

Motherhood: Some Reflections

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Abstract

The idea of motherhood is socially constructed. The media images create unrealistic expectations for a woman and project an image of a superwoman. The first part of the paper deconstructs the myth of a superwoman projected by television commercials. The second part of the paper charts the journey of a woman who chooses to be a professional and a mother, a choice seen as natural for men but highly problematic for a woman. It enters the home life of an educated mother who struggles to understand herself as she facilitates the identity development of her child.

Motherhood as a construct has always been an area of interest for not only researchers and academicians but for the common people as well. Popular ideas of motherhood are often shaped by prevalent social and cultural standards around it. The preparation of a girl for the motherhood starts from an early age and is shaped by many socio-cultural practices. The primary socialisation within the family and community reinforce that the girls take up the roles of nurturance and care in their natal homes (which can continue after their marriage as well). It includes familiarity and training with the household chores, expectation of girls being resourceful and responsible with the home economics. She is expected to be considerate and accommodating of needs of the family members. Most parents aspire for good education for their daughters while simultaneously expressing inhibitions about their professional choices. Those professions are encouraged for perusal which enable women to balance their work and home, thus, ensuring their viability of being responsible mothers in coming times. There is a widely accepted understanding within the masses that the child rearing predominantly lies with the role of being a mother. Such a mindset often discourages women to take up and continue with those professions which require sustained commitment and time investment. Women are also met with a certain 'judgemental gaze' on their decision and time of being (or choosing not to be) a mother.

Certain ideas of motherhood are further strengthened (and seldom contested) by the depictions and representations in the popular

social media and mass media. Some of the imageries as presented are- a mother with eight hands (fictional) effortlessly managing household chores with a smile, a working mother balancing the family life with grace, a hardworking mother who takes pride in taking care of her loved ones and sacrificing her comforts for the same. It's a common image on screen to see a stressed and concerned mother always fretting about the health and well-being of her family members and so on. These depictions present to us a very convincing and idealized construct of the motherhood. These are the imageries that young women grow up with and are asked to follow. One often fails to question deep seated patriarchal norms and unfair societal expectations forming such a notion of 'motherhood'. It is often presented as socially desirable and glorified phase of a woman's life.

Growing up with the above cited ways in which 'motherhood' is understood in the everyday, my education often made me ponder and question it repeatedly. Some of the questions that I grapple with are – Is there choice and agency of a woman in defining motherhood? Why is motherhood so glorified and celebrated, as compared to fatherhood or parenthood in general? Can the responsibility of child rearing be shared by fathers and other family members? Why women are put in a position wherein they have to choose between their career aspirations and being a mother? and finally, what are the kind of support systems that can be provided to the mothers?

These questions often translated and unfolded in my own journey of motherhood. As a working woman and a research scholar, being a first-time mother was very challenging. My excitement of being a mother was equally matched with overbearing sense of responsibility towards the newly born, especially in a situation where my spouse was not residing together and was working in a different city. I would not only grapple with the rapid physical changes taking place in the body, I would also experience various mental stressors, anxieties and exhaustions at different times. Following are some of the insights from my own motherhood journey:

Child Rearing- Expectations, Realities and Possibilities

There is a very popular saying that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. I experienced it when my family members would actively assume the role (s) of primary care takers of my child in my absence (many times during my presence as well). My father would lovingly and voluntarily take care of his grandson- bathing, feeding, reading him stories, taking him for long walks and tending to him when he is unwell. It was very humbling and empowering to see my father take up a non-traditional role of child rearing, as a retired banker. My mother also had a very encouraging and supportive role in my journey of motherhood. Being a working professional herself, she would always share the importance of cherishing the experience of being a mother but also acknowledging the need to visualize oneself with more than that. She always laid stress on the financial independence and professional aspirations of women to experience life holistically. I learnt to organize and plan my time meticulously. I have learnt to not overburden myself with the unrealistic standards of being a ‘working mother’ who is able to manage each aspect perfectly. I can now find my own pace, daily rhythm, and realistic expectations in work-life front. To this day, this idea of a wholesome life has stayed with me and has helped me grow and mature at a pace which is not necessarily defined by socially acceptable standards. It now feels okay to feel overwhelmed

at times and seek help, support and assistance from friends and family. This realization has also humanized and individualized the experience of motherhood for me.

Life at Home- Understanding Parent Child Relation

Parents, as a general tendency, would often spend immensely on pedagogizing the home space by buying expensive toys, books, games and other ‘educative experiences’. It becomes a matter of pride and gratification for the parents to be able to provide plethora of educative experiences from an early age of the child. The underlying expectation is that every conversation or engagement with the child should culminate in some form of learning and self-improvement of the child. In this pursuit, there is a possibility that one may ignore or not acknowledge enough the child and her inclinations, interests at an early age. With excessive pedagogizing of the home space, the focus of parenting shifts from understanding and developing parent-child relation and mainly focus on the academic achievement of the child.

As an educator and a parent, it was a tremendous learning opportunity for me to observe my child grow and engage with his immediate (physical and social) environment. I eventually realized that a child does not necessarily require exuberantly priced battery-operated toys and educative materials which may catch their attention momentarily but later on are of not much use. Such toys may produce dramatics of light, sound and movement but are not able to provide a scope of sustained engagement or exploration to the child leading to lack of interest in them in due course of time.

I would, instead, observe my child play repeatedly with things used in daily chores of home such as exploring different sizes and sounds of utensils, playing with water buckets and mugs in summer and estimating how much water can fit in different sized buckets. His favorite play items include washing and dried clothes. He spends time by folding and stacking washed clothes and organising them on basis of colours. We make different games on the spot using color, shape and type of cloth as

categories. These were some of the ways through which he would participate in the everyday tasks and interact with family members through it. I understood that one does not have to always wait and plan out exclusive time slots to interact with the child, it can be an ongoing process infused with the daily rhythm and life at home. Participating in daily chores gives children a sense of routine and structure and help inculcate certain habits in a more natural way than impositions. Along with the ongoing engagement throughout the day, I would also try to find some exclusive time where I would just narrate stories to my child. I would give my uninterrupted attention to him during this time and both of us looked forward to it everyday.

My journey of motherhood has led me to the path of discovery and learning about myself and my child. It has also made me see and experience motherhood beyond the normalised or patronising notions of motherhood. There have been several moments of breakdown when I felt overwhelmed with emotions. I have learnt to accept that I am a humanized mother and not an unrealistic superwoman who has all the answers. I have grown as a mother and so has my professional aspirations. I am not trying to balance both, I have learnt to juggle both and in the midst of chaos and confusion I have found a sense of order.