CHAPTER – 1

The Politics of Maternity Discourses

Maternity is an emblem of women’s power, an experience that forms the source for the organization of a female community. Maternal power is the force that protects women’s bodies; it is passed down like mother’s wisdom from generation to generation; its designs mirror the commonplace but profound concerns of all women – love for their children. Like women’s art or other forms of female creativity, maternity, is nonlinear, non-hierarchical and intimate; it stands in opposition to the realm of the Paternal. In women’s fiction maternity is often textually constructed as a counter discourse, a resistance to patriarchal discourses.

Many women’s novels represents the politics of maternity as a resistance discourse. Discourse is often defined as the work of a specific language practice: language as it is used within various constituencies to define or represent power relations in society. Social structures and processes are organized through institutions and practices such as the law, the political system, the church, the family, the education system, the media, medicine and so on, each of which is located in and structured by a particular discursive field. Michel Foucault has taken the idea of discourse further than the identification of a language practice arising as a result of organizational or institutional forms in society.
In his analysis, discursive formations are active in the production, replication and dissemination of power. Language is not merely an adjunct to forms of power embodied in institutions; the language manifested in particular discourses is the articulation of that power. This is how language or discourse becomes a medium or manifest form of power.

Foucault’s distinctive perspective on “power” throws light on the ways in which “discourse” can not only be an instrument and an effect of power but also a hindrance to power, giving rise to resistance and a starting-point for an oppositional strategy. He insists that power is a distinctly productive relation, one that creates resistance at the same moment as it exerts force:

Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix – no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. (The History of Sexuality 1: 94) Foucault explains why the forms of power are certainly not founded on a top-down model of subjection where all forms of law always succeed in imposing authority from above. This Foucauldian notion of power clarifies how patriarchy as a “discourse” has finally given rise to
resistance and thereby, paradoxically, prepared the ground for the emergence of alternate politics in the form of maternity discourses. These maternity discourses constitute a brilliantly effective attempt to show how the patriarchal discourses that seek to produce a regulative order, paradoxically, manage to empower those (women-mothers) it tries to subjugate.

Maternity discourses, which insist on woman’s use of her “maternal power” as a means to fight back against all male-oriented discourses, can be seen as a representation or manifestation of Foucault’s model of “reverse discourse.” Foucault’s general point that power can be refracted through discourse, showing how it is not always burdened by a repressive sovereign law, constitutes his concept of “reverse discourse.” This Foucauldian suggestion, actually, points to the possibility for a discursive system like patriarchy to be overthrown, clearing the path for the advent of maternity discourses.

Patriarchy, as a discourse, colonizes women, mothers, and the social world imperialistically from the point of view of a male-governed institution. This can be realized with a true understanding of the ways in which “discourse” operates. The Foucauldian concept of a discursive field is part of an attempt to understand the relationship among language, social institutions, subjectivity and power. Discursive fields consist of
competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of rearranging and organizing social institutions and processes.

Discourse comprises of polyvocal tracts and the different effects that they imply – according to who is speaking, the speaker’s position of power, the institutional context in which the speaker is situated and so on. This operation of the discursive field, in turn, includes the shifts and re-utilizations of identical formulas for multiple objectives. From this understanding of the ways in which “discourse” operates, it is easy to see how there exists a tendency to interpret the discursive situation as the “unequal” relation between the colonizer and the colonized, or the oppressor and the oppressed: a notion that discourse often puts one interlocutor above another. Such a tendency establishes “discourse” as not merely a neutral tool concerned with the assertion of objective veracity but as a structurally interactive flow, serving inescapably an ideological function.

Patriarchy misinterprets and takes advantage of this notion about “discourse,” propagating the idea that the “unequal relation” between the alternatives that the discursive situation includes is unchangeable, unchallengeable, unquestionable and hence “inevitable” giving no scope for resistance. It is on this strategic political standpoint that patriarchy establishes itself as an oppressive colonial model assuming Man/Father as the Colonizer/Oppressor and woman/mother as the
colonized/oppressed. Patriarchal discourse, therefore, produces strategic methods of control to induce docility in the social body and exerts specific forms of power over the human body, the female “maternal” body.

It is the feminist understanding of patriarchy as a colonial model of domination and subordination causing “resistance” that challenges the threatening autocracy of the patriarchal discourse. It is from the Foucauldian concepts of “power” and “reverse discourse” that we draw in the notion of “discourse” as an ever-evolving and endless interaction of power relations which is open to change or reconstruction. Judith Butler is one of the prominent feminist theorists who has employed Foucault and his discourse theory in her arguments about the productivity of power to construct what it appears to exclude. Following Foucauldian model of power and discourse, Butler offers a wonderful possibility of the de-institutionalization of patriarchal discursive identity. She explains her concept of identity:

If there is, as it were, always a compulsion to repeat, repetition never fully accomplishes identity. That there is a need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming de-
instituted at every interval. (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 24)

According to Butler, if identity is constituted in its most mundane fashion by repetitions of behaviours and modes of self-representation, then repetition offers a place to locate and instigate change through a process of de-institutionalization. The agent of change or de-institutionalization here is the concrete, resisting human being. Butler illustrates:

If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness . . . strategies for engaging the “unnatural” might lead to the denaturalization of gender . . . . (Gender Trouble 189-90)
Butler suggests that the dominant discourse with its received language and categories of gender and sexuality, with its interpretations of human subjectivity and identity politics, remains shifting and resignifiable, creating resistance and denaturalization of its own constructs. This, in turn, follows Foucault’s notion that “power” reciprocates itself by producing “force” and “resistance” simultaneously, that dominant discourse, paradoxically, provides the base and room for resistance to its own existence. Butler, therefore, serves as an insightful source for the theoretical comprehension that the repudiation of essential foundations for patriarchal human subjectivity based on binary oppositions (Man/woman, Father/mother, active/passive), which are projected as fixed and forcefully natural, does not preclude effective political action and subversive intervention of counter-discourses like maternity discourses.

Thus, Butler’s attempt to combine Foucault’s arguments about the productivity of power and her notion of identity as repetition that involves constant recontextualization and hence change creates the space for the emergence of “mothering” as an alternative and counter-hegemonic discourse that threatens the patriarchal institutions propagating the Law of the Father. Drawing from Foucault and Butler, we may arrive at the notion that there will always be resistance against socially imposed constraints, leading to the emergence of renewed
dialogue, the de-institutionalization and the transformation of social forms or social order. This notion, in a way, proclaims the theoretical possibility of all currently active constructs of patriarchal discourse—like motherhood, or bipolar gender roles—getting de-institutionalized. It is from this theoretical standpoint that maternity discourses establish woman’s experience of “mothering” as an alternative discursive force that poses strong resistance to the dominant patriarchal discourse. In short, a specific struggle against patriarchy—a cultural revolution—is required for the emergence of maternity discourses as an alternative politics which gains prominence not only as a feminist theoretical premise but also as a promise for the future generations of women-mothers. That is, a maternal discourse, a female-centred discourse, manifests itself in the very processes of struggle against the dominant patriarchal discourse that positions women, mothers, in oppressive ways; it emerges in the “gaps” of patriarchal hegemony discovered in moments of struggle, disruption, rebellion.

Unlike the patriarchal discourse based on the phallocentric world of fixity, linearity and binarity, maternity discourses are rooted in the concept of “discourse” decoded as a series of discontinuous segments the tactical function of which is neither uniform nor stable. Precisely, the theoretical space of maternity discourses is not divided between “accepted discourse” and “excluded discourse” or between the
“dominant” discourse and the “dominated” one; instead, it constitutes a multiplicity of discursive elements that adopt various strategies in discursive practice.

Such an interpretation of discourse, as offered by maternity discourses, challenges the fixity, linearity and bipolarity of the patriarchal world. This, in turn, arises from Foucault’s argument that “power relations” between men and women do not involve a static disparity between those who “rule” and those who are “ruled/subordinated” in an assortment of institutional settings like patriarchy or a phallocentric social order (*The History of Sexuality* 1: 103). This Foucauldian argument leads to the idea that such binary power differences or oppositions in patriarchy turn against themselves by allowing the participants in this “strategic game” to take control of the erotic charge factored into domination and subordination. If patriarchy is viewed as a strategic system, the “slave” (woman-mother) is not really a slave and the “master” (Man/Father) not really a master: this view goes against the way how the system would like to interpret itself.

These views expose the inauthenticity and instability of patriarchy, announcing the arrival of maternity discourses which create immense space for the woman-mother to express her resistance against the colonial structure of patriarchy and to decolonize her body using
“maternity” as a weapon. As maternity discourses indicate, when the Law of the Sovereign-Father fails to function, when the tendency to surround desire with all the trappings of the male-centred Old order of power is removed, woman’s body – mother’s body – undergoes the process of decolonization and the Maternal Body finally emerges as an independent, liberated and challenging discursive realm.

Maternity discourses, therefore, challenge all the patriarchal systems favouring pyramidal binary power structures (like, for example, Master/slave, Colonizer/colonized, Man/woman, Father/mother) which simply duplicate the most bleakly unequal power structures experienced in the everyday world. In the field of maternity discourses, the Maternal is restated as a force that disrupts the dominating patriarchal discursive arena that tries to confine and restrict “woman-mother” within the limits of a patriarchal construct incapable of any resistance. In short, Maternity discourses are sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of woman’s unique experience of Mothering. By subverting the active, universal, social order of Patriarchy or Phallocentrism, the maternity discourses aim at creating a healthy social sphere where all patriarchal constructs like motherhood and bipolar gender/sexual differences are no longer “resistless” entities.

The maternity discourses as a distinct feminist theoretical space has been initiated by women writers belonging to diverse cultural
backgrounds. As suggested earlier, the realm of maternity discourses is one which concentrates on how maternity or mothering emerges as an alternative form of politics that challenges the phallocentric social order. The feminist theoretical realm of maternity discourses deconstructs the concept of motherhood as a patriarchal institution or a social construct, and replaces it with the concept of mothering as an inexplicable experience of woman’s body and mind:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.” Motherhood’s impossible syllogism. (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 237)

This cryptic remark is telling of woman’s experience of becoming-a-mother, the gestation, which makes woman the Master of a discursive process. The two discourses of religion and science, despite their different but effective devices, acknowledge and confirm that they cannot take away the experience from her. This is exclusively the experience of a woman-mother which, in turn, constitutes the maternal mystique. The fact that the maternal power, that wonderful experience of
woman which is beyond the limits of the Word, that power to create another human being, is the instrument of such a mystery that embodies the triumph over death. In other words, the power of the woman-mother to create, to survive all approaching obstacles in life, manifests in the unchallengeable re-affirmation of life over death.

Maternity discourses replace the patriarchal theory and deconstruct the conceptual, practical discourse of the Father, leading to a state where the articulate father is absent as an active discursive figure. Maternity discourses effect a subversion of women’s oppression in patriarchy, rupturing the patriarchal notion of parentage and family, and decentring fatherhood. The politics of maternity discourses redefines woman’s body, Mother’s Body, as a liberated realm of the self, of subjectivity, freeing it from being the site of sexual oppression. Women writers, irrespective of culture, have a similar perspective on maternity as an alternative discourse, an equally effective power which can be used as the ultimate weapon to fight against the male-hegemony in patriarchy. These women writers celebrate maternity as an effective resistance to the reckless exploitation of women, of mothers: they develop maternity as an effective discursive tool to fight against and resist the unending oppression and exploitation of the female body, the maternal body, in patriarchy. Bringing together insights from women’s activism and female experiences, the domain of maternity discourses offers a critique
of maternity as a sign of self-defining freedom for women in its resistance to patriarchal violence.

Maternity discourses intersect feminist issues like articulating voice, victimhood, subjectivity, selfhood, identity, body politics, sexuality, language and so on – all in relation to the unique female experience of mothering. Mothering is a force or an experience that keeps alive the creativity of women century after century, irrespective of culture, race and class. With this maternal experience, women have a bigger maternal dimension of conditioning, controlling and creating the unimaginable survival strategies of the human race. The politics of maternity discourses constitutes and analyzes this maternal continuity among women, an experience which is passed down the centuries to all generations of women like Mother’s Wisdom. This reproduction of mothering is a central and constituting element in the social organization and reproduction of non-patriarchal gender. Contemporary reproduction of mothering, as Nancy J. Chodorow observes, occurs through socially and structurally induced psychological processes:

Women’s mothering perpetuates itself through social-structurally induced psychological mechanisms. It is not an unmediated product of physiology. Women come to mother because they have been mothered by women. By contrast, that men are
mothered by women reduces their parenting capacities. (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 211)

Chodorow explains the reproduction of mothering as neither a product of biology nor of intentional role-training, but as a psychological experience. That is, it is the psychoanalytic account of female and male personality development that demonstrates how women’s mothering reproduces itself cyclically.

Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the innate desire to mother. This maternal continuity among women of all generations, irrespective of their different cultural or individual experiences, can be seen as a strong challenge to the symbolic paternal bond that holds patriarchy intact. In this context, Julia Kristeva comments:

> By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself . . . through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory . . . and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond. (*Desire in Language* 239)

Kristeva explains how the reproduction of mothering, the maternal continuity, is experienced as the real reunion of a woman-mother with
The body of her mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also, one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis: that body cannot penetrate her as can a man when possessing his wife. *(Desire in Language* 239)

Hence, according to Kristeva, the Maternal Body is a liberating entity that celebrates woman’s lack of penis thereby curing her of what the psychoanalytic fathers call the penis-envy. Luce Irigaray also makes a comment similar to Kristeva’s view: “Woman has no reason to envy either the penis or the phallus. But . . . man, the people of men, has transformed his penis [sexe] into an instrument of power so as to dominate maternal power” *(Lodge* 420). Both Kristeva’s and Irigaray’s identification of the woman’s “maternal power” and rejection of “penis-envy” as a mere patriarchal construct, find their confluence in Helene Cixous’s strong declaration: “I don’t want a penis to decorate my body with” *(Marks and De Courtivron* 127). Thus, feminists like Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous direct our attention to the unlimited “maternal power” within woman to release her of the constraining political chains of patriarchal fabrications like penis-envy.
It is in this context that a redefinition of the term “phallus” becomes important. The psychoanalytic notion of penis-envy propagate the idea that women always envy the social power and advantages represented by the male sex organ, and bewail their lack of that organ. Later, Jacques Lacan replaced the term “penis” with “phallus” to refer to the Symbolic order of language in patriarchy giving rise to his concept of phallocentrism. The phallus, for Lacan, stands for the child’s entry into the Symbolic (the Lacanian psychic stage representing the paternally-oriented realm of signification), marking the disappearance of the mother from the sphere of language in patriarchy.

However, the phallus in Lacanian theory should not be confused with the male genital organ, although it clearly carries these connotations. By further extension of this notion, we realize that the phallus is first and foremost a signifier and in Lacan’s system a particularly “privileged signifier.” A similar view that phallus is no longer connected to the male sex organ is shared by Butler as she comments:

The question, of course, is why it is assumed that the phallus requires that particular part to symbolize, and why it could not operate through symbolizing other body parts . . . the phallus is a transferable phantasm . . . an imaginary effect . . . part of an
imagined morphology or a morphological imaginary that can be appropriated and made to signify/symbolize differently. (*Bodies That Matter* 84-88)

As Butler points out, such “aggressive reterritorializations” reveal the status of phallus within a bodily schema which, like language, is a resignifiable signifying chain with no “transcendental signified” at its origin (*Bodies That Matter* 86). Butler makes the most of this resignifiability in her ascription of the phallus to other body parts:

Consider that “having” the phallus can be symbolized by an arm, a tongue, a hand (or two), a knee, a pelvic bone, an array of purposefully instrumentalized body-like things . . . the simultaneous acts of deprivileging the phallus . . . and recirculating and reprivileging it between women deploys the phallus to break the signifying chain in which it conventionally operates . . . The phallus is a plastic signifier that may suddenly be made to stand for any number of body parts, discursive performatives or alternative fetishes. (*Bodies That Matter* 88-89)

So, Butler ultimately tries to insist that the subversive potential of the resignifiable phallus resides in the concept that one does not need to have a penis in order to have or be a phallus, and that having a penis does not mean that one will have or be a phallus. In order to substantiate
Butler’s notion, it is relevant to recall a similar reference to the resignifiability of phallus that Adrienne Rich makes in her survey of prepatriarchal societies:

In prepatriarchal life the phallus (herm) had a quite different significance from the one it has acquired in androcentric (or phallocentric) culture. It was not worshipped on its own account or regarded as autonomously powerful; it existed as an adjunct to the Goddess, along with other figures such as the bull, the cow, the pig, the crescent moon, the serpent, the lunar axe or labrys, the small child in her lap . . . The sacred grove is sacred to the Goddess . . . Prepatriarchal phallus-cults were the celebration by women of the fertilizing instrument, not the celebration by men of their “manhood” or of individual paternity. (*Of Woman Born* 99-100)

Here, Rich throws light on how phallus can represent woman’s power to create, her maternal power, the unending source of fertility or creativity which resides in woman-mother, rather than representing penis as the fixed, unchangeable and unchallengeable source of power controlling women in a phallocentric universe.
From Rich’s project of surveying the prepatriarchal societies, we can draw in the insight that the maternal power of women not only rests in their potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life but also in the magical power (“phallus”) invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women. This, in turn, throws light on the psychological account that men resent and fear women because they experience them as “powerful mothers.” So, Rich’s reference to the different significance that “phallus” once had in the prepatriarchal culture strengthens the possibility which Butler offers – the scope for the resignifiability of “phallus” as something that performs the innumerable, that it signifies rather than merely confined within the male sex organ and its attributes.

Thus, Butler’s passing reference to the performativity of the phallus in her entire work on performative bodies is compatible with the Lacanian scheme. Understanding her concept of performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end suggests that a performative utterance is not constrained by its specific speaker or its originating context. Performatives, according to Butler, cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. Performative productions continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors’ intentions. The resignifiability at the heart of Butler’s concept of performativity
implies that, within political discourse, the very terms of resistance and insurgency are spawned in part by the powers they oppose. This notion of performativity explains the disintegration of patriarchal discourse that associates or equates “phallus” with male power as part of its political strategies leaving women, mothers, as unarticulated, ignored, silent presence or an absent presence (present but absent). Butler’s intention is, therefore, to resignify “phallus” –like gender, sexuality, subjectivity, identity, politics– as a performative, to see compulsory sexual and gender roles as the product of law (for example, the Law of the Father) which is also productive of other excluded performances. Thus, as a performative, Phallus is not something one is, but something one performs. This performativity of phallus, as discussed by Butler, reinforces resistance to phallocentric linguistic norms.

Butler’s notion that phallus is not dependent solely on penis and Lacan’s notion of phallus as merely the privileged signifier jointly put forth the wonderful possibility that women can both “have” and “be” the phallus, the privileged signifier. It is in this sense that “phallus” is no longer considered physical/sexual alone but psychological as well, since both man and woman can represent the Phallus, the source of language or signification. In patriarchy, it is easier for man/father to become the privileged signifier since he is closer or nearer to the phallus. However, the realm of maternity discourses and its politics that subverts patriarchy
considers the woman-mother, the maternal metaphor or the Name-of-the-(M)Other, as the privileged signifier who triggers the process of signification in her child, particularly in the absence of an active articulate paternal signifier or the Name-of-the-Father. Therefore, developing a distinct feminist theoretical realm of maternity discourses finally succeeds in creating a maternal space where the Privilege, the Power, the Phallus, is represented by the woman-mother and not man, the Father.

Maternity discourses bring the lives of women, of mothers, to the forefront either by rejecting the position of the Other ascribed to them by dominant patriarchal discourses or by appropriating their Otherness as a tool of resistance against those hegemonic patriarchal discourses. Since woman’s identity, her subjectivity, and her experience of mothering are intrinsically linked, a woman has to reject the stereotype of woman/mother and reclaim that same position of Otherness (Motherhood/(m)Othering) on her own terms for subverting patriarchal conventions. In other words, women can politically threaten the phallocentric social order by experiencing the institution of motherhood constructed by patriarchy, or through the act of (m)Othering. So, the (m)Other is a metaphor for those subversive exiled energies which threaten the coherence and authority of phallocentric thought (Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* 38). (M)Other (the maternal
metaphor) as subversion is, therefore, an exterminating intervention into common psychoanalytic, philosophical and cultural myths in patriarchy about the “woman-mother” as a passive and conservative body which is acted upon, which nurtures and reproduces the subject, but which is incapable of reproducing the subject otherwise. Thus, woman-mother achieves her freedom, independence and autonomous individual identities when an oppressive construct like patriarchal “motherhood” itself is used as a vehicle to fight against the same oppressive dominant ideological forces with its transformation from an “institution” to an “experience.”

The politics of maternity discourses places the “experience” of mothering as an integral and constituting element in the restructuring of active patriarchal society and the subversion of its phallocentric constraints. It is the instinctual drive or the innate desire to give birth, the never-ending urge to create, that makes the woman-mother a non-Symbolic, nonpaternal Creator – a strong opponent to the patriarchal realm of creativity. In reference to the ultimate Creator that resides in Woman-Mother, Rich writes:

Out of her body the woman created man, created woman, created continuing existence. Spiritualized into a divine being, she was the source of vegetation, fruition, fertility of every kind. Whether she bore children or not,
as potter and weaver she created the first objects which were more than objects, were works of art, thus of magic, and which were also the products of the earliest scientific activity, including the lore of herbs and roots, the art of healing and that of nurturing the young . . . Woman did not simply give birth; she made it possible for the child to go on living. Her breasts furnished the first food, but her concern for the child led her beyond that one-to-one relationship . . . The human species is dependent on maternal . . . and in creating a situation in which they could nurture and rear . . . safely and effectively, women became the civilizers, the inventors of agriculture, of community, some maintain of language itself. (Of Woman Born 100-01)

The never-ending creativity in women, which Rich discusses, makes woman not only a producer and stabilizer of life but also a great “transformer.” Woman-mother’s transforming power, her unimaginable power for survival, in contrast to the patriarchal power, is not the “power over others” but the “power of the self.” That is, this transformative power that resides in every woman, every mother, is the power over life and death, the power for causing all kinds of transformation, including reincarnation. The transformations necessary for the continuation of life
are thus exercises of female power (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 98). This power of Mothering in woman is to live with wisdom, generosity, integrity, strength and empowered identity. So, it is the Maternal that shapes a woman’s real identity and subjectivity. That is, it is her innate maternal power, her innate creativity, her being-a-mother, that gives woman her real strength as a new Subject and causes her real emancipation: an attempt to help the Mother reclaim her significance and lost glory against a male-dominated society.

It is this desire to mother, the maternal desire, which constitutes the creative continuity of women across all ages and cultures that makes them part of a genealogy which poses effective resistance to patriarchy. In this context, Irigaray’s reference to this genealogy of women gains prominence:

> It is also necessary, if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women. There is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mothers’ side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters. Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our
identity. . . Humanity might begin to wash itself clean of a sin. A woman celebrating the eucharist with her mother, sharing with her the fruits of the earth she/they have blessed, could be delivered of all hatred or ingratitude towards her maternal genealogy, could be consecrated in her identity and her female genealogy. (Lodge 421-23)

It is this maternal genealogy that Irigaray speaks of, this maternal power that is handed down the generations, which constitutes a woman’s real identity and strength. Irigaray also comments:

We must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. We must give her new life, new life to that mother, to our mother within us and between us. We must refuse to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to jouissance, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger. (Lodge 421)

This crucial remark made by Irigaray constitutes some of the major concerns and goals lying beneath the politics of maternity discourses emerging as a new feminist theoretical realm. This theoretical space, celebrating the maternal genealogy, attempts to analyse the different
ways in which maternity emerges as an alternative politics challenging patriarchy.

The emergence of maternity as an alternative discursive force is finally powerful enough to rupture the domain of patriarchal discourses; it takes shape and colour in the very same maternal continuity among women. This unimaginable and unchallengeable maternal power that women inherit from their female ancestors, therefore, emerges as the ultimate weapon to fight the oppressive ills of patriarchy. Thus, it is her maternal identity, her experience of being-a-mother, which helps the woman-mother to pose effective resistance against the restricting, constraining chains of patriarchy. The feminist theoretical strands generated by the politics of maternity discourses stress the continuity among women, among mothers, down the line of time and space, irrespective of their cultural diversity. These theoretical strands also insist on an ultimate lack of separation and differentiation among women, among mothers. They also emphasize on multiplicity, plurality and continuity of being which, in turn, constitute their experience of mothering, an experience that challenges and ruptures the fixity of the patriarchal binary polarity – the dual hierarchical oppositions based on Superior/Inferior or Man/Woman dichotomy.

According to the maternity discourses, the female identity, the maternal identity, women’s being, on account of the quality of the
pre-Oedipal mother-child relationship, is continuous, plural, in-process. Thus, the maternal continuity, which is in-process among women of all ages and cultures, creates the possibility for a universal immortality among mother, daughter and granddaughter. While Rich champions mother-daughter connection, she recognizes that this connection gives rise to the daughter’s empowerment if and only if the mother with whom the daughter is identifying is herself empowered:

What do we mean by the nurture of daughters? What is it we wish we had, or could have, as daughters; could give, as mothers? Deeply and primally we need trust and tenderness; surely this will always be true of every human being, but women growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves. But this loving is not simply the old, institutionalized, sacrificial, “mother-love” which men have demanded: we want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children’s books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It
means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim: and then to go on from there. Only when we can wish imaginatively and courageously for ourselves can we wish unfetteredly for our daughters. (Of Woman Born 246)

Rich speaks about a kind of strength which can only be one woman’s gift to another, the Mother’s gift to her descendants, the bloodstream of women’s inheritance. In this context, Rich comments on the wonderful psychic process, an experience that every girl/woman inherits from her mother: “I am a woman giving birth to myself” (Of Woman Born 184). This, in turn, constitutes the constructive process of reproduction of the experience of mothering in women down the ages. Thus, in Rich’s view, until a strong line of love, confirmation and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women/mothers will still be wandering in the wilderness (Of Woman Born 246). So, unlike in patriarchy, the child (son/daughter) has to be ultimately the woman-mother’s wish. In other words, as the maternity discourses insist, the child should be a product of wishing or the choice of the woman-mother without compromise.

Women attain power in mothering that enables them to model the empowerment they acquire in and through the maternal connection. In this context, Rich’s comments on women’s need is appropriate:
mothers who want their own freedom and ours.

The quality of the mother’s life – however, embattled and unprotected – is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. (Of Woman Born 247)

Rich throws light on how the conditions of life for women, for mothers, in patriarchy demand a fighting spirit for sheer physical survival. Such courageous fighting mothers have been able to give their daughters something more valuable than full-time caretaking. This extraordinary experience of mothering which women share makes the woman-mother a phoenix rising from the ashes of the patriarchal oblivion, fighting for her as well as her child’s physical survival as the inhabitants of the unique Maternal space. For a child, the Mother is no longer a helpless Victim of the patriarchal system but a miracle, the brave and successful Survivor. These insights contributed by Rich are similar to Chodorow’s idea of the reproduction of mothering among women.

Women, being the primary caretakers of the entire humanity, cherish the endless desire to mother and get gratification from their experience of mothering. They, with all the conflicts and contradictions, have succeeded at mothering against their male counterparts in
patriarchy. It is essential to note women’s mothering since it has ceased to be embedded in a range of other activities and human relations. Women’s mothering stands out in its emotional intensity and meaning, in its centrality for women’s lives and their physical as well as psychological experience of being a Mother.

Women’s productive and reproductive roles have changed in the past decades, resulting in the deconstruction of the patriarchal concepts of family and parentage. The notion of a single or an independent mother fighting against the odds of a male-dominated society and surviving in patriarchy no longer remains alien to our imagination. Women’s mothering plays an integral part in shaping the lives of both women and men. In other words, it is the Mother in every woman who shapes the entire humanity. This notion of woman as the True Creator of human life is wonderfully illustrated in Rich’s comment:

All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body . . . We carry the imprint of this experience for life, even into our dying. (Of Woman Born 11)

As Rich argues, we (both men and women) are all mothered by women, we are all “of woman born,” and our psyches retain the imprint of these
“maternal” origins. But this creative power of the woman-mother has not been acknowledged for centuries by patriarchy. Under patriarchy, women-mothers are made intentionally powerless as part of male-oriented political strategies. In this regard, Rich comments:

In the division of labor according to gender, the makers and sayers of culture, the namers, have been the sons of the mothers. There is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of dependence on a woman for life itself, the son’s constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is “of woman born.” Women are also born of women. But we know little about the effect on culture of that fact, because women have not been makers and sayers of patriarchal culture. (Of Woman Born 11)

Rich discusses mothering as it has been affected by patriarchy. She describes how patriarchy controls women, mothers, and their children. In this context, Rich explains how patriarchy deliberately colonizes women’s bodies, mothers’ bodies, as part of its purposeful coronation of men, fathers, as unchallengeable Sovereign Rulers of humanity.

It is high time that we reacknowledge the wonderfully creative “maternal” dimension that belongs to women which is incredibly capable of decolonizing female bodies from the sexual colonialism of
patriarchy. This decolonizing act finds accomplishment only in women’s repossession of their maternal bodies. In this context, Rich explains:

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society . . . 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, position, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin. (Of Woman Born 285-86)

By commenting on women’s, mothers’, repossession of their bodies, Rich provides a vision of the potential power of maternal bodies which enable women to be intellectually, spiritually and sexually transformative, and which can forge nurturant, sexual and spiritual linkages among women. It is this maternal power that makes women, as Mothers, capable enough to rupture, transform and reconstruct the entire human world. The aura of maternity discourses perpetuates the realization that women, mothers, must repossess their bodies and in this
act of repossession “mothering” becomes an experience that enriches a woman’s life rather than an institution laid down by phallocentric social order that prescribes woman’s confined place in the patriarchal family and thus enables men to control women’s bodies. Such a repossession by women of their maternal bodies would help women to reclaim their unique experience of “mothering” as empowering.

A similar attempt to rediscover and reassign this maternal power as an experience that uniquely belongs to women is made by Irigaray:

It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example. But this creation has been forbidden us for centuries, and we must reappropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women . . . We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language . . . which does not replace the bodily encounter,
as paternal language [langue] attempts to do . . . words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. (Lodge 420-21)

Like Rich, Irigaray also insists on the importance for women, mothers, to resist men of colonizing their bodies, to decolonize the same, and to identify and repossess their bodies as their own. As Irigaray points out, the creative power of the Maternal within women must be restored to glory since it forms the sole foundation from where life really springs in. According to her, it is important to acknowledge women’s exclusive maternal experience and identify a language that does not replace one’s bodily encounter with the woman-mother, as paternal language attempts to do in patriarchy, since the first body which the humanity has any dealings with is a “woman’s body” and the first love it shares is “mother’s love.”

Reflecting on the woman-mother’s extended connection with humanity, her eternal bonding with the child, an experience which man lacks, it is important to recall Chodorow’s comment in this regard:

In response to alienation and domination in the paid work world, many men are coming to regret their lack of extended connection with children. They feel that they are missing what remains one of the
few deep personal experiences our society leaves us. (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 213)

Chodorow speaks about how men, fathers, lack that extended “umbilical-cord” experience of the unbreakable Mother-Child dyad, that never-ending connection with children which marks a unique and exclusive experience of the Woman-Mother.

It is this distinct maternal experience of women that enables the emergence of mother-based theories which investigate relationships among women. These theories of interdependence among women allow theoretical independence from men and break with past theories that define the female by deviations from the male. However, all these theoretical strands generated by the interconnected realm of maternity discourses which centralize the experience of the woman-mother are based not on motherhood as a patriarchal institution but as an experience, (Mothering) with its pains, joys and rewards. All these theoretical arguments lead to the possibility for mothering to provide the context for a fruitful, creative and professional life and a space for political activism for woman. By viewing motherhood in the new perspective of the politics of maternity discourses, women attempt for the creation of new identities or subjectivities that promise them the real liberation. This resourceful Maternal power which resides in every woman is capable of thwarting the patriarchal norms of gender that hold
the sexual exploitation and subordination of women intact. Likewise, women’s universal mothering role has influenced the development of both masculine and feminine personalities and the relative status of the sexes. Thus, by redefining the concept of gender and sexuality, the Maternal shakes the foundation of the entire patriarchal system.

What makes woman a powerful comrade of the entire womanhood striking against the walls of patriarchy is her capacity to mother humanity. We find that men, while guaranteeing to themselves socio-cultural superiority over women in patriarchy, always remain psychologically defensive and insecure. Although women, by contrast, have always secondary social and cultural status in a male-dominated society, they gain psychological security and a firm sense of worth and importance in favourable circumstances. This strength of women springs from their maternal power.

Women reproduce themselves as mothers, emotionally and psychologically, in the next generation. Moreover, women reproduce men and children physically, psychologically and emotionally. Women’s mothering is the basis for the reproduction of women’s subjectivity, women’s location and responsibilities in the social sphere. Since women are themselves mothered by women, they grow up with the relational capacities and needs, and psychological definition of self-in-relationship, which commits them to mothering.
Women have more flexible, fluid, less rigid ego boundaries than men; they define themselves through relationships, especially intense and ambivalent mother-child bond. Unlike men, as the Ultimate Artist woman-mother feels creatively responsible to a human network rather than to an abstract code of rights that sustain a system like patriarchy. The theoretical domain of maternity discourses focuses on women’s writings that reflect these qualities which in turn constitute a woman’s physical and psychological experience of “mothering.”

In redefining their own experience of mothering as the storehouse of an equally (or even more) powerful alternative politics and in reviewing this maternal experience in newer perspectives, women attempt to deconstruct such patriarchal dichotomies as man/woman, culture/nature, subject/object, self/other, mind/body and so on. Given that the very nature of women’s, mothers’, lives constructs an overlapping space of these dichotomies as they simultaneously undergo the experiences of the Self and the Other within multiple contradictory locations, their maternal experience constructs for themselves multiple identities/subjectivities. That is, “mothering” involves a double identification for women, both as “mother” and as “child.” In this regard, Chodorow explains:

The whole preoedipal relationship has been internalized and perpetuated in a more ongoing way for women.
than for men. Women take both parts in it. Women have capacities for primary identification with their child through regression to primary love and empathy. Through their mother identification, they have ego capacities and the sense of responsibility which go into caring for children. In addition, women have an investment in mothering in order to make reparation to their own mother (or to get back at her). Throughout their development, moreover, women have been building layers of identification with their mothers upon the primary internalized mother-child relationship. (The Reproduction of Mothering 204)

Chodorow explains the cycle whereby women wish to be mothers and succeed at their maternal role which remains alien to men forever. Moreover, women, as mothers, can speak from the child’s perspective as well as from the mother’s position, which remains impossible for men, fathers. In other words, challenging patriarchy, women-mothers can articulate the two sides of the mother-child dyad. Thus, in Chodorow’s view, women’s mothering produces psychological self-definitions and capacities appropriate to mothering in women, and curtails and inhibits these capacities and self-definitions in men. In simple terms, the very visible, physical and emotional relationship of the Mother to her child
remains more authentic and strong than the indistinct paternal relationship which depends so tangibly on the mother for its realization. It is this presence of the Powerful Mother that our patriarchal fathers fear and try to subvert as part of the politics of phallocentric discourses.

The woman’s body, the Maternal Body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been a field of endless creative possibilities, a space invested with immense power. The theoretical arena of maternity discourses, therefore, creates room for showing how women’s “maternal” qualities can and should be extended to the other non-mothering works that they do. So, as critics like Chodorow argue, women’s maternal role has profound effects on women’s entire lives, on the ideology of women/mothers. This, in turn, is capable of causing a drastic reconstruction of the power relations in society, breaking the autonomy of the patriarchal norms that rule sexual and gender inequalities.

Maternity discourses, by celebrating the power of Mother’s love, develop a feminist theoretical space to read women’s, mothers’, sexuality in its historical context and women’s self-presentations outside the space of pejorative male norms. They try to retrieve the submerged “maternal” relationships that challenge the exclusive focus on male autonomy, individuality and difference in patriarchal discourses. This in turn leads to the collapse of male-oriented conventions, and the
reproduction of (m)Othering as an act, a writing, a mode of living in the world, that serves as a new form of politics alternative to phallocentrism, threatening the strong holds of patriarchy.

The discourses of the Maternal, by effecting a shift in attention from the institution of “motherhood” (a construct of patriarchy) towards the intense feelings of “mothering” as an experience, establish mothering as an extraordinary and unique way of living a woman’s life. These discourses, therefore, develop a philosophy of the Maternal Body among women in contrast to that as we find in patriarchy. It is a philosophy that allows us to think of women, of mothers, in a philosophical dialogue with one another. This maternal-feminine philosophy offers the voices of women-mothers speaking among themselves, thereby rejecting the patriarchal gesture that constructs the paternal-masculine realm of philosophical discussion as the only place of philosophy.

In patriarchal terms, the feminine should be either woman or mother, never both (woman-mother). The “woman-mother,” as she represents the greatest threat to the existence of male-domination, is exiled to the margins of patriarchal society. The patriarchal systems of representation find difficulty in accepting that the woman-mother’s body is that of a woman and a mother at once. These systems repress the (carnal) knowledge that the woman-mother’s body is a sexual one with the singularity of its own desires, and thus in patriarchal philosophy her
body remains mute and silenced. In connection to this terrible patriarchal oppression of women, of mothers, Cixous comments:

In philosophy, woman is always on the side of passivity. Every time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures; whenever a family model is brought into play; in fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question ‘What is it?’ . . . A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back – to the father. you can even fail to notice that there is no place at all for women in the operation! In the extreme the world of ‘being’ can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for mother – provided that there is something of the maternal: and it is the father then who acts as –is–the mother. Either the woman is passive; or she doesn’t exist. What is left is unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the oppositions, she is not coupled with the father . . . She does not exist, she may be nonexistent . . . It all refers back to man, to his torment, his desire to be (at) the origin. There is an intrinsic bond between the philosophical . . . and phallocentrism. (Lodge 265-66)
Cixous clearly exposes the oppressive politics of the patriarchal philosophical history that reveals itself in its subordination of the feminine which remains the pre-condition for the functioning of the phallocentric machine. Like her, Irigaray has also exposed the unhealthy and damaging political strategies of phallocentric social order or patriarchal culture:

The social order, our culture . . . want it this way: the mother must remain forbidden, excluded. The father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother . . . our separations from that first home and the first nurse remain uninterpreted, unthought in their losses and scars . . . The unavoidable and irreparable wound is the cutting of the umbilical cord . . . The problem is that, by denying the mother her generative power and by wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language [langue] and symbols which cannot take root in it except as in the form of that which makes a hole in the bellies of women and in the sight of their identity. In patriarchal traditions . . . women may be tolerated . . . as non-active bystanders. (Lodge 418-19)
Hence, like Cixous, Irigaray also finds the metaphorical murder of the woman-mother, her burial, the sacrifice of the unique umbilical bond, as the pre-requisite for the stable persistence of the Law of the Father as “eternal-natural” that in turn holds the patriarchal structures intact.

In patriarchy, the woman-mother is literally reduced to a holding “vessel,” a receptacle – the non-subject that makes possible the man’s, the Father’s, subjectivity. Paradoxically, it is from this point of comparison that associates woman-mother to a “vessel” that feminists like Rich initiate the undeniable feminist act of returning to the mother, “Back to the Mother,” causing her re-emergence as an active and powerful discourse. For instance, Rich illustrates this feminist act while tracing the primordial feminine creative force:

It does not seem unlikely that the woman . . . molded . . . the vessel of life, the transformer of blood into life and milk – that in so doing she was expressing, celebrating, and giving concrete form to her experience as a creative being possessed of indispensable powers. Without her biological endowment the child – the future and sustainer of the tribe – could not be born; without her invention and skill the . . . vessel – the most sacred of handmade objects – would not exist . . . The potential improvement and stabilization of life inherent in the development and
elaboration of pottery-making could be likened to the most complex innovations of a technological age – the refining of crude petroleum, the adaptation of nuclear energy – which invest their controllers with immense power. And yet this analogy, even, fails us, because the relationship of the potter to the pot, invested with both an intimate and a communal spirit, is unknown in present-day technology . . . It must be also borne in mind that in primordial terms the vessel is anything but a “passive” receptacle: it is transformative – active, powerful. (Of Woman Born 97-98)

Thus, in Rich’s illustration, we can see the extension of the woman-mother/vessel association beyond all patriarchally acquired responses to such an analogy. This association, in turn, forces a return to the “woman-mother” – the active receptacle from where the all-powerful creative and transforming force originates.

Rich’s resignification of the maternal-feminine as an active magical receptacle of creativity runs parallel with Kristeva’s concept of “semiotic chora” that also proves integral to the accomplishment of one’s reunion with the mother, resulting in the resurrection and resurgence of the “woman-mother” as the unmatchable discursive realm of signification. Kristeva defines the signifying space called “semiotic
“chora” as the maternal psychic energy that resides in the earliest stages of one’s psychic development that the individual later retains in the Symbolic (Oedipal Stage) and beyond, in his/her later years of life, which is repressed by patriarchy. For her, this “semiotic chora” – this repressed, maternally-oriented psychic energy – re-emerges as an unimaginably creative force that poses a strong continual challenge to the patriarchal realm of signification. Kristeva identifies two types of signifying processes to be analysed within any production of meaning, a “semiotic” one and a “symbolic” one:

The semiotic process relates to the chora, a term meaning “receptacle” . . . It is . . . mother and receptacle of all things . . . The symbolic process refers to the establishment of . . . paternal function, grammatical and social constraints, symbolic law. In short, the signifying process . . . results from a particular articulation between symbolic and semiotic dispositions . . . The speaking subject is . . . belonging to both semiotic chora and the symbolic device . . . (Desire in Language 6-7)

For Kristeva, the semiotic process refers to the maternally-oriented realm of signification that remains repressed in the patriarchal world. Here, she dismisses the dominance of the Lacanian Symbolic (the paternally-oriented realm of signification) by arguing that
the speaking subject is engendered as belonging to both the “semiotic chora” (maternally-oriented psychic energy) and the “symbolic device” (paternal function). Thus, Kristeva’s “semiotic” privileges the maternal voice. The semiotic chora, therefore, refers to that signifying space dominated by the “maternal-feminine,” and not the father. As a result, Kristeva’s “semiotic” challenges the authority and stability of the Lacanian Symbolic as the sole and inevitable signifying sphere in patriarchy.

As a maternally-oriented feminine realm of signification, the “semiotic” produces revolutionary linguistic variations like alliterations, lexical repetitions, broken syntax, grammatical deviations and so on which, according to Kristeva, disturb the unquestioned logic of the paternal signifying chain that governs the linguistic dimensions in patriarchy. Such effects, ultimately, serve to overthrow the normativity and naturalness of the bipolar patriarchal language, and to subvert the semantics and syntax of patriarchal linguistic order. Logically and chronologically “anterior” to the imposition of the Symbolic (or Paternal) Order, the “semiotic” is conceptualized as the pre-Oedipal moment when the child is bound up with and dependent on the mother’s body. Likewise, Kristeva links the “semiotic” to the “maternal,” and hence defines it as:
. . . a *chora* . . . receptacle . . . unnamable . . . hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connotated . . . At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification . . . But the symbolic . . . constitutes itself only by breaking with this anteriority . . . Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary . . . the subject of poetic language maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual, maternal element. (*Desire in Language* 133-36)

Kristeva, thus, names the revival of archaic pre-Oedipal modes of operation, the “semiotic.” According to the patriarchal mindset, this “semiotic” relation to the Maternal must undergo repression for the acquisition of language, a phenomenon that pervades the entire structure of the Symbolic Order. Challenging this patriarchal thinking, Kristeva views the “semiotic” as part of the dialectical process of signification through which all subjects constitute themselves. As she suggests, while remaining anterior to and inherent in the Symbolic, the “semiotic” goes beyond it and threatens its position.
As Kristeva argues, only the reactivation, the irruption of the “semiotic chora” can, therefore, fracture and remodel the Symbolic to produce the new poetic language or discourse called the Maternal. Poetic language, art in general, is then “the semiotization of the symbolic” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 79). Such a revitalization of Kristeva’s “semiotic chora” (that too, in the absence of an active, articulate paternal discursive realm) opens up a very real route back to a moment that privileges the “woman-mother,” that proves crucial to the emergence of the “maternal” as an active, alternative discursive source of poetic creativity. Kristeva argues that the “semiotic” potential of language is subversive; she describes the “semiotic” as a poetic-maternal linguistic practice that disrupts the Symbolic which is understood as culturally intelligible, rule-governed linguistic dimension. In other words, she argues that the “semiotic” is a dimension of language occasioned by the primary Maternal Body which not only refutes the Lacanian Symbolic but also serves as a perpetual source of effective subversion within the Symbolic. Kristeva, thus, attempts to expose the limits of Lacan’s theory of language by revealing the “semiotic,” the “maternal,” the dimension of language that it excludes. Her “semiotic chora,” as an alternative poetic-linguistic source, challenges the Lacanian narrative which assumes that cultural meaning requires the repression of the primary relationship to the maternal body, and totally
dismisses the unchallengeable, dominating presence of an active paternal signifier. This is, in fact, a call for humanity to accept and acknowledge a new politically-oriented realm of signification, that of maternity discourses. Maternity discourses evoke the realm that women have traditionally occupied: a space that generates the human species, a space like Kristeva’s “semiotic chora,” where time is marked by repetition on the one hand and a sense of eternity of the woman-mother’s species on the other. Kristeva claims that maternity positions woman in a kind of corporeal contiguity with her own mother restoring her “maternal-feminine desire” that remains repressed in patriarchy. While reflecting on the threshold of the maternal space, the “semiotic chora,” in the pre-Oedipal moment, and insisting on how the imprint of this maternal-feminine moment is undeniably retained throughout the life of an individual (whether male/female), Kristeva highlights the importance of recognizing the woman-mother’s desire which is shunned from our thinking in patriarchy. She suggests, in this regard, that “. . . we must reckon with the mother’s desire, beyond which it is hard for her to go, to maintain the . . . child . . . as . . . a wealth of her own . . .” (Desire in Language 282). Thus, woman’s, mother’s, desire constitutes an innate defining quality of her identity, her subjectivity.
The revival of woman-mother’s desire into prominence forms an important concern for the feminist theoretical domain of maternity discourses that calls for the recognition of women’s as well as mothers’ subjectivity at once. This feminist theoretical journey back to woman-mother’s “desire,” a journey that maternity discourses initiate, is discussed by Cixous:

We won’t advance backward anymore; we’re not going to repress something so simple as the desire of for life . . . all . . . drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive – just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood. We are not going to refuse . . . the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always . . . cursed – in the classic texts . . . This says a lot about the power she seems invested with at the time, because it has always been suspected, that, when pregnant, the woman not only doubles her market value, but – what’s more important – takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably, acquires body and sex . . . Woman of course has a desire for a “loving desire” . . . (Marks and De Courtivron 126-27)
This, in turn, constitutes Cixous’s poetic invocation of a “feminine libidinal economy” – an economy of “maternal-feminine desire” which is open, productive and creative. Patriarchy (Phallocentrism), as pointed out by Cixous, is predicated upon the exclusion of this economy of female desire.

Cixous’s concept of the “feminine libidinal economy” is about liberating a repressed female desire, about circulating that desire within language, and about recognizing and encouraging an economy which moves beyond the strictures of phallocentric law (Lodge 265-66). This economy of the maternal-feminine desire threatens the stability of the paternal edifice that holds the authority in patriarchy causing the absence of the woman-mother. Like Cixous, Irigaray also makes a reference to the patriarchal repression of this “maternal-feminine desire” and the terrible need to rediscover this maternal-feminine power:

The maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need. Where desire is concerned, especially in its religious dimension, the role of maternal-feminine power is often nullified . . . Desire for her, her desire, that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious fathers, professor-fathers, doctor-fathers, lover-fathers, etc. Moral
or immoral, they always intervene to censor, to repress, the desire of/for the mother . . . And what is . . . becoming apparent in the most everyday things and in the whole of our society and our culture is that, at a primal level, they function on the basis of a matricide . . . The murder of the mother . . . is born of the father and . . . his law . . . the exclusivity of his law forecloses this first body, this first home, this first love. It sacrifices them so as to make them material for the rule of a language [langue] which privileges the masculine genre . . . to such an extent as to confuse it with the human race . . . the life of the mother – of the mother in all women, of the woman in all mothers – reproduces the living bond with her . . . This rebirth is necessary for women. It cannot take place unless it is freed from man’s archaic projection on to her and unless an autonomous and positive representation of her sexuality exists in culture . . . Throughout all this, what we have to do . . . is discover our sexual identity, the singularity of our desires . . . (Lodge 415-21)

Thus, Irigaray indicates how the phallocentric theoretical world orders woman-mother to give up her “maternal-feminine desire,” and demands the child (boy/girl) to dismiss its desire of and for the mother so as to
enter into the desire of/for the father that establishes the patriarchal law.
Moreover, as Irigaray also suggests, women must not give up their
“maternal-feminine desire” because doing so will uproot them from their
identity or subjectivity.

A concept of “gift” is also central and closely connected to
Cixous’s understanding of the “feminine libidinal economy.” Within this
economy, there is a “giving” which does not expect a “return.” That is,
in this economy of “maternal-feminine desire” the Subject gives to the
Other without experiencing the “gift” as a loss of the self, something
which will reduce the self’s worth. In other words, in this economy the
“giving” itself may emerge as the “return.” Cixous, thus, attributes this
gift as the unique power of the woman-mother:

. . . she gives. She doesn’t “know” what she’s giving, she
doesn’t measure it; she gives, though, neither a
counterfeit impression nor something she hasn’t got.
She gives more, with no assurance that she’ll get back
ev even some unexpected profit from what she puts out. She
gives that there may be life, thought, transformation. This
is an “economy” that can no longer be put in economic
terms. (Marks and De Courtivron 128)

Cixous, thus, relates the feminine economy of desire to the maternal
body: the body which gives of itself in our culture (the woman-mother
gives life itself) and does not demand a return (another life, or even a death). In simple terms, the phallocentric libidinal economy of the patriarchal world is death-driven (its very existence demands the death of the woman-mother), while the feminine libidinal economy is life-affirming. Maternity discourses, as a distinct feminist theoretical stream, aims at to identify and to manifest this economy of the “maternal-feminine desire” that characterizes woman-mother’s identity, her subjectivity.

Maternity discourses decry the patriarchal alienation of women from their maternal bodies and their unique mothering experience; these discourses also link mothering, writing and sexuality. If woman uses her maternal body, her maternal power, as a resistance discourse that renders indubitable defiance to the patriarchal authority, she speaks not merely from the position of woman or that of mother alone, but from the position of the “woman-mother.” This innately unified “maternal-feminine” being has the immense force to challenge and upset the patriarchal foundations, the tyranny of the father’s law. Maternity discourses, therefore, constitute a feminist theoretical space that focuses on the uniqueness of woman’s maternal nature and attempts to know the “woman” in “every mother” and the “mother” in “everywoman.”

Cixous identifies a return to the “woman-mother” as crucial to the process of reclaiming women’s creative powers. According to her, it
is only through their maternal body that women come to writing or creativity. Cixous’s contention of the woman-mother’s body, the maternal, as the privileged metaphor of literary production deconstructs the binarism of patriarchal meaning and connects mothering, writing and sexuality. For Cixous, the woman-mother’s discourse is a language of voice and body, a maternal song. She celebrates this “maternal voice” as a pre-Symbolic (pre-Oedipal) fusion of body and breath, a continuum that refuses the division and separation of the father’s speech (Sellers 142-43). This “maternal-feminine voice” constitutes the language, the mother tongue, that the child (boy/girl) learns in the pre-Oedipal, the terrain of the woman-mother’s body which is the privileged site of the mother-child bond. Cixous describes this “maternal-feminine” language, this voice, as writing (living) which becomes the passage to and away from death, towards a new self, a new liberated body, a new sexuality, a new subjectivity. With reference to this “maternal song,” she explains:

In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we’ve been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us – that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman . . . a woman is never far from
“mother” . . . There is always within her at least a little of that . . . mother’s milk. She writes in white ink . . . There always remains in woman that force which produces . . . In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off . . . (Marks and De Courtivron 117-18)

Cixous argues that the “maternal-feminine” voice of the woman-mother sings from a time before the Law of the Father, before the Symbolic, took one’s breath away and reappropriated it into patriarchal language under its authority of separation. For her, mothering, writing, is a rhythm, a movement that defies the stability of definition and meaning that rules the patriarchal world. Cixous encodes this sense of movement as a gesture that returns again and again to the woman-mother’s body. Here, as Cixous suggests, the woman-mother comes to language in a breathless song of desire. The maternal desire is linked continually with the desire to write, the desire to live. Cixous, therefore, evokes a creative power into which woman can tap, if only she can relocate that “first attachment” to the mother within the self, and resume writing in “mother’s milk,” writing in “white ink.” For women, in Cixous’s view, writing is about giving birth to the “(m)Other woman,” the self as (m)Other which has been colonized by phallocentrism. Writing the
“maternal” body, thus, bridges the gap or heals the fracture caused between the woman-mother and the child by the intrusion of patriarchy. This writing, this mode of living, which gets brilliantly manifested in maternity discourses, begins the effective feminist act of making a “return to the mother” through which the woman-mother regains her censored body and breath from the patriarchal tyranny.

The theoretical realm of maternity discourses asks for the “reunion with the mother,” it codes the “maternal” as the space where the “woman-mother” finally emerges as the “Subject,” as the space that exists prior to the formation of the Subject within the Symbolic or the space of phallocentric thought. This maternal space is powerful enough to carry itself across the pre-Oedipal (pre-Symbolic), and capable of entering, threatening and even disintegrating the Symbolic (the patriarchal space). This brings the focus back on how maternity discourses represent the desire for fusion or reunion with the mother, to re-experience the pleasures of fusion with the maternal body, that an individual retains throughout his/her life which, in the patriarchal perspective, is impossible after the pre-Oedipal period. The Oedipal or the Symbolic pictures the Father as the Subject, dismissing the subjectivity of women, of mothers. However, it is important to note that the pattern of the Oedipal drama is the same whatever be the sex of the child: all children are in love with their primary caretaker, the woman-
mother (Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* 164). Therefore, it is one’s relation to the primary object of love, the woman-mother, that determines the future of his/her life; it is this relationship with the woman-mother, the way in which separation from her and reunion with her is achieved, that primarily determines the future of humanity as a whole. In this regard, Melanie Klein comments:

> Throughout my work I have attributed fundamental importance to the infant’s first object relation – the relation to the mother’s breast and to the mother – and have drawn the conclusion that if this primal object, which is introjected, takes root in the ego with relative security, the basis for a satisfactory development is laid. Innate factors contribute to this bond . . . the breast is instinctively felt to be the source of nourishment and therefore, in a deeper sense, of life itself. This mental and physical closeness to the gratifying breast in some measure restores, if things go well, the lost pre-natal unity with the mother and the feeling of security that goes with it . . . in this way the mother is turned into a loved object . . . While the pre-natal state no doubt implies a feeling of unity and security . . . we might, therefore, consider the universal longing for
the pre-natal state . . . as an expression of the urge for idealization. (Envy and Gratitude 3-4)

Klein makes a reference to one’s intense and never-ending desire to re-establish the umbilical bond, his/her pre-natal unity with the woman-mother, which forms the base for the entire journey of human race. Klein’s notion of the child’s first object relation, the relation to the mother’s breast, getting extended as the “relation to the mother” is further substantiated by a similar view that Irigaray shares:

. . . when the child makes demands of the breast, isn’t it demanding to receive all? The all that it received in its mother’s belly: life, the home in which it lived, the home of its body, food, air, warmth, movement . . . . (Lodge 419)

In concordance with Klein’s standpoint, Irigaray suggests how the child’s demand for its mother’s breast is simultaneously extended as its demand for the woman-mother. Such a demand, as Irigaray suggests, indicates how there exists in an individual (man/woman) a greater and stronger urge to return to the Mother, an intense feeling to seek refuge in Her Womb, which in turn is strong enough to terminate the patriarchal tendency to constantly repeat the humanity’s journey back to the Father.

Thus, as Klein points out, from birth the infant is reared through relatedness with the woman-mother, the first object, who is
simultaneously identified with and internalized. These two processes of
the child’s identification with and internalization of its woman-mother
form the basis of object relations in its later life. It is on this ground
that Klein develops her analysis of the infant’s experience within the
mother-child dyad, focusing on the child’s relationship with the
woman-mother and analysing how this relationship governs or decides
the child’s formative relations with objects which come to be perceived
as separate from the self. Thus, Klein gradually emphasizes the
centrality of the pre-Oedipal phase (the phase of strong maternal
relation) that is characterized by the child’s bodily relation (both
psychic and actual) with the mother. Her emphasis on the pre-Oedipal
phase makes it possible to concentrate on the period of time when the
woman-mother’s body dominates the child’s world. Klein links the
child’s relation with the mother’s body to the development of
symbolization and differentiation by showing how this relation extends
the child’s focus from the maternal body to the external world; through
symbolization the child’s interest in its mother’s body begins to extend
to the whole world around. Klein, thus, manages to capture the
overwhelming importance of the woman-mother in the period before
paternal authority intervenes with Oedipus. Moreover, Klein rewrites the
Oedipal drama to make the woman-mother and her body (as prime
object for the child) the central figure in an individual’s life.
Klein’s re-evaluation of the Oedipal complex, thus, involves a feminist theoretical shift towards the woman-mother. Taking the cue from Klein, we are, thus, led to emphasize the importance of the humanity’s endless desire to “return” to the early phase of psychic development, to the pre-Oedipal moment of unity with the woman-mother (a moment before the intrusion of the father) to restore the figure of the mother herself into prominence against patriarchy.

Kleinian notion of the internalization of the child’s identification with its woman-mother (the first object) as integral to its object relations remains an influential source for the theoretical dimension of maternity discourses. In this context, Klein explains:

... a complex object-world ... is felt by the individual, in deep layers of the unconscious ... I therefore use the term “internalized objects” and an “inner world.” This inner world consists of innumerable objects taken into the ego ... all these objects are in the inner world in an infinitely complex relation both with each other and the self. (*Love, Hate and Reparation* 362-63)

According to Klein, the child’s inner world, the world of internalized objects, is thus a complex interaction between the child’s inner and outer experiences leading to the internal institution of objects which are interrelated with each other and with the self. But, Klein stresses that it
is the strength of the “inner world” which determines how the aspects of the external world will become internalized within the psyche. This inner world is, in turn, recognized as the voice and the influence of the woman-mother established in the child’s ego (Klein, *Love, Hate and Reparation* 362).

In simple terms, the child (boy/girl) constructs a complex internal world initially in relation to the mother’s breast (the first object in relation), and later to the woman-mother as a whole. This, in turn, constitutes the child’s awareness and acknowledgement of the woman-mother as a whole person, an independent subject. As Klein suggests, the child “relates . . . more and more, not only to the mother’s breast, hands, face, eyes, as separate objects, but to herself as a whole person . . . ” (*Love, Hate and Reparation* 68). Thus, the child’s awareness and genuine concern for the first object (woman-mother) as a separate, independent entity, as Klein sees, stems from the child’s gratitude for the love it has received from its mother:

. . . feelings of love and gratitude arise directly and spontaneously in the baby in response to the love and care of its mother. The power of love – which is the manifestation of the forces which tend to preserve life – is there in the baby . . . and finds its first fundamental expression in the baby’s attachment to its
mother’s breast, which develops into love for her as a person . . . These feelings . . . now enter as a new element into the emotion of love. They become an inherent part of love . . . (Love, Hate and Reparation 65)

Klein refers to the fundamental importance that she gives to the infant’s first “object relation” – the relation to the mother’s breast – which later develops into the child’s relation to the woman-mother as a whole. The child simultaneously recognizes her as a whole person, a separate subject. In other words, while developing and sustaining the desire to reunite with the woman-mother, the child has to simultaneously see and recognize her as an independent subject, and not simply as an adjunct of its ego. Such a recognition, as Klein argues, serves as a source generating the capacity for gratitude and love in the growing child. In this connection, Klein states:

. . . enjoyment is always bound up with gratitude; if this gratitude is deeply felt it includes the wish to return goodness received and is thus the basis of generosity. There is always a close connection between being able to accept and to give and both are parts of the relation to the . . . object . . . Furthermore, the feeling of generosity underlies creativeness and this applies to the infant’s most
constructive activities as well as to the constructiveness of the adult. (*Envy and Gratitude* 310)

According to Klein, the child has a concern for the woman-mother as a separate whole being: the ability of an individual (child/adult) to accept and return love, goodness, to his/her mother and in extension to the whole external world. Moreover, one’s creativity or constructiveness flow from the child’s gratitude for the love and caring affection that it receives from the Maternal. Klein once again shows the principal importance that she assigns to the child’s relationship with the primary object (woman-mother), as the creative impulse (whether in the child or in the adult) itself arises out of the need to restore the first object of love (woman-mother).

These Kleinian views paying foremost attention to the importance of the woman-mother and the goal of the total reunion with her finally open up a discourse on and of the mother. While Lacanian theory erases the woman-mother almost entirely behind the linguistic operation, Klein insists that we think through the mother’s body, as the “maternal body” is retained in our psyches forever. As Klein suggests through her writings, the world and environment from which the self should not separate is the woman-mother. In other words, the woman-mother is the world and vice-versa. That is, the outside world is the woman-mother’s body in an extended sense, a reincarnation of the
mother’s womb, the maternal space. And to explore the world, therefore, means to explore the insides of the mother. By implicitly suggesting the urgency behind the humanity’s essential journey “from mother, to mother, in mother,” an interesting return to the woman-mother, Klein emerges as one of the crucial figures in the feminist theoretical domain of maternity discourses.

Maternity discourses, as a distinct feminist theoretical space, foresee a future that would witness the real birth of the “woman-mother” at the cost of the termination of her centuries-long fate, of her metaphoric murder and burial in patriarchy. The contributions of feminists like Chodorow, Kristeva, Butler, Rich, Cixous, Irigaray and Klein have finally set the pace for such a vigorous theoretical return to the woman-mother and reunion with her. It is this act of “return” or “reunion” that helps to evolve the ever-new feminist theoretical statement of “mothering,” the unique experience of woman-mother, as an alternative form of politics, a resistance discourse, that is powerful enough to overthrow a system like patriarchy. Thus, confronting and resisting the ideological constructs of patriarchy, “maternity discourses” make an entry as constituting an alternative discursive space in opposition to the currently active phallocentric world. Challenging the laws of patriarchy and all phallocentric branches of knowledge, the politics of maternity discourses would possibly mark the most important
and remarkable feminist theoretical movement approaching in the
evolution of humankind in the coming years.

Threatening the existing patriarchal culture that we live in, the
politics of maternity discourses brings in an effective change in our
attitude to women, to mothers, and their unique experience of
“mothering.” Maternity discourses, thus, band together to resist
woman-mother’s hardship, suffering and frustration in patriarchy, and
make women-mothers aware of the codes that confine and limit them in
such a male-centred system (phallocentrism). These discourses centred
on “woman-mother” liberate the human world into “her” language, “her”
story, and not his-story that silences her as in patriarchy. For maternity
discourses, a new and distinct feminist theoretical realm, patriarchy or
written history no longer remains an unchallengeable fort. In a way,
patriarchy (phallocentrism) and recorded history are parallel and
identical twins. The patriarchal societies accord the power of the law to
men, to fathers, denying the subjectivity of women, of mothers. It is
against this patriarchal backdrop that the emergence of maternity
discourses gains prominence. These discourses re-inform that the
position is very different from a woman-mother’s standpoint. Women-
mothers have different desires and attitudes that distinguish them from
being mere patriarchal constructs.
The politics of maternity discourses re-establishes the focus on women’s unique maternal power, a space of unending creativity, and reveals the need to dismantle the patriarchal world order which confines the woman-mother as an insignificant presence in the pre-Symbolic or pre-linguistic stage, forcing her to disappear from culture. Therefore, maternity discourses revive the “woman-mother” as the real source of speech (language) for the child (boy/girl), and not a forbidden space that prevents the voice. This, in turn, brings back an emphasis not only on the child’s strong pre-Oedipal bond with the woman-mother but also on the unconditional revitalization of this “maternal” bond even in the Oedipal period (the Symbolic), even in the adult life. So, as maternity discourses claim, one’s relation to one’s woman-mother is unique without parallel, something that is rooted within for a whole lifetime without question. It is, thus, inevitably impossible for patriarchy to comprehend women’s mothering experience with its delights and violences; it is an experience that cannot be appropriated by a male-dominated system for ever. The feminist theoretical framework established by the politics of maternity discourses attempts to show how women’s mothering as a resistance discourse can cause a revolutionary moment capable of rupturing the coherence of the Symbolic, the coherence of the function of paternity, the coherence of all patriarchal structures.