one social group above the other needs the undercutting of our relational capacities as human beings. Gilligan's feminist observation of the women's situation amidst the conjectures of patriarchy makes her reinstall the belief system in the nurturance capacity of women as mothers. The fact that the focusses of women are gravitated towards the issues of care, connection and nurturing in contrast to men who are more inclined towards rules and abstractions is one of the remarkable observations made by Gilligan in her epoch-making book *In a Different Voice* and has contributed enormously to the recent feminist understanding of adoption and motherhood.

Moreover, the pronatalist perspective that the adoptive maternal bodies are essentially inferior to biological maternal bodies is very common and their lack of biological connection places the adoptive maternal body on the same plain with that of adoptive paternal body. As Shelly M. Park observes in her essay, "From the pro-natalist perspective, adoptive bodies are frequently characterized as infertile (and thus damaged) bodies and adoption is considered a second-best solution to the discovered infertility: adoptive motherhood is better than being childless, but inferior to having a child of "one's own" (Park 206).

However, Sara Ruddick refutes this pro-natalist claims of interiorizing the status of adoptive maternal bodies by bringing into question the essential differences between maternal and paternal practices, which cannot be captured by the experiences of generic paternal body. Ruddick observes rhetorically, "Parenting is a complex ongoing work of responding to children's needs in particular economic and social circumstances...This work is not prima facie associated with either sex...[but] the younger the children, the more physical their demands...the more likely that the work of caring will be assigned to women" (206).

The post-structuralist feminist understanding of body as a fluid and a socio-cultural construct helps ease our dilemma regarding the anxiety hovering

around maternal body and builds up the feminist counter-narrative of maternal outliers. Amrita Nandy opines regarding the intended disassociation of the maternity from the maternal by countering the hegemonic portrayal of mothering, "the intention is to know if and how they tease, affirm and/or negate the supposedly linear dialectics between maternity and the maternal" (Nandy 26).

Therefore, the confrontation with the patriarchal concepts of biological motherhood often entails a list of probabilities, ensuing the revelation of greater details about birth, adoption and surrogacy and confirming our entry to the ever-unfixed discourse of knowledge about the 'real' motherhood. Following Foucault's reiteration on power as piercing through our bodies, molding and confirming our speech and gesture, our relationships and practices, the feminist infusion of power can, therefore, be used to produce knowledge about the adoptive maternal bodies. In the words of Shelly M. Park:

Noting the techniques of surveillance to which the adoptive mothers are subjected illuminates the ways in which biological motherhood regulated through normalizing discourses, albeit less visibly and explicably. This focus on the ways in which adoptive maternal bodies are produced may illuminate strategies of resistance to traditional understandings and practices of motherhood. (Park 208)

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