

**3. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. Describe and analyse Rich's argument about how the confusion of this distinction in patriarchal culture(s) impacts on the experience of motherhood in *Of Woman Born*.**

This essay involves a reading of multiple feminist theorists and attempts to examine the implications of engendering and thereby rendering people as other to the historically unified subject—man. Motherhood will be examined as a gross example of this.

Resentment between the mother and child can be associated with the maternal figure adhering to the paternal figure's needs in place of her child's or her own. Since the female role has been to raise the young, daughters have been left with a sense that the mother is settling for less than she is capable of. Adrienne Rich expresses her lamentation over her mother's submission, 'for years, I felt my mother had chosen my father over me, had sacrificed me to his needs and theories'. (*Of Woman Born*, 222). Rich explains how her father placed the pressure on her mother to create two perfect daughters, since she failed to produce a son. Rich did not live up to the ideal her father wanted from her and thus her mother was perpetually flawed as well as her. Rich explains the situation as 'wanting my mother desperately and feeling she had gone over to the enemy', (*Of Woman Born*, 224). Thus the emotional bond between Rich and her mother is mottled with disappointment, anger and pity.

When Rich has her own child, who is a son, the exact thing she denied her mother of, her conflicted feelings towards her mother are raised:

*I wanted her to mother me again, to hold my baby in her arms as she had once held me; but that baby was also a gauntlet flung down: my son. Part of me longed to offer him for her blessing; part of me wanted to hold him up as a badge of victory in our tragic, unnecessary rivalry as women. (Of Woman Born, 223).*

But where does the conflict between mothers and daughters stem from? The mother's plight is that whether she 'mothers' or 'non-mothers' her children, her maternity is turned against her. In the case of Rich's mother, if she abided by her husband's theories of raising children instead of her own, she would be non-mothering, and if she abided by her own theories of raising children, she would be a kind of renegade mother. Rich wanted her mother to raise her, but instead had her father raise her through the mother—her mother was subjugated. Thus Rich resents but also identifies with her mother, through weakness.

Adrienne Rich posits the impossibility of mothering comes from how men subjectively see women.

*Two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's gateway." On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—the same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life. (Of Women Born, 34)*

It is very challenging to reconcile this set of opposites. Aside from mother-child conflict, a pervasive distrust and duplicity between women exists which originates from the polarisation of women into the two categories above. These categories are irreconcilable in the film *Black Swan*, Darren Aronofsky. Natalie Portman is the asexual, purist ballerina undergoing a psychosis with intense hallucinations in which Lily, the effortless, charismatic alternate dancer is 'out to get her'. But where does Nina's polarising view of women come from? The incestuous bond with her mother, Erica perhaps. They are bound to one another, depending on one another and hating one

another for it. As Nina's career progresses, Erica's grip tightens on her daughter who wants to maintain the little girl version of Nina, asexual, naive, ineffectual. But Nina is called to embrace her sexuality to dance the Black Swan and is put under immense stress to develop sexually, to her mother's disgust. Nina's hallucinated sexual encounter could represent an initiation into womanhood as she is physically intertwining with the Black Swan she must emulate in performance — Lily. Every time Nina struggles against her mother, she is met with fear and resentment. Even when Nina gets the solo role, Erica presents Nina with a monstrous slice of cake as a duplicitous reward; Nina has trumped her mother's own ballet career which was ended quickly due to pregnancy. They are attracted and repulsed by everything they mean to one another. The disappointment of this film is that Nina does not survive her development, she annihilates herself before her peak performance. It is a story of a mother sabotaging her daughter's development by repressing parts of her psyche. It also displays women as unable to integrate sexuality into their psyche. Luce Irigaray posits the consuming mother comes from a specific place:

*The devouring monster we have turned the mother into is an inverted reflection of the blind consumption that she is forced to submit to. Her womb, sometimes her breast, gape open as a result of the gestation, the birthing, the life which have issued from them, without reciprocity. Unless murder, whether real or cultural, serves to erase the debt? Forget the dependency? Destroy the power (puissance)? (Body against body: in relation to the mother, 15)*

Gayle Rubin argues that in their work, Claud Levi-Strauss and Freud introduced the modern concept of femininity or at least harbour it through structural anthropology and psychoanalysis. A description of how they function to domesticate women:

*Kinship systems require a division of the sexes. The Oedipal phase divides the sexes. Kinship systems include sets of rules governing sexuality. The Oedipal crisis is the assimilation of these rules and taboos. Compulsory heterosexuality is the product of kinship. The Oedipal phase constitutes heterosexual desire. Kinship rests on a radical difference between the rights of men and women. The Oedipal complex confers male rights upon the boy, and forces the girl to accommodate herself to her lesser rights. (The Traffic in Women, 51)*

Irigaray argues that women have been taught 'that their pleasure lies in 'producing' children: which amounts to bending them to the values of production, even before they have had an occasion to examine their pleasure'. (Women's exile, 66).

Rubin quotes Strauss: "the sexual division of labor is nothing else than a device to institute a reciprocal state of dependency between the sexes." (Levi-Strauss, 1971: 347-48). Rubin sees the division of labor by sex as "taboo":

*'a taboo against the sameness of men and women, a taboo dividing the sexes into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and thereby creates gender. The division of labor can also be seen as a taboo against sexual arrangements other than those containing at least one man and one woman, thereby enjoining heterosexual marriage.' (The Traffic in Women, 39)*

In reading through the works of Levi-Strauss and Freud, one begins to have a sense of a systematic social apparatus where females are traded as products.

Back to motherhood, Freud's psychoanalysis claims that the little girl must give up her love and attraction to her mother, if she is to enter into the desire for her father. This process of sexualising the child is drastic as well as harmful. Neither the daughter nor the mother needs to give up love for the sake of the other. What psychoanalysis describes here is the effects of the process of kinship whereby the mother-daughter bond is to be severed as the daughter enters a foreign home in marriage. Irigaray is not naively accusing Freud or Strauss of anything, she says, 'Freud's

discourse represents the symptom of a particular social and cultural economy which has been maintained in the West at least since the Greeks.’ (Women’s exile, 63).

The creation of “femininity” in women as Freud delineates in his work, requires so much suppression of love and sexuality that Freud even saw motherhood as a kind of masochistic act. Irigaray quotes Karen Horney:

*“The special point about Freud’s viewpoint is rather that it sees the wish for motherhood not as an innate formation, but as something that can be reduced psychologically to its ontogenetic elements and draws its energy originally from homosexual or phallic instinctual elements... It would allow, finally, that women’s whole reaction to life would be based on a strong subterranean resentment”. (Horney, 1973:148-490) (Traffic in Women, 50)*

The point made by Horney is that through the Oedipal crisis and castration anxiety, the girl turns from her mother who was unable to give her the phallus and grows the desire for castration from the father in order to ‘accede to the place of a woman in a phallic exchange network’ (The Traffic in Women, 49). Rubin explains that the desire to be castrated comes from ‘classic discussions’ in biology in which ‘finding joy in pain is adaptive to the role of women in reproduction, since childbirth and defloration are “painful”’, (The Traffic in Women, 51). This is merely a psychological and biological rationalisation of female subordination, and not an accurate account of female subjectivity, the female libido nor motherhood. Through kinship and psychoanalytic theory, one can see a clear ‘justification’ for female subjugation. Strauss and Freud note and justify phallic culture’s undermining thinking of sexuality and motherhood in women, and turns them into a means for reproduction—since in the phallic world, production is prioritised. Ironically, though ‘women’s bodies constitute the infrastructure of our society’, (Womens exile, 73) they are not recognised or celebrated as such.

It might be plausible to argue they are not recognised because in the phallic world there is no representation of the placenta. Males constitute the logos of the world, while females, homosexuality, intersex people, trans people and queer folk are bracketed into the ‘other’ category. Irigaray has an interesting theory of females as the unconscious and therefore, unseen, unheard, unknown:

*I do not think that women, in fact, have an unconscious operating in the same way as that of men. Even the fact that women possess an unconscious is not self-evident. It is possible that one has been imposed on them. But to say that women’s sexuality is naturally subject to processes of repression, sublimation etc., that’s very doubtful. I would rather frame the following question: are women not, partly, the unconscious? That is, is there not in what has been historically constituted as the ‘unconscious’, some censored, repressed element of the feminine? Certain functional criteria attributed to the unconscious, like non-contradiction, contiguity, etc., are, I think, close to female sexuality and language. (Women’s exile, 70)*

When male and female subjectivities are not seen as irreducible to each other, a polarisation forms and Irigaray questions, is female the unconscious? Perhaps it is, in an environment of a phallogocentric world. Irigaray expands:

*When J. Lacan bemoans: “I beg them on my knees to tell me what they want and they tell me nothing”, why does he not hear what is at issue here? It is because he situates himself in the functioning of language and of desire in which women cannot say anything, and in which he cannot hear them, even if they were to begin to speak to him. (Women’s exile, 71)*

Rubin proposes a remedy for the unawareness of female subjectivity at this place in time:

*If the sexual division of labor were such that the adults of both sexes cared for children equally, primary object choice would be bisexual. If heterosexuality were not obligatory, this early love would not have to be suppressed, and the penis would not be overvalued. If the sexual property system were reorganised in such a way that men did not have overriding rights in women (if there was no exchange of women) and if there were no gender, the entire Oedipal drama would be a relic. In short, feminism must call for a revolution in kinship (The Traffic in Women, 52).*

Because kinship made heterosexuality obligatory and defined roles that made men and women separate entities, a chasm formed between female and male, regardless of the fact men and women are, biologically, closer to each other than either is to anything else in nature. Psychoanalysis and kinship show how the “feminine” is repressed in men and the “masculine” is repressed in women.

Looking closer at women, mothers and daughters have become professional at splitting the subjectivity of ‘mother’ and ‘child’ and projecting all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the “other” woman.

An asymmetric division of the sexes is what has caused women to pass on weakness to their daughters. Through institutions of kinship, psychoanalysis and motherhood, daughters are taught to accept they will never get to give away the phallus but only have it pass through them in the act of intercourse or bearing a child. Irigaray posits that the female sex is plural, and that ‘one can never determine of these two, which is one, which is the other: they are continually changing.’ And, ‘instead of that being the visible or the form which constitutes the dominant criteria, it is the touch which for the female sex seems to me primordial: these ‘two lips’ are always joined in an embrace’ (Women’s Exile, 65).

Reference List

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