



IS MOTHERHOOD IN ANCIENT TIMES BOUND BY THE SHACKLES OF PATRIARCHY? — A COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Dr. Sayani Bhattacharya

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

Silda Chandrasekhar College (Affiliated to Vidyasagar University), Silda, Jhargram, West Bengal, India

Abstract: In the creative process of the world, although living cells were created initially, through the continuous course of evolution, the purusha and nature (prakriti) came into being. With the help of the purusha, nature manifests its own creative play. Perhaps because of physical strength, male dominance became established in society, and from there began the inception of patriarchy. Patriarchy was such an institution, within the bounds of which the identity of motherhood was expressed. Needless to say, through motherhood a woman's life achieves fulfilment. Just as the entire process from conception, gestation, labour pains, to the birth of the child falls under motherhood, so too does the physical and mental development and upbringing of the child belong to motherhood. Not only the child, but through motherhood, a woman's own physical and mental development also takes place. This entire matter was regulated by patriarchal society. Now the question is: through this institution, was it possible to fulfil a mother's own identity, or was it possible to foster her child's development? In discussing this matter, I have analysed several dimensions in the female and maternal characters of the Vedas, the Manusmriti, and the Mahabharata, and have tried to show whether motherhood was indeed shackled by patriarchy or whether through motherhood an independent and autonomous identity is expressed.

Index Terms - Motherhood, veda, patriarchy, worship.

I. INTRODUCTION

Creation, dissolution, and destruction—the combination of these three has formed the universe, and the smallest part of that universe is this earth. On this earth we dwell. With the emergence of life, humankind was not created at once; first, various cells of life and animal organisms were created. Then, through diverse evolutions, the human race came into being. In the creation of the human race, the male and female sexes emerged. The male was recognised as the first sex, and the female as the second sex.

The subject of our present discussion is motherhood. Motherhood is an essential aspect of a woman. However, to attain the fulfilment of this matter, it is not only women but the sincere cooperation of both women and men through which motherhood achieves its purpose. Yet, since the entire process from

conception, gestation, labour pains, to the birth of the child is conducted under the mother's supervision, our primary topic of discussion is motherhood.

In contemporary society, when children are born into our families, from very early childhood, distinctions are made between sons and daughters. Differences are imposed upon them in all matters—toys, clothing, and so on. From childhood, girls play with toys, dolls, household activities, etc., while boys engage in games involving warfare, fighting, and similar activities. As they grow a little older, a girl is taught to cook with care and attention. She is further told that after marriage she must go to her in-laws' home and that one day she must become a mother. From childhood through adolescence, the ideas of marriage, domestic life, and motherhood are subtly implanted in every girl. Embedded within these very notions are the seeds of patriarchy. Just as, in judging the future, one must rely on the past and the present, similarly, in discussing the fulfilment of motherhood in the current era, it is not possible to leave aside motherhood in the ancient age. Therefore, we shall now discuss motherhood in ancient times, particularly as represented in the Vedas, the Manusmriti, and the Mahabharata.

II. MOTHERHOOD IN THE VEDIC AGE

In the Vedic age, we find reference primarily to two types of women, namely Brahnavadini and Sadyodvahas.[1] Brahnavadini women remained unmarried throughout their lives and pursued the study of theology and philosophy. On the other hand, Sadyodvahas women could enter into marriage at the age of 15 or 16, having completed their education. In that age, references are found to learned women such as Vishwabara, Ghosha, and Apala. Many learned fathers desired learned daughters.

Just as, when one side of an object is illuminated, the other side remains shrouded in darkness, so too in the Vedic age, the status of women was not uniform everywhere. From childhood, a girl was taught to be a proper housewife, a proper wife, and the mother of many sons. Needless to say, greater importance was given to male children, because in that era daughters were neglected. Almost as soon as she attained understanding, a girl was bound in marriage. She had to bear all the responsibilities of the household, and in return, she had no personal autonomy. For instance, in the Rigveda, a verse states: "Be the empress of your father-in-law's family." [2]—that is, the fulfilment of motherhood was expressed through establishing oneself within domestic life.

Marriage was also regarded as another name for giving birth to children through a legitimate means. Therefore, when women became pregnant after marriage, there is mention of a ceremony called Pumsavana, the purpose of which was to ensure the birth of a male child. The Atharvaveda also speaks of obtaining a male child. In the Bharadvaja Grihya Sutra, it is said that three bowls of cooked rice are placed before the pregnant mother, and she is asked: "What do you see?" She replies: "A son and cattle." [3] From this, it is evident that far less attention was paid to the health of the pregnant mother than to the production of male child. The scriptures also contain provisions for abandoning a woman who could not give birth to a son and gave birth only to daughters. Again, the Manusmriti states that between the seed and the womb, the seed is superior. Therefore, women had no independence in matters of motherhood.

III. DIVINE MOTHERHOOD IN THE MANUSMRITI

Although the importance of a mother was recognized primarily through the birth of a son, the mother was nevertheless accorded a very high position within the family. The scripture states, "A teacher is equal to ten instructors, a father is equal to a teacher, and a mother is more worthy of honour than a thousand fathers." [4] For the purpose of maintaining familial well-being, he (Manu) has said that if the wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, and other women in a family remain aggrieved and lament, that family is soon destroyed; on the other hand, in a family where women do not grieve or lament, prosperity increases. [5] Therefore, within the household, there is no distinction between Shree (prosperity) and the wife. It is further stated that in the performance of domestic duties such as procreation, upbringing of children, and honouring guests, the wife's role is primary. He also stated that the true fulfilment of a woman lies in marriage.

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that motherhood was particularly revered. The scriptures say that a son can never repay his mother's debt; he can only do so if he performs the Sautramani sacrifice. Thus, motherhood was deemed divine. However, when did motherhood attain this divine status? It was when a woman gave birth to multiple sons in the family. If she failed to do so, her condition became an

object of pity. Even within these various laudatory statements about motherhood, can we discern the seeds of a deeper conspiracy? Were women's responsibilities confined merely to taking care of the family and giving birth to children? Did they have the right to pursue education of their own free will while living in their husband's household? Various questions were raised concerning their intellectual abilities. Thus, the Manusmriti states that women were not qualified to perform rituals accompanied by the recitation of Vedic mantras. They could not participate in sacrifices, and their lack of patience and knowledge was also emphasized.[6] On the other hand, the practice of Niyoga is mentioned, according to which, if a husband died without leaving a son, his wife could conceive a son through a male member of the same lineage.[7] Thus, in every respect, the seeds of patriarchy remained embedded.

IV. THE CONCEPT OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE MAHABHARATA

So far, we have discussed the nature of motherhood as depicted in the Vedic age and in the Manusmriti. We shall now examine the portrayal of motherhood in the epic Mahabharata through a discussion of several significant female characters. The Mahabharata is a monumental text of immense diversity, rich in complexity and colour, in which the author has portrayed various women characters in their own distinctive grandeur. Through these female figures, the epic conveys both affirmative and critical perspectives on womanhood and motherhood. While some narratives celebrate the strength, sacrifice, and moral authority of mothers, others reveal the constraints, sufferings, and social expectations imposed upon them. In the following discussion, we shall explore both the positive and negative dimensions of motherhood as reflected in the Mahabharata through the experiences and representations of its women characters.

First, let us turn our attention to negative motherhood. The first question that arises is: why have we viewed motherhood in this manner? Because motherhood signifies conception, nurturing, and aiding the overall development of a child — but a mother who cannot do this is considered a bad mother. For example, Ganga drowned her seven sons in the water. Again, Kunti, through her invocation to God Surya (the Sun), bore a son while still unmarried, and later abandoned him out of fear of public disgrace. Here, the contrarian aspect of the maternal character of Ganga or Kunti is revealed.

At the same time, the Mahabharata also presents several positive dimensions of motherhood. First, let us consider the motherhood of Satyawati, whose maternal life was characterized above all by the desire for her children's well-being and her deep affection for them. She never allowed Bhishma, the son of Shantanu, to become king, in order to secure the succession for her two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Here, we find a portrayal of Satyawati's excessive affection and partiality towards her sons.

Gandhari's love for her sons was even more pronounced. Yudhishtira, the son of Kunti, was the eldest child of the family, and, fearing that he might eventually become king, Gandhari caused her own pregnancy to be prematurely terminated. Even when her son Duryodhana deprived Yudhishtira and his brothers of all their possessions, she remained silent. Again, when Draupadi was publicly humiliated in the royal assembly by her son Dushasana and the others, she did not raise her voice in protest against the incident. She consistently sought to protect the interests of her sons.

Both of the forms of motherhood discussed above are characterized by deep affection for their children, and in both cases, the mothers did not hesitate to harm others in order to protect the interests of their own children. While Kunti has been presented as an example of the negative dimension of motherhood, we also find her extending her maternal affection towards her own children as well as towards other children.

Alongside human motherhood, the Mahabharata also portrays motherhood among demonesses. First, let us consider the demoness Hidimba. Hidimba, the wife of Bhima, despite being a demoness herself, always taught her son to stand by his father in times of danger, even though his father was a human being. It is here that we find an exemplary form of motherhood.

We have discussed motherhood across different eras. In every age, particular importance was attached to the birth of a male child. For the purpose of begetting a male child, the practice of conception through a man other than one's own husband was prevalent. The fundamental purpose of motherhood was largely centred on arranging the marriage of a daughter and producing a son. A daughter did not enjoy the same importance as a son, and special rituals and sacrifices were performed specifically for the purpose of obtaining male offspring. In the Mahabharata, we even encounter increasingly sophisticated forms of

obtaining a son, including references to the development of the embryo or foetus. According to the Dharmashastras, sons born as aurasa, kshetraja, krita, kanina, and gudhotpanna were entitled to inherit paternal property. However, dattaka, kṛtrima, svayamdatta, and paunarbhava sons were not entitled to such inheritance.[8] This indicates that the demand for a male child had reached such an extent that the production of a son through almost any accepted means was considered legitimate.

Thus, it appears that in the ancient Vedic scriptures, a woman's life was fulfilled through attaining motherhood. This motherhood found its fulfilment through the production of male offspring. Motherhood was considered divine, so it was a son's duty to serve his mother in her old age. This motherhood was proven divine only when she could give birth to a male child. If a girl had to be bound in marriage merely for the sake of obtaining a male child, does that not constitute the degradation of her feminine essence? Because being a mother does not mean that her womanhood is lost. It is true that motherhood is an essential characteristic of women. For as a girl grows up, the ideas of a household, a husband, and motherhood are ingrained in her mind. But there may well be many girls who do not wish to enter into marriage, do not wish to run a household, or do not wish to become mothers. It is true that we find some exceptional female characters like Ghosha and Apala in the Vedic age, but they are like drops in the ocean. On one hand, the practice of Niyoga has been prescribed for widows; on the other hand, by prescribing special sacrifices for producing sons, a girl's feminine identity has been usurped. Until she gave birth to a son, her importance was immense, but after childbirth, her life was humiliated. She had to endure this humiliation until the next conception.

While discussing the importance attached to the production of male offspring, I would like to examine a few female characters portrayed in the Mahabharata. Gandhari gave birth to one hundred sons and one daughter through an extraordinary method for the purpose of producing male offspring. Since Pandu was incapable of fathering children, Kunti invoked different gods and gave birth to three sons. Madri also adopted this unusual method. When Satyawati's two sons died, she compelled her two daughters-in-law, Ambika and Ambalika, to have sexual relations with their brother-in-law, Vedavyasa, solely for the purpose of producing sons. It may therefore be argued that, in prioritizing the status of motherhood, the woman's own identity as a woman was diminished.

V. CONCLUSION

Through a discussion of the position of motherhood as reflected in the Vedic scriptures, the Manusmriti, the Mahabharata, and other such texts, it becomes evident that motherhood in those times was deeply constrained by patriarchy. A woman's life could not be conducted independently and autonomously without the decision or permission of a man. Although women could, in certain circumstances, make decisions independently, motherhood itself remained heavily bound by patriarchal constraints. Giving birth to a son, serving the husband, and maintaining the prosperity of the household were regarded as a mother's principal duties during that period. Therefore, it may be concluded that under a patriarchal system, autonomy and freedom associated with motherhood were considerably restricted.

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