

# **Politics of Maternity: Contesting Motherhood in Select Contemporary Narratives**

Thesis Submitted to the  
University of Calicut for the Award of the Degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy in English**

*By*

**VIDHYA VISWANATHAN**

*Research Supervisor*

**Dr Prasanth V.G.**



**Research & Postgraduate Department of English  
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)  
Devagiri, Calicut  
(Affiliated to the University of Calicut)**

**2023**

## Certificate

*Certified that the thesis entitled “Politics of Maternity: Contesting Motherhood in Select Contemporary Narratives” submitted by Ms. Vidhya Viswanathan to the University of Calicut for the award of degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is a bonafide record of research work done by her in this department. This work has not been previously formed the basis for any award of degree or diploma.*

*I also certify that the adjudicators have not suggested any changes/corrections in the thesis and recommend to accept in the present form.*

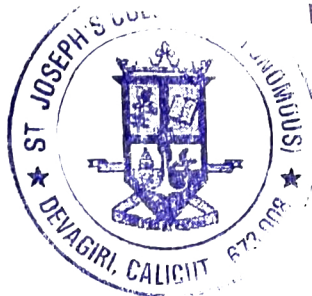
Devagiri

24.11.2023



Dr. Prasanth V G

*Research Guide*  
Dr. PRASANTH. V.G  
Research Guide, Dept. of English  
St. Joseph's College  
(Accredited with NAAC A++)  
Devagiri, Calicut-673 008



## **DECLARATION**

I, **Vidhya Viswanathan**, hereby declare that this thesis titled “**Politics of Maternity: Contesting Motherhood in Select Contemporary Narratives**” submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in English is a bona fide research work carried out by me, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, or any other similar titles.

Devagiri  
04.12.2023



**Vidhya Viswanathan**  
Research Scholar

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”*

--- Paulo Coelho

*As a believer in the force and power of nature, first and foremost I place on record my soul-filling gratitude to that spirit of nature which has conspired to enable me to accomplish this long-cherished dream of working towards the realisation of a thesis.*

*Every work of art is the result of debates and discussions that expose multi-layered possibilities of a stream of thought, and I owe my wholehearted gratitude to my research guide, Dr Prasanth V. G for his inestimable counsel that has lit the path of ideas, observations and arguments which are the essence of the imprints made in every page of this thesis. Right from the initial days of the formation of this work, he has provided ample space to voice my thoughts in all our confabulations without ever cutting short a conversation and has paid attention to all my excitements and bewilderments with the calmness of a professional who understands the idiosyncrasies of a research scholar. Words cannot contain the ways in which he inspires and takes one to the brim of one’s potential to make one realise that there is no limit to aptitudes. Thank you, sir.*

*I express my sincere gratitude to Dr Salil Varma, my co-guide and the Head of the Research and Postgraduate Department of English at St. Joseph’s College (Autonomous), Devagiri for his support and guidance that has led to the time-bound completion of this work. I also thank the other members of the staff from the Department of English of this college for their assistance that has encouraged me to formulate this thesis.*

*I am extremely grateful to the Principal Dr Bobby Jose and the former Principals Dr Sabu K. Thomas and Dr Jose John Mallikasseri of St. Joseph’s*



*College (Autonomous), Devagiri for providing all facilities to carry out this research work.*

*I endorse my sincere gratitude to the Manager of SNDP Yogam Colleges, Sri. Vellapally Nateshan for his benevolence and sustenance that has enabled me to pursue and complete this work. I am grateful to Dr C. P. Sujesh, Principal of R. Sankar Memorial SNDP Yogam Arts and Science College, Koyilandy for his constant support and encouragement. Thanks are due to the Head of the Department of English, Prof. A. Vinod Kumar and my colleagues Dr V.S. Anita, Dr Merlin Abraham, Prof. A. M. Abdul Salam, Ms Nandhitha U.M. and Ms Anuja N.C. for their cooperation, understanding and inspiration. I also thank all the other colleagues from the college for their motivation and encouragement which has helped me to proceed with my work.*

*I am thankful to Dr S. Nagesh, former Head of the Department of English of St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Devagiri for his valuable suggestions and critical comments that have helped to formulate this work.*

*I am indebted to Dr Janaki Sreedharan, Professor of English at the University of Calicut for her commendable counsels that have contributed to the framing of this work.*

*I am highly obliged to Dr Nasrulla, founder of Literariness.org for all the e-books, scholarly articles and materials that have brought life to this study.*

*I express my sincere gratitude to Dr Radhika K. M, Principal of IHRD, Thamarassery for the books, worthy suggestions, and appreciation of the progress of this work that has largely boosted my confidence and enthusiasm.*

*I am grateful to Ms Veena A, my fellow Research Scholar for the meticulous effort she has taken to proofread this thesis.*

*I thank all my teachers right from my school days to the present day for having done their best in moulding me to be well-oriented in my personal and professional circles.*

*I extend my gratitude to the library staff of C. H. Mohammed Koya Library, University of Calicut for their assistance in locating and suggesting books that proved highly beneficial in my study. I am grateful to the Head of the Department of English at the University of Calicut and the members of the staff at the Department library for their succour at all times. Thanks, are also due to the following centres of knowledge that have enabled me to shape my thoughts with books and materials: RSM SNDP Yogam College Library, Koyilandy; St. Joseph's College Library, Devagiri, Calicut; Indira Gandhi Memorial Library, University of Hyderabad; English and Foreign Languages University Ramesh Mohan Library, Hyderabad; and Bharat Ratna Dr B. R. Ambedkar Library of Osmania University, Telangana, Hyderabad.*

*I express my deep-felt gratitude to my parents: my father, Viswanathan who has always encouraged me to seek knowledge to attain independence and my mother, Sobha who has sacrificed her aspirations to enable me to conquer my dreams. They have taught me the basics of the English Language and the art of learning to excel. From those first steps to this, I have come a long way and I am extremely grateful to them for having enabled me to venture through language to the world of knowledge. I owe to them, whatever I have attained that is worthy of consideration. I thank my sister, Dhivya for her timely involvement and support during the hours of need. She is one of the pioneers who has taught me to critically evaluate perspectives to bring forth submerged realities.*

*This work, though conceived as expected, would never have materialised without the unwavering support, diligent encouragement and affection of my husband and partner in parenting, Abhilash. He has been extremely patient and understanding and has taken the utmost care of our kids and domestic affairs by extricating me of my share in these matters. I am extremely grateful to him for his compassion and for providing all the facilities that have equipped me to work in comfort. I thank him for all that he is.*

*I am grateful to my kids, Aashika and Alaina, who constantly teach me about mothering. From them, I learn every day the wonders and complexities of*

*motherhood. I thank them for comprehending the gravity of this work and for providing comic relief by way of laughter and games occasionally.*

*I thank my mother-in-law, Chithralekha and father-in-law Sudhakaran for their motivation and support that has enabled me to pursue my studies. I express my gratitude to my brother-in-law, Amithab and sister-in-law Joshitha for their love, understanding and encouragement which was essential to complete this work on time.*

*Thanks are due to all those ladies, mothers and friends who have voiced their opinion, nodded understanding, and expressed their curiosity to know more about motherhood from unconventional perspectives. I thank them all for their willingness to listen, probe and enquire as those queries have enabled me to dive deeper to seek more.*

*This work is for all of us – to live better and feel better. This is for all women to ease the burden of expectations by dissolving the encircling politics of power.*

*As Paulo Coelho states in *The Alchemist*: “It’s the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting”, and hence, this achievement excites me in its lustre and leads me towards the next treasure that awaits me.*

*Thank you.*

Vidhya Viswanathan

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1 – 47</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Juxtaposing Patriarchy and Motherhood</b>	<b>48 – 115</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Delineating Mothering and Making Babies</b>	<b>116 – 192</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Cantankerous Tales of Flux and Panic</b>	<b>193 – 250</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Incessant Wrestling with Motherhood</b>	<b>251 – 309</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>310 – 346</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>347 – 370</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural context of the twenty-first century with its heterogeneous discourses resonates with the challenges of traditional ideologies of motherhood against contemporary cultural, psychological, physical, emotional, and psychoanalytical perspectives initiated by the reality of experiences encountered by women at the altar of the glorified concepts of motherhood. Along with the medical and scientific revelations associated with the process of gestation and birthing, literary narratives from across cultures and beyond geographical boundaries highlight deviant attitudes of mothers that compel a deconstruction and restructuring of motherhood by breaking the myths associated with the process of bearing and rearing the newborn. Scientific and theoretical standpoints have further triggered emotional dissociation from the earlier association of women with dignified maternal instincts. Feminist perspectives along with psychological and psychoanalytical orientations have fueled the emergence of alternate discourses on motherhood that reinstate the fact that women of the contemporary period refuse to adhere to the conventional norms of motherhood.

The concept of maternity is simultaneously unique and universally diverse across geographic and cultural boundaries as this phenomenon varies in its performance based on the socio-cultural framework in which it is realised. Over the years, the social attitude to it has gradually been transformed by the scientific and theoretical advancements that continue to critique and challenge the conventional

practices allied with motherhood. This understanding of the existence of multiple perspectives that seem to be inherent in maternity and motherhood bore the requirements to conceive the title of the thesis. The notion of politics defined by Kate Millett in her work *Sexual Politics* as “power-structured relationships, arrangements, whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (23), serves as the starting point of the enquiry. As she elaborates further, the ideal politics must not execute power over groups to subjugate them but should be based on “agreeable and rational principles” (24), and yet, she confesses that social politics at every level is based on power structures, and this must be addressed to ensure justice for all. Moreover, the word “politics” (24) helps to present the true nature and functioning of established institutions throughout history to the present era. The word politics is used in the title in the same sense as proposed by Millett and it aims to expose the subscriptions enforced on motherhood by ethnic practices. It also attempts to lay bare the blindness of the male-oriented ideologies under which women are objectified and marginalised vis-a-vis the reproductive role that they are conditioned to perform. Judith Butler in the text *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* presents the functioning of power in society as “power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalise or accept its terms . . . . Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (2). Holding on to the political aspects associated with mothers and maternal narratives, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly in the article titled, “Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives” state that mothering and being a mother are both “political and personal” (2). Conclusively,

Manon Garcia in the work *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* states that patriarchy has politicised women to remain submissive to men:

To be a woman is therefore to be in a certain economic, social, and political situation. This situation implies a set of norms according to which women are conditioned to behave and on the basis of which they are judged. To be a woman, a 'real' woman, implies conforming to these norms. And in the same way one questions the nature of a tool when it stops working, a woman's femininity starts being questioned when a gap appears between her behaviour and the behaviour that is socially prescribed to her. (67)

Motherhood and maternity issues which were once considered as belonging exclusively to the realm of feminine discourses have now emerged as an area that is of concern to all sexes and genders extensively. The patriarchal institution of motherhood as an ideology has designed the lifestyle of women as mothers and the attempts to fit into this pattern become appalling when personal experiences contradict the institutional norms. Barbara Katz Rothman reveals in the text, *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society*, that "the horror of a dominant ideology . . . is its distortion of the reality" (26) as experienced by the stakeholders. Ideologies evolve into hegemony when this dominant order is supported by most people in every aspect of their daily existence. Accordingly, ideologies become political as they are based on power structures that construct reality and in a patriarchal society the ideology of motherhood constitutes

the attributes attached to women and children by males. In consequence, Wendy Chavkin in the book *The Globalization of Motherhood: Deconstructions and Reconstructions of Biology and Care* states the need to explore and establish the true representations and experiences of motherhood as “female biologic reproductive capacity and social assignment for childrearing and the maintenance of domestic life have been centrally connected with women’s subordinate status across many cultures and historic eras” (4). As motherhood indicates not only mere reproduction of young ones but also “social (re)production of values, norms and culture” (Weissman 103), it becomes further problematic and political as it bestows on women impossible standards of perfection. Like motherhood, the maternal body too becomes political as it is constantly under the surveillance of the power structure that defines its possibilities and limitations within the prescribed system. Susannah Sweetman in the chapter titled, “Birth Fear and the Subjugation of Women’s Strength: Towards a Broader Conceptualization of Femininity in Birth” with reference to Conboy et al. (1997) suggests that the social roles prescribed for women revolve around their bodily functions and this has marked the constructs of “myths of femininity” (18) and “female identity” (18) leading to the establishment of “paradigms of womanhood” (18). Similarly, Christine Battersby in the chapter titled, “Nativity, Materiality, Maternity: The Sublime and the Grotesque in Contemporary Sculpture” in which she talks about the established attributes of “femaleness” (73) of a woman’s body that is bound around “procreation and reproduction” (73) states that this role identification was forced to “prevent women from transcending the merely material or, indeed becoming fully individual and autonomous persons” (73). Professor of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies, J. Lenore Wright in the book



*Athena to Barbie: Bodies, Archetypes, and Women's Search for Self* concurs with this construction of ideology as: "Archetypal ideals weigh heavily in women's search for self. Female archetypes produce idealised standards of womanhood that discipline the body and shape the mind. Archetypal ideals also weigh heavily in religion, politics, society, economics, and ultimately in the status of women themselves" (viii) and argues that to cherish a gratifying life as a woman, all women will have to have a "confrontation with the womb" (viii). Robin Truth Goodman in the introduction to the book *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Feminist Theory* upholds the same argument by suggesting that speculation of the functioning of "agency and power" (5) has been detrimental in feminist critical thinking that has paved the way for radical changes by struggling to undo "the Gordian knot" (Casarino and Righi 1) of motherhood by breaking "dominant structures, institutional forces, oppressive ideologies, and historical atrocities" (5).

The Oxford Languages Dictionary defines maternity as "the period during pregnancy and shortly after childbirth" (n. p) and Gill Rye in the edited work *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe* defines maternal as "a site of potent intersection between scientific possibilities, psychosocial practices and cultural representations" (8) and continues to suggest that this term resonates with the notion of maternal instinct promoted by the institution of motherhood that is oppressive to women. Accordingly, this thesis focuses on the psychological, emotional, and physical alterations that sweep through women during the period of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering in socio-political contexts and contemplates it through the lens of feminism. Hence, the first part of the title

“Politics of Maternity” indicates the multifarious perspectives that define and construct the ideology of women as mothers, and the deviant attitudes women reveal against the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The second part of the title “Contesting Motherhood in Select Contemporary Narratives” suggests that the thesis analyses diverse representations of motherhood as experienced by mothers through fictional and non-fictional narratives in opposition to the traditional construct of motherhood as promoted by patriarchy. An investigation of multiple voices becomes relevant as it provides opportunities to consider the alternate vibes and experiences that acknowledge the existence of varied emotions and traumas that are most often silently endured by women. These revelations become significant as it results in self-reflection and understanding as Angela Garbes states in the book *Like A Mother: A Feminist Journey Through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy*, “We need to keep telling our stories, but we also have to learn to listen. Our stories – and the diversity of our perspectives – are invaluable” (12). The remark made by Audre Lorde in her introduction to *The Mother Knot* becomes relevant at this point: “It is not women’s differences that divide us but our silence, our failure to speak honestly about those differences” (ix).

To claim autonomy and liberty for women in the social, cultural, and political spheres, feminism came into prominence, and during its first wave challenged and made valiant efforts to dismantle the patriarchal regime of the time that induced injustice in the social attitude to women. To end oppression and discrimination against women, literary figures, artists, politicians, and educationalists of the period fought for reforms that would enable women to be at

par with men who occupied a central subjective position. During that time women were presumed as objects to please and support men by boosting their confidence at the cost of women's worth as individuals. The lack of inclusivity of women in mainstream social roles became the subject of many discourses during the period and it witnessed the emergence of several literary works that voiced the need to redefine the norms set by patriarchy. Among such literary outputs, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the significant works of feminism which demanded equal opportunities in the field of education, work, and politics for women to be equipped enough to demand rightful position in a society that is predominantly male-dominated. The British writer and an advocate of women's rights, Wollstonecraft presents the need for education for women along with men to lead a respectable life and in the tenth chapter of this book titled, "Parental Affection" she illustrates the need for women to be sensible in their approach to life and parenthood. By referring to the need for both parents to share the responsibility of child-rearing and the assumed maternal instincts associated with women, she observes, "Natural affection . . . I believe to be a very faint tie, affections must grow out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy; and what sympathy does a mother exercise who sends her babe to a nurse, and only takes it from a nurse to send it to school" (216). Another prominent figure in the history of women's struggle is the Russian-born Emma Goldman who was arrested in 1916 for speaking against social conventions and birth control measures. *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*, a collection of her lectures, published in 1914 documents not only the anarchism and social issues, but a literary analysis of the works of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw that she intentionally voiced to

expose the social injustices of the time. Following this in 1929, the British writer Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, in which she asserts the need to have personal space and financial security for women to be able to make use of their potential. In this work, Woolf speaks of how women have supplemented men in executing power against women by boosting the images of men. Woolf presents this glorification of men by women as “women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural image” (30) and further demonstrates men’s way of looking at women as inferior to them. Consequently, in the absence of an external force to remind themselves of their potential, women assimilated the notions of inferiority imposed on them by the conditioned male-oriented society and submitted themselves to the group exerting power. Hence, in the literature of the early periods, men who were exposed to literacy and control over women wrote of them as they perceived them to be and “not in the white light of truth” (28) as Woolf notes. Women of that time who were deprived of education and independent thinking could never ventilate their thoughts even if they were talented, for fear of criticism and ridicule. Consequently, women read their representations as written by the men folk to construct images of women as intended by patriarchy.

The French writer and feminist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir in her treatise of 1949, *The Second Sex*, repudiates the myth of the eternal feminine and in its stead raises a feminist consciousness that has formed the essence of several books by scholars. This book has provided indisputable discourses on femininity and its representations in society. Along with biological factors and social constructions of

gender, de Beauvoir states the multiple facets of pregnancy and motherhood and attempts to convince that maternal instinct is fictitious by asserting that “the mother’s attitude is defined by her total situations and by the way she accepts it” (681). The British-American anthropologist Ashley Montagu in his book *Man in Process* argues in support of the claims made by de Beauvoir that the mind of humans is a product of the socio-cultural notions that are reinforced through political, religious, and cultural practices. In this book, he defines myth as “nothing more than a belief in something as true, and upon which men act as if it were true, but which is in fact not true” (13) and claims that these myths are an attempt to explain the world of one’s existence and performances. He reflects on the nature of man and urges the readers to reconsider the notions and beliefs that limit the potential of humans. Following *The Second Sex*, appeared the groundbreaking text by Betty Friedan in 1963, titled *The Feminine Mystique* which critiques the socially accepted roles of women with marriage, domestic work and mothering that is expected to gratify them beyond any other achievements in life. The text vents out the despair of women on their conditioned chores and Friedan refers to this existential dilemma in the first chapter of the book as “the problem that has no name” (n. p). Though critics have pointed out the limited focus of the text as it addresses the issues of white-middle-class women, this book has been accepted and to date, it appeals to the issues of women. Similarly, the English paediatrician, psychiatrist, sociologist, and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott in the book *Playing and Reality* which was first published in 1971, introduces the term “good enough mother” (14) that indicates the demands made on mothers and the frustrations it causes on their psyche in their attempts to meet the idealised image of perfect

mothers. He advises mothers to be “an almost complete adaptation to her infant’s needs” (14) and speaks of this mother-child relationship as a paramount requirement as every mother is expected to be responsive to the needs of the child at the physical and emotional level to assist the child to break the magical world of illusion required to assimilate with the world of external reality.

Adrienne Rich’s work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* published in 1976, is one of the earlier classical texts directly associated with the concept of a woman’s right over her body that indicates the need to liberate the female body from the clutches of “archaic and unnecessary bonds” (n. p). In this text, Rich re-visions motherhood from a feminist perspective, setting it against the backdrop of a patriarchal society that embodies it in ways incompatible with women. Of the ignorance of society on maternal aspects, she says, “We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). This stands true to the present time as even today the idealisation and exploitation of women exist despite the diverse discussions to consider her as a human equal in status to men. In this work, Rich distinguishes the functioning and understanding of motherhood by analysing it from two distinct perspectives of which one is through the lens of patriarchy which is referred to as the institutionalised notion of motherhood and the other one is based on the genuine experiences of mothering as felt and recorded by women and mothers. She states that the institutionalised notion of motherhood curbs the aptitude of women while the activity of mothering based on the reality of its experience empowers women as it enables them to understand the potential of their bodies in a powerful way.

However, the ideology set by patriarchy diminishes their capacity to identify their prowess and denies them recognition of prospects outside the domestic circle.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn in the edited work *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency* refers to ideology as a collective product that serves as “lenses that filter and distort our experiences and understanding” (9) of the multiple systems and institutions that function in society with definite goals. Accordingly, the prescribed mode of conduct associated with motherhood in a patriarchal society denies women “identities and selfhood outside mothering” (9).

American writer and activist Kate Millet in the book *Sexual Politics* published in 1970 holds the anatomy of the female body and the conditioning of the mind as the foremost reasons for women to be bound to domesticity and motherhood. In the book, she analyses the functioning of the patriarchal power over women by asserting that these power politics is neither biological nor innate but socially induced. Hence, to release women from its clutches personal affairs must be contested as political to attain liberation. Her contemporary writer Shulamith Firestone in her work *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, which is dedicated to de Beauvoir challenges the desirability of biological motherhood as presumed by the institution of motherhood and vilifies the dignified ideology of motherhood. She astutely suggests women’s bonding with children as “the special tie women have with children . . . is no more than shared oppression” (72) and underlines the need to distance the mother from the child to execute women’s liberation. American sociologist Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* states that the concept of

motherhood itself is reproduced by social institutions to impose the authority of the male:

Women's capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it are strongly internalised and psychologically enforced and are built developmentally into the feminine psychic structure. Women are prepared psychologically for mothering through the developmental situation in which they grow up, and in which women have mothered them . . . It suggests that major features of the social organization of gender are transmitted in and through those personalities produced by the structure of the institution – the family – in which children become gendered members of society. (39)

Feminist philosopher and professor Mary O'Brien in her article titled, "Viewpoint: Feminist Theory and Dialectical Logic" agrees with the social construction of reality that has led to the disempowerment of women as "the history of male supremacy has bequeathed to us a set of cultural and symbolic forms that view human experience from the distorted and one-sided perspective of a single gender" (n. p). This concept is further developed in her book *The Politics of Reproduction* in which she elaborates on the cause for this "one-sided perspective" (n. p) as the result of objectifying the woman's body and the reproductive process due to which it "appears as a neat unilinear affair going on in women's bodies in a rather mechanistic way . . . this is not enough. We learn nothing from descriptive obstetrics which can further our knowledge of the dialectics of reproductive experience and reproductive consciousness, and we learn very little of the social



relations of reproduction” (46). Similarly, Julia Kristeva in her essay titled, “Women’s Time” which attempts to redefine political feminist identification of women in a patriarchal establishment associates the common notion of maternal experience as “. . . redoubling up of the body, separation, and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech. This fundamental challenge to identity is then accompanied by a fantasy of totality – narcissistic completeness – a sort of instituted, socialised, natural psychosis” (31). Consequently, these scholars suggest the need to restructure the approach towards understanding the experiences related to women’s reproduction and nurturing of the child from a wider perspective that includes science and physiology along with the experiences of women. Maithreyi Krishnaraj in his book *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment?* reinforces the impact of the cultural conditioning of the human mind that results in female subjugation in society. He states, “It is not the mere fact of motherhood and/or mothering that makes women vulnerable, but their social construction, the implications for women flowing from the meaning attached to the idea of motherhood and the terms and conditions under which it is allowed to express itself” (22). Author and Professor of Sociology, Shelley Budgeon in the book, *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* marks the transition that has emerged in the concept of motherhood over the years through feminist revolutionary movements that led to the dissolution of the “gendered boundaries” (53) resulting in the enhancement of “individualisation and autonomy” (53) in women.

The history of literature exposes, through distinct narrative forms, the affairs related to women focusing on their objective and subjective roles as mothers through the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the lived experiences of mothers. These literary texts provide materials for the comparison and illustration of the dual identities with which women are labelled. In most of the popular socio-cultural narratives, women are depicted as characters who function in ways administered by patriarchy and in these narratives patriarchy functions as an agency that imposes power on women to mould them into the system to shield the superiority of men. Friedrich Engels in his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* refers to this submission of women to patriarchal ideologies as “the world historical defeat of the female sex . . . the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude . . . a mere instrument for the production of children” (56). This functions by the concept of hegemony which explains the functioning of a system in which people are dominated and oriented towards certain predetermined ideologies by consent. Within this system, the victims are made to believe through certain state apparatuses like religion and cultural practices that they should live by the established norm without challenging it. Accordingly, under the patriarchal system, the world view of men as detaining women in an objective position came to be accepted as a cultural norm against which women before the development of feminist perspectives remained silent victims. French philosopher, Louis Althusser illustrates the functioning of the Ideological State Apparatus like family, marriage, religion, and politics that are used to execute control over people in a similar pattern. Accordingly, as Althusser opines in the essay titled, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, submitting oneself to cultural or religious ideologies, “the individual

in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which depend the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject” (82). Hence, it can be surmised that women who are unaware of their subjugation and their rights as individuals willingly promote patriarchal norms by accepting their role as supporters of patriarchy. Rinki Bhattacharya in the book *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood* comments on this status quo of women: “A woman’s most obvious power to reproduce and nurture the species is then made into the most effective engine of her enslavement. This is one of the most central paradoxes of society that is camouflaged by the halo that usually surrounds motherhood” (13). Professor of Philosophy and author Elinor Mason in her book *Feminist Philosophy: An Introduction* agrees with the social interference on women’s bodies and their reproductive abilities stating this experience as “women’s bodies are controlled and policed in many ways, but there is no interference as common, or as political, as interference with women’s capacities to bear a child” (53).

Despite the emergence of various alternative discourses on mothers and motherhood, the iconography of representing mothers as goddesses with “inherent feminine powers to create and preserve as well as to destroy the cosmos for new creation” (234) prevails even today in the political, religious, and cultural discussions as Tola Olu Pearce states in the book *Global Perspectives on Motherhood, Mothering and Masculinities*. This assures that an aspect that was once accepted as the norm is now in debate as every element of gestation and taking care

of children are preconceived in the mind of males and females before submitting to physical acceptance of motherhood. The controversies and accords of motherhood based on the divergent attributes of it that have till recently been silenced by women and men alike form the base of the argument that is being dealt with in this study.

The case under consideration is that women particularly mothers should be accepted as humans with capabilities, desires, limitations, choices, and an identity free of social conditioning. Though this has been a pliant of feminism right from the beginning, even twenty-first-century motherhood is entwined within the boundaries of social, cultural, and political transformations that continue to nail it on the pedestal of the glorified images of mothers. In this context, this study analyses motherhood from a fresh perspective to expose the hitherto suppressed aspects of motherhood through its various stages beginning with conception to birthing and rearing children. Social historians along with theorists of psychoanalysis and feminism have vindicated the patriarchal assumption of mothers as supernatural beings capable of multitasking as a myth. As a result, anomalous descriptions of the experiences of the entire process of gestation are on the rise and it continues to rupture the structure of patriarchy which is built on the shoulders of women and mothers who support it unaware of its impact on themselves. The conventional concept of motherhood which mothers generally adhered to in the past is now contested by women considering themselves as “having a psychic organization independent of the maternal function” (x) as Alcira Mariam Alizade mentions in the foreword to her edited work *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*.

As Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One's Own* women had to overcome several hassles before being able to create a niche to accommodate their works which were ridiculed by the dominant male pedagogy as insignificant. Though reluctant in the initial stages, women gained potency against the male-dominant language to express their experiences and thoughts in a comprehensible manner to create a better representation in popular culture. From writing in bits and pieces by hiding their works from others and using pseudo-male names, women writers have progressed by deconstructing language and systems to create an identity by challenging the myth of male superiority and female subjugation. Against the “silent revolt” (58) as Woolf remarks, women writers of the present era vociferously voice their endurance and celebrations in a language that promotes universal understanding. Through their narratives and discourses women writers attempt to fill the gap in the existing texts as “so much has been left out, unattempted” (Woolf 69) and venture to ameliorate the representation of women in popular writings: “For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All have vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to inevitably lie” (75). Hence, literary outputs by women in the forms of non-fiction, memoirs and autobiographies can be considered as strips of life experienced by people. The texts selected for this study offer raw materials for considering the aspects related to womanhood and motherhood as depicted by women writers within variant global and cultural perspectives. This resonates with a pertinent observation visualised by Woolf which has become a contemporary reality: “Lock up your libraries if you like

but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (63).

Several fictional and non-fictional narratives have been published to expose the diverse characterisation of mothers to challenge the conventional approach to motherhood and mothering. One of the prominent elements in such writings is the expression of maternal ambivalence which the British psychotherapist, art historian and writer Roziska Parker in her book *Mother Love/ Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* defines as the “experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side” (1). One of the earliest writings in this category is the memoir, *The Mother Knot*, by Jane Lazarre published in 1976 which presents the personal and political implications of motherhood and maternal ambivalence. In this book, Lazarre challenges the myths of motherhood and mothering experiences that have altered her individuality beyond recognition as she thinks aloud: “I am a different person” (7). This work depicts the extreme joy and desperation of a mother in her attempts to recognise the demands of motherhood and her longing to reclaim the self that is lost in the transition from an independent woman to a mother.

Jacqueline Rose in her work, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* traces mother figure representations in literature that strike against the patriarchal notions of motherhood by expressing their subjective emotions and desires which are commonly suppressed by women and mothers for fear of being stigmatised as less feminine or womanly. Rose refers to ancient Greek literature and presents a shockingly deviant mother through the character of Medea in Euripides’ work of the

same title published in 431 BC. This play, considered as one of the greatest tragedies of the Western canon dares to project the extremes of emotions of both desire and destruction in the character Medea, the wife of Jason and a mother of two boys. The play evoked multifarious responses and interpretations within the framework of perceptible literary and social theories on the mother character of Medea who unleashes violence equipped with her determination and skill to challenge male domination. This Greek tragedy is a unique one of a mother who commits the cold-blooded murder of two of her children in a state of vengeance against her husband who betrays her to marry another woman with better prospects. Literary scholars consider Medea to be a proto-feminist who is aware of her worth and dignity as an individual capable of bypassing the patriarchal conditions outlined for women and mothers. The chorus is stupefied by Medea's anger as described by her nurse: "She's like a bull or lioness with cubs" (6), though her husband ignores it as "silly rage" (14) and Medea proclaims: "Let no one think, I am a trivial woman" (25). The play became a source of debates, discussions, and controversies as Medea makes calculated moves against her children though aware of its impact on herself. After poisoning Creon and his daughter Glauce, who was to marry Jason, Medea murders her two sons and leaves the place in a chariot given to her by the Sun God Helios, prophesying an evil doom on Jason for agreeing to give up his family for a princess. Her filicide breaks all the regulations that were employed in the description of female characters, especially mothers. An alternate aspect considered by the chorus of the play after Medea takes out her anger on her children as presented by Rose is that women without children are happier as they are free of care, worry and concern: "Those who have never given birth/ such people have far more happiness than those

who have been parents” (33). At the end of the play, it is evident that Medea does not flinch when Jason addresses her as a “child killer” (33) and she expresses no regrets about her act, though she asserts that she loved them.

*The Mother's Recompense* by Edith Wharton is a novel published in 1925, a time before feminism debated the patriarchal institution of motherhood. This novel depicts a mother named Kate Clephane who appears to be a misfit in the maternal capacity as per the constructed gender roles as she abandons her young daughter and husband anticipating a better life in Europe with her young lover, Chris Fenno. The novel opens with a depiction of her unsuccessful life in France picturing her as living in the economic suburbs of the place among people who seem to be as displaced as she is, when her lover deserts her. Unexpectedly, one day she receives a telegram from her grown-up daughter, Anne who invites her back home saying that Kate's mother-in-law had died. In the novel, Kate does not abandon her family for money but for love and freedom away from the demands of a wife and mother. As Jacqueline Rose comments on this novel, Kate leaves out of despair in her inability to give into the “so-called normal family” (99). Unfortunately, in the novel as Wharton writes, she moves from one man to another one to realise that “one had to manoeuvre and wait; but when didn't a woman have to manoeuvre and wait?” (2). However, accepting her daughter's invitation, Kate returns to New York to take up the role of a mother once again. As the mother-daughter bond flourishes between the two, Kate is informed of a man Anne is in a relationship with. This man turns out to be the young lover for whom Kate had abandoned her family and as she fails to disclose her past affair with Fenno, Anne marries him with Kate as a witness.



Unwilling to live with the couple, Kate returns to her life in France thus abandoning motherhood once again for what she assumes to be the right thing to do. Critics of the time attacked the work calling it a product of “the bitter, uncomprehending rant of a childless woman writer with a hostile relationship to her own mother” (102) as stated by Rose. She explores the work by juxtaposing it alongside Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and affirms the statement made by Rich that only a childless woman would dare to express the silenced emotions of a mother as, “It was only a childless woman who could grant herself permission to confess, even to her most secret self, that she had willingly deserted her daughter . . . without the testimonies of childless women . . . we would all suffer from spiritual malnutrition” (102).

Colm Toibin’s novel *The Testament of Mary* published in 2012 and shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize depicts the solitary character of the much-acclaimed epitome of Mother Mary that formed the foundation for the New Testament. This work exposes the deviant attitude of Mary as she challenges the glorified image of motherhood that is imposed on her by the patriarchal community. The narrative unfolds the centuries of beatified maternal pain for which she continues to be celebrated for her mode of sacrifice when Mary reveals her ignorance of the claims that were published in her name by saying, “I have asked him to read the words aloud to me, but he will not . . . I know that he has given shape to what I lived through” (2). This unorthodox narrative aims to reveal the genuine emotions and feelings of Mary who has been idealised and kept on a pedestal at a distance with forced silence while others spoke of her through

scriptures and paintings imposing her identity as a worshipful, obedient, docile, and silent mother. However, she reveals the truth that others had framed her image and had refused to share with her whatever they claimed to be her state of affairs. During her isolated stay after the crucifixion of her son, she responds to those who praise her for redeeming the world that, “It was not worth it” (8). Reflecting on this work Jacqueline Rose comments that the age-old conviction of presenting Mother Mary as an icon of the idealised image of an all-sacrificing and enduring mother is “a complete lie” (14).

*An Abbreviated Life: A Memoir* by the author and journalist Ariel Leve published in 2016 presents a non-conformist mother through the eyes of a child. In this book, Leve depicts her memories of her eccentric mother which are different from the assumptions of motherhood that she had internalised during her growing-up years. The narrative presents the chaotic life of a child as she struggles to cope with the demands and conditions put on her by the mother in return for the shelter and provisions the mother provides. Gloria Steinem in her review of the book refers to the mother as a “self-appointed troublemaker and attention seeker” (n. p) who frightens the child to obedience by constantly reminding her that if her mother dies, she will be alone in the world as her father has already left the family. Against the anticipated unconditional love of mothers, this memoir reveals the conditional love with which she threatens her five-year-old from which the child finally escapes at the age of forty-five. The intensity with which she relates to her escape from the strangling clutches of her mother when she declares, “I am free. Unleashed from history. My mother will never find me. I am untraceable” (1) suggests the trauma

experienced by the child at the hands of a mother. Leve escapes from her mother to Bali and marries Mario and lives with his two daughters offering them the love and compassion that she had missed as a child. Mario fails to understand the suppressed emotional currents from which she struggles to escape even though she is physically distanced from her mother. He asks her to get over her past life either by destroying it or by dealing with it rationally and her inability to do so makes the readers understand the effects of psychological maltreatment endured by a child at the hands of a mother. Jacqueline Rose in her interpretation of the mother's attitude to her child observes that this approach is a possibility from a mother on whom society bestows the entire responsibility of nurturing the child with absolute attention at the cost of all personal desires. She presents her perception of this demand enforced on mothers as:

We talk of the depths of attachment, but there can be no emancipation for mothers, no better life for the offspring of the future, unless we recognise what that seemingly innocent instruction – be all for your child – might mean . . . We have to look further. In most of the accounts of motherhood explored so far, something is missing or being pushed aside. Nothing less, I will now suggest, than a mother's right to know her own mind. (110)

Another remarkable text that projects the misery of women in a patriarchal system is *Ahalya's Awakening* by the Indian author Kavita Kane. This work becomes significant as it gives voice to the silent cries, frustrations, and disappointments of the mythological character Ahalya from a perspective that

presents her as not a meek woman but a strong-willed princess who struggled to establish an identity as a scholar or a learned Rishika. In this retelling of the well-known character of Ahalya from the epic *Ramayana*, Kane traces her life as a princess who desired education more than royalty. This desire is met with harsh contempt, especially by her mother who wanted her to marry the king of Gods, Indra. Pursuing her desire to become a scholar, she marries Rishi Gautam and leaves the luxury of her palace to live in his *ashram* as his wife and student. Here, during the initial years of marriage, Ahalya's life unfolds as per her expectations but soon it turns out to be irksome as she becomes the mother of four children. The toils of motherhood and domestic chores reduce her to a woman who is denied space for creative pursuits. Though mythology presents her as a woman who is seduced by Indra, cursed by Rishi Gautam, and liberated by Lord Rama, Kane presents her as a woman who reawakens from the stifling bondage of male-defined notions of womanhood and motherhood by accepting her identity as a woman with passions and desires. This narrative climaxes with the meeting of Ahalya and Sita, the two most courageous mother characters in this mythology who are abandoned by their partners. The conversation that takes place between them marks them apart from all submissive women and Ahalya presents herself as one who has responded to her innermost desire to love and to be loved. She tells Sita of the social attitude against women who transgress from the path laid down to them by society:

A woman has so many roles, but each has a perimeter. You have to step out and away and yet move forward. But the world won't allow you that: it defines you as someone who has been born a daughter, to

live as a wife and die as a mother. Who sees the woman behind that daughter, that wife, that mother? Women are not told that they also belong to a bigger world – of freedom, of knowledge . . . of passion, of ambition. (340)

*The Reluctant Mother: A Story No One Wants to Tell*, a contemporary autobiographical narrative written by Zehra Naqvi from India has set the floor for the emergence of narratives by women and mothers that are disparate from popular Indian writings as it illuminates the chaotic psychological, physical, and emotional ambivalence experienced by a mother in a society that is predominantly patriarchal in outlook. The book surfs through the nurturing amniotic fluid of motherhood to break the myths of maternal constructs and expose the dilemma experienced by mothers. Naqvi reminds the readers that a mother should not limit her life to family obligations and encourages women to break conventions: “Set goals for your own self, goals unrelated to family. Goals for your achievements, professional or otherwise. Don’t let your only skill be taking care of others . . . construct your happiness around you. Stay in touch with friends and visit them” (199).

These works can be considered as counter-narratives to the dominant discourse that projects the idealised notion of motherhood as per patriarchal conventions. From the societal training that compels women to conceal their physical, emotional, and psychological experiences women writers have made their presence felt by disclosing their intimate feelings through fictional and non-fictional narratives in print and online platforms. Jane Van Buren in the second chapter titled, “Female Subjectivity” in the text *Mothers and Daughters and the Origins of Female*

*Subjectivity* traces the causes and effects of female objectification and notes the transition that has led to the expression of female subjectivity as: “The interest in women’s subjectivity is closely associated with the waning of faith in traditional belief system. Interest in women’s subjectivity follows as the deconstruction of given values releases them from incarceration inside concepts of sexual difference that had marked them as limited, and inferior” (27). Elaine Tuttle Hansen in the book *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* argues along a similar note that only when women break their silence will they be able to “escape the traditional plots that confine them to the roles of wives and mothers” (15). Melissa Benn in her book *Madonna and Child: Towards a New Politics of Motherhood* relates to the gradual revolutionary change that has evolved amid women from a silenced state to one of solidarity that has resulted in their empowerment through revelations of aspects that are intricately linked to the lives of women. An analogy to this can be traced in the 2022 released Hindi movie “*Jayeshbhai Jordar*” (Valiant Jayesh) directed by Divyang Thakkar in which women of a village meet regularly to share the experiences of their lives and offer support to each other during difficult times. These narratives focus on the changing lifestyle of women that hold testimony to the gradual transformation seen in the attitude of women towards conventional practices. The emergence of online platforms and websites like “Netmums Forum: Pregnancy, Parenting and Family Life Chat” and “The Coffee House Web” established in 2000 and 2004 respectively promote non-mothers and mothers to break centuries of silence and share experienced emotions, interpretations, and advice on a platform that can be viewed by millions of people from across the globe. These websites on parenting call to

question the myths of perfect motherhood and womanhood by exposing the truth of the matter.

*Mother Love: Myth and Reality*, a non-fiction work by the French philosopher, author, and feminist critic Elisabeth Badinter considers motherhood and challenges the biological determinism imposed on women through the socio-political and psychological framework by establishing it as an evolutionary phenomenon. Through an analysis of the execution of motherhood during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in France, she draws instances to claim that motherhood is a construct more than an innate natural characteristic of women as patriarchal society claims. To substantiate her argument, she refers to the system which included the wide use of wet nurses to rear children soon after birth. Further, she mentions the practice of employing tutors and governesses to train and educate children of affluent families in which women were comparatively free of any domestic chores. This iterates the claim that the concept of innate maternal love and sacrifice is a myth that is enforced on women to bind them to the idealised image of motherhood. In this context, Badinter calls attention to the question, “Where is the mother love that is said to exist in all places and at all times?” (66). She explores the change that came over the early concept of motherhood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during which children came to occupy the central space in the life of mothers and a mother came to be redefined as “the one who lives entirely for and through children” (176). While some women attained recognition and acceptance through this maternal role, others who were unwilling to acknowledge this idealisation was marginalised and condemned for not adhering to this “terrifying assignment” (Badinter 20). Rebecca

Coulter in her article titled, “Perspectives of Motherhood: A Review Essay” based on Badinter’s book observes:

Rousseau and Freud both characterised the normal woman as one with a highly developed sense of devotion and sacrifice. For love and with joy she gave herself to the bearing and rearing of children. Feminine nature became synonymous with loving motherhood, and this had dire consequences for women who did not live up to the ideal. Women seeking to escape the role of mother were subject to moral condemnation and women who could not or would not conform to the expectations for good mothers were also condemned.

(n. p)

This Freudian myth of the naturally loving and sacrificing mother was challenged by second-wave feminism and this discourse continues to be valid even now against the social construct of motherhood. Jacqueline Rose in the book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* documents the comment made by the child psychoanalyst Brunu Bettelheim: “I’ve spent my whole life working with children whose lives have been destroyed because their mothers hated them . . . which demonstrates that there is no maternal instinct – of course, there isn’t . . . This book will only serve to free women from their feelings of guilt” (111). Based on this comment, she observes that guilt binds a mother to her child; consequentially, it can be assumed that the social system has an agenda in generating guilt in the minds of mothers. The comment made by the English author, Ann Dally in the introduction to her book *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* becomes relevant at



this point when she observes, “the word mother is one of the oldest in the language. But the word motherhood is relatively new” (17) indicating that the word motherhood and its implications were later incorporated into language and these words gained momentum during the Victorian era before which it meant “merely to the fact of being a mother” (17).

In the context of multiple perspectives on motherhood, this thesis intends to analyse the representation of motherhood in selected texts which include *A Married Woman* and *Custody* by Manju Kapur, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* by Rachel Cusk, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Teresa Enright, *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* by Clover Stroud, *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* by Nell Frizzell and *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti. The seven primary texts are by writers from different parts of the world – Manju Kapur is an Indian writer, Rachel Cusk is a Canadian-born British novelist, Anne Teresa Enright is an Irish writer, Clover Stroud and Nell Frizzell are British writers and Sheila Heti is a Canadian writer. These texts from across geographical boundaries are chosen for detailed analysis in this study as it provides a distinct depiction of womanhood and motherhood from different socio-cultural standpoints. Another noteworthy aspect of this selection is that all these writers are women, and it is a result of a conscious effort made to search for books by women writers as they will be able to provide a firsthand experience of motherhood. Moreover, this study provides a genuine representation of motherhood, by bringing to the limelight the aberrant attitude of women towards this characterisation, as five out of the seven texts are biographical narratives that reveal the experienced reality which is deviant

from the norm. The two fictional works by Manju Kapur unfold an upcoming reality that indicates a revolutionary move from women who dare to challenge the patriarchal institution of marriage, womanhood, and motherhood by breaking the boundaries set for women in society. Unlike in the past, the present literary texts represent women characters who dare to reveal the true experiences of lived reality rather than blindly submit to the existing norms promulgated by patriarchy. Each of these texts can be considered a microcosmic representation of the emerging resistance and simultaneous acceptance of motherhood based on the experiences of women and mothers, which is different from the patriarchal construct. Holistic reading and interpretation of these texts broaden the perspectives on motherhood and help distinguish between the genuine experiences and existing dogmas that are prevalent in society. These texts are scrutinised for its delineation of female protagonists and their attitude towards the patriarchal institution of womanhood and motherhood.

The seven texts are incorporated into the chapters in an order that is based on the gravity of the representation of the deviant attitude towards the patriarchal construct of motherhood. As the protagonists in the works of the Indian author, Kapur subtly defends individuality and personal rights in comparison with the narrators of other texts analysed for this study, *A Married Woman* and *Custody* are exhaustively discussed in the first chapter that initiates the study. These texts depict the condition of the educated middle-class Indian women who are caught in the matrix of the patriarchal institution of womanhood and motherhood that are considered beyond debate in the Indian cultural context which is male-dominated.

The protagonists namely, Astha of *A Married Woman* and Shagun of *Custody* are representatives of the emerging modern women in India who challenge the conventional notions by expressing their personal emotions and sexual orientations in a society that still considers these aspects as taboo. *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* by Rachel Cusk and *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Enright are detailed in the second chapter. These biographical writings expose the ambivalent attitudes that are experienced by women upon becoming mothers. It also pays attention to the transition that takes place in the personal and social life of these individuals when they are burdened with the task of looking after their infants during the days and nights. The books *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* by Clover Stroud and *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* by Nell Frizzell are meticulously elaborated in the third chapter. These biographical narratives discuss the societal pressure on women to conceive and settle within a family system that is administered by patriarchy. These texts also talk about the presence of a biological clock inside every woman that ticks to remind her of her bodily functions to conceive and nurture children in time. The most daring of all the female figures in this collection is the narrator in Sheila Heti's work *Motherhood*. The unnamed protagonist of this work, who is assumed to be Heti herself challenges the existing patriarchal institution of motherhood by calling into question the need to conceive in a world that is already overpopulated. Heti claims this book to be a wrestling place as all the pages are charged with her conflicting thoughts on the need to accept or reject motherhood after perceiving it through the lens of contemporary feminist theories. Challenging the gendered identities and biological determinism, she ultimately decides against not having a child despite social pressures to fit into

the established concept of femininity. This text forms the crux of the fourth chapter of this thesis as it surfs through the multiple pros and cons of motherhood that disintegrate the individuality of mothers in a patriarchal society.

This study is assumed to make a better understanding of the conviction of motherhood as the authors of these texts from across geographical boundaries perceive motherhood through the lens of theoretical and experiential viewpoints that set it apart from the ideological framework of patriarchy. These texts are analysed keeping in mind that there are diverse attitudes and identities towards motherhood, and all of these do not fit into the patriarchal concept of the same. Juxtaposing the contemporary literary writings and theoretical perspectives with the earlier understanding and perceptions on motherhood, this study underscores the fact that certain elements are contested even today due to uncertainties and ambivalence that pierce the minds of women on account of accepting or rejecting motherhood. This state of precariousness is stated by Ellen Peck in the first chapter titled, “In The Time of Your Life, Live. . .” of her controversial book on motherhood, *The Baby Trap* as “I think that many couples do not want children. They want something; perhaps they define that something as a child. But that may not be what is wanted at all. And this fact may become obvious only sometime after the decision to have children is made” (13). Harriet Lerner in the book *The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life* presents similar reasons for women to accept motherhood: “She may want a baby to fill a big empty space in her life or because she doesn’t have a clue about what to do with herself and is terrified of testing herself in the world of work. She may want a child to replace a prior loss, to outdo

her big sister, to cure her loneliness, or to hold on to her husband and keep him close to home” (14). Of a woman’s desire to live a life of her own choice, independent of cultural and historical evolutionary ideologies, Peck affirms that there are women who long for a life that is creative and innovative instead of being muddled with repetitive schedules.

Every literary text is a complex reflection of human interactions and relationships that gives expression to the existing norms and their multiple interpretations in specific socio-cultural contexts. In the wide canvas of literature, every text becomes an integral part that in its way contributes to discourses that are in several ways associated with human lifestyle. Hence, contexts and aspects that are discussed in a text move beyond the covers to trigger analytical thoughts, comparative studies, and criticisms that lead to evaluations and interpretations based on the past and present theoretical perspectives to understand an emerging attitude in the contemporary society that may serve as the base for the formation of novel theories of the future. Accordingly, the seven primary texts chosen for this study reflect the social and cultural contexts of human life and a semiotic understanding of it reveals the performance of internalised notions and attitudes of the stakeholders in its execution.

The research methodology used in this study includes at the outset an in-depth textual analysis and interpretation of all the primary texts to understand the representation of women and mothers in distinct contexts to grasp the impact of social, cultural, and political aspects in the life of mothers. Texts are integral to this study as they signify and provide meaning to the elements related to womanhood

and motherhood in specific cultural contexts. Critical and interpretative analysis of characters along with their thoughts, actions, and attitudes to motherhood and its related associations throw light on the existence of diverse approaches to motherhood as experienced by women and mothers in these texts. This investigation is carried out based on the available critical and academic materials and contemporary feminist perspectives that acknowledge the existence of aberrant attitudes to motherhood. Hence, the study looks forward to offer fresh perspectives and alternate explanations to the ongoing discourses related to women based on their physiological abilities. To expose the undercurrents of the patriarchal institution of motherhood that limit the potential of women to domesticity, this study makes use of the available qualitative data to establish the need to restructure the socially constructed reality of glorified motherhood. Secondary sources of information are evaluated to critique, accept, and respect cultural variations and their impact on the acceptance and rejection of motherhood. An analytical method is used to critically evaluate the primary texts based on the existing knowledge and theoretical perspectives. Historic representations and their interpretations help to understand the past from a contemporary standpoint and provide the framework to reread the present by analysing the evolutionary changes that have resulted in the latest developments in this field of study. Specific concepts that determine and limit the roles of women and mothers in diverse cultural contexts are conceptually analysed to challenge the existing norms and to develop a fresh viewpoint to accept emerging concepts based on a logical and coherent understanding of facts.

The first chapter of the thesis titled, “Juxtaposing Patriarchy and Motherhood” reconnoitres the representation of women as individuals, wives, and mothers in the works of the Indian-born Manju Kapur, chiefly based on her novels *A Married Woman* published in 2002 and *Custody* published in 2010. She made her presence felt in the literary scenario with the publication of her first book, *Difficult Daughters*, which was awarded the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in 1999. Her fourth book titled, *The Immigrant* was short-listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2011. The novel *A Married Woman* pays attention to the transition that overpowers the individuality of the protagonist, Astha on becoming a wife and a mother along with exploring the inner turmoil reflected through intrapersonal communications and interpersonal relationships that force her to submit to gendered discrimination. Initially, as a wife and mother, she pretends to be happy despite the underlying anguish that froths in her mind. Kapur develops this unrest in Astha along the lines of the political turmoil that takes over the nation during the Hindu-Muslim conflict initiated by the Ram Janma Bhoomi-Babri Masjid issue, successfully blending the personal with the political aspects. Through the character of Astha and her friend Pipeelika, Kapur inspects the psyche of the contemporary women who challenge conventional notions of wifehood and motherhood by juxtaposing them against the women of older generations to specify the difference in their attitudes towards the satisfaction of personal desires and interpersonal demands.

To make a further assessment of the representation of female characters in the works of Manju Kapur, this chapter attempts to make an analysis of another

work by the same author, *Custody*, published in 2010. *Custody* can be considered a chronicle of Indian middle-class families as it deals with infertility, infidelity, divorce, and adoption of children which are central to most of the issues in the family. This work analyses in detail, the life episodes of two women characters, Shagun and Ishitha, who represent the emerging new women in the Indian context as they challenge the patriarchal norms prescribed for women in society. The novel focuses on the transformation that takes place in the character of Shagun from a docile Indian mother to a daringly willful woman who forsakes her marriage and children to join her lover, Ashok Khanna. In a broader perspective, with the depiction of family issues and women's demand for equality and sharing of responsibilities in the domestic circle, this work marks the disintegration of the institution of marriage as women refuse to abide by the patriarchal norms of womanhood and motherhood. The works by Kapur, in general, provide multiple personalities embedded in women that are vital to understanding the plurality of women's psyche and sexual orientations which the patriarchal society conveniently avoids keeping women as subordinate to establish their egocentrism. The first chapter of the thesis will sift these women characters to expose the existence of certain traits in the persona of the women that challenge the established constraints set by patriarchy against which the clarion for women's liberty reverberates to reveal the unseen.

The second chapter of the thesis titled, "Delineating Mothering and Making Babies" discusses two texts, namely, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* by Rachel Cusk and *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Enright.



Rachel Cusk is a Canadian-born British novelist and writer with eleven novels and four non-fiction works to her credit apart from the several introductions and forewords she has written for scholarly texts. Her first novel *Saving Agnes* published in 1993 is a social satire on femininity that received the Whitbread First Novel Award in 1993. Among her literary contributions, a trilogy consisting of *Outline*, *Transit* and *Kudos* published in 2014, 2017 and 2018 respectively are noteworthy for its content, style, and narrative strategy. She is an acclaimed writer who has won several awards and many of her works have been short-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction, Goldsmith's Prize, Folio Prize, Bailey's Prize and Governor General Award for English-language Fiction and two of her works *In the Fold* (2005) and *Second Place* (2021) were long-listed for the Booker Prize. Her non-fiction book, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* published in 2001 is a memoir that reveals the wonders and disappointments of becoming a mother. On its publication, the book was equally admired and critiqued for its bold representation of motherhood as experienced by the author in a deviant manner when compared to the glorified experiences of the same as depicted and assured by men and women in a patriarchal system.

This non-fiction work breaks taboos associated with the patriarchal institution of motherhood as she gives voice to the genuinely experienced realities of nurturing kids. This book provides a detailed account of her early years of motherhood that is filled with bewilderment, ambivalence, love and compassion in the role of a mother. It pours out her experiences with sleepless nights, colic, fatigue, advice manuals, breastfeeding, and caretakers. This anecdotal narrative subverts the

romanticised concept of motherhood by juxtaposing the reality of the experience with the expectation of it. It also attempts to illustrate the life-altering transformation that takes in a woman upon embracing motherhood. This work marks the transition that takes place in the life of Cusk when motherhood forces her to forsake the familiar land of writing to enter the unknown world of motherhood. Her anxiety on being displaced from her pre-maternal life is illustrated in every chapter as she tries to balance her past and present.

The second work that is discussed in this chapter is by the Man Booker Prize winner Anne Teresa Enright, an Irish writer who has penned seven novels, several short stories and one non-fiction work. She won the Man Booker Prize for her fourth novel *The Gathering* in 2007 and the same work was acclaimed as the Irish Novel of the Year in 2008. Apart from these, she possesses other prestigious recognitions and awards including the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, Encore Award, Davy Byrne's Irish Writing Award, Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction and Kerry Group Irish Fiction Award. Moreover, Goldsmiths College, University of London bestowed onto her an Honorary Degree (DLit) in the year 2012. The book *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* published in 2004 and set in the socio-political context of Ireland, explores family relationships, love, human bonds and primarily the ambivalent attitudes of mothers. This biographical work depicts pregnancy and the early years of mothering as experiences that rip the physical body moving on to dismantle the established individual identities. Enright wrote this book during the period of her pregnancy with her second child and in the introductory chapter of the text she affirms that it is an honest representation of her

experiences as a mother of two children. This text records Enright's experience of pregnancy and the early stages of motherhood that have altered her life beyond recognition when compared to her pre-maternal life. The work begins with a note of apology to the defenders of the patriarchal system as it challenges the glorified image of motherhood that is promoted by patriarchy. Along with elaborating on the difficulties encountered while nurturing the child, she presents her traumatic experiences and the feeling of confinement that isolates her from social activities.

Both these texts that are elaborated on and discussed in detail in the second chapter of the thesis are autobiographical and project how the social life of a woman gets reduced to the domestic circle when she becomes a parent. These writers depict their isolation from the social circle after becoming mothers as society pressurises them to be always available to the demands of the children. These writers argue that the social system that limits the role of a woman while becoming a mother is not natural but a socially constructed one by the patriarchal system to execute power over women and the claim made by the writers is analysed in the light of the feminist perspectives.

The third chapter of the thesis titled, "Cantankerous Tales of Flux and Panic" explores the depiction of mothers and motherhood in the books *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* by Clover Stroud and *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* by Nell Frizzell. Stroud is a journalist by profession and writes for the *Daily Mail*, *Sunday Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Conde Nast Traveler* among others. As she depicts in this memoir, she is a mother of five children and lives in Oxfordshire with her husband. *The Wild Other: A Memoir*

published in 2017 was her first book and was shortlisted for Wainwright Prize. This work pictures an enduring life of love, loss, family, and relationships along with the transformations she had to endure as an adolescent when her mother was left brain-damaged following a riding accident. Her recent publication is *The Red of My Blood: A Death and Life Story* published in 2022 and it embarks on a description of life in all its shades of love, despair, and joy related to her own life as a lover, wife, and mother of five children. Stroud's *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* that explores her predicament as a mother of five children published in 2020 is the one that is considered for analysis for its representation of mothering and motherhood to bring into focus an aberrant approach to the same. Dedicating this book to her five children namely Jimmy, Dolly, Evangeline, Dash, and Lester she admits her fascination to endure labour pain as a "wild feeling of emerging from the brink of labour, blood pouring from me, my body split open, holding new life in my arms" (2) which intoxicates her enough to crave for it again as soon as it is accomplished. This memoir also depicts her dislike for mothering and her love for the messiness created by her children. This deviant attitude towards motherhood is discussed in detail in the third chapter. As mentioned above, along with Stroud's work, this chapter discusses *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* by Nell Frizzell. She is a journalist, writer, and *Vogue* columnist and writes for the *Guardian*, *the Telegraph*, *Elle*, *the Observer*, *Grazia*, and *I-D*. *The Panic Years*, her first book published in 2021, is an exploration of bodies, babies, motherhood, and what she calls the "flux" (6) of a woman's life wherein she is caught between societal demands of family, motherhood, and establishing a career. This book explores her dilemma of wanting and not wanting to be a mother and she

reflects on her thoughts on this as “. . . I then had to work out if having a baby was really a sensible decision, for me, for my relationship, for my career, and for this wildly uncertain future” (183). This memoir charts her navigation through years of irresolution regarding the complexities of accepting and rejecting motherhood with thoughts and emotions that sink and float creating more ambivalence in decision-making. The book also explores the challenges and decisions women are forced to make between adolescence and menopause on friendships, partners, family, home, career, and savings; along with sexual orientations and bodily functions all of which ultimately depend on the decision to have or not to have a baby. Both these books prod at those emotions that are genuinely felt but surface as unintelligible as language itself lacks a proper diction to express the complex vehemence of women at the individual and political level. Within the perspectives of these two texts, the third chapter intends to make a study of the ambivalence and consequences generated by women in undertaking the role of mothering.

The fourth chapter of the thesis, “Incessant Wrestling with Motherhood” focuses on the text, *Motherhood* by the Canadian writer Sheila Heti published in the year 2018. As a writer her contributions span across the genres of novels, novellas, plays and short stories and she also contributes to periodicals including the *Flare*, *Maisonneuve*, *London Review of Books*, *Open Letters*, *Bookforum*, *The Look* and *The New York Times*. Her first published book, which appeared in 2001, is a collection of thirty short stories titled, *The Middle Stories*. Other prominent works include the novella *Ticknor* (2005), and *How Should a Person Be?* (2010). Her works in collaboration include *The Chairs Are Where People Go* (2011) and *Women*

*in Clothes* (2014). Heti's most recent publication of 2022 is the novel *Pure Colour*, which talks about grief in general and relates to her father's death. *Motherhood*, the autobiographical fiction that won the Governor General's Award in 2022, is considered for a detailed study in the fourth chapter of the thesis as it projects the narrator's dilemma in taking a decision related to the acceptance and rejection of motherhood along with presenting the complicated and thought-provoking relationship she had with her mother.

This work delves into the life of women by interrogating the purpose of existence and challenges the concept that compels women to accept motherhood. It is a complex record of the narrator's ambivalence on procreation that is discussed and evaluated in every chapter. The narrative begins by revealing the dilemma experienced by the narrator and ends with the suggestion to consider voluntary childlessness for women. Against the societal pressure to conceive and become a mother, the speaker dares to reject motherhood by probing into the pros and cons of accepting it in a patriarchal society. The book can be considered as a feminist debate and a philosophical reflection that compels the readers to perceive motherhood through the lens of contemporary feminist theories to determine the right to accept or reject motherhood based on individual priorities instead of submitting impulsively to patriarchal demands. As she reveals in the text, this book is considered a "wrestling place" (284) wherein she wrestles against her thoughts and social construction of gendered identities.

The narratives mentioned above pave the way for wide and alternate discussions on the imposed destiny of women and mothers as it is subversive in their

presentation of concepts that are intimately linked to females. As there is a rise in the number of works on matters related to womanhood and motherhood, this research study becomes relevant as the sensibilities, sensuousness and extreme emotions of mothers continue to be hushed up due to social conditioning that enforce them to follow the clichés of motherhood and womanhood. Accordingly, this study becomes highly pertinent as even with years of feminism and the emergence of a plethora of critical theories on women's empowerment, motherhood continues to be articulated and performed by the patriarchal norms that are highly disorienting for women. As Andrea O'Reilly states in her article titled, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century" the present scenario is "impervious to change because it is grounded in gender essentialism, a gender ideology that establishes a naturalised opposition between public and private spheres" (n. p).

Among the myriad representations of women characters and their attitude towards motherhood, the above-mentioned texts portray women and mothers who are deviants from the established and accepted ideologies of motherhood. Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya denote in the book *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* that women are considered as deified under religious iconography, able or disabled under the capitalist culture and as a commodity under the consumerist culture. Conceiving the multiplicity of identities embodied in motherhood they observe that, "cutting across the disciplinary boundaries conjured up by the empirical bent of the social sciences and the interpretive slant of

representational discourse, the body emerges, fades and re-emerges in these narratives, evincing the shifting effects of patriarchal cultural codifications” (xiv).

Within the purview of these texts, this study explores the multiple ways in which patriarchal constructs of social norms remap individual mind settings to incorporate and surrender to the expectations of a gendered society. Of the seven texts that are discussed in this thesis, five are autobiographical writings and these books provide a first-hand depiction of mothering as experienced by women. As Brodzki and Schenck state in the introduction to their text, *Life / Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, these biographical narratives present an “unmediated and undistorted” reflection of life which can be perceived as “a self whose depths can be plumbed, whose hearts can be discovered, and whose essence can be definitely known” (17). In agreement with this, Anne Ruggemeier in the article titled, “Autobiographies: Kureishi, Miller, Weibe, Coetzee and Bechdel – Self-Reflexivity in Contemporary English Auto / Biographies” refers to these texts as “self-reflexive narratives” (241) that are “self-reflective, auto-referential, and auto-representational” (241). From a broader perspective as the writer Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet states in the article titled, “Textualisation of the Self and Gender Identity in the Life-story” the protagonists of memoirs and personal narratives construct their identities by placing themselves in a socio-political context to present not only “facts and events, but also social representations and cultural values” (61) that influence the construction of identities in life-writings. Accordingly, an in-depth study of personal narratives by women that are placed in specific socio-cultural and political framework become significant as it is considered a “testing-ground for feminism”



(Cosslett et al. 2) as these narratives disclose the personal experiences which are deviant from the norm.

Writings by women on motherhood are known by several names in academic circles as Heather Hewet mentions in the article titled, “Motherhood Memoirs” and these include terms like “mommy memoirs . . . motherhood autobiography . . . maternal memoir . . . motherhood memoir . . . and maternal confessional writing” (192). Though popularly known by these names, in a 2003 article titled, “Navel-Gazing Their Way through Parenthood”, the writer Katie Allison Granju uses the term “momoir” (n. p) to refer to the life narratives of mothers. The comment made by the writer and Professor of Cultural History, Deborah Philips in the *Women’s Fiction From 1945 to Today* concerning the novels she analyses, applies to these selected works as well, as these works too are “not a barometer of social history, and is never a simple reflection of its times, but what it can do is to chart the limits and shifts in social discourse, and so offer insights into what can and cannot be fantasized about and publicly acknowledged” (3). Accordingly, through an in-depth analysis of the characters in these narratives, this study attempts to explore the possibility and consequences of projecting an aberrant attitude to conceived notions of biological determinism against individual choices of preference over one’s body, mind, and reproductive abilities. This project also attempts to expose the limited and inefficient ideologies of patriarchy that fail to contain the diverse attitudes and desires of women that distinguish them as different, unique, and daring from the male-designed prototype of how a woman should be in the individual and social spaces. As Rachel Chrastil remarks in the introduction to her book, *How To Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children*, “Whether you are

wondering about whether you want to have children or have made that decision long ago, whether you are childless or child-full” (1), this research work is an attempt to voice the suppressed emotions, physical, and psychological trauma and ambivalence experienced by women that lead to an unfathomable transition in the life of a woman than fatherhood creates in the life of a man. It works on the assumption that motherhood matters and yet, it is not the only thing that matters in the lives of women as O’Reilly claims in her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* according to which to comprehend the life of a mother it is essential to know the impact of accepting motherhood in the personal and social life of women. This sort of analysis and understanding of the status quo of women and mothers in today’s society become significant as Rose states: “Unless we recognise what we are asking mothers to perform in the world – and for the world – we will continue to tear both the world and mothers to pieces” (7).

The study argues that the institution of motherhood as promoted by patriarchy is a social construct that needs to be deconstructed to create space for women to express their individuality beyond this role that limits them. It further argues that concerning accepting or rejecting motherhood experiences, women should not be tied down to the two extreme points of identification of the binary framework of motherhood, according to which women are either mothers or non-mothers. This binary concept ignores all other emotions and distinct variations experienced by women as it refers to them as either childless or childfree which leads to comparison and despair between the duo. Ruby Warrington in her book, *Women Without Kids: The Revolutionary Rise of an Unsung Sisterhood* introduces the term “Mommy Binary” (10) to refer to this aspect. Hence, with the help of the

primary texts, this study attempts to establish that the concept of motherhood is not a binary but rather a spectrum with diverse standpoints for women to position themselves anywhere in between the extreme points of reference. This exploration will further lead to the establishment of the fact that it is natural for women to experience ambivalence, frustration, discontent, and disillusionment along with the expected joy and contentment upon becoming a mother.

The primary texts considered for the study provide ample illustrations of the consequences of accepting and rejecting motherhood and suggest alternate courses of life that are equally significant as becoming a mother. This work also interrogates the existing supremacy of family life as per patriarchal norms, over individual choices to remain child-free, which poses a threat to a woman's social existence. Within the purview of multiple perspectives and theoretical assumptions this study further attempts to position women on a pedestal free from their biological determinism. It enables them to incline to their orientations by making a choice to liberate their body that entails them to certain rigid and hostile norms in society. It looks forward to making contributions to an ongoing discourse on the role and position made available to women in society. The study further proposes the need to liberate women from social institutions that compel them to fall in line with the norm. This study honours the biological potential of women to become mothers and it also simultaneously considers the fact that biological attributes alone should not mark the destiny of women. It proposes the aspect that acceptance or rejection of motherhood should be considered as an individual's choice and the social mindset should be broad enough to respect it as an individual's right.

# CHAPTER 1

## JUXTAPOSING PATRIARCHY AND MOTHERHOOD

Contemporary writer Manju Kapur attempts to evince through many of her fictional works an assemblage of male and female characters who emulate multifaceted realities of human existence within the domains of India's social, cultural, and political context. Kapur's second novel, *A Married Woman*, published in 2002, begins with the stigmatised perceptions of Indian middle-class families that hold on to conventional doctrines of patriarchy to create meaning to their existence. This fictional work is set in Delhi against the backdrop of the socio-political and religious agitations instigated by the Ram Janma Bhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict which set the nation ablaze during the 1990s. The novel ushers a pan-Indian traditional family system that is still in force in the socio-cultural web of the nation. It exposes the variant forms in which the credos are strictly administered to the female characters to secure the sanctity of cultural and moral convictions that are considered vital to fasten the reigns of family life. In this context of expected norms that conflict with individual differences in attitudes and approaches, *A Married Woman* significantly limns characters who scuffle to fit into these acquired standards of living. The novel gyrates around the persona of Astha from her adolescent period to womanhood and motherhood, and the transition from one milestone to another unveils manifold circumstances that puzzle and enlighten her understanding of the constructs that are precisely grounded in her mind by the patriarchal society.

*A Married Woman* begins with a culturally sound statement that underscores the socio-cultural expectations of how a girl child is forecast to evolve in Indian society: “Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable, and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure” (1). This statement unravels how a girl child is raised in a traditional Indian household so that they adhere to the disciplines of the conventional family system in the fear of getting abused and for the sake of being safe and secure. Astha, born as an only child to a bureaucrat father and a teacher-mother, grows up in a government quarter at Delhi fearfully aware of her vulnerability as a girl like most of the girls of her time. Right from an early age, she tries to visualise her adult life based on the notions constantly fed by her mother Sita, a typical middle-class woman, who is concerned more with the marriage of her daughter than her higher education.

The novel opens with the discussion of Astha’s marriage initiated by Sita’s conventional belief system: “When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know what the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughters married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth” (1). Despite being educated and employed as a teacher, her mother constantly reminds Astha that true happiness in life lies in serving her husband and children. The impact of these statements that are ingrained into her mind plays a significant role in her personal and social life as she gets transfixed between the traditional feminine attributes and personal inclinations that she craves to explore to experience its ramifications.

Kapur presents Astha as a young lady who is aware of her emotions and dares to challenge conventions to experiment and experience her individuality. Despite all the measures taken by her parents to keep her away from boys and infatuations, she falls in love with Bunty, the son of a family friend, studying at the Defense Academy at Kharakvasala. Though she is fascinated by him, her mother's interference in this matter leads to an abrupt break-up between the two. Soon Astha falls in love with Rohan, another boy in the neighbourhood, and urges him to marry her as soon as he declares his affection. The boy, too practical to accept this condition, takes her around for some time and goes abroad for higher studies, putting an end to their relationship. His negligence reminds her of her mother's caution to beware of boys as they would all seek ways to exploit girls.

Sita and Astha, two ladies who represent the first and second generations of women, are entirely different in their outlook and approach to life. Sita is conventional and attempts to train Astha along the lines of patriarchal expectations while Astha, who is more progressive and capable of independent thinking, does not easily admit to the ideas raised by her mother. Yet, under the continuous surveillance and instructions given by Sita, to a large extent, she falls in line with the prevalent system. Sita considers marriage more crucial to higher education and employment and hence compels her husband to take the initiative to construct a house and get their daughter married before his retirement. With this objective in mind, they discuss the father's retirement plans but unlike her mother, Astha's father who is more progressive in his approach encourages her to study and under his watchful eyes she tries to perform well in her academic activities though she is not

very keen to pursue her studies. After her basic graduation, she takes up a post-graduate course in English Literature only to keep her engaged till she is married. Marriage seems to be the ultimate goal in her life and her preoccupation with these thoughts brings to the forefront the impact of reinforcing gender-oriented life roles for women in a male dominant society.

As per the expectation of her family, a marriage proposal from Hemant, a well-settled young man marks a distinguishable track for Astha from her mundane routine. After copious discussions among the trio – father, mother, and herself – Hemant’s proposal for marriage is accepted as he is the “foreign-retuned son of one of the bureaucrats who lived in large houses bordering Lodhi colony” (33). An MBA from abroad and the soaring financial status of his family enable him to be the most eligible suitor and the days following the marriage turn out to be a dream realisation for the young bride. During their honeymoon trip to Srinagar, she appears to be at the peak of excitement: “A deep seed of happiness settled in the pit of her stomach, she was married, she didn’t have to be the focus of her parents’ anxieties any longer. She was now a homemaker in her own right, a grown woman, experiencing her first plane ride” (37). Through the days and nights, she basks in his love and considers herself fortunate to be his wife as he seemed liberal and progressive in his attitude to women. At Hemant’s residence, Astha contentedly executes the expected duties of a wife and daughter-in-law considering it a privilege to meet the requirements of her husband and his household:

Back in Delhi, Astha submerged herself in the role of daughter-in-law and wife. Time spent in the kitchen experimenting with new dishes

was time spent in the service of love and marriage. Hemant's clothes she treated with reverence, sliding each shirt in his drawers a quarter centimetre out from the one above so they were easily visible, darning all tiny holes in his socks, arranging his pants on cloth-wrapped hangers so there would be no crease. (43)

Impressed by her attention to all the domestic affairs, she is appreciated by her in-laws and Hemant takes credit for all the work performed by her. However, quite contrary to the general expectation, discontent slips into her life as she feels exasperated and forlorn with the customary activities of housekeeping. Hence, to keep her engaged she is encouraged to take up a job as a teacher that is considered as an ideal one for women as it enables them to fit in with the professional and domestic responsibilities. Her in-laws and Hemant consider women unworthy of professional accomplishments and so they deem her job as a "good time pass" (47) and expect her to gratify the requirements of running a house along with meeting the requisites of her job. These remarks not only deprecate the worth of the teaching profession but also her potential as an individual. Though she realises that her future seemed pedestrian to others, the reality of being employed makes her ebullient:

Being a teacher meant the languor of her days was over. No longer did she have the luxury of leisurely brooding over her love, she had to get up early and go to work. She had exercises to correct, and lessons to prepare. She started a reading club, a writing club, a painting club, directed by the principal's suggestions and followed through with her encouragement. The peripheries of her world now



stretched to include many schoolgirls. Life was shaping up nicely, with her mind and heart gainfully employed. (48)

However, a transition takes place in the character of Astha when she conceives after two years of marriage and her priorities shift in her excitement of becoming a mother. Though she continues to work, the physical changes that become visible in her body delight her. She successfully satisfies the needs of her personal as well as professional life and gives birth to a daughter, Anuradha, who presents Astha with a life filled with exhilaration and anxiety. The initial days of motherhood elate her in its warmth and intimacy with the infant but contrary to her expectation, Hemant does not entail tending to the needs of the newborn. He performs the role of a father only on weekends and on all other days, childcare becomes the responsibility of Astha as expected invariably by everyone around her. As days pass, Hemant becomes more engaged in his new business endeavours and though she is glad for his success and his skills in exploiting situations to meet his targets, she longs for more leisure time with him than just mothering his child. Though she tries to express her uneasiness, he ignores her and remarks, “Grow up, Az, one can’t be courting forever . . . Why are you so childish? I work hard all day, and when I come home, I want to relax. If you are feeling something, tell me. I have no time for all these games” (66).

This representation of Astha’s routine life on becoming a mother is what is commonly performed by women in most societies in which the tasks of caring for and nurturing children fall entirely on the shoulders of women. Writers Carole Zufferey and Fiona Buchanan in their work *Intersections of Mothering* present the

societal attitude towards mothers as: “Good mothers are positioned as intuitive nurturers and intensive mothers, constantly emotionally available for their children, providing them with endless activities, investing in their development and are held individually responsible for the care of children” (5). This kind of submission to family and children is expected from Astha by Hemant and his parents as they consider women to be primarily associated with the responsibilities of housekeeping and commitment to members of the family.

The transformation that Kapur traces in the character of Hemant on becoming an established businessman who is too busy to indulge in family matters and the needs of family members forms a significant aspect in the novel as it exposes the ego of the character who does not care for mutual respect and understanding with his wife. Though highly educated from a foreign university and seemingly progressive, when it comes to the matter of having a second child, he along with his mother shows preference for a male child as the first one is a girl. Consequently, the assumed stability between family and work is further at risk for Astha with Hemant’s expectation for a male child. Though she tries to remain calm, she notices that everyone has a say in the gender of her unborn foetus: “She was not allowed to forget that everybody, her colleagues, her in-laws, her husband’s friends’ wives, her mother, the cook, the gardener and the part-time helper all had an opinion about her baby’s gender and that almost universal opinion was that it would be a son and heir” (68). She is annoyed when Hemant supports his mother to perform certain religious rituals to ensure the birth of a male child and is enraged when he suggests

going on having babies till they beget a son. Her quagmires are never taken into consideration as is disclosed in the confab between the couple:

But Hem, I do not wish to go on trying and trying until we get a son.

It's very difficult with the teaching as it is.

Oh-ho, what is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organise a few clubs, and come back. If you do feel it [teaching] is important, all the more reason not to mind if mummy does some puja. Who knows it may yield good results?" (68)

With the birth of Himanshu, Astha is shamefully happy to have a son to satisfy the desire of her friends and ménage who comments, "the family is complete at last" (68). Being the mother of a son raises Astha's status and she willingly basks in the beams of love and appreciation that glide towards her from everyone. Like a quintessential woman, Astha feels exhilarated at the attention and recognition that is showered on her:

Astha often looked at her family, husband, daughter, and son. She had them all. She was fulfilled. Her in-laws frequently commented, 'Woman is earth,' and it is true. She felt bounteous, her life one of giving and receiving, surrounded by plenty. Visitors to the house would say, 'A mother's love' and then trail off, words collapsing into significant silence, which in turn washed over Astha and made her

feel that she had partaken of the archetypal experiences marked out for the female race. (69)

This feeling of contentment cherished by Astha on becoming the mother of a son is a sensation that is ingrained into the psyche of Indian women under cultural conditions that reinforce the notion that a male child is superior to a female child. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar refers to this condition in his book *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytical Study of Childhood and Society in India*:

Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is a fresh bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is a son, is both a certification and a redemption. (56)

Similarly, the symbolic representation of women as earth is rampant in the Indian culture and this image of a woman to be the carrier and nurturer of the seed is inculcated in the minds of women from childhood days onwards through stories that are passed on from one generation to another. Referring to Leela Dube's article, "Seeds and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production", Bagchi in the text *Interrogating Motherhood* amplifies this further:

Leela Dube's writings bring out what anthropologists have pointed out from findings made throughout India, the implications of the

widespread metaphor of seed and field. 'Two related points emerge', says Dube. 'First, an essentially unequal relationship is reflected in and emphasized through the use of these symbols, and second, the symbolism is utilised by the culture to underplay the significance of the woman's contribution to biological reproduction'. (7)

Dube exemplifies it further by stating that this image associated with motherhood and mothering denies women the rights over their children and hence the kids are claimed as the property of the father and as their authority by marginalising the mother. This symbol is extensively used with male children as according to Bagchi this "has far-reaching implications for defining the contours of both lineage and transmission of private property" (8). This stands true in the case of Astha as Hemant takes pride in the birth of his son and yet refuses to share the responsibilities of parenthood. The flow of events and the induced gratitude for the same suffer when Hemant begins to act like a typical male chauvinist as the last thing he wanted to be bothered about was taking care of the child. Every time Astha requests his assistance in looking after the baby, he firmly declares, "It's your job . . . It's a woman's work. Hire somebody to help you or quit your job" (70). Astha is dumbfounded at his response, and this breeds a prominent detachment between the couple. While Hemant is diligently engaged in his business matters and travels, she feels strained in her tussle to meet the demands of children:

Astha was now virtually a single mother. Beleaguered by job, small children, and house, she sometimes toyed with the idea of resigning from school, but between her marriage and the birth of her children,

she too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence. Besides there was the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs. (72)

Recognising her potential as an educator and the solace her occupation offers her, Astha decides to proceed with her job irrespective of the domestic challenges. This job provides her with a sense of worth and financial independence that is indispensable, but her in-laws stipulate her to be more domestic-oriented than a professional and hence, they complain of her negligence of motherly duties. Consequently, she looks for a maid to relieve her mother-in-law of the responsibilities of looking after the children while she is away from home. Here too she is inculpated for her ineptitude to manage and deal with servants as some of them turn out to be thieves or lazy. Despite the efforts she makes to satisfy the expectations of others along with meeting her targets, the responsibilities of being a mother linger above everything else in her mind. To ease the grandparents of the troubles of looking after the children, she struggles to get back home sooner to engage them. Yet, her in-laws instead of appreciating her efforts complain about her inefficiency as a homemaker and consequently, managing her home and profession single-handedly becomes arduous for her. When she sends the kids to them, they say she is neglecting family responsibilities and when she engages them by herself, they complain to Hemant and without understanding the situation, he barges at her, saying, “You fuss too much. Besides Dada and Dadi are lonely. They complain they do not see enough of the children” (78). Hemant in these situations takes the side of his mother depriving Astha of his support in sharing parental responsibilities. As he

does not pay attention to the demands of the kids, she considers herself accountable for all their requirements including their schoolwork, games and food habits which suffer when they are sent to their grandparents who do not restrict any activities of the children. He fails to understand the concerns of a mother and wife regarding family affairs and subsequently Astha retorts, “What about me? As it is when I am in school Himanshu is upstairs [with grandparents]. When I come home, I want the children. I hardly have you, I should have them” (78).

Lack of consideration from those who are physically close disappoints Astha and as they fail to recognise her efforts, she decides to seek contentment by devoting more time to her skills of writing and painting. She hopes that with the passage of time Hemant and others will become more compassionate. Writing becomes an intense medium of communication between herself and the life around her as it helps her to be engaged effectively during her free hours, especially when she is homebound after surgery to rectify a deviated septum. This recreation gradually conciliates her and reflects her profound agitation:

She wrote about gardens and flowers, the silent dark faces of gardeners tending plants and never getting credit. She wrote about love, rejection, desire, and longing. The language was oblique, but it was her own experience endlessly replayed. Writing alleviated the heaviness within her, a heaviness she found hard to deal with. Discussing her feelings with Hemant usually led to argument, distance, and greater misery. (79)

Hemant who reads these poems spites her for expressing emotions and recommends writing pleasant romantic ones instead of these bleak ones. His attitude seems to indicate his frustration as the poems explicitly reveal her predicament as a married woman and it inversely casts a shadow on his pseudo concepts of a perfect family man. He conceals his prejudices and discourages her writing by saying that the romantic poems on nature that she had written during the days of their honeymoon were better than the new ones. To this remark, Astha says, "I've lost interest in nature. I'm older, I think differently" (80) expecting Hemant to understand that she is no longer that timid immature lady who was blindly passionate about him. He remarks, "I don't know what to make of them. Look I am no reader, but they sound rather bleak, don't you think? Good heavens, Az, they are all about cages and birds, and mice, and suffering in situations that are not even clear. There is not one happy poem here" (81). As he fails to understand, Astha explains that poems are based on emotions, expecting him to realise her reasons for being upset, irritated and angry. This exposes her intense longing for a conversation with him but unsympathetically he says, "What kind of emotions? This person sounds positively neurotic" (81). She feels miserable at his indifference and expresses her state of mind: "I want to bang my head against the wall because you never understand anything" (81) and stops writing to concentrate on her talent for drawing and sketching. Referring to this context, Anu Aneja in the chapter titled, "Anticipating the Mother's Dream: Maternal Subjectivity in Psychoanalysis, Literature and Cinema" analyses the mother-figure of Astha and states that "*A Married Woman* alludes to the search for aesthetic satisfactions and a concurrent escape from the stifling life of marriage and motherhood" (66).



As the narrative proceeds readers become aware of the metamorphosis that takes place in the character of Astha. She becomes conscious of her dependence and realises the need to be socially, mentally, physically, and financially independent to have an identity for herself other than as a wife and mother. This, however, is not an easy course of action as she must find excuses and assert her claim for independence, which is deviant from the norm. Traditionally women in India are not expected to take charge of the financial matters of the family or make attempts to claim authority over the family assets. After her father's death, Sita surprises her by entrusting money to Hemant without even considering her opinion on it. Here, Kapur elucidates how women in general are delineated as individuals who are incapable of financial management. All the prominent female characters including Sita and Astha are pictured as unfit to manage their financial matters. Though Sita is an educated woman who is employed as a teacher, she never has a say in any of the pecuniary matters and during a conversation with Astha she reveals her husband's role in administering the monetary affairs: "It was same with your father, I only did the household accounts . . . But he looked after my tax saving, my provident fund, and decided how much we should spend, how much to save, all that. After him, Hemant took over" (97). After the demise of her husband, Sita sells her home and before leaving for Rishikesh entrusts the money to Hemanth, though it was Astha's legacy from her late father. Her reflection on this matter throws light on the societal attitude towards financial management as male-centred:

Her mother had delivered her into Hemant's hands. If her mother was at fault, so was her father, for managing the money, and teaching his

wife that this was normal behaviour, so was her mother-in-law for bringing up Hemant to never regard women as beings to be consulted in their own lives, so was the Swamiji for teaching that only in detachment lies happiness, which lesson can be read in as many different ways as there are people and attachments. (98)

Astha makes several attempts to initiate a discussion on the financial matters of the family to feel associated with these matters but contrary to her presumption these triggers lead to further distress as Hemant fails to fathom the depth of her troubled consciousness. Every question she raises meets with indifferent responses and a lack of trust and in this circumstance, she expects consideration: “That’s not what I mean. I know she [Sita] trusts you, certainly much more than she trusts me, but is it such a bad thing if I know how much is in my name and how I can have access to it?” (99). This stirs up Hemant as he finds her queries an insult to his position as a husband and provider for the family.

A comparable situation indicating the financially dominant attitude of Hemant occurs during one of their family trips to Goa. Here again, without consulting her, he decides to spend the money she had earned from her paintings to purchase flight tickets to Goa. Astha who is unable to accept his ascendancy retorts amiably, “But darling, you could have asked me if I wanted to spend the money on a plane ticket, and that too when it is off-season” (163). Unsurprisingly, Hemant ignores her question and during a shopping expedition in Goa, she is fascinated by an antique silver box that is priced at five thousand rupees. To her request to possess this box as a memento of Goa, Hemant replies, “You must be out of your mind”

(164) and this insouciant reaction hampers her entity, and she is left pondering over her worth as a working woman:

The tone, the refusal both hurt her. She was an earning woman. Why couldn't she have a say in how some of their money was spent? She never said anything when he chose to squander money on airline tickets, why couldn't she buy a box she liked? . . . Nine thousand five hundred rupees spent on one of the worst weeks of my life, thought Astha, as she stepped into the hotel for the airport. She thought hopelessly of all the things she could have done with that money, of the beautiful silver box she could have admired and possessed forever. But their money spending was decided by him, not by her. (167)

These instances generate a discernment according to which she understands that Hemant and his reckonings cannot be disrupted by anybody. He is inexorable in his private and public spheres where everyone is expected to adapt to his likes and dislikes. She cogitates:

What kind of a fool had she been to expect Hemant to understand? She had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned. This boat could not be rocked. She could paint that on a canvas and put it upon the wall, and stare at it day and night, so that its message burnt its way through her brain into her heart. This boat cannot be rocked. (99)

The attitude of her family members and husband towards her makes it explicit that her emotions and concerns are nugatory to them, and this reduces her to a subservient position in Hemant's house. The narrative depicts how the seemingly high status that mothers are revered within the Indian culture is a pretentious one that does not upgrade the status of women in family and society. However, unlike most women, Astha who is aware and conscious of her worth as an individual does not easily succumb to this male domination that tries to restrict her individuality.

Along with describing the mounting responsibilities of women while becoming a mother, this narrative also throws light on the sexuality of mothers. This is manifestly a bold attempt by Kapur as mothers in the Indian cultural scenario are undoubtedly considered asexual beings who yield only to satisfy their husbands. Against this presumed notion of motherhood and wifehood, Astha gets attracted to the artist Aijaz Akhtar Khan, leader of the Street Theatre Group who comes to hold a drama workshop for the students at the school. Astha becomes an active member of this theatre work on being the staff coordinator of this programme. After many discussions with her, Aijaz encourages her to write a working script for the drama, *Babri Masjid: Fact, Fiction and You*. She does research, collects materials, and makes attempts to write a working script. Her effort and skill are appreciated by Aijaz, but Hemant humiliates her by referring to her as a "donkey" (109) to which she snaps back, "Translating history into theatre is hardly work a donkey can do . . . I don't need experience. She felt she was being denied something, not understood, throttled, and choked" (109). Whenever Astha makes a comment or an opinion, he dumbfounds her by saying: "You sound like a parrot . . . Keep to what you know

best, the home, children, teaching. All this [raising an opinion on political matters] doesn't suit you" (116). Concomitantly, Hemant is full of acclamation for Anuradha and Himanshu who are also performing in the play. His appreciation of the kids and neglect of Astha is made explicit by the attitude with which he encounters his wife and kids.

Hemant's neglect and criticism make her pay more attention to people who appreciate her skills and acknowledge her potential. Accordingly, she fantasises about Aijaz and soon after the initial days of interaction begins to observe him closely. Aijaz takes Astha's comments and opinions during the drama workshop though being a history teacher he is better equipped than her on the Babri Masjid issue. His style of complementing her skills creates in her a desire for this immensely talented man and so she sketches him in different styles on paper. On one occasion when he casually touches her, she is alarmed and relives that memory several times over sleepless nights that are spent tossing and turning. The thought of being married and being the mother of two kids makes Astha feel guilty for feeling allured to Aijaz. Astha suppresses the thoughts associated with him and consoles her guilty conscience by saying that she will have nothing to do with him after the workshop ends.

Thoughts of Aijaz continue to preoccupy Astha's mind and she is in a fix between fantasy and reality: ". . . he looked at her, he wanted her opinion even when it wasn't necessary, he smiled when there was no occasion. Perhaps she shouldn't think of him so much, but soon it would be over, where was the harm, it made her happy and that in itself was worth something" (113). These revelations

seem to indicate that Astha is perplexed in her emotions and feels torn between her commitment to Hemant as a wife and her infatuation towards Aijaz who seems to be more compassionate. Hemant discerns her appreciation for Aijaz, and this makes him spiteful towards him as can be seen later in his attitude at the brutal modus operandi in which Aijaz along with his theatre group was burned alive in a van. This incident triggers heartrending emotions in her and watching her cry, Hemant says, “Why are you crying? What was he to you? This kind of thing happens all the time, I don’t see you wasting your tears” (139). Though Hemant’s nonchalant attitude piques Astha, she does not retreat from manifesting her protest at this massacre along with other thousands of people who are socially committed. Against Hemant’s regard, Astha participates in the massive protest rally that was organised from the Red Fort to the Prime Minister’s house and she becomes part of a forum, Sampradayaka Mukti Manch, that is set up to eternalise the memory of The Street Theatre Group. The Manch decides to hold an exhibition of paintings that intends to focus on secularism and for this, Astha contributes a painting. Amidst schoolwork and domestic demands, painting becomes strenuous and as she is battered by severe headaches and body pain which leaves her smothered in balm and painkillers, Hemant voices his annoyance:

Why are you doing this to yourself? . . . You can’t paint and teach, every time I come home you are lying on the sofa. You are suffering, we are all suffering . . . Your body cannot stand the strain. Mummy said you are neglecting the children, you do not sleep in the afternoons, you are exhausted in the evenings, you are spreading

mess in the house, everything smells of turpentine. And all for what? Some dead man . . . You can't do everything. Leave your job if you insist on painting. It never brought in enough money to justify your going out of the house. (148)

Every work that Astha does outside the domestic area is subjected to contempt and every time she is reminded of the fact that being a mother, she must be available to her children at all hours. This turns out to be ironic as Hemant, despite being the father, never pays attention to the needs of the children. Neglecting these accusations, she completes her project, and the painting gets sold for ten thousand rupees at the exhibition. She feels elated at her achievement and the money is generously offered for the workings of the Manch. Though she is involved in the activities of the Manch, family onuses keep stifling her every time she is involved in pursuits outside her home. Her fret can be seen from the uneasiness she expresses once when she is late to get back home from a meeting: "Astha sat silently at the back, her head bent steadily on the moving hands of her watch, and as the hour advanced so did her alarm. It was getting late, the children were upstairs [with in-laws], their homework had to be attended to, Hemant would be coming home" (151). Her thoughts of being an inefficient wife make her culpable whenever she is unable to meet the expectations of Hemant.

Through the various episodes of her life, Kapur presents Astha as a woman who is determined to pursue her desires despite being criticised by her husband and in-laws for her lack of involvement in domestic affairs. She feels disgusted when her colleagues talk of womanhood as a sacrifice and on one occasion while criticising

the Western style of marriage and divorce, Astha looks at it from a different perspective and expresses her opinion: “She didn’t want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail . . . If a marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave” (168). As Astha becomes more conscious of her potential as an artist and a social activist, she starts to put her foot down whenever Hemant tries to execute his domination over her. On the eve of the New Year, though they had functions to attend with him, she decides to participate in a demonstration that was going to be held in front of the Rashtrapathi Bhavan to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre in which Aijaz was killed along with his teammates. When Hemant complains about her going out when he is free, she is reminded of the several days she had spent waiting for him in vain. When he reminds her of the evening function, she says, “I will come back in time, what does it matter what I do one or two hours before?” (173). This equivocal response has its impact on him as in response to her answer he puts on an indifferent attitude: “Hemant’s face assumed its shut-in-aspect. Astha knew she was equivocating. It mattered because going out with her husband must be the highlight of the day, not something she was squeezing into the rest of her activities, unregarded, unimportant done for the sake of doing” (173).

Astha’s transition from a docile and humble woman to one who becomes demanding and self-assertive can be seen in the way she executes her intended affairs by challenging the expectations of her mother, husband, and in-laws. During a discussion with her colleagues, she boldly speaks against the concept of sacrifice that is expected from all women. She reveals her discontent in a relationship that is



suppressive and opines on the need for individual space in every relationship for personal growth. When her colleagues are appalled at these comments, Astha carefully takes a safer stand by saying that she was referring to Hemant's sister who is trapped in an unhappy marriage lest her marriage be exposed as a failure. But this stance changes, and she becomes more vocal in expressing her exigencies with others. This is further revealed when she decides to accompany the team of Sampradayaka Mukti Manch to address the people of Ayodhya to create awareness of the aspects related to religious fanaticism. Though she knows that Hemant and his family will oppose her going to Ayodhya, she decides to proceed with her plan. Her mother-in-law warns her not to get involved in all these political matters and reminds her, "It is not a woman's place to think of these things" (187). Similarly, her mother continues to denounce her by saying, "You know I never try and stop you from doing anything. Even when you neglect the children, and are busy in your paintings and meetings, I do not say anything . . . Don't you care about your children or husband? But he is too good, he will say nothing" (187). All these reproaches make her even more determined to join the team to Ayodhya and when her friend and activist Reshana enquires whether it would be a problem to leave the children behind during the trip, she boldly states, "Since when has the personal been allowed to interfere with the need of the hour" (186). However, she feels dispirited and defeated the moment Hemant confronts her with the question, "As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to servants?" (188). This question aggravates her as she is reduced to the position of merely a wife and mother as he puts it. Though she tries to convince him of her need, so that he would be around during her absence to take care of the children, he reveals that he

too is going to Bombay on the same date to meet a dealer. He does not bother to elaborate or convince her of his need to travel when she says he had not informed her of this earlier. To her query on the matters of children, he casually remarks, “That’s your responsibility. I have work to do, a factory to run, I can’t be both mother and father” (189). When he decides to leave home, he does not have to take permission or convince anyone of his need to be away from home. Through this situation, Kapur indicates that in a traditional Indian system, domestic affairs including rearing children is a responsibility entrusted to the mother and any deviant nature expressed by her in this matter is seen as “culturally inconceivable and unacceptable” (2) as Ruth F. Lax presents in his article titled, “Motherhood is Unending”. Not being able to calm herself, Astha thinks of her own life and how society tries to wind her up to enact the anticipated role of a woman:

Her mind refused to rest, roaming restlessly among the things that made up her life, her home, children, husband, painting, and the Sampradayaka Mukti Manch. Was this too much for a woman to handle . . . her children were well taken care of, she had trustworthy servants, she had someone who cooked better than she, she had left her teaching. And yet she was chained. (190)

Though Astha has all the material requirements to run a household and manage a family, she is distraught while thinking of leaving her children behind during her trip. Through this dilemma of Astha, Kapur voices the predicament of mothers in a society that binds them to maternal obligations at the cost of all individual desires. This is due to the societal pressure that is imposed on women as

indicated by Sangeeta Dutta in her article titled, “Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English” that “The ideology of motherhood has been put forward as the natural and primary destination and responsibility of woman. Woman’s mothering has continued to be basic to woman’s lives and the organisation of the family and fundamental to the genesis of ideology about woman” (84).

In comparison with Astha, the role played by Hemant as a father showcases the liberty and privilege, he enjoys even though he has equal responsibility in meeting the requirements of the children. Kapur presents him as a man who is unconcerned about any domestic affairs. He does not have to bear the burden of home or children and can focus on his work and its requirements at his own pace without bothering to convince anyone of his schedule. But for Astha, the institutionalised notion of motherhood that prescribes ideal maternal behaviour for mothers poses a hindrance at every stage of her individuality. It provides an exalted position to self-abnegating mothers but simultaneously deprives them of individual freedom and choices. Alicia Leisse de Lustgarten in the chapter titled, “The Impossible Being of the Mother” relates to this condition of mothers and claims that the expectations from mothers and their personal affairs are incompatible: “The discrepancy between the goal and what actually occurs means that the promise contained in that image of the mother is untenable; the fact that she is also an individual in her own right as a woman, part of a network of relationships and having a project of her own, is to all intents and purposes ignored” (197).

As the narrative proceeds, it is revealed that Hemant leaves a day before her and his trip to Bombay does not call for any attention as it is accepted by all that

being a man he will have to travel for various reasons. However, at the time of Astha's departure, the children cling to her and enquire about the need for the trip. Though she says she has some work, it does not convince them as it did with Hemant with whom children never raised any questions about his travel. This trip is a very assertive move that she makes to gladden her heart and her anguish in leaving the children along with her attempts to comfort them can be seen in her parting gesture at the railway station: "Bye darlings, bye dearest ones. I will be back before you know it, and I will phone, all right. Be good, don't give Dadi any trouble" (192). In the train, Astha feels adventurous as she is travelling for a cause all by herself, but this daring soon diminishes on reaching Ayodhya as she is constantly worried about the wellbeing of her children:

She felt strange and dislocated. What would her children be doing? She missed them, she hoped Anuradha wasn't fighting too much with Himanshu, she hoped that their grandmother wasn't feeding them too much rubbish, but it didn't matter, it was just two days, she hoped they weren't watching too much TV, but then that didn't matter either, it was just two days. (194)

From this point on Kapur develops and explores the possible sexual orientations of women that shatter the heterosexual relationship that is acclaimed as the best form of intimacy as per the patriarchal system. Astha who is brought up in the traditional style by her mother dares to explore her physical desires with a woman and Kapur presents this as a possibility in the Indian context though it is considered taboo. This happens in Ayodhya where she meets Pipeelika, Aijaz's

widow. An intimate relationship develops between the two that simultaneously strengthens and weakens Astha as this attachment, which is both emotional and physical, plays havoc in her life. After they part from Ayodhya, Pip continues to visit Astha in Delhi and gradually this relationship grows deep moving beyond the usual concept of friendship as they become physically intimate. Pip's endearing thoughts of Astha are revealed: "I want to know her better, at least she doesn't remind me of Aijaz. Her house is quite near mine, that is convenient, I wonder if she realises she is attractive. Her marriage sounds horrible. I'm sure her husband is a jerk" (218). Pip and Astha continue to think of each other, and the initial encounters lead to several more that last for many hours. Hemant, who notices this intimacy Astha has with her friend outrightly expresses his disapproval and insults her by howling derogatory words at her. Hemant's indifferent attitude and his conventional demands from her hatches a distance between the couple which augments further when she finds a condom in his travel bag. Though she questions him, she is unconvinced of his explanations, and it further drifts them apart from each other leading to chasmic intimacy with Pip:

They met on weekdays; evenings and weekends were out. Still, Hemant caught a whiff of this new interest in his wife's life and was free with his disapproval. Since Pipee was a woman, this disapproval was tinged with contempt, and the assurance of no real threat, indeed had Pipee been a man, Astha would have found it impossible to stray so far down the road of intimacy, or be so comfortable on it. (218)

It is Pip who consoles Astha when she learns of her strained relationship with Hemant. The intimacy that develops between the two ladies creates a strong bond that enables them to discuss and disclose the issues of their personal lives. Pip tells Astha of her earlier relationships with women and Astha confesses that Hemant is the only man she had ever known and that she is not happy with him. When Pip asks if she had ever longed for lovers, she is left wondering at her plight, “What could Astha say? She was living, the way people like her lived, where was the question of more lovers, or love for that matter?” (222). This thought discloses her disappointment with Hemant and her unvoiced desire for a more compassionate relationship with someone. Despite Hemant’s antipathetic attitude, her willingness to accept the existing social norms seems to expose the general orientation of the women folk to fit into the socially determined system of marriage and relationships. She realises that the relationship with Hemant has lost its warmth and the present situation is such that they must consciously force a conversation between them as nothing comes up naturally to keep them engaged.

In the company of Pip, Astha blossoms into an energetic and sprightly lady who can look at herself with confidence. Astha who had felt old and worn out in the presence of Hemant now looks forward to maturing by experiencing the ability to love the self along with being in love with another woman. Her association with Pip appears strange in the beginning, as she recollects: “Afterwards Astha felt strange, making love to a woman took getting used to. And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary” (231). Astha refers to Hemant as an “adversary” and recollects her relationship with him: “She was a wife too, but not much of her

was required there. A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth were the necessary prerequisites of Hemant's wife" (231). She refers to their attachment as "the marital function" (224) which lacked intimacy and satisfaction. Anu Aneja in the chapter titled, "Anticipating the Mother's Dream: Maternal Subjectivity in Psychoanalysis, Literature and Cinema" projects this relationship between the women as illustrated by Kapur as a threat to the heterosexual paradigm: "Women's search for pleasures beyond the heterosexually defined relationships of adulthood becomes possible only through a hazardous escape from the patriarchal paradigm which sets women up as rivals for the phallus" (62).

With the depiction of a maturing and rewarding lesbian relationship between these two women characters, Kapur seems to be questioning the established norm that a heterosexual relationship is the only gratifying one. Accordingly, by challenging this patriarchal myth, Astha reveals that the physical intimacy that she experiences with Pip is more rewarding than what she procures with Hemant. This burgeoning alliance puzzles Astha and simultaneously she becomes audacious and timid, yet she is unable to capitulate to the predilections of Hemant who finds her distracted and she reflects on the number of occasions Hemant has ignored her:

What about the times he had not been there, and the reasons had always been such that her own claims seemed selfish. Now sexually involved with another, she realised how many facets in the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power rather

than love. Hemant had managed to ignore her because ultimately, he filled his own landscape. (233)

Astha's deviation from her earlier behaviour generates suspicion in Hemant and she learns the skill to lie efficiently convincing him of her need to go out of the house and meet friends including Pip. Astha scorns the present attention that Hemant pays her: "When had he acquired the sensitivity? . . . he who had not looked since the early days of marriage, was now looking, and found that what he saw did not add up" (233). Pip being a lady seems to be the reason for Hemant to not think of divorce as he assumes that a woman cannot be a threat to his manliness.

Despite all the outrageous measures that Astha takes to be with Pip, she lives torn between Pip and her family. Though she has dared to trespass the boundaries set by society for a married woman and mother, she is never at ease and is always split between her family obligations and personal desires. On the contrary for Pip, it is easier to handle the situation as she is single and independent. The conversation that takes place between them on a weekend when Pip invites Astha to go to a gay and lesbian film festival reveals the conflict in Astha:

He's going to be home this weekend. He will find it strange if I make a programme without him.

Let him.

He is beginning to complain . . . you know. He feels something is not right.



Well, it's not. It's time he woke up.

I wouldn't go so far . . . No. Everything is all right the way it is. (235)

Like most women who are taught to endure life as it is, Astha does not want to disrupt the existing system of marriage even though she is unhappy with it. Hence, though Astha is initially reluctant to accompany Pip to the film festival, she later decides to go by challenging Hemant who mocks her saying, "I'm not interested in homosexuals. And I thought neither were you. But I am learning something every day" (236). Hemant tries to dissuade her from this programme by offering to watch a video with her, but she sees this as an attempt to blackmail her as he had not bothered to spend time with her for many years. Similarly, in an earlier situation when she talked of buying a car for her personal use, he had discouraged her stating that it was unnecessary but now he offered to buy a car of her choice. Despite all these efforts that Hemant makes to get her attention, he fails as the bond between Astha and Pip is now stronger than he imagines. This relationship can be perceived as an open resistance to the forced and accepted relationship between a man and a woman.

The character of Astha, as picturised by Kapur throughout this fiction, marks the transition that takes place in this female figure from a tradition-bound woman to a progressive woman who is capable of independent thinking and action at the cost of conventions. She seems to be the representative of those women in society who struggle to establish their individuality against the odds of a society that prescribes certain ways of existence for women. Far from being general in her approach, Kapur

seems to focus on the predicament of married women especially mothers who are crushed amid the weight of wifhood and motherhood that smother their individuality. This work reveals Astha's desperate efforts to break free from the familial responsibilities of a wife and mother. The desperation is at its peak when she agrees to go with Pip for a three-week programme called The Ekta Yatra from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. Though this is a political affair, the two ladies take this as an opportunity to escape all other nuisances and be on their own. Astha who is fascinated by such an adventurous trip instantly agrees, but the very next moment she realises the mental strain she must endure to make this trip a reality:

My heart is beating, my hands begin to sweat, of course, I will come as though it is the easiest thing in the world, of course, as though I can get up and go anywhere, I like, any time I like, of course, because I love you . . .

My mind is whirring, how will I manage it, what will I say, but I have to go, I have to. (246)

Cautiously Astha presents the matter to Hemant dreading his response as the induced notion to remain subservient in front of a husband prevents her from demanding equality or justice from him as it would lead to disputes. Hence, to avoid a conflict, she cunningly prepares to present the matter: "I shouldn't seem to want justice, it will create endless arguments, I must seem to want his compassion, his magnanimity. He is doing me a favour, but I must also be firm, he is not going to be compassionate and magnanimous if he has a choice" (248). This is the power

politics that exists between Astha and Hemant. Even though he makes several trips, when it comes to Astha travelling without him, he hurls complaints and Astha recollects his words: “I was running off on a wild goose chase, neglecting my family and burdening his poor mother with my responsibilities. I had no sense of what was fitting for a woman, I hadn’t bothered to ask him whether it was appropriate or convenient . . . I had no sense of home, duty, wifehood, or motherhood” (248).

Hemant arrogantly tries to prevent her from going by rebuking her for ignoring the duties of a wife and mother. Despite all this, Astha announces the date of departure and calls up her mother to help with the children. Her mother Sita, like Hemant, does not approve of her going and reminds her of family obligations. In this situation, Astha is forced to reprimand: “Finally I lost my temper and had to shout are men the only ones who can do things, nothing is going to happen to me, will you stop talking like this, you are making everything worse” (254). Astha at this point fits into those categories of mothers who are not “self-sacrificing angels but are made of flesh and blood; beings who face contradictory pulls” as referred to by Maithreyi Krishnaraj in his work *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment*.

This predicament of Astha who longs for love and understanding in a relationship, exposes the condition of women who are caught in suffocating roles as wives and mothers. Tied down to a heterosexual relationship in the system of marriage, Astha suffers as she never gets space to vent her emotions. She gets muddled up between her love for Pip and familial obligations in such a way that she is unable to sever her relationship with her family to go with Pip. Though Pip

encourages her to leave her husband, Astha rejects her offer of establishing an alternate family structure with Pip and the kids, as she is bowed down by the burden of motherhood. This dilemma can be seen at the time of her departure with Pip for the Ekta Yatra, “As the time comes to go, I am tense and anxious. I have never left the children for so long. I told them this evening I was going for three weeks, and I’ll phone you every day – I promise” (252). Her heart sinks when Himanshu replies, “Go, Mama, we should learn to be without you” (252). She keeps her promise and calls home from every possible town or village with a public call booth and enquires about the children’s well-being.

Kapur presents the relationship between Astha and Pip as a complicated and strenuous one for Astha as she is unable to break free of her obligations to her family, especially her children. Unlike her, Pip being a single and independent woman looks for a full-time companion in Astha. Despite all the efforts that Pip makes, Astha is powerless to get out of the web of marital bondage and is at her wit’s end when everyone around her blames her for disregarding her matrimonial responsibilities. Her mother constantly reminds Astha of the attention she must pay Hemant to keep him healthy and content, “Poor Hemant needs a break from all his troubles. You do not give him enough attention. Remember men have to bear the burdens of the outside world, home is their refuge” (270). Hemant, however, is not her concern but her thoughts are preoccupied with her kids even when she is far away from them: “I wonder how Anu and Himu are managing? I can’t tell on the phone. Their school is opening today. Did they finish their holiday homework? Does

my mother manage to get them up and off in time? Are they all right? They say yes to everything” (263).

Astha’s agony when she is away from her children makes it difficult for both to proceed with their relationship and during a conversation with Pip, Astha discloses one of her fantasies:

I have a fantasy, listen my love . . .

I have a room, small but private, where my family pass before my eyes. It is very light, before me is a wall which divides the house, but I can see my children, that satisfies me, though to them I am invisible, that satisfies me too.

This room will be our room, you with me, living in harmony. Our lives are separate, different things call to us, different demands are made on us, but always that solid base beneath us, like two flies caught in a sticky pool they cannot leave. (241)

This image in which Astha compares Pip and herself to “two flies caught in a sticky pool” (241) indicates that however rewarding her life is with Pip she will not be able to forsake her family for a brighter future, but Pip makes a practical comment urging her to consider other possibilities: “There are other places in the world if you would only consider them. Instead, you allow yourself to be shut up by that man, who neither knows nor appreciates you, and for what? I do not understand” (242). Here, Astha confesses that she is holding on to her family only for the sake of her children and she is very particular about their well-being in a

socially acceptable manner. As a solution to this problem, Pip says: “Your children, your children, don’t hide behind them. Live with me. Bring them” (269). Astha regrets that she cannot accept any of these offers as it would wreck the children’s schedules – their life in the colony, with grandparents, with friends. She strongly believes that there are certain dynamics for raising kids and these cannot be sacrificed for her personal desires and fascinations. At this juncture, Astha avows her miserable plight:

I love you; you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can’t abandon my family, I can’t. Maybe I should not have looked for happiness, but I couldn’t help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen . . . Oh Pipee, I’m sorry I am not like you. (242)

Astha’s dilemma presents the trauma experienced by women who are caught in relationships that deprive them of opportunities to execute their skills and desires in life. Through this character, Kapur exposes the impact of social conditioning that smother women by forced silence as they struggle to fit into a mould that is meant for all females irrespective of individual differences.

Accordingly, Prabhat K. Singh in the first chapter of the book *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium* states that this fiction deals with the “matrix of pains and passions of the housewives of middle-class Indian families” (7) as depicted through the character of Astha. Conditions that lead to the subjugation of women like Astha in a patriarchal society seem to be the result of the upbringing that induces certain ideologies in the minds of women from which they fail to liberate

due to their inability to comprehend the difference between their needs and commitments. Right from childhood through adolescence and womanhood Astha is indoctrinated with the norms of patriarchy beginning with her mother and later by friends and relatives who all appear to be the spokespersons of this system to which they are victims to a large extent. Consequently, her unfeigned emotions are looked down upon by her family, Hemant, and in-laws and in this scenario, Astha and Pip decide to go along different routes as they realise, they cannot lead a life of their choice in a society that does not comprehend or acknowledge their relationship. Only very few people like Pip's mother understand same-sex relationships, the rest of them are like Astha's mother who refuses to believe in the truth and this non-believing attitude seems to be a non-acceptance of a reality which is an impact of social conditioning.

As a mother, Astha seems to be a victim of the idea of intensive mothering that is prescribed as ideal by patriarchy and this text points to the pitfalls of intensive mothering. Emma Gross in her article titled, "Motherhood in Feminist Theory" argues that "mothers as subjects cannot continue to be ignored. That is, women need to be esteemed for having their own legitimate needs, aspirations, and desires. To date, motherhood ideologies have typically required women to sacrifice themselves for their children and husbands and have viewed other alternatives as not viable or as morally reprehensive" (271). Gross continues to argue that intensive mothering results in evoking guilt in the minds of mothers when they leave their children under the care of friends or family members. This is evident in the case of Astha as she reveals her frustrations whenever she is taxed by the responsibilities of intensive

motherhood according to which she is expected to be the primary caregiver of her children. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels in the book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* refer to intensive motherhood as the “ultimate female Olympics” (16) in which mothers compete with each other and with the self to be the best mother.

Like many women, young and old, Astha seems to live in fear of some internalised notions of an ideal wife and mother and these thoughts fill her with fear and guilt: “There was a Pinocchio lurking in her moral self, waiting and watching. Her nose would grow, her eyes cross themselves in vain attempts to hide the gruesome deed, her skin would turn yellow, and pimples sprout all over her. Her inner ugliness would be reflected for all to see” (233). The word ‘Astha’ in Hindi refers to ‘faith’ and throughout her life, Astha strives to be true to her life and she desires to live as per the conventional notions of Indian society though it suppresses her individuality. Her obligation to speak the truth is so seminal that she regrets not confiding in Hemant the infatuations she had as a teenage girl: “When she married, she had wanted to tell her husband about those boys, but she had been afraid he would not accept her, and that tiny seed, usually forgotten, was still inside, telling her she was unworthy. She had compromised by being excessively truthful; she knew her husband trusted her implicitly” (233).

Motherhood above every other role she performs tightens its grip on her to be available to every beck and call of her children. Astha is bound to her role as a mother and the expected notions of conventional motherhood unnerve her the moment she thinks of her children:



She returned home in a daze. As she neared her house, she succumbed to panic, she was a mother, nothing should disturb that. For a brief and guilty moment, she wished she was like Pipee, alone and free, but she checked herself. A large part of her belonged to her children, that was how she lived her life. She couldn't imagine any other way. (231)

Of all the criticisms that are hurled at her for being an unfit wife and mother, none of them hurts her more than how her children may consider her a mother. She is afraid that they may leave her or blame her for not being available to them. This appears to be Astha's predicament as a mother and at such moments of hopelessness she turns to God for support: "Teach me how to live, God. I am not asking for happiness, but I would welcome some stability, so I need not run all over the place looking for love and confirmation. Give me substance, God, give me a life that has not been lived for nothing. And protect my children" (252).

Astha's dilemma concerning her personal and political life has an explicit connection with the views expressed by Singh in her work, *Only So Far And No Further: Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*:

Family is constituted as the essential moral centre of society of which woman is the silent, unpaid domestic guardian. Woman's social identity is obliterated, and the home acquires an elusive power and appeal, security, and comfort. Assumed risk and terror in the process of breaking through the walls of home help to maintain the harmony of this patriarchal unit. (53)

Astha loses the grip of her life on being split between her roles as a wife, mother, and lover to Pip. During a trip with Pip to the beach, she feels marvellous looking at the sunset and the very next moment, she becomes fearful of the same thinking that she will have to pay an unaffordable price for the happiness that she feels away from her family. This thought of having to pay for her happiness seems to indicate the guilt that gnaws at her at every juncture of her life. This same thought haunts her when she is tested positive for jaundice and currently, everyone reminds her that this illness is her punishment for going away from home. This induced thought becomes problematic with her guilty conscience as she internalises it as indeed a punishment for her actions: “Have I been struck by this dreadful illness because I left my home to be with the one I love? I feel so weak I can’t get out of bed . . . I can’t deal with my life. I want a safe place, a warm place, a loved place” (265).

Astha becomes devastated when she gets separated from Pip as “everything became dull, the grass looked ordinary, the sky looked bleak, the paint on her canvas colourless” (282) just like her lifeless existence with Hemant. She is so desperate for love that she finds it miserable to think of going back to her mundane existence as a wife and mother that dispirits her and being unable to contain the grief, she becomes hysteric, “At home, she threw herself into a frenzy of house cleaning. Every nook and cranny, every book, every mote of dust, layer of dirt, every inch of carpet, every remote cupboard high and low she attacked” (285). Anuradha on seeing her agitation calls Hemant to enquire about the matter and a thought-provoking conversation takes place between them when she continues to cry: “Don’t cry. You are upsetting

the children. They will think something is wrong with you. /Let them. Let them know mothers also can feel” (286). Astha longs to expose her misery but when her son enquires about the cause of her sorrow, she says: “It’s nothing really. It’s nothing, baby” (286). These words remind Astha of one of her childhood memories of her mother crying:

Her mother coming from the bedroom, the bedroom that had been locked, unusually for a whole hour.

Why are you crying, Mama?

It’s nothing.

How can you be crying for nothing?

I am not crying. What gave you that idea, *beta*? (286)

Both these instances seem to project the self-induced behavioural pattern of women in a patriarchal society that convinces them that their emotions and expectation from life situations are insignificant to be explained. Under all circumstances mothers are expected to be stable, happy, and content; accordingly, like most women, Astha too becomes a victim of this society in which she fails to communicate her physical and mental trauma of being enforced into marriage and motherhood that does not satisfy her.

*A Married Woman* climaxes with the separation of Astha and Pip, Astha’s exhibition of her paintings and her decision to return to her family life with Hemant and kids. Astha’s ultimate return to her family indicates that any deviant kind of

existence that challenge the heterosexual relationship induced by patriarchy is gruelling for women and hence, for fear of getting excommunicated from family and society women are left without a choice in living a life as per their anticipation. The character of Astha, as developed in this narrative, fits perfectly into the framework that Garcia pictures in the text *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* following the idea stated by de Beauvoir: "The girl is in bad faith since she is caught in the crossfire between a destiny she rejects and a desire for this destiny, between the desire to be prey and the refusal to abandon freedom. Moreover, it is a form of bad faith because the girl refuses to confront the massive problem that she faces: the pleasure she takes in (self) objectification, in turning herself into an object" (173) as "women who submit themselves consent to a destiny that is assigned to them after a sort of cost-benefit analysis in which the delights of submission are seen to outweigh the risks of freedom" (176). She continues to say that a woman's submission to her situation is not the result of a choice that she makes but "a social state that is historically situated and economically and politically built" (214). Based on this notion she elaborates on the condition of a woman:

. . . to choose is to decide to use one's freedom, to throw oneself onto the world.

Conversely, the submissive woman is the woman who, passive about her life, does not seek to conquer a freedom of any sort against her situation—the submission to which she is destined. Submission is a destiny that is always already there for woman; therefore, to submit consists mainly in doing nothing to oppose this destiny, in letting

social norms, and the men who define these social norms, decide for her. Most of the time, woman does not actively choose her submission; she merely accepts what is suggested to her. She consents to her destiny of a submissive woman. (197)

Concerning the plight of Astha, Kuhu Chanana in the article titled, “Plurality of Lesbian Existence in Modern Indian Writers: Manju Kapur, Rajkamal Chaudhary and Geetanjali Shree” comments that like most of the women who experience physical and emotional malnourishment in a patriarchal society, she is “left with no choice but to resort to pseudo-blissful heteronormative structure” (202). Chanana further explores the dominance of heteronormative relationships in a patriarchal society and reveals that:

Lesbian exploration is regulated not only by heteronormative conditioning but also by the false sense of security that is considered to be the obvious outcome of such relations. Woman’s false sense of being safe only in the company of man (who is assigned a stereotypical role of a protector) is the result of continuous feeding of fear psychosis since childhood which in adults results in the perennial sense of insecurity in the company of female partners. (203)

Astha, who is fed on the notion of fear and the need for security, is left with no choice but to retreat to the family structure with the false concept of safety. If it is her parents who feed her with the idea of safety before marriage, the same dire need to be secure is reinforced by her husband after marriage.

In *A Married Woman*, Kapur depicts women characters like Astha and Pip who are non-conformists as per the patriarchal construct of womanhood and these women are impelled to lead lives that are personally disastrous. India is a patriarchal society with deep-rooted cultural artefacts that uphold conventions that are mostly against contemporary feminist perspectives and in this context representation of female figures like Astha and Pip are indeed daring approaches as people may not be able to accept and appreciate such diverse portrayals. In the interview by Giri published in the *Times of India*, Kapur admits that the fictional characters in her works are representatives of real-life women, and she refers to her works as “women-centric . . . a reflection of life from a woman’s point of view” (n.p). Similarly, Mithu C. Bannerji in her article titled, “Lesbian Passion Forged in a Land of Turmoil” refers to this work as a site of “female revolt” (n.p) against the patriarchal institution of family, marriage, and motherhood. Astha’s struggle for independence and understanding is juxtaposed with the communal unrest that shakes the nation over the Hindu-Muslim riot in the name of the sacred ground of Ayodhya.

Kapur’s fifth novel *Custody* published in 2010, presents women characters who dissect the patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood abstaining from the conventional doctrines associated with femininity. In this fictional narrative, the writer attempts to inspect the conventional structures of social institutions and relationships to expose the need to reconsider the ubiquitous standards set by patriarchy. This novel underscores two distinct aspects, namely infidelity and infertility which determine the status of women in a patriarchal society. A feminist reading of the novel brings forth the attitude of modern women against those who

succumb to social dictates by suppressing their intense desires for financial and personal independence. The novel predominantly deals with the life of Shagun who is a representative of the evolving modern women who dare to challenge the existing system that upholds certain assumptions of womanhood which play a significant role in subduing the personal and the general lifestyle of women. Kapur juxtaposes this character alongside the character of Ishita who is family oriented, to showcase the contrast in the attitude of both these characters toward wifehood and motherhood.

The novel ushers in the story of Shagun and Raman Kaushik who are married as per the “standard lines, she the beauty and he the one with the brilliant prospects” (14). Raman is a rising marketing executive at the global beverage company Mang-oh and Shagun is a charming lady with a blond complexion and greenish eyes that pose as a perfect blend of the East and West. Shagun marries at the age of twenty-one and does so in the interest of her parents who believe that for a girl marriage is the primary prerequisite. As Raman recollects later, Shagun wanted to be a model and her mother strongly opposed this profession saying, “Do what you like after you marry” (11) and soon after the marriage, the claims of husband and family pull her back into the stifling folds of household matters. Shagun enjoys the initial years of wifehood and is pleased when she conceives her first child:

“Everything was a glorious adventure and being pregnant plunged her into the centre of all attention. She didn’t throw up once, her skin glowed, her hair shone, her husband called her Madonna, her mother said she was fruitful like the earth, her in-laws looked proud and fed her almonds and ghee whenever they could get near her”

(15). She sparkles with excitement when she gives birth to a boy with her complexion as the heir to her husband's family. This satisfies her as she has performed the duty expected from a daughter-in-law and assumes that she would not be bothered about conceiving a second time. Shagun during this period seems to be living the Indian woman's dream life as a wife and mother content with her family, indulging in celebrations with friends, attending club meetings, and doing shopping. Simultaneously with his promotions and bonuses Raman also joyfully takes pride in his marital life.

This seeming equilibrium in Shagun's life begins to sway on conceiving a second time after her son, Arjun turns eight. Unlike most women who cherish the moments of early pregnancy, she is upset and uneasy about this as she was already tired of domestic work and mothering. She is distraught by the confirmation of pregnancy and Kapur reveals her thought: "There might have been empty spaces in her life, but this was not how she chose to fill them" (17). She blames Raman for not being careful and when he says she can get all the help she wants to raise the baby, she retorts, "It's not that. I'll be thirty, Arjun is just becoming independent, I don't want to start all over again. Always tied to a child, is that what you want?" (18). Unlike most women of the past and the present era, Shagun raises her voice against limiting her to the role of a mother. She suggests that there is much more a woman can do than just being engaged with parenting responsibilities. Anyhow she carries the baby to its term and gives birth to a girl, Roohi. This, however, does not elevate her, rather she complains of her loneliness and tiredness in tending to the requirements of the child. Though Raman understands her situation and feels the



distance that creeps between them, he does not take any measures to ease her burden or console her. Though thinking of his wife as being aloof from him is agonising, he consoles himself by saying, “Maybe it was the baby she hadn’t really wanted, maybe it was all the travelling he had to do, had always had to do” (9). Raman, who is engrossed in his busy and hectic schedule to meet the marketing targets of his company fails to probe into the uncertainties that disturb Shagun. He pays no heed to her emotional breakdowns and expects that irrespective of his non-engagement to unburden her, things will fall into place after a while as the child grows up.

Kapur through this narrative depicts the loneliness, depression, and frustrations that set into the lives of women after marriage due to the expectations to stick to the conventional norms of wifedom and motherhood. Shagun, though a mother of two kids, tries to break free from the traditional norms to pursue her dream to become a model. She grows weary of her mother-in-law who expects her to do nothing other than devote her time to her family. The monotonous routines of her life undergo a change when Raman’s boss, Mr. Ashok Khanna an unmarried and handsome man shows interest in her. As revealed later, Ashok is a man who likes to accept challenges to make it work in his favour and so he approaches Shagun even though he knows that she is the wife of his colleague. He successfully offers her a chance to act in the advertisement of the company and on acceptance she is chosen to do the role of a mother in a thirty-second advertisement which elevates her as acting had been her dream. Subsequently, she is lured towards Ashok who appreciates her talent and promises to promote her acting career through his influential contacts. This initiates an interaction between them that opens Shagun’s

vistas of unknown happiness that gratifies her, and this makes her consider her life with Raman, “. . . she must have been unhappier than she realised. She had been brought up to marry, to be wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. She had never questioned this destiny; it was the one pursued by everyone she knew” (27). As she analyses her life in detail, she understands that she has wasted a lot of her time unable to venture out of familial knots and it is Ashok who lets her explore her potential as an actor.

This burgeoning relationship with Ashok revamps the course of Shagun’s life and she, like Astha of *A Married Woman*, begins to move away from familial tracks that limit her aspirations. She begins to curtail certain matters to not raise any suspicion in others regarding the same: “It was when she told her first lie, a lie of omission concerning the cup of coffee, that she became complicit in those efforts. From then on, a curtain was drawn between her normal life and another secret one, more charged than anything she had previously known” (27). This relationship opens to her new realms of life that are more rewarding and endearing and so with the support of Ashok, she declares the need to go to Bombay to do a screen test for a new advertisement. Raman, in disbelief, raises concern over her responsibility as a mother and she replies reminding him of the years she has sacrificed as a caretaker of the family: “You don’t wish me to have a life of my own? . . . All these years there was nothing I particularly cared for” (31). These words bring to light her suppressed desire for a creative life which Raman could never fathom. She realises that her family life which she considers a blessing with healthy children, comfort, and money loses its charm when compared to her relationship with Ashok as he

encourages her to look beyond these conventional roles to establish her identity as an individual.

A comparison can be drawn between Astha of *A Married Woman* and Shagun of *Custody* regarding the transition that takes place in their private life on becoming exposed to a wide world outside their family circle which offers them multiple opportunities to initiate a career and an ingenious life vibrant with better prospects. On realising the limitations imposed on mothers by mothering responsibilities both these women carve out a space for themselves outside the family circle to gratify their physical, emotional, and intellectual inclinations. Like Astha, Shagun too feels guilty when she thinks of the latest developments of her life that threatens her existence: “Now the destroyer was in her heart, threatening what she had once held dear. All her energy was spent in keeping secrets. She had to be constantly vigilant, continuously invent excuses, convincingly justify absences from home, phone calls, even a preoccupied expression” (35). Yet Shagun moves ahead to warm the cockles of her heart to materialise her dreams even though the thoughts of her children, especially her toddler daughter, Roohi who is dependent on her makes her conscious of her expected roles as a mother. To move out of her house and to spend more time on her personal matters, she thinks of admitting the child to a playschool but Raman outrightly objects to this idea and forces her to let go of her passion to spend quality time with the children. Through this context which showcases the norm that the responsibilities towards children fall on the shoulders of women, Kapur seems to suggest that like most men who are fathers, Raman does not consider spending time with his children as his responsibility and expects his wife to

take charge of them. This lack of awareness and negligence towards her passions compel Shagun to look beyond the marital space to accomplish her desires and she voices her annoyance: “I want something else in my life, can’t you understand that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same old things over and over. It’s boring” (47). Raman as a husband is unable to comprehend her boredom at home as he expects her to be content with the life that he provides her: “She had two lovely children and everything she wanted. Next summer they would be going to England for the World Cup. How many women had what she did?” (48). As a man who holds on to certain conventional expectations, Raman fails to understand the aspirations of his wife.

Shagun’s mother, Mrs Sabharwal, in whom she confides her relationship with Ashok, is shocked at her daughter’s foolhardy ways as it can lead to terrible consequences in her family life. She tries to convince her daughter of the need to adjust and sacrifice for the sake of family and attempts to make her see reason, “*Beti*, have you ever thought of the consequences of your actions? Even if you don’t care for Raman, for heaven’s sake preserve some appearances. You think all wives love their husbands? But they stay married. You are so idealistic; you don’t think of the long term. What about society, what about your children?” (79). Her mother’s words unsettle her and though she is aware of the trauma a divorce can cause children, her urge to lead a more satisfying life overpowers her maternal feelings and Kapur presents her thoughts as:

It was her children who dragged her back to the reality of the past twelve years, standing like sentinels in the way of what her whole

being craved, a life with Ashok Khanna. She owed it to them to try and save her marriage. But the effort was too much, she couldn't make it in a sustained way. These days she appeared schizophrenic: one minute madly concerned with her children's well-being, the next abstracted, the next excessively attentive to Raman, the next absorbed in her private world. (81)

Through the character of Shagun, Kapur exposes a female figure who admits her predicament as a wife and mother, the two roles that bind women to domesticity. She voices her dilemma, "My life is a nightmare. It's hard to be a wife when your heart is somewhere else. If only I were not a mother, how easy it would be. To leave him, to live with you, just be happy" (87). Her concern for her children torments her and she is apprehensive of how they would look up to her when they know of her relationship in the future. Yet, there are several moments when being unable to challenge and defend her new interests, she thinks of submitting to her earlier life, "be wife like, be good, docile, compliant" (49), but the possibility of better prospects with Ashok makes her reject the life with Raman.

Raman, a traditional man who expects his wife to be satisfied with wifedom and motherhood turns suspicious of Shagun's frequent absence from home and negligence of children. Feeling powerless to hold on to uncertainties, he assigns a private detective agency – Lovely Detective Agency – to watch the movements and whereabouts of his wife. Within a month the agency provides details of his wife's encounters with Ashok Khanna with photographic evidence. This devastates him as he considers himself to be a retarded fool to be cheated by the two most trusted

people, his boss and wife, at the same time. When he confronts her, she admits to him of her novel interest and with this disclosed, they begin to live apart from each other. Shagun spends the daytime with kids, helping them with their homework and food; and leaves in the evening when Raman comes back from the office. She spends the night with her mother who keeps reminding her of the sanctity of a married woman and the need to protect her family at any cost. Mother and daughter talk of the “unbridgeable chasm of passion versus safety” (98) and she confronts her mother by lamenting at her pitiable state: “. . . it is only me that is wrong. Me, my whole life, from this stupid early marriage, to – to having Roohi so late – Arjun is old enough. I can explain things to him – but Roohi? What can a two-year-old understand?” (98). Irrespective of all the mental agony that she encounters she never thinks of ending the relationship with Ashok as she trusts him capable of providing her with better companionship along with a more vibrant life. She considers herself a flower that blooms in his presence and does not want to fold back to its bud-like condition. She is disappointed with her mother, as Mrs Sabharwal fails to understand her plight in being engaged in tedious domestic labour. Mrs Sabharwal makes a final attempt to make her see reason by reminding her of her duty as a wife and mother when Raman is hospitalised after a heart attack. The statement made by the mother at this time is significant as it reinforces the patriarchal notions of wifedom and motherhood: “The house rests upon us women. In your children’s happiness, your husband’s happiness lies your own. Anything else is just temporary” (103). At this juncture, Shagun ridicules her mother by responding that the great Indian tradition is always burdened on the shoulders of women and their sacrifices. Everyone including her in-laws who has by now

deduced that Shagun and Raman are not on good terms blames her for his illness. They make her feel guilty by saying that she should have taken care of her husband's health as a noble wife. The only person with whom she can share her misery is Ashok – he listens to her laments, consoles her, encourages her to face the situation boldly, and urges her to leave Raman to join him with the kids.

In comparison with Astha of *A Married Woman*, it can be deduced that both these women characters are exposed to similar situations in life. They are unhappy with their marital status and the demands of motherhood; Pip urges Astha, and Ashok convinces Shagun to leave their families to pursue life as per their desires. Unlike Astha who does not give up her presumed commitment to family, Shagun is bold enough to realise her requirement and hence, proceeds to divorce Raman for a better life with Ashok. During this time, she also expresses her desire to give up her children for her freedom to move away from all conditioned obligations. She does not even bother to tell Raman of her plans and entrusts her mother to communicate her decisions to him. After a month of separation, Shagun contacts him for a divorce by mutual consent and during the conversation, Raman criticises her saying, “What right did you have to do this to me? What about your children? Even if you don't care for me, you should be concerned about them. Suddenly no mother. Gone. Vanished” (114). Even to this Shagun gives him a well-studied response, “I have left you the best part of the marriage. Surely my freedom is not too much to ask in exchange” (114). She willingly gives him the kids and demands custody only when he refuses to grant her divorce by mutual consent.

From here onwards, Kapur presents the legal battle that is fought by them for divorce and custody of children. Advocate Nandan Kaushik, Raman's cousin helps him to file a case against Shagun for keeping the children and after many trials, though he gets visitation rights he is disappointed as the kids do not show any emotional intimacy with him. He understands that Shagun has turned them against him so that he may grant her divorce. Shagun, who handles this situation with more clarity and cunningness than Raman reveals to her mother the present attitude of the children towards their father: "They realise it's either him or me, and they naturally prefer their mother to their father. How much time did he spend with them, that they should miss him now?" (160).

Shagun moves in with Ashok and in the new atmosphere the kids who are unfamiliar with him fuss over silly things and become clingier. Arjun, the elder boy feels insecure and expresses his discontent by refusing to go to school where his friends and teachers ask him about his parents. Hence to ease all these emotional strains, Arjun is enrolled in the Dehradun Public Academy, one of the best-rated residential schools in Delhi. Though he is reluctant to move away from his mother, the possibility of going away from friends and known people who enquire about his family makes him agree to join the boarding school.

Through the character of Shagun, this narrative brings into the limelight, a usually silenced aspect of a mother as she gives up her daughter Roohi to Raman in exchange for her freedom through a divorce and gets custody rights of Arjun. Though a mother, she considers her independent life more significant than being with her children even though the separation is painful. Mrs Sabharwal does not



agree to her deal to give up her child as she presumes that “nothing good could come of a mother giving up her children” (253). Shagun, however, makes this offer to Raman and he accepts the child and reluctantly gives the mother the freedom to marry the man of her choice. To achieve her goal and to hand over the child to Raman as per the agreement, she tries to cajole her daughter to stay with her father even though the child clings to her. At this point Kapur presents her excitement about getting a divorce although it is at the cost of her child: “She wanted nothing from him – nothing except her freedom. Not a shred, not a pin, not a rupee would she keep of their former life” (257).

In her attempt to present the concept of motherhood and expectations from women in Indian society, Kapur in this work delineates the character of Ishita who suffers at the hands of her in-laws and husband as she fails to conceive. Ishita, the daughter of Mr and Mrs Rajora who are neighbours of Raman and an educated young lady who is looking forward to a career in teaching accepts the marriage proposal of Suryakantha, nicknamed SK, on accepting their condition to remain as a homely, family-minded girl. The initial months of her marriage are filled with moments of joy, love, and appreciation for her homeliness. Nevertheless, this seemingly blessed life changes its colour when Ishita does not conceive even after a year of marriage. Her in-laws begin to ask about her health conditions and make her fast on Tuesdays along with making her do a special *jap* (prayer) one hundred and eight times a day. She unwillingly follows their instructions and goes for medical checkups which reveal that she has faulty fallopian tubes which are blocked and sealed irreversibly against both egg and sperm. To hold on to her marital status

which is at risk due to her inability to conceive, she performs religious fasting in the hope that she will be able to give birth to a child whereas SK who should be equally involved in these practices is spared of all these nuances. Of this attitude of men towards their concept of religious supremacy the theologian and writer, Saldanah comments in her article titled, “The Power of Religion Over Women in India”:

Men have been dominant as recipients, interpreters, and transmitters of divine messages, while women have largely remained passive receivers of teachings and practitioners of religious rituals. Attitudes developed around patriarchal interpretations of religious belief have defined and shaped the social and cultural contexts of Indian women resulting in their disempowerment and second-class status. (n. p)

Ishita’s submission to religious practices bears testimony to the statement of Saldanah as she is forced to observe fast and perform rituals while her husband is not expected to do so. SK who had so far poured all his love on her and promised to give her all support in her treatments backs off leaving her in the company of the mother-in-law who cunningly agrees to accompany her to the doctor to get a coherent picture of her issue. After all the tests, the doctor suggested an IVF treatment for Ishita. With her body and mind immersed in prayers, she undergoes this painful ordeal which involves frequent visits to the doctor, and embryologist and inserting the catheter which holds the embryo into her uterus. Desperately Ishita prays, “Please stay, please grow. You are my only chance of happiness. So many people to love you, just come into the world. I beg you” (67). This forlorn cry to conceive a child indicates the pressure that is enforced on women to become a

mother. When all these attempts fail, the house that had earlier filled her with love begins to suffocate her:

The mother began to call her shameless, the sisters refused to talk to her, the father and SK avoided her. She only saw her husband at the dining table – a place to which she now seldom came. Who can eat if they are treated as invisible? She stayed in her room, reading magazines, flicking through TV channels, waiting for it to be late enough so she could take a sleeping pill. (72)

Unable to bear this humiliation Ishita agrees to a divorce by mutual consent. Hence at the age of twenty-seven and after almost three years of marriage, she returns to her parents who are weighed down by the fate of their daughter. Ishita curses her body for its malfunction and her parents continue to search for a suitable companion for her. In the face of their expectations, she boldly states, “I can look after myself. You think all married women have their husbands caring for them. Look around you” (176). Even this declaration of a social truth does not settle the disturbed mind of her parents and they continue their search for a suitable man for their daughter. Ishita ignores these attempts and, not being able to pursue her studies further, decides to do voluntary service with Mrs Hingorani who runs Jeevan, a school for slum children. She gets engaged in this work and takes care of kids of different age groups who come from families that are mostly broken and deprived of basic requirements. Though she happily attends to the needs of these children, an intense desire to be the mother of a child continues to lurk in her mind. She discusses this matter with Mrs Hingorani, and they come up with a solution to adopt

a child. However, her parents who wanted to get her remarried objected to this idea. Her discussion with her parents discloses her innermost desire to remain family-oriented, to be a wife and mother. She presents her perception of life as, “In everybody’s life there had to be focus for the love in one’s heart. Without that, what was the use of living?” (183). This seems to bring forth the age-old concept that is ingrained in the minds of women that a woman needs a child to be complete and this seems to be how social constructs are embedded in the minds of young females to bind them down to fit into the patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood. Dr Pragya Agarwal, a behavioural and data scientist in her book *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* presents the root cause for women to be oriented towards motherhood as, “A woman’s identity is so strongly attached to her womb and the notion of motherhood, that the way women navigate identity – especially gender identity – when they cannot become mothers deserves more attention in popular media and scientific studies” (200).

Fate plays a role in granting Ishita her most intense desire to be a mother and this happens when her mother Mrs Rajora gets the news of Raman’s divorce. Though Ishita is irritated on hearing about another marriage proposal, after meeting Raman and his child Roohi, she develops a fondness for the child who has become motherless at a tender age. With the willingness of their parents, they get married, and Ishita fits into the family of Raman and takes care of Roohi as her child.

Kapur, through this fiction, juxtaposes the characters of Ishita and Shagun who represent traditional and modern perspectives on women’s reality of experiences. Though these women belong to the same generation and are brought up

by tradition-bound parents, their attitude to life is entirely different. Unlike their parents, these women characters have their perceptions and aspirations on wifehood and motherhood. In comparison, Ishita longs to be a mother in the traditional sense by devoting herself to childcare, unlike Shagun who longs for more creative space and progress in life. The way Ishita pays attention to Roohi, the effort she takes to get admission to a reputed school and how she coaches the child to get her custody from Shagun convey her motherly longing even though she has not given birth. She shares her concern with Raman: “I hope that the child will not be torn between her biological mother and me?” (305). Ishita is conscious of the mental and physical fitness of the child and Raman is convinced of her love for the child, “. . . he saw the pleasure Roohi took in the attention, saw her flower under her regular routine, which was so much more thought out than the structure he had provided” (314). Unlike Roohi, Arjun does not accept Ishita as his mother and he attempts to persuade Roohi to dislike Ishita to love her biological mother, Shagun. This confuses the child and Ishita tries to explain things to her:

. . . yes, another woman gave birth, yes, you saw her in America, but now you are with me. Let people say what they like . . . I am the person who looks after you, sees to your food, makes sure you do your homework, buys you pretty things, who will never leave you, no matter what . . . there are two kinds of mothers. The ones who give birth to babies, and then forget about them, and the other ones who look after the babies for the rest of their lives. (329)

The character of Shagun is quite different from that of any conventional mother as rarely any mother would be willing to give away her kids for individual freedom. Though she is initially ready to give up both her kids to Raman in return for a divorce by mutual consent, it is only when he objects that she takes away the kids. Despite being the biological mother, she leaves her children to join her lover. All this and how she turns the kids against their father reveal the unsympathetic nature that she possesses. When Ishita and Raman refuse to send their daughter to America, Shagun comes down to India to file a petition to get custody of Roohi. Here again, unlike Ishita she does not think of the mental trauma and confusion that will disturb the child when she stays in two places and calls two ladies as her mother.

Shagun, who is brought up by her parents in a conventional manner, initially tries to adhere to it by looking after her home and family. Despite having a financially secure life, as the narrative proceeds it becomes evident that she is not content in her family life and expresses a desire to venture away from the domestic chores that appear to be stodgy especially with her husband always travelling and meeting professional targets. Here, as a wife and mother, Shagun struggles to keep pace with family matters and like Astha of *A Married Woman* longs to be valued more than as a caretaker of the family. Like Astha, it is this longing to feel worthy and to be appreciated for one's potential that urges her to explore a world outside the confines of a home. Though she loves her children, she does not want to limit herself to being a mother stereotypically and wishes to explore life in its various dimensions. In search of happiness and contentment, she goes to the US to be with

her lover Ashok after enrolling her son in a boarding school and giving up her toddler daughter to Raman. She leaves India in great excitement and her mother wonders at her willingness to leave her kids behind. Life with Ashok turns out to be as expected and with his encouragement, she establishes herself as a businesswoman in America. All these broaden her vision of the world from a perspective that is entirely different from a homemaker, and she becomes capable of making her contributions and savings in her business. Despite being the mastermind and team leader in his office, Ashok takes charge of the matters regarding her children and accepts them as his own.

Even though Shagun is happy with her choice of Ashok and is gratified in her new life, Kapur does not present her as a lady who is totally against mothering though she gives importance to her personal goals in life. She is happy that Arjun is doing well in his studies, and she frequently writes letters to him to keep the mother-son bond alive. The son also understands her situation and reciprocates affectionately; he also bonds well with Ashok which is a further consolation for Shagun. It is the absence of Roohi that pines her heart as every young child that she sees reminds her of her daughter. She reveals this in a letter that she writes to her mother, "It is the middle of the night, and I cannot sleep . . . every minute screams of loss. Over dinner, he [Ashok] again said I had to work. How that will help me from missing my children, I don't know, but I mustn't grumble. Nobody gets everything, and if I had to do it all over again, I would" (279). Despite having a life as expected, she misses the presence of her kids and gets caught amidst the duality of traditional roles and feminist perspectives. Her traditional upbringing tries to confine her in the

mould of a mother whereas her progressive outlook on life provides the courage to break free of all confines to experience the ramifications of existence and experiences.

In the novels, *A Married Woman* and *Custody*, Kapur sketches the ideology of motherhood as it exists under the patriarchal system in the public and private spheres and the intransigence of the stakeholders against the glorified images of motherhood. The novels explore the inner turmoil and interpersonal relationships of the protagonists in shades that distinctly differ from the assumed modes of conduct for women who belong to culture-bound middle-class families. Astha and Shagun are unable to attain contentment in their life as family-oriented women and this condition of these characters resembles what Shashi Deshpande has elaborated as her own experience of becoming a mother in the text, *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. Deshpande elaborates the consequence of becoming a mother as an “. . . emptiness, a sense of something untapped . . . an unfulfilled potential . . . Maybe it was out of the conflict between this female self and the intellectual self that self-expression began” (5). As Alexander and Kumaran state in their article titled, “An Outlook of Radical Feminism in Manju Kapur’s *Custody*” the women characters of Astha and Shagun critique the “conventional social milieu that obstructs the liberation of women and intensifies women’s subordination” (175). On a comprehensive note, Kuhu Chanana states that it is childbirth that causes them to succumb to “subversive heterosexual domesticity” (207). Author Lynn O’Brien Hallstein in the book *Bikini-Ready Moms* fortifies this argument by stating that “privileged cisgender women who are college educated, middle-class, professional,



and in heterosexual relationships, may not encounter overt gender discrimination until they become mothers” (12-13) and this stands true in the case of both Astha and Shagun. Similarly, author Ann Crittenden in the book *The Price of Motherhood* analyses this argument and clarifies this further with the statement, “Once a woman has a baby, the egalitarian office party is over” (88).

The first-generation mothers and mothers-in-law of *A Married Woman* and *Custody*, actuate within the traditional ideology of motherhood and they try to fasten their daughters and daughters-in-law to the patriarchal poles of womanhood and motherhood by constantly reminding them of their roles and family obligations. Writer and critic, Lucy B. Hall in the edited book *Troubling Motherhood: Maternity in Global Politics* refers to conventional mothers as those who “uphold the masculinist values, policies and institutions that simultaneously essentialize women’s reproductive roles and devalue the labour of caring” (22) that are popularised through patriarchal institutions. Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* also explores similar contexts that contrast traditional and modern vibes when Virmati quits the conventional path laid down for all women in society. This work presents the predicament of women who violate social codes of conduct as society accepts only those who follow suit to the existing patterns of wifedom and motherhood. A woman who is nurtured with these patriarchal concepts feels devalued like Virmati’s daughter, Ida who finds worthless as per the ideology: “I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society” (279). Nisha of the novel *Home*, like Virmati, is a character who is stifled by the expectations of conventional belief systems and the progressive mentality that she

gains through education. Nisha who had to toil through several agonising episodes of childhood and adolescence is forced to give up her established business endeavour to fit into the traditional framework of wifedom and motherhood. Her parents, husband, in-laws, and relatives compel her to succumb to the traditional notion by stating that “your family has to come first” (305) in the face of all personal aspirations and achievements. Unlike Nisha, Nina of *The Immigrant*, who is caught in the matrix of unpleasant experiences of life and childlessness leaves her home and husband to reinvent herself to find “a new place, new friends, a new family” (330) with the belief that “when something failed it was a signal to move on” (330). This indicates the need to move ahead from all systems and situations that bind women to a single notion of existence. How these female characters are raised from childhood following the style meant for the upbringing of women in Indian society is mentioned by the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar in the third chapter titled, “Mothers and Infants” of his book *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytical Study of Childhood and Society in India*. He talks of the three psycho-social realities that define a woman: “First, she is a daughter to her parents. Second, she is a wife to her husband (and daughter-in-law to his parents). Third, she is a mother to her sons (and daughters)” (57). According to this, women are devoid of any space outside the domestic life and hence, their desire for a creative professional life is never taken into consideration. This stands true for Astha and Shagun as both had career plans and were not supported by their parents and partners to progress and establish a professional identity. This chapter challenges the traditional practices associated with “maternal ethics” (127) that prescribe behavioural rules for women, especially for mothers as Rebecca Wilson argues in “Mother Knows Best?” Angela Saini in her

work *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong – and the New Research That’s Rewriting the Story* remarks that society encourages men to climb the ladder of professional growth while women are denied this privilege because they are involved in the “perennial problem of child care, which lifts women out of their jobs at precisely the moment their male colleagues are putting in more hours and being promoted” (4).

Depiction of motherhood and the several aspects associated with women who are mothers in these two fictions throw light on the assumed notion of motherhood in society as illustrated by Talia Esnard in her article titled, “Mothering and Entrepreneurship: Experiences of Single Women in St. Lucia”: “As a way of thinking, mothering centres on a patriarchal ideology in which women’s identity is tied to domesticity and maternal attention and devotion are elements of practice associated primarily with normalized and often idealised gendered and maternal values” (112). Jasodhara Bagchi in her book *Interrogating Motherhood* says of conventional mothers: “As such, she is the keeper of the social order by upholding the upper caste/upper-class Hindu family as a hegemonic instrument in keeping the public/private, productive/reproductive, *sadar/andar* (public/private) binaries intact, so that the boundaries of patriarchy are never crossed” (4). Bagchi goes on to reveal that these mothers who uphold the norms administered by the patriarchal system glorify motherhood as its defenders. Accordingly, motherhood seems to have acquired the paradoxical glorification which is the other side of the powerlessness that surrounds women in traditional Indian society.

Astha of *A Married Woman* and Shagun of *Custody* expose the ambivalent attitudes women have towards mothering and motherhood along with other family obligations. These women are “caught between systematically related pressures . . . that expose one to penalty, loss or contempt whether one works outside the home or not, is on welfare or not, bears children or not, raises children or not, marries or not, stays married or not, is heterosexual, lesbian, both or neither” (3-4) as Marilyn Frye presents as the predicament of women in the book *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. These characters cross the boundaries set by patriarchal institutions to liberate themselves beyond the assigned roles of daughters, wives and mothers thus giving vent to their suppressed desires to overcome the constraints of physical and psychological trauma. The protagonists Astha and Shagun, according to Garcia as suggested in the book *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* based on de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, are victims who suffer in a male dominant society where the power resides in the hands of men. Hence, women who do not submit to the norms of the existing system suffer and they are made to pay a heavy price for their transgression in this system as: “. . . a woman who refuses to have children because she values other experiences more than parenthood will be judged in a considerably harsher way than a man; a mother who does not attend her children's school events because of the time constraints and responsibilities of her career will often be perceived as a bad mother when a father would not” (Garcia 195).

Pratibha Patel in her article titled, “An Inner Voyage of Existence: An Introspection of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and *Immigrant*” refers to the

female protagonists in Kapur's works as women who dare to "reject the hegemonic shadow of a dutiful wife" (n. p). As Anita Nair presents in her review of *A Married Woman* published in the *Times of India*, after the initial excitement of marriage Astha is "hit by existential angst and begins an internal rebellion" (n. p) and this stands true for Shagun who, like Astha, falls apart unable to meet the requirements of motherhood at the cost of personal desires. Their life after marriage and on becoming mothers is initially as per the notions of conventional lifestyle in a patriarchal society and it gradually begins to suffocate them. As De Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex* marriage mutilates a woman and compels a transition in her life: "The first twenty years of a woman's life are extraordinarily rich . . . she discovers the world and her destiny . . . mistress of a home . . . linked to one man, a child in her arms . . . her life is finished . . . her only occupations . . . are exhausting but never fulfil her" (635-636). The mundane episodes of ceremonial existence urge these women characters to explore and lead a life beyond the constraints of a patriarchal society and their experiences reflect alternate thoughts and desires women cherish to look forward to in their life.

The tug of war between tradition and modernity as it exists in the Indian society is revealed by the protagonists of these two novels. Unable to detach from the chains of conventions, Astha succumbs to her unhappy marital life even after having experienced the joy of love from her relationship with Pipeelika and Shagun of *Custody* breaks the chains of tradition to lead a life of her choice leaving behind her husband and children. These characters who echo the indistinct and often mumbled voices of women who are bound by marriage and motherhood expound to acknowledge the prevalence of anomalous attitudes submerged in the minds of

women for fear of social discrimination. Of these characters, Dr Raizul Hoque in his article titled, “A Critical Analysis of the Women Characters in the Novels of Manju Kapur” states that against all odds they grapple to “establish their identity, their struggle against the existing culture, social limitation and prevailing morality” (n. p). In consequence, it can be surmised that there is a need to reinforce the notion stated by Ellen Peck in her book *The Baby Trap* that marriage and motherhood must awaken women to a better life or else “it will shrivel into boredom and routine” (13) as is the case with most women who are deceived to believe in the exalted images of a “pretty, happy mother-to-be, basking in attention and daydreaming of glories to come.” (21)

These works of fiction become relevant in the discussion on motherhood as it illustrates an emerging Indian sensibility based on the independent thinking of women in a society that has always glorified marital bliss and maternal joy. The challenging thoughts and rebellious actions of the protagonists who are the representatives of the emerging new women mark the inevitable change that is seeping through the layers of revered conventions that attempt to immobilise women from leading a life outside the domestic sphere. Through these fictions, Kapur attempts to foreground the veracity that the institution of motherhood is far from liberatory and emphasises that under male dominance it is a tool to retain women within the boundaries of domesticity. Scrutinising the status of mothers within the family and public domains, Kapur indicates the need to question the stipulated roles of motherhood, and also exhibits the impact of struggles suffered by them to conform to the framework set by patriarchy.

The prominent female figures considered and analysed in this chapter are not an exaggeration of the real characters as they exist in society but are true reflections of life reaffirmed through literature. Writer and critic Dr. Reena Mitra in her book *Critical Response to Literatures in English* concludes on the roles played by family and society in the lives of Indian women:

The family and the society, in the ultimate analysis, become intimidating prescriptive factors in life and are largely responsible for the rigid standards of morality imposed upon the Indian woman, who, instead of emerging as a self-determining individual is cursed with playing a subordinate role in every field of life. Though, there is no gainsaying the fact that the social structure in India does provide the individual with a strengthening sense of security, the tradition-bound, male-dominated society is her cross. It does not let her grow. It courts her to the point of wreckage and then leaves her to piece the shards together. (82)

The protagonists of Kapur's narratives who bear the cross of role constructs as per the institution of motherhood protest the conventional attributes of motherhood and emphasise the need to re-structure the politics of maternity to enrich and empower women by moving along the path set by modern feminist perspectives. Thus, in the Indian context, *A Married Woman* and *Custody* can be considered as literary outputs that act as a prelude to the upcoming narratives that challenge the archetypal image of motherhood that is detrimental to women at the physical and psychological level.

## CHAPTER 2

### DELINEATING MOTHERING AND MAKING BABIES

Rachel Cusk, the British novelist and writer attempts to explore the realities of pregnancy and early motherhood in her memoir, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, published in 2001. This book depicts and dissects the traditionally celebrated notions of motherhood from a feminist perspective by calling into question the state of affairs of gender inequality. Cusk provides a polemic account of the physical and psychological transition that takes place in the body and mind of a woman upon becoming a mother. In this narrative, which is anecdotal in style, she illustrates the disenchantment between the experienced realities and the innocent expectations of becoming a mother in a society that is built on biased ideologies between the sexes. With an eye for detail, Cusk presents this life-altering transformation as infused simultaneously with anomalous passions of love, anxiety, compassion, and servitude. She subverts the romanticised notion of motherhood by presenting her ingress into it as equivalent to serving a prison sentence. Complying with the concept put forth by Simon De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, Cusk argues that women are not born as mothers but rather mothering and motherhood are forced upon them by circumstances. It provides a pioneering account of the narrator as an ambivalent mother who considers it her responsibility to provide an honest exposition of her experiences of gestation and the initial years of mothering her infant daughter.



In the introductory note to this work, Cusk discloses the motive behind writing this book: “This book is an attempt to describe something of that arrival, and of the drama of which childbirth is merely the opening scene. It is necessarily a personal record of a period of transition” (8). In a more far-reaching tone that is sensible to those who are experienced with motherhood and mothering, Cusk states:

Childbirth and motherhood are the anvils upon which sexual inequality was forged, and the women in our society whose responsibilities, expectations, and experiences are like those of men are right to approach it with trepidation. Women have changed, but their biological condition remains unaltered. As such motherhood provides a unique window to the history of our sex, but its glass is easily broken. I continue to marvel at the fact that every single member of our species has been born and brought to independence by so arduous a route. It is this work, requisitioned from a woman’s life, that I have attempted to describe. (15)

Cusk makes a record of her personal experiences starting from the fifth month of gestation of her child. She has an avidity to document the physical and emotional transitions during the period of it happening as she realises that it is impossible to depict it in all its sincerity by recollecting it after the event: “A few months after the birth of my daughter Albertine, it vanished entirely. I willfully forgot everything that I had felt so keenly, so little time ago: I couldn’t bear, in fact, to feel it” (8). As Joanne S. Frye states in the article titled, “Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood” Cusk through this work attempts to write

as “rawly and negatively as she can about the shock of the new motherhood and the culture’s failure to prepare her for it – even as she explores new ways to love, learned by being a mother. She examines her own experiences through a dual lens of chafing honesty and a cultural norm that belies her individual experience” (195-196).

*A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* is divided into twelve parts which are titled: “Forty Weeks”, “Lily Bart’s Baby”, “Colic and Other Stories”, “Loving Leaving”, “Motherbaby”, “Extra Fox”, “Hell’s Kitchen”, “Help”, “Don’t Forget to Scream”, “A Valediction to Sleep”, “Breathe” and “Heart Burn” based on precise experiences. According to writer and critic, Frye the chapters are labelled in tune with her experiences of being a mother and hence, “it reinforces the possibility of multiple dimensions to a self” (196). The first chapter of the book titled, “Forty Weeks” reveals the thoughts and an indescribable fear of the mystery of childbirth. On testing positive, though she was unsure of wanting to be a mother, she sees this predicament as something that is experienced by all females: “My sex has become an exiguous, long-laid, lovingly furnished trap in which I have inadvertently wandered and from which now there is no escape. I have been tagged, as if electronically, by pregnancy. My womanly movements are being closely monitored” (31). She says that she could never imagine or even think of a situation in which she would consider giving birth to a child. Yet, during this stage of her gestation, she is unable to comprehend the magnitude of the pain that she will have to bear to give birth to the infant. Here, she is reminded of the Mexican piñata doll filled with sweets and during her childhood days, she too had beaten up these dolls, mostly

during celebrations, to bring forth its glorious contents. Now, as an expecting woman, she considers the act of delivery as equivalent to tearing apart the doll to take out the sweets. The time that is spent in expectation calls to her mind dreadful images of women in labour pain and to indicate its intensity she narrates an event in a movie in which the woman in labour pain is presented as possessed, “[she] paced the room groaning and bellowing, like a lunatic or an animal in cage . . . The naked woman tore at her matted hair and roared. The naked woman’s final yell of pain fluted upwards into a yodel of delight” (19-20). These images generate panic in her mind, and she considers herself as a bridge or vehicle that is carrying precious cargo to be delivered to its destination. She says, “But I am not merely the chauffeur of this precious cargo; I am also its box, its container, and while my fastnesses are regulated and supervised, the manner in which I will be broken open on arrival at our destination remains in mystery” (41).

The fear of the unknown lurks behind every thought that passes through her mind, and she is constantly preoccupied with the consideration of what is best for the child. Every morsel of food is taken with this thought and its nutritional values are calculated to ensure proper growth of the foetus. The conviction that follows her is the one of labour pain which is unfathomable and hence, to evade this pain she willingly practices every instruction provided by the midwife which includes trying to remain calm even during moments of extreme pain. She also tries to get in touch with the baby by feeling and talking to it and based on this experience of trying to communicate with the baby, she admits, “Afflicted by sleeplessness . . . my communications with the baby always end up taking the undignified form of my

pleading with it not to hurt me. As my stomach grows bigger, I realise that getting in touch with it is about as useful as a field getting in touch with the motorway being built through it” (35). Anticipating unbearable pain, she decides to have the baby at home in the traditional way as she believes that hospitals complicate matters and she expects it to be less painful at home with a midwife to assist the process. This however turns out impractical and so the baby is taken out, as she feared, by cutting her open through a caesarean section.

Cusk, through various instances, details the transition that takes place in the persona of the woman on becoming a mother. She realises that post-delivery she is no longer the same person, “I have replicated, like a Russian doll. I left home one; I have come back two” (56). Unable to comprehend the physical and mental alteration along with the settled notion of confinement, she sits on the sofa and cries. She perceives that contrary to her expectations an automatic link at the emotional or physical level does not develop between herself and the child. Consequently, she feels deceived by the institutionalised notions of motherhood: “Pregnancy begins to seem to me more and more of a lie, a place populated by evangelicals and moralists and control-freaks, a place haunted by crazies with their delusions of motherhood” (59). The presence of the baby generates in her a feeling that the infant is an expensive possession that she is afraid of keeping as well as losing under any circumstance. Concerning feeding and holding the baby appropriately, she is as ignorant as a young girl who plays with a doll. Gradually, she gets accustomed to meeting the demands of the child at the expense of her personal life and as she becomes involved with the task of mothering, her own life appears like an

abandoned building in which the ceiling comes crashing down to the floor. Her personal life completely transfigures, and she becomes a person who sacrifices all her physical existence and associations for the sake of the newborn. To meet the expected norms of motherhood, she is forced to forgo many of her routine activities due to which she confesses: “To be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger, or leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think about other things. To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other” (63). She presents this dilemma of becoming a mother and getting alienated from the self as “I am surprised to discover how easily I have split in two. I worry; I console. Like a divided stream, the person and the mother pay each other no heed, although moments earlier they were indistinguishable: they tumble forwards, each with its separate life, driven by the same source but seeking no longer to correspond” (62).

In the second chapter titled, “Lily Bart’s Baby” which refers to Lily Bart, a character in Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth*, Cusk elaborates on the societal expectations of bearing and rearing children as adhering to pressures in the persona of females. The novel presents Lily as an orphan who is penniless without education, training or talent and leads a lonely life balancing her money so as not to fall out of fashion. Howbeit, her encounter with a slave girl whom she had once assisted and to whose house she goes helpless and haggard undergoes a radical transformation on seeing a baby in the house. Under the influence of the drugs she has taken, Lily hallucinates the need of having a baby to make her life meaningful. On the character of Lily, Cusk opines:

The baby is the symbol not just of Lily's exclusion from the human life cycle, nor of the vulnerability, the helplessness that marks her life and her life's end: it is also the vision of her squandered femininity, a ghostly image of mother and child, their bodies entwined, rising from the brittle, broken shell of her useless beauty. Through this image, Lily finally finds the physical warmth, the closeness, the commitment that has been lacking in her relationships with men. (55)

The chapter titled, "Colic and Other Stories" solely discusses the health-related issues of the child and exposes the fact that mothers are initially bemused when a baby falls ill. Though it is commonly assumed that mothers will be able to identify the factors that affect the child, Cusk states a different aspect. According to her, mothers are as ignorant as other people, and they find the cause or a solution not by any mysterious knowledge but by several trial-and-error attempts to console the child. As the baby cannot verbally communicate, mothers observe and analyse the need of the child. Similarly, through several instances, Cusk asserts that when the child wails at night, a mother is expected to stay awake and comfort the child. On such a sleep-deprived night, pitying her predicament she says, "My thoughts have become rat-like and rudimentary with guesswork, with lack of sleep" (69). This narrative presents various situations in which being unable to console the baby, helplessly she paces the room carrying the child and praying for the child to fall asleep. The only time during which she tries to connect with her pre-maternal life is when the baby falls asleep and during such moments, she becomes conscious of a fast-moving life outside her apartment where people are heading to their offices to

keep up their schedules. To reconnect with the life going on around her, she outlines some work that can be done when the baby falls asleep, but the transition from a role that is child-oriented to another one which is more personal is a challenge and often she is too tired to do anything by the time the baby sleeps. She says, “The prospect is exciting, for it is when the baby sleeps that I liaise, as if it were a lover, with my former life. These liaisons, though always thrilling, are often frantic” (71). Often, when she feels that the baby is drifting off to sleep and makes plans to read, write or call up her friends the baby unexpectedly opens her eyes and looks up; according to Cusk this is not a joyful moment as some mothers claim it to be:

As I look, an alarming colour spreads rapidly over it. The skin darkens, promising storms. Her eyes flip open, her body writhes, her small mouth opens like a yawning abyss of grief and pain. She roars. She bellows. She cries out in anger, agony, outrage, terror. I feel as if I have been discovered in some terrible infidelity. My thoughts of freedom cover themselves and scatter and I am filled with fury and shame. (71-72)

The chapter titled, “Loving and Leaving” encapsulates the trauma of mothers while being with and away from kids. This chapter focuses on the transformation that prevents a mother from engaging in activities that are not related to the child. Every moment spent away from the child on personal affairs makes her feel guilty as social norm dictates the mother to be always present to meet the demands of the child. With several references, Cusk opines that mothers who always appear to be content with mothering activities are suppressing their ambivalence for the sake of

conventional acceptance. In her case, there are several situations during which she fails to keep her cool and screams at the child over the never-ending demands and attention that are expected of her. An entire sleepless night almost makes her frenzy with anger and consequently, in her agony, she shouts at the six-week-old baby and demands a few minutes to stretch to ensure that she is not insane. At this juncture, she discloses the fact that she almost had the urge to hurl the baby out of the window. Baby who is alarmed at the mother's hysteria cries and falls asleep. The impact of this episode has a dreadful smash on Cusk's psyche and consequently, she is guilt-stricken on seeing the sleeping child and instantly regrets her thoughts and moans sympathetically. Be that as it may, she cannot bear to see the child sleeping though she had longed for it and in her quandary, she assumes that she has sinned and wants to wake the baby to shower her love. To share her grief, she calls up some friends and confesses her obstreperous behaviour and to her surprise, everyone sympathises with the baby and does not offer any support or consolation to the mother. On waking, the baby continues to be her usual self and it is Cusk who tries to alter her attitude towards the baby by keeping a close watch on her behavioural patterns and demands. In this context, Cusk narrates an incident in which in her utmost desire to attend a concert she entrusts the baby to her mother-in-law. This was planned before her delivery and in her ignorance, she was certain that nothing would prevent her from leaving the house for a few hours to attend this programme. Despite the arrangements she makes to look after the baby, the actual turn of events surprises her. Though she leaves home to attend the programme, she phones home from all possible phone boxes and on getting favourable responses gets onto the train. The farther she moves away from the child, a sense of wrongdoing grips her.



The baby's cry that she hears over the phone makes her turn away from the hall before entering it and consequently, without attending the concert she rushes home to pacify the child discerning that she has lost the liberty to move around as and when she pleases. Painfully she realises, "In motherhood, a woman exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings, and like sounds outside a certain range they can be very difficult for other people to identify" (9). Whenever she moves out of her house by leaving the child, she becomes dreadfully aware of the clock's ticking which measures her guilt. She confesses: "It is not love that troubles me when I leave the baby, like a rope and harness paid out behind me wherever I go. It is rather that when I leave her the world bears the taint of my leaving, so that abandonment must now be subtracted from the sum of whatever I chose to do" (92-93).

The chapters titled, "Motherbaby" and "Extra Fox" project the idea that during the initial phase of motherhood, the mother and baby cannot be considered as two different entities as the baby is solely attached to its mother: "They are one, a composite creature best referred to as mother - and - baby or perhaps motherbaby. I find this claim unnerving, even threatening, even though it perfectly describes the profound change in the coordinates of my being that I experience in the days and weeks after my daughter's birth" (100). Her fear of the motherbaby concept and the desire to liberate herself from this bonding develops a panic situation during which she feels insane:

. . . it is a madness that has its genesis in pregnancy; it is the whole reproductive act, not just its postscript in breastfeeding, that has

shaken my sanity. But I steeled myself to endure its strangeness, as one would endure pain, believing that on the day of her birth, it would end. Like a dreamer who retains the knowledge that they are dreaming, and hence knows that they will not dream forever, I remained certain that the same physical process that had taken me away would return me to myself. I would cross back over the border, back into the country of myself, and I would know that I had done it as surely as the dreamer knows that they have woken up. What has now begun to alarm me is the fact that the dream is going on and on, is each day gathering to itself more of the appearance of reality. (112-13)

As the narrative suggests, though she attempts to overcome the complexities of the initial years of motherhood, she realises that her expectation is a mere dream, and the reality holds her tight to her child from whom she finds it impossible to detach herself. This chapter exemplifies the trauma of breastfeeding which Cusk finds extremely difficult as she comprehends that the ease and comfort that mothers are expected to feel on feeding the child does not come naturally to her. She affirms, “The word ‘natural’ appears in a sort of cartoon bubble in my head. I do not, it is true, feel entirely natural. I feel as though somebody is sucking my breast in public” (101). Based on her experience, she admits that breastfeeding is a skill to be mastered with training and effort. Due to her lack of competence in feeding the child, she consults a doctor to know the frequency, duration, and posture required for breastfeeding. Though the doctor and the midwives provide many instructions,

Cusk affirms that her exhausted life has become one of uncertainty that oscillates between sleepless nights, feeding and crying and she blames herself for her inefficiency in satisfying the child. Along with this she also exposes the fact that breastfeeding never generated any kind of satisfaction, fulfilment, or pleasure in her:

I begin to suspect that I have presided over some kind of bureaucratic madness, wherein feeding has become the penalty for crying and hence creates more crying. Or perhaps there is some deeper root to the problem, some stealthy malaise plaguing the organism of motherbaby. Is my milk polluted by its passage through my unclean self? Is it carrying messages? Is the dark turmoil of what I feel being broadcast by my daughter's cries? There is, I suspect, some connection between my sense of etherealness, of non-being, and her increasingly furious and desperate assertions. I know that this curious function is meant to bring body and mind into a state of harmony unique in human experience. I know that other women derive feelings of fulfilment and well-being from breastfeeding. Why don't I? (111)

As indicated in the quote, she considers herself to be unclean or polluted as she holds thoughts of hurting the baby and experiences irritation in its nurturance which are seemingly contradictory to the expected attitudes of mothers. Rozsika Parker calls this emotion "maternal depressive anxiety" (88) that generates anxiety in mothers for not being able to mother as per the conventional expectations. The accepted norm of receiving contentment while breastfeeding contradicts Cusk's reality and so, to detach herself from this tiring and physical bonding of

breastfeeding, she introduces bottle feeding. Though the use of the bottle is rampant, she is guilty of committing infidelity as the midwives and health inspector advise her to deal with the requirements of the baby by ignoring all personal desires and difficulties. This makes her realise the end of her individuality and so, she laments:

The story of my need is over. I believe myself to be immune, with the immunity of a dead thing, to everything I once felt so deeply. Instead, I have become a responsive unit, a transmitter. I read that my daughter is receiving my antibodies, my resistance, through my milk and sometimes I imagine it lining the little hollow of her body, strengthening her walls. I imagine my solidity transferring itself to her, leaving me unbodied, a mere force, a miasma of nurture that surrounds her like a halo. (104)

Cusk's attempt to bottle feed the baby becomes a traumatic experience as she wants to wean the child from her as well as remain attached to it. This situation exposes her plight as she is expected to keep feeding the child irrespective of all challenges. This is an occasion in the text where the father of the child comes to play. Unable to bear the wounded gaze of the child, she asks the child's father to persist in bottle feeding while she moves away crying. She feels a pain in the pit of her stomach when the child finally yields to this new endeavour that hurts her more than the child as everyone around her fails to understand her predicament: "Could it be true that one has to experience in order to understand? I have always denied this idea, and yet of motherhood, for me at least, it seems to be the case" (128).

Cusk speaks of servitude and imprisonment in the chapter titled, “Hell’s Kitchen” and impressively draws an analogy between a mother travelling with a child and a traveller moving around with a large rucksack. She says, like a traveller being clumsy with the straps and the luggage, a mother with her child will also appear clumsy and burdensome for others to stare and pass comments without offering any assistance. She further compares the life of a couple without kids to those with kids and grounded on her observations she reveals that childless couples can move on by not sacrificing their lifestyle and sleep whereas those with kids quarrel among themselves to stay awake and set timetables to monitor sleeping hours; apart from giving up their life outside the domestic circle. Particularly for mothers, childbearing and nurturing are like new projects that they initiate, and this demands constant attention by way of cleaning, washing, feeding, and carrying. Cusk states that the pressure to attend to the child in the most befitting manner turns the mother into an “untended garden” (139) with her tasks undone, calls unanswered and bills unpaid. On a heartbreaking note, she confesses that she would love to get back to her non-mother self “before the winter of old age sets in” (140). Based on her individual experiences, Cusk lets slip the truth that women’s lives turn chaotic upon becoming a mother:

From the irreconcilable beginning, it seemed to me that some kind of slide into deeper patriarchy was inevitable: that the father’s day would gradually gather to it the armour of the outside world, of money and authority and importance, while the mother’s remit would extend to cover the entire domestic sphere. It is well known that in

couples where both parents work full-time, the mother generally does far more than her fair share of housework and childcare and is the one to curtail her working day in order to meet the exigencies of parenthood. (11-12)

In this scenario where the responsibility of tending to the demands of the child becomes a mother's duty and being powerless to monitor the child who begins to crawl, pull, jump off steps, and throw things around, she confines herself along with the child to the kitchen. Here, she struggles to do the domestic chores by holding the baby in one hand which she illustrates as a silent serfdom that women never voice:

One does not, it is true, often hear a woman observe with incredulity that her baby won't seem to go away, not even for a night so that she can get some sleep, but that doesn't mean she doesn't think it, hasn't always thought it. I often think that people wouldn't have children if they knew what it was like, and I wonder whether as a gender we contain a Darwinian stop upon our powers of expression, our ability to render the truth of this subject. People without children certainly don't seem very interested in anything that people with have to say about it: they approach parenthood blithely, as if they were the first, with all the innocence of Adam and Eve before the fall. (136)

The chapter titled, "Help" uniquely narrates various events associated with hiring childminders and maids who never satisfactorily rise to the level of expectations. Professor Jane Satterfield, the British-American poet, essayist, and

editor reviews this aspect depicted in this text: “She documents power struggles with both a recalcitrant toddler and temperamental baby minders” (205). Here, Cusk recollects fairy tales which project the archetypal images of motherhood and mothering. In these stories and popular cultural representations, some mothers and grandmothers readily pour all their love and attention into their children. In these literary texts mothers are presented as overwhelmed by the childishness of their children and they all seem to enjoy the pleasures of motherhood. She audibly highlights her protest in misleading the young women and mothers about their true experiences of motherhood by concealing the reality of experiences. In her inefficiency to manage the child and save some personal time for her own needs, she decides to experiment with maids and caretakers. Rosa, Celia, and Stefan are some of them whom she appoints to look after the child, although none of them proves to be methodical in their dealings with the child. Time and again she realises that none can look after her child the way she expects them to as every childminder comes with their specific styles to raise the child and these predetermined manners often fail to console the child. She dislikes the inquisitive Rosa who keeps talking about her ill fates; the Brazilian woman Celia can manage the child but leaves due to some personal issues; Stefan, a male caretaker responds to her advertisement, and she hires him only to feel disappointed at his attitude towards the child as he has no awareness on consoling a child when it cries. All these attempts to find a suitable person assure Cusk that even if someone can engage the child, she does not feel at ease. As a mother, she becomes too conscious and suspicious of the child’s contentment in another person’s presence. Whenever she leaves the child with the maid and goes upstairs to utilise her precious personal time, she fails miserably to

concentrate and make use of it. She says, “I mostly spent my expensive hours alone worrying about what was going on downstairs” (158). Her account of the time that she saves for her personal matters reveals her ambivalence towards her commitment as a mother:

. . . those hours I had purchased back were damaged and second-hand. They were cramped and unsatisfactory; they were hours whose crazy ticking could be heard. Living those hours was like living in a taxicab. Working in them was hard enough; pleasure, or at least rest, was unthinkable. I couldn't fit my world into a space carved, as it seemed to me, from my daughter's own flesh. Besides, I had conveyed to her distinctly the fact that I thought her abandonment was unreasonable, her protests fair: I wasn't ready, it seemed, to let her love somebody else. (163)

These statements depict her ambivalence in maintaining some physical distance from the baby and she also experiences separation anxiety as she is unsure of the child's safety in another's care though she yearns for some moments of personal space and time.

There are considerable moments in the text during which Cusk longs for some minutes of uninterrupted sleep. The chapter titled, “A Valediction to Sleep” which begins with a revelation that she hasn't slept uninterrupted for a year since the birth of her child highlights the trauma caused by sleep deprivation. When the baby cries seemingly, without any cause, she leaves the room and when the baby falls asleep on her own, she regrets it and feels guilty for not tending to her need. Her



emotional state is expressed vividly when she says, “The dark house is filled with silence. It is a silence I feel I have purchased brutally, illegally, like a death by contract” (196). Consequently, on her sleepless nights, she is reminded of an invalid character from Proust’s *Swann’s Way* in which the invalid on seeing light outside his room thinks that it is daybreak and expects some servant to come to assist him in his difficulty. But, to his distress, he realises that the time is past midnight, and the last servant has just gone to bed by switching off all the lights. Hence, he painfully awaits daybreak. Similarly, sleeplessness creates havoc in the mind and physique of Cusk soon after her delivery:

Darkness fell. Presently it was half past ten or so, time to go to sleep. I wrapped the baby up in blankets like a new purchase, a present that I would unwrap and look at again in the morning . . . My new purchase had gone off in the dead of the night like some alarm I didn’t know how to disconnect. The penumbral bodies of other women began to roll in their beds, like tethered boats in a sleeping harbour stirred by waves of noise. Presently someone tutted. In the same ward the night before, under similar circumstances, I too had tutted. I wasn’t tutting now. I felt for the first time the discomforting spotlight of responsibility, its glare rude in the darkness, and since then I have not closed my eyes without the expectation of opening them again to that light which is not the blessed light of day but is rather a visitation, a spectre, a summons to the secret, lawless world of night. Sleep, like a great bear, a soft, warm, vigilant guardian of

unconsciousness, had rolled away with a yawn and padded off elsewhere, never, it seems, to return. (182-183)

Befuddled with tiredness and lack of sleep, she becomes perplexed by her reality and feels her features to ensure that everything is in place. The traumatic experience and her inability to cope with the changed situation in life are depicted as: “The day was sometimes a sticky mire to be laboriously crossed, the air unbreathable glue; and sometimes a frantic, untethered cloud speeding across the sky, upon which I could never gain a foothold” (184). As a consequence of this agonising experience, she becomes unable to distinguish between day and night; and falls prey to daydreams and hallucinations. This situation reminds her that like lovers, parents are also nocturnal as they are forced by circumstances to make strange meaningless pacts and compromises to struggle through the lonely and traumatic sleep-deprived nights:

For almost a year of nights, I have gone to bed knowing that the front door was wide open, that there was something on the stove, that the alarm clock was set to go off hourly until dawn, with a new method of silencing it to be devised somehow each time. I have gone to bed like others get up for work, alert, keyed up, and steeled for battle. (192)

The following chapter titled, “Breathe” is an extension of this similar experience. Here, she shares all these ordeals with her friend, Miranda who is also a mother like Cusk. Though Miranda agrees to all the realities and difficulties of mothering, she does not openly admit her discomforts with the anarchy of nights,

friendlessness, exile, exclusion, loneliness, and claustrophobia. The concluding chapter titled, “Heartburn” highlights the distance that develops between the child and the mother as the child begins to grow independent and less demanding. When the child moves away from the mother towards the father as well as others, Cusk misses those early years of her daughter’s babyhood. The transformation enables her to understand that motherhood is:

. . . a relay race, a journey whose purpose is to pass on the baton of life, all work and heat and hurry one minute and mere panting spectatorship the next; a team enterprise in which stardom is endlessly reconfigured, transferred. I see my daughter hurrying away from me, hurtling towards her future, and in that sight, I recognise my ending, my frontier, the boundary of my life. (212)

Cusk further proceeds to say in a sentimental tone that “Mothers are the countries we come from” (212) and so it burns her heart to discern that as a separate individual, the child will drift away from the mother. She perceives that birthing has enabled her to transform into a mother and though she considers it the hardest work she has ever done; she senses that she has not been able to do justice to the expected norms of mothering. She worries that “she has been somehow flawed and unauthentic, a burned offering, a botched canvas” (213). As children take up responsibility and authority as they grow up, she assumes that like politicians they too execute power which as children they had spurned. Subsequently, she opines that there is a sentimental conservatism that is inherent in the family system, that like a genetic disease is passed on to future generations by which the need to be the

“ruler and ruled” (213) continues to exist between parents and children. She admits that the early year of parenting takes away the self from the mothers, and for them, living is nothing other than meeting the requirements and demands of children. Nevertheless, situations change as the child grows to be independent, she observes: “Stairs are just stairs again. Nights are once more vague and soundless. Time is no longer alarmed and trip-wired: things can wait, can be explained, and deferred. My body has lost its memory of her birth and sometimes I feel surges of girlishness, of youth and lightness” (214). In this context, Cusk seems to suggest that motherhood is not a condition but a job which begins and ends within the speculated time outside which the mother is let free to enjoy her freedom. Even then being away from the child does not comfort her as wherever she goes, she is preoccupied with the thoughts and whereabouts of the child. She states, “The most terrible feeling of stress and anxiety begins to mount in me . . . My heart flails in my chest with panic. I long for my child, long for her as for a sort of double, a tiny pilot boat winging young and certain up the channel ahead of me, guiding the blind, clumsy weight of me through” (217). Cusk observes that however attached or distanced, the relationship between a mother and child is like any other relationship in which the people involved seek a kind of oneness, “. . . a oneness lost but haunting with the prospect of its recapture” (215). On the bond that remains between herself and her child, she says:

We are like awkward lovers, like two people, any old people,  
clumsily sharing the regular cup of emotion. In such moments I feel  
as though I have survived what insurance policies refer to as an act of

God, a hurricane, a flood. It roared around me threatening destruction and then vanished, leaving silence and a world strewn with broken things, a world I patiently repair, wondering what I can salvage, whether I'd be better off just starting again. (216)

The multiple situations and their impacts depicted in the text throw light on the conundrums encountered by mothers in their struggle to maintain equilibrium between the self and being a mother. She asserts that only through personal experience one can identify the trauma experienced by mothers in their attempts to meet the demands of the institutionalised notions of motherhood. She goes on to suggest that the magnitude of change that falls on a parent is unfathomable: "I feel like a house to which an extension has been added: where once there was a wall, now there is a new room. I feel my heat and light flowing vertiginously into it" (100). Consequently, it can be assumed that parenthood becomes a political statement when individuals who take up this responsibility are estranged from the social circle. Assertively, Cusk suggests that a kind of madness engulfs her when she fails to escape from the tiresome bonding with the child and this madness has its genesis in pregnancy and motherhood. She endures this insanity believing that it will cease to exist one day and she will be able to return to her world of pre-maternal stage. Amid all this chaos and confusion, Cusk projects a perspective that is deviant from the accepted patriarchal institution of motherhood which should dawn in the mind of every human: "What a woman is if she is not a mother has been superseded for me by that of what a woman is if she is a mother; and of what a mother, in fact is" (64).

Cusk makes use of various images, symbols, and metaphors to explicitly illustrate her life as a mother. A regnant metaphor that recurs in the text is the one of a prisoner that by way of its presentation accentuates a sense of confinement. At the various stages of gestation and mothering, Cusk considers this entire process as a trap that holds women down to the domestic circle. Accordingly, she feels that she is an inmate with pregnancy and motherhood as her prison. Pregnancy brings about physical transformations and being powerless to control these changes, she comments, “It is as if I have been arrested or called to account, summoned by the tax inspector, isolated and searched” (40) and in her helplessness, she surrenders her solitude to escape this claustrophobia caused by the “rising mountain of [her] stomach” (39). Cusk’s description of the moments of childbirth through a C-Section, reveals her feeling of having lost all significance of her physical and emotional state and in its stead, the central place is occupied by the baby, who is liberated from its confinement like an “uncaged animal” (70) while she is imprisoned to remain within the child’s surveillance. Cusk suggests that the child’s life begins at the cost of its mother’s liberty and this realisation sinks in from the time of delivery itself as doctors pay more attention to the newborn child than the newborn mother:

What’s happening? I say. My voice sounds preternatural coming out of my dead body. I fear suddenly that I have been forgotten, that I am going to be left dismantled, a talking head on a table . . . Nobody replies to my question. Some transfer of significance has occurred: I feel it, feel the air move, feel time begin to pour down a new tributary . . . as if she [baby] were a light I fall deeper into shadow. (48)

Following the several ordeals of mothering her child, and in her desperate attempts to release herself from the grasp of the child, she says, “I attempt to unravel the tangle of crying and feeding in which the baby and I have become knotted up” (110). She feels as if the child is a colony that is no longer confined to her, but who is strangely seen as the mother’s self. Consequently, the child appears to take control over the mother, “What she needs and wants will vie with, and often take priority over, what I need and want for the foreseeable future” (101). As the narrative proceeds, Cusk reveals that despite all the efforts that she takes to meet the needs of the child, she fails miserably as she is unable to comprehend the meaning of the child’s cry at different times. Adhering to the advice provided by friends and midwives, she tries to feed the child more frequently and this act is also presented in tune with the image of a prison that indicates a kind of confinement: “Every time she cries my breasts appear like prison warders investigating a disturbance, two dumb, moonfaced henchmen closing in on her, silencing her, administering opiates” (111). Bowed down by sleeplessness and fatigue, Cusk undergoes a kind of insanity that makes her assume that she is losing parts of herself as a consequence of the non-resolvable traumatic experiences which have now become an everyday reality: “In the early months of my daughter’s life I felt my own tiredness as a physical shock. The spring of activity, given no chance by night to uncoil, felt as if it were being wound tighter and tighter in my chest, derailing all my natural tensions, and corralling them into one, great, explosive point of fatigue” (183). She relates her sleepless nights to torture camps where people are prohibited to sleep adequately and like how the free world pays no heed to the tortures executed in the camps, others without kids ignore and take for granted the sufferings of new mothers

without offering any assistance. Eventually, Cusk is confined to the responsibilities of a mother that she loses all contact with her pre-maternal life so much that she reveals her excruciating situation to her friend as, “. . . I was shut in a box, that I couldn't breathe” (207).

In her attempts to detach herself from the alluring personal life of pre-maternal days, she shifts her residence from the city of London to a university town, “a place where people lived in order to forget that the rest of the world existed” (165). Cusk confesses that she would never have lived in this kind of a place, if her life was her own, as relinquishing the active life of London is a challenge. Her powerlessness to hold on to her old free life is evident when she says, “I could no longer live the life that I had been living. I had moved away because I thought I no longer belonged where I was” (168). This stay in the new place, isolated from the rest of the world, is like serving a prison sentence: “The loneliness of hours spent with the baby at home merged with that of moving to a new, friendless and uncongenial place . . . our life in the provinces quickly took on the tenor of a prison sentence, whose term could not be set because of the difficulty of admitting to ourselves or others that we had erred” (168). She says that her association with the passing time undergoes a drastic change as she is no longer at ease to use it for her personal needs, rather it turns out to be, “a sort of serfdom, a slavery, in that I am not free to go” (141). As the child grows and begins to crawl around, she feels that from a rucksack as the baby is considered earlier, it now appears to be an “escaped zoo animal” (143) of which the mother becomes the trainer. When the child begins to pull down and climb up onto stairs, chairs and tables, to reduce the risk of accidents



that are likely to occur frequently, the child and mother confine themselves into the kitchen. Cusk avows that a pregnancy that has come like an “earthquake or a falling meteor” (140) that wipes out her existence of a kind, now imprisons her: “In this lonely place I am indeed not free: the kitchen is a cell, a place of no possibility. I have given up my membership in the world I used to live in. Sometimes I listen to music or read, and it is like a ray of light coming from outside, bright, and painful, making me screw up my eyes” (144). This same image of imprisonment continues to wrap her up when she shares her experience of breastfeeding the child. Though most of the mothers invariably claim this to be an overwhelming experience, Cusk admits that no motherly love dripped or emerged in her attempts to breastfeed the child. She finds it extremely troublesome to feed the baby as sometimes it would not accept her offer at all and at other times it would go on feeding for hours. In her attempts to liberate herself from the restrictions imposed by the baby, she says, “My daughter’s eyes are shut. I put my finger into the corner of her mouth and silently wrench it open, like a prisoner attempting a jailbreak” (102). Her stay with the child in her own house becomes a matter of survival in a “domestic torture camp” (189) to which the world around her turns a deaf ear. The magnitude of this torture is so high that there are several instances when Cusk screams at the child causing its delicate body to shiver with fear and, she lets the baby cry for hours without heeding her demands by shutting the door to her deafening wails. When in good spirits, the baby’s tireless movements and daring escapades cause the mother to be alert with undivided attention, lest she falls from the stairs, pulls electrical cables along with boiling kettles or iron on top of her or delves into rubbish. Desperate in her attempts

to safeguard the child, she is always vigilant and cautious as the child seems to be a dangerous and explosive item around which her existence is threatened:

Suddenly our life was like a drama in which a bomb is being disabled against the clock. We were, all at once, the slaves of time, and we kept our daughter to the kitchen so as better to contain her ticking, to contain her power to destroy. Only when she was upended, neutralized by sleep, did the ticking stop; interludes which washed swiftly and soundlessly past us like flood waters, bearing away the pleasure of books or conversation too quickly for us to do more than grab at them. (171)

Concerning the metaphor of confinement, writer and critic, Alice Braun in her article based on the text, *A Life's Work* refers to this comparison as an “arbitrary form of confinement” (n. p) as it seems to be a kind of confinement that is instilled by patriarchal expectations rather than a biological one that develops during pregnancy and childbirth. This kind of representation that is contradictory to the institutionalised norms of motherhood has triggered readers as popular culture depicts and glorifies this same experience as the most rewarding one for women. To relate her personal experiences of gestation and motherhood, she uses metaphors of confinement and death, which generate an atmosphere of totalitarianism. Cusk resorts to such wayward imagery because she feels that very little of the truth has been revealed in fictional and non-fictional representations. Hence, Cusk dares to present an honest picture in the article titled, “Shakespeare’s Daughters” published in *The Guardian* in 2009: “So the woman writer looking for work will still find

plenty in the task of demystification, of breaking the silence that forms like fog around iterative female experience. She won't win the Man Booker prize for writing the book of repetition: she will as De Beauvoir perceived, irritate, and antagonize rather than please" (n. p). These statements highlight the purpose of writing as upheld by many feminists that women should write to reveal their genuine experiences and not to repeat what is already established or to please the readers who glorify women instead of being compassionate towards them.

Since its publication, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* was received with much acclaim as well as opprobrium. This work was accused of its honest revelations and Cusk's name was used as a synonym for bad mothers and child haters as she discloses in the introduction to the text. Despite all these and after several years since its first publication, Cusk assures that this work is still relevant in our society that continues to promote patriarchal institutionalised notions of motherhood against the true experiences of it as revealed by mothers. She comments:

*A Life's Work* did seem neglected to me when I picked it up, dusty and unstrung, like an old violin lying forgotten in a cupboard. How pleasant, then, to draw the bow across and discover that its notes still sound true to me, its music sincere, its core of love undamaged. I no longer expect this music to speak to everyone, but I retain the hope that for those who want to hear it, it is at least preferable to silence.

(6)

Many of the readers put forth hostile comments and reviews as Cusk brought to the limelight the intimate aspects of womanhood by describing her experience instead of just being silent about the whole affair of motherhood. In her article titled, "I was only being honest" that is published in *The Guardian*, Cusk comments on most of the criticisms that were hurled at her. Some of these include: "If everyone were to read this book, the propagation of the human race would virtually cease, which would be a shame", "Believe it or not, quite a few people enjoy motherhood, but in order to do so, it is important to grow up first", "pure misery to read" and one critic refers to her as "a self-obsessed bore, the embodiment of Me! Me! Me! attitude" (n. p). In the same article, she reveals that she is denounced for "having said the unsayable: that it is possible for a woman to dislike her children, even to regret having brought them into the world" (n. p). Most of the writers who reviewed this text disclosed the relentless accusations that were levelled against Cusk. For instance, Olivia Parkes in her review of this work states that Cusk was accused of, "child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual" (n. p). Following Parkes, Alice Braun mentions in her article that most of the readers, especially women and mothers, criticise Cusk for her inability to be an efficient parent. She claims that people have a judgmental attitude towards Cusk as she deals with a topic that continues to be taboo in the public gaze. By way of presenting her perspective towards women's writing and public acceptance or rejection of it, Braun states, "When Hemingway gave an autobiographical account of his time in the Spanish War of Independence, did anyone ever think of judging his combat skills? The very fact that he took part in

this inherently respectable endeavour was enough to grant him hero status” (n. p). Unlike this appreciation, birthing and mothering are deemed trivial matters in the lives of women, people assess them and judge their performance as if it is a social and political matter far removed from their subjective experiences. The criticisms that follow her work make her consider this subject matter once again to see if she must feel guilty or proud of her revelations. In response to all the ruthless words that are hurled at her, she says:

I wrote it because I am a writer, and the experience of ambivalence that characterises the early stages of parenthood seemed to me to be kith and kin of the writer’s fundamental ambivalence towards life; an ambivalence that is obscured by the organised social systems human communities devise, and that the writer or artist is always trying to recover and resolve . . . In becoming a mother, I became briefly both child and parent, both individual and the other, and it was this rare and fleeting exposure of the psyche that I sought to capture in *A Life’s Work*. (5)

In the article titled, “Shakespeare’s Daughters”, Cusk evaluates the value system that prevails in society long after the publication of *A Room of One’s Own* and *The Second Sex*. Cusk in this article argues that women writers are still expected to please the male perceived value system and to remain silent about things that are considered irrelevant and unpleasant. When a woman writes a book about war she is applauded for her creativity as it seems that she has made proper use of her room and money whereas when a woman writes something of her unique female

experience, she is criticised for having squandered with her room and money. The hostile reports fill her with guilt and shame as she realises that people judge her work without paying attention to her attempts to present an experience in all its honesty. Despite all the reprovals, Cusk says that this book is meant for those readers, parents, and mothers who search for childcare manuals that provide a true depiction of the reality of the experience of being a mother. She opines that this book can be “an echo, a consolation, a mirror” (3) to those who care for genuine individual experiences over the communal and institutionalised representations of motherhood and affirms that she does not need anyone’s approval for this work as this is neither a childcare manual nor an attempt to promote a world view on the topic of motherhood. Nevertheless, she makes efforts to reflect and explain “all the love and terror and strangeness” (5) which are associated with motherhood, and which are often suppressed for fear of being considered less womanly or abnormal. As opposed to all the cynical criticisms, in the article titled, “Mother Luck: A Review of *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* and *The Lucky Ones*”, Price reviews that “Cusk breaks taboos, speaking with the humour of the tyranny of breastfeeding and health workers, the inanity of mother-and-baby groups, the impossibility of finding the perfect caregiver, and the hallucinogenic world of the sleepless parent” (n. p). Price alludes further that through this work Cusk presents the pain and anxiety of becoming a mother which causes her world to shrink down to the demands of the baby. Clare Hanson makes an interesting observation in her article titled, “The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity” when she points out that Cusk owes a debt to Simon De Beauvoir in the subtitle of the text as it asserts how women are not born but become a mother under social

circumstances that force her to accept this gender role. Further, the sub-title recalls the idea of a woman succumbing to the social norms that enforce her to accept certain roles that limit her potential and liberty in society. Jane Satterfield on the other hand, claims that Cusk attempts a cultural analysis of the representation of motherhood in this work by referring to several literary texts and personal experiences. According to Satterfield, “Cusk resists interpreting the experience of childbirth and motherhood through the lens of either archetypal life script or popular culture” (204).

As Danielle Price reviews, during Cusk’s period of symbolic confinement, she gets guidance and consolation not from any childcare manuals but from some literary works. She meticulously reads certain passages related to motherhood from works which she had earlier skimmed through. Its content and significance become more appealing and relative to the episodes from her personal life. There are numerous debates and reports on every aspect of mothering, but Cusk opines that literature itself presents a meagre collection of its subjective reality. Consequently, through this work, she presents a subjective experience challenging the dominant discourses that aspire to silence the intuitive and impressionistic experience of women. However, as a solace to her dilemma, she turns to certain literary passages from *The House of Mirth*, *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Rainbow*, and the poem “Frost at Midnight” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This narrative provides an account of the transition that takes place in the demeanour of Natasha, the young and romantic heroine of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. On becoming a mother of three children Natasha loses her glowing charm and, in its stead, “had

grown stouter and broader, so that it was difficult to recognise the slim, lively Natasha of former days in this robust motherly woman” (21). She also reads some books and manuals on pregnancy and childbirth as per the instruction of the midwife. On observation, she realises that these books hold a mystery and none of them explicitly convey the actual process of birthing and mothering. She is dismayed when she says: “It is as if some secret female history is unfolding in these photographs, a tale of suffering conspiratorially concealed” (23). Mothers and women who are aware of these traumatic experiences do not disclose it even on enquiry. Except for her mother, who advises her to take any drug offered by the doctors during the labour pain, everyone else remained silent or merely remarked mysteriously, “You are never the same again” (24). It is this conservative notion of keeping the true experiences in the dark that motivates Cusk to reveal the practical reality of the situation. On the forced silence maintained by other women, she says, “Somehow, during those tortured hours, some fundamental component of oneself is removed, so that afterwards although one looks and sounds more or less exactly as one did before, one is, in fact, a simulacrum, a brainwashed being programmed not to bear witness to the truth” (24). Women who enforce silence and keep new mothers in the dark about the true experiences of motherhood seem to be supporting and nurturing the patriarchal system that uses motherhood to subjugate women to their physical liabilities. Amidst all the voices raised under feminism to uphold the dignity and equality of women, Cusk comments:

The biological destiny of women remains standing amidst the ruins of their inequality, and in approaching it I have the sense of stepping off



the proper path of my life, of travelling forwards but at some unbreachable distance; as if I had boarded a train and could see through the window the road on which I had always been, a road with which for a while my train ran parallel before gaining speed and moving steadily away to east or west, to a vista of unfamiliar hills, leaving everything vanishing behind it. (25)

Cusk in her attempts to explore the predicament of a woman upon becoming a mother says that it is a tug-of-war between love and grief that emerges in the mind of a mother when she is bound to her child. Mothers are the homes of kids and so they keep returning to this shelter for all their requirements. Whenever they travel without kids, mothers feel exposed as someone ignoring the well-being of their children as people ask mothers about their kids when they travel alone, whereas the fathers are free of such queries. She unveils this as:

Birth is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth, they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so, it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them. To discover this is to feel that your life has become irretrievably mired in conflict, or caught in some mythic snare in which you will perpetually, vainly struggle. (13)

This quote gives clarity to the undisputed fact that once a woman becomes a mother, she can never be her earlier self again as the woman is then seen as not an individual but a dual personality consisting of both mother and child from which one element cannot be separated. Consequently, a mother who is aware of her pre-maternal state experiences a loss of identity in the new phase of her life. As is seen throughout this fiction, the revelations of this reality by writers like Cusk have provoked much criticism and violent reactions as Olivia Parkes remarks in her article that Cusk is condemned for her “unwillingness to assume the saintly mantle attributed to the roles of wife and mother” (n. p). Parkes reveals that Cusk was trolled on the parenting forum, Mumsnet for her crude representation of motherhood and in this review her response to all types of criticisms that are raised against this work is stated:

I see that, like all intolerance, it arose from dependence on an ideal . . .  
 . I see that many – most – of my female detractors continue to write routinely in the press about motherhood and issues relating to children. Their interest in these issues has a fixated quality, compared with their worldly male equivalents. I am struck by this distinction, for it is clear that they hunger to express themselves not as women, not as commentators or intellectuals, but as mothers. (n. p)

Despite the various traumatic instances that Cusk reveals in the text, she also says that the love that develops between the mother and child after the initial years of mental and physical struggle remodels the mother’s life in such a way that this love develops novel dimensions. Accordingly, she says, “This love is a

restitution; it is like a new place, from which the old country, the unhappy past, can safely be viewed . . . confinement becomes freedom, ugliness beauty: parenthood is redemptive, transformative, creative. It is how the self's limits are broken open and entrance found to a greater landscape" (147).

As the narrative reaches its climax, readers see a poignant change in the course of events that are elaborated in the concluding chapters. As the child becomes capable of independent movement, the mother seems to feel alienated from the baby. Even though right from the period of gestation to early motherhood, Cusk was awaiting this moment of physical and emotional detachment, it did not happen in the way she expected. She is simultaneously happy and sad, realising that the child is growing up to be an independent entity. Even then, as expected, she is not free of all the psychological and emotional strings that bind her to her offspring. Cusk seems to have a realisation that motherhood is not a condition but a job which begins and ends within a specific time. However, this notion appears to be a contradiction as she is unable to fit into the socially active world outside her domestic circle and the heartburn of separation and preoccupation torments her in all personal space and time.

Anne Enright, winner of the Man Booker Prize and the inaugural Laureate for Irish fiction, in her memoir, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, published in 2004, records her experiences of traversing the panorama of pregnancy and early motherhood. The text is divided into fifty-eight chapters of varied sizes and documents her transition from a self-centred individual with pre-natal suicide tendencies to a mother of two children. The memoir explicitly explores the pregnant

body, its impact on the woman and the consequences of becoming a mother based on her experiential knowledge of gestation and parturiency.

*Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* begins with a note of apology to all those people who feel that she has vandalised the prosaic directives of the patriarchal society for voicing and exposing the so far suppressed and controlled experiences of motherhood which are entirely different from the institutionalised characteristics of maternity. In the first chapter titled, "Apologies All Round" Enright speaks of the criticism that she had to encounter for exposing motherhood in its true colours and for not contributing to the further glorification of maternal roles established by patriarchy. The introductory sentence of the text, "Speech is a selfish act, and mothers should probably remain silent" (1) seems to strike at the existing admonition that is silently enforced on women in order not to disclose the unfeigned experiences of motherhood. It may also indicate that the unveiling of the true attributes of motherhood may lead to the disruption of the patriarchal system which uses motherhood as a tool to confine women to domesticity by convincing them that "for a woman, anatomy is destiny" (2). Enright sarcastically affirms this notion by saying that since anatomy determines the destiny of a woman; she should indeed be conscious of the various roles that she performs as these roles may alter her life beyond reversal. She acknowledges that the different experiences and observations that are revealed in this book extend across the initial years of her two kids, a girl and then a boy with two years of difference between them. She claims that the narrative style of this book is by the rhythm of her life as a mother:

The reason I kept writing about my babies, even when they were asleep in the room, was that I could not think about anything else. This might account for any wildness of tone. The pieces were typed fast. They were written to the sound of a baby's sleeping breath. Some were assembled, later, from notes, but I have tried to keep the flavour of the original scraps . . . I wanted to say something about the anxiety of reproduction, the oddness of it, and how it feels like dying, pulled inside out. (3)

In the chapter titled, "The Glass Wall" Enright makes a subtle comparison between the life of mothers and non-mothers by assuming that these two categories of women are separated by a wall of glass through which each group looks at the other side wondering about the lack and abundance of the women on the opposite side. Against the societal expectation of non-mothers being deprived of the meaning of existence, Enright comments looking at the mothers who are on the other side of the glass wall: "I look at women in their thirties with their noses pressed up against the glass, and all I can tell them (wave!) is that life in here on the other side is just the same – only much better, and more difficult" (14). Standing on the side of the non-mothers she states, "On my side were women who simply were. It didn't seem possible that I would ever move through the glass – I couldn't even imagine what was like in there. All I could see were scattered reflections of myself" (13). Enright and her mother discuss the role of women in society, and both agree that "getting pregnant was the worst thing that could happen to a girl. My mother thought it would ruin my marriage prospects and I thought it would ruin my career prospects"

(13). She makes this statement by taking into consideration the life of women across a period during which at least some of them in one way or the other wordlessly consider mothering as an obstacle that hampers relationships and career prospects to a certain extent. The concerns that mothers deal with affirm the worries that haunt them as Enright espies on looking at the other side of the glass wall: “I see them wondering, Does he love me and do I love him? and Will I have to give up smoking? and What about my job? and I don’t want to be that fat woman in the supermarket, and What if it is autistic and Don’t they cry all the time?” (14).

The chapter titled, “Dream-Time” discusses a dream in which she sees some of her ancestors and a floating woman who speaks while patting her stomach. This dream when analysed based on Freud’s text *The Interpretation of Dreams* indicates that it is stimulated by external and internal factors associated with the physiology and psychology of the dreamer who is preoccupied with the thoughts of considering the ambivalent attitudes towards motherhood. On waking she recollects this dream and understands it as indicating the possibility of either being pregnant or being able to conceive. Soon, she discloses her pregnancy and narrates how both she and her partner Martin manage the situation. Subjectively she reveals the initial dilemma and contradictory feelings of motherhood: “I looked at the world around me and listened to my own blood. There was a deep note humming through me, so low that no one else could hear. It was in every part of me, swelling in my face and hands, and it felt like joy” (18). Even though this is the first impulsive sensation that she gets, her conscious thoughts on this transition are depicted as:

All of a sudden I was going to have a baby. The fact of my pregnancy was as real and constant to me as a concrete block in the middle of the room, but I still did not know what it meant. A baby. A baby! I had to realise this many times: first with a premonition, then with a shock. I had to realise it slowly, and I had to realise the joy. After the ultrasound, it came to me all in a clatter and I walked home, roaring it out in my head. (19)

This quote seems to suggest that women in general do not normally feel any kind of excitement or bliss on conceiving. It is developed or rather the expected emotions are consciously evoked and expressed by many as is the case with Enright as she discloses in the later chapters. In the initial chapters, Enright expresses the condition of pregnant women and the attention public pays to them by way of advice and gestures as if these women are now social property beyond individual privacy and choice. She illustrates this state of her pregnancy as:

A pregnant woman is a public property. I began to feel like a bus with 'Mammy' on the front – and the whole world was clambering on. Four women in a restaurant cheered when I ordered dessert. A friend went into a prolonged rage with me for no reason at all. Everyone's unconscious was very close to their mouth. Whatever my pregnant body triggered was not social, or political, it was animal and ancient and quite helpless. It was also most unfair. (19-20)

She presents the general assumptions about pregnant women and her attitude towards the public approach: "A pregnant woman does not know what she is. She

has been overtaken. She feels sick but she is not sick, she lives underwater, where there are no words. The world goes funny on her; it is accusing when she is delighted and applauds when she feels like sh\*t” (20).

The chapter titled, “Birth” illustrates the actual process of giving birth in all its animosity and vehemence; it shares the events untold by those who have experienced it. She presents her awareness of her bodily functions that lead to contractions and delivery: “My cervix has to do five things: it has to come forward, it has to shorten, it has to soften, it has to thin out, it has to open” (30). Ignoring the social norm of maintaining silence about the veracious affairs of giving birth, she blatantly expresses the death-like pain that women encounter during the event, she describes her endurance as, “. . . it has been forty-five minutes since I realised that I could not do this anymore, that the pain I had been riding was about to ride over me, and I needed something to get me back on top, or I would be destroyed by it, I would go under – in some spiritual and very real sense, I would die” (31). Enright describes the entire process of childbirth as a traumatically painful experience which continues to haunt her even after the birthing process. As is usually expected, the sight of the newborn does not evade this pain and the impact of the first meeting with the baby is presented as, “She opened her eyes for the first time, looking into my face, her irises cloudy. She blinked and found my eyes. It was a very suspicious, grumpy look, and I was devastated” (37). As she repeats in several instances, she does not believe in the myth of love at first sight between the mother and child, which in fact, she concludes is a conscious effort of the mind to feel and establish a relationship with the newborn. The next chapter titled, “Milk” deals with the aspects



related to breastfeeding the child which too is a novel and astonishing experience for a new mother. In this chapter, she narrates the deviant attitude people have towards breastfeeding by briefly tracing the history of this act beginning with wet nurses and then moving on to the expected bonding that is likely to develop between the mother and child through the process. She mentions that with the arrival of formula drinks, breastfeeding has lost its glamour among middle-class mothers. This part of the text also deals with the transition that takes place in the life of mothers as the processes of birthing and nurturing the child alienates the persona of the mother from her own body and mind:

This is why mothers do not write, because motherhood happens in the body, as much as in the mind. I thought childbirth was a sort of journey that you could send dispatches home from, but of course, it is not – it is home. Everywhere else is now abroad.

A child came out of me. I cannot understand this or try to explain it. Except to say that my past life has become foreign to me. Except to say that I am prey, for the rest of my life, to every small thing.

Damn. (47)

These statements lay bare the lack of freedom and the feeling of confinement that mothers encounter after the birthing process. Enright affirms that this is the known plight of women across many cultures as she is expected to be with the child at the physical and emotional level by consequently waiving all other individual passions at the personal and professional level.

The following chapter that is titled, “Nine Months” describes the changes and developments that befall the child and the mother over the span of nine months after delivery. In the first month, she notices that the child makes some sounds as if trying to communicate somehow by experimenting with some of the sounds that she can articulate. This brings to her memories of the pre-delivery stage during which she had sensed the movements and the sounds made by the foetus in her womb. Now, after delivery, she senses a kind of emptiness and silence as the baby is now pushed out of her body. Yet, the role of a mother does not entice her as a sublime experience and she exposes the reality as something traumatic, “I weep like someone who has been in a car crash. I weep like someone who has woken up from a dream, to find that is all true, after all” (51). This revelation depicts the anguish and confusion that develops in the mother which leads to a kind of identity crisis and disbelief in her new role as a mother. During the third and fourth months as the child grows, she searches for a solution to her own mental and physical predicament. The vulnerability and the helplessness of the situation force her to probe for answers on the internet when she understands that those near her remain secretly silent about the aftereffects of childbirth. However, she fails to find convincing replies even over the internet as everything seems to be cunningly glorified by concealing the truth. In this context, she presents her hassles as “I am still not walking so well, and the blood is an absolute nuisance. I look up the internet to try and someone who knows when this is supposed to stop, but it’s all about joy and despair, it’s all feeding and post-natal depression and not a single thing about leakage, seepage, anaemia” (52). At this moment of self-realisation, she perceives herself like a “waste land” (53) deprived of energy and worth; and she blames women for not disclosing the truth of the

experience of mothering by referring to them as “liars . . . No wonder they didn’t tell us anything – those lowered voices in the kitchen when I was a child” (53). In response to the forced silence made by these mothers, she reveals the truth of her experience, “Welcome to the big secret – it hurts” (53).

The third and fourth months of the baby and mother pass on as before in confusion, cries, and joy as the mother notices the growth of limbs and the novel things the baby learns to do. In the presentation of the fifth month, however, she mentions a situation that she encounters soon after a book tour in America. To meet the demands of her professional life as a writer, she leaves for Toronto, and the baby returns home with the father. At this moment of separation, Enright confesses that she did not feel guilty for leaving the child and she enjoys spending her time drinking, smoking, and writing peacefully. Even after returning home, she does not express any emotion but longs for the baby to fall asleep to return to her passion for writing a story on becoming a mother, which runs like this:

There is a lull, a sort of hopelessness that comes over women just before they have children, or so it was with me. I did not know where it came from. Perhaps it came from my body, perhaps it came from my life, but I had the feeling that what I was doing was no good, or that I was no good at it. I have seen other women sink like this, they lose confidence, they dither, and then shortly afterwards, they have children. (59)

Though she presents it as a story, it seems to reflect her dilemma and depression on becoming a mother, and this hopelessness and lack of confidence in

the performance of the role of a mother reach its peak in the sixth month of the child. During this time, she remains alert as the baby is after every object around her, unaware of the harm that it can cause her, and she indicates the need for the undistracted attention the child demands:

I am worn out and amazed by her constant ambient, grazing attention, as she flings herself from me to get at one thing or another, obliging me to catch her, time and again. The world is a circus, and I am her trapeze, her stilts, her net. Not just mother, but also platform and prosthesis. I'm not sure I feel like a person anymore. I think I feel a little used. (60)

The seventh and eighth months expose similar incidents, and Enright feels that though her husband is supportive, most of the domestic work and child-rearing falls on her shoulders. Unable to find time for work, she complains, "How does it always . . . end up like this, with the woman climbing a domestic Everest while the man walks out the door?" (63). She explains the cause of this incertitude that a woman encounters in the interview with Conan Putnam, in which she addresses the different attitudes mothers and fathers have in their devotion to parenting:

. . . If somebody drops the baby, the person who catches the baby is going to be the mother.

This is what I mean. The debate is always framed in female terms, as though it was women's business, not men's. When life is unfair, the people on the losing side spend a lot of time worrying about what

they are doing, questioning themselves. And the people on the winning side don't think at all. They don't have to. But the problem is still about fairness, not just about women. Do men want children? I think the answer is yes. So, what are they going to do about that? Having kids is very difficult to do on your own, and it's really crazy difficult to think you're doing it as a team and to find out that you're not actually part of a team. (n. p)

As the child grows and repeats routine activities, the mother stays secluded by satisfying her demands. Though the child responds to the mother, Enright projects her vexation, which shows the absence of any emotional gratification: "I hold the baby and love her, like a tragic event. She loves me like a best joke out" (64). The succeeding chapter titled, "Time", elaborates on the physical and mental growth of the child through various games that remind the speaker of her childhood days with her parents and grandparents. This chapter concludes with a remark made by Enright's friend on seeing the baby crawl, "It's the beginning of the end" (72), and she clearly understands the meaning of this remark as "It is the beginning of the end of a romance between a woman who has forgotten who she is and a child who does not yet know" (72). It indicates that a toddler's mother needs to relinquish all personal desires and expectations for "undressing, dressing, sterilizing, mixing, spooning, wiping, squawking, smiling, banging, reaching for the bread knife, falling down, climbing up, in the middle of which – a crisis!" (73). This list of activities that she mentions draws attention to the undivided attention that is to be given to a toddler. The corresponding chapters titled, "Advice" and "Being Two" deal with the

growing-up stages and the demands the child makes for various things which are mostly toys. However, in this scenario, the mother loses her adult self and becomes one with the child in all her tireless endeavours which tires the mother so much that she says, “. . . the best thing to do is to become benignly invisible. If I can manage simply not to exist, there is no escalation” (85). The burden of managing a two-year-old child becomes so traumatic that on one occasion she curses the child and says, “I will kill you and take the consequences” (85). These emotional uprisings, though momentous, happen at frequent intervals to burst out the truth to the readers that mothering a child is not an easy job.

The chapter titled, “Groundhog Day” projects the trauma of birthing a second child by raising a relevant question on the experience of the first child. Here, while pushing the baby out she thinks of the impossibility for a woman to forget that massive pain which tears her apart and yet of the daring courage that forces them to take it up again as is the case with herself. During the second delivery, she is consciously aware of the damage done to her body by the first one and she depicts the present condition as: “They are trying to take it easy with my pelvis because, over the last while, it has become apparent that the last birth left it all a bit . . . disjointed. As the ligaments softened with this second pregnancy, the bones started to ease away from each other, like a slowly cracking bowl” (92). She wonders at the reasons that give women the courage to go for more than one child after enduring the pain and its consequent physical and mental torture. In this chapter, she recollects a childhood conversation with her mother in which she queries about labour pain. Her mother cunningly evades the question by saying, “You know, you

forget” (89). Even when she repeats the same question, her mother gives the same reply and now while suffering the pain she interprets her mother’s silent response as “an attempt to suck me into the reproduction game” (89). The mother later tries to reinforce the conventional notion with the question, “But wasn’t it worth it?” (96). Enright assumes that it had been either fear or outrage that had forced her mother to remain silent about the entire experience of this bone-breaking torment and suggests that it is social conditioning that coerces women to endure pain all over again by feigning forgetfulness. She intimates the magnitude of this pain by elaborating on the physical state:

A baby rearranges your body, it shoulders your kidneys out of the way, it flattens your bladder with its head, squishes your intestines like an intemperate cook squeezing the meat out of a string of sausages; a baby obliges your legs to pop out of their sockets, and it doesn’t care whether they pop back in again once it is through – and where is all this happening? . . . A baby makes its way out of your body through the softest route available, and for quite a while on that fully adjustable birthing bed, I feel as though the softest route is a dead end. (90)

The forgetfulness that is induced by patriarchal conditioning also seems to be an attempt to glorify women as ever-enduring epitomes of self-sacrifice. As her child grows up, much later, she affirms her forgetfulness: “The baby is crawling, and I have forgotten the girl who could not crawl. She keeps replacing herself” (179). With this perspective in mind, she says, “The body has no imagination . . . the body

has no memory . . . the body lives in the present tense. The body makes a fool of you, every time” (91). Though she tries to somehow believe that there is a sort of forgetfulness that is induced by the mind and body, it does not seem to be wholly true:

And I know what the edge in my mother’s voice was – it was wonder. An appalled sort of wonder. You forget. How can your mind let you down like that? How can you be such an amnesiac as to repeat the experience, as she [mother] did, four more times? The most important and intense moments of your life, the emotion sodden – sodden weeks and months of nursing a new person into the world, wiped, gone; locked in some part of your mind to which you have no access. Where is it written – in your bones? Certainly not in the flesh, because flesh grows again, this is the mystery of it, everything springs back into (roughly) the right place; your bruised soft tissue plumps up again, and the cells that contain the secret of your last baby give way to cells that are indifferent and ready; perhaps even mildly disposed towards Doing It All Again. (97)

In the chapter titled, “Science” she challenges the social system that expects mothers to tend to the child to tame them to become socially acceptable. She wonders why men do not take up the task of mothering even when they claim to be better than women in many aspects. Jovially she asks when according to science, men have a better grasp of three-dimensional spaces that enable them to locate places and read maps better than women, why are they unable to manage and find



anything around the house? She claims that women are responsible for their plights in the domestic circle as they take up all responsibilities by struggling to show off their multi-tasking potential for bubbles of appreciation which are often muted. When scientists research the food and the demands of professional jobs that can harm the child, they consciously avoid any impact of domestic chores on pregnancy. According to Enright, this is so as “scientists rarely research against the interests of industry” (106), and in consequence of the attitudes of these social scientists towards mothers, she scorns them by saying that the only purpose of their studies is to keep women confined to the domestic circle. Through these evaluations, she seems to suggest that people present and interpret childhood matters as if mothers alone should take up the responsibilities of satisfying the demands of an infant:

Sometimes I think scientists and sociologists are just Big Babies. They want mothers to be on hand all day every day and to the child alone. They talk like eight-month-olds with separation anxiety. They talk like toddlers suffering from the unspecified and universal hurt that ‘Mother’ provokes – because she has left them to go for the shops, for example; or she has betrayed them by having another child; or there is a dog that she pets from time to time; or a book she wants to read; or a television programme that interests her; or any of the things that our babies do not like us to do. (107)

Enright agrees that mothers have responsibilities in the upbringing of the child, and she also argues that a child’s development is not based on the physical

presence of its mother alone. Accordingly, in this chapter, she challenges the sociological findings that try to keep women bound to children:

What we are not agreed on, what we cannot agree on, is whether, and to what extent, a child is damaged when the mother doesn't spend all her time with it in those first twelve months. We can't agree on it because we can't, any of us, stay at home. We don't have the money. We don't have the patience. But also because we sense that the debate is overblown, that sociology, psychology, or the media's representation of them – society perhaps – is just a child pulling at our skirts. The child's need is real, but it is not in some way true. It is not well-founded. Yes, I am leaving – but will be back in five minutes, or in five hours, and you will be all right. There must be limits to being a mother: not in the spiritual sense, but between 4:30 and 5:00 on a Tuesday, say, there must be limits to being a mother.

(108)

In the chapter titled, "Babies: A Breeder's Guide", she explores the trauma of childbirth and the expectations from a mother in nurturing a child. Referring to labour pain, she says: "Having a baby is like being run over by a small car – from the inside" (117) and describes the process of birthing using this analogy from different perspectives. According to her, some people may suggest that if you are going to be driven over by a car from outside, to evade or reduce its impact on the body, you should adopt appropriate positions or sit or lay down till the last minute by which the car will roll over the body. Similar is the attitude of some people who

suggest remedial measures to reduce labour pain: “If you practice hard, they say, you may feel no significant pain at all” (118), which is equivalent to “You are in charge of this. You must, however, breathe out rapidly while a wheel is on your chest or stomach – this is vital” (118). She ridicules the public attitude towards childbirth and smirks the ignorance concerning the experience of bearing and nurturing a child. She refers to the different ways women approach labour pain – some of them want to be done with it, whereas others being unable to tolerate pain resist it as “a certain amount of resistance makes it easier for the motor to get over the hump” (118). She refers to another group of people who cherish every moment of childbirth as a rare experience and, of all those women who feel that the child may get stuck in the way, she says: “Your stomach is designed to take the weight. Your friends and extended family will be there to cheer you on. It will be like a party, the best party you have ever held” (118-119).

This chapter, divided into several parts with sub-headings, discusses the early habits and the training given to babies with eating and other mannerisms that enable them to be a part of the civilized world. Moreover, it also discusses the effort taken by a mother to maintain her baby as a presentable one. She affirms that the thought of keeping the baby tidy preoccupies mothers, mostly all mothers, more than fathers. Enright’s father wonders about the need to “polishing” (149) the children, and in contrast, she reminds the readers that a mother usually does not doubt the effort required to keep a baby fresh. This is presented as, “You see that cute baby in a buggy, with a little stretchy hair band and embroidered sandals and an ironed dress that does not appear to have sh\*t on it, no matter which way you turn it around?”

That baby represents, in terms of shopping, washing, ironing – I don't know half a day? No, a whole day's work" (148). When a woman asks Enright about her experience of rearing a child, to the woman's horror, she replies: "It's a very low-grade work . . . As far as I am concerned, rearing a baby means holding, smiling, feeding, shushing, and waving a rattle around. This can be lovely, but it is sometimes quite dull, and the rest is pure drudgery. The only intellectual challenge, amid such ecstatic inanity, is how to keep yourself sane" (149). Despite all the sacrifices that mothers make to rear a child, the child seems to take everything for granted as they grow up unaware of how they came to be so. In the part titled, "Unforgiven", Enright refers to a list of things for which fathers are forgiven and mothers are taken to task:

Going out.

Coming home late.

Smelling of drink.

Reading the newspaper.

Watching the television.

Looking at people in the television with a vague sexual interest.

Not being bothered, much.

Having other important things to do. (153)

Depicting these injustices done to the mothers in their gendered roles, she remembers episodes from her teenage days when it was a fashion to complain about the inefficiency of mothers. She says that a mother is everything to her child, and yet they are “seen as a lardy wodge of nothing much; of worry and love and fret and banality” (154) and wonders about the belittling status that is given to mothers by ignoring all their efforts of mothering. Irrespective of the practical realities of subjugating mothers, from a personal perspective, she comments on the life that mothers hold on to, “Women come back from childbearing like Arctic explorers. You see them in the foyer of the theatre, perhaps: they have lost weight or dyed their hair. Their faces glow. They expect people to notice them and the amazing fact that they have come through” (156). She seems to suggest that mothers long to be appreciated and acknowledged for mothering in a society where they have to do housekeeping along with mothering. Here, she presents the societal expectations from a woman and the gender discrimination that is held high concerning domestic work: “There is a strong connection between a clean house and a tendency towards paranoia, which is quite annoying for someone like me, who gets paranoid tendencies without the bonus of a gleaming kitchen sink. If you are a woman and you clean, society thinks that you are fantastically well-balanced and sane” (159).

At this point in the text, Enright compares the role played by men and women in balancing domestic affairs. She speaks of the significance of cleanliness and reminds us that cleaning has nothing to do with gender and its execution in society is “seldom fair and never calm” (160). According to her, women are obliged to do it, and this constant involvement in cleaning makes them develop the habit.

She states that women spend a major part of their life in removing stains and dirt despite the little enjoyment they derive from such tasks:

Housework makes women more miserable than anything else: because it never ends, because they do the bulk of it, and also because whatever provokes us to clean and tidy has its roots in rage and disgust. Some women are cheerful around the house, of course, and many men are not just clean but tidy, but the statistics seem to bear out the idea that men do not feel themselves endlessly obliged in the domestic sphere the way that women do, and that women do not enjoy doing the housework, despite the fact that they just keep doing it. We are slaves to our own heads. (161)

Enright turns her attention to the undivided care expected from mothers towards their children, which for fear of underestimation, women willingly perform. The chapters titled, "Entertaining", "On Giving Birth to a Genius", "Dreams", "Speech", "On Being Loved", "The Moment", and "Worry" carefully present the brief moments of pleasure, pain, excitement, and dilemma of motherhood as each of these chapters vocalises the unvoiced emotional exhilaration on seeing the baby smile in her dreams or listening to her initial attempts to utter a word. These chapters also elaborate on the mental trauma of a mother who is to be heedful of a baby's diet and food habits, due to which she becomes neurotic and desperate when unable to feed the child as required since she considers it her prime responsibility. In this context, she narrates an incident of boiling an egg to feed her howling and hungry child. In her hurry to feed the baby, she takes the egg out of the boiling water only to

find it uncooked, and after peeling off the shell, keeps it in the oven to cook it further. As the child continues to wail with hunger, she carries the child with one hand and takes out the egg with the other trying to amuse the child all the while. As she tries to slowly open the egg with a slight squeeze of her fingers, the yolk sac of the egg explodes upwards onto her face. Shocked by this incident and hurt, she remains calm to pacify the already disturbed child. Yet, in pain, she likens this personal episode to a woman who gets wounded on a battlefield:

The thing is . . . I kept smiling. I might have recoiled a little with the fright, but I didn't even yelp. Not a squeak. Not a hint. At most, there was a small silence.

. . . It's about war-wounded women dragging themselves across the kitchen with bits missing, saying, 'It's all right, darling. Your Mama's here'. And thinking, 'They have bombed the fridge – what will I feed her now?' (174)

Though a singular incident, it extrapolates the magnitude of endurance of mothers in their attempts to safeguard and nurture a child at the cost of their subjective affairs. In the chapter titled, "On Being Loved", she puts on record the transition that has come over her since becoming a mother, "I have lived without a mirror for years at a time and quite like it . . . my hair . . . is greying and unkempt. I am wearing (what else) a tracksuit. I have, I decide, crossed that line between living and ageing; between being alive and getting old" (172-173).

The chapter titled, "Worry" deals with a mother's consideration and anxiety regarding her child's safety, and this overwhelming concern leads to mental and physical fatigue that results in depression. Here, Enright reveals that in her desperate attempts to keep the child safe, she read books like *How to Kill Your Baby* that illustrate the various things that can harm and even kill the child. The emotional drain that results from this vigilance makes her feel that some mothers may feel like hurting the child: "If the unconscious works by opposites, then it is a murderous business too, giving birth" (176) by which she seems to suggest that babies are so vulnerable and hence, slight negligence may bring unfathomable guilt and distress on to the mothers. She reveals the weariness caused by "separation anxiety" (177) that results in her confinement in a suffocating manner. By way of this, she comments on the social system in which mothers and fathers seem to play distinct roles in the matter of the child's security in such a way that "mothers are supposed to worry, and fathers are supposed to reassure" (177). Wondering about the gendered nature of this division of labour, she concludes:

Maybe the people who worry most are the ones who spend the most time with the baby because babies train us into it – the desperation of holding, walking, singing, distracting. Babies demand your entire self, but it is a funny kind of self. It is a mixture of the 'all' a factory worker gives to the conveyor belt and the 'all' a lover offers to the one he adores. It involves, on both counts, a fair degree of self-negation. (177)



The aftermath of all this involvement with the child leads to registered estrangement from the reality of existence, as pictured in the chapter titled, "What It Does", in which she observes that women becoming mothers not only change physically due to negligence of appearance but also at the emotional and psychological level as the children grow up to be independent of the mother. Accordingly, as a mother, she becomes compassionate towards people as she views everyone through the lens of a caretaker. This kind of rewiring of the mental system leads to alienation from the practical realities of society, and Enright, in this context, perceives that like a gardener who notices streets based on the kind of plants and trees on its sides, as a mother she observes things from knee height. Consequently, she notices that children are "surrounded by hazards or pleasures that I check for, even though it is none of my business . . . I look at their shoes and their hair, and whether they have bobbles or clips, and are they smiling or squirming or yelling the place down" (180). This task of monitoring children is so preoccupying and results in her alienation from living a life of her choice: "These are the things I miss: I miss swimming with Martin, both of us in the sea at the same time, and no one minding the baby on the strand. I miss being able to walk out the door. I hate, hate, hate, the endless packing and unpacking and repacking. All that clobber" (180).

Throughout this memoir, Enright attempts to vocalise lucidly the mental and physiological trauma against which mothers struggle to remain clear-headed and coherent. She confesses that for every mother her child is initially a stranger, a different individual, for which the mother is only a carrier through whom the infant joins life on earth. Like a carrier, who is carrying a parcel unaware of its contents,

she feels her baby bump and says, “Even my own much discussed, often caressed, high-focus bump was filled with someone I did not know. And perhaps never would” (24). Enright’s instantaneous response on seeing her child for the first time evokes shyness in meeting and getting to know the child like the way an adult feels on meeting a stranger. Before the birth, when she sees the image of the child during the sonogram, her impulsive response is “It looks a bit disgusting” (19), and after the birth, she says that the child is “just a set of emotions arranged around a gut” (42) empty of any consideration towards the mother. When milk leaks from either side of the baby’s mouth, she associates the child’s appearance with a “White Dracula” (44) with black eyes and a white chin, trying to suck the life out of her. All these seem to suggest that the bonding that gradually develops between the mother and the child is the result of constant and conscious efforts that a mother makes to create an emotional correspondence between them – it suggests that the relationship to a great extent is arbitrary.

In several instances, Enright presents a philosophical attitude associated with the ordeal of becoming a mother. She suggests that once a woman conceives, she becomes a public property as every passerby stops to throw a glance or pass a comment of appreciation for falling in line with the system to which one is wound for life:

Pregnancy is as old-fashioned as religion, and it never ends. Every moment of my pregnancy lasted forever. I was pregnant in the autumn, and I was pregnant in the spring. I was pregnant as summer came. I lived like a plant on the window-sill, taking its time, starting

to bud. Nothing could hurry this. There was no technology for it: I was the technology – increasingly stupid, increasingly kind, a mystery to myself, to Martin, and to everyone who passed me by.

(25)

Pregnancy lasting across a long period makes women consider their body to be a biological clock "made of blood and bone, that you could neither hurry nor delay" (21) and they remain alert to every second ticking of this clock to monitor the changes their body exhibits over time. As stated, once women conceive the process cannot be accelerated, and they are expected to be patient enough to overcome this trial as every difficulty and challenge a pregnant woman is exposed to is considered worthy of its outcome, which is a baby. Consequently, every woman, who conceives intentionally or otherwise, is expected to fit into the system which considers women to be potential enough to mother an entire society. Enright presents her forced acceptance of this *modus operandi* as: "So, for a while, I try to be. And am, that 'Mother' thing – the one who holds everyone, even myself, and keeps us safe. The container (the old bag, my dear, the old bag)" (57).

At length, Enright ponders over the reasons for targeting women in this long and laborious task of monitoring an infant, when this labour can easily be undertaken irrespective of gender once the child is born. The unfairness of the system strikes her hard the very moment after conception and continues even after delivery, and she presents this anxiety as: "Why should your time, as a woman, be so little valued? Why should you be the one to give and to bend?" (155). Though she fails to answer these questions, it can be assumed that the patriarchal construction of

reality leads to this unfairness. By and large, women succumb to this norm unaware of its consequences, and ultimately realise its impact at a later stage from where a reversal is almost impossible as what is done, by then, cannot be undone.

On realising this fact, Enright comments on motherhood as “a lonely business” (174), and she claims that if a mother finds it impossible to meet the demands of motherhood as per social acceptance, she should have the courage to leave rather than give up her life for it and they should be like brave warriors in this matter. She asserts this as a possibility when she says, “Some people do leave. It is important not to forget this. Leaving is possible. There are such things as amputees – they walk around with their sleeves pinned to the fronts of their jackets, they manage fine” (175). Apart from these daring mothers, she also talks about those women who become victims of the patriarchal system by undertaking all the challenges of mothering without defending themselves against exploitation. These women are honoured in society, but she says this to be deceptive as this glorification appears to be a tool to bind women to their gendered roles. She presents her perception of these mothers as: “The martyred mother is someone uplifted, someone who has given everything. She is the reason we are all here. She is also and even to herself, a pain in the neck” (178).

The concluding chapter titled, “Oh, Mortality”, throws light on the social and political context of Ireland within the framework under which this memoir is written. In this chapter, she refers to the cultural history of Ireland and her own mental agony and depression caused by the personal and political uprising that was

taking place in Ireland in the eighties for the rights over one's own body, the demands for reproductive rights and use of contraceptives:

The older I get the more political I am about depression, or less essentialist – it is not because of who you are, but where you are placed. Ireland broke apart in the eighties, and I sometimes think that the crack happened in my own head. The constitutional row about abortion was a moral civil war that was fought out in people's homes – including my own – with unfathomable bitterness. The country was screaming at itself about contraception, abortion and divorce. It was a hideously misogynistic time. Not the best environment for a young woman establishing a sexual identity. (187)

By this, the Spanish writer and researcher on gender studies Maria Amor Barros del Rio, in the article titled, "Caroline Moreira Eufrausino's Anne Enright *Feminine Aesthetics: Writing, Mothering, Spiraling*", describes Enright as "a key author among a generation whose work has become essential to understanding more fully the past and present of Irish womanhood" (185). In the concluding chapters, Enright presents her depression, suicidal attempts, and her fearlessness of death. She illustrates one attempt at suicide, "Some years later again I found myself in a room in England going home for real, with a bottle of sleeping pills, some serious alcohol, and various implements of destruction" (186). She survives all the attempts and admits: "I quite enjoyed my suicide. I felt vaguely fulfilled. I felt renewed. And the years that followed were busy and interesting and good enough, except that I always had this, like a sweet in the bottom of an old pocket, a little yearning something –

the desire to die” (188). Though she yearns for death, with hospitalisation, she overcomes this depressive state and returns to life, family, friends and children. Her expression of this state reveals absolute contentment:

Being alive was easy. And more than that – I had got into such a habit of gratitude, and a mother’s worry for the future, that I didn’t, I found, want to die at all, not for a very long time . . . I want to burst into my life like a bank robber, shouting at my family and at each of my friends, ‘Nobody is going anywhere, all right? Nobody goes out that door’. (196)

Anne Enright, as she claims, has written this memoir following the pace of an infant with an urgency to denote all relevant facts of bearing and rearing children along with depicting the unforeseen dilemma of mothering. Throughout the text, she attempts to delineate the ambivalence women experience on conceiving, thus revealing the true nature of conception muzzled by women who knowingly or unknowingly contribute to the sustenance of patriarchy. How she pictures the ambivalent attitude speaks volumes of the true experiences associated with maternity. In an earlier instance, she is excited by the thought of becoming a mother that she goes to the extent of saying: “Children seemed to be such an absolute good, independent of the relationship that made them . . . ‘Buy one if you have to or hurry’” (14) and later on realising the magnitude of troubles her child causes – provoking, thwarting, whining, refusing, baulking, delaying, complicating and annoying – she wonders “how human race has survived” (85), and in this circumstance, she is so annoyed that she dares to harm the child by saying “I’ll

swing for you” (85). As a result, her disclosures of matters related to motherhood threaten the long-induced concepts of mothering promoted by patriarchy.

At the very outset of this memoir, she expresses her dilemma about becoming a mother, and this is evident from how she feels trapped and liberated at the same time. At this point, she senses her body and mind trying to incorporate a unit as part of her existence by constant vigilance, “I spent the next six months remembering and forgetting again, catching up with what my body already knew” (19). She associates her body with a clock by which she attentively monitors the functioning of her body and the changes the foetus marks in her from an unfathomable depth. As if in a trance with the evolving foetus, she feels simultaneously romantic and distressed and presents this as, “I was in the middle of the sweetest, quietest romance . . . And there was no escape now. I felt as though I had been watching a distant train for months and only now, when it was approaching, did I realise I was tied to the tracks” (23). The physical changes are so strenuous that she feels as if humans are overbred when compared to animals like marsupials, who come to the full term of pregnancy within six months. The physical trauma is so arduous that she considers it not worth the child against the common assumption that mothers consider the difficulties of childbearing a gratifying experience. Enright expresses her experience and her quarrel with her husband Martin on this matter:

I couldn't walk for more than twenty minutes. Everything hurt.  
Somehow, I blamed the bump and not the child for the obstruction in  
my gut and the vile acid that was pushed up into my throat . . . I

started fighting with Martin . . . the stupidity of it, the blankness, the senseless days, and the terrible, interrupted nights. Somewhere in there, I forgot entirely that I was having a child. Nothing wonderful could come of this. I was bored to madness, and there was nothing I, or anyone else, could do about it because I had the concentration span of a gnat. A very fat gnat. (23-24)

This plight continues even after delivery, and she realises that she has been misled to believe in the romanticised notion of motherhood that is against the genuine experiences of mothering. The physical pain and the emotional turmoil that contrast with the expected assumptions make her ambivalent, and she states this ordeal as:

I don't know. I have never heard anyone discussing how long the pain is supposed to last. So, I draw upon however many ghastly generations of suffering have preceded me and when I go back for my check-up, I smile hugely and say that everything is fine, wonderful, marvellous. I don't want to piss on the parade, and besides it is true: I am extravagantly happy – messy, creaky, bewildered, exhausted, and in pain, but happy, hopeful, and immediately refreshed by it all. (53)

In this best-seller book, Enright denounces the institutionalised concepts of motherhood that subjugate women and provides a variant perspective on motherhood by examining pregnancy and motherhood as life experiences that cause alienation and identity crises in mothers. In this autobiography, written in a crisp and



daringly honest manner, she critiques not only the patriarchal society but also the conditions of the Catholic church that force women to conceive and take up motherhood as the central objective of their life. Accordingly, she deals with the nightmares and strangeness of motherhood and attempts to develop a sense of direction among women towards career aspects before they take up motherhood. Writer and scholar Raximova Umida Saliyevna in her research article titled, “Identity, Gender and Space in Ann Enright’s Novels”, supports this claim by saying that “from time immemorial, women . . . have been considered responsible for taking care of children, feeding, bathing, nurturing and educating them” (34). Though, as practised in society, the roles of motherhood are customary and habitual, for women who venture into motherhood, it is an unanticipated and uniquely strange experience when it happens to them. Even though there is so much of a hue and cry for equal division of labour in the domestic circle, Vanessa Thorpe in her article titled, “No going back” published in *The Guardian* comments that all this agitation in the name of equality is a farce to mislead the attention of women towards other non-significant aspects:

All this phoney intelligence of minor skirmishes brought back from the front line merely serves to distract our attention from the main theatre of war; a place where established identities are being ripped apart, bodies violently altered, and relationships put under a potentially fatal strain. Enright’s autobiographical book about the shocks and rewards of motherhood accepts as a basic premise that getting pregnant and going through labour is a scary odd thing. (n. p)

In tune with Thorpe, the author Judith Newman in his article titled, “The Consequences of Motherhood”, comments that writing a book on motherhood is tough as nothing is exciting about it, and it involves repetitions of duties leading to boredom. Newman projects his understanding of the experience of motherhood as, “To write well in the mother-child arena, a person must understand that the essential condition of motherhood isn’t pleasure or wonderment or even terror – although there’s plenty of that. The essential condition is absurdity” (n. p). Enright, in this work, recalls the moments of repetition and absurdity when she is forced to pay attention to the seemingly trivial games and actions of the child that do not make sense to the adult mind. Yet, as Newman writes, she catches every bit of this new life around a child in all its essence: “Its sights, sounds, smells and most of all its consequences – runs through the work of this marvellous Irish novelist and short story writer like the River Liffey through Dublin” (n. p). In agreement with Newman, the writer and critic Cathi Gulli also reveals in his review of this text that for people who are not directly involved with the mothering process, the sight of the same is bewildering and mystifying as they fail to associate with this experience. Hence, with their limited awareness and perspective on this subjective experience, common folk glorify motherhood by referring to it as a “commendable sacrifice rather than unfortunate circumstance” (n. p).

Apart from all these critical reviews and comments based on the text, Enright in an interview conducted by Lisa L. Lewis for *Literary Mama*, reveals her intention behind writing this book:

During the birth of my second child, I had a very strong sense of, ‘This is what it’s like to die.’ Generally, people aren’t talking about the extremes of the experience. There’s a lot of adrenaline around a birth. I wanted to be utterly personal – to take the personal to the limits of its expression so that I could say what it was like.

In Ireland, there was a clear loss of status that mothers felt. There was also a sense that you pretty much pop them out and get on with it, you know – we’re still enthusiastic breeders in Ireland. I took pride in writing something that wasn’t important because it was ‘only’ about babies. There are all these things at play when you’re talking about what is an incredibly visceral biological and pretty wonderful experience.

The Irish discourse is still mired in abortion and even contraception. I wanted to get under that discourse a little. What they don’t consider important is in fact the most important thing. (n. p)

The honesty with which Enright has written this work evokes her sincerity in feeling the need to write a book on motherhood which she observes is the need of the time not only in Ireland but also in all places where women are pushed to the margin either because they are mothers and hence cannot divide their attention to any other matters or because they are considered as an ill omen for not bearing children. Accordingly, she tries to foreground the idea that childbearing should not be considered the only pragmatic mode of existence for women, and even non-

mothers should be given due credit and acknowledgement for their contributions to society. In this attempt, to create cognizance among women, she assumes her book to create a spark in women who feel they do not fit into the concept of normalcy as the unsettling and bizarre experiences of motherhood traumatise them. In the interview, “A Conversation with Anne Enright” she says that this book can also serve as a “great contraceptive” (n. p) as the actual escapades of mothering evoke unnerving revelations that may lead a person to reconsider the decision before venturing into motherhood. Enright refers to her predicament as a mother and expresses her thoughts on what she would have become if not a mother, in the chapter titled, “What It Does”: “Think of how far I would have gone, if I’d known all this ten years ago. If I had been a creature of the moment instead of a creature of the sofa. I would have written many books. I might even be rich. I would finish painting the hall” (181). Here, she seems to suggest that the expectations of a mother are so exhausting and hectic that she is unable to squeeze out time for her personal and professional needs. This text bears testimony to her statement as she wrote it to the rhythm of her sleeping child – the chapters are in a non-unique manner in size and content, the structure is in tune with the fast-breathing tempo, and it reflects the smell, taste, sight, touch and sound of rearing up an infant. In another interview with the writer, editor and reviewer Conan Putnam, Enright talks of the style she adopts for writing that brings out a unique and the most unanticipated flow to her works:

In the beginning, you have a plan for a book that everyone will love in various ways. And then you start writing and you realise you have a different kind of a book on your hands. And so the easy,

conventional novel, the idea of that novel, falls apart, and you must start writing the thing itself. If you resist and you continue to pursue the easy idea, you get a fake novel, written according to a preordained pattern. The world is full of them. You have to be less controlling. It's like getting a herd of sheep across the field. If you try to control them too much, they resist. It's the same with a book. If you try to control it too much, the book is dead. You have to let it fall apart quite easily on and let it start doing its own thing. And that takes nerve, not to panic that the book you are going to write is not the book you will have at the end of the day. (n. p)

Of the narrative structure that she follows in the text, Joanne S. Frye states in the article titled, "Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood" that it is "circular" (197) which indicates a "circular sense of time . . . the daze of repetition, the oddly fluid notion of time that both passes and stands still. And she draws on a structure of brief elliptical pieces to render the fragmented sense of this early mothering experience" (197). In the same interview, she reveals her attitude towards children and how partners are affected by the coming of a child between them:

When kids come, something happens, which is that gender isn't a game anymore. It's easy to be equal when there are no kids. But when a kid comes along, the sh\*t literally hits the fan. It was amazing to see the changes, not just in the women I know but, in their husbands, and how threatened some of them were, and how they

refused or embraced the challenge of having kids. It seems that it very much boiled down to what kind of man you were with. No woman that I know is capable of leaving her child down for thirty seconds. She can't walk away without making sure that everything is absolutely as secure and safe for her child as can be. (n. p)

Following the warning that Enright and Cusk provide to women to consider and reassess the decision to become mothers, the British clinical psychologist Harriet Lerner in her work, *The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life*, highlights the concerns with which every woman should be prepared before becoming a mother:

I would not advise any woman to slide haphazardly into motherhood. It's not a good idea to close your eyes, hold your nose, and jump. There are things to be considered, not the least of which are how a baby fits into your own life plan and whether or not you feel prepared to rear it. Indeed, there are countless questions to reflect on if you are contemplating having children. For example, what are your short and long-term work and career goals? Where do you most want to invest your time, talent, energy, and money? What is the condition of your marriage, if you have one, and your overall support system? What are your fantasies about what you will gain or lose from having a baby? How much responsibility are you ready to take on? How will you and your partner decide how much time each of you will spend on

childcare? Are you prepared, if necessary, to care for a child with a severe emotional or physical disability? The list goes on and on. (13)

Though Enright pays attention to almost all aspects of motherhood, Carolyn See in her article titled, “Anne Enright’s *Making Babies*: at times pleasing, at times troubling” mentions that she does not in particular deal with postpartum depression. However, she elaborately talks about her suicide attempts and her consequent term in a sanitarium before becoming a mother which seems to indicate her fearlessness. She confesses this in the last chapter titled, “Oh, Mortality” in which she recollects her adolescent life during which her mother tells her of a severe health issue which may have led to her demise. Although the mother is panic-stricken when the doctor discloses the matter, Enright is pleased with the thought of death:

I heard in the very centre of my head, the phrase that occurred without beat or pause, was, ‘Going Home’. Or perhaps just the word ‘home’. And with this word, there came (I am embarrassed to say) a burst or suffusion, an experience of light, that seemed lovely to me . . . . But I have no idea why it should have manifested itself in this way and not another. I have only the vaguest idea why ‘death’ and ‘home’ should, at sixteen, have been the same thing for me, and both so lovely. (185)

Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work: On Becoming A Mother*, like Anne Enright’s *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* deals with the commonly unacknowledged trauma of pregnancy and motherhood. These writers make

attempts to bring into focus the often-bleared sights of motherhood within the purview of the feminist framework of motherhood. Both Enright and Cusk write from their subjective experience of becoming mothers by interconnecting it with the studies and discourses that throw light on the experience of the same. Both writers deal with the extremes of ambivalence they have experienced during the phase of motherhood. Here, soon after the delivery, Cusk experiences the delusions of motherhood when she fails to connect with the child in any meaningful way and similar is the case with Enright to whom the infant is nothing more than a stranger. Like Cusk, Enright also expresses her bewilderment and dilemma on conceiving: “Martin says I was delighted when it proved positive, but I was not delighted, I was shocked and delighted maybe, but I was mostly deeply shocked” (17). Based on the observation of these writers it is explicit that once the baby is born, the life of the mother is entwined to it in such a way that it is almost impossible to separate them as the responsibility of caring for the young one falls on the shoulders of mothers. As a consequence of this understanding, Cusk refers to mother and baby as a single entity and she names them “motherbaby” (99), and in *Making Babies* Enright also introduces them as a single unit: “Pregnancy is a non-place, a suspension, a holiday from our fallible and compromised selves. There is no other time in a woman’s life when she is so supported and praised and helped and loved. Though perhaps it is not ‘she’ who gets all the attention, but ‘they’; this peculiar, mutant, double self – mother and child” (20). Margo Lowy in the book *The Maternal Experience: Encounters with Ambivalence and Love* projects this ambivalent attitude as a means of strengthening maternal affection: “Mothering can be considered as an experience of continual messy interruption. While these interruptions often elicit psychic



disarray and momentary feelings of hatred in the mother, they also urge her to keep moving forward and to renew her connection with her child, keeping her from falling into indifference” (15).

Both writers regard the early stages of motherhood as a period of confinement and Enright, in particular, compares a mother to a soldier who is wounded on the war front. In support of such a comparison made by writers on motherhood, Leta S. Hollingworth in her article titled, “Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children” comments: “The fact is that child-bearing is in many respects analogous to the work of soldiers: it is necessary for tribal or national existence; it means great sacrifice of personal advantage; it involves danger and suffering, and, in a certain percentage of cases, the actual loss of life” (19).

Another significant revelation made by these writers is about the frustration they experienced during their confinement and the urge to harm their children. Cusk reveals she had an impulse to hurl the child out of the window for sleep deprivation along with physical and mental strain: “At this point, I don’t just want her to go to sleep, she has to go to sleep otherwise I do not know what will happen. My position is at once reasonable, utterly desperate, and non-negotiable . . . I begin to shout . . . I shout not because I think she might obey me but because I am aware of an urge to hurl her out of the window” (85-86).

In a similar context, Enright exhibits her plight as:

Once, maybe twice a day, I get an image of terrible violence against the baby. Like a flicker in the corner of my eye, it lasts for a quarter

of a second, maybe less . . . Martin says it is all right – it is just her astonishing vulnerability that works strange things in my head. But I know it is also because I am trapped, not just by her endless needs, but also by the endless, mindless love I have for her. It is important to stay on the right side of a love like this. (54)

Both writers share a common platform from which they brawl against the ambivalent self to successfully voice the innermost turmoil of their traumatic experiences. This exposure of violence in the attitude of mothers, as Sara Ruddick presents in her book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, is natural as children not only evoke love but also anger, frustrations and hatred in mothers. According to her, the peacefulness that mothers are expected to possess is “sentimentalized and atypical” (xi) and appreciates the efforts taken by mothers to maintain peace by suppressing the flow of diverse emotions towards children. Cusk and Enright attempt to make audible the silenced voices of mothers by expressing the experiences of mothering against sexist arrogance and glorification of motherhood that distort the true reflections of mothering experiences. As Sara Ruddick says of mothering, these writers seem to be struggling to articulate the ambivalent thoughts, frustrations, and subjective desires of mothers to penetrate literary and political discourses for recognition and acceptance of the miscellaneous attributes of motherhood that are distinct from the archetypal forms of maternal constructs that continue to reinforce the myth of “maternal peacefulness” (220).

Thorpe in her article titled, “No going back” published in *The Guardian* observes a common feature in the content and style of both writers, she says that

these books represent the “humour and urgency of someone who is grasping rare moments of solitude to communicate with the outside world. Like Cusk, she wrote quickly while her baby slept or was minded by a helpful partner, like Cusk, she has also gone on to have another child, despite the unholy jolt to the psyche caused by the first” (n. p). Both Enright and Cusk search for books and discussions on pregnancy to find a solace to their dilemma, and to read similar unequivocal experiences that are entirely different from the common tales of motherhood. To their surprise, most of the books glorify motherhood without sharing the practical realities related to the physical and mental transition that takes place in the person of the mother. The animated optimism presented in such books created an urge in them to write a book that would disclose and provide unadulterated details of this unique experience. Both writers observe the presence of social factors that operate through individuals and systems to make women fall in line with the established style without challenging the norm of patriarchy. Thorpe asserts this attitude in both writers: “While Cusk suspected a social conspiracy designed to keep women producing, Enright too has a nose for peer-group propaganda” (n. p). She also observes it as a “herd instinct” (n. p) that results from blindly following the norm due to the enforced silence and inability to identify the individual differences and potential that may enable women to find their realms of occupation. Similarly, Newman in his article draws attention to the neglected truth that, “What we think we know about ourselves, we no longer know” (n. p), suggesting that in a patriarchal society, women are indoctrinated to believe in the existing system and so they fail to recognise the diverse ways in which a life can be led free of cultural confinements. On a similar note, Thorpe says women who live in fear of the system cannot afford

to express the “luxury of a complex reaction to motherhood” (n. p) which is being done by writers like Enright and Cusk. In both texts, authors share the details of their traumatic experiences, ambivalence, and uncertainties of their physical and mental well-being in a manner that simultaneously evoke something strange, rare, and unknown in their relationship with the newborn. Apart from the parallelism in the style and content of these two texts, another point of resemblance is that both the texts offer dynamic introspection of pregnancy and motherhood as a social construct based on gendered physical features according to which women are considered destined to be mothers irrespective of their choice to be or not to be so.

## CHAPTER 3

### CANTANKEROUS TALES OF FLUX AND PANIC

*My Wild and Sleepless Nights*, a 2020 non-fiction work by Clover Stroud depicts the life, experiences, and recollections of the author concerning her identity as a mother of five children namely Jimmy, Dolly, Dash, Evangeline, and Lester. The narrative, which appears in nine chapters with a prologue and an epilogue, begins by unfolding the experiences of the advanced stage of pregnancy with her fifth child towards which people express their disbelief with the comment, “You’re brave! Are you mad” (7) which compels her to consider the significance of this concern shared by others. This memoir foreshadows most of the other works related to motherhood as it reverses the glorified and conventional attributes of the same by presenting gestation as an experience that is visualised within the novel perspectives of the writer. As she mentions in the prologue of the text, pregnancy and delivery make her feel “doubly alive” (10) with “two pulses” (10) in such a way that she feels it as the cause of her liveliness. Though it creates traumatic experiences resulting in ambivalent thoughts, she admits: “Being a mother pushes me, unwillingly, into parts of my mind that I didn’t know existed before I had children” (84). By accepting and rejecting the emotional, psychological, and physical metamorphosis that accompanies motherhood, the narrative presents a holistic view of the various stages of maternity across conception, pregnancy, delivery, lactation, and the act of mothering the children through infancy to adulthood. As the story unfolds, the

narrator's life is depicted picturesquely on the canvas of spilt milk, scattered cornflakes, balled-up socks, strewed rooms, piled-up clothes, and abandoned toys.

The first chapter titled, "Two Blue Lines" which refers to the positive result of a pregnancy test speaks of the initial stage of conception. Stroud expresses the first emotional thought that crosses her mind when she tests positive: "It does not make me feel especially happy or for that matter sad" (10). This chapter apart from presenting the sickness of the early stages of pregnancy which is presented as equivalent to "putting [her] head in a plastic bag" (15), also reveals the attitude of her husband and other children towards the news of her fifth pregnancy. Her husband Pete, who shares the responsibilities of parenting is stupefied and calls it an "amazing nightmare" (14). Her teenage son, Jimmy, expresses his disapproval and at a later stage when he is punished at school for misbehaviour and for using weed, he blames his mother for not sparing time for him: "You're always busy. You don't - ever - listen. Ever. I wish you would just f\*\*k off and leave me alone anyway. You're always distracted by the kids. You don't even know who I am! How do you think you can look after another baby? Just GO AWAY" (7). Though she tries to console and convince him of the situation, she fails as he shuts her out of his room, and she laments, "Something unsaid is tearing us apart. Motherhood and being a son and individual responsibility and fear are suddenly all mixed up together so that we're both blaming each other about whose fault this actually is" (6). Her elder daughter Dolly, on hearing the news of pregnancy, looks at her mother with glistening eyes and says, "It's so funny. I never thought I'd have so many brothers

and sisters” (17). Irrespective of all these reflections from dear ones, she confesses her thoughts:

Having another baby will be like letting a wild animal into our life. Because although I want the mess, the reality is also terrifying and disorienting. I really, really want this baby. I must have it. But it will also take up so much of my brain, my life and my time, that however much I want it, I know that another child will stop me from having the thoughts I want to have, and, to a great extent, living the life that I want to lead. I know, too, that motherhood can bring a sort of violent, overwhelming love that feels like being encased in metal and dropped into a deep silent sea. This mother love can feel as raw and rare as cutting through the soft dark crimson of uncooked liver, and as unsettling as that, too. These are the reasons why another pregnancy isn't pure joy. (14)

The following chapter titled, “Birthing Waters” explains the practical pains and illusions of pleasure that are experienced during the various phases of pregnancy. Here, she presents the traumatic experiences of pregnancy either as “being murdered or mustering my powers to horribly murder someone else” (36) which makes her appear “like a possessed woman in a zombie movie, slapping both palms flat onto the [hospital] door . . . howling with pain” (40). Though she has experienced childbirth four times before, the fifth one is as chaotic, painful, and unsettling as the previous ones, and makes her scream like the monstrous Medusa. She compares the birth of the child as “lashing and hissing and desperate to get out,

to erupt like a whole cask of snakes” (42) like the living venomous one on Medusa’s head. In the moments just before the birth, Stroud feels hysteric and consequently narrates her plight: “My head is a cracked enamel sieve with wet sand pouring through it. Sand is rushing through my ears and running down my back. It’s scratching under my fingernails and inside my eyelids” (40). She presents the process of birthing as being involved in a battle against oneself and compares her bleeding body to that of an injured warrior: “I have stood under a shower, warm water running down my warrior’s body, blood straight from the battlefield pouring out of me, pooling at my feet and then swirling away, away” (47).

Despite these harrowing ordeals, there are several instances in which she desires to undergo this encounter with her body and tries to find pleasure in it, she says: “I’m supposed to be enjoying every single moment of this” (31). This need to enjoy every aspect of motherhood beyond choice is reinforced in her mind because of the revelations made by many women either falsely or otherwise, that after pregnancy and delivery, there will be a longing for the whole process which they would have forgotten. Accordingly, falling in line with the expected notion she claims this as “the best, brightest and rightest feeling in the world” (45). Unlike other writers on motherhood like Sarah Knot, Anne Enright, Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti, Stroud exposes this escapade of parturition as an exciting and euphoric one which is far beyond “the inimitable and absolutely singular joy of holding a new baby” (50). However, her emotional turmoil is revealed when she refers to her foetus as an alien whom she wants to “expel from personal space” (33). Despite the dilemma caused by pregnancy, at certain moments it also excites her so much that



when contractions begin, she informs the midwife: “This is my fifth child . . . I don’t think there is going to be much hanging around” (39) seeming to suggest that delivery will be a smooth glide though it does not turn out to be so. The intoxicating sensation of feeling “high” (39) makes her crave this experience all over again after the actual process of pushing the baby out by enduring the excruciating pain of tearing her body apart. She observes:

I would do anything to go back to that moment when my children are arriving. Going through labour a second or third or fifth time has all the intensity of the first time. Experience does not dull it; labour still scares me, and I think that’s right because it should be a scary thing. The arrival of a new life is the most epic thing I can imagine doing on an otherwise unremarkable Thursday evening or Sunday morning.

(44)

Regarding the contractions that take shape at specific intervals before birth and which are commonly felt as terrible, for Stroud it is like “a tuning fork that is humming” (38) generating in her “high and wild and other” (38) kind of a sensation that is like the ones experienced while using drugs. She explains this as “This is ecstasy pumping gently through me; it’s not too shrill and not so obvious that I’m high, but I am, I later realise, much later, unquestionably in an altered state of consciousness. It might take me in several directions. It’s a very strong drug” (52). Similar is the excitement and longing for the experiences of motherhood despite her understanding of the entire process as a kind of “quiet madness” (51).

The chapter titled, “Milky Days and Skin Gloves” narrates the instances related to breastfeeding the infant. She affirms that irrespective of the earlier experiences she has in feeding the child, each beginning is as awkward and strenuous as the earlier ones. She informs that breastfeeding is a skilled labour that must be attained through practice as most mothers are not naturally inclined towards it. From her recollections of her own experiences of motherhood, it is evident that she does not always enjoy breastfeeding as at times she feels that the baby is sucking the life out of her like a “vampire devouring my bleeding, cracked nipples. A couple of times when it’s most difficult, I see smudges of red blood in the milk around his mouth when he finishes feeding” (57). To be free of her baby’s dependence on her and to reclaim her rights to her body, she introduces bottle feeding though she feels that this may eventually weaken the bond between them.

Regardless of the excitement that Stroud experiences during birth, she does not seem to enjoy the process of mothering a child after it is born. In the episodes that relate to the after-birth incidents, she explicitly expresses the anxiety, loneliness, and confinement that she feels with the baby. Her identity as a mother of five children does not excite her at all and in fact, she feels that it isolates her from the public in such a way that she is only able to connect with women who are either in the family way or are mothers which makes her feel “like a cow looking for its herd” (32). Exposing her fantasy to run away from her responsibilities as a mother during the advanced stage of her fifth child, she says, “Life has not just paused, but been yanked to a complete standstill” (10) engulfed by silence and loneliness. During this phase, she recollects her earlier life as a single mother of Jimmy and Dolly before

she met Pete and of her struggles to raise them while earning barely enough. Her relationship with Pete rejuvenates her back to life and she gets lost in the mythical gratification of motherhood with Evangeline and Dash, till she senses suffocation on being confined to her house. To ease her feelings of physical and mental confinement associated with motherhood, they shift to a bigger cottage with a garden and open space only to realise that physical space is not the cause of confinement, but “a place I carried inside me” (68) of which she says: “It was motherhood, more than anything, that brought me right up against it. Loving them is easy; it’s pure joy. But being a mother, and what that demands of me, night, and day until I feel like I have become an eclipse, is something else. Sometimes it cracks me open and there are days when what pours out of me are tears.” (69)

In her dilemma of meeting the expectations of maternal love, she confesses that though she has willingly become a mother, “. . . this love has me encased, imprisoned” (71) in such a way that “no part of my body is mine anymore. I want to enjoy every moment of this, but how can I when I am thick with exhaustion, my body wrung out” (71). Her feelings of ensnarement and detachment widen as the responsibilities of mothering fall heavily on her shoulders, especially after her husband leaves for work. She relates her predicament as, “. . . it’s as if I can, in tiny flashes, see myself inside this cage, my body contorted as I struggle, the outside world visible through all the holes, but distant, vanishing” (72). These self-draining events propel her to stretch her mind and body beyond the anticipated realms of existence to overcome the disability caused by children.

As the narrative progresses, Stroud makes it evident that motherhood is no longer a divine role that is genetically instilled in women, but a drama that women force themselves to perform under the patriarchal society which expects them to do so. Consequently, women who do not have any urge or desire to devote their time to mothering also unwillingly become mothers as society projects it as the most ideal quality of a woman. Thus, trained from an early age, women grow up anticipating themselves to be the best model of mothers, as per the conventional norms that set certain conditions for a woman to be good and acceptable as a mother. Accordingly, to experience the feeling of being alive in a patriarchal society, she daringly ventures to experience the trauma of childbirth by simultaneously rejecting and disliking the labour of child-rearing along with domestic chores. The demands that society expects from women as mothers, force them to accept this role despite their aversion to this task that poses consistent threats to their individuality. As Stroud reveals in the chapter titled, "Milky Days and Skin Gloves" the compulsion to meet the conventional expectations degenerate her personality leading her into post-natal depression resulting in a "blank sense of separation sliding between me and the rest of the world" (73). At this juncture, she reveals the cause for this post-natal anxiety: "I think the depression I experienced also came from the way I was straining to be a perfect mother to them. I wanted to be always calm, loving, benign, and generous, and so when I also started feeling angry, frustrated, despairing or bored, I tried to deny it to myself until I felt as if I was drowning" (73). Stroud in this depressed condition compares herself to the mother image that is projected in the cartoon, *Topsy and Tim* which her children watch, and she observes in this character the ideal mother attributes that she lacks in her reality:

She's a mother before she is anyone, someone who is ceaselessly giving, constantly kind, enduringly patient and perennially benign. She is pastel-hued and pin-neat, communicating gently, and firmly with her children. No means no and her children obey. She has authority but contains her extreme emotions, maybe because those are powerful and dangerous as a storm. There's no pain and rage in Topsy and Tim's mum. (74)

Stroud conveys that this idealised notion of motherhood that is promoted through popular culture haunts and dispirits mothers who suffocate themselves to become so resulting in mental and psychic pandemonium. As she nurtures her children, expecting every day to be the ideal sort of mother, she fails to keep her cool which ultimately leads her to accept the reality that she presents after the birth of her fifth child:

The optimism his birth brought with it subsides into the past. I was wrong to think that this time I could be the good mother I wanted to be to my children. It was a mirage. In fact, I am exactly the same woman I have always been. I am still irritable, detached, bored, impatient, frustrated. I had been pretending. I do not change. I am not better, calmer, kinder, sweeter. And anyway, I do not know who I am anymore; Lester cries so much and even at night there is no rest. I don't have time to figure it out. (69 – 70)

Stroud seems to suggest that this purport is so habitual among women that they refuse to disclose the true experiences of mothering under any circumstance for

fear of judgments and accusations by other mothers who are conditioned to fall in line with the expectations of motherhood. However, during her ambivalence, she attempts to talk to other mothers expecting them to spill the truth of their experiences of mothering. She does not voice her thoughts to them, as she could not find a genuine one and so lays it bare for the readers, expecting them to recognise the pain of motherhood. She presents her state of mind as terrifying as it includes “invasive thoughts in which she might smother her new baby, stab her with a bread knife or throw her off a bridge” (78). These thoughts that spark through her mind force her to observe silence in the company of mothers as she internalises that “at baby groups, it’s safer to just go on singing pat-a-cake-pat-a-cake-pat-a-cake-pat-a-cake as if the feeling did not exist” (78). Thus, to a certain extent, she too excels in pretending to be gratified in motherhood by affirming that “motherhood is a drama” (84). To fit into the mould of patriarchal motherhood, she feigns the reality of experiences even with her husband Pete, by responding to him of the time spend with kids as: “Oh, you know, fine, it was great, we did this, that and the other, and it was all really interesting” (110) when the reality is:

. . . while someone has been with me the entire time, touching me, prodding me, pulling at me, I have felt actually lonely . . . while there’s been a huge amount of noise, there’s also been a deafening silence in my head . . . time had not just stood still, but actually moved backwards, but that I’d also had too little of it to myself, that looking after the children had made me feel like an overfilled cup on a swaying table, slopping and spilling everywhere . . . I don’t like the

toil that motherhood has forced me on . . . nothing happened all day, but that sense of nothing was also completely overwhelming . . . baby groups make me feel as if my heart has been scooped out and replaced with an excoriating sense of loneliness . . . I can't tell him how much the repetition that motherhood brings to every day can feel as though it may break me: some women claim there's a silence around the pain of labour, but there's a silence as loud around the squashed feeling of despair that can come with cooking supper which will get thrown into the bin untouched, night after night . . . A day with the children . . . makes me feel like a zigzag. (111- 112)

Stroud suggests that it is the idealised notion of fitting into the alleged demands of motherhood that gives rise to leading a pretentious life resulting in anxiety and depression. The societal insistence is at such heights that in front of her kids and husband she pretends to be an “endlessly patient, endlessly engaged, endlessly kind mother from the children's books” (115) recollecting that the only time she has lived and expressed without pretensions were her pre-maternal days. Various instances described in the text divulge her struggle to be a mother as expected of every woman and the desire to be one makes her feign mothering as an invigorating experience.

The chapter titled, “Russian Beauties” shares memories of her mother who had gone into a state of coma due to an accident that took place when Stroud was sixteen. This chapter also illustrates how her life was altered in the absence of a conscious mother to help her through adolescence. Now as a mother of five children,

she looks back on how her mother had looked after her as a child: “She must have felt bored and angry and frustrated at times, and trapped in the kitchen at home, but if she did, she dealt with it by spending time outdoors, in the garden planting roses and fruit trees, or riding her horse” (125). It is this desire to experience contentment in motherhood that creates havoc in her life and yet, she attempts to offer her children similar experiences that she had as a child:

. . . running barefoot across frost on the lawn, walking down an empty road under a moonlit sky, the sting of fizzy-cola-bottle sweets in my cheek just as supper was on the table, the warm, comforting smell of the kitchen when Mum was there . . . What I want is to give them a feeling of confirmed security and love within a childhood that’s steeped in its own special and peculiar colour. (127)

This seemingly satisfactory image of herself and her mother that Stroud visualises is a threat to her existence in the role of a mother as she fails to attain what she believes her mother had done so well. This image that she carries in her mind may not be absolute as nowhere in her memory does her mother speak for or against the anticipated roles of motherhood, yet, it bothers her to the extent of desiring to run away from her motherly responsibilities and guilt that wrench her “. . . there are things I want to do, thoughts I want to have, which don’t involve Lester at all, or any of the children. I want to wrestle myself away from them, and try put away the small, heavy box of guilt I carry when I am not with them” (143). The impact of her struggles to meet the demands of every child is explicit and influential that her daughter, Evangeline who observes her closely ends up playing mother with



her dolls imitating Stroud without discerning its emotional and physical complexities.

The chapter titled, “Working Away” flashes episodes of Stroud’s attempts at withdrawing from the routine tasks of motherhood for short periods to get in touch with her profession as a writer. Whenever she squeezes out time to read and write, the instilled idea of motherhood generates in her guilt as she assumes that she is depriving her children of care and attention. The strenuous efforts with which she finds time to invoke her professional talents often end up in disappointment as the responsibilities of domestic chores distract her attention:

I open my computer to try and write until the urgency of the washing machine bleeping its finished load overtakes me, and I start wandering around the house again, picking up discarded clothes, carting toys back upstairs to the children’s bedroom, opening curtains which have blocked out the light since the rush of the morning.

Often, I have to stare at the screen for a very long time, trying to piece together the jumble in my mind, before I can make thoughts my own again. What appears on a Word document I closed the night before might be written in Arabic, or Urdu. I barely recognise my ideas. (140)

This revelation explicitly projects the challenges encountered in balancing professional needs with the clamour of domestic drudgery. She affirms that motherhood has changed her beyond recognition by taking away her individuality,

professional qualities and freedom which are invisible to the onlookers. The constant attention that she needs to pay her kids to avoid accidents makes her identify herself as a “soldier on the domestic front” (145). As a result of the anxiety caused by her feeling of being an inefficient mother, she has an urge to physically hurt herself to feel more alive from the tedious and lifeless toils of motherhood: “. . . I go out into the garden to pull up thistles from the lawn. They make my hands sting, but the pain makes me feel alive. I imagine what it would be like to run the sharp blade of the knife across my palm” (146).

On one occasion after delivery, the editor of a newspaper with whom she had worked earlier asks her if she could do a cover story on a pop star and she accepts the offer as an opportunity to get back to work. On the day of the interview, she leaves home with the then-youngest child and a caretaker to look after the baby during the interview. Though she manages to complete her task successfully, she does it uneasily as she feels grief-stricken on thinking of her kids. She relates her predicament: “Just getting to the interview, with my newborn baby in tow, had made me feel as though I was walking around with my fists scrunched up in tension. I shouldn’t have been in a hotel room with a megastar while my hungry baby was being walked around downstairs by my friend” (149). Taking into consideration this plight of mothers who feel guilty while engaging in their professional work, Melissa Hogenboom in the text *The Motherhood Complex: The Story of Our Changing Selves* says that women can overcome “toxic mom guilt” (190) by not trying to be the perfect image of archetypal mothers imposed by society.

The narrative proceeds to make a comparison between the roles performed by both partners in becoming parents. This juxtaposition reveals that her husband can devote his entire potential to his profession oblivious to any aspects related to the children. Unlike Stroud who is emotionally and physically torn between home and office, Pete's life is entirely different as she observes: "I imagine him moving all day, walking into and through big, important conference rooms and board rooms. I imagine what it feels like to do business. Cards handed out, fast adult conversations driven by urgency and purpose" (130). In comparison with her husband's life, her life is stagnant in which instead of the coherent utterances of adults, she listens to the incoherent speeches of kids, limiting her potential to match theirs and thus reducing her to their level of comprehension. Stroud seems to convey that this is the condition of most of the mothers as Alex, one of her friends and a mother of two kids agrees: ". . . I feel that, as a mother, I'm being babied a lot of the time. I often don't feel like I'm living an adult's life" (185). This revelation coincides with the thoughts shared by Pragya Agarwal in the book *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*: "I envy the men who are allowed to spread their legs and desires, hopes and aspirations. Women squeeze themselves into the narrow boundaries between the rails, hesitant to take up space, their ambitions ugly and abhorrent to society" (121).

In contradiction to the common notion, Stroud through this narrative argues that children do not ameliorate the relationship between partners but alienate them along different paths by always getting in between them. In this memoir, the earlier intimacy between herself and Pete to a certain extent wanes with the coming of

children who nudge them to create space for themselves in their midst. The narrative presents that she already had two children from her previous relationship, and she ties the knot with Pete on realising his understanding and compassion towards her. He is enthusiastic and supportive in all family matters, but with five children between them they lose space for themselves, and this gradually leads to estrangement as Stroud gets suffocated in child-rearing while Pete moves out of the station by way of work:

Having a baby to bring you closer together is like breaking your leg in order to make running a marathon easier . . . It's very difficult to conceive of the work involved in bringing up a child, to understand that having a baby will be like living with a little fire that needs tending all the time. Also, that being parents will change something in your relationship so that you are no longer equal. However much you want it to be something you will share, the chances are, based on all current evidence, that the mother will carry the domestic load . . . a few weeks or a few months later, you'll find yourself kissing your partner goodbye as he leaves the house to work while you turn around to fold a pile of laundry and work out what's for supper. (160)

Stroud states that the lifestyle of partners alters when they become parents as society imposes on them certain codes of conduct that are gender biased. As the load of childcare and domestic work impair mothers, the relationship begins to lose its charm. *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, a text on sociology that elaborates on the formation

and establishment of social systems through tribal communities to civilised societies by William Graham Sumner illustrates the relationship between parents and children in the seventh chapter titled, “Abortion, Infanticide, Killing the Old”. Stroud’s perception of the relationship between parents and children resonates with the comment made by Sumner:

Children add to the weight of the struggle for the existence of their parents. The relationship of parent to child is one of sacrifice. The interests of children and parents are antagonistic. The fact that there are, or maybe, compensations does not affect the primary relation between the two. It may well be believed that, if procreation had not been put under the dominion of a great passion, it would have been caused to cease by the burdens it entails. (n. p)

Though Stroud presents the lack of involvement of men towards child-rearing as a common reality among many people, she also admits that there are men who are considerate towards their families and take great responsibility in child-rearing. In her case, despite some differences of opinion that occur between them at times, Pete is a responsible father to all five children and considerate towards her as well. Though he moves out of town for his professional requirements, he is supportive and consequently, when he sees her desperate, broken and entrapped in mothering he consoles her saying, “We just need to go and do something on our own. We just need to be away, to see each other again. It’s OK” (193). In this circumstance, both understand how parenthood hampers relationships at the cost of their likes and dislikes. During a conversation with her friend Kathryn, who is also a

mother, she agrees to switch her role of a mother to that of a father, which is seemingly more independent of the duties associated with motherhood. As she has five children, many of their friends assume that she loves motherhood, and to this, she replies, “Loving my children is different from my feelings about myself as a mother. The two things are quite different” (165). Here, she makes a comparison with her mother whose motherly qualities she does not possess:

. . . when I look back to the mother I remember, who was calm and kind and loving and always present, I don’t feel like that. I feel impatient, distracted, irritated, bored, as I run around looking for lost clothes and unsigned permission slips, swearing up baby seats that won’t fit and buggies that won’t fold and teenagers who think I haven’t noticed they are telling me lies. Motherhood feels so different from the way it looked when I was a child. (166)

The chapter titled, “Separation Anxiety” elaborates on how parenting affects partners irrespective of their choice to become caretakers intentionally or otherwise. Here, Stroud and Pete feel the need to rejuvenate their love as partners over the “danger of seeing one another only as caregivers” (207). She presents their reality that is submerged in the shambles of life as parents:

The children squirm between us on the sofa, talk over our conversation at the kitchen table and elbow us away from one another in bed. Days will pass when we barely converse beyond making plans for the children, making plans for tomorrow. Weeks can pass when we barely touch, even when we are in bed, because there’s almost

always a child between us. Often the closest we come to touching is our fingertips brushing in sleep. (210)

To revive their relationship and to spend more time exclusively for each other, they make a trip to Seville entrusting the children to caretakers. Throughout the journey, Stroud gets overwhelmingly anxious about the children who are left behind. She fears that her absence will make things fall short and consequently, texts Pavel, the caretaker enquiring about their day, activities and food. Stroud seems to suggest that even when physically away from children, mothers, more than anyone else, experience separation anxiety and they carry the burden of uneasiness with them. Contradictory to this revelation, during the trip she admits that being alone with Pete helped her to relax and refresh her intimacy with him: “Absolved from being a mother, I am someone different: less harassed and calmer” (209). This opportunity resuscitates her sprightly exuberance, and they are once again able to be content with each other when they are free of care and concern for children. Far removed from the chaos of domestic responsibilities, she observes and understands the support she has always received from Pete even though she has felt several times that he has neglected her. The clarity of vision and thoughts that she can perceive now enable her to see that without Pete’s assistance she would have become insane and hence, she refers to him as her “life raft” (211) as he has safely taken her across the stormy waters of motherhood. Asserting the need to find time for each other in a family with five kids, she presents the benefits of being spared of mothering as:

Alone together we can remember what it’s like to behave as people who love one another, rather than as people who have vaguely started

walking through life together but are continuously separated by a herd of others. When it is just us, I become someone different. I become the person motherhood separates me from. It's like waking up. It's exciting, and consoling too, this feeling that we are both still there for one another. That we have not lost us, or our marriage. (211)

These statements spill out the true experiences of motherhood by refuting the common notion that for most women motherhood itself is the very essence of life and they crave for nothing else. Even after analysing the benefits of liberating oneself from the socially imposed clutches of motherhood, there are moments when like most women Stroud too feels guilty while being away from kids. Whenever she ventures outside the limits of her children's vision, as if in compensation for the time that is spent away from them, she brings them gifts which are intentionally referred to as "tokens of apology" (153).

This narrative brings to the front line the adversities of monitoring and guiding a teenager by illustrating Stroud's confrontations and compromises with her teenage son, Jimmy. Like how she is anxious about the birth of her newborn, she is also preoccupied with her concerns for Jimmy when his school authorities inform her of his smoking and his possession of knives which are both against the laws of the institution. This unexpected behaviour from Jimmy breaks her notions of an ideal mother-son relationship and she refers to their present attachment as "once magnets, now repelled" (31). In such situations, Stroud fails to reason with him as he holds her responsible for his delinquency. She says, "I am completely at a loss as to how to make him talk to me, to look at me, or even to be in the same room as me.



I do not feel I know how to mother my teenage boy” (54). Consequently, she blames herself for his misdeeds and feels she should have spared more time for him. These thoughts eventually lead to guilt and as the accusations that are hurled at her fill her with intense remorse, she recollects the childhood days of Jimmy during which she never had time to spare for him as she was always engaged with the younger kids along with her fatigue and sleeplessness. At this point, she blames herself for not being able to pay sufficient attention to Jimmy and regrets her inability to monitor him. The consequence of this silent and voiced riot between Stroud and Jimmy takes a toll on her identity as a mother: “There is so much anger and failure and it’s directed right at me so that I’m spun around inside myself, disoriented about where I am as a mother” (6). This lack of understanding that engulfs their relationship makes her ponder over the bond that she had carefully knitted between them across his years of growing up. In this drifting away from each other, she feels inefficient to hold him back from forces that are more powerful than a mother’s feelings of love and compassion. She feels that the bond that they had once shared is now weak as Jimmy is travelling along paths which are unfamiliar to her and to avoid confrontations, they ignore each other. Though the rift between them widens as he grows up, at a later stage Jimmy understands his mother for what she is, instead of how she should be. Writer and critic Eleanor Mills in her review of this text comments that this work “. . . brilliantly evokes the pain mothers feel when teenagers begin pulling away, and your sense of powerlessness about protecting or guiding them” (n. p). Accordingly, the task of motherhood becomes so suffocating that she feels as if she is “locked in a room that’s filling with water” (84).

The narrative calls to attention the notion of time and how women monitor time by relating themselves to a biological clock to the ticking of which they schedule their life's activities beginning with the waiting for menstruation, marriage, conception, menopause, and for everything beyond as well as between these milestones. Every event beginning with puberty is calculated and monitored based on this biological clock as is in the case of pregnancy during which women count days, months and trimesters based on the ticking of this clock that helps them to understand their physical condition. Of this state, Stroud says, "Pregnancy focuses me, switching on a timer counting down to when a baby – a whole new person bringing with it an entirely new personality – will be here and I will, for a while, need to stop work" (26). Even during the lonely days of pregnancy, while counting the last minutes of delivery, she feels that her life is a never-ending wait for things to take place and these things gradually move out of her control causing her to wonder aloud: "Does this ever end?" (76). This seems to be a very valid question as most mothers would like to have an end period of mothering but as she indicates society winds women with the tasks of mothering in such a way that they are never liberated from this role even when their children grow out of infancy and childhood. She exposes the plight of all mothers, "We wait and we wait until our children do what we tell them, and then they are grown, and we are older" (133). Accordingly of her adolescent boy, Jimmy, who is caught and punished for smoking at school she says, "Jimmy is mine. He's, my son. It's my job, although I didn't think the intensity of my role as a mother would go on for so long. I didn't think I'd still be having to monitor my teenage son as I do my two-year-old" (76). As in the case of most women, motherhood is a lifetime commitment that is expected from women under

all circumstances and Stroud is informed of this by her friend Alex as “. . . this is not the end. Even if you might want pregnancy to be over, labour is just the start” (33).

While encountering such trying moments of motherhood where mothers become responsible for all the schemes of their children, Stroud talks of the different kinds of love mothers possess for their children which can be anywhere from the invisibly terrifying one to the acutely binding one. She presents this emotion as:

It's a wild love; it thrashes and roars. It's a massive, jagged emotion, coursing through my blood and covering my skin and seeping into my bone marrow. It's deep love but there's fear there, too. Becoming a mother has unleashed this feeling of intense new love, but it's also unleashed the possibility of a loss so great, I don't know how my body would contain it. My love . . . hurts me, like a bruise under a nail, protected on the surface by the hardness of life but actually bleeding underneath. (77)

Of this love between mothers and kids which is considered customary and deep-rooted under every circumstance, Stroud says this love can also be shattered when mothers are over-pressurised by the demands of children. She says that before becoming a mother, time was to her “an endless resource I could bend to my will” (109) which after the birth of her children becomes an enigma that is difficult to sort out. She presents an analysis of how time has swapped on becoming a mother:

Back then, time wasn't a puzzle. It didn't torture me with dizziness, constantly changing speed, and neither did it thrum behind my eyes, like a mild migraine, like it does now, tick, tick, ticking away,

counting down, counting forward, as it has since Jimmy, Dolly, Evangeline, Dash, and Lester stepped into my life.

People talk about having a baby to silence the ticking body clock, but in my experience having a baby just makes another clock tick more loudly. I am always counting, backwards and forwards. (110)

The concept of time and its impact on the body and mind of a woman is further elaborated in the chapter titled, "Every Precious Moment" which focuses on a mother's angst and apprehensions when her children gradually grow up to be independent. For Stroud, this awareness is a very painful one as she has sacrificed her life for her children and as they move away from her, she feels lost and shattered. This, however, also generates in her an urgency to reclaim her lost life by bringing time under her control to stop its ticking by anaesthetising it within her command. She considers this as a way of "destroying myself without dying" (228) to rise like a phoenix from its debris. On an optimistic note she surmises ". . . motherhood submerges you, but you can come up for air, and you are still here. Shattered, but there's space to put yourself back together" (229).

Stroud's *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* seems to usher the idea that patriarchal conditioning of women results in the ambiguous thoughts and guilt that they experience on becoming a mother. By way of several cases and situations during which she laments, overwhelmed by her concerns for children shows that mothers are conditioned to feel so when they are near as well as away from them. The statement "I miss myself when I'm with them and I miss them when I am away from them" (152) highlights the dilemma of a mother who believes that

both physically and emotionally she should be bound to her child at every moment of her life. Yet, Stroud's intermittent admissions of her anxiety over children's safety and education; her bouts of guilt when she is away from her kids; her disappointments when she fails to meet the demands of her children; her regrets when she tries to focus on her work by entrusting the kids to caretakers, her strenuous efforts to provide the best experiences of childhood along with her repeated statements like ". . . loving my children is the only thing that really matters in my life" (112) and her admission that irrespective of all its complications pregnancy is a "ravenous kind of hunger" (12) seems to point at her mindset which is conditioned by the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is deviant from the true experiences of mothering. Crisply she presents the price she pays for motherhood as: "The plates fall and smash all the time. I'm constantly on the run, grabbing moments to work which I feel I've stolen from my children. The school assemblies I missed, the concerts I was late to, the parents' evenings I had to reorganise are the guilty price I pay: and make no mistake, it's a price" (21).

A unique revelation that Stroud makes in this narrative is the one related to the actual process of birthing a child by enduring labour pain. At various places, she commemorates this experience admitting that the trauma of death-like pain that tears her apart is an intoxication that makes her crave it repeatedly even after the event. She claims that nothing else is more pleasurable than this pain:

I've craved the cosmic weirdness of childbirth, the screaming fear and pain, the agonising ecstasy of labour. I wanted to step back into the realm of life and death colliding, which is my experience of

giving birth to my children. Childbirth took me to the brink of my own human experience; it was terrifying, and it was extraordinary, this sense that I'd looked at death as a way of showing me what it felt like to truly be alive. It was the biggest, darkest frontier I'd ever taken myself to; pushing myself to that brink feels to me like the very reason I was put on this planet. (228)

The belief that she suggests in the concluding line of the above quotation seems to be in tune with the patriarchal notion that mothering should be the primary concern of all women. Though Stroud in some circumstances contradicts this idea by revealing her ambiguity, some women are conditioned to accept motherhood as their life's goal, and it can be assumed that the extreme glorification of motherhood in the popular culture results in this acceptance. Along with Stroud, her friend Alex also craves more kids, but her husband discourages her from this by pointing out the financial burden as well as the emotional and physical discomforts that will surface along with another child. Stroud's dilemma in accepting and rejecting motherhood can be seen in the contradictory statements that she makes concerning this role. In one instance she talks of the trauma of becoming a mother and when she feels the urge to run away from family and home, she reminds herself, "When these days are gone, I will miss them" (101-102). This induced ideas of forgetting or missing the memories of pregnancy, gestation and infancy of children are conditioning of the mind under the patriarchal system that compels women to assume a feigned forgetfulness thus encouraging non-mothers to accept motherhood. Moreover, patriarchy presents mothering as a voluntary responsibility and tags non-mothers

and ambivalent mothers as less womanly and selfish. This is the case with Stroud too as whenever she tries to even think of finding time for her personal and professional work, she becomes guilty, and this emotional state is expressed with the question “How can I ever say I need more than this baby?” (145). This question that arises in the mind of a mother seems to flash the ambivalence she holds due to the instilled concept that nothing else is to be considered more significant or worthy than devoting time and energy to children. This kind of conflicting thought often emerges when motherly attitudes are compared to those of their mothers or grandmothers who had lived during a different period according to the beliefs and assumptions which were relevant then but may not be applicable in the present. In this narrative, Stroud compares her performance as a mother to those of her mother and regrets when she is not able to contribute as her mother had done. Perhaps these thoughts of not being able to be a perfect mother as expected under the institution of motherhood could be the reason for her frustration and depression that make her feel “I am pushed aside like a scullery maid whose role it is to wipe surfaces, find shoes and carry coats” (120). The questions that she puts to the readers like “Am I getting this right? Am I good enough? Am I a good enough mother, or barely close? And is *good enough* good enough, anyway?” (85) evoke a sense of comparison that triggers the conscience of mothers forcing them to fit suitably in the best possible way in the mould of the institutionalised framework of motherhood. She seems to admit to the conventional norms of motherhood by comparing her body to the earth in an attempt to hold the entire landscape into her motherly fold by becoming one with the desire to “feel everything around me and inside me . . . to open my body to all the terror and all the life that’s contained in the landscape” (226). Similarly, her intense

passion to hold on to the childhood days and events of her children seem to bring forth her fear of being left behind empty-handed when they grow out of her fold:

Time is tricking me again, and he's always moving away from me, the essence of who he is just outside my grasp, and I am left wondering whether this difficult yet intoxicating experience of mothering a newborn baby is something I'll ever feel again. I fear that in this trance I may have missed out on something serious and more important about mothering that will never happen again. (116)

As a result of these thoughts and experiences of mothering, she admits that she has surrendered her life, body, and mind to take up this responsibility along with her professional work as the denial of one for the other suffocates her. She feels that the actual process of mothering is the reason for her liveliness as it provides her with an identity in society, though it makes her feel lonely and deserted. Though she says she enjoys all the mess created by children, she also admits to her daughter, Evangeline that she would like to possess “the male ability not to see mess” (205) to which she also adds “I'd like the ability to fly” (205) probably from all the chaos and confusions of motherhood, “across a foreign land, miles from home, and stepping into the identity of someone completely different, with no responsibilities tying me down” (189). By this desire presented by Stroud, O'Keeffe in her review of this text notes that “mothering for Stroud has more to do with hedonism and adventure, about escape, and exploring the outer limits of human experience” (n. p).

*My Wild and Sleepless Nights* explores the dilemma encountered by the narrator while mothering her five children ranging from infancy to adolescence.



While the newborn child tries to hold on to the mother with his ever-widening demands, the eldest son Jimmy struggles to be free of the policing or rather the limitations of freedom imposed by the family. As she observes the distinct characteristics, qualities, and requirements of her children, she is left wondering about her own life and the sacrifices she makes at the personal and professional levels by tackling loneliness, chaos, and postnatal depression. The memoir in a way begins and concludes by attempting to figure out an answer to the question “What does motherhood really feel like?” (220) which her husband, Pete asks her towards the end of the memoir. She does not provide any answer to this question but to explore and expose all possible answers, she lays bare her personal experiences and traumatic incidents that are potential enough to enable the reader to infer the true experience of motherhood.

Observations made by critics and readers on this work become significant as it uncovers the multiple perspectives on motherhood that are discussed in this text. Writer and editor, Naomi Racz observes that this work explores “the push and pull of mothering a newborn and a teenager, as well as the push and pull of time, the desire to both stop it and also press fast forward” (n. p). Another pertinent observation made by O’Keeffe in her article titled, “What Does Being a Mother Feel Like” indicates that this book is “the very antithesis of the sanitised, smiling vision we are sold in washing powder ads” (n. p). In a nutshell, it can be surmised that this literary work has successfully communicated the dilemma experienced by mothers in their struggle to fit in and simultaneously challenge the institutionalised notions of motherhood from feminist perspectives that provide them space to speculate and

decide for themselves the difference between true experiences and expectations of motherhood.

Nell Frizzell's autobiography *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* published in 2021 vocalises the need for an open conversation regarding a woman's life between the late twenties and forties during which she is expected to provide definite answers to several questions related to occupation, settlement, and relationship along with the irreversible decision of having or not having a child. This non-fiction work, consisting of twenty-one chapters preceded by an introduction, reveals the need and the significance of writing this book in an era that discusses feminist perspectives of gender equality along with the liberty to make decisions associated with one's body. As mentioned in the introduction to the text, there is an urgency to label this specific time in the life of every woman as this crucial period remains without a label despite its significance as it forces on the persona of the woman certain poignant questions like, "Should I have a baby, and, if so, when, how, and why and with whom?" (3). This decision-making is more pivotal than all the other choices as once the choice is made it becomes irreversible, for after a definite time the body will not yield to fertility by default. The lack of a label for this complex and uncertain period indicates that language, as defined and explained by patriarchy, does not wholly appeal to all aspects of femininity. Moreover, this period is not socially considered significant as it is exclusively the concern of women and men are comparatively free of such botherations concerning their fertility and the biological clock that functions as an alarm for women. In a patriarchal society, most often it is unmistakably taken

for granted that all women will choose to be a mother without ever having to consider it as a choice, but the changing times have made it limpid that a woman has every right over her body irrespective of what its capabilities are. This book throws light on the pressure that a woman experiences when encountering this question during her early thirties and forties when she alarmingly becomes aware of the biological clock that threatens to put an end to her fertile years. This becomes a relevant issue as the responsibility to “confront, carry and resolve” (4) on this matter falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women while men by “adjusting women’s bodies with contraception . . . live as eternal teenagers – [with] uncertain jobs, short-term flings, adolescent hobbies” (4).

Keeping these gendered variations of social inequalities in mind, Frizzell attempts to label this period through which every woman passes. After much contemplation on the possible words from different languages, she names this period: “Flux: a physical and emotional transformation found growing in the soil of the Panic Years” (6). She explains the choice of this term: “In the landscape, ‘flux’ means the flowing of water; in our bodies, it is the discharge of blood; in Physics, the state of constant change. The flux is the gap between adolescence and midlife, during which women lose that constructed artifice of control over their lives, confront their fertility and build themselves new identities.” (6)

Frizzell claims that this biologically, socially, and politically enforced urgency to take firm decisions regarding motherhood creates havoc and ambivalence in the minds of women making them appear like “women possessed” (6). Correspondingly, through this work, she elaborates on how it has affected her life,

friendships, work, mind, and body. She explains the causes for panic which include a breakup with her boyfriend after six years at the age of twenty-eight, an unsettled job, and a memory that her mother had an early menopause at forty. She feels left out at this stage as her friends, who were with her, are moving fast ahead with boyfriends, engagements, weddings, pregnancies, and babies. As time passes, she realises the panic and stagnancy in her concerning others who were moving ahead. In the initial chapters of this text, she refers to Dolly Alderton's book, *Everything I Know About Love* in which the author talks of her panic years and her methods of attempting to overpower this situation: "Fertility is such a difficult feminist issue because our biology hasn't caught up with our politics" (23). This period, according to Frizzell causes anxiety as it demands clarity in careers, friends, partners, and settlement in comparison to the earlier life of variability.

The chapter titled, "A Friend in Trouble" discusses the experiences a woman, especially one who is trying to get pregnant, feels on being informed of her friend's pregnancy. Challenging the socially induced notion that women feel joy and excitement on hearing the news of someone being pregnant, she shares a deviant emotion filled with disappointment and jealousy. In her, the news generates antithetical feelings quite different from the anticipated ones: "It hurts, it stops your breath, your whole life flashes before your eyes, you get a pounding in your chest, and you need to sit down. Of course, it's wonderful. But it can be other things, too" (47). Boldly she reveals the other alternate feelings of "panic, nostalgia, grief, longing, uncertainty, and confusion" (51) that wave through her mind as she digests the news. Along with these, she expresses her feeling of losing Alice for good, as

she would be engaged more with her husband and the new baby. Alice's disclosing of her pregnancy causes a nervous breakdown in Frizzell causing her to refer to her monotonous life as "hamstrung" (49). In consequence, she expresses a desire to see Alice as non-pregnant to be able to continue their previous life as friends free of all deliberations. Her thoughts on pregnancy leading to the estrangement between friends throw light on the fact that on getting married, being pregnant and becoming a mother, it is mostly women who get alienated from their social and professional life. In this circumstance, she compares her lonely life with that of her pregnant friend Alice whose life now appears colourful along a path on which Frizzell longs to travel. This showcases the "maternal hunger" (53) she feels along with jealousy and betrayal as the friend seems to be moving away. About this conditioned feeling of wanting to have something that others possess is the crux of the functioning of our economy and of this attitude concerning children, she says ". . . the competition between women for pregnancy is the effect of perceived competition" (54) more than a genuine need to mother a child. This is an unhealthy competition as the desire seems to be an induced notion based on social pressures that define a woman based on her status as mother or non-mother. Justifying this notion, the literary critic and editor Madeleine Feeny in her review of this text states, "In a capitalist society, we're conditioned to read others' success as our failures, meaning the flux can feel like a race to leap over milestones: career, relationship, property, children" (n. p). To clarify this point further, she illustrates the case of the editor, writer, and broadcaster Terri White who in one of her interviews says: "The biggest myth our generation was told was that we could have it all. I've definitely felt like I couldn't have the career I wanted if I had a kid" (72). Terri White suggests that women are not

supreme beings capable of performing multitasks as society expects them to be. Contradicting her statements six months after the interview, Terri who was up on her career ladder with writing, networking, leading, and travelling announces her pregnancy though she had earlier praised her child-free status and the right to fight against biological determinism. This seems to suggest that whatever a woman is at her professional level, the social pressure to conceive and create meaning as per the conventional norm is so high that even women who decide against conception, end up doing the alternative at the last moment to fall in line with a system that administers the course of a woman's life. Reinforcement of this traditional perspective even by professional women flares up her craving for a baby so much that Frizzell looks for a suitable partner to father her child.

The chapter titled, "Glass Baby" narrates an incident that occurs during her visit to an art gallery wherein the assistant at the place hands over a six-month-old-sized glass baby to her. She keeps it on her lap and this baby evokes in her all the anticipated emotions a real baby is expected to generate in a woman. The presence of this glass piece simultaneously evokes a dilemma in her mind as she considers kissing it as well as dropping it down to see it smash into a thousand pieces. Frizzell relates this attitude to the result of jealousy that she feels towards her pregnant friend because of her inability to experience motherhood. The adjacent room in the gallery that kept boiled eggs for visitors also heightens her anxiety as it reminds her of her ovulation, eggs and fertile years that may soon come to an end. Even though she looks forward to having a child, she comprehends the impact of it on the lives of working women who are expected to juggle their personal and professional life. She

says, unlike men, women often feel left behind in the professional circle as maternal circumstances force them to stay away from the core of responsibilities to satisfy the demands of motherhood and domestic chores. Their competency in the professional circle diminishes in comparison with child-free women and men. According to her, this is a challenge that mothers encounter at the job front as “the physical demands of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding, the unaffordable cost of childcare, and the competitive nature of modern employment” (65) handicap them by limiting their potential. Despite the resentment and grief, she feels against herself for not being able to settle down in life with a stable partner and family, she tries to overcome her predicament by consoling herself with optimism:

It is also worth mentioning that many people will turn thirty married, in love, with a mortgage, planning a baby, only to lose it all by the time they turn thirty-three. These deadlines may feel significant, irreversible, eternal at the time, but they are all essentially, arbitrary. An individual life will weave through dates and ages as unpredictably as the weather – the secret is how you prepare, adjust, and adapt. (84)

Despite her optimism, the reality of the world around her is as bizarre as she expects, and she reveals the three different replies that she holds in response to the dilemma of having and not having a child in the chapter titled, “Parent Trap”. The first one is “self-protection” (103 ) by which she convinces herself that she does not want to have a baby; the second one is “optimism” (103) a kind of consolation that supports her faith and hope that if she is meant to be a mother, it will happen at the right time with the right person regardless of her worries; and the third response is

based on “pessimism” (103), an attitude that she develops by telling herself that she will never become a mother and so should adapt to this reality of her life. These contradictory and uncertain responses do not settle her thoughts of motherhood: “. . . I was locked in a civil war with my own womb. It was forcing me to decide on something that I felt I had no control over – and it was threatening to take that decision away if I left it too long” (94). At this moment of chaos and confusion, her mother consoles her on the possibility of a childless future, whereas her father when informed of the possibility of never being a grandfather, cries instead of supporting his daughter who declares that she does not need children to feel fulfilled in life.

Frizzell relates her inefficiency of not being able to find a partner to her memories of the arguments that she had witnessed between her parents who eventually broke their marital bond. In the chapter titled, “Ding Dong” she talks about her growing up years in a broken family which ultimately led to her disliking the rituals and promises of a marriage ceremony. Consequently, she feels left out on her father’s second wedding with his new wife and two of her kids. On this day, she recalls, “I didn’t belong to The Family that day. I belonged to The Past” (110). She presents her attitude towards marriage as consisting of “meaningless gestures, the hypocrisy of undertaking a religious service in full knowledge you have no faith in god, the non-sense of promising to act in a certain way fifty-seven years into the future even though you can’t be certain how you’ll act in a week, the heteronormative bigotry of it” (111). She bears witness to her father’s second marriage amidst many divorced people and victims of bad marriages who speak of this ceremony as an unhappy trap. Accordingly, she fears marriage as it occurs



around her and presents her expectation of it to be “eternal and unbreakable” (117). The fear of a relationship causing heartbreak and interdependence resulting in liabilities makes her cautious while finding a partner and she shuns from being involved in a committed relationship. However, her encounter with Nick, a journalist with whom she takes up a project to prepare a report on refugees, proves to be a fruitful one. The chapter titled, “Meeting the Man” illustrates the discussion of their professional works and personal tastes at the end of which they decide to tie the knot.

A remarkable feature of this text is the presentation of the concept of motherhood as perceived by Frizzell and her partner Nick. Conversations that take place between them reveal their distinguished outlook and it becomes significant as they project the conventional and the modern approaches to motherhood provoking a thought in the minds of readers. After marriage, her suppressed fear of the flux returns to full swing as people begin to enquire about their family planning. Nick, who looks for happiness and love in a relationship more than being a parent, makes his stand clear: “I’m from a non-traditional family; I know that a loving relationship doesn’t necessarily involve marriage and babies” (136). Though his attitude disappoints her, she remains calm and moves away from friends who are either mothers or on the family way. Nick’s attitude to parenthood as expressed in this text is similar to the approach of most men as Agarwal analyses in the text, *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*: “Most men don’t feel the sense of urgency, because society does not tell them to catch the fatherhood train. They don’t hear the clock; no alarm goes on around them; there is no regret for the time they have

wasted not finding a good partner who would help them achieve fatherhood. No, there is none of that. Not in the same way at least” (123).

In this scenario, to make the best of their child-free state and to prove to others that they are enjoying their freedom, they plan adventurous trips and move to Berlin to spend the summer. She presents the objective of spending the summer in Berlin as:

Nick and I moved to one of Europe’s most beautiful, dynamic, and hedonistic capitals precisely because all our friends with babies couldn’t. Their first blooms of parenthood were making me feel panicked and jealous, so I thought I would do something that made them feel panicked and jealous in return. They couldn’t go to Berlin in the summer, in choosing to ‘settle down’ they’d cut off the possibility of running away; their security precluded them from my freedom. Nine months into our admittedly turbo relationship, Nick and I were doing something they couldn’t do, to feel better about all the things I hadn’t done. (139)

This declaration of the purpose of exposing their new life to make others, who are tied down by parenthood, jealous can be considered as an attempt to convince herself that she is doing something equally wonderful. She admits this fact when she says, “I was probably feeling cynical and unkind about myself at the time” (139) and she wishes goodness on her friends who have followed the traditional path of parenthood. Consequently, to shadow her absence from motherhood, she makes her presence felt by posting pictures of her travel destinations on social media.

Unlike her, Nick does not attempt to convince others of his lifestyle and declares that he is non-conventional in his approach to parenthood as he does not believe that it should be the sole outcome of a relationship.

However, her earlier presumptions about motherhood change when she has a baby with Nick. It is only then she feels the magnitude of the personal space and time, giving way to the maternal demands, which till then remained disregarded. On becoming a mother, she enviously looks up to her child-free friends who are travelling, celebrating promotions, wearing stylish and stain-free clothes, going to bars, and camping. She says the enormity of this difference in the lifestyle of mothers and non-mothers generates envy that is inescapable and understands the message her friend Alice had shared when she became a mother: “Don’t make Nick have a baby yet. Give yourselves a year before you get pregnant. Have a nice time. Enjoy each other. Because you’ll need nice things to look back on when you’re going through absolute sh\*t” (141).

Nick presents a thought-provoking observation on motherhood when he analyses its impact on partners. He thinks of the transformations that are likely to take place in their relationship, finance, and profession with the coming of a baby. As a result of these thoughts, he remains silent during the early years of marriage whenever Frizzell initiates a conversation about having a child. Of his response to this question, she says:

A man who had brought my life delight and depth and devotion but who, simultaneously, seemed unable or unwilling to recognise a maternal desire that had been pulsing away at the very root of my

soul for decades . . . a man who – throughout the months and years during which I wrangled, writhed and wrestled with the question of how, why, whether, and when to have a baby – seemed genuinely to never consider it. Ignored it, forgot it, dismissed it or simply overlooked it. (143)

It appears that Nick has often ignored this question irrespective of her repeated and deliberate attempts to convince him to have a child with her. At a later stage, after he agrees to have a child, he discloses the reasons for initially turning a deaf ear to her pleas. He tells her that at the time when she was deeply concerned about having a baby, he was simply not thinking about it at all. He tells her frankly that he never felt the need and admits that “men are sort of encouraged not to think about their fertility” (143). Accordingly, she envies the freedom and relaxation that he enjoys while she was always on the countdown with her ovulation and menopause. Instead of dreaming about a baby, Nick was concerned about their job security, financial status, and settlement; he confesses that if they had a baby then all their attention, focus and energy would be drained by it: “Babies need to be brought into a fairly stable environment. We had a stable emotional environment, but I didn’t think at that time we had a stable financial, work or home environment; all those other things” (144). These statements made by Nick help her to understand the different ways in which both were visualising the reality of parenthood. From this context, it becomes evident that Nick has a more practical approach to motherhood and later she admits that it is Nick’s indifference that had impelled her “to examine, question and ultimately defend” (146) the reasons for having a child. The impact of

his lack of interest to be a father was so high, that it enabled her to analyse and consider her anxiety, fear, desire, and hope of wanting a child several times before finally deciding to have one. In this case, Nick's ambivalence provides the ground for Frizzell to reappraise her attitude to motherhood before plunging into this activity to such an extent that she even considers freezing her eggs. At the peak of her certainty clubbed with Nick's uncertainty in having a child, she compares herself to the Ancient Mariner like whom she too stops every person to get their opinion on becoming a mother:

. . . I now went around parties, offices, the internet, and supermarkets asking parents and non-parents if they thought I should have a baby. If I would be doing the right thing, a silly thing or the natural thing? If they regretted having kids, regretted not having a choice over having kids? If it was fair, sensible, cruel, realistic, kind, short-sighted, or selfish to bring another child into this world? (183)

These queries reveal the height of ambivalence in her mind, vis-à-vis accepting motherhood which is not even a choice for most women. The answers perplex her further as she fails to get a definite reply to her questions as some of them regret having children and others consider it a worthy investment for the future. At this juncture, she compares herself to a "damp sponge" (191) indicating the heaviness and lifelessness she feels in the physical and emotional state; and compares pregnancy to the game of "football" (225) which for some people is a significant game whereas for others it has no relevance. Yet, Nick's continued refusal to try for a child ultimately makes her beg him for a baby until he yields. Her

state of ambivalence and desire to conceive is observed by Rachel Chrastil in her book, *How to Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children*: “Childlessness affects all genders, but it is often perceived to be a woman’s issue. After all, there is something specific happening to women who pass from childhood to puberty and fertility to infertility” (9).

The chapters titled, “A Tricky Period” and “Moorhens” talk of the initial days of conception and pregnancy by revealing the physical, mental, and psychological transformations that take place in her. When she tests positive, in her excitement, she finds it difficult to believe and so she does the primary test several times to ensure its credibility. However, as she proceeds with it, she discerns the struggles and hassles of gestation: “I felt peeled open and exposed to the whipping wind of frailty, need and hope” (231). This vulnerable state scares her as she feels that her dependence on Nick may drive him away from her. Understanding the depth of vulnerability and discomfort experienced during pregnancy, she wonders if any man would dare to undergo the ordeal of the various stages of pregnancy and childbirth. She presents her assumption as:

Not one of those ham-faced assemblages of fear, misogyny and idiocy could handle having their skin, muscle and bones torn apart by an unborn child. Not one of them would undergo three months of daily vomiting, existential terror, occasional bleeding, constant nausea, and unshakeable fatigue, followed by another six months of aching joints, short breath, decreased mobility, near incontinence, fear and exhaustion for the sake of something that may not even

survive. Not one of them could give up their status, their ability to work, their financial security, their freedom of thought and movement, their whole previous way of life, in order to grow something in their bodies that they never even wanted – it is hard enough when you do want it. (240)

She admires women who give up their space, time, and energy for another being and says that women should be made aware of their right to decide between having and not having a child. She affirms that before venturing into motherhood women should be made aware of this life-altering decision which is, “. . . as important, as interesting and as worthy of our attention as anything created, experienced or believed by humanity" (241).

The chapter titled, “Labour of Love” discusses the trauma of labour pain and childbirth which is a crucial aspect of gestation as no one can be prepared for it in advance and everyone in the natural birthing process will have to experience it. In this chapter, she encourages mothers to voice their experiences of birthing as, “It is the thing we’re all wondering about, talking around, preparing for, or avoiding. It is the engine that gives the whole train momentum” (250). She says this on understanding that the reality of experience could be entirely different from the predetermined and conditioned assumptions of labour. Of her own experience, she says that during labour she felt like a “pulsating maggot” (258) pinned to the bed and “. . . pressed, gripped, wrung” (262) for forty-five hours of pain during which she experiences shame, fear, despair, and excitement at the end of which she feels emptied as childbirth has altered her beyond reversal: “Everything had changed. I

had changed. Nothing would ever be the same” (269). In continuation with these revelations, the chapter titled, “Midnight Fury” discloses the plight of parents, especially mothers, after the birth of the child. As the title suggests, this chapter speaks of sleep-deprived nights and howling days during which the mother, who is uncertain of taming the newborn sheds silent tears which gradually turn into violence that is threatening enough to harm the infant. She says that her experiences of fear, regret, sadness, and jealousy that she had felt during the flux were mere “dress rehearsal” (271) for the havoc caused by the newborn. Her midwife calls this period of relentless cry and sleeplessness of the child the “Witching Hours” (272), hinting at the wild and vicious chaos a young one can cause in the life of its mother resulting in her “fight or flight” (277) based on the situation. Frizzell says that mothers who only speak of the rewarding and glorifying moments of motherhood are “under the blanket of parental amnesia” (272) and it is this conscious forgetfulness constructed by a patriarchal society that induces women to have more children. As a result, she refers to the varied shades of motherhood which are quite different from the glorified ones that are commonly shown in popular culture, social media, books, and television. She takes this opportunity to challenge the patriarchal institution of motherhood that silences the true experience of mothering in which mothers feel traumatic, grief-stricken, and regretful. She says that the acceptance of the existence of these deviant attitudes towards motherhood is still considered taboo, even though it is the reality. Similar is the case with anger, as society considers female anger as “unnatural . . . unwomanly” (276) by enforcing her to remain silent about the varied emotions that every human being experiences. Consequently, for fear of being ridiculed or being considered inadequate, women tend to subdue the



burden of motherhood as imposed by the conventional conditionings and Frizzell in her attempts to express consideration and compassion towards women motivates them by saying, “. . . my friends, I am here to tell you that to err is human, but to doubt, hate, regret and despair is human too” (275). She projects the social expectations from mothers as:

Parents, particularly women, are supposed to express nothing but love, contentment, happiness, and pleasure in their new identity. The very act of producing a child is meant to scrub us clean of all those other, nastier, trickier emotions like anger and resentment. We are supposed to deny them, suppress them, ignore them, or reject them, putting in their place a plump and placid face of maternal certainty. (274)

Frizzell narrates a conversation that she engages in with her friend Ellie, who is an established professional artist with a gallery of her own. Both had entered into the flux almost at the same time and now Frizzell leads the life of a mother and Ellie is a child-free businesswoman. Ellie says that her decision to focus on her career has enabled her to establish herself professionally. She considers the abortion that she had ten years ago as a wise decision, for if she had then become a mother, she would have been stuck with the child and the man in the same place without being able to fulfil her desires. In this context, Frizzell proposes that the decision to have or not have a child should be a universally acknowledged human right as the consequences of being a mother will alter the assumed course of a woman's life:

When you have a baby, your life changes, your freedom evaporates, your priorities shift and your very ability to move through the world becomes compromised. The unending manual labour involved in raising a child allows you little time for friends, conversation, even leaving the house . . . The omnipresent risk of death, illness, or catastrophe with a newborn, leaves you with very little energy or residual empathy to keep up with other people's lives. The endless logistics involved in getting your child to sleep, to eat and to stop crying make it hard to exist in public spaces as you once did. And so, of course, all too easily you can lose touch with your child-free friends. Resentment can creep in where affection once lay, exhaustion can obliterate interest, and self-pity can drive away companionship.

(152)

In this context, Frizzell also presents the mental agony of women who choose to remain child-free by saying that they are constantly haunted by the fear of being marked out by friends who are parents. Accordingly, she suggests measures to relieve the women who are transfixed in betwixt and presents the need to restructure the existing patriarchal social system which is designed by men for men by limiting women to chores that are socially and politically insignificant. Hence, on observation, it becomes evident that women struggle and suffer in their attempts to fit into "a system designed and largely managed by men, [in which women] . . . are trying to live like men" (154).

Despite this awareness, women continue to follow suit irrespective of their dilemma as society compels them to believe that denial of motherhood may later lead to regret at a stage when it is impossible to conceive. Consequently, many of them unwillingly conceive either to follow the norm or for fear of the future which is wildly uncertain for everyone. Many of them venture into motherhood to silence their biological clock that ticks making them conscious of their bodily functions. Columnist and freelance writer Sara Ditum in her review of this book refers to this narrative as “one woman’s race against the biological clock” (n. p). She criticises the patriarchal society that uses motherhood and mothering as a tool to bind women to their domestic circle by displacing them from all social roles. The existence of the biological clock that compels women to conform to norms is elaborated by the German American psychologist and psychoanalyst Erikson in his work, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. He refers to it as something that is based on “rhythmicity and biology” (n. p) that play a vital role in making decisions that are related to motherhood. Estela V. Welldon, a consultant psychiatrist and author, agrees in her work, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* that the presence of the biological clock that keeps ticking in the mind of women affects not only their “emotional lives but also the mental representations of their bodies and, concretely their physical bodies, albeit for a fixed period” (42). Similarly, Tanya Selvaratnam in the book, *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism and The Reality of the Biological Clock* presents a distinct perspective on motherhood, reproductive abilities, and fertility reminding the readers that women can’t have all the time in the world, and it is a lie that “women can do what they want on their timetable” (33). This memoir is, in fact, a record of personal experiences that “calls

for feminism and feminists to arm women with information and knowledge so that women can make more informed choices and take control of their future – including fertility” (n. p) according to the writer and critic Emma Winiecki.

The impact of the conventional notions of motherhood on women is such that even during times of difficulty, women do not usually disturb their partners for any kind of assistance. This is true even in the case of Frizzell as she prefers not to wake Nick up during those wailing nights on which her son would refuse to be calmed and soothed to sleep. Here, she confesses her fear of presenting her true emotions to her partner as he may move away from her in his inability to console the mother and the child. She presents this as a thought that emerges from an attitude that is thrust upon women by society:

. . . you must bear your own burden entirely. Your baby, your health, your work: they are yours to deal with and yours to fix, alone. Along with the poisonous lie that female anger is unnatural, we are all too often made to believe showing too much of our raw selves – biological, emotional, psychological, historical – will turn people against us . . . we are, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways brought up to consider these things our own problems, ‘women’s problems’, and either too disgusting, too heavy, too abstract or too personal to expose to other people. And so, we push men out of the orbit in which these things could be solved. (282)

Due to this conditioning, women are deluded to consider themselves as capable of handling multiple cases and situations which in turn result in bearing the

burden of “mental and parenting load” (284) without any support from others. In this context, Frizzell talks of post-natal depression and physical discomforts that affect the lives of mothers encountering the horror and bliss of gestation. She refers to the trauma caused by motherhood and shares the episodes of violence that many mothers feel towards their newborns. On a personal note, she confesses that she too had the urge to throw away the child when its wailing completely exhausted her: “My arms were locked, my swaying was gentle, but my mind was racing with violence and hot fury. I could imagine the feeling of weightlessness if I were to drop him, the release of energy as I threw him into the door frame, the rush of relief as I just let go” (270). Similar to Frizzell, Cusk in her book *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* and Enright in her book *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* share the thoughts of harming their infants and Alcira Mariam Alizade in her article titled, “The Non-maternal Psychic Space” alludes to this hatred and rejection some mothers feel towards their children. She refers to this attitude of mothers as “the dark side of motherhood” (47) where “hate for the child reigns, together with deadly feelings of rejection and the conscious and unconscious persistent inflicting of damage” (47). Cathi Hanauer in the edited book, *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage* relates several angry, frustrated, and intriguing accounts by women which she refers to as “chorus of different voices, the elations and disappointments” (14). In this book, she exposes “the bitch in the house . . . The opposite of what Virginia Woolf called the Angel in the House – but with anger to boot” (10). A similar reference can be seen in the book, *Night Bitch: A Novel* by Rachel Yoder in which the protagonist presents her traumatic experiences on becoming a mother and seeing her fury at night towards

the wailing child, her husband presents his observation as “you were a kind of . . . a bitch last night” (6). She agrees with him on realising the anger, bitterness, and coldness she experiences in looking after the child and admits that the “Night bitch had always been there, not even that far below the surface” (6). The American psychoanalyst and social historian, Lloyd de Mause begins his book *History of Childhood* with the statement “History of childhood is a nightmare” (1) and presents episodes of physical and psychological child abuse by mothers as well as other elders that bear testimony to the existence of ill-treatment towards children. In his record of infanticide and death wishes toward children, he states that a mother’s desire to harm or kill the child is generated from “a powerful attempt to undo motherhood” (25).

Another aspect that preoccupies mothers, as presented in Frizzell’s narrative, is the fear of the safety of both the foetus and the infant. Referring to her distinctive experience she says that pregnant women are always on the alert to monitor the growth and safety of the foetus as throughout the period of gestation the thoughts of the foetus which can neither be seen, felt, or heard haunts women on realising that this process of becoming can end unawares. This fear of uncertainty leads to vulnerability and dependence that combine with fatigue to disturb the life of women. Thus, induced by the thoughts of an emerging life at the emotional and psychological level; and a growing foetus at the physical level, she compares her traumatic existence to an “overloaded cardboard box” (253) that she longs to empty. She also brings to focus the permanent alterations that embrace women on becoming

a mother by referring to it as a “rubicon that, once passed, can never be undone”

(237). She reflects on the permanent transformation caused by motherhood:

Unlike marriage, unlike a contract, unlike a mortgage, parenthood is a lifelong commitment that you cannot ever truly undo. You may have your baby adopted, move out of the family home, or lose that child to illness or accident; your children may emigrate, ignore you or run off to join the circus. But you will never completely go back to the person you were before you had them. (278)

The text, *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all Decisions* ultimately revolves around the thoughts of “freedom and fear of being left behind” (120) from a collective consciousness that is instilled in the mind of the human race by the socially constructed patriarchal system. Accordingly, caught up in this snare and driven by the patriarchal definition of the life of a woman, most women seem to experience ambivalence and ultimately succumb to having a child to cater to that sense of belonging to a herd. Hence, being in a battle with herself with a suppressed irritation at her partner’s relaxed approach to the same compels her to conceal her trauma and the assumed lack of her life by projecting a lifestyle that she expects would make her presence felt in society:

I wanted to show the world what fun I was having without a baby. I was unconsciously reinforcing the painful divide between the parents and the non-parents by carving out a picture of child-free liberty online. I was undertaking a not-so-subtle war of propaganda against the baby pictures, the foetal scans, the wedding photos, and the

nursery pics uploaded onto my timeline by proud and deserving friends. (145)

In her war of recognition, she fights back considering her “empty womb” (145) as a weapon against the turmoil that is being caused by the seemingly advancing life of others who were comfortably following the tradition. Yet, in her dilemma, she observes and compares the life of parents and non-parents and concludes that she enjoys the freedom of being able to travel, camp, swim, and sleep free of all considerations though the desire for a baby fills her mind.

The chapter titled, “Gift Horse” narrates incidents of buying and sharing gifts for babies during baby showers as a seemingly innocent gesture, but it creates great estrangement between friends who are parents and non-parents. Quoting a line from Margaret Atwood’s fiction *The Handmaids Tale*, “You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself” (168), Frizzell indicates that these kinds of social gestures of celebrating conception, baby showers, naming ceremony, and birthing widens the gap between friends who due to several reasons may not be able to follow suit. In a way, these celebrations and acknowledgements are identity markers as they label an individual as belonging to and supporting a particular kind of community at the cost of another role. These celebrations seem to indicate that the woman from now on will be limited to the role of a mother at the cost of her tastes or desires, thus forsaking her friends who are non-parents. At this point, the narrator makes it evident that the pressure to fit into the norm falls heavily on the “one with the womb” (140) irrespective of your personal choices and biological orientations. She lists many reasons including sexual



orientation, lack of maternal inclinations, illness – polycystic ovary syndrome, endometriosis, blocked fallopian tube, underactive thyroid, depression, anxiety, psychosis, bi-polar; or it could be pursuing a dream career, planning an adventurous trip or may even be that one could not find the right person to have a baby with, as causes for not embracing motherhood. Despite the umpteen number of reasons why a woman may not be able to or may not want to conceive is overlooked when people raise their eyebrows to question or challenge the status of a woman as child-free. This patriarchal expectation and demand of everyone to accept the existing system by enforcing a collective move towards a group dynamic that largely define women as being mothers or non-mothers expose the alternately oriented group to criticism, isolation, and ambivalence. Hence, by way of a solution to overcome peer pressure, Frizzell suggests a remodelling of values and social conditioning to not undermine, disregard or criticise those women who choose to be different. Of the need to change the existing norm, she suggests a change of attitude unbiased by the politics of the social system:

Those women who cannot or do not, for any number of reasons, get pregnant should not be made to feel left out, less valuable, less female or more socially conspicuous because of those circumstances. Those women who choose to get pregnant and wish to mark that life-changing decision with some collective celebration among the people who mean the most to them should never be made to feel selfish, old-fashioned, smug, or irrational for doing so. (167)

By suggesting this mandatory shift in the attitude towards all types of people by learning to respect individual attitudes, she reinforces the need to accept, acknowledge, and tolerate differences. She asserts the need for mutual support among people for the upliftment of humanity as without mutual understanding, there will be an emphatic disparity between the hedonists and homemakers leading to the criticism and judgment of both groups.

It can be surmised that through this work Frizzell refers to the stage in a woman's life when she must make decisions regarding her career, professional goals, partner, and social stability before venturing into the maternity role and refers to this period as the "second adolescence" (7). She asserts that for some a child is a promise of stability, love, and security for the future while for many others mothering can be a bewildering, chaotic, and tormenting experience. Feeling one with those who panic during the flux, she reminds them that the deadlines and seemingly irreversible biological changes that take place in the body are all arbitrary to one's life's contentment and a solution to overcome this flux is to prepare, adjust, and adapt to the situations as and when it occurs. She also specifies that all individual choices associated with motherhood should be accepted and acknowledged, as deciding, either way, is challenging for a woman. She ridicules those who put the responsibility of their troubled relationship on their children by saying that "people stay together because of financial interdependence, fear of being alone, illness, the unaffordability of housing, religious belief, social pressure, conditioning, complacency or cowardice" (102) and not because of children. She makes a pertinent observation at the end of the narrative by asserting that

motherhood is an act that once taken up cannot be undone whatever maybe the fate of the child:

Your life will be changed, permanently. And, whichever path you take through choice or circumstance or a combination of the two you will never be able to know what your life would have been like if you'd taken another. You will never know if it was the right choice because, and this is almost impossible to bear, there is no right choice. There is just the choice you made and, on the other side, the absolute unknown. (311)

The narrative climaxes on an optimistic note as she tries to console women by assuring them that they can make any choice and universally it is integral to choose as one cannot experience everything. Yet, in contradiction to this perspective, the writer and critic Feeny comments referring to the panic years as a “fertility cliff edge” (n. p) that “I finished the book more conflicted than ever: terrified by motherhood’s life-changing, career-wrecking potential, wondering whether Frizzell’s panic exposes my relative serenity as denial” (n. p). Feeny warns the readers to not expect the book to calm them of their issues as books that tackle subjective matters will provoke divergent responses based on the reader’s circumstances. Structurally, the book can be marked out with its engaging narrative style, peppiness, and realist observations that reveal the underlying conundrums of actuality for women as the editor Smith relates in her review of this text. Contrary to the positive reviews and applauds the book received on its publication, the critic and author, Zoya Patel inspects that the experiences of the panic years that Frizzell has

represented are not universally applicable to all as many women are in command of the biological clock and consequently make their decision for or against motherhood without all the noisy quandary that she elaborates. She continues to argue that despite all the economic and social deprivations that kids and adults experience in refugee camps, her desire to have a child for herself is “selfish” (n. p) though she agrees and relates to the circumstances that in their new responsible identities as mothers, women are smothered between home and office. Contrary to the argument that a woman who exposes her dilemma and desires is selfish, Sara Fredman reveals in the report of her interview with Frizzell that this narrative vents out the suppressed anguish and words of every woman who struggles through the panic years and accordingly, she considers Frizzell to be in her best “when getting right under her own skin and digging out the twisted feelings of resentment, jealousy, and shame that gnaws at so many women going through *The Panic Years*” (n. p).

The quandary of mothers as illustrated by Clover Stroud and Nell Frizzell in the texts *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* and *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all Decisions* respectively highlight the perception of feminism concerning motherhood as illustrated by Bagchi in *Interrogating Motherhood*: “Women’s creative energy was seen as an essential component of their agency, especially the patriarchal relegation of women into the private sphere, making motherhood the main excuse for doing so, has meant that women have been denied the minimum opportunities for realising their creativity as artists” (42). Bagchi states that motherhood has been one of the primary causes that resulted in lowering the status of women in the process of socialisation. The psychological

bewilderment and the impact of emotional and physical transformation as expressed by Stroud and Frizzell flashes light on the traumatic experiences encountered by most of the mothers during and after gestation. A similar account of parenting responsibilities is shared by the writer, Rebecca Asher in the book *Shattered: Modern Motherhood and the Illusion of Equality* in which she confesses that on becoming a mother, the life of a woman transforms beyond recognition from her pre-maternal self, and she presents her experience as: “I was entirely unprepared for the fundamental undoing of the life and identity I’d carefully constructed for myself over the previous fifteen years and, in particular, the demolition of the equality that I had thought to be at the heart of my relationship with my husband. This illusion of equality was completely shattered” (3). On analysing the predicaments of mothers, she suggests that parenting responsibilities should be shared by both partners and “the birth of a child should mark the opening up of our lives, rather than the closing down of options” (58). The French psychiatrist, Leon Chertok who is popularly known for his contributions to the field of hypnosis and psychosomatic medicine refers to the befuddlement through which women proceed after becoming a mother as a common predicament of many and relating it to the period of adolescence he states:

Motherhood activates powerful and labile psychic processes comparable with those of adolescence; and these must not be assessed clinically with reference to classical semiology . . . Thus, the crisis of maternity – more or less severe or masked – is the lot of every woman, and as such can be regarded, at least in some measure,

as general rather than specific to any given case and therefore independent of personal problems. (24)

The cognisance of this reality as expressed by medical science and academic theories align with the attitude of Stroud and Frizzell as their autobiographical narratives are an attempt to promote a re-thinking and re-structuring of the conventional philosophy associated with motherhood. The chaotic thoughts that envelop Frizzell before becoming a mother and her urge to mother a child illustrate that it “stems from an unconscious response to pressures” (2) that compel women to submit to societal expectations of femininity as presented by Alizade in the text *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*. The contemporary social framework that promotes independent thinking and critical reasoning envisions a future that will provide space for all women to be free of the burden of biological determinism. Accordingly, the texts analysed in this chapter provide literary instances based on real-life experiences that serve to foreground that the emotions associated with motherhood are not inherent in women, but rather culturally transmitted to accept maternal function to fit into the patriarchal configuration of gender-based performances.

## CHAPTER 4

### INCESSANT WRESTLING WITH MOTHERHOOD

Depiction of motherhood in literature often seems to pay attention to how this role is performed by women in a sociocultural context. Simultaneously, many narratives attempt to glorify or mystify motherhood by associating women with supernatural powers that enable them to conceive, bear and rear children in all circumstances. Accordingly, most mothers in fiction as well as non-fiction seem to testify to the doctrines of a particular social context associated with the work of mothering and these representations present the trials and travails experienced by mothers in myriad ways. Scholars and critics have debated over the rights, responsibilities, ambiguities, and choices of women who deal with the roles of bearing, birthing, and rearing children. Against the general notion of maternal instincts that are considered congenital in women as propagated by the institution of motherhood and popularised through narratives, counter-narratives that challenge these ideologies are on the rise. Counter-narratives argue that these characteristics are not instinctive or innate but rather instilled by social agencies as part of enforcing socio-cultural and political authority over women. *Motherhood* by the Canadian writer, Sheila Heti can be considered as one such writing that attempts to project an aberrant attitude to motherhood as the unnamed protagonist of this semi-biographical fiction ponders over the thought of accepting motherhood and ultimately rejects the idea to remain child-free. This work addresses the issues

associated with the rights of women over their body and its reproductive abilities, and thereby brings to the forefront the dichotomy of a thirty-seven-year-old woman's indecision on having and not having a child.

*Motherhood*, a semi-autobiographical narrative that problematises the rationale behind the question of having or not having a child, vouchsafes to the reader the diary of a divided mind and the entries of a partially personal record that begins at the age of thirty-seven of the narrator. This text does not adopt a chronological method of narration but oscillates between the questions and queries related to a life with and without kids. Desperate to find answers to some of the questions associated with motherhood, the narrator, in her helplessness, flips coins to resolve her dilemma. She explains the use of coins: "Flipping three coins is a technique used by people who consult the *I Ching*, a divination system that originated in China over three thousand years ago . . . In the pages that follow three coins are used – a technique inspired by the *I Ching*" (1). A mock divination technique like the one that was prevalent in ancient China is used to get answers as 'yes' or 'no' to ambiguous questions. At several places in the narrative, the speaker flips coins to obtain answers to certain irresolvable questions on having and not having kids which are otherwise considered surreptitious by the common folk. The frequent use of these coins spotlights the intensity of the perplexity that makes her thoughts chaotic.

This book holds several chapters with and without titles, and the chapters titled, "PMS", "Bleeding", "Follicular", and "Ovulating" are in accordance with the physical stages of a mature female body, and it discusses the biological aspects



related to the feminine anatomy. Throughout the novel, the protagonist presents an ambivalent attitude towards conceiving and is often terrified at the possibility of an affirmation of conception. On observing and discussing the multiple facets of motherhood with friends and acquaintances, she concludes that “the doing is what seems hard, the having seems marvellous. In a way, I have nothing at all. But I like that and think I do not want a child” (22). The “doing” used in this statement seems to refer to the actual process of bearing and rearing a child which turns out to be the pivotal focus of this narrative as the text dissects this process from diverse perspectives to confront the patriarchal institution of motherhood. This statement by Heti strikes a similarity with the comment made by the writer, Ann Oakley in the book *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*: “A baby makes a family. A home is not a home without children. The drive to parenthood is felt, but not understood” (4).

The opening pages of the narrative throw light on the bewildered and muddled mind of the speaker who at the age of forty feels that she has not yet decided the purpose or the destination of her life. She says, “I was old, all the boats were far off, away from the shore, I hadn’t even found my boat yet” (1). Considering herself too old for any other task, she contemplates writing a book which she believes can be begun at the age of forty. Being uncertain of the ways to develop a book, she depends on the technique of flipping coins which helps her to decide on how to write and present her matter to the readers. Accordingly, she resolves to write about herself revealing her thoughts and actions to embody and introspect her thoughts without offering any explanations for them. Hence, *Motherhood*

foregrounds certain suppressed thoughts regarding the bearing and nurturing of kids as per the conventional expectations and the dilemma of the speaker caused by the traditional and contemporary approach to parenthood. These reflections of her emotional turmoil project many silenced concerns due to which women tend to fall in line with the expected norms of gender roles without much resistance:

Do I want children because I want to be admired as the admirable sort of woman who has children? Because I want to be seen as a normal sort of woman, or because I want to be the best kind of woman, a woman with not only work, but the desire and ability to nurture, a body that can make babies, and someone who another person wants to make babies with? Do I want a child to show myself to be the (normal) sort of woman who wants and ultimately has a child? (22)

The traditional ways of accepting the prescribed duties of womanhood and motherhood create confusion in the mind of the speaker as she does not want to live as per someone else's definition of womanhood. Though she admits that her parents may attain things that she may never have in her entire life, she does not want to become one for the sake of normalcy. Her perplexity in this matter reaches its peak as she thinks from a unique perspective that may not sound meaningful to others:

There is a kind of sadness in not wanting the things that give so many other people their life's meaning. There can be sadness at not living out a more universal story – the supposed life cycle – how out of one life cycle another cycle is supposed to come. But when out of your cycle, no new cycle comes, what does that feel like? It feels like

nothing. Yet there is a bit of a let-down feeling when the great things that happen in the lives of others – you don't actually want those things for yourself. (23)

Bemused with the thoughts of the dominant cultural norms of having a child and accepting the responsibilities of motherhood, the speaker assumes that life becomes meaningful only when we consider and give due credit to “values, happiness and the things the people around you need” (12). However, she also realises that the values that make sense to one person may sound absurd to another, and she shares her concern with her friend, Teresa who supports her by saying: “Often people are streamed into the conventional life – the life there is so much pressure to live. But how can there only be one path that's legitimate? . . . This path is not even right for many of the people who wind up living it” (22). Despite these reassurances that she gets from some of her friends, she makes use of the *I Ching* to enable her to take a firm decision:

Is art a living thing – while one is making it, that is? As living as anything else we call living?

Yes

Is it as living when it is bound in a book or hung on a wall?

Yes

Then can a woman who makes books be let off the hook by the universe for not making the living thing we call babies?

Yes

Oh good! I feel so guilty about it sometimes, thinking it's what I should do, because I always think that animals are happiest when they live out their instincts. Maybe not the happiest but feel most alive. Yet making art makes me feel alive and taking care of others doesn't make me feel alive. Maybe I have to think about myself less as a woman with this woman's special task, and more as an individual with her own special task. (25)

The responses she gets from the *I Ching* console her as it confirms that all women need not bear children and that a work of art too can be considered a worthy creation, though it happens with ink and paper instead of flesh and blood. Simultaneously, when she asks more questions related to the passing on of one's genes to the next generation, *I Ching* answers in the affirmative that life can be made sensible through art as well. However, these answers do not resolve her maladies because the *I Ching* also gives contradictory responses to some questions. When she asks about the fate of women who do not reproduce, *I Ching* answers that such women will be punished by the universal force whereas men who do not procreate will be exonerated. Amidst all these puzzling responses, her ambivalence is further agonised by friends who force her to conceive and others who assure her that she has the right to decide against biological determinism. On one occasion, her friend Erica sends her a painting by Berthe Morisot which projects an image of a mother sitting and watching her sleeping infant. To Erica's eulogy and comments that the mother appears like the narrator, she replies "The woman in the painting looked a little

bored” (27). Similarly, when she visits Mairon, she too tries to convince her to accept motherhood by saying that she “seemed very fertile” (33), this comment upsets her and she reflects on Mairon “. . . as if becoming a mother had made her psychic as if she could gauge someone’s fertility by being near them” (33). Mairon suggests that motherhood is the most satisfying role for women and expresses her desire to see all her friends settled with babies. In contradiction to Mairon and Erica, Teresa encourages her to follow her heart’s inclination and consequently, it is with Teresa that she shares her predicament of not being able to choose between wanting to be a mother and staying child-free. The narrator’s discussion with Erica on this matter reveals a perspective that is unique and thought-provoking:

I brought up my worries over paths not taken, and she said everyone had those, but often when you look back on your life, you saw that the choices you made and the paths you went down were the right ones. She said it wasn’t a matter of choosing one life over another, but being sensitive to the life that wants to be lived through you. You need tension to create something – the sand in the pearl. She said my questioning and doubts were the sand. She said they were good and forced me to live with integrity, to interrogate what was important to me, and so to live the meaning of my life, rather than resort to convention. (28)

This conversation enables her to ponder over the often silenced and taken-for-granted consideration of a woman’s life in a patriarchal society. To clarify and streamline her conflicting thoughts, she decides not to compare her life with those of

her friends who seem to be moving in a different direction with marriage and children. In this context, she speculates on the purpose of existence:

The reason we don't just kill ourselves when we have figured out what we want our lives to look like is because we actually want to experience things. But what happens when things we thought we wanted to experience don't occur? Or when something we didn't think we wanted to experience does? What's the point in living all that other stuff, the stuff we never wanted, the stuff we didn't choose? (29)

She acknowledges that life will move along the trajectory each individual sets for it irrespective of having conceived or not and she adds that most people who follow the antecedent path are neither happy nor content with it. Yet, they adjust and move ahead with their circumstances as it is most often impossible to undo what is already done. Unlike her friends, who move by the established cultural system, she finds it threatening to become a mother. Her feelings against customs, which are blindly followed by many, are so intense that at the age of twenty-one when she became pregnant unintentionally, she gets it aborted without any delay. Her expression of certainty: "There was no gap between finding out and knowing what I wanted to do" (31) indicates her clarity of thought. When the doctor discourages her from aborting the first child by saying that it is too early to do so, she takes several measures to terminate the foetus lest it should continue to grow against her will: "I spent the days before my next appointment doing nothing but waiting for my abortion – smoking pot, eating candies and chocolates and chips, drinking and

smoking too much, as if to poison the little thing that was growing inside me, that was making me nauseous all day” (31). The attitude of the doctor who inspires her to keep the child by suggesting that he would take care of the child after delivery indicates the general notion that all women are expected to be mothers. Though she aborts the child, she ponders over the social construct that urges women to become mothers:

Why are we still having children? Why was it important for that doctor that I did? A woman must have children because she must be occupied. When I think of all the people who want to forbid abortions, it seems it can only mean one thing – not that they want this new person in this world, but that they want that woman to be doing the work of child-rearing more than they want her to be doing anything else. There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make? (32)

With these questions ringing loud in the mind of the narrator, this book elaborates on the narrator’s memory of her mother crying for forty days and forty nights for reasons that she could not comprehend as a young girl. This memory of her mother haunts the narrator throughout her growing-up years and she aspires to be a different kind of a woman compared to her mother who could never explain the reason for her tears except to reveal that, “I am tired” (15). As the book unfurls, the narrator identifies her mother’s agony as caused by the coercion to be accountable to

mothering along with meeting the requirements of her medical profession. Being a doctor, her mother preferred to spend more of her time in the laboratories with books and found childcaring a difficult task that failed to link with her professional life. Though as a child she was unable to understand and console her mother, at a later stage in life when she realises her mother's plight she decides, "This will be a book to prevent future tears – to prevent me and my mother from crying" (16). Hence, it can be assumed that this book is an attempt to explore and expose the ambiguous thoughts and experiences that women encounter while struggling to live a life that is unconditionally expected of every woman in a patriarchal society. To breach this taboo and to find an alternative to these forced mores, Heti seems to break the boundaries of thought and actions by challenging the institutionalised notions of womanhood and motherhood. To convince the readers of the intensity of her dilemma, the narrator employs the stream of consciousness technique with questions, uncertainties, and reflections that spin across the pages to create a similar turmoil in the minds of the readers and the peak of her ambiguity is revealed when she says, "whether I want kids is a secret I keep from myself – it is the greatest secret I keep from myself" (21).

*I Ching* has a significant role in the text as the questions she asks and her comments on the answers unmask her innermost thoughts and predicament. From the questions that are put to the *I Ching*, readers can discern that she is deeply concerned with the passage of time and age which may force her to be without kids as she has not yet decided to have or not to have a child. In her urgency, to make a firm decision before it becomes too late, she queries about barrenness and gets the



reply that this term applies only to women as society tends to classify them and not men as fertile and non-fertile. To resolve the complexities caused by this concern, she wonders if it is selfishness that makes her want to live a life without commitment. *I Ching* complicates her thoughts with contradictory replies and leads to more dubiety by simultaneously telling her to consider motherhood and not to be a “romantic female figure” (39) who follows the norms of conventional society. Correspondingly, to have clarity in this matter, she looks back on her adolescent and youthful days and affirms that if she were to invent the various aspects of this world, she would have invented boyfriends, sex, friendships, and art but would never have considered motherhood: “I would have had to invent all those other things to fulfil real longings in me, but if no one had ever told me that a person could create a person, and raise them into a citizen, it wouldn’t have occurred to me as something to do. It would have sounded like a task to be very much avoided” (41). Contemplating motherhood in the personal and social realm she surmises that motherhood is nothing more than “a once-necessary, now sentimental gesture” (42). She co-relates it with a story that one of her cousins narrated:

It’s like the story my religious cousin told me when we were at her home for Shabbat dinner – of the girl who made chicken the way her mother did, which was the way *her* mother did: always tying the chicken legs together before putting it in the pot. When the girl asked her mother why she tied the legs together, her mother said, *That’s the way my mother did it*. When the girl asked her grandmother why she did it that way, her grandmother said, *that’s how my mother did it*.

When she asked her great-grandmother why it was important to tie the chicken legs together, the woman replied, *That's the only way it would fit in my pot.* (42)

This story reflects her attitude towards the sentimental gesture that the public manifests towards the concept of motherhood. Though she fathoms the non-essentiality of this gesture in contemporary society, the prosaic rules that are imprinted in her mind make her guilty for having aborted a pregnancy in her youth. Of her quandary regarding the need to conceive, she perceives that she is denying a life that can come to existence only through her, she presents it as “there’s someone I’m not letting born or a future-tense issue: there’s someone I won’t let be born” (42). Sometimes, the grief that builds up in her is so dense that she suspects the presence of a baby that is waiting inside her to take birth and she presents this intense thought: “A baby’s right there, building up at the back of my throat, a self that wants to come through me – not necessarily even my child – I don’t feel this child wants to be raised by me, only that I’m the vessel through which it must come” (45). She assumes that motherhood is all about being a carrier of another person, who is an entirely different individual and society expects women to perform this role irrespective of their interests: “Being a woman, you can’t just say you don’t want a child. You have to have some big plan or idea of what you’re going to do instead. And it better be something great. And you had better be able to tell it convincingly – before it even happens – what the arc of your life will be” (51). On one occasion, she has a conversation with her friend, Sylvia, a mother of three children, who encourages the narrator to have a baby with her boyfriend, Miles, to

bring him closer to her. The narrator considers this as the reason for many women to conceive and argues that “when a woman has a child to bring a man closer, often the man just gets further away” (82). On the same day, she talks to Sylvia’s elder daughter who is a mother of a two-year-old child to enquire about her experiences of motherhood, expecting her to enjoy it like Sylvia. But she says, “That’s not right. I used to have things. I don’t have anything anymore. I don’t have my work . . . my daughter is her own person. She doesn’t belong to me” (82-83). These kinds of contradictory responses from friends fail to channelise her thoughts and in her desperate attempts to get her thoughts clarified, she approaches and seeks advice from a spiritual healer. The healer associates the cause of her dilemma with a curse that she along with her mother and grandmother, received from a man and a woman who are now dead. To overcome this curse, she asks the speaker to “squeeze her [healer’s] finger three times and push” as if giving birth to reverse the curse and she convinces the narrator that with the final push, the entire curse is expelled out of her life. This episode projects the obscurities of the narrator’s mind that are further disoriented by the healer. Her attempts to get elucidations from the *I Ching* leads to the inference that, “Happiness and joy are feeling like you belong to the world, at the level of nature, humanity and time” (79) and thereupon she decides to remain happy irrespective of other matters that disturb her.

The chapter titled, “Book Tour” that follows all the above discussions seems to reveal that the narrator of the text is the author of this book, and it is for the promotion and acceptance of this book that she travels. Readers are made aware of this at this stage as everyone whom she meets enquires about the choice she has

made regarding the rejection or acceptance of motherhood. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the biographical aspects and perspectives that are addressed in the text may be those of Heti's personal experiences. As the book questions the institutionalised concepts of motherhood, during the book tour, people express their curiosity to know the motivation behind the publication of this kind of book that discusses a topic from a revolutionary feminist perspective. Consequently, whomever she meets during her trip talks about the diverse attributes of motherhood, and many are interested in revealing their stance on the matter. To elaborate on the different attitudes towards motherhood, she narrates a conversation that takes place with her editor in Stockholm in which she particularly speaks of one of her friends who is married for seven years and is still without kids. When the narrator says that it could be out of choice, her editor insists that it is not so as she could not imagine a "woman not wanting to have a child" (89). This child-free woman is always the centre of discussion as her state of childlessness is of interest to many, especially in gatherings in which she is absent. The topic of discussion continues to be the same at Dublin where she meets an American writer who also affirms that women are keenly inquisitive about the motherhood status of other women, and they wonder at what child-free women would do to pass their time. While in a bar in Dublin, the narrator sympathises with women, who are disturbed by the thoughts of children left behind at home and accordingly, she feels that it is unfair that women are always expected to be engaged with the thoughts of children and family even at functions and celebrations when the men folk can enjoy the party by being free of all familial botherations. On her tour to Munich, she meets the producer of a television programme, a pregnant woman, engaged in preparing shots to interview the speaker.

Before the interview commences, the producer points to her belly and says, “This is not the only life I could have had. I could have made a different choice. It’s not necessary to be a mother – it’s just one thing” (91). Unlike the producer of the programme, the interviewer, a man in his mid-fifties reveals that though he wanted to have children, he could never find the right woman to have it with. As if trying to probe into the personal choices made relevant in the text, her Dutch publisher tells her that he has three kids and though his wife was willing to have more, he did a vasectomy as he didn’t want any more. These conversations to a certain extent relax and perplex the narrator as these diverse opinions push her into more bewilderment.

A unique conversation that she has during the trip is with another writer, Adam, who tells her that her questions and debates on the need to have a child would ultimately lead her to accept motherhood. To this, she boldly replies that as motherhood is taken care of by many other people, she wouldn’t venture into it even for the sake of an experience. However, an old woman who was present as an assistant during one of the panel discussions says that like the speaker her daughter too was ambivalent about conceiving but now, she is a happy mother. This lady requests the narrator to reconsider her decision not to accept motherhood. Adam, who overhears this conversation expresses his disgust at people who attempt to tell others what choices they should make:

It’s like with abortion, he said. People think they own your body; they think they can tell you what to do with your body. Men want to control women’s bodies by forbidding them from abortions, while women try to control other women’s bodies by pressuring them to

have kids . . . One side spoke from the point of view of the imagined desire of the foetus to live, while the other spoke from the point of view of the imagined joy and fulfilment of the woman, but they both reached the same end. (95)

Apart from these discussions, even the driver, a young French man who is also an artist with whom she has a conversation, comments that though true art like a particular context is invisible, livelihood is possible only from making concrete things that can be created, seen, felt and sold. This analogy strikes a similarity concerning her predicament, and she replies that not having children is like creating a context which is invisible to most of them whereas having a baby is like making a thing that can be seen and felt and it would also make apparent their plans for the future. Here, she draws an interesting analogy to illustrate this aspect:

To have a child is like being in a city with a mountain in the middle. Everyone sees the mountain. Everyone in the city is proud of the mountain. The city is built around it. A mountain, like a child, displays something real about the value of that town.

In a life in which there is no child, no one knows anything about your life's meaning. They might suspect it doesn't have one – no centre it is built around. Your life's value is invisible. (95-96)

The following chapter titled, "Home" records the impact of the various discussions that took place during her book tour, and she confesses that on returning home she had an intense desire to conceive a child from Miles. Though she

speculates on sharing this thought with Miles, decides against it as she does not want to be considered as an ordinary woman. Accordingly, she fantasises about Miles desiring to have a baby with her and presents her thought as, “If I had baby, I’d be dominated by the needs of the baby. I don’t fantasise about being dominated by the needs of a baby” (103). On one occasion, when she decides to remain child-free, to avoid all chances of conceiving, she goes to a hospital and gets an IUD (Intrauterine Contraceptive Device) that is used to prevent pregnancies. On doing this, more than the physical discomfort, she experiences a mental dilemma due to which she is unable to be at ease with herself and Miles as the thought of having terminated all scope of the possibility of conceiving makes her traumatic. Therefore, she removes the IUD after a few days and reveals its impact, “Leaving the hospital, my love for Miles felt unleashed. I had to admit, sheepishly, that the slimmest possibility that I might get pregnant made me love him even more. Just the possibility worked some charm” (117). This kind of uncertainty curbs her as she fears that she would become like her friend Marissa, who seems to have lost her status in life as she is divorced and childless, and is now “just this floating thing, a potential threat . . . outside the mainstream of life, as though she had lost a certain status in the world, especially among women” (114-115). The reasons for Marissa’s divorce and her present vulnerability seem to suggest to the narrator that to be accepted into the social system one must adhere to the norms of the system.

Despite many discussions on motherhood, she continues to be confined to this thought of having and not having a child. In her mental agony, she goes to the extreme of testing the potency of her eggs to free them for the future. When the

doctor tells her that her eggs are in good condition, instead of being happy she breaks into tears realising the magnitude of her inability to make a decision. She reveals: “Indecision has always been with me, but I didn’t want it to dominate my life more than it has already done. Getting my eggs frozen would have been like freezing my indecision. I couldn’t reveal my weakness to myself in such a tangible way” (128). Consequently, she decides against freezing her eggs as she wants to get over all possibilities of being able to conceive and this decision unsettles her:

Maybe I feel betrayed by the woman inside of me who can’t bring herself to do this thing. Or maybe I feel betrayed by my mother for not devoting herself to me and creating whatever loving memories must be created in a child to make her want to repeat the process again. Or maybe it’s part of me that goes deeper that – my lifelong desire to leave my family and never be part of a new one. I did not grow up imagining that after leaving my family of origin, I would go off and make my own. I figured you grew up and out of your own family, more and more each year; that you increasingly tried to win your independence – your freedom and solitude in this world. (128)

The narrator has a strong impulse to lead a child-free life and it is societal expectations that create anarchy in her mind, thoughts, and conversations. Yet there are many instances during which her innermost desires slip out. One day on the beach with Miles’ daughter from an earlier relationship, the teenage girl asks her if she was not going to have a baby and she replies that even as a young girl she never



dreamt of being a mother though she enjoyed being with boyfriends and making art. She adds as a reflection: “I wanted to be free” (129).

Despite the number of times, she tries to focus on the reality of her life, dreams continue to haunt her. Soon after her firm decision to lead a child-free life, she has a dream in which she sees a little boy, who is her son with Miles. This troubles her and for consolation, she consults the *I Ching*, but unexpectedly the response she gets indicates that she must have a child from another man by deceiving Miles. She outrightly rejects this suggestion and loses her trust in the *I Ching* and concludes that this has got nothing to do with any spiritual power to reveal practical or relevant answers. This comprehension creates an emotional breakdown leading her to cast it away as gibberish: “You don’t know the future, and you don’t know my life, or what city I should be in, or what I should be doing, or if I should have a child with Miles or not. You are complete randomness, without meaning, and you are not showing me the way” (131). This realisation empowers her to not depend on anyone or anything to make a choice and she understands the need to look into herself for the answers that she seeks: “That can only be determined by mining my own heart and looking at the world around me; thinking deeper and more clearly, and not being so insecure that I should need you to tell me what’s what” (131). At a later point in the narrative, when she feels perplexed over the same question of accepting or rejecting motherhood, she wonders, “When will it finally feel safe to prioritize the me, I know?” (190) At this point she once again consults the *I Ching* and when it provides indiscriminate answers, she discerns the need to take a firm decision independent of external matters:

Randomness is useless and leads nowhere! It is better to believe nothing than to believe things randomly and haphazardly. It is better to have a foundation from which to rule one's behaviour and life, than this randomness and haphazardness, which leads as much to absurdity as it does to anything true. It is only fear that makes us interrogate too deeply into our relationships, and only a lust for power that makes us interrogate too deeply into the unknown. (192)

Following this, she has a dream in which she sees herself on a stage receiving a diploma but none of the audience cheers or appreciates her. This seems to reflect that women without children will not be appreciated, accepted, and acknowledged for whatever they achieve and hence, she decides to be less emotional and sentimental towards people.

In *Motherhood*, a comparable experience indicating the need to fit into a social system comes up when the narrator meets her friend Nicola, a mother of four children. Nicola suggests to the narrator to visit and spend some time with her babies to have a first-hand experience of how it feels to be with kids. Hence, she visits Nicola's house and once there, Nicola goes to wash the dishes handing over the child to the narrator. Though she tries to look after the baby, it doesn't create any passion or interest in her. She says, "There were other things I wanted to do. I played with her toys before her ten-month-old eyes. Then I thought I should hold her, and I held her facing away from me, so she could see the world" (133). Though she understands that being with kids does not bring about any change in her, she tries to

imagine a life like that of Nicola but soon realises her folly in trying to live the life of another person. At this juncture, she presents the presumption of her life's desire:

You cannot build a life on the misperception that you are someone who could have it all – if only you kept the path. Even if you could have some of those comforts, for some of the time – convince someone to marry you, or have a child with you – it would be a mistake, a life built on a misunderstanding of who you are inside . . . Those promises and pleasures were never meant to be yours. You had a great time imagining they could be, working yourself up into a real rather: Should I? Should I? Should I choose it? But the real question is, could you? No, you could not. It was just a fantasy and the most common one in the world. (135)

The chapter titled, “Bleeding” presents certain aspects related to menstruation and mood swings that affect the lives of women due to hormonal changes. The narrator reveals that mostly during her monthly periods she feels nervous as this process repeatedly reminds the author of the preparation being done by her body to conceive without understanding the trauma caused by the same issue. As her mood swings and sadness begin to disturb her relationship with Miles, she struggles to make up her mind on this matter associated with motherhood which prevents her from doing anything else with diligence. At this point, she longs for menopause as she expects it to end her dilemma concerning motherhood. She becomes depressed on seeing the blood and many questions rise to her mind related to the functioning of the body:

Why is my body doing this inside me every month, and how many opportunities could I miss? How stupid am I really? How little I care for what it wants? How neglected and abandoned is this little animal inside me that is doing its work so diligently and well – this tiny uterus, these mushy ovaries, these fallopian tubes, and my brain. It has no idea I need nothing from it. It just keeps on working. If only I could speak to it and tell it to stop. (151)

When she considers talking to her uterus to make it understand the purposeless task it performs every month, it generates a feeling that she sees this part of her body as an entity that is separate from the whole. The following chapter titled, “Follicular” deals with the same issue, and it presents the different ways in which her disquieting thoughts affect her relationships. In this chapter, she tries to disclose what society expects from a woman on becoming a mother and illustrates the social attitude with a story of one of the holy rabbis of the eighteenth century, Baal Shem Tov. In the story, Baal’s daughter requests him to reveal her future husband and her status as a mother. Accordingly, she is informed of her future marriage, husband, and her two children – a son and a daughter. The story provides details of the sons and what they became in life but does not provide any particulars of the girl and what she grew up to be. With this reference, Heti seems to suggest that from historical times women were never associated with any of the social roles rather they were only seen as mothers and preferably mothers of sons: “. . . a woman is not an end in herself. She is a means to a man, who will grow up to be an end in himself and do something in the world. While a woman is a passageway through which a

man might come” (158). Against this notion, the narrator presents her attitude as: “I don’t want to be a passageway through which a man might come, then manifest himself in the world however he likes, without anyone doubting his right” (159). Despite these resolutions, she is unable to be steady in her attempts to live as per her choice as society continues to look at non-mothers as incomplete and stagnant:

I fear that without children, it doesn’t look like you have made a choice, or that you are doing anything but just continuing on – drifting. People who don’t have children might be thought not to move forward, or change and grow, or have stories that build on stories, or lives of increasing depth and love and pain. Maybe they seem stalled in one place – a place the parents have left behind. (161)

In contrast to the life of a woman, as presented in the above quote, modes of survival are comparatively easy for a man as he can live as per his choice as society gives due credit to whatever he does with his life. Whenever women are hesitant to take a step forward along the chosen path, men seem to be ignorant of those conditions that prevent women from being expressive. As a woman becomes a victim of social demands, she becomes reluctant to communicate her thoughts for fear of being ridiculed or undervalued.

In this scenario, this narrative proceeds to make the readers understand that mothers who imagine the distress of living without children and project their anticipated misery onto others should be able to recognise the potential of the latter to live a life based on their aspirations. She affirms that this child-free life can also be “filled with hope, purpose, futurity and care” (161) and proceeds to say that

women who do not want children may have a different orientation both biologically and sexually, and so they must be given space and acceptance for their traits. She holds social ideologies responsible for binding women to traditional roles based on gender and reinstates that even for the sake of continuing one's progeny or one's community; one must not venture into repopulating the world:

“We have learned from our history about the farthest reaches of cruelty, sadism and evil. And so, in protest, we will make no more people – no more people for a hundred years! – in retaliation for the crimes that were committed against us. We will make no more aggressors, and no more victims, and in this way, do a good thing with our wombs” (162).

*Motherhood* as a narrative focuses on the personal ambivalence and conflicts that emerge in the minds of women under societal expectations and pictures the attitude of the general public to the patriarchal notions of the institution of motherhood. Promptly, in this context, she is reminded of some of her friends who had initially shared her predicament and expressed their solidarity in her activities. However, she realises that with time, one by one these friends slowly drifted away into motherhood leaving her behind. Yet, she does not regret remaining child-free and specifies her attitude to reproduction:

I resent the spectacle of all this breeding, which I see as a turning away from the living – an insufficient love for the rest of us, with billions of orphans already living. These people turn with open arms to a new life, hoping to make happiness greater than their own, rather

than tending to the already living. It's not right, it's not kind when everyone you look at is a crying baby, and there my friends go, making more – making another one! – another new light in the world. Certainly, I am happy for them, but I am miserable for the rest of us – for that absolute kick in the teeth, that relieved and joyful desertion. When a person has a child, they are turned towards their child. The rest of us are left in the cold. (164)

Her inability to make a choice bewilders her despite the several attempts she makes to convince herself to remain child-free. When she thinks of a life that is unlike most of the others, she feels that it is taking her further away from her mother and friends, "... like a dog who stepped on to a train going in the wrong direction from its companions, not realising what it had done, not knowing what it meant" (250).

In the chapter titled, "Ovulating" she presents the attitude of the common people towards women based on the assumption that all women love to be considered mothers. She observes that on seeing a woman who is not a mother, there will always be someone who will offer to become the child of this woman who is falsely considered as suffering from a lack of child-rearing. This person will "step into the bright and shimmering path of her freedom" (169) as a society is full of needy people who "want you to arrange their vitamins, or who need your advice at every turn, or who just want to talk and get a drink – and seduce you into being their mother. It's hard to detect this is even happening, but before you realise it – it's happened" (169). Consequently, the narrator suggests that the biggest drawback in

women is their failure to create and demand some space and time for themselves by asserting their individual choice. This seems to be essential as people tend to overlook the need for liberty for a woman and try to glorify them as someone who sacrifices everything for others. According to her, the false notion that is ingrained in the mindset of women is, “to feed oneself last in self-abnegation, to fit oneself into the small spaces in the hopes of being loved – that is entirely womanly. To be virtuously miserly towards oneself in exchange for being loved – having children gets you there fast” (170). In contradiction to these expectations, the speaker is bold enough to say that she would take up all space and time available to her to spend it in the way she desires:

I want to take up as much space as I can in time, stretch out and stroll with nowhere to go, and give myself the largest parcels of time to which to do nothing – to let my obligations slip to the ground, reply to no one, please no one, leave everyone hanging, impolitely, and try to win no one’s favour; not pile up politeness doled out to just everyone in the hopes of being pleasing, so I won’t be thrown out of society as I fear I will be, if I don’t live like a good maid, gingerly.  
(170)

She concludes this chapter by affirming her insight, “Having children is nice. What a great victory to be not nice?” (170). This seems to be a revolutionary statement by which she forces alternative thinking that would enable women to realise their potential in other realms of life that could be more rewarding than accepting the role of a mother. To promote this thought among the readers, she says:



Maybe we are capable of making the right choices before we fully understand the reasons. I must accept that my choices are the right ones, but for mysterious reasons. Or perhaps they are the wrong choices, but for the right reasons. Yet we do not live for the right reasons, we live for our own reasons. When we figure out what those reasons are, our choices will all make sense. (176)

To clarify and pacify the chaotic thoughts that disturb women while trying to choose between accepting and rejecting motherhood, she proclaims:

There is no inherent good in being born. The child would not otherwise miss its life. Nothing harms the earth more than another person – and nothing harms a person more than being born. If I really wanted to have a baby, it would be better to adopt. Even better would be to give the money I would have spent on raising a child to those organisations that give women who can't afford it, condoms and birth control and education and abortions, and so save these women's lives. That would be a more worthwhile contribution to this world than adding one more troubled person from my own troubled wound. (178)

On thinking and widening her perspectives on this topic, the narrator comes to understand that for mothers or non-mothers, one style of life is not more meritorious than the other. She says that a woman with a child does not reveal anything of what is going on in her mind just as a child-free woman too does not reveal anything of her mindset. Both lead their unique lifestyle based on their

understanding of it and for this reason, none should bother to be judgmental about the kind of life each woman leads.

Despite all the justifications that Heti presents, the latter part of this chapter whirls around the same dilemma of being and not being a mother. She wonders, “Could I ever hope to be a good enough writer – capture on the page what being human felt like – if I had not experienced motherhood? If I had no experience of what I increasingly took to be the central experience of life? (187). This conflict is further enhanced when she says she has always feared “the endlessness of motherhood, its eternity” (188) and accordingly she pronounces her thought: “You can’t make someone live to resolve a debate in your mind, or because you are curious for every human experience, or to fit in with your friends. I could only give a child a worse life than I was given. How do people have the confidence to ever think otherwise?” (188). These questions are powerful enough to strike and disrupt the institutionalised notions which urge women to take up the role of reproduction. To evade this constant thought of accepting or rejecting motherhood, she longs to cross her fertility period. The intensity of her longing to be free of this interrupting thought is so high that she compares it with a bug: “The question of a child is a bug in the brain – it’s a bug that crawls across everything, every memory, and every sense of my own future. How to dislodge that bug? It’s eating holes in everything there ever was or will be. Nothing remains intact” (183).

A recurring cause that Heti presents as one of the reasons to reject motherhood is her own mother’s attitude towards her as a child. Here, she documents her experiences of being a Jew and reveals the torture to which her

grandparents were exposed during the holocaust. She discloses the love and commitment her mother had towards her grandmother, Magda and her prime concern was to satisfy the dreams of her mother more than paying attention to the narrator. Heti suggests that women generally live like their mothers, thinking of them and analysing how they had managed their lives as wives and mothers. She concludes that this typical style of blindly following the earlier generation makes life difficult for women. Despite all the socially imposed roles, through this novel Heti tries to present an alternative to this convention by suggesting a different approach by reminding the readers that life does not last forever and hence, one must live as one desires by making the right choices. She unveils a fresh and more empathetic view of this matter:

Let the soul that passed down from your mothers try out this new life in you. There is no living your life forever. It's just once – a trial of a life – then it will end. So, give the soul that passed down from your mothers a chance to try out life in you. As a custodian of the soul passed down through your mothers, you might make it a little easier for it this time around. Treat it nicely because it's had a hard time. This is the first time in generations it can rest or decide with true liberty what it will do. So why not treat it with real tenderness? It has been through so much already – why not let it rest? (197)

A significant transition takes place in the attitude of the speaker when she decides to make up her mind independent of the *I Ching*, card reading, or friends who are mothers by choice or otherwise. She attains an understanding of life, by

which she becomes sensible enough to live as she desires irrespective of what culture and people ask her to do. To present her stage of transition, she refers to the metamorphosis that takes place when a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. She says that before becoming a butterfly a caterpillar turns into a mush and a new creature emerges from this mush. Similarly, the narrator is now like a mush and from this state she expects to emerge as a person who can comprehend the dimensions of life in all its plurality. She opines: “Right now your entire life is mush. But only if you don’t try and escape it might you emerge one day as a butterfly. On the other hand, maybe you will not be a butterfly at all. Maybe you will become a caterpillar again. Or maybe you will always be mush” (228). As the cocoon provides the required conditions for the caterpillar to develop into a butterfly, she says that her writing or rather this book is her cocoon that provides the circumstance suitable for her to grow and mature in sublime tranquility of time and space:

I want to be in this cocoon for as much of every day as possible – to remain within it as long as I can and spend as much time as I can within it, and for it to be my shell, my protection against the world. No one can be in here with me. In here I feel no tears, I feel no emotion at all, no pleasure or pain. But when I stick my head out of my shell to interact with people again, all of that disappears. The shell, the cocoon, the mush. (229)

The cocoon offers her solace to think and act independently undisturbed by the societal and cultural expectations of how life should be lived. The consequence of this realisation fills her with such excitement that it completely dismisses the

sadness and confusion that was always a part of her existence till then. She reveals her exhilaration as, “. . . there was a bubble of happiness, a happiness I had not felt in such a long time. The bubble of happiness was my shell protecting me. And even lying in bed with Miles, I felt as if I could pull my head inside, and find my happiness there” (230).

One of the highlights of this text is the analogy that the narrator draws between the process of writing and mothering which are considered equally worthy. During a conversation, when one of her cousins proudly says that she has six children, the narrator makes a point to project her contribution to society by stating that she has six books to her credit. Thus, like women who seem to be contributing to the existence of life by being mothers, she too claims to be doing the same through books. She narrates her life as a Jew who was threatened and killed by the Nazis and presents her desire to make something that cannot be destroyed. Here, she refers to her books as her contributions to the world. She says that once people read, it will remain in their minds, withstanding the tests of time and space. At this juncture, she illustrates the narcissistic agenda that is involved in childbearing:

The egoism of childbearing is like the egoism of colonising a country – both carry the wish of imprinting yourself on the world and making it over with your values and in your image. How assaulted I feel when I hear that a person has had three children, four, five, more . . . It feels greedy, overbearing and rude – an arrogant spreading of those selves.

Yet perhaps I am not so different from such people – spreading myself over so many pages, with my dream of my pages spreading over the world. (84-85)

Heti goes on to say that like a bonding that takes place between a child and its mother, a relationship develops between a book and its author. Consequently, she writes, a writer is never lonely as “you are in a relationship with some force that is more mysterious than yourself. As for me, I suppose it has been the central relationship of my life” (93) and it is this act of writing that enables her to acquire “the feeling of peace, happiness, lightness and joy” (225). Heti suggests the relevance of writing and the completion of this book as a central purpose of her life right from the beginning of the narrative. In New York, when the speaker was at her wits end unable to figure out her life’s mission, the spiritual healer whom she meets tells her that this book would be her pathfinder. Accordingly, it so happens that this book helps her to calm her disturbed mind as she reveals that the book is her saviour:

I know the longer I work on this book, the less likely it is I will have a child. Maybe that is why I’m writing it – to get myself to the other shore, childless and alone. This book is a prophylactic. This book is a boundary I’m erecting between myself and the reality of a child. Perhaps what I’m trying to do in writing this is build a raft that will carry me just so long and so far, that my questions can no longer be asked. This book is a life raft to get me there. For myself, that’s all it

needs to be – not a great big ocean liner, just a barge. It can completely fall to pieces once I land on the other shore. (193)

As the narrative reaches its climax, once again the ambiguity is expressed in all its intensity: “She doesn’t want a baby – but her body doesn’t believe her. On some level, no one believes her. On some level, she doesn’t even believe herself” (235). Even at this stage of indecision, she develops the confidence to follow her values as she assumes that even if the decision that she makes is wrong, it gives a sense of freedom in being able to make an independent choice. Defending her decision to remain child-free, she presents the plight of her friend, Libby who is now a mother. Libby conceived when she was not in a serious relationship with her boyfriend and though she was unhappy, she chose not to terminate the foetus. Consequently, the narrator foresees the trap that is closing in on her: “Already the architecture was rising around her, like the growth of a city, sped-up. Skyscrapers were flying up, a new boyfriend, a new baby, new in-laws, a new home. The walls are being erected outside her as her baby grows inside her” (163). Later, on seeing Libby with a child, she draws a comparison between her child-free state with that of Libby’s life as a mother and this comparison elucidates the speaker’s philosophical understanding of human existence. She reveals that everyone’s life is unique and there are umpteen ways in which a person may live. These ways may not apply to everyone and so there is no question of what is right and wrong. In comparison with Libby’s life, she clarifies her point: “She resents my freedom, the privilege of all my questioning, and I resent the privilege of her striding into a new life, without feeling the burden of all this questioning” (238). She says there are many paths to travel,

and some paths are either rejected by the travellers or forbidden to some of them.

Whichever path a person chooses to stride by, will appear brave to some and cowardly to others, yet every path is equally significant, virtuous, and rewarding at the personal level:

But we both have everything and nothing at all. We are both so cowardly and so brave. Neither one of us has more than the other, and neither one of us has less. It is so hard, I think to see this: that our paths equal something the same; that having a child reflexively or not having one doubtfully are equal lives, the number of her life and the number of my life the same . . . the childless and the mothers are equivalent, but it must be so – that there is an exact equivalence and an equality, equal in emptiness and equal in fullness, equal in experiences had and equal in experiences lost, neither path better and neither path worse, neither more frightening or less riddled with fear.

(239)

The narrator ventures to strike a similarity and exclusive equality between mothers and child-free women. Both categories of women live by their choices and hence, neither life can be considered better than the other even though this equality may not be acceptable to everyone. Taking into consideration the condition of mothers and non-mothers, she appraises the uniqueness of both identities as:

Yet the not-having seems just as amazing, unlikely, and special as the having. Both feel like a kind of miracle. Both seem like a great feat. To go along with what nature demands and to resist it – both are



really beautiful – impressive and difficult in their own ways. To battle nature and to submit to nature, both feel very worthy. They both seem entirely valuable. (182)

She talks of the need for mutual respect and philosophically states that in this human existence on earth everyone seems to be performing their role to create meaningful existence as they presume life to be based on their understanding, awareness, and perceptions:

Human life is a kind of myopia, everyone walking around, seeing only what is in front of them, or not even that – passing each other by, embroiled in our little dramas to such an extent that we miss out on everything; making big what is small. These desperate grasps at our own meaning! – When really our lives are meaningless. Our lives are meaningless, but Life is not – Life is hilarious and wonderful and brimming with joy. Life is pure freedom, and it contains everything – even this dismal, grey human world. (223)

As this novel concludes, it brings to focus the character of the narrator's mother, Magda who was born in Hungary to Holocaust survivors. Her mother is a professional doctor who sets the track for Heti to be able to recognise and choose her life most suitably. The thoughts of her mother with which the novel unfurls gain great implication as the mother comes directly into the narrative towards the end. Though as a child she could never understand or relate to her mother, as a mature woman she tries to probe deeper to comprehend the reasons for her mother's unhappiness. As a child, she often saw her mother in tears, and in miserable

situations for which she could not provide convincing reasons. As an adult, when she dreams of her mother, it is this same image that comes to her mind, “. . . my mother’s face, with the expression she had always worn when I was a child: full of mistrust, unhappiness and distance” (254). As a mature woman, Heti now understands the reason for her mother’s anguish as the burden of motherhood, “. . . existentially one couldn’t care about both one’s work and one’s child. So, it wasn’t my mother’s fault” (248). Here, she narrates an incident that she has often witnessed in her childhood and which she now deciphers as a kind of depression that her mother had experienced:

It happened so often during my childhood that our family would be sitting at the kitchen table, eating dinner. Then, without any warning, my mother would suddenly be crying, and she would get up and hurry off to the bedroom, in tears. Many times, I followed her, but she would not open the door, would tell me to go away – she was unwilling to see me or be comforted. After a while, I stopped following her. We would remain at the table, and just continue talking as though nothing had happened. (255)

The closing pages of the novel expose a magnificent level of understanding that develops between the mother and daughter. After all the tumultuous thoughts that had confused the narrator in finding an answer to be a mother or a child-free woman, it is her mother who eventually assists her to develop a sense of direction. In the presence of her mother, when she ponders over what she will be losing in life by remaining childless, her mother replies, “But nothing is happening in the world.

Don't worry; you are not missing out on anything" (251). During a conversation, her mother confesses that she has often failed to give proper attention to the speaker in her growing-up years and she admits that between her profession as a doctor and her responsibilities as a wife and mother, she had tried to hold her marriage along with her job which made her life miserable. This was a delicate balance which she could not maintain and so at present, living away from family, her mother leads a gratifying life at her own pace without any regrets. She has ceased to bother about the expectations of others and is happy that her daughter can choose life. The confidence that she sees in her mother boosts her potential to lead a life according to her assumptions. The mother's attitude and determination to live independently is evident in the response that she gives when the narrator tells her that for some reason her father and brother are upset with the mother: "So what? I'm not going to go and hang myself" (257). Surprised by this unusual response from her mother, she requests her to explain what she meant by it: ". . . she was going to enjoy her life despite their anger at her – she wasn't going to go and kill herself because her ex-husband and son were upset at her for reasons of their own" (258). This bold answer from her mother strikes a spark in her mind in such a way that it wipes away all her ambivalence and she decides: "If she is not going to hang herself, then neither am I – not for any reason at all" (258). At this point, in her excitement at having deduced a solution to her problem, she projects the significance of the support she gets from her mother's willpower to lead a life on her terms. She presents this as, "Do you ever feel like you cannot grow beyond your mother? So, it's wonderful when your mother climbs up one step higher on the ladder where she had been standing before" (258).

Inspired by this realisation that she gains with the help of her mother, going back in time and looking at what message her body signals, she says, “. . . the thought of having children always made me feel dizzy, or as elated as sucking helium, like all the things I’ve rushed into, and jump as impulsively, left” (265). Moreover, even during her early days of vacillation, she has a perceptive of what a child is, though she fails to adhere to it then as she could not relate to the idea of “another creature” (43) coming from her. She says, “A child is not a combination of you and your partner, but a reality on its own, separate, and unique – a distinct point of consciousness in the world. I don’t think this was something I ever felt – that my body, my life, belonged to me” (43). Now, when she makes the ultimate choice, the dilemma that she had once experienced becomes transparent:

Before, when the thought of having the child was near, I couldn’t imagine any distance or depth to a life without one. It felt like emptiness, like boredom, like poverty – like all the things I loved and would never be enough, would never make up for this lack; that life would always have a lacking.

But now that I am older, my oldness makes me not want them. My life is not a speculative life, or a blueprint for a future life. It’s just my life. (266)

At this juncture, she justifies her decision by saying that till old age she had deliberately and seriously considered this question, and she never sensed the need to have a child to make life meaningful. She remarks: “When the sun has set, the meal

you eat cannot be called breakfast. I'm in the afternoon of my life. The time for children is breakfast" (267) and brings forth a philosophical dimension to her status:

I love the people who exist already, and there are so many books to read, and so much silence to inhabit. I don't have to live every possible life, or to experience that particular love. I know I cannot hide from life; that life will give me experiences no matter what I choose. Not having a child is no escape from life, for life will always put me in situations, and show me new things, and take me to darkness I wouldn't choose to see, and all sorts of treasures of knowledge I cannot comprehend. (268)

She finds her choice a miraculous one and appreciates herself for traversing her childbearing years without conceiving. She is grateful to Miles for his empathy and support, and his attitude makes her realise that he loves her for what she is and not for what he can get through her. Yet, the true delight comes when she gets a response from her mother who comments on reading her book, "It's magical" and as the narrator promises in the opening lines, she can wipe away tears from her own and her mother's eyes as this book answers the most paramount question of whether women can live a life of their choice. As expected, like an alchemist or a philosopher she turns "dark matter into gold" (16), by being successful in finding a solution to the unhappiness of many women who are caught up in the matrix of life placed down for women by patriarchy. At various contexts in the narrative, she challenges the public notion towards women who choose to remain child-free and brings into analysis the recurring facets of it which are concisely presented by the

writer Maura Kelly in the article titled, “Women’s Voluntary Childlessness: A Radical Rejection of Motherhood?” as “the woman will change her mind . . . will regret her decision not to mother, the accusation of selfishness, and the perception of childless women as unfeminine” (165-166). As a solution to the various types of ambivalence to which women are bound under certain circumstances, Heti remarks, “Life is not a game, but we turn it into one. Will I win at being the perfect woman if I have children? Will I win at being an ideal woman if I do not? It seems to me that the best thing in the world was to ride life – just be docile, accepting, happy and peaceful, and not make waves. I don’t know why, but that seemed to me like the closest human could approach to wisdom” (224).

Taking into consideration the cases of women who decide against being mothers, Gillespie shares the argument that the rejection is a consequence of many related particulars:

. . . some women forgo motherhood in favour of what they perceive to be the pull or advantages associated with a childfree lifestyle, such as a career and an enhanced financial position, but that a more radical rejection of motherhood is taking place for other women. Despite normative cultural discourses that posit motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment for women and the cornerstone of feminine identity, I suggest some women experience a more radical rejection or push away from motherhood and its association with hegemonic notions of femininity. (123)

Writers like Heti who bring into live discussions maternal affairs counter and shatter the stereotypical images of women as they realise the consequences of accepting this role as stated by Ivana Brown in the article titled, “Mommy Memoirs: Feminism, Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature” that “By becoming a mother, a woman’s femininity is essentialized and the biological differences between men and women become critical” (n.p). Chandni Bhambhani and Anand Inbanathan in the article titled, “Not a Mother, Yet a Woman: Exploring Experiences of Women Opting out of Motherhood in India” affirms this social standpoint: “A maternal body is an outcome of interpretations, reinterpretations and discourses, and not just biology. In a society that has had constant social, political, and economic transformations, the notion of motherhood continues to evolve through reinterpretations by women themselves as well as society” (162). Alison Stone in the article titled, “Beauvoir and the Ambiguities of Motherhood” discusses the concept of motherhood as analysed by Simon de Beauvoir along with the concept of essentialism as “the ideology of essential motherhood is a key part of how women have been defined as men’s Other” (125) and this has resulted in their subjugation.

The narrator’s partner in life, Miles, a lawyer who already has a child from a previous relationship, plays a vital role in this narrative as contrary to most men, he respects the perspectives of the narrator and creates ample space for communication between them. During the initial days of her ambivalence that suffocates the narrator, he scaffolds her to discern that parenthood is not an easy job as it is deduced by many. He convinces her by stating that the willingness to take up the

commitments of motherhood is analogous to tilling the field, “and why should people with other work to do also till the field? Why should everyone have to?” (35). He reminds her that a person cannot do two things simultaneously, “one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both, because both art and parenthood take all of one’s time and attention” (35). Amidst all the turmoil caused by the question of the need to become or not become a mother, Miles clearly states his understanding and the hype that is socially constructed around this concept. He presents the personal and the institutionalised notion as:

Of course, raising children is a lot of hard work, but I don’t see why it’s supposed to be so virtuous to do work that you created for yourself out of purely your own self-interest. It’s like someone who digs a big hole in the middle of a busy intersection, and then starts filling it up again, and proclaims: filling up this whole is the most important thing in the world I could be doing right now. (193)

To support his argument and to enable her to make a decision, he projects the cultural and existing social practices according to which some categories of people are excused for not producing children and this group includes nuns and priests, along with artists and scholars. Though this does not fully convince her, she is grateful towards Miles for his support and compassion. His attitude towards her ambivalence turns out to be her pillar of strength that enables her to write this book on motherhood.



American novelist, Kate Christensen in her article titled, “Killing the Puritan Within” presents a similar context in which when the partners think about having a child, the husband opines not to proceed with it as he didn’t want their life to be “centred around bottle and diaper schedules . . . restricted by bedtimes . . . school times . . . baby sitters” (86) and reflects that they were “unencumbered and unburdened” (86) to move and work freely and it would be foolish to give up this freedom for anything else. This text ends with their decision to lead a child-free life in which they are content.

Dreams have great significance in this text as it brings to the forefront those aspects that are affiliated with the institutionalised notions of motherhood which are suppressed in the mind of the speaker. One night she dreams that Miles has an intense desire to have a baby with her and this dream excites her so much that she too considers having a baby and so, on waking she shares the dream and her urge to conceive from Miles. However, Miles’ response, “I’m sure it’s also nice to get a lobotomy” (66) suggests that though he tries to convince her that life can be lived meaningfully even without children, she fails to make up her mind due to which he talks about the need for a mental treatment for the speaker. In his attempts to make her realise the worthlessness of having a child, he says, “Two people who can help hundreds of people – that they should put their energies into one half-person, each? This is a human life we’re talking about here! Why do people – as soon as things are good – suddenly want to change everything?” (122). As a result of this conversation and her understanding of life, she decides to live her life to the full without fantasising about what may happen in the future.

Unlike her friends who make the narrator conscious of the passage of time and urge her to conceive, Miles can see things from a different perspective as he encourages her to follow her thoughts. When her friend Libby forces her to conceive, Miles says, “You see it is not benign – this pressure your woman friends are putting on you to have kids. They want you to be in the same boat they’re in. They want you to have the same handicap they have” (174). This introspection brings to the forefront an analogy that Heti presents between women and soldiers. She says, “Like soldiers nudging each other into battle, we nudge each other into relationships. Stay there, we say. Don’t run from the front lines” (216). She says that for costs or benefits, women force each other into motherhood by refusing to give space and time for contemplation and opines that, “parenthood is the biggest scam of all time” (174). Similarly, towards the end of the novel, when the narrator is at her wit’s end struggling to make a choice, he attempts to clarify her indecisive thoughts by saying that lesbians and gays do not have this pressure on them to be parents and society targets only the heterosexual couples with producing children. Moreover, even among this couple, usually women are the targets and they become victims of harsh words and criticisms for not contributing to the physical progress of humanity. These kinds of criticisms are hurled against women when they try to make a choice based on their reproductive abilities. Writer and critic, Agarwal presents the social attitude towards ambivalence in *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, as, “Ambivalence is not prized in a woman, especially when it comes to having children. Society sees this as weakness, indecisiveness, selfishness” (122). Quite distinct from the general opinion people have towards women, Miles does not force the narrator to accept motherhood under any situation but assists her in making a

decision that is based on her particulars. He tells her that if she wants a child, she could have one, but he wants her to make a firm decision. Writer and critic Jenn Fields in his review of *Motherhood* comments on this attitude of Miles:

Heightening this tension for the unnamed narrator is the fact that the choice is hers and hers alone. The option is neatly duped into her lap by her boyfriend, Miles, who already has one child from a previous relationship (his daughter lives abroad and they don't see her often). He'll do it if she really wants to, he tells her, "but you have to be sure". One imagines a stern face of ambivalence with this patronizing remark, perhaps a dismissive shrug punctuating his ruthless declaration. (n. p)

It can also be surmised that Miles' attitude makes the narrator speculate deeper about her thoughts and choices as she would be responsible for its consequences in the future. This could be one of the reasons for her to consider this mental trauma as a kind of wrestling with her own contemplations and societal norms that handicap her. Concerning this symbolic wrestling in which she participates, Jenn Fields reflects:

No wonder she has so much to wrestle with, nor is it surprising that from the start, she doesn't quite trust herself with the enormity of the decision. She pulls tarot cards with a psychic and uses the toss of three coins, oracles of the I Ching, to inquire about finer points within the larger one. The coins can only answer yes or no, and her

questions climb ladders of abstraction to humorous and absurdist effect. (n. p)

Apart from the various aids that she makes use of to make up her mind, she also uses Biblical motifs to illustrate her agony of not being able to come to a resolution. She refers to the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel as mentioned in Genesis in which Jacob is left to fight with the demon angel all alone throughout the night as his loved ones are all on the other side of the lake. Eventually, he wins, and the angel blesses him; accordingly, he says, "Here is where I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (59). This story seems to indicate that whatever may be the challenges one faces on earth, one must not give in but must resist and overcome. Here, the narrator may be making a reference to her indecisions and challenges that she encounters at every level of her irresolution. This lonely wrestling with the demon not only symbolically refers to her inner turmoil but also to her social situation in which she is left alone wondering about becoming and not becoming a mother. Hence, within the limits of the novel this personal and social struggle turns out to be a lonely one and the impact of this representation reaches its climax at the end of the text when the narrator makes up her mind to not submit to anybody else's definition of a woman. She decides not to yield to the institutionalised notion of motherhood and the novel ends with the most powerful statement of having endured all challenges successfully: "Then I named this wrestling place Motherhood, for here is where I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (284). Hence, according to Heti, this book becomes the narrator's battleground from where she wrestles against all norms to assert her individuality.

This symbolic wrestling is made evident even in the form and style of the narrative as the text follows the stream-of-consciousness technique. Like a whirlwind, the thoughts and ambiguities chaotically swirl the pages, paving the way for the reader to internalise the traumatic experiences of this unnamed protagonist. About the choice of independent form, structure, and symbols that are used in the text, Heti explains in the interview conducted by the writer, Kate Wolf:

I didn't want to think inside a ready-made structure, like feminism or Marxism or anti-natalism. I wanted the voice in the book to be more unmoored than that, because the state of not knowing whether or not you want a child — genuinely felt — is so deeply unmooring. I didn't want the questioning to have a solid rock like feminism to sit on, or for the issue to be experienced through a shared filter. I wanted the book to be about wrestling alone because I think we *do* wrestle alone when it comes to whether or not to have a child. (n. p)

Though Heti does not want to place her text within the matrix of political theories, this text can be analysed through the framework of feminism and regarding its political perspective, the French feminist and cultural theorist, Luce Irigaray points out that in the patriarchal system, women have always remained the other — the passive agent in carrying out the rules and norms of patriarchal dictatorship by willingly or unwillingly occupying the object position. Contrary to the norm, in *Motherhood* Heti tries to place the female protagonist in the subject position along with her mother by attempting to reserve a prominent place for the women folk in general. This attitude is in tune with the idea suggested by the feminist critic and

theorist, Luce Irigaray, in her popular prose work *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other* in which she talks about the relevance of the subject position for the mother and daughter by asserting that only when women remain subjective and independent can they avoid being objectified by men.

As it can be noted, through this work, Heti strives to point out that in society women live in anxiety and fear of being deeply conscious of the passage of time. Soon after their childhood days, from around the age of fourteen to forty is considered their prime time. During this period, “she must find a man, make babies, start and accelerate her career, avoid diseases, and collect enough money” (194). Consequently, the challenges and pressures on women are so high that it becomes frightening for a woman to choose a different path from the one that already exists. As Heti puts it, all around us one sees women and mothers who are happy and unhappy, and this reality perplexes a woman so much that it becomes difficult to decide on a solution to this issue. In this situation, she suggests the need to detach sentimentality from the concept under consideration. From cover to cover, this text twirls around the questions on which the narrator contemplates: “What is a woman who is not a mother – doing that is more important than mothering? Is it possible to even say such a thing – that there is anything more important for a woman to do than mother?” (134). In the concluding chapters, by way of answering these questions, she says that each person is a separate entity, and no one needs to follow the institutionalised notions of motherhood unless done by choice.

In this work, which is described as a wrestling place, Heti wrangles with her concepts of femininity by not submitting herself to the conventional notions that

bind femininity with motherhood. From the outset, till the climax of this narrative, she challenges the patriarchal concepts of womanhood that are aptly described by Rosemary Gillespie in the article titled, “Voluntary childlessness in the United Kingdom” as “motherhood for women has historically and traditionally been seen to be natural and the desire for it inevitable, and constructions of feminine identity to be synonymous with motherhood and mothering” (n.p). Amidst all the chaos in her mind, she justifies her decision to lead a child-free life as vibrant and fruitful one as those of mothers. She elaborates: “Yet there is a positive thing that is being lived and chosen by those who don’t want children. But how can we say what that is when parents feel they lived it too, and that they know it well? Yet many of them lived it without choosing it or lived it while knowing that it was going to end” (161). She is certain and confident about the decision she has taken after much contemplation as she affirms: “Raising children is the opposite of everything I long for, the opposite of everything I know how to do, and all the things I enjoy” (185). As the narrative concludes, Heti discloses that it is writing that keeps her body and mind filled with ecstasy and joy as nothing else in life provides her with the comfort and solace that she gets while engaged with her professional tasks as a writer. In her ambivalence, to perceive the depth of writing in comparison to motherhood, she considers both these jobs and remarks, “Writing seems so small in comparison to motherhood. It doesn’t feel like it will fill up all the nooks and crannies of the soul. And perhaps it won’t. But even if one is a mother, are all the nooks and crannies filled up?” (187). She makes it clear that she is not the kind of woman who can bear the cries and chuckles of babies as whenever she imagines herself in the role of a mother, the only thing that she enjoys is bidding them goodbye as they move away from her in search

of their destinations. However, she also clarifies that she does not hate children but looking after them is simply not her cup of tea. She explicitly states this as:

Living one way is not a criticism of every other way of living. Is that a threat to the woman without kids? Yet the woman without kids is not saying that no woman should have kids, or that you – woman with a stroller – have made the wrong choice. Her decision about her life is no statement about yours. One person's life is not a political or general statement about how all lives should be. Other lives should be able to exist alongside our own without any threat or judgment at all.  
(134)

These univocal statements made by Heti echo the observations of Ellen Peck depicted in the book *The Baby Trap* in which she tracks down the certitudes that all women are not designed to be mothers by default. She also asserts that some aspire to different experiences in life that are considered better than following suit to a cultural practice. Of her personal choice to remain child-free, Peck says that she does not want to relive her childhood experiences after becoming an adult:

I don't want to learn the alphabet again, and learn about creative playthings, toilet training, and playground etiquette again. I went through that once. We all did. Now, I would like some different experiences. I want the Riviera in January. And please give me the Berne Street festivals, and anniversaries in Liechtenstein . . . there is a choice to be made. Take your pick. One or the other. Housework



and children – or the glamour, involvement, and excitement of a free life. (14-15)

In a nutshell, as the writer Paskin suggests, Heti in this novel addresses the predicament of a woman for whom thinking and executing a life that is deviant from the norm becomes challenging as society at large dictates the kind of roles that a woman must perform during her life span. Accordingly in her article titled, “Art or Babies” Paskin foregrounds certain matters which are the key aspects Heti addresses in this text:

This is the conundrum at the heart of *Motherhood*: You can't know what it's like to have a baby until you have a baby, but once you have a baby, what you think about that baby is biased and besmirched (unless you hate the baby: thus, the strange authority of the regretful parent). If nearly everyone who has children tells you that having children is worth it, is that convincing or is that brainwashing? Is that knowledge or false consciousness? On one side of motherhood is the woman who imagines she has the incisive eye, the hard questions, and the time to ponder them—on one side there is Heti. And on the other is the woman with all the experience—the woman Heti could become. Can these women hear one another? (n. p)

Since its publication in 2018, *Motherhood* has received much acclaim and appreciation for voicing the silently suppressed thoughts and ambivalence that pass through the minds of most women. The dilemma of this female character is unique to the female gender alone as it is generally seen in the matrix of a patriarchal

society in which there is an illogical division of labour between the sexes.

Considering the socially constructed norms of gender inequality, the critic, Luce Irigaray in her text, *This Sex Which is Not One*, states:

Man by his participation has never been reduced to a simple reproductive function. The woman, for her part, owing to her seclusion in the home, the place of private property, has long been nothing but a mother. A woman's development, however radical it may seem to be, would thus not suffice to liberate a woman's desire. And to date, no political theory or political practice has resolved, or sufficiently taken into consideration, this historical problem, even though Marxism has proclaimed its importance. But women do not constitute, strictly speaking, a class, and their dispersion among several classes makes their political struggle complex, their demands sometimes contradictory. (32)

Considering the diverse criticisms that are raised following the theme and theoretical perspectives, in her review of this work, the author and journalist Kate Leaver in her article titled, "Sheila Heti Asks if She Should Have a Baby in Her New Book" substantiates that this book has gained much momentum as it has flared up a global conversation on the possibility that some women may not want to be mothers. She asserts: "It's a revolutionary thought and a bafflingly stubborn taboo, this idea that some women might choose to be childless, and Sheila is really the first one to confront it head-on" (n. p). In harmony with this consideration, writer Molly Fischer refers to this book as a "catalyst for thought" (n.p) that stands up to this

central idea of becoming or not becoming a mother. This irradiating and exasperating work is a documentation of a quest spanning across a period of three to four years during which the narrator observes and takes guidance from the minute symptoms that her body reveals along with philosophical contemplations and mysticism that enable her to project “deeply ambivalent and complex study of the choice between procreation and art” (n. p) as Lara Feigel reviews in her article titled, “To Breed or Not to Breed”. Among all the fictional and non-fictional works, Heti’s *Motherhood* seems to occupy a distinct identity as it deals with the life-changing choice of womanhood with intimacy, candour, and ingenuity. As Feigel comments, “In all the literature about motherhood – enthusiastic, anxious, joyfully fecund, heartbreakingly infertile – there remains very little about voluntary childlessness. This is so much the case that the decision not to have children may now be more of a taboo than maternal ambivalence” (n. p). As Feigel states in this article, Heti seems to be trying to develop a sense of compassion among readers by examining several attitudes towards motherhood to create an awareness that “once the baby arrives, it’s not the joyride it looks like” (147). According to the writer and critic Schwartz, the central figure in this novel is more an interrogator than a narrator as she asks more questions. After examining and cross-examining all her uncertainties, Schwartz assumes that Heti’s objective in writing this work is to reveal the true experience of being a mother which is often silenced by the patriarchal institution. She says:

Heti now sees her art not as a way to save the world but as a way to satisfy and accompany the self, and this relationship is what the prospect of motherhood threatens. Pacing in the sunlight in the

middle of the afternoon, blithely unaware of the time rushing by, is a privilege reserved for the childless, like staying out dancing till four in the morning or going to the movies at a moment's notice. Plenty of writers are mothers, of course. But writing depends on hoarding time, on putting up a boundary (often at home) between oneself and the immediate world in order to visit a separate one in the mind. A mother must make herself always available. A writer needs to shut the door. (n. p)

The details furnished by the Canadian author, Claudia Dey in her report of the interview with Heti agree with Schwartz's observation that the purpose of this book is to promote an existential reading and understanding of motherhood which is different from the institutionalised form that makes it suffocating for women. Heti says in this interview: "There's a fundamental existential shift that happens when you have this other life, you're responsible for, and also, you are sentencing another person to life when you become pregnant. Yet we tend to talk about it as though it's a lifestyle choice" (n. p). In this interview Heti provides the reasons for labelling *Motherhood* as a novel despite having a resemblance to her private affairs as more than a memoir and an autobiography, a novel provides space to create, shape and develop a postulation. Moreover, Heti refers to this work as "self-consciously symbolic" (n. p) and so she wants it to be read with "an openness towards symbolic associations" (n. p). Talking of the scope of a novel, Heti says that whereas a memoir would limit the entire text to an individual's experiences and perceptions, a novel helps to probe into "an imaginative world" (n. p) which is more accessible,

relevant, and relatable to many. This explanation follows the idea presented in the text where the narrator says that instead of a child, she prefers writing a book as it can neither be killed nor shot like how her people were attacked by the Nazis. She expects a book to have its impact over space and time and live in the minds of many people, unlike children who are mostly considered selfishly belonging to their parents. Correspondingly, even though many readers referred to *Motherhood* as autobiographical fiction, Heti rejects this attribution saying, “It’s not my person I’m revealing . . . even if it contains my thoughts, I am putting a work of imagination into the world. I’m putting an artwork into the world, not myself” (n. p). In congruence with the above comments on the genre of the text, critic Oyler in a rather sarcastic way comments: “If you’re not super concerned with the fictionalizing of non-essential details, *Motherhood* could be described as an essay, so Heti’s choice to frame it as a novel deserves attention. You could say it’s an evasive manoeuvre, a sneaky way to write about oneself without having to account for any repercussions or associations that create in the non-fictional world” (n. p).

From a universally philosophical perspective, Heti calls attention to the fact that despite individual differences everyone is of equal significance on earth. Yet, women are often culturally categorised as mothers or non-mothers based on their acceptance of motherhood as the question of rejecting motherhood is never expected in a conventional society. In this scenario, women who do not become mothers by choice or otherwise are delineated as inferior and for mothers, motherhood becomes their sole identity irrespective of all other achievements. Irish author, Sally Rooney in her review on *Motherhood* titled, “Get a Lobotomy” comments on this

classification of women and its representation in the book: “This is the double bind Heti dissects: to be childless, and therefore less important than a mother, or to be a mother, and therefore less important than one’s children” (n. p). Rooney elucidates in her review that this book, though referred to as a novel with fictional and non-fictional aspects does not follow the usual pattern of fiction. She says, “The book looks like a novel. It is arranged in short fragments, which incorporate dialogue, but it doesn’t tell a story as such. Its progress often feels more cyclical than linear. Many of the chapter headings refer to stages of the menstrual cycle – ‘PMS’, ‘Bleeding’, ‘Ovulating’ – in a repeating pattern, turning the story back on itself” (n. p). In agreement with Rooney, Molly Fischer in her article titled, “Should Sheila Have a Baby?” comments, “In the book’s final form — fragmentary, cyclical, a collection of scraps and dreams — conversations still echo throughout. The narrator talks about motherhood with other women inexhaustibly: younger women, older women, women her age, women with babies, women with frozen eggs, women with regrets” (n. p). Similarly, the American author, Lauren Oyler also remarks that this novel is “claustrophobic, like a diary, or a day with a newborn, and shapeless, even inchoate. It exists only to keep existing” (n. p). Consequently, it can be surmised that the non-linear and repetitive pattern the book adheres to is in tune with the unpredictable ways with which an infant reacts to its surroundings. Moreover, in this book which unwinds through inner monologues, Heti doesn’t give a name to the protagonist and so, it can be supposed that she is every woman who has a right to decide the course of her life. The sinuous ways in which the events of ambivalence are presented indicate the trauma that women experience by scrutinising aspects of their bodies from a perspective that is deviant from the norm.

Rooney comments on Heti's concept of art as being equally significant to the task of motherhood: "Having babies is no doubt very interesting, but part of the point Heti is making is that not having babies can be interesting too; that living eternity backwards through one's ancestors could be just as fulfilling as living it forwards through one's children" (n. p). Concerning a comment that Miles makes to convince the protagonist that having a child is equivalent to digging a hole in the middle of a road and then filling it up as the most urgent work, Rooney in her review of the text comments:

I was reminded of Camus's Myth of Sisyphus: 'To decide whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy.' Camus meant that the only serious philosophical problem was that of suicide; it seems to me that the most serious philosophical problem could equally be that of parenthood: to decide whether or not life is worth bringing into existence. (n. p)

Among other critics, Emma Brockles in her report of an interview with Heti "There's a Sadness in Wanting the Things that Give Others Their Life's Meaning" propounds an idiosyncratic perception revealed by the narrator which is quite distinct from other critical reviews on *Motherhood*. Here, Heti says that if there is a biological longing for babies that is inherent in women, then not having such a longing should also be accepted as biological. In this interview, Heti also refurnishes the need to have "alloparents" (n. p) which is an anthropological idea that was practised across cultures throughout history. Alloparents are people who assist in parenting but are not biologically parents by themselves. They ease the burden of parents by taking care of the children for specific periods as they are not

unconditional caretakers. In contradiction to the above comments, surprisingly, author and literary critic Adam Kirsch in his article titled, “The Art of Parenthood” asks what right a person has to deny motherhood in a society in which many people happily or unhappily embrace motherhood. He goes on to say that though refusal would generally become traumatic for the person concerned, for Heti it appears to be energising: “The feeling of not wanting children is the feeling of not wanting to be someone’s idea of me. Parents have something greater than I’ll ever have, but I don’t want it, even if it’s so great, even if in a sense they’ve won the prize, or grabbed the golden ring, which is genetic relief – relief at having procreated” (23). He goes on to say that in this book Heti is not trying to make a decision, but rather she is trying to justify the decision that is already taken, and he attempts a valid analysis of the entire text from a feminist perspective:

*Motherhood* reads much more like a journal, in which mundane events—a conversation, an outing, an argument—mingle with essayistic explorations. The book’s focus is not doing, but thinking, and the great pleasure it offers is that of a mind reflecting, obsessively and unpredictably, on a subject so central that it leads in every direction. For in writing about motherhood, Heti is also writing about femininity and vocation, embodiment and mortality, history, and freedom. (n. p)

In tune with the repeated thoughts and questions of the narrator, this text seems to oscillate between the institutionalised notion of motherhood and the anticipated expectation of the same in such a manner that the readers feel the unrest of the ambiguous thought process that perturbs the speaker. Internalising the



ambiguity experienced by the speaker, Jenn Fields in her review of this book reports, “*Motherhood* isn’t so easily encapsulated—much like how motherhood itself can’t be distilled and crammed into a one-size-fits-all essence. It’s complicated, at once individual and collective, a beautiful mess. Reading this book is like living in the bright mind of a woman consumed with the tyranny of making this irreversible choice” (n. p). The concept of motherhood has undergone vast change over the years in its representation in society as can be seen in the earlier and contemporary depictions. The Kannada Folk Song that is translated by Tejaswini Niranjana, “In the Forest Sithamma Gives Birth” presents the traditional aspect by which non-mothers are presented as worthless: Lives of Women without Children: Like oxen hired out// Like a plantain leaf discarded after the meal . . . A fig tree in the barren woman’s yard// On every branch a parrot sits// Saying, ‘Your labours only for others’” (142). These lines indicate that if a woman is without a child, then she will have to work for others as there is no question of any other mode of existence for her. From this state, contemporary society has come a long way marking progress in the socio-cultural and political life experiences of women that awaken them to multiple possibilities and opportunities of a worthy life far removed from biological determinism and gender orientations. Based on the analysis of the text *Motherhood*, it can be surmised that like every other individual, mothers too should be seen as subjects with self-driven potential capable of establishing their distinctiveness as the writer Heidi Lyn Hadley writes in her article titled, “Good Mother / Bad Mother: The Representation of Mothers in Printz-Award-Winning Literature” they too can exercise “agency and power, and open up additional possibilities in the performance of gender” (33).

## CONCLUSION

Motherhood is one of the most prevalent subject matters that is debated and discussed in the contours of feminism in its multifarious socio-political and cultural contexts. The discrepancy between the lived experiences of women and the elusive standards expected of them to meet in everyday circumstances of girlhood, womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood has triggered to bring into focus the often-blurred life episodes of women that are lost between the frames of expectations and achievements. The struggles made to conquer milestones set by patriarchy have encumbered women to be in a civil war with the self as they fail to do justice to the individual aspirations as Susan Maushart points out in the introduction to her text *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't*:

... the content of women's daily realities has changed enormously, as has the nature of the images to which we seek to conform. But the identity crisis – the mismatch between expectation and experience, between what we ought to be feeling and how we do feel, between how we ought to be managing and how we do manage – remains as painful and as intractable as ever. (xi)

Attempting to swim against the current of innate orientations, women have been juggling up multiple aspects in thoughts and actions to meet the assumed

feminine qualities through identities that label them as worthy and unworthy human beings. Of the various roles that a woman performs as part of her obligations to be feminine in appearance and deeds, motherhood seems to be one of the most pretentious ones that are silently rolled on from mothers to daughters through generations of catechising women with the aid of social, political, and cultural apparatuses that forcibly prevent dilutions in any of these systems through which women are being kept captive in body and mind.

The image of all sacrificing and ever-loving mother as constructed by the patriarchal system is no more the bedrock of narratives that outrightly challenge the myth of perfect mothers by revealing the ambivalent attitudes that women have towards bearing, birthing, nurturing, and caring for a child in ways that are entirely different from the assumptions of patriarchy. Literary texts from early Greek literature to modern times have depicted women characters who do not fit into the established and accepted template of femininity. In comparison with the contemporary writings on motherhood, the earlier voices were minimal and subtle in their perspective and depiction of the deviant attitudes to motherhood. Earlier texts existed by way of suggesting remedies to be within the system rather than providing a space to contest and emerge with distinct vantage points to be different. The present outpourings by women writers, however, hold true to the statement made by Carol Hult in the article titled, "Writer in the House" that though it has taken a long time, the contemporary literary field now witnesses writings from the "once-silent female majority: mothers" (25). Though the concept of motherhood as per patriarchal norms was contested in different narrative forms of the past, the recent

works seem to be more eloquent in their representation of the acceptance, ambivalence, dilemma, and rejection of motherhood. Contemporary writers present it as a choice that can be exercised by women irrespective of their physical attributes. Rinki Bhattacharya in her edited work *The Oldest Love Story: A Motherhood Anthology* marks the context that has led to the representation of motherhood as experienced by mothers in literature. According to her, education that encouraged independent and critical thinking has contributed to this revelation:

Until women learnt that it is all right to question received wisdom and voiced their doubts, fears and disappointments, motherhood was the Untouchable, beyond scrutiny. It was, and is expected to be, the most important event in a woman's life, a life-exchanging experience that she is expected to negotiate intuitively, drawing from genetic wisdom supposedly inherited, implanted in her psyche from girlhood.

(xii)

The difference in the attitude of women of the past and present based on the roles limited to biological determinism is explicitly observed by feminists and sociologists to be the result of the induced principles of a male-dominant society. This notion promotes the concept that women will feel gratification only when they embrace motherhood at the cost of all personal and professional desires. By this, the German philosopher, historian and political theorist, Friedrich Engels in his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* reminds the readers of the need to acknowledge the self by convincing them that the present life is a "material expression of an evolving system that precedes you, that conjures and constitutes

you” (ix). Consequently, this realisation has led to the voicing of those suppressed emotions and thoughts through fictional and non-fictional narratives, as according to Mary Frances Berry “discontent is becoming contagious” (n. p) among women who share the experiences of juggling the personal life with the political and professional ones. Analogously, Maushart presents her observation on the acceptance of the role of motherhood as the “non-negotiable term of a biosocial contract into which one does not so much enter as tumble headlong. There is no opportunity to study the fine print. And it is binding for life” (xii-xiii). Most of the contemporary writings bear testimony to this facet of motherhood that is often conveniently suppressed in early popular narratives that adhered to the patriarchal components of the same.

In this context, the present study is elaborated within the purview of literary texts that are published after the year 2000 and these recent publications asseverate the existence of aberrant and admirable experiences of motherhood by not silencing one kind of experience to promote another. Accordingly, to establish the argument that the institution of motherhood as designed by patriarchy is a construct, this study has illustrated instances, episodes and dialogues from seven contemporary texts which provide the primary materials to support this claim. These texts are categorised based on the intensity of their representation of mothers and motherhood from perspectives that are not constructed by male-dominant ideologies but from stances that uphold the genuine experiences of motherhood that have the potential to disintegrate the well-constructed masks of motherhood. For the women of the present and future generations, the light that enters through this new crevice will

provide a distinct view of the knowledge and understanding of motherhood in all its multifarious diversity.

The first chapter titled, “Juxtaposing Patriarchy and Motherhood” portrays the predicament of women and mothers in Manju Kapur’s two novels, *A Married Woman* and *Custody* in a manner as subtle as it exists in Indian society. Both these narratives depict the transition that takes place in the demeanour and attitude of women after becoming mothers along with the societal expectations from women who are mothers. These novels present the social, cultural, and political frameworks that compel women to fit into the conventional system of gendered identities by accepting the conditions that are against individual priorities. The protagonists of these novels namely, Astha of *A Married Woman* and Shagun of *Custody* are victims of a society that enforces women to live in predetermined ways that do not provide them with any space to explore and ventilate their discrete inclinations. In both narratives, the mother figures of these characters mould them through their childhood days to assume and accept the socially determined specifications of the female gender. Consequently, passing through adolescence into adulthood and motherhood by staying within the limits imposed by society, they encounter mental conflicts that unsettle them. As the narrative unfurls these characters realise that the limits set by society are travesties that prevent them from occupying a subjective position by asserting their individuality. Gradually the conflict begins to surface through expressions and dialogues that make visible to others the frustrations experienced by women. In response to this dilemma, these characters challenge the rules laid down for mothers by trespassing the patriarchal boundaries to explore their

individualities and sexualities that are considered beyond the possibilities of women who are mothers. The fact that these characters probe outside the boundaries of gender norms despite having kids, supportive partners, and parents highlights the intensity of the need to stretch beyond the limited space allotted to women in a male-oriented system. These women characters struggle to shun away from marital bonds and maternal obligations that fail to comprehend and provide space to traverse their desires, passions, potential, and skills. Negligence of women in domestic decision-making and financial management along with the issues of managing the family and children form the integral episodes of these narratives that expose the prevalent condition of women in an erudite Indian society.

*A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* by Rachel Cusk and *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Enright are the two auto-biographical texts that are discussed in detail in the second chapter of this study titled, "Delineating Mothering and Making Babies". These texts present the peak of the existential dilemma of mothers who are largely misguided about motherhood and mothering activities before becoming mothers themselves. Both these works have gained manifold responses on its publication as readers and critics effused acceptance as well as rejection of the works with acclaim and outrage on the arguments debated in the texts that are simultaneously interpreted as honest, pretentious, and insane. The texts picture the initial wonder at conception leading to the trauma of physiological and psychological ambivalence triggered by discomforts reaching a climax of traumatic bewilderment leading to insanity. Mother figures of these texts realise that the actual experiences of bearing, birthing, and rearing children are excluded from

the popular narratives and discourses that smother into silence the shriek of mothers with lullabies of love, tolerance, and sacrifices. Explicitly, the narratives focus on the life-changing events of maternity that keep women far removed from societal activities by compelling them to uphold maternal subjectivity above every other interest of a mother. Cusk and Enright experience this alienation from their social activities and professional requirements as writers; and Cusk who was subject to criticisms for writing on motherhood from a different perspective defends her work by stating that “I no longer expect this music to speak to everyone, but I retain the hope that for those who want to hear it, it is at least preferable to silence” (6). To disclose the truth of the matter both writers provide details of labour pain, birthing process, post-natal conditions, colic, breastfeeding, and sleep deprivation that have the potential to create insanity. These writers shatter the taboos related to mothering by exposing their frustrations and fury triggered by the infants that end up in thoughts of hurting and hurling the children out of the window. While both writers present motherhood as a stage of confinement by relating it to a prison sentence, Enright alludes to the endurance and survival of women at the chapel of motherhood to the desperate attempts made by a soldier at the war front to pull through by conquering the enemy.

*My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* by Clover Stroud and *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* by Nell Frizzell form the crux of the third chapter titled, “Cantankerous Tales of Flux and Panic”. These texts are counter-narratives that challenge biological determinism by arguing that women are not designed to fit into the mould of motherhood that is shaped by



patriarchy. Stroud's *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story* illuminates her predicament as well as her wilful choice of being a mother of five children. This narrative elaborates on Stroud's desire to experience labour pain that takes her to the verge of death, and she craves it as it makes her feel alive. However, she confesses her dislike for caring, feeding, washing, and cleaning the mess created by children and consequently, this biographical record of her life exposes the chaos and trauma induced by mothering five children ranging from a newborn baby to an adolescent boy. The wonder, joy, disillusionment, despair, alienation, and forlornness as experienced by Stroud justifies the argument that motherhood has faces that are left unexposed to lure women into motherhood by the patriarchal society. The sole responsibility of tending to the demands of children makes her critical and this narrative exposes a mother who does not fit into the archetypal image of mothers as she never tries to be the image of a perfect mother who manages mothering along with all other domestic activities. Similarly, the text *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of All Decisions* by Nell Frizzell describes the tormenting presence of a biological clock that holds women in a flux preoccupied with the thoughts of becoming a mother before it is too late as per the physiology of feminine attributes. The narrative weaves through societal expectations of family and career establishment to be achieved within the limits of speculated time. After much contemplation, the speaker decides to embrace motherhood and the later chapters of the book deal with the consequences of this decision by projecting the variegated emotions of joy and despair.

*Motherhood* by Sheila Heti discussed in detail in the fourth chapter of the thesis titled “Incessant Wrestling with Motherhood” has set a landmark among literary narratives by way of content and presentation through which the intensity of the societal and peer pressure to become a mother is presented. Heti refers to this work as a “wrestling place” (284) as from cover to cover it toils with the single idea of wanting and not wanting to become a mother, and as if in a battle with the self every page is charged with this question to find a solution. The speaker of this narrative approaches this concept from multiple perspectives and ultimately decides against becoming a mother by convincing herself and the readers that matters outside the realm of motherhood can also be taken into consideration by women to be worthy of their existence.

The narratives discussed in this study break the myths of maternal instincts ingrained in every female by dissociating motherhood from femininity as these protagonists assert their individuality, irrespective of their choice to be mothers or not. Along with breaking the constructs imposed by patriarchy, these texts also expose the feelings of confinement, imprisonment, identity crises, physiological transformations, psychological impairments, and life-binding responsibilities that are experienced by mothers. Moreover, all the protagonists draw a comparison between mothers and warriors as both these categories of people bleed, survive, and sacrifice their lives for others. The statement made by the Italian Nationalist Benito Mussolini in his speech to the Chamber of Deputies that “war is to man what motherhood is to a woman” (2) seems to indicate the traumatic life experiences of women and men in specific contexts. Contemporary British poet Liz Berry in her poetry collection *The*

*Republic of Motherhood* refers to motherhood as a “wild queendom” (2) with “unbearable skinless beauty” (40) in the poem by the same name and projects all the distressing experiences associated with it to which most women submit unaware of the consequences. Of this reality she says, “As required, I stood beneath the flag of motherhood and opened my mouth although I did not know the anthem” (21-22). Writer Alison Stone in her article titled, “Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity” comprehensively describes the status quo of a mother as “to become a mother is to enter a chaotic time, in which one is no longer recognised as a unified agent by others and can no longer easily regard oneself as a unified agent either” (1). Psychoanalyst and psychotherapist Gina Ferrara Mori who investigates the psychological and psychoanalytical states associated with pregnancy and childbirth refers to the ambivalent experiences of mothers as “crises of the internal motherhood” (232) which as illustrated in the book *From Pregnancy to Motherhood* generates due to the mother’s inability to associate with the foetus that develops inside her.

The primary texts discussed here challenge the gendered division of labour based on biological determinism which is considered fair for women according to traditionalists as explained by Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*: “Woman’s maternal function is seen as a species necessity since societies could not have survived into modernity without many women devoting most of their adult lives to childbearing and child-rearing. Thus, the sexual division of labour based on biological differences is seen as functional and just” (17). However, this notion of reducing women to reproductive function has been challenged through the

developmental stages of feminism by feminists and theoreticians acknowledging that as mothers women are paradoxically valorised and debased. Accordingly, Fanny Soderback argues in the chapter titled, “Birth”: “This paradox is the result of a double repression of sorts: the forgetting of woman as mother and, at the same time, the forgetting of woman as anything other than mother” (62). This kind of paradoxical representation of women can be seen in Nancy Tuana’s work *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman’s Nature* in which she traces the historical creation of concepts that have resulted in women’s subjugation despite her procreative capabilities due to which she is referred to as a “necessary evil . . . with the exception of her function in reproduction, the woman adds little of value to man’s life. She is necessary only for bearing children . . . Woman, like Pandora, not only brings children . . . also brings misery to man” (155). Through such an evolutionary path, the works analysed in this study can be considered as instances that break the “cultural conspiracy of silence” (xiv) by exposing that “maternal altruism is difficult to sustain” (xiv) as Shari L. Thurer refers to in the book *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*.

The plurality of voices and assertions that are now prevalent in most of the discourses on motherhood uphold and acknowledge the existence of deviant attitudes as normal and natural. As Joanne S. Frye states in the article titled, “Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood” these renderings by mother-writers “provide us with new and resistant understandings of maternal subjectivity. . . to resist the simplistic notions of ‘good’ mother as selfless, and ‘bad’

mother as selfish, and develop instead a fuller understanding of human mother as an active and thinking self” (191). Shashi Deshpande in her essay “Learning to be a Mother” published in the book *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood* re-establishes this assertion of the plurality of emotions experienced by mothers:

. . . mothers can be selfish, mothers can be cruel, mothers can want freedom from clinging – all this, even while they are loving their children and nurturing them. We must accept the truth that mothers can be unreasonable and possessive, they can be cruel, neglectful, and sadistic. Hating their children, battering them. Between this extreme and the other extreme of the ideal mother, stretches a long line on which most of us stand. Nowhere on that line is there a point that marks the point of perfect motherhood. Motherhood is something that cannot be calibrated. (134-135)

Similarly, Emily Jeremiah in the chapter titled, “Broken Nights, Shattered Selves: Maternal Ambivalence and the Ethics of Interruption in Sarah Moss’ Novel, *Night Waking*” in which she draws situations from Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* mentions the potential of narratives that challenge the institution of motherhood as these works “help peel the mask of motherhood and evoke, or even create, a shared awareness of both the virtue and terror of mothering and human experience” (207). Sarah Moss in the text *Night Waking* elaborates on the conflicting experiences of maternal emotions and states: “It seems that the relationship between the theory and practice of parenthood may be inverse” (n. p) and this stands true concerning the maternal experiences represented in the primary texts that are analysed in this study.

However, the contemporary consumerist society continues to categorise the female body by labelling it as worthy or unworthy based on its ability to perform the role of a mother. Simultaneously, theories associated with feminism and psychoanalysis consider motherhood as an integral element that moulds the psyche of women as society reinforces the need to be mothers under every circumstance. These studies argue that women feel alienated and secluded from society when they fail to adhere to its conditions. Against the backdrop of a politically charged society that expects women to be mothers in a conventional manner, this study has analysed the narratives that negate stereotypical images of conventional mothers through feminist perspectives to expose true feminine experiences. The study has also depicted the consequences of imposing patriarchal ideologies of motherhood on women.

A distinct perspective is essential to understand that every woman is unique and hence, their emotions and aspirations should not be generalised. Muriel Rukeyser illustrates this in the poem "Myth" which tells of a conversation that takes place between the old and blinded Oedipus and the Sphinx. She presents this as: " 'When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, Two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about woman.' 'When you say man,' said Oedipus. 'You include women too. Everyone knows that.' She said, 'That's what you think.'" (n. p). Sphinx's reply indicates that female experiences are unique and diverse, and it cannot be considered as a collective reality of all genders. As Estelle B. Freedman in the book *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* explains in Rukeyser's writing

“viewing the world through the male eyes can misconstrue the female, with tragic consequences” (9) as with distinct national, cultural, and political differences experiences cannot be universalised. Accordingly, in the introduction to the book *Feminisms*, Arpita Mukhopadhyay refers to feminism as a “polyvalent amalgam of diverse multi-layered, complex, and often contradictory ideas” (10) that indicate the heterogeneity of feminine experiences.

The primary texts considered in this study provide a distinct representation of motherhood as opposed to the perception promoted by patriarchy according to which all women are seen as potential mothers before becoming mothers and are expected to be perfect mothers after childbirth by limiting their aptitudes to satisfy the roles woven around motherhood. Professor of Sociology and Social Policy, Ann Oakley in the book *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History*, presents the state of wives that are similar to those of mothers as “women are seen as proto-wives, wives in the making, wives when they aren’t, they are persistently judged by standards of behaviour, personality and presentation which are tied to the character of the female half of a married couple” (ix). She argues that like motherhood, culture dictates the conditions of wifehood that result in disastrous consequences for the women at the physical and mental level. The award-winning journalist, author, and Pulitzer Prize nominee Ann Crittenden in her work *The Price of Motherhood* critiques this injustice done to mothers:

It isn’t fair that mothers’ life-sustaining work forces women to be society’s involuntary philanthropists. It isn’t fair to expect mothers to make sacrifices that no one else is asked to make, or have virtues that

no one else possesses, such as dignified subordination of their personal agenda and a reliance on altruism for life's meaning. Virtues and sacrifices, when expected of one group of people and not of everyone, become the mark of an underclass. (9)

Accordingly, these texts that present non-conformist female figures shatter the perceived system as these are counter-narratives that have evolved to challenge the dominant discourses on motherhood with its inhuman standards of perfection. The protagonists of these texts explore and expose their lived experiences which reflect resistance to the stereotypical norms of motherhood. Consequently, they are vexed when friends and acquaintances become overanxious about the family planning and the gender of the foetus as if these are substantial matters to be discussed in public. Alice McCulloch's observation becomes relevant at this point when she refers in her article titled, "The Rise of the Fetal Citizen" to the public interest of the female body as "the inside of a woman's body, in particular, her uterus or womb has become a public space, perhaps even a public square, populated – when she is pregnant – by a person" (17) and she observes that the reverberations of this depiction of the female body have resulted in "making her interior a public space . . . a space to be kept under surveillance and, ultimately controlled" (17). Similarly, Rosalind P. Petchesky, a theorist on international reproductive rights and a political scientist in her book *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom* elaborates on the reproductive and abortive choices of a woman and provides a socialist-feminist politics of the reproductive autonomy surrounding a woman's life with instances drawn from the social, cultural,



economic, political, moral, and legal aspects of the same. The chapter titled “Foetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction” published in the edited book *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* by Kirkup is set in the context of the politics of abortion combined with the rights of the unborn foetus and reproductive technologies, she notes that women “have no role as agents of their reproductive destinies” (183). She wonders at the impact of reproductive technologies and post-modern scientific treatments, as capable of empowering or revoking the women’s right to make a choice on their reproductive capacities based on the “complex weave of socio-economic position, gender psychology and biology” (183-184). In this context, she asserts the need to re-design the existing system to accommodate the revolutionary changes that are demanded by women as essential aspects of their everyday existence. Andrea O’Reilly in the article titled, “The Motherhood Memoir and the ‘New Momism’: Biting the Hand That Feeds You” speaks of the need for all mothers-to-be to read motherhood memoirs to “prepare women for the truths of mothering and enables mothers to feel less guilt, anxiety, and stress about being a mother” (209). Pragya Agarwal in the book *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* addresses the issues of motherhood and suggests that by separating motherhood and mothering “the cultural tyranny that forces the morass of motherhood and womanhood can be untangled, leaving women free to shun the social oppressiveness that shackles them into these ambiguous luminal roles” (320). However, in her book *Abortion and Woman’s Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom* Petchesky cautions the system analysts and designers to be alert while modifying the existing practice “because the sexual division of labour around child-rearing prevails and defines women’s position, a

policy emphasising improved benefits and services to encourage childbearing may ease the material burdens of motherhood; but it may also operate to perpetuate the existing sexual division of labour and women's subordination" (17). Hence, alternate perceptions and policies must adhere to the betterment of women as individuals rather than trying to mould them into better mothers.

Contemporary attitudes and stipulations of women towards motherhood as illustrated through the primary texts in this study, prognosticates a revolutionary change that may lead to an anti-patriarchal perception that promises subjective and self-oriented decision-making for women irrespective of their biological framework. Nora Doyle agrees with this possibility in her article titled, "Conclusion: In Search of the Maternal Body Past and Present" by stating that "This feminist approach to representations of childbearing constitutes a radical departure from a long history of efforts to valorize the emotional aspects of motherhood while suppressing the physical" (211). Accordingly, for women to gain autonomy over their bodies and their capabilities, Petchesky suggests the need to "restore women to a central place in the pregnancy scene. To do this, we must create new images that recontextualise the foetus: that place it back into the uterus, and the uterus back into the woman's body, and her body back into its social space" (187). This declaration of the need to consider women as an individual and not as someone with specific orientations under biological determinism is a far cry for recognition and acceptance so as not to reduce women to "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (212) as Offred, a handmaid refers to women who are kept for the breeding purpose in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that is set in the fictional fascist

Republic of Gilead in which women are categorised based on their reproductive abilities.

Maushart observes that women are not adequately prepared to become mothers and this ignorance of the transitions that happen at the physical, emotional, and psychological levels often leads to delusions and frustrations that result in internal conflicts. She presents this dilemma experienced by mothers by stating that “the reality hits when the ideal baby in our minds is abruptly displaced by the real baby in our lives. It is then we realize there are no ‘easy steps’ to follow. Sooner or later, we realize we’re going to have to make the whole thing up from scratch” (xiii). British natural-childbirth activist and an author on childbirth and pregnancy, Sheila Kitzinger in her book *Giving Birth: The Parents’ Emotions in Childbirth* agree that a woman becoming a mother does not instinctively know anything about managing a child and there is a need to replace the “fantasy child” (178) of the mind with the “real” (178) baby in her hands. She also asserts the need to consider pre-maternal life and suggests that it is inappropriate for others to expect the new parents to change overnight to their idea of a “perfect mother or father” (191). The mother figures in the selected narratives share similar experiences of becoming mothers though in different magnitudes. Astha of *A Married Woman* and Cusk of *A Life’s Work* are mothers who struggle to identify and establish their potential along with the tasks of mothering. Hence, Astha pursues her painting and Cusk returns to her writing exercises as these enable them to reconnect themselves to their individuality even after becoming mothers. As the life coach and parenting specialist Bria Simpson proposes in her book *The Balanced Mom: Raising Your Kids Without*

*Losing Your Self*, it is essential to inculcate in the minds of women the significance of individuality and its attainment in every walk of life including motherhood as “exploring your authentic passions can go a long way toward honouring your unique self as you raise your children” (33). This reaffirms the concept that women should not be limited to the expected role of mothering by sacrificing all other essentials that help them to establish their distinctiveness. Similarly, Amy Tiemann, the award-winning author, educator, and media producer in her book *Mojo Mom: Nurturing Your Self While Raising a Family* suggests the need to safeguard the pre-maternal life even after becoming a mother. She presents an alternative framework to motherhood by suggesting that “motherhood is personal and political . . . all women need to continue to grow as individuals, not just as moms” (xvi). The Nigerian writer and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her work *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, an epistolary manifesto recounts the repercussions of gender roles and the first one among the fifteen suggestions that she makes to empower women to attain dignity is: “Be a full person. Motherhood is a glorious gift, but do not define yourself solely by motherhood” (n. p), and as a remedy to the gendered notions of parenting, she suggests that “domestic work and care-giving should be gender-neutral, and we should be asking not whether a woman can ‘do it all’ but how best to support parents in their dual duties at work and at home” (n. p). Likewise, British-born feminist, writer and historian Sarah Knott in her book *Mother: An Unconventional History* illustrates her experiences of pregnancy and motherhood by tracing it along the lines of the historical understanding of the renditions of this unique ordeal and offers a remedy to the notion of the patriarchal institution of motherhood by suggesting the need to

consider the word “mother as a verb” (xiii) that would make it an activity which can be performed by all irrespective of gender. She says: “Switch the noun to a verb, the identity of mother to the act of mothering and the prospect looks rather different” (258).

This study has attempted to project the ambivalence of women and the causes for the same by throwing light on the fact that there is a need to reframe the social perspectives through which women are challenged and judged based on their gendered roles and expectations. In this context, it becomes essential to understand and accept women as they are instead of being judgmental regarding how they should live their life. Andrea O’Reilly in the book *From Motherhood to Mothering* supports this claim with a note that as children are vulnerable, they need love and care but “it is culture, not children, that demands that the mother be the one to provide such love and care” (6). The frustrations expressed by all the mothers of the primary texts reveal this notion that is imposed on them by society, and it becomes the cause for their disempowerment. Therefore, to create self-awareness women should be educated on motherhood by breaking the age-old silence imposed on them on the actual experiences of conception, delivery, and childrearing to enable them to make a free choice in their future life as mothers or non-mothers with proper support from partner and family. In this context, it is essential to make ripples on the imposed silence and stillness of reproductive experiences and it becomes integral to realise that “perfect parenting is a toxic fallacy dangerous for our mental health and the well-being of our children” (177) as revealed by the science journalist and writer Melissa Hogenboom in her book *The Motherhood Complex: The Story of Our*

*Changing Selves*. Judith Warner in the book *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* refers to all these diverse experiences of motherhood – the overflowing demands expected of them, the schedules they are forced to keep for engaging the kids along with the frustration, resentment and guilt associated with achieving this target – as “this mess” (7) into which they are caught and introduces the word “Mommy Mystique” (13) to refer to the soul-draining perfectionism that mothers are expected to achieve along with domestic disciplines and professional targets. Hence, to resolve this predicament of mothers, with a reference to Rich’s concept, O’Reilly suggests feminist mothering that is empowering to women, and which can be attained “by rejecting the pressures and expectations” (130) placed on them by patriarchy. The psychologist and author Daphne de Marneffe further propounds this argument in the book, *Maternal Desire* that feminist mothering can be rewarding for mothers, children and humanity if practised in the real sense and yet she claims it can have outrageous repercussions when seen through the “wrong lens or experienced in frustrations” (18) and can be “swallowed up by the hotly contested political waters surrounding the idea of mothering activity as ‘disempowerment’ or ‘submission’” (18).

Protagonists of the primary texts reveal the social pressures induced by peers, friends and family that compel women to accept motherhood in every circumstance and they also make evident that non-mothers are lured into motherhood by an induced silence on the true experiences of gestation, birthing, and rearing. American psychologist Leta S. Hollingworth in her article titled, “Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children” provides an account of

the social, political, legal, religious, and economic factors that bind women to the reproductive process despite the awareness that it is “painful, dangerous to life and involves long years of exacting labour and self-sacrifice” (21). She argues that though there are no verifiable documents to establish the presence of maternal instincts in women, society has devised certain systems and practices to coax women into the reproductive process “to meet the wastage of disease and war” (21). As part of this propaganda, there have been attempts to construct ideal as well as mythological mother figures who are held in high esteem leading to their glorification that serve as indicators to every woman as their life’s purpose, destiny, and identity. This has induced the notion of the “normal woman” (22) or the “womanly woman” (22) who performs “maternal and allied activities” (22) and those who deny these roles are crucified as “abnormal or decayed” (23). Resonating these ideas Elizabeth Batterfield in the article titled, “Days and Nights of a New Mother: Existentialism in the Nursery” suggests that every experience is distinct and not absolute as “we are always more than and other than the identities we possess and the roles we play. We are not mothers in the way that a stone is a stone” (68) and hence, she concludes that to be a mother is to be “socially positioned in a specific way, within a specific social context in the world. This context presents us with expectations for how a ‘good mother’ should behave, and there may be real advantages and disadvantages – socially, emotionally, materially, and physically – associated with the extent to which one follows or veers from the stereotypical script” (69).

Hollingsworth elaborates on the social institutions that play key roles in subjugating women to a dependent and objective position in society. To her, laws made in the past were instrumental in enhancing the enslavement of women as they considered the physiological differences between men and women while formulating laws claiming that women suffer from “natural physiological handicap” (24) due to the reproductive role they must undertake. Formal education and exposure were denied to women in the ancient societies for fear that this may disrupt the family system and so, education for a girl was meant to prepare her for a future life as a wife and mother. On the role played by education in the earlier days she states that education had a “negative means of control, by failing to provide any real enlightenment for women . . . education has been made a positive instrument for control” (25). Religious beliefs promoted the concept that children were gifts of God and hence, denial or neglect of kids would invite punishment either in this life or in the afterlife. Consequently, birth control measures, infanticide, abortion, and desertion of children were prohibited and punished. Similarly, art too played a major role like literature, in reflecting ideal images of mothers and children that set goals for every woman to achieve under all circumstances:

The mother, with the child at her breast, is the favourite theme of artists. The galleries of Europe are hung full of Madonnas of every age and degree. Poetry abounds in allusions to the sacredness and charm of motherhood, depicting the yearning of the adult for his mother’s knee. Fiction is replete with happy and adoring mothers.



Thousands of songs are written and sung concerning the ideal relation which exists between mother and child. (26)

Apart from these social knots that weigh down women to domesticity and reproductive roles, Hollingworth makes a note of threats to which women are exposed when refraining from accepting motherhood. She refers to these devices as “bugaboos” (27) and this includes stories and beliefs imposed by doctors and other social instructors who advise women to bear children in their early years to reduce risks and to ease the pain of delivery. Without any scientific evidence they also claim that women who bear children live longer than others and compel women to have more than one child as a single child may become “selfish, egoistic and an undesirable citizen” (28). This shows that besides men of letters, social scientists too emphasised reproduction as the primary responsibility of women.

Taboo is yet another facet of motherhood that is kept alive in society to tangle the socio-cultural and political approaches to maternity that has been framed at the cost of the psychological and physiological orientation of women. Hollingworth discerns those religious and social practices that forbid its stakeholders to express in the spoken or written form certain aspects which include the description of labour pain, risks involved in delivery, mental and physical trauma caused by sleep deprivation and fatigue that are related to reproduction. William Graham Sumner in his book, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* supports this claim by stating that talking of the burden of childcare and childlessness is taboo. It lingers around the topics of sexuality, property rights, and ghosts in such a manner that those who

promote these, project a utilitarian social philosophy to safeguard the system to subdue women behind the canvas of active social participation. Hollingworth suggests the motive behind the implementation of these norms as a “tendency to create an illusion whereby motherhood will appear to consist of compensations only, and thus come to be desired by those for whom the illusion is intended” (27).

Accordingly, Rachel Chrastil states in her work *How To Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children*, that throughout history women were forbidden to dissociate themselves from their bodies and they were never allowed to attain “the status of full selfhood independent of a male head of household, to be considered as separate from the messiness of menstruation and reproduction and breastfeeding, to be other than the powerful and feared giver and taker of life” (9).

In opposition to the established norm of becoming perfect mothers, Sara Ruddick in her book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* presents a rethinking and reframing of the concept of motherhood that is radical in its outlook as it tries to state that “there is nothing foreordained about the maternal response” (xi). She states the three demands – “for preservation, growth and social acceptability” (17) – are imposed on women who are engaged in maternal practice. She asserts that mothers can have diverse emotions towards their children based on the “behaviour of children, the space, time, and services available to her, and myriad other desires and frustrations” (ix) and in consequence, she perceives the emergence of motherhood and maternal work as a separate discipline like any scientific discipline that involves critical thinking and reasoning. Ruddick’s concept of maternal thinking projects mothering as an asexual activity that may be performed

voluntarily irrespective of gender orientation. This book has paved the way for the articulation of maternal perspectives in the larger context of motherhood studies.

Andrea O'Reilly in her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* supports the arguments of Ruddick by tracing the need for empowered mothering initiated by Rich in *Of Woman Born* that distinguishes between motherhood as experience and institution. Rich distinguishes between motherhood and mothering as, while motherhood is male-defined, oppressive, and controlled; mothering refers to experiences of mothering as revealed by mothers that lead to self-realisation and empowerment. Similarly, the book *Feminist Mothering* edited by O'Reilly proposes a kind of mothering practice that appreciates a mother's need to focus on her individuality along with mothering. She suggests the participation of partners and relatives in the upbringing of children as it will ease a mother in meeting the demands of children. She encourages women to resist the stereotypical notions of motherhood propagated by patriarchy by refusing to relinquish their desire for paid work, activism, and relationships. According to her, "feminist mothering bridges motherhood and feminism, and makes motherhood doable for feminism, and feminism possible for motherhood" (4). Thus, she bridges the gap between feminism and motherhood against the earlier conflict that existed between the two as presented by Ann Dally in the work *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* that "the two have not been reconciled" (168) to empower women with true experiences due to lack of genuine representations of motherhood. By this, O'Reilly in the article titled, "Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers" further states that "motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism . . .

[as] although women have made significant gains over the last three decades, mothers have not” (51). Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy in the work *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* account for this reality as they agree that despite multiple narratives on motherhood, “mothers’ voices continue to be ignored . . . Even in women’s accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent” (1). Hence, feminist mothering like courageous mothering functions as a counter-narrative to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is oppressive to women. Similarly, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels in the book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* use the term rebellious mothering to refer to the non-patriarchal outlook to mothering and this book suggests that a revolutionary transition has developed against the institution of motherhood as many feminists believe that “having children was tantamount to acknowledging that you had succumbed to the brainwashing of a male-dominated society” (49). These alternative mothering practices offer creative space for mothers to pursue their desires without feeling guilty.

This investigation carried out in the light of the contemporary feminist, socio-political and psychoanalytical theories within the purview of the primary texts that are current in publications, surmises that the presence of maternal instinct that is ingrained in women as per the existing conventions is a social construct, employed and popularised by literary and scientific personalities to keep women within the boundaries of social spaces. Ellen Peck’s observation in the book *The Baby Trap* underpins the notion that maternal instinct is a myth that is culturally constructed

and according to her, it is like religious practices of genuflect that are “learned behaviours that are strongly reinforced” (19) by compulsions. Julia Kristeva in her article titled, “Motherhood Today” reinforces the notion that motherhood is not an instinct but a construct that is entrenched in the minds of women due to which they experience a deviant emotion from men who are differently oriented in society: “Of course, both parents experience conception and giving birth as initial acts marking a beginning, yet the mother feels it most strongly because of the importance of her own body’s involvement in the process” (n. p). Lynda Rachelle Ross in her book *Interrogating Motherhood* makes a similar analysis of maternal constructs in society and suggests a “rethinking of mothering and motherhood” (132) to position women within the domains of active social roles independent of physical and mental conflicts. Writer and scholar Shani Orgad in the work *Heading Home: Motherhood, Work and the Failed Promise of Equality* based on the analysis made by interviewing employed and unemployed mothers brings forth the need to “deconstruct [motherhood] from those powerful cultural fantasies and norms” (217) to enable women to “reconnect to and excavate their buried desire . . . to realise those desires” (217). True to this interpretation, the female protagonists of all the primary texts reveal the psychological and physiological trauma caused by childbirth. The continuation of the legal, cultural, religious, political, and social taboos, myths and glorifications that are raised around the concept of bearing and rearing children is evident enough to prove that it is not the presence of maternal instinct but rather the social conditionings that play vital roles in binding women to reproduction. Sheila Kitzinger in her book *Giving Birth: The Parents’ Emotions in Childbirth* fortifies this argument: “Much of this learning is informal and

unselfconscious and is a result of noticing how other women handle their babies, or even how her mother or an aunt handled a baby when she was a small girl herself, and of childhood play with dolls, or caring for animals or younger siblings” (182). Rachel Chrastil evaluates and comments on this social conditioning as “the religious, legal, familial, and cultural pressures designed during this time to ensure that women would reproduce, and do so within acceptable parameters testify to the fear that women may somehow opt-out” (26). The patriarchal society on recognising the painful, engaging, and traumatic bewilderment of parental responsibilities has astutely made women bear the lifelong commitments of parenthood by camouflaging it along the lines of divinity and glorification by hailing motherhood as the most supreme of all identities for women. Emerging literary and scientific texts that present the actuality of the diverse and ambivalent experiences surface the dilemma suffered by women and the social devices that are used to reinforce maternal instinct which in effect does not exist. She foresees the rupturing of this enforced system when women recognise their potential and right to choose the ways to use the power of their physical and mental capabilities.

Ashley Montagu in his book *The Natural Superiority of Women* substantiates this argument by saying that women are not weak by nature rather from biological and evolutionary standpoints they are “more richly endowed than the male” (46) and he also states that this truth must be accepted at the cost of all traditional beliefs that may be outraged in the process. However, he urges one and all to appreciate and respect each other for the betterment of humans as the poet Tennyson wrote of men and women as being mutually complementary in all walks of life, “The woman’s

cause is man's: they rise or sink/ together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free" (142). Montagu's view is by the claim made by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* in which she explains that women are not to be defined by "hormones or mysterious instincts" (929) but by "a product developed by civilization" (929). In this context, she also says that men cannot be made responsible for their attitude towards women as they like women are victims of a particular socio-cultural context. Garcia in the text *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* elaborates on this statement: "Individual men are sometimes not doing anything to put women in submissive positions; like women, they are thrown into a world in which there are always already meanings and social norms" (201). Consequently, it can be assumed that the future will represent women who can make decisions by evaluating the consequences of accepting and rejecting motherhood based on their knowledge and no one can be forced to accept the biological possibilities without exploring the other side of the prospect.

Contemporary discourses, to which the primary texts considered for this study belong, pave the way for an upcoming social scenario in which women will not fall victim to the patriarchal conventions and systems that push women to the margins of social activities in the name of cultural practices. The politics of motherhood as it emerges now evidently calls into question the ulterior motives fortified through social devices to force women to sacrifice their lives at the altar of motherhood for which a legacy is constructed through religious and social myths to reinforce it as the most desirous state for all women. The expression of fear that when motherhood becomes a voluntary decision, the human race may come to an

end itself becomes propaganda to restrict women's thoughts and actions, as

Hollingworth deduces:

The natural desire for children may and probably will always guarantee a stationary population, even if childbearing should become a voluntary matter. But, if a surplus population is desired for national aggrandisement, it would seem that there will remain but one effective social device whereby this can be secured, namely, adequate compensation either in money or in fame. (29)

The ride of the protagonists of the primary texts as mothers and non-mothers by compulsion or by choice through various chapters of this study presents their ambivalence, acceptance, and rejection of motherhood. Based on their thoughts triggered by emotional, historical, and scientific facts they have boldly carved out a space that extends beyond the covers of these texts to probe into the mindset of all genders, the need to reconsider the patriarchal institution of motherhood. It becomes vital to create a space for the expression of the self for mothers as according to Linda R. Hirshman: "Modern society still puts roadblock after roadblock in their path. It will take a laser focus for women to reach their ambitions for a full human life. They must even resort to the love that dares not to speak its name: love of work" (30). These texts reveal that the lives of women operate under many constraints which without invitations come to design their lifestyle as part of cultural expectations and politics with ulterior intentions. In specific cultural contexts, women are considered custodians of culture, tradition, family honour and legacy but as Jasbir Jain indicates in the book *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture,*



*Subjectivity and Agency*, “custodianship implies marginal glory and a heavy responsibility but in reality, has neither power nor agency” (74). This is revealed through these autobiographical and fictional voices that expose the impact of customs, religions, beliefs, politics, and traditions on women. These personalised notes of social reality speak against cultural impositions that result in a conflict between social acceptance and self-interest. As intended at the outset, this study has brought to the centre of attention the aberrant attitudes towards motherhood with the aid of scientific and theoretical perspectives without disparaging the status of a parent by considering the state of being a non-parent as superior in comparison. This study has objectively investigated the ambivalence, trauma and bewilderment challenged and accepted by women at every level of their interaction with the self and others that have enabled them to create awareness to explore the less-trodden paths of deviant thinking concerning the age-old, enforced norms of patriarchy and female body. As Chrastil perceives in her book, *How to Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children*, the most significant matter of motherhood in the present era is its impact on women and their potential in diverse social activities:

What’s at stake for us is not just our ability to make a choice about our reproductive lives, although this ability is crucial. At issues as well is our confidence to think and judge for ourselves, with fuller knowledge of the range of possibilities and pathways available to us in the present. How we make decisions matters – not just the outcome of the decision. The intentions we have and the care with which we contemplate the options matters, even though we don’t have complete

control over whether or not we will, in fact, conceive and take a child to term. (15)

Being and not being a parent is a personal choice that should be made by considering the individualistic, social, philosophical, and spiritual aspects as it pertains to all genders. It should be noted that in the present scenario, a woman accepting this role gets transformed beyond recognition unlike a man accepting fatherhood. It is also deeply political as throughout history it has been forced on women by patriarchal society to forbid women from exploring their potential in other realms of social activities. Even this proclamation of choice to decide the direction of one's life, according to Linda R. Hirshman, is very often a farce as for women it is not easy to restructure the pattern of life without restructuring the existing system and argues that "for all its achievements, feminism cannot make more progress, private or public until it turns its spotlight on the family. Childcare and housekeeping have satisfying moments but are not occupations likely to produce a flourishing life. Gender ideology places these tasks on women's backs; women must demand redistribution" (2). She also asserts that feminism has not been radical enough to demand and execute the change in society that will liberate women from the boundaries marked out for them by society. Before Hirshman, the American Professor Emeritus of Sociology Arlie Hochschild in the book *The Second Shift* elaborated on the predicament of mothers who are ripped between the double burden of home and office; and referred to this situation as a "stalled revolution" indicating that society has not changed to accept the changing women who look for opportunities beyond the domestic life that result in a clash between "treasured ideal

and an incompatible reality” (n. p). Jacqueline Rose in the work *Mothers – An Essay on Love and Cruelty* refers to mothers as “objects of licensed cruelty” (7) as they are made responsible for all mishaps that take place in society and she reminds the readers that unless this is recognised, accepted, and rectified “we will continue to tear both the world and mothers to pieces” (7). Concerning Rose’s work, Eliane Glaser in the text *Motherhood: A Manifesto* laments the plight of mothers who become “scapegoats for our personal and political disappointments” (25) and by way of a solution to the motherhood issues states: “Rather than make motherhood a proxy for politics, we should use politics to improve motherhood” (25). Mary Eagleton shares this same concern in her work, *Feminist Literary Criticism* indicating that if both masculinity and femininity are not deconstructed “what we now understand as ‘we women’ will not survive patriarchy” (16). In the aggregate, despite several theories and academic pursuits, as Orna Donath states in the book, *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*, in practice society forbids women from choosing any path that moves towards non-motherhood or regret accepting mothering responsibilities and hence, “The fact that remaining nobody’s mom is still such a difficult path, beset by stereotypes and sanctions, shows that options do not exist; the path of non-motherhood is still closed off” (202).

Analysis of the texts selected for the study with the help of contemporary feminist perspectives helps establish the fact that in a patriarchal society, motherhood is over-glorified to lure women to accept it as the destination of their life. It also reveals that the socially constructed reality of mothers as being esteemed with love, respect, joy, and contentment upon becoming a mother does not always

hold water to mothers. The narratives considered in this study support this argument as none of the mother figures is free of ambivalence, bewilderment, or dilemma on becoming mothers. As illustrated in detail in every chapter, they project themselves as caught in the matrix of a patriarchal society that has curtailed their physical, emotional, and psychological liberty to a state of stillness to remain within the surveillance of the child and the public by performing the expected roles of motherhood.

This study has also paved the way to manifest that the concept of “Mommy Binary” (Warrington 10) is a myth that is derived by society to label women as either childless or childfree by ignoring all other possibilities of emotions and standpoints that are in between these two extreme points of reference. As per this binary, according to Warrington women are seen as “either sadly childless or defiantly childfree” (8) in which the childless state is seen as deserving sympathy and the childfree state of a woman is considered selfish and deviant. In her work, *Women Without Kids: The Revolutionary Rise of an Unsung Sisterhood* she associates this to be the result of pronatalism which promotes the idea that parents and families are more important than non-parents and single individuals. She elaborates further that pronatalism has controlled the human mind to assume that the purpose of life is to couple up and procreate. This makes women feel guilty for not conceiving, it triggers their biological clock to conceive on time, it denounces all non-procreative sex and makes others comment on what people with wombs should and should not do. This understanding based on the analysis of the representation of mothers through the lens of feminism establishes the fact that motherhood can be

accompanied by a complex emotion filled with joy and despair, misery and contentment, pleasure and pain, ambivalence and certainty, along with loneliness and companionship. This validates the argument that motherhood is not a binary but a spectrum, as Warrington argues with diverse positions between the extreme points of reference which visualise women as either regretting being childless or defiantly enjoying childfree status. Women and mothers position themselves anywhere between these extremes as the experiences of motherhood far from being unique vary in its reality based on the physical, social, cultural, and political conditions in which it is realised. Warrington elaborates motherhood spectrum:

In essence, this speaks to the idea that any person's desire and aptitude for parenthood will be influenced by a multitude of factors – everything from our basic personality, to our family and cultural background, to our desires and ambitions for our life, to our finances, to our physical and mental health, to our relationship status. It also does away with the notion that not being a mother, not wanting to be mom, or not naturally revelling in the role means that there is something wrong with us. Rather it suggests that there is everything wrong with a society that treats biological women as a monolith – as if being born with a c-word between your legs automatically equips a person for parenthood. (26-27)

It becomes evident from the unique revelations made by the women characters in the texts selected for this study that along with mothers, women who do not hear the bells of motherhood in their personal life should be accepted and

acknowledged as they are, in distinctive ways. They should be included as individuals with a shift in perspectives and the social mindset must be broadened to incorporate them with mutual respect and appreciation as Michael J. Sandel states in his book, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do*: “To achieve a just society we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and to create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise” (261). Accordingly, when mothers reveal the actual experiences involved in mothering, they should be provided ample space to express and expose themselves and this acceptance of honest deviant voices should ultimately lead to the reconfiguration of maternal constructs that will ascertain motherhood as a woman’s choice rather than her destiny. Supporting this argument, Petra Bueskens in the foreword to O’Reilly’s book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* reinforces the need to incorporate the distinct and diverse attributes of mothering experiences in its entirety in the social and academic realms by accepting it as “an art, a practice, and a politics” (xv) that need to be revised along with “maternal politics and strategies for subversion” (xv) when circumstances demand. The comprehensive landscape of literary discourses provides and persists to contribute ample space and theoretical perspectives to assimilate the social behaviour of people to deconstruct conventional notions with novel ideas of political correctness. It will in turn broaden the vision of society to enable everyone to admit that women can be dynamic in leading a life that is of their choice; be it in accepting motherhood or outside the realms of their physical attributes or potential.

## WORKS CITED

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. Harper Collins, 2016.

<https://ameforeignpolicy.files.wordpress.com>. Accessed 18 May 2023.

Agarwal, Pragya. *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*. Canongate, 2021.

Alizade, Alcira Mariam. "The Non-maternal Psychic Space." *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*. KARNAC, 2006.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" edited by L.

Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. Monthly Review Press, 1971.

Aneja, Anu. edited. "Anticipating the Mother's Dream: Maternal Subjectivity in Psychoanalysis, Literature and Cinema." *Embodying Motherhood:*

*Perspectives from Contemporary India*, SAGE, 2016.

Aneja, Anu and Shubhangi Vaidya. *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India*. SAGE, 2016.

Asher, Rebecca. *Shattered: Modern Motherhood and the Illusion of Equality*.

Harville Secker, 2011.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage, 1985.

Badinter, Elisabeth. *Mother Love: Myth and Reality*. MacMillan Publishing Company, 1981.

Bagchi, Jasodhara. *Interrogating Motherhood*. SAGE, 2017.

Bannerji, Mithu C. "Lesbian Passion Forged in a Land of Turmoil." *The Guardian*. Feb 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/books>. Accessed 4 April 2023

Batterfield, Elizabeth. "Days and Nights of a New Mother: Existentialism in the Nursery." *Motherhood – Philosophy for Everyone: The Birth of Wisdom*, edited by Sheila Lintott, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Battersby, Christine. "Nativity, Materiality, Maternity: The Sublime and the Grotesque in Contemporary Sculpture." *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*. Routledge, 2018.

Benn, Malissa. *Madonna and Child: Towards a New Politics of Motherhood*. Vintage, 1999.

Berry, Liz. *The Republic of Motherhood*. Penguin Random House, 2018.

Berry, Mary Frances. *The Politics of Parenthood: Child Care, Women's Rights, and the Myth of the Good Mother*. Penguin Books, 1994.

Bhambhani, Chandni, and Anand Inbanathan. "Not a Mother, Yet a Woman: Exploring Experiences of Women Opting out of Motherhood in India."



*Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. May 2018. 24:2, 159-182,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2018.1462932> Accessed 01 May 2023.

Bhattacharya, Rinki, editor. *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood*. SAGE Publications, 2013.

Bhattacharya, Rinki Roy, and Maithili Rao. *The Oldest Love Story: A Motherhood Anthology*. Om Books International, 2022.

Braun, Alice. "A Compound Fenced off from the Rest of the World: Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*." *Open Edition Journals*, 2017, <https://doi.org>. Accessed 17 Sept.2022.

Brockles, Emma. "There's a Sadness in Wanting the Things that Give Others Their Life's Meaning." *The Guardian*, 25 May 2018, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). Accessed 9 Oct 2022.

Brodzki, Bella, and Celeste Schenck. *Life / Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Cornell University Press, 1988.

Brown, Ivana. "Mommy Memoirs: Feminism, Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*. Vol.8, No.1-2. 2006. [www.jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/](http://www.jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/) Accessed 01 May 2023.

Budgeon, Shelley. *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

- Buren, Jane Van. *Mothers and Daughters and the Origins of Female Subjectivity*. Routledge, 2007.
- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Casarino, Cesare, and Andrea Righi, editors. *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*. Translated by Mark Willaim Epstein. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Chanana, Kuhu. "Plurality of Lesbian Existence in Modern Indian Writers: Manju Kapur, Rajkamal Chaudhary and Geetanjali Shree." *Indian Literature*, Vol.54, No. 3. June 2010.
- Chanfrault-Duchet, Marie-Francoise. "Textualisation of the Self and Gender Identity in the Life Story." *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* edited by Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, Routledge, 2000.
- Chavkin, Wendy, and Jane Maree Maher. *The Globalization of Motherhood: Deconstructions and Reconstructions of Biology and Care*. Routledge, 2010.
- Chertok, Leon. *Motherhood and Personality: Psychosomatic Aspects of Childbirth*. Tavistock Publications Limited, 1969.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978.

- Chrastil, Rachel. *How To Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Christensen, Kate. "Killing the Puritan Within." *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage*. Perennial, 2002.
- Cosslett, Tess, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield. editors. *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*. Routledge, 2000.
- Coulter, Rebecca. "Perspectives of Motherhood: A Review Essay." *Atlantis*. 1985. Vol.10, No.2. <https://journals.msvu.ca> Accessed 13 Dec 2022.
- Crittenden, Ann. *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*. An Owl Book, 2001.
- Cusk, Rachel. *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*. Faber and Faber, 2008.
- "Shakespeare's Daughters." *The Guardian*, 12 Dec. 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com>. Accessed 17 Sept. 2022.
- "I was only being honest." *The Guardian*, 21 Mar. 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk>. Accessed 18 Sept. 2022.
- Dally, Ann. *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*. Schocken Books, 1983.
- Daly, Brenda O. and Maureen T. Reddy. (editors) *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*. The University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

De Beauvoir, Simon. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2011.

De Mause, Lloyd. editor. *The History of Childhood*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers INC, 1974.

Deshpande, Shashi. "Learning to be a Mother." *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood*. SAGE Publications, 2013.

--- *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. Penguin, 2003.

Dey, Claudia. "The Child Thing: An Interview with Sheila Heti." *The Paris Review*, 26 April 2018. [www.theparisreview.org](http://www.theparisreview.org). Accessed 9 Oct. 2022.

Ditum, Sarah. "Review of *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all Decisions*." *The Times*, February 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk> Accessed 03 Dec. 2022.

Donath, Orna. *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*. North Atlantic Books, 2017.

Douglas Susan, and Meredith Michaels. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. Free Press, 2004.

Doyle, Nora. "Conclusion: In Search of the Maternal Body Past and Present." *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America*, University of North Carolina Press, 2018. pp. 203–10. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org> Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

Dutta, Sangeeta. "Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.25, No. 42/43, Oct. 1990.

- Eagleton, Mary. *Feminist Literary Criticism*. Longman Group, 1991.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Verso, 2021.
- Enright, Anne. *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*. Vintage, 2022.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. W.W Norton, 1968.
- Esnard, Talia. "Mothering and Entrepreneurship: Experiences of Single Women in St.Lucia." *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, Vol. 4, No.1, 2016.
- Euripedes. *Medea*. 431 BC. Translated by Ian Johnston [www.marcuswitcher.com](http://www.marcuswitcher.com)  
Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.
- Feeny, Madeleine. "Review of *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all Decisions*." *Evening Standard*, February 2021.  
<https://www.standard.co.uk> Accessed 01 Dec. 2022.
- Feigel, Lara. "To breed or not to breed." *The Guardian*, 6 June 2018.  
[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), Accessed 9 Oct. 2022.
- Fields, Jenn. Book Review of *Motherhood*. *RUNSPOTRUN*, 6 July 2018.  
[www.runspotrun.com](http://www.runspotrun.com), Accessed 11 Oct. 2022.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. Bantam Book, 1970.
- Fischer, Molly. "Should Sheila Have a Baby?" *New York Magazine*, 30 April 2018.  
[www.thecut.com](http://www.thecut.com). Accessed 10 Oct. 2022.

Fredman, Sara. "Having a Baby Gained Me More Friends and Earned Me More Money: A Conversation with Nell Frizzell." *Write Like a Mother*, February 2021. <https://sarafredman.substack.com> Accessed 03 Dec. 2022.

Freedman, Estelle B. *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*. Ballantine Books, 2002.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Frizzell, Nell. *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all Decisions*. Penguin Random House, 2021.

Frye, Joanne S. "Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood." *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures* edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010.

Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Crossing Press, 1983.

Garbes, Angela. *Like A Mother: A Feminist Journey Through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy*. Harper Wave, 2018.

Garcia, Manon. *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives*. Princeton University Press, 2021.

Gillespie, Rosemary. "Voluntary childlessness in the United Kingdom." *Reproductive Health Matters*, 1999. 43-53, DOI: [10.1016/S0968-8080\(99\)90111-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(99)90111-8). Accessed 01 May 2023.

- Giri, Aditi. "Exclusive Interview on *A Married Woman*." *Times of India*, March 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com> Accessed 04 April 2023.
- Glaser, Eliane. *Motherhood: A Manifesto*. 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 2021.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey. editors. *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*. Routledge, 1994.
- Goodman, Robin Truth. editor. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Feminist Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Granju, Katie Allison. "Navel-Gazing Their Way through Parenthood." *Salon*, 21 Oct. 2003, [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com) Accessed 29 April 2023.
- Gross, Emma. "Motherhood in Feminist Theory." *Affilia*, Vol.13. Issue 3. Oct 1998. <https://journals.sagepub.com> Accessed 7 April 2023
- Gulli, Cathi. Review of *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Enright. *MACLEAN'S*. 12 June 2012. <https://www.macleans.ca> Accessed 01 Nov. 2022.
- Hadley, Heidi Lyn. "Good Mother / Bad Mother: The Representation of Mothers in Printz-Award-Winning Literature." *The Alan Review*, June 2018. <https://www.researchgate.net> Accessed 30 April 2023.
- Hall, Lucy B, Anna L. Weissman, and Laura J. Shepherd. editors. *Troubling Motherhood: Maternity in Global Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Hallstein, Lynn O'Brien. *Bikini-Ready Moms: Celebrity Profiles, Motherhood and the Body*. Suny Press, 2015.

Hanauer, Cathi. *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage*. Perennial, 2002.

Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*. University of California Press, 1997.

Hanson, Clare. "The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity"  
<https://doi.org>. Accessed 19 Sept.2022.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. Vintage, 2018.

Hewett, Heather. "Motherhood Memoirs." *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*. edited by Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, Andrea O'Reilly, and Melinda Vandenberg Giles. Routledge, 2020.

Hirshman, Lind R. *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*. Viking (Penguin Group), 2006.

Hochschild, Arlie, and Anne Machung. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. Penguin Books, 2012.

Hogenboom, Melissa. *The Motherhood Complex: The Story of Our Changing Selves*. PIATKUS, 2021.



- Hollingworth, Leta S. "Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children." *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, Vol. 22, No.1. July 1916. pp 19-29. <https://www.jstor.org> Accessed 22 Jan. 2023.
- Hoque, Dr, Raizul. "A Critical Analysis of the Women Characters in the Novels of Manju Kapur." *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field*, Vol.7, Issue 12, Dec 2021. <https://www.ijirmf.com> Accessed 6 April 2023.
- Hult, C. "Writer in the House." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 1999. <https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca>. Accessed 6 April 2023.
- Irigaray, Luce. "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other." *Chicago Journals*, Vol.7, No.1. Autumn 1981. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org). Accessed 15 Oct. 2022.
- *This Sex Which is Not One*. Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. SAGE, 2011.
- Jeremiah, Emily. "Broken Nights, Shattered Selves: Maternal Ambivalence and the Ethics of Interruption in Sarah Moss' Novel *Night Waking*." *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*. edited by Gill Rye, Victoria Browne, Adalgisa Giorgio, Emily Jeremiah, and Abigail Lee Six. Routledge, 2018.

Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1981.

Kane, Kavita. *Ahalya's Awakening*. Rupa, 2019.

Kapur, Manju. *A Married Woman*. IndiaInk, 2002.

--- *Custody*. Random House India, 2011.

--- *Difficult Daughters*. Faber and Faber, 1998.

--- *Home*. Vintage, 2006.

--- *The Immigrant*. Penguin Books, 2010.

Kelly, Maura. "Women's Voluntary Childlessness: A Radical Rejection of Motherhood?" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3/4, 2009, pp. 157–72. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Kirkup, Bill et al. editor. *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Routledge, 2000.

Kirsch, Adam. "The Art of Parenthood." *The Atlantic*, 13 May 2018.

[www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com) Accessed 9 Oct. 2022.

Kitzinger, Sheila. *Giving Birth: The Parents' Emotions in Childbirth*. Victor Gollancz, 1971.

Knott, Sarah. *Mother: An Unconventional History*. Viking, 2019.

Krishnaraj, Maithreyi. *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment?* Routledge, 2010.

Kristeva, Julia. "Motherhood Today." 2005. <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>

Accessed. 16 April 2023.

Kristeva, Julia, Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. "Women's Studies." *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, Vol.7, No.1, 1981. <https://warwick.ac.uk>

Accessed 16 May 2023.

Kumaran, S., and S. Alexander. "An Outlook of Radical Feminism in Manju Kapur's *Custody*." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cycle Research*, Vol. XII, Issue XI, Nov. 2020.

Lax, Ruth F. "Motherhood is Unending." *Motherhood in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Mariam Alizade, Karnac, 2006.

Lazarre, Jane. *The Mother Knot*. Duke University Press, 1976.

Leaver, Kate. "Sheila Heti Asks If She Should Have a Baby in Her New Book." *Refinery29*, 26 May 2018. [www.refinery29.com](http://www.refinery29.com). Accessed 10 Oct. 2022.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

Lerner, Harriet. *The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life*. Happer Collins, 2009.

Leve, Ariel. *An Abbreviated Life: A Memoir*. Harper Collins, 2016.

Lewis, Lisa. L. Interview. "A Conversation with Anne Enright." *Literary Mama*, April 2013. <https://literarymama.com> Accessed 01 Nov. 2022

Lowy, Margo. *The Maternal Experience: Encounters with Ambivalence and Love*.

Routledge, 2021.

Lustgarten, Alicia Leisse de. "The Impossible Being of the Mother." *Motherhood in*

*the Twenty-First Century*. edited by Mariam Alizade, KARNAC, 2006.

Marneffe, de Daphne. *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love and the Inner Life*.

Scribner, 2019.

Mason, Elinor. *Feminist Philosophy: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2022.

Maushart, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes*

*Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't*. Penguin Books, 1999.

McCulloch, Alice. "The Rise of the Fetal Citizen." *Women's Studies Journal*,

Vol.26. No.2. December 2012. [www.wsanz.org.nz](http://www.wsanz.org.nz) Accessed 16 Jan. 2023.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. University of Illinois Press, 1969.

Mills, Eleanor. "A Review of *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story*." *The*

*Sunday Times*, February 2020. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk> Accessed 18

Nov. 2022.

Mitra, Reena. *Critical Response to Literatures in English*. Atlantic Publishers, 2005.

Montagu, Ashley. *Man in Process*. World Publishing Company, 1961.

--- *Natural Superiority of Women*. Altamira. 1999.

Mori, Gina Ferrara. *From Pregnancy to Motherhood: Psychoanalytic Aspects of the*

*Mother-child Relationship*. Routledge, 2015.

Moss, Sarah. *Night Waking*. Granta Publishers, 2011.

Mukhopadhyay, Arpita. *Feminisms*. Orient Blackswan, 2014.

Mussolini, Benito. Speech to the Chamber of Deputies (28 April 1939), quoted in *The Military Quotation Book*. edited by James Charlton, Thomas Dunne Books, 2002.

Nair, Anita. "Book Review: Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*". *India Today*, July 2012. <https://www.indiatoday.in> Accessed 4 April 2023.

Naqvi, Zehra. *The Reluctant Mother: A Story No One Wants to Tell*. Hay House Publishers, 2021.

Newman, Judith. "The consequences of Motherhood." *The New York Times*, 11 May 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com> Accessed 01 Nov. 2022.

Niranjana, Tejaswini. (Translator). "In the Forest Sithamma Gives Birth." *Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present-Volume 1: 600 B.C. to the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. The Feminist Press, 1991.

Oakley, Ann. *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History*. Policy Press, 2021.

--- *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*. Policy Press, 2019.

O'Brien, Mary. "Viewpoint: Feminist Theory and Dialectical Logic." *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, Vol.7, No. 1. 1981.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu> Accessed 19 Nov. 2022

--- *The Politics of Reproduction*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

O’Keeffe, Alice. “What does motherhood feel like.” *The Guardian*, February 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com> Accessed 18 Nov. 2022.

O’Reilly, Andrea. *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*. Demeter Press, 2016.

--- editor. *Feminist Mothering*. University of New York Press, 2008.

--- “Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century”. *Hecate Press*, Vol. 36. Issue 1-2. 2010.

<https://go.gale.com> Accessed 16 April 2023.

--- *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born*. State University of New York Press, 2004.

--- “The Motherhood Memoir and the ‘New Momism’: Biting the Hand That Feeds You.” *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures* edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010.

--- “Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers.” *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* edited by Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, Andrea O’Reilly, and Melinda Vandenbeld Giles. Routledge, 2020.

Orgad, Shani. *Heading Home: Motherhood, Work, and the Failed Promise of Equality*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

Oxford Languages Dictionary <https://languages.oup.com> Accessed 25 April 2023.

Oyler, Laura. "Motherhood!" *The Baffler*, 1 May 2018. [www.thebaffler.com](http://www.thebaffler.com).

Accessed 10 Oct. 2022.

Parkes, Olivia. "Rachel Cusk Examines the Power of Motherhood by Ignoring It."

19 January 2017. <https://www.vice.com>. Accessed 7 Sept. 2022.

Parker, Rozsika. *Mother Love/ Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*.

Basic Books, 1995.

Paskin, Willa. "Art or Babies." *Slate*, 3 May 2018. [www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com). Accessed 13

Oct. 2022.

Patel, Pratibha. "An Inner Voyage of Existence: An Introspection of Manju Kapur's

*A Married Woman and Immigrant*". *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*. Vol 8, Issue VIII, July 2017. <https://www.the-criterion.com>.

Accessed 6 April 2023.

Patel, Zoya. "Review of *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all*

*Decisions*". *The Canberra Times*, March 2021.

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au> Accessed 03 Dec. 2022.

Pearce, Tola Olu and Andrea Moraes. editors. *Global Perspectives on Motherhood,*

*Mothering and Masculinities*. Demeter Press, 2021.

Peck, Ellen. *The Baby Trap*. Pinnacle Books, 1971.

Petchesky, Rosalind P. *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom*. Longman, 1984.

Philips, Deborah. *Women's Fiction From 1945 to Today*. Bloomsbury, 2006.

Price, Danielle. "Mother Luck: A Review of *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* and *The Lucky Ones*." *Literary Mama*, February 2005.

<https://literarymama.com>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2022.

Podnieks, Elizabeth and Andrea O'Reilly. editors. "Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives."

*Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010.

Putnam, Conan. "An Interview with Anne Enright." *Culture.org*, 1 Jan 2014.

<https://culture.org>. Accessed 01 Nov. 2022.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1986.

Rio, Maria Amor Barros del. "Caroline Moreira Eufrausino's Anne Enright

Feminine Aesthetics: Writing, Mothering, Spiraling." *ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol.23, No.1, 2021, pp 185-188.

Rooney, Sally. "Get a Lobotomy." *London Review of Books*, Vol.40, no.16. 30

August 2018. [www.lrb.co.uk](http://www.lrb.co.uk). Accessed 9 Oct. 2022.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. Faber and Faber, 2019.



- Ross, Lynda Rachelle. *Interrogating Motherhood*. A U Press, 2016.
- Rothman, Barbara Katz. *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1989.
- Rucz, Naomi. "A Review of *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother's Story*." *Literary Mama*, September/ October 2020. <https://literarymama.com>  
Accessed 13 Nov. 2022
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Beacon Press, 1989.
- Ruggemeier, Anne. "Autobiographies: Kureishi, Miller, Weibe, Coetzee and Bechdel - Self-Reflexivity in Contemporary English Auto / Biographies." *Self-Reflection in Literature* edited by Florian Lippert and Marcel Schmid. Bill Rodopi, 2020.
- Rukeyser, Muriel. "Myth." *Breaking Open*, 1973.  
<http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org>. Accessed on 14 May 2023.
- Rye, Gill, et al. *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*. Routledge, 2018.
- Saini, Angela. *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong – and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story*. Beacon Press, 2017.
- Saldanha, Virginia. "The Power of Religion Over Women in India." *Global Sisters Report*, Nov. 2016. <https://www.globalsistersreport.org>. Accessed 7 April 2023.

Saliyevn, Raximova Umida. "Identity, Gender and Space in Ann Enright's Novels."

*Middle European Scientific Bulletin*, Vol.13. June 2021.

Sandel, Michael J. *Justice: What's The Right Thing to Do*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

Satterfield, Jane. Review of *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, by Rachel Cusk.

*Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, Vol. 6, no. 1, 2022, pp.204 – 205. <https://core.ac.uk>. Accessed 7 Sept. 2022.

Schwartz, Alexandra. "To have and to Do." *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2018.

[www.newyorker.com/magazine](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine). Accessed 9 Oct. 2022

See, Carolyn. "Anne Enright's Making Babies: At times pleasing, at times troubling." *The Washington Post*, 19 April 2012.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com>. Accessed 01 Nov. 2021.

Selvaratnam, Tanya. *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism and The Reality of the Biological Clock*. Prometheus Books, 2014.

Simpson, Bria. *The Balanced Mom: Raising Your Kids Without Losing Your Self*. New Harbinger Publications, 2006.

Singh, Chandra Nisha. *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing: Only So Far and No Further*. Atlantic Publications and Distributors, 2022.

Singh, Prabhat K. "The Narrative Strands in the Indian English Novel: Needs, Desires and Directions." *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*. Cambridge Scholars, 2013.

Smith, Gwendolyn. Review of *The Panic Years: Dates, Doubts and the Mother of all Decisions.*” March 2021. <https://inews.co.uk> Accessed 03 Dec. 2022.

Soderback, Fanny. “Birth” *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Feminist Theory.* Bloomsbury, 2019.

Steinem, Gloriana. “Review of *An Abbreviated Life: A Memoir.*” SCRIBD  
<https://www.scribd.com> Accessed 06 Dec. 2022.

Stone, Alison. “Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity.” *Mothering and Psychoanalysis: Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Petra Bueskens. Demeter Press, 2014

--- “Beauvoir and the Ambiguities of Motherhood.” *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir.* pp.122-133. 2017. <https://www.researchgate.net>. Accessed 01 May 2023.

Stroud, Clover. *My Wild and Sleepless Nights: A Mother’s Story.* Penguin Random House, 2021.

Sumner, William Graham. *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals.* Ginn and Company, 1906.  
<https://www.gutenberg.org> Accessed 22 Jan. 2023

Sweetman, Susannah. “Birth Fear and the Subjugation of Women’s Strength: Towards a Broader Conceptualization of Femininity in Birth.” *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe.* Edited by Gill Rye, et al. Routledge, 2018.

Tennyson, Alfred. *The Princess and Maud*. Philadelphia, 1895.

Thorpe, Vanessa. "No going back." *The Guardian*, 1 August 2004.

<https://www.theguardian.com> Accessed 01 Nov. 2022.

Thurer, Shari L. *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*. Penguin Books, 1995.

Tiemann, Amy. *Mojo Mom: Nurturing Your Self While Raising a Family*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2005.

Toibin, Colm. *The Testament of Mary*. Scribner, 2012.

Tuana, Nancy. *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature*. Indiana University Press, 1993.

Warner, Judith. *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. Riverhead Books, 2005.

Warrington, Ruby. *Women Without Kids: The Revolutionary Rise of an Unsung Sisterhood*. Sounds True, 2023.

Weissman, Anna L. "Ideal Citizens and Family Values: The Politics of Reproductive Fitness." *Troubling Motherhood: Maternity in Global Politics* edited by Lucy B. Hall, Anna L. Weissman, and Laura J. Shepherd. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Welldon, Estela V. *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. KONARC Books Ltd, 2004.

Wharton, Edith. *The Mother's Recompense*. Scribner, 1996.

Wilson, Rebecca. "Mother Knows Best? Critical Maternal Ethics and the Rape Clause." *Troubling Motherhood: Maternity in Global Politics* edited by Lucy B. Hall, Anna L. Weissman, and Laura J. Shepherd. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Winiecki, Emma. Book Review of *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism and The Reality of the Biological Clock*. 18 Feb 2014. <https://www.girlsglobe.org>. Accessed 30 April 2023.

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, 2005.

Wolf, Kate. "A Fundamentally Absurd Question: Talking with *Motherhood* author Sheila Heti." *Angeles Review of Books*, 7 May 2018. [www.lareviewofbooks.org](http://www.lareviewofbooks.org) Accessed 12 Oct. 2022.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The Scott Library, 1792.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Feedbooks, 1929.

Wright, J. Lenore. *Athena to Barbie: Bodies, Archetypes, and Women's Search for Self*. Fortress Press, 2021.

Yoder, Rachel. *Night Bitch: A Novel*. Doubleday, 2021.

Zufferey, Carole, and Fiona Buchanan. editors. *Intersections of Mothering: Feminist Accounts*. Routledge, 2020.