Chapter IV

Motherhood and Mothering

The attribution of divinity to mother is essentially an Indian concept. It glorifies mother as a divine form, elevating her to the level of a goddess. Nature is conceived of as a foster mother who nurtures and protects all created things. The ‘Shaktheya’ cult is the most logical manifestation of the Indian mode of worshipping the universal mother. The Indian outlook on woman is shaped and nurtured by the perception of divinity in feminine form. For example, Shakti is the counterpart and complement of Shiva. This angle of vision is the pivot of the Indian literary concept of womanhood, and the cardinal virtue of Indian philosophy. The glorification of the feminine principle underlies all classical mythologies, but not in relatively new and revealed religions.

Western feminist writers depict with psychological insight the social isolation and physical and mental torment to which the women are subjected in a male-centred society. They reveal two aspects of womanhood – woman as sufferer and as fighter. Depiction of woman’s predicament is central to the novels of writers like Fay Weldon and Margaret Drabble. Some women characters portrayed by Weldon have a certain kinship with the women in Hardy’s fiction. Praxis is akin to Eustacia Wye, and Madeleine, before her re-appearance as a revenant, is reminiscent of Susan Henchard. Fate gives a
twist to their lives, and they are the victims of the cruelties of a world, which is man-centric.

Womanhood in Fay Weldon manifests itself in two different lights – motherhood and mothering. Motherhood is the concept of a sacred institution and mothering is a sacred duty. There is also the possibility of an autobiographical element creeping into and governing an author’s depiction of motherhood, and her own experiences as a child and as a mother, dictating her pronouncements on the tasks of a mother. For instance, Weldon wrote *Puffball* after the birth of her fourth and final child in 1977, hoping to capture some of the extraordinary feelings and emotions of pregnancy and motherhood. To quote Weldon’s words:

*Puffball* was written soon after I became pregnant as it related to an actual experience. It was written deliberately fast because the feelings of being pregnant evaporate so quickly and the whole pattern of physical changes disappears months after you’ve had them. That novel was an attempt to nail them. (Kenyon 200)

The dual aspects of womanhood – motherhood and mothering – have been the alluring theme for novelists, especially feminist writers, in almost all flourishing literatures; Indian fiction in English, for example, as in the hands of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, is no exception.

According to Andrea O’Reilly, “motherhood refers to the institution of motherhood, which is male-defined and male-controlled, and mothering
refers to experiences of mothers which are female-defined and female-centred” (97). The role of mother, in all its depth and vicissitudes, can be entered through giving birth, adoption or marriage to a child’s father. The duties and rights of motherhood vary considerably. They depend on various factors like the mother’s position in society, her nature, age, race, marital status, sources of support and so on. The gender, the order of birth, physical condition and behaviour of the child influence the mother. That mothers parent differently from fathers is a matter to be attributed to both physiological and social factors, and feminist scholars have bestowed a lot of attention on this subject. It may be noted that motherhood is more than a biological event. Why women are willing to become mothers is a question answered by Chodorow with the help of psychoanalytic theory, by Lorber and Coser from a sociological point of view, and by Rossi with reference to the interplay between biology and social structure. Although medical advances have enlarged the potential for choice over whether and when to have children, societies vary in whether or not such action should be encouraged. For the most part, women’s decisions are constrained by policies created and maintained by men for political, economic or religiously guided goals. The concept of fertility seems to be mandated in some parts of the world but suppressed in others.

Perhaps, no area of family life is more laden with ideological baggage than that surrounding women’s roles as mothers. Though seemingly tied to the biological nature – women’s unique capacity for childbearing and lactation-
mothering, in fact, varies temporally and geographically. As distinct from mothering, motherhood is a social construction and a questioning of motherhood has been one of the central thrusts of feminist discourses. Feminists have uncovered the historical specificity of the concept of motherhood as women's chief vocation and primary identity. This concept developed among the white bourgeoisie in Western Europe and North America, with the rise of industrialization, as the transfer of manufacture out of the house gave rise to a new ideology of domesticity and womanhood. There was an obvious rift between publicly organised production and privately organised consumption and reproduction. A natural division of labour was posited, with men ruling the 'public' sphere of economy and polity, while women and children inherited the shrinking and narrow 'private' sphere of the household.

This period also saw the rise of social childhood. Childhood came to be seen as a special and valued period of life, and children were depicted as innocent, dependent beings in need of prolonged protection and care. This new construction of childhood required a contemporary conception of motherhood as a serious responsibility, one that required total and exclusive devotion. Women were deemed naturally suited for childcare because of their innate qualities of nurturance, self-sacrifice, moral purity and limitedness of purpose.

The extent to which women and families acted out the norms prescribed in the ideology cannot be verified. What is clear is that these norms were
appropriate for only a very limited sub-group within a narrow time span, namely the European and American bourgeoisie of the last two hundred years. Such prescriptions were largely irrelevant for the majority of working class families and women – native whites, immigrants, Afro-Americans and other social ethnics. For these groups, the ideal of full-time motherhood, even if desired, was unattainable. Men in these families rarely earned a ‘family wage’ and women had to continue income-earning activities in and out of the home with childcare and domestic labour. Even within comparable income levels, women of different ethnic groups adopted varying strategies for combining mothering and income earning. For example, Italian women preferred to remain at home, sending children out to work, while Afro-American women were more likely to keep children in school, while going out to work themselves.

Women of colour were not accorded the respect and social support for the mother role that white middle-class women received. Racist ideology triumphed over sexist ideology. Women of colour were not deemed to be truly women, exempting them from the protective cloaks of feminine frailty or womanly morality. Their roles as workers took precedence. Thus Black, Mexican-American and Japanese-American domestic servants were expected to devote long hours to taking care of their mistresses’ households and children, while leaving their own offspring in the care of others.

Despite their limited social base, norms founded on the assumption that motherhood is a full-time vocation have moulded the conception about
women and mothering. Women who could not fit themselves into the model were considered deviant. Even the large-scale movement of the white women into the labour force after World War II did not displace motherhood from its position as women's primary responsibility. It is interesting to note that employed mothers and wives found themselves in the now-familiar dilemma of the double day. The fact that most women today have admirably adapted themselves to the task of performing 'two jobs' has eroded the notion of motherhood as a full-time and exclusive responsibility.

"The ideology of motherhood has served an important mystifying function in capitalist society, simultaneously glorifying motherhood and marginalising mothering" as Evelyn Nakano Glenn rightly observes (360). Without taking into account their actual maternal status, all women have been shackled to the role, and their participation in activities other than mothering is strongly discouraged. If motherhood is their inevitable and indispensable vocation, other activities, regardless of whether or not they fetch income, are bound to have a negative impact on their full-time devotion to the role. It was widely presumed that children's development is totally dependent on the mothering they receive. Hence impossibly high standards were generally expected of every mother and they were made to feel guilty for less than perfect outcomes. In her essay "Who Are We This Time?" Mary Kay Blakely observes, "I wish it were true that a mother was the most powerful influence on her children, but her singular power is for a limited time only, in
early childhood, when most of us are half out of control ourselves” (38-39). Another side of idealizing motherhood is that it is mothers who are taken to task for all the problems and ills of their children, even in their adulthood. Mothers are often accused either of being neglectful and insufficiently loving, or of being smothering and over-protective. It is this fact that Mary Blakely emphasizes when she says, “While the stricken mothers … may be responsible for less than a fraction of a fraction of the blame for the violent eruptions of their sons, women habitually receive the major share of the blame” (39). In her article entitled “Of Birth of Fiction” Fay Weldon writes:

It is true that women in my novels often give birth, as do women in real life. It is true they often have children, not necessarily very nice children: as often just occasionally happens in real life – at which point mothers get blamed. (198)

Weldon adds:

But then mothers always get blamed, even more in real life than in fiction. Mothers get blamed, I notice, for generic male behaviour. If husbands behave badly around the house it is because their mothers failed to teach them better, not because their fathers failed to set a proper example. (198)

The stalwarts of the contemporary women’s movement prod the ideology associated with motherhood by challenging its inevitability. Giving women the choice whether or not to mother has been a major focus of the movement.
The freedom for choice is at the root of the struggle for access to birth control, abortion and forms of sexual repression separated from reproduction. It also lies at the core of the fight for the recognition of women's equality in the labour market, politics and other arenas lying outside the frontiers of the family.

The tendency to view motherhood as a social construction has, in turn, led feminists to question the organization of mothering in Western industrial societies. They point out that mothers in these societies are encapsulated in their roles. They are left isolated, over burdened and unsupported. These conditions tend to distort the mother-child relation, besides inflicting long-term damage on women and their children. Some feminist critics of motherhood assert that isolation engenders frustration and rage, which even lead mothers to become the oppressors or destroyers of their own children, particularly daughters. Nancy Chodorow strikes a note of warning about the negative consequences of a sexual division of labour that assigns women the primary responsibility for infant and childcare. The practice of entrusting children to mothers or female caretakers creates different developmental experiences for boys and girls. It results in distorted adult personalities. It encourages boys to devalue women in order to develop a masculine identity. This finally results in men undervaluing connections with others, and women concerning themselves excessively with relationships. The psychic differences between men and women enter our culture, which encourages men to deny
femininity and to be emotionally distant from women and from one another.

In pre-capitalist societies, parenting is not exclusively vested in the biological mother. Childcare is carried on in conjunction with other activities and is shared by kin and non-kin, with the result that the mothers do not feel themselves isolated. The responsibility of parenting spreads to a large kin-group or society as a whole. Some socialist states have attempted to enforce this kind of parenting through conscious design. Examples include policies designed to encourage male involvement in childcare by granting parental lives to fathers as well as mothers. Efforts are also made to ease the burden on women by establishing flexible work hours. Specific arrangements like funding nurseries and childcare centres facilitate non-kin childcare. These measures enable mothers to devote themselves to other activities, as well.

A critique of the mystique of motherhood emerges in some feminist accounts. The mystique implies that the mother alone holds her children’s fate in her hands. This view of the all-powerful, all-giving mother greatly distorts her actual power to shape her children’s lives. It reduces women to one dimension, and ignores the fact that they have activities, interests, needs and relationships, apart from mothering. The conditions imposed by a patriarchal and capitalist social order often tend to distort the mother’s work. Of course, women are given the responsibility of mothering; but they are deprived of the power to determine the actual conditions of mothering. There are two areas of particular concern and one of them is the medical system,
which has structured the childbirth process to enhance physician control and profits. The other refers to the manner in which the lives of women with dependent children are regulated by our welfare systems, which provide little scope for mothers to plan their children’s future.

Quite a different perspective on the limits of mothering is offered by Chodorow and Contratto in their essay “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother.” They think that the feminist writers whether they belong to the group of those who celebrate mothering, as does Adrienne Rich, or to the class of those who decry it, as for example, Dinnerstein does, share with conservative writers, a larger-than-life image of the mother. None of them have escaped the vision that underlies the myth: the image of mothers as omnipotent and potentially perfect, and of infants as passive and totally needy. Chodorow and Contratto point out that the feminists must abandon these fantasies and embrace a realistic view of mothers and children. In order to do this, they have to take into account the actual practice of mothering, and listen to mother’s own voices – a task that still remains undone.

In her famous book *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone points out that there is a universal answer to the question of why it is that women are dominated universally by men. According to her, it is reproduction that lies at the basis of female subjection. Biological mothering and its concomitant features of menstruation and the tyranny of heterosexual reproductive practices form the material base of women’s oppression. She makes a re-appraisal of
the Marxian concepts of class and production. She argues that the ‘material’ of the woman’s body is the source of her enslavement. She suggests that women should exploit the technological changes in order to enable them to seize control of reproduction, just as Marx has argued that the changes in capitalist production can help the working class to break their chains. She observes:

Just as to assure elimination of economic classes requires the revolt of the under class (the Proletariat) and, in a temporary dictatorship, their seizure of the means of production, so to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of reproduction: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility – the new population biology as well as the social institutions of child-bearing and child-rearing. (Humm 67-68)

Firestone thinks that women’s reproductive and productive roles are not distinct. The physical realities of reproduction encourage the association of women with domestic sphere and hence determine their social inferiority and lack of economic status. Her call for women’s control over reproduction became the key demand of the 1970 Women’s Liberation Conference in Britain. But Michele Barrett and others criticise Firestone for her universalism and for what they call her ‘Utopian hope’ that freedom can be achieved through
technology. Yet *The Dialectic of Sex* is a powerful book, since it recognizes woman’s oppression in a grand way, besides tracing a causal relationship between reproduction and the sexual division of labour.

Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* is a monumental work in which she reveals the ties between reproduction and sexuality, without hoping as Firestone did, that technology will magically undo them. Rich focuses attention on the ways in which society controls mothering by making the nuclear family the main reproductive institution. She describes the ‘erotics’ of motherhood and argues the case for a clearly confirmed tradition of maternal power. She distinguishes between the social institution of motherhood which controls women’s reproductive and sexual possibilities, and the experience of motherhood which, either as fact or as potential, gives women great pleasure and great power. In contradiction to de Beauvoir, Rich does not believe that women’s biological and reproductive capacities necessarily cause them to be oppressed. Both Firestone and Rich have been potent sources of influence for Fay Weldon in formulating her views on motherhood and mothering. Her *Puffball* embodies Firestone’s faith in the effectiveness of technology as well as Rich’s belief that motherhood is a source of pleasure and power.

*Of Woman Born* interweaves social psychology, biology and history in a new form of feminist scholarship in order to describe the might of matriarchy. Rich, like Andre Lorde, offers to transform women’s eroticism and
consciousness through a fresh understanding of women's bodies. To quote her words:

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers .... We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence — a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed.

This is where we have to begin. (285-86)

Nancy Chodorow, trained initially as a sociologist, became one of the most influential psychoanalytic theorists of sexual difference. She believes that the mother is the central element in differential identity formation. She focuses on the mother and on the pre-Oedipal period in reaction to Freud's focus on the father and on the Oedipus complex. Her work, *The Reproduction of Mothering* is a significant revision of Freudian theory with its major premise that it is mothering relations, not Oedipus complex, which structure gender differences. She points out:

A girl continues a pre-Oedipal relationship to her mother for a
long time. Freud is concerned that it takes the girl so long to develop an Oedipal attachment to her father and the ‘feminine’ sexual modes that go with this attachment .... Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves .... Boys are more likely to have been pushed out of the pre-Oedipal relationships and to have had to curtail their primary love and sense of empathic tie with their mother. (Humm 281)

Despite the deep, bio-chemical affinity existing between the mother and the female child, the relationship has been minimized and trivialised in the annals of patriarchy. Whether in the theological doctrines, art, sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal determinative dyad. While the father sees himself as “twice born” in his son, such a “second birth” is denied to mother and daughter. This attitude can be traced back to the days of the ancient Upanishads.

Chodorow’s observation that mothers try to mould their daughters like themselves is what Weldon makes use of in the depiction of Gwyneth in Female Friends, who tries in vain to fashion her daughter into a meek, and submissive creature like herself.

It is worth remembering in this context Margaret Drabble who is hailed as the ‘novelist of maternity’ depicting two generations of mothers – the bad mothers and the good mothers – in her novels like A Summer Bird-Cage. The
mothers of some of her protagonists who are themselves 'caged birds' make the lives of these heroines miserable by trapping them into the cages of their own conservative notions about what a mother should be. They are the 'bad mothers' of the first generation and Gwyneth takes her place among them. The protagonists who escape the cages set by these mothers do not try to trap their daughters and they belong to the class of 'good mothers' of the second generation. Chloe who resists Gwyneth's attempt to 'trap' her in her traditional concept of motherhood has her rightful place with the women of the second generation who are bound to establish a rich, rewarding and reciprocating mother-child bond.

Sara Ruddick takes maternal understanding to be the centre of woman's pacifist ethics and epistemology. In her article "Maternal Thinking" published in 1980, she argues that the values and knowledge derived from women's mothering capacities can adequately provide an ethical alternative to masculine aggression. Ruddick, like Adrienne Rich, does not limit mothering only to biological mothers. She thinks that maternal thinking is a form of cognition available to all women. It inculcates in women the skills of reconciliation, empathy and respect for others. She believes that these specifically female skills, if enacted publicly, will have the potential to transform all human life by promoting a politics of peace and ecology. She says, "I believe mothers do have a tradition of peacefulness that can be strengthened and mobilized for the public good" (Humm 299).
An interesting feature of a number of novels appearing in the 1970s is that they centre round the oppressive aspects of motherhood. These novels lay a lot of emphasis on the idea that women’s reproductive capacities make them vulnerable to male control – an idea that has engaged the attention of Shulamith Firestone. They make it appear that childbirth is a painful experience and that the task of bringing up children is an extremely burdensome duty, assigned to women. But a different attitude is discernible in the novels written in the 1980s. They handle the topics differently in that they celebrate the joys of motherhood. They depict motherhood as an experience that affords immeasurable pleasure and a sort of ambiguous power. But *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which Margaret Atwood wrote in 1985, embodies a blend of these contrary perspectives. Her novel throws light on the personal and the political facts of motherhood. The methods adopted by the various novelists who deal with the problem of motherhood vary strikingly, and they embody realism, anti-realism and fantasy as distinctive features of their style. A realistic representation of the plight of mothers in the patriarchal inheritance is what Weldon offers in some of her novels.

The attitude to motherhood that prevailed in the 1970s had been negative, by and large. Eisenstein rightly describes the 1970s as a period in which “feminism and motherhood were in diametrical opposition” (Palmer 122). The idea that the bearing and rearing of children compose a kind of drudgery was very much in vogue, at the time. Many theorists maintain that
the duties and responsibilities associated with childbirth and the raising of children result in keeping women attached inseparably to the home. Women are thus barred from participation in the public sphere. They find it impossible to accept paid employment or play a decisive role in the field of politics. Opportunities are denied to them to take up any constructive work outside the narrow confines of the household. Their freedom is restricted, to a great extent, and they are constrained to resign themselves to their lot. This is the reason why the socialist feminists underscore the need for devising ways and means to liberate women from the practice and ideology of motherhood. Firestone and Mitchell, the stalwarts in the field of feminism, have vociferously advocated freedom for women from the servility of domesticity, childbirth and care. The former suggests that the biological birth processes should be replaced by artificial methods of reproduction, and the latter is known for her strong argument in favour of collective childcare and abortion on demand. Weldon's remarks in her article “Of Birth and Fiction” are pertinent in this context. She says:

Babies can grow in vitro, outside wombs. You need an egg, some sperm, a nice warm broth, and lo, life begins! A whole new personality; a dash of this, a dollop of that, emerges .... Birth isn’t what it was. Mothers provide wombs, it’s true, wherein a foetus of much-disputed legal ownership can grow: but the feeling still is, well, any one could do it. Mothers “bond” – but
even that has clinical, dismissive overtones. Even a baby duckling
bonds with the mother, waddles after it: nothing special – just
instinct. The only comfort I can find in this changing situation
... is that to say men have art and women have babies now seems
an impossible thing to say. (199)

Simone de Beauvoir’s observations that women’s role as Other dates
from pre-history and derives from her relegation to the reproductive sphere,
which leads to the sexual division of labour and that women are victims of
menstruation and maternity are in conformity with Weldon’s speculations on
motherhood. Weldon’s remark that “Nature is our enemy” (DAW 61) echoes
de Beauvoir’s argument. “Women are hopelessly handicapped by their
biological natures” (203), says Hilda in Weldon’s Praxis. Weldon seems to
be certain that the reproductive capacities of women keep a curb on their
freedom, making them especially prone to male domination, and domestic
servility.

The negative attitude to motherhood that the feminists assumed during
the early years of the movement was tinged with resentment against the very
figure of the mother. The mother was often the target of a great deal of criticism
and she was sarcastically referred to as the tool of patriarchy. The part she
played in nurturing children into traditional gender roles was severely attacked.
It was argued that the way she trained her children often facilitated male
supremacy and female subordination. Chodorow’s warning about the negative
consequences of women’s mothering habits has great relevance in this context. Weldon, in *Female Friends*, presents a situation, which shows a daughter questioning her mother’s attempt to mould her into a submissive woman that takes male supremacy for granted. Gwyneth tries her best to inculcate in her daughter Chloe the values of forgiveness and silent suffering which, according to her, are indispensable for all women. “Understand and forgive” (FF 1) – this is the familiar refrain that Chloe often hears from her mother. She spares no pains to convince her daughter that women have to be content with an inferior status, both in society and family. But Chloe who brims over with self-respect strongly resents her mother’s attempt to turn her into a meek and gentle person. Chloe says:

Understand and forgive. It is what my mother taught me to do, poor patient gentle Christian soul, and the discipline she herself practised, and the reason she died in poverty, alone and neglected. The soles of her poor slippers which I took out from under the bed and threw away so as not to shame her in front of the undertaker, were quite worn through by dutiful shuffling. Flip-flop. Slipper slop. Drifting and dusting a life away .... Understand and forgive, my mother said, and the effort has quite exhausted me. I could do with some anger to energise me, and bring me back to life again. But where can I find that anger? (FF 1-2)
Chloe’s words echo the hostile approach adopted by the early feminists to motherhood, especially to the maternal tendency to treat the son and daughter differently. Chloe vehemently opposes her mother’s persistent efforts to relegate herself into a silent, submissive, suffering woman – a mere puppet of patriarchy.

It may be noted that the negative attitude to motherhood is closely linked up with a negative approach to femininity. This is because the mothering behaviour and feminine behaviour are inextricably connected. The works of Baker Miller and others have paved the way for a re-evaluation of motherhood. Feminine attributes like the capacity to nurture, co-operate and express emotions fall within the purview of their enquiry. The inseparable connection between motherhood and femininity has been thoroughly explored in certain works of fiction. Weldon and Tennant, for example, devote a lot of attention to making a probe into the contradictions of the strength and weakness inherent in the maternal position. Some of their works focus on maternal power and vulnerability. They also highlight the disruptive influence that motherhood and femininity exert on the phallocratic culture and the values it cherishes.

There are a number of inconsistencies in the various attitudes to motherhood adopted by feminists. Glaring contradictions exist between theory and practice. Of course, motherhood has gained great prominence in academic discourses and works of fiction. All this has done only very little to better the lot of mothers. Their economic conditions and social position have not improved, and they are as low as ever. Not only the society at large, but also
the Women's Movement has been helpful to resolve the issues relating to motherhood. There has been widespread complaint about the degradation, discrimination, and hatred meted out to mothers by feminists who are childless. Motherhood and its political implications have been a contentious issue among feminists. A charge brought against cultural feminists is that it is they who have promoted a cult of motherhood that reaffirms the stereotypical view of women as the eternal nurturers. It is argued that the popularity accorded to motherhood in contemporary fiction and culture is the outcome of a lack of satisfaction on the part of women in other spheres of life. Lynne Segal rightly observes:

In my view, the new focus on mothering, the maternal revival in feminism, has come partly from feminists' disappointment that our aspirations to engage in creative and rewarding work, to struggle for social change, to build warm and supportive communal spaces and friendship networks – as well as to choose to have children – have proved so often difficult, stressful or transitory. (17)

Segal's view is not without truth. The fact that it has become a fashion among contemporary novelists and short-story writers to build their works on themes of motherhood and mothering, rather than on those relating to women's struggles in the field of paid employment or politics, only confirms the relevance of Segal's observation. It is not, however, easy to evaluate whether
the primacy accorded to motherhood in fictional works has invited attention or deflected it from the problems of actual mothers. Feminist theorists who take interest in motherhood differ considerably in regard to the maternal processes they wish to highlight – biological, psychological or domestic. But they are all unanimous in acknowledging the importance that the topic enjoys in the domain of sexual politics and the dialectic of sex. Adrienne Rich observes that motherhood is a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men. To quote her words, “I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children: and the institution, which aims at ensuring that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (13). Ann Oakley’s statement in Subject Women, a socialist feminist study, that the way “reproduction is managed is inseparable from how women are managed and controlled” (206) is memorable in this context.

Detailed study of the sexual politics of motherhood constitutes a major part in fictional works. Weldon’s The President’s Child has its major focus on this area. Woman’s complex position in the system of patrilineal inheritance is what it celebrates. The heroic struggle on the part of Isabel against Dandy Ivel, an American Presidential candidate, and his henchmen who try to murder her for the possession of the son she bore him is the pivotal event in the novel. Isabel comes to the inescapable conclusion that male power, when at
stake, has no regard for the happiness of women and children. Dandy’s fear that his illegal son may pose a threat to his political prospects makes him resort to foul tactics. The battle between Isabel and Dandy for the possession of Jason, their son, makes Weldon pursue the theme of the patrilineal inheritance system, which represents the traditional form of patriarchal relations prevailing in the west. This system relegates woman to the role of a mere bearer of children, preferably sons, who will inherit the father’s name and property, in addition to treating her as an object of exchange, cementing bonds between men. Julia Kristeva rightly points out in *About Chinese Women*, translated by Anita Barrows the miserable plight of the woman who finds herself finally denied the right to possess the son she bears her husband who claims them as his own property. In certain cases, the part she plays in the act of procreation is not even acknowledged. In accord with this focus, Weldon interprets the dialectic of sex as a battle between the sexes in order to gain control of women’s reproductive capacities and the sons she bears. By making her novel revolve around the theme of the patrilineal system of inheritance, Weldon provides ample scope for a probe into the contradictions of power and vulnerability associated with women’s reproductive capacities. Isabel’s status as a mother gives her a sense of personal pleasure and fulfilment and it enhances her prestige in a society of male dominance. At the same time, it makes her highly vulnerable to male manipulations and machinations.
The contradictions of power and vulnerability emanating from the maternal position, particularly from the woman's capacity to bear and rear children, a favourite theme of Weldon, dominate other fictional works as well. Walker's *Meridian* published in 1976, for instance, amply illustrates how childbearing makes woman a prey to male control and manipulation. Walker's novel, however, is noteworthy for its positive perceptions. She does not fail to stress woman's capacity to transcend restrictions to the male role and achieve independence, by extricating herself from all her limitations. Weldon's *Puffball* and Tennant's *Alice Fell*, both appearing in the 1980, share several common features. A 'cultural feminist' approach identifying woman with nature and the body is their common characteristic. Both the writers present motherhood in an ambiguous light. They celebrate motherhood by idealizing the processes of birth and reproduction. At the same time, they present it as a source of conflict between the sexes.

All the four novels mentioned above have a thematic unity, which lies in the fact that they centre round the contradictions of power and vulnerability issuing from childbearing. This is a topic, which feminist theorists have explored in detail. Adrienne Rich, while speaking about the mother's ambiguous position mentions a contradiction that exists in patriarchy. It relates to the laws and sanctions designed to render women powerless, attributing to mothers, superhuman powers and virtues. The dichotomy of maternal power and female powerlessness is cardinal to Dinnerstein’s reflections in *The*
Mermaid and Minotaur. Her argument is that the subordinate role assigned to women in public life arises, to a great extent, from the tremendous power that mothers possess over their children in the realm of the private home. The patriarchal social order counters the threat posed by maternal power by restricting women’s participation in activities in the public sphere. The question whether the power that the mother wields at home is illusory or real has perplexed feminists. Psychoanalytic theorists have formulated the concept of the ‘Phallic mother’ in order to refer to the fantasy image of the omnipotent mother which every child has in mind. The ideas of Rich and Dinnerstein have been a potent source of influence for Weldon and Tenant in shaping their perceptions on motherhood, as we find in Puffball and Alice Fell.

What is particularly noteworthy about Weldon’s Puffball and Tennant’s Alice Fell is the celebratory delineation of motherhood they achieve. Both of them present the pleasurable aspects of domesticity and mother-child relations, by identifying woman with nature and the body, and depicting her as being governed by hormonal and physical processes. They also portray the home as the hub of the power-struggle between the sexes. A purely British upper-class atmosphere prevails in both the novels. Weldon’s novel contains frequent references to the folklore and superstitions common among the country folk of Gloucestershire and Tennant’s work is full of allusions to the myths of the British Empire and the Suez crisis. The two novelists deserve appreciation for the romanticized and idealized representations of reproduction and
childcare. They valorize certain aspects of woman’s life, which are often disparaged and marginalised. It may be noted that these novels are also criticised on the ground that they conceal woman’s drudgery and tedium under a delusive cover of fake glamour.

Weldon’s *Puffball* revolves around the reproductive capacities of Liffey who is married to Richard. The couple living in the city, are seized with an impulse to settle down in the countryside in order to start a family. Their encounter with Mabs and Tucker gives an unexpected twist to the even tenor of their lives. Under the influence of Mabs and her potions, the couple fall a victim to a series of follies. Liffey becomes pregnant. Weldon makes use of a series of chapters entitled ‘Inside Liffey’ in order to portray the perils and pleasures of conception, pregnancy and childbirth. This is not, however, Weldon’s first novel where she has introduced a pregnant heroine. In *Down Among the Women* which appeared nine years earlier, we find Scarlet lying in bed “swollen and monstrous” (DAW 20) – an object of the ambivalent attention of her female friends. Her friends admire her for having left the girls and joined the women. Yet, they pity her, for “a good woman knows that nature is her enemy” (DAW 1), though science and technology can often come to her rescue. In *Puffball* too as in *Down Among the Women*, Weldon lays stress on the value of technology and culture. We understand that it is an attempt at natural birth, grossly mishandled, which makes Lally give birth to a stillborn child. But the timely help rendered by a male surgeon at a modern
hospital is what is instrumental to saving the lives of Liffey and her baby. Ignorance ruins Lally and technology saves Liffey. However, one may not lose sight of the fact that it is nature, not culture that Weldon wishes to foreground in *Puffball*.

Weldon's treatment of sexual reproduction as the arena of a fierce battle between the sexes makes her ponder whether the woman's capacity to bear children is a source of pleasure or of vulnerability. Weldon's answer to this vital question is rather ambiguous. Liffey realizes that her pregnancy has decreased her power in the public world, as she cannot help being dependent on her husband, Richard, economically and socially. She falls an easy prey to the manipulations of Mabs and Tucker, who exploit her credulousness and innocence for their selfish gains. But she feels within herself the urge of mysterious psychic powers, or, as Weldon proudly proclaims, "Liffey now had powers of her own" (PB 142). Her ability to communicate with her unborn child, coupled with her psychic powers, emboldens her to overcome the perils caused by Mabs's poisonous potions and witchcraft. Mabs's powers which also derive from her maternal status are mysterious, and they ebb and flow in response to the interplay of light and darkness. It is interesting to note that *Puffball* ends with a birth, and *Alice Fell* commences with the birth of Alice, the eponymous heroine. Tennant, as Weldon often does, makes sexual reproduction emerge in her novel as the site of the power struggle between the sexes. Weldon says in "Of Birth and Fiction," "Asked what the favourite
of my novels is, I always say *Puffball*, without even thinking. I think because of these few lines:

Liffey sat on the ground and turned her face towards the mild sun. She felt a presence: the touch of a spirit, clever and benign. She opened her eyes, startled, but there was no one there, only a dazzle in the sky where the sun struck slantwise between the few puffy white clouds, which hovered over the Tor.

“It’s me,” said the spirit, said the baby. “I’m here. I have arrived. You are perfectly all right, and so am I. Don’t worry.”

The words were spoken in her head: they were graceful, and certain. They charmed. Liffey smiled, and felt herself close and curl, as a sunflower does at night, to protect, and shelter. (206)

The various changes coming over Liffey during pregnancy, described in ‘Inside Liffey,’ particularly the movements of the baby within her womb and her capacity to communicate with the ‘unborn’ are reminiscent of the poem, “First Foetal Movement of My Daughter” written by Penelope Shuttle, the British poet, whom Renuka Rajaratnam quotes in “Mothering Heights.” The poet feels:

Shadow of a fish

The water-echo

Inner florist dancing

Her fathomless ease
Her gauzy thumbs
Leapfrogger,
Her Olympics in the womb's
Stadium. (1)

The poet, like Liffey, feels that the mother is the first mirror of all realization, the very source of care, emotions and languages. Liffey's resolve to be the mother, braving all hazards to her pregnancy, brings to one's mind the moving birth-poem called "In My Name" by Grace Nicholas, the Afro-Caribbean British poet who depicts a mother, abandoned by the white colonizer cum seducer. She celebrates her identity as a mother and commands the earth to receive her child.

Heavy with child
belly
an arc
of black moon
...... I
command the earth
to receive you
in my name
in my blood. (Rajaratnam 1)

There is a point of similarity between Liffey and the slave woman. The latter welcomes the birth of a bastard, while the former does not allow her
husband’s initial doubts about the paternity of her child to deter her from being the mother. It is interesting to note that Liffey’s pregnant belly resembles a puffball, a swelling mushroom, and that of the slave woman puffs out like ‘an arc’. Margaret Atwood’s description in *The Edible Woman* of Clara’s bulgingly obvious pregnant body as “a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon” (36) is memorable here.

Weldon’s novels *The Hearts and Lives of Men* and *Splitting* introduce the reader to two women with strikingly different attitudes to motherhood. In the first novel, which celebrates the wedded life of Clifford and Helen, Weldon views motherhood from Helen’s point of view. The relationship of the couple runs into rough weather on account of the contrivances of Angie Wellbrook, who loves Clifford. Helen strongly objects to the idea of becoming a mother. Her initial refusal to be the mother arises out of her fear that pregnancy will make her “sick, swollen and tearful” (HLM 46). Besides, she does not relish the intrusion of a third person, their own child, into their happy world. However, she becomes pregnant and just three months after the birth of her daughter Nell, her marriage falls into ruins. Childbirth alters her attitude to motherhood. Her motherly instincts manifest themselves appealingly when Nell goes missing, to become a lost child in a hostile world.

Lady Angelica Rice, ex-rock star, the female protagonist in *Splitting* differs from Helen. Her objections to motherhood have a firm base. She refuses to become pregnant, because Edwin Rice, her husband, wants a baby for his
family’s sake, and not as a celebration of their love. She does not believe that her husband alone has the sole right to possess her child, and she, unlike Helen, willingly forsakes motherhood for the sake of freedom. The travails that she undergoes foreshadow woman’s battle for liberation from male chauvinism. The clash between the sexes highlighted in *Splitting* has its source in Edwin Rice’s decision to divorce Lady Angelica.

Weldon offers an excellent example of the powerful bond existing between the mother and daughter through her portrayal of Madeleine in *Remember Me*. She is the deserted first wife of the architect, Jarvis Katkin. She is highly solicitous about her daughter, Hilary, whose welfare and well-being are uppermost in her mind even when she is put to unbearable indignities from the part of her husband who lives with Lily, his second wife and their son Jonathan. There was a time when she was perfectly happy with her husband, and that was during her pregnancy.

Once Madeleine woke up singing. When she was pregnant with Hilary, she even sang in her sleep. Jarvis heard her. Once Jarvis loved Madeleine, drew back chairs for her, brought her tea when she was tired; held her hand in the cinema; scowled at her admirers; brought her yellow daffodils fifty at a time. (RM 18)

Those days are irrevocably gone. Her husband ignores her totally, treating her as a “thorn in Lily’s white soft flesh” (RM 19). Hilary is sad that her parents have separated and she is all pity for her mother whose presence
she longs for. She often tells herself:

Mother, do you hear me? I need your help. I am growing stunted,
I know I am. If you don’t do something soon, I’ll fall apart like
some dried-up walnut, and you will find me withered in my
shell inside. (RM 91)

By presenting this “sharp peremptory call of the child bent on survival”
(RM 91), Weldon accentuates the strong bond of affinity between the mother
and the daughter. The daughter’s love for the mother has to be viewed against
Jarvis’ selfishness, which makes him use and abuse Madeleine and destroy
her and her child’s life for the sake of sex.

It is, indeed, strange that Madeleine dies in a car accident at exactly
the same moment that her husband drinks a toast to all ex-wives. While she
was alive, Madeleine was compared by her husband and his new wife to a
“neurotic bitch” (RM 96), an ogre, a vampire, a leech, to succubus and to old
women “who suck men’s blood, destroy their life forces” (RM 97). Madeleine’s corpse lies for a long time on the road, in the hospital, and in the
morgue before its burial. Her face, though drained of blood, appears uncanny,
as her eyes seem to close and open repeatedly. Her re-appearance as a revenant
by getting possession of Margot Bailey, her friend, invests her with enough
power to make her defiant husband submissive; she easily makes Jarvis abide
by all her wishes without demur. Her wishes are rooted in her great concern
for her daughter’s future. Jarvis finds it impossible to resist her demands,
which are intended to safeguard Hilary’s interests and ensure for her a sense of security and well-being. Elisabeth Bronfen points out:

Furthermore, Madeleine uses her body double to regulate the future of her daughter, Hilary. For at the moment of death she significantly forgets her anger at her husband and remembers her responsibility as mother. She thus returns from the dead, in accordance with vampire lore, not only to articulate her grievances, but also because her child needs her to find her a more suitable home with the Baileys, away from a stepmother and a stepbrother. (76)

Hilary is perfectly happy to be weaned away from her stepmother and stepbrother in order to enjoy the protective care and loving attention of Margot and Philip Bailey, her husband. Margot, who becomes Madeleine’s double after her death insists that Hilary should live within her family to be looked after properly. Jarvis cannot but agree to this idea. Her mother’s death comes as an invaluable gift to Hilary, who says, “My mother’s death has set me free. My life – her death – that’s the sum of what she gave me. Dying was the best thing she could do for me – this was her good and final gift (RM 274). The lines from the lullaby that Madeleine used to sing to put Hilary to sleep come back to the girl’s mind and she sings them aloud when she thinks of the great help rendered by her mother through her death:

To his nest the eagle flies,
O'er the hill the sunlight dies.

Hush my darling, have no fear,

For thy mother watches near. (RM 93)

The realization of Lily, Jarvis's second wife, which comes to her in a state of panic caused by the swelling on her son's foot, conveys the feelings of a woman about being a mother:

To have a husband is nothing. To be a wife is nothing. Sex is idle pastime. To be a mother is all that counts. Lily recognizes it, and now the shock of the discovery numbs her for a moment to the anxiety and distress which accompanies the state of motherhood. (RM 262)

'The anxiety and distress', accompanying the state of motherhood, expressed through Lily's realization, is to be viewed against what Hilary says about her father's utter neglect of her mother. The girl is not sure that her father is able to identity Madeleine's corpse, because he has not seen her face for long. The following conversation between Hilary and Lily amply illustrates the intensity of the damage that her father's neglect of her mother does to the sensitive mind of the little girl. It also reveals her sense of isolation.

'Daddy might not know it's mummy,' says Hilary, 'It's so long since he saw her.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' says Lily.

'He didn't even like her,' his daughter persists. 'He might make a
'Of course he liked her,' says Lily, angry as she always is in her lies. 'He was married to her'. (RM 171)

More effective in death than in life, Madeleine, once she haunts Jarvis, makes him consciously acknowledge her interests, as well as those of her daughter. The mother in Madeleine comes to the fore more compellingly and persuasively when she is dead than when alive. Her return as a revenant has such an effect that Jarvis even sides with her against his second wife. Furthermore, once Madeleine is dead, Jarvis desires her again and again. He comes to recognize that he was unfair to her. He realizes that there is truth in her accusation, "You took away my life, my home, and gave them to Lily. Now you want to destroy my child as well" (RM 245). Perhaps, a sense of guilt that runs through his heart may be one of the reasons why he becomes the very soul of affability, giving extreme regard for her wishes about Hilary. Remember Me is a novel in which Weldon describes the essential forces that conjoin parent and child, husband and wife and lover.

It is interesting to note that Remember Me bears semblance to R.K.Narayan's The English Teacher. Both the novels take the readers to certain unfrequented domains. Sushila, the wife of Krishna, the English teacher dies, but her presence is felt throughout the novel, though the way she appears is different from the manner in which Madeleine makes herself felt. The
upbringing of her daughter becomes uppermost in Sushila’s mind, as in the case of Madeleine. Krishna is able to establish spiritual communion with his wife and this is a point where Weldon’s novel differs from Narayan’s. But the dead wife makes her presence felt in both the novels. The motive force behind their visitations is their great concern for their daughter’s future. In both the novels there is a continuance of life even after the death of the wives. Though Jarvis and Krishna lose the physical presence of their wives, the spiritual presence of the two women pervades the novels and one feels that even death fails to destroy their concern for their daughters.

If *Remember Me* celebrates the worries and anxieties of a mother for her daughter, both when alive and dead, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* introduces us to Ruth Patchet, a mother with a difference. Without a pang, she removes herself totally from familial and social concerns. Freed from the society that imprisons her, Ruth can even laugh at the institutions like marriage, motherhood and community that once bound her down. The single-minded devotion with which she pursues a well thought-out plan of revenge on her husband makes her impervious to love, which is an essential ingredient of motherliness. She regards absence of love, even for her children, as a prelude to freedom. She is clearly set up as someone willing to ‘un-become’ herself and unfix her gender, by indulging in a series of unbefitting behaviours like burning her house to embrace she-‘devildom’. She realizes that she does not want her children. Made of sterner stuff, and devoid of the ‘milk of human
kindness,' Ruth is insensitive to her motherly instincts. Without a prick of conscience, she takes her children to Bobbo, who lives with Mary Fisher, his beloved, without even pausing to ascertain what Mary Fisher's attitude to her children will be. It is her strategy for revenge, not her children's future that seems to motivate this mother.

On her way to Mary Fisher's tower near the seacoast, Ruth tells her children, Nicola and Andy, that they are going to see their Daddy. The children ask her whether they are going to live with him. "You have nowhere else to live, my dears" (SD 64), she tells them. "You too?" (64), ask the children who are eager to have the parents united. Her reply to this innocent question is emphatic, sarcastic and hypocritical. She says, "No. Your father lives with someone else now and there is no changing that. But I'm sure she'll be happy to have you, she loves him so much" (64). Her words belie her real feelings of hatred for her faithless husband and his mistress, besides giving false hopes to the credulous children. An utter lack of insight into the workings of her children's minds is what her words reveal.

Bobbo asks Ruth to take the children home, and she, by no means, is willing to oblige. "It is obvious that the children can't stay here. They must go home where they belong, with their mother" (SD 71), he says. Mary Fisher also speaks in the same vein, "The best place for them is with you, Ruth, in their own home, with their own mother" (72). But Ruth has already forestalled the possibility of being compelled to take her children back home by setting
fire to the house. The ease with which she rids herself of her maternal responsibilities is really surprising. Her callous disregard for her children reveals itself in her indifferent replies to Bobbo’s pertinent question:

‘And what about school, Ruth? They’re going to miss school.’
‘Find them another’
‘There are no schools round here.’
‘There are always schools for those who want them,’ said Ruth. (SD 73)

But to charge her with complete indifference towards her children will be rather unfair. Her maternal affection gets itself eclipsed by her passion for revenge. There are times when memories about her children bring to her mind a sense of guilt, which she can hardly suppress. She confesses, “I am a woman learning to be without her children .... I’m sure I miss them more than they miss me. They have been the meaning of my life ....” (SD 76-77).

It is seen towards the close of the novel that her children have grown up, left and forgotten their parents. A father in prison, a mother in the thick of revengeful designs, and a stepmother, whose life is in ruins have done little for her children. They have grown and found their ways, without being able to enjoy the warmth of parental love at a time when they had needed it badly. This handicap does not prevent them from being self-reliant. It is strange that Ruth who exults in her final victory does not concern herself with thoughts about them.
The views of feminist thinkers like Simone de Beavoir, Nancy Chodorow, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Sara Ruddick have the greatest formative effect on Weldon’s concept of motherhood and mothering. Firestone’s belief that reproduction is at the root of female subjugation, Chodorow’s analysis of the psychic differences between boys and girls, Rich’s attitude to the ‘erotics’ of motherhood, and Ruddick’s conviction that maternal skills have the potential to transform society, have all found expression in Weldon’s various novels. Gwyneth, the mother in Female Friends endeavours to impress upon her daughter the idea that women should implicitly obey the rules of patriarchy. The patriarchal system of inheritance comes in for castigation through the struggles of Isabel in The President’s Child. The triumphs and perils of pregnancy and childbirth are what Weldon depicts in Puffball through Liffey’s trials and tribulations. The contradictions of power and vulnerability pertaining to motherhood – one of Weldon’s favourite themes – find expression in other works as well; Tennant, Walker and Atwood discuss it in detail in some of their novels. Tennant’s Alice Fell and Weldon’s Puffball share certain common features. Remember Me and The Life and Loves of a She-Devil stand poles apart. Madeleine, the protective mother, is a foil to Ruth, who abandons her children. The mothers whom Weldon creates have their own distinctive ways of tackling their problems. They are all inherently strong and display amazing dexterity in struggling against adversities, and finally in achieving their goals.
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