

MOTHERHOOD THROUGH THE PERISCOPE OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The research paper under review is a humble attempt to sophisticatedly dissect literary master pieces focusing their lens upon the role of mothers in them. It would be illustrated through a critical, philosophical, scientific and logical analysis against the backdrop of their family, social and anthropological obligations that, how the concept of motherhood is dealt by different authors. It will be helpful to investigate whether a mother should always be a personification of sacrifice and selflessness or some room and space should also be given to her as a human being with her own desires, feelings and ambitions.

KEYWORDS: Motherhood, Sacrifice, Selflessness, Goddess, Personification

INTRODUCTION

Whether singing or scolding, loving or smothering, mothers tend to occupy a mythic space _____ children may see them as creators, God – like beings who nourish and mend, adults may have to learn how to see them as humans, real people with their own histories and flaws and personalities. They may be resented, quietly tolerated, or loved to the point of melodrama, as in Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “To My Mother”.

*The angels, whispering to one another,
Can find among their burning terms of love,
None so devoted as that of “Mother”.*

Mothers are considered to be a source of inspiration, as role models, as teacher, as the life- giving force, a lush green prolific oasis in the parched desert of life and a solace from anxieties, worries and disappointments. Sylvia Plath pays homage to her mother in a unique way by highlighting the intimacy of her strong relationship.

*“In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water up leaping,
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.”*

The traditional concept of motherhood is no doubt a source of inspiration for poets, authors and philosophers. Motherhood is considered to be synonymous with sacrifice, selflessness and absolute love. Literature being the “Criticism of life” should be a picturesque and vivid delineation of human nature and life. As human nature is intricate,

multidimensional, complicated and unpredictable; same is the case with the depiction of different characters in the realm of literature. While going through the pages of literature we come across different hues, shades, tints and facets of motherhood. Sometimes it is pure lone, sacrifice, determination and integrity but she is also portrayed as selfish, greedy, self-centered and opportunist on the other hand.

The focus of our research is based on the question:

Whether the mother should always be dealt as a goddess or as a human also with all the weaknesses and infirmities of nature?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To find the answer of this ticklish question we have to come across different female characters in the role of mothers. Whether it is Gertrude (Hamlet), Maurya (Riders to the Sea), Lucy (Smokescreens), Nora (Doll's House), Mrs. Thurlow (The Ox), Mrs. Sunbury (The kite), Susan (to Room 19), and last but not the least Mother Courage (Mother Courage and her Children), all of them radiate different gleams of human nature and the reader is baffled to pinpoint what ought to be the real reflection of motherhood.

In the galaxy of these characters we first of all meet Gertrude who is introduced after the death of king Hamlet, in the form of a newlywed Queen. Hamlet, her only son seems to be devastated mentally as well as psychologically by her over-hasty marriage. He is unable to justify what compelled her to marry so early,

'A little month or ere those shoes were old,

With which she followed my poor father's body.'

This 'wicked speed' and 'dexterity to incestuous sheets' is nerve wrecking for her son. Her life with senior Hamlet, the late king of Denmark was just like a chapter of some fairy tale. Why does she become a prey to the bestial tactics of a Satyr forgetting completely the Hyperion who so loved?

"That he might not be teem the winds of heaven,

Visits her face too roughly"

She appears to be a weak, fun-loving and frail woman as well as a careless mother in the beginning. About her character the indictment of the Ghost is also much alarming who declares,

"My seemingly virtuous queen"

Such a woman sounds like a failed mother. Yet despite her moral weakness she loves her son too much. She is really concerned to restore his normalcy and entreats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to bring back her "too much changed son". She understands her son's nature very well and commenting upon Hamlet's malady her assessment is absolutely right when declares,

"I doubt it is no other but the main,

His father's death and our over-hasty marriage"

Though she is not involved in the murder of her husband, but as a wife she does not fulfill her liabilities. However, as a mother she wins our sympathies because she tries her best to make her son as balanced as he used to be.

When it is decided that Ophelia will try to find out the cause of Hamlet's transformation, she expresses her concern by saying these words to Ophelia,

*“And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish,
That you're good beauties be the happy cause,
Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues?
Will bring him to his wonted way again”*

When Hamlet rebukes her in the Closet scene she feels the prick of conscience and ultimately compensates for her sins by drinking the poisonous cup. Though she is not a faithful wife yet proves herself to be a good mother and leaves indelible marks on the pages of literature.

Another character is that of Lucy with whom, we come across in Brig house's play "Smoke Screens". She is presented as a **sharp-witted, adroit, energetic, bright** (smart, intelligent), financially independent, and an egoist lady. After a failed marriage she challenges all **the** men folk by running **and managing** successfully the cab business of her own. She dedicates her life for a **safe, bright and promising** future of her daughter, Primrose. To save her from queries and taunts of society she sends her to a school where other children of broken families used to study. Despite giving all the luxuries of life to her daughter, she meets an ungrateful and rude behavior from her daughter. Primrose starts smoking, uses make-up and remained out of home till late night but Lucy does not object to it. **So she cannot advise appropriately and also cannot develop** friendly relationship with her daughter and it can be inferred that she fails to prove herself a truly successful mother. She hates to mention her ex-husband's name before Primrose and is against the institute of marriage. Failed marriage makes her the apostle of "*Esposas de Matrimonio*" ("Wedding Cuffs"). Primrose takes a **dire and desperate** (drastic) step of marrying John; the ugliest guy in the town just to expose the genuine feelings of her mother towards her daughter. But Lucy does not object which makes her further determined that her mother loves her business only. But we feel sympathy for Lucy who is a genuine mother behind this hard covering. Her heart aches to hear Primrose's comments regarding her. Though she wants to stop Primrose from this mismatch, yet does not want to aggravate the situation by imposing her will. However, we see that beneath the stubborn crust of strictness or behind the smokescreen of indifference; there stands a genuine, selfless and sacrificing mother who murmurs in a determined tone:

“.....but I'm behind the screen, you John. It's very simple John. If you're not kind to Primrose I shall shoot you.”

Mrs. Thurlow, the most hardworking, laborious (**industrious zealous**) and ox-like woman is another page in the volume of motherhood. She has two sons and works from dawn to dusk at the houses of different people. An (unattractive), **plain-featured, unappealing**, (stubborn), (rough) rugged and (average featured) woman who does not pay attention to herself. **She toils selflessly to save money for the sake of a promising future for her sons.** When her lethargic and idle husband is jailed, she does not bother and only thinks about her money which was stolen by him. She sends her son to their maternal uncle who is a rich man. Later on when she decides to bring them back, they refused to come back as they get used to the new life style and there was no emotional attachment between mother and sons. She comes back with broken heart and empty hands. Among all the mothers she seems to be the most unfortunate. People take her for granted. As she works like an ox, nobody considers her as a human being with a heart and feelings also.

Though her character as a wife can be criticized, yet it is an undeniable fact that she is a pure mother from every angle. But what an irony of fate that the children for whom she ignores herself; denounce her as a mother. Her character has some similarities with Lucy (Smoke Screens) also. Both sacrifice their joys and feelings for the sake of their children but both are misunderstood and abandoned by their respective children.

“THE KITE” by Somerset Maugham gives the image of an unusually possessive mother; Mrs. Sunbury. A strong lady with iron nerves, a dominating wife and assertive mother. She is the lady of the house imposing her decisions on the family. She never allows her only son Hubert to play with other boys in the street. She firmly maintains,

“Evil communications corrupt good manners’ she said: I always have kept myself to myself and I always shall keep myself to myself”

She expects same attitude from Hubert and Hubert learnt it since early childhood that whatever he needed would be demanded from his mother. When Betty comes into the life of Hubert, Mrs. Sunbury feels devastated. Despite her utmost efforts, Hubert marries Betty and leaves his parents’ house. “Kite” in this story serves as the symbol of motherly love. Hubert used to enjoy kite flying before marriage. Mrs. Sunbury welcomes his desire to rejoin his parents for kite flying and the whole family is united again without Betty’s knowledge. Betty protests forcefully when the secret is revealed to her. Their relationship gets estranged and finally it breaks up. Mrs. Sunbury becomes extremely happy to get her son back. Hubert refuses to pay the alimony when comes to know that Betty did smash his favorite kite. Kite was like motherly love for him, he prefers to be imprisoned rather than accommodating Betty after divorce. So here a mother fixated young man is depicted. An alarmingly different shade of motherhood is highlighted here. She emerges as a dominating, cruel and selfish mother who ruins her only son’s peaceful life for the sake of her ego. She does not appeal as an ideal mother at all but a sick, selfish and sadist woman.

Maurya in “Riders to the Sea” is the most helpless character in the garb of motherhood. A poor, contented woman who loses her father –in-law, husband and five sons to sea. A helpless soul facing the slaps of fortune with stoic resignation. On one occasion she tries her best to dissuade her only son, Bartley, from going to sea. She ignores her harsh and rude behavior and goes behind him to give him something to eat. Her prophetic soul already warns her about the death of her son; but surprisingly she receives the tragic news with a stoic resignation. The cry of a genuine mother makes the readers weep when she says to Bartley before his departure,

“If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?”

When her all fears come true, she all of a sudden becomes calm and says,

“They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me.....I’ll have no call now to be crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the East, and the surf is in the West, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I’ll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy water in the dark nights.....”

How pathetic, heart-rending and painful this cry is! Coming from the heart of a broken woman who has lost everything. She is a mother_____ a genuine mother_____ tries her best to save her sons but fate plays its role and deprives her of all of them. She shows stoic resignation but moves us to tears owing to the priceless and genuine passion of motherhood in her. A mother whose fate is eternal separation from her sons

Nora Helmer, the central character of Ibsen's masterpiece 'The Doll's House' is the most artistic and unique example of this category. In the beginning of the play she is the 'doll-wife' 'Singing lark', pretty 'little Squirrel' and 'little Spendthrift' for her husband. She is living a happy-go lucky sort of life. Her children are only briefly mentioned in the text. Loves her children madly rather she is proud of them. She appears as a playful and protective mother. She is not an authoritative, dominant mother but a jolly, lively and fun mom.'

Following extract depicts the picture of a home which is Nora's Garden of Eden.

"NORA: How fresh and well you look! Such red cheeks like apple and roses (The children all talk at once while she speaks to them) have you had great fun? That's splendid! What, you pulled both Emmy and Bob along on the sledge' both at once? _____, that was good. You are a clever boy, Iver. Let me take her for a little, Anne. My sweet little baby doll! (Takes the baby from the maid and dances it up and down) Yes, yes mother will dance with Bob too. What! Have you been snow balling? I wish I had been there too".

Then Dorval's suspicion and rigidity snakes into this paradise. Nora gets shocked to know that his love was only superficial and he does not realize once that Nora did everything for the sake of her husband. She at once decides to leave this house which has imprisoned her soul for so long. Apart from being a disillusioned wife _____ she declares to Helmer very plainly that she is leaving him because he called her hypocrite, a liar and a criminal. When he tries to stop her by using the name of children to exploit her instinct of motherhood, she rebuts,

"I know I leave them in better hands than mine" she says, "The way I am now I can't be anything to them."

To a baffled and shocked Helmer she announces,

"There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and educate myself _____ you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that's why I am going to leave you now."

Though her motherhood is subject to severe criticism due to this decision of leaving alone such innocent kids, yet it is a reality that she had no other option. Living with a person who was treating her like a plaything for so long was just like a sort of 'living death' and in such an environment children would turn into suppressed and abnormal grownups. So here she appears to be a strange mother who sacrifices her motherhood for the sake of her "wounded self"

Dorris Lessing's "To Room 19" also depicts a revolutionary change in the concept of motherhood. Susan after spending a decade with her husband as a perfect couple, all of a sudden realizes that she has lost her 'true' or 'real self' and is now taken for granted by her family. Her husband commits adultery but he is not at all ashamed of it and she also ignores it. She decides to find her lost 'self' and isolates herself physically as well as mentally .when her staying at a separate room in a hotel creates ripples in the suspicious mind of her husband, she commits suicide. She was a very good, caring and sacrificing mother who gave up her career for the sake of her children and husband. Unfortunately her personality gets lost in the desert of domestic commitments and she is forced to bid farewell to her children forever.

The most astonishing, challenging and unbelievable depiction of motherhood is that of Bertolt Brecht's play "Mother courage and Her Children". A canteen woman with her three children; Katrin, her dumb daughter and two sons Eilif and Swiss cheese. In the days of Swedish campaign in Poland, she presents the picture of a woman who is basically poor but hardworking and shrewd enough, and knows very well how to make money. A Machiavellian personality, not believing in moral values and prefers war to peace because it is beneficial for her business. Once she appears to be subbing

Eilif for his reckless venture and sounds like a conventional mother but at another occasion denies identifying her slain son Swiss cheese'. When her daughter Katrin dies she is not at all moved and starts her business again.

It is astonishing rather shocking that she prefers business to her children. She is a business woman and trying to survive in this world but for whom a mother usually does so? Obviously for children but we do not find this trait in her. So this play has totally changed the concept of motherhood. She is no more an ideal mother, a goddess of sacrifice or the incarnation of selfless love but a human being with all the complexities and weaknesses of character. A mother sans motherhood.

FINDINGS

The above mentioned details and arguments aptly illustrate the fact that any character in the realm of literature should be dealt as a human being also. It would be an injustice with all the mothers to treat them as the incarnation of sacrifice and selfless love only. They should be given their due space to emerge as multidimensional characters with all the traits of head and heart; irrespective of the fact whether their individuality appeal to the taboos of conventional societies or not. They are humans and should be allowed to behave like humans and let them breathe in the world which is theirs also.

CONCLUSIONS

Last but not the least, it can be concluded without any hesitation that as all the characters in the world of literature exhibit different shades of human psyche, in the same way different women in the guise of mothers reflect the mysteries and complexities of their personalities also. Motherhood is a persona which may be hiding entirely shocking and complicated aspects of human psyche beneath it.

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