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DEMOUNTING MOTHERHOOD: CONSTRUING RACHEL CUSK'S *A LIFE'S WORK: ON BECOMING A MOTHER*

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Abstract: From oral folk traditions to contemporary written and digital modes of expression, literary texts have consistently engaged with the subjectivity and agency of individuals as central to the dignified human condition in all societies. However, the representations circulated and canonised over time appear to have inadequately addressed the deeply embodied and life-oriented experiences of women. A critical examination of fictional and non-fictional texts reveals that the multifaceted dimensions of women's lives remain underrepresented, obscured, or silenced, and that such representations serve to uphold entrenched socio-political ideologies that operate at the expense of women in society. Theoretical interventions and critical analysis reveal how popular literary and non-literary texts confine women to stereotypical roles that curtail narrative agency. In this scenario, which seeks to marginalise women's individuality through various customs and socio-political institutions, select contemporary narratives by women articulate suppressed experiences that have the potential to dismantle the ideological structures that govern literary production and circulation. Accordingly, it is imperative to examine contemporary narratives by women to explore the lived realities of womanhood and motherhood experiences. Consequently this paper seeks to analyse, through the lens of feminism and gender politics, the text *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001), a memoir by the Canadian-born British novelist and writer Rachel Cusk that presents a brazen representation of motherhood as experienced by the author in an aberrant manner vis-a-vis the glorified experiences of the same as depicted and assured by men and women in a conventional social contours.

Keywords: *Ideology, stereotypes, womanhood, motherhood, feminism, gender politics*

In a patriarchal society, where power is vested with men in the social, political and economic institutions, motherhood is prioritised as a woman's primary identity and its attributes of bearing, birthing and nurturing are projected as integral to her moral responsibilities and a measure of her social worth. Furthermore, the institutionalised notions of motherhood and mothering experiences reinforce the binary of good and bad mothers by associating goodness with selflessness and devotion to home, while projecting mothers with personal goals as callous and greedy. These gendered aspects of womanhood and motherhood are fortified through literary and non-literary narratives that continue to feed on the institutionalised notions of gender roles that bind women to pre-conceived notions of existence. However, contemporary narratives challenge traditional ideologies of motherhood that bind women to domesticity and reveal deviant attitudes among women that compel a deconstruction and restructuring of the glorified paradigms of motherhood.

A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother (2001) by the British novelist Rachel Cusk scrutinises the lived realities of gestation and motherhood through a polemical account of the physical and psychological transition that occurs in a woman's body and mind upon becoming a mother. In this narrative, which adopts an anecdotal style, Cusk explores the tension between the lived realities of motherhood and the idealised expectations imposed by a society. With meticulous attention to detail, she portrays the transformative life from girlhood to womanhood as simultaneously imbued with conflicting emotions of love, anxiety, compassion, and servitude. By framing the conventional motherhood practices as restrictive and burdensome experiences, Cusk subverts their romanticised portrayal by equating her initiation into motherhood as a confinement: "My sex has become an exiguous, long-laid, lovingly furnished trap in which I have inadvertently wandered and from which now there is no escape. I have been tagged, as if electronically, by pregnancy. My womanly movements are being closely monitored" (31). Aligning with Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical perspective in *The Second Sex*, Cusk argues that women are not innately mothers; rather, mothering and motherhood are imposed by sociocultural circumstances. Accordingly, this text provides a pioneering account of the narrator as an ambivalent mother who assumes the responsibility of offering an unvarnished exposition of her experiences of gestation and the early years of mothering her infant daughter. In her attempt to provide an elaborate depiction of the maternal experiences, Cusk states:

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

This narrative which is divided into twelve parts namely, “Forty Weeks”, “Lily Bart’s Baby”, “Colic and Other Stories”, “Loving Leaving”, “Motherbaby”, “Extra Fox”, “Hell’s Kitchen”, “Help”, “Don’t Forget to Scream”, “A Valediction to Sleep”, “Breathe” and “Heart Burn” based on precise experiences “reinforces the possibility of multiple dimensions to a self” (196) as stated by the writer and critic, Frye in the book *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures*. By providing details on the various stages of motherhood, Cusk traces the transition that takes place in the woman's persona upon becoming a mother. She realises that, post-delivery, she is no longer the same person: “I have replicated, like a Russian doll. I left home one; I have come back two” (56). Unable to comprehend the physical and mental alteration along with the settled notion of confinement, she sits on the sofa and cries and gradually comprehends that an instant link at the emotional or physical level does not develop between an infant and its mother. Consequently, she feels deceived by the institutionalised notions of motherhood that mislead women to accept the role of a mother. She states: “Pregnancy begins to seem to me more and more of a lie, a place populated by evangelicals and moralists and control-freaks, a place haunted by crazies with their delusions of motherhood” (59). Post-delivery, Cusk understands that the infant is like an expensive possession she is afraid to keep and lose under any circumstance. Gradually, she gets accustomed to meeting the child's demands at the expense of her personal life, and as she becomes involved in mothering, her own life feels like an abandoned building, with the ceiling crashing down onto the floor. Her personal life is utterly transfigured, and she becomes a person who sacrifices all her physical existence and associations for the sake of the newborn. To meet the expected norms of motherhood, she is forced to forgo many of her routine activities, due to which she confesses: “To be a mother, I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself, I must let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger, or leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think about other things. To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other” (63). She presents this dilemma of becoming a mother and getting alienated from the self as “I am surprised to discover how easily I have split in two. I worry; I console. Like a divided stream, the person and the mother pay each other no heed, although moments earlier they were indistinguishable: they tumble forwards, each with its separate life, driven by the same source but seeking no longer to correspond” (62).

In the chapters titled “Colic and Other Stories” and “Loving and Leaving”, Cusk elaborates on the health-related issues of the infant and reveals the predicament of newborn mothers who fail to comprehend the cause of all the wailings. According to her, mothers do not possess any innate or paranormal ability to interpret their infants’ cries; rather, they learn to decipher their meanings through repeated trials and careful observations. She states this quandary as, “My thoughts have become rat-like and rudimentary with guesswork, with lack of sleep” (69). Throughout the text, she illustrates the pre-maternal and maternal lives of women and statuses that she becomes conscious of her independent

and pre-maternal life only when the baby falls asleep, and during such moments, she becomes conscious of a fast-moving life outside her apartment, where people are heading to their offices to keep up their schedules. To remain part of the exciting pace of life outside her vicinity, she schemes to complete certain tasks while the baby sleeps. About these instances, she confesses, “The prospect is exciting, for it is when the baby sleeps that I liaise, as if it were a lover, with my former life. These liaisons, though always thrilling, are often frantic” (71). Whenever she plans to read, write or call up her friends, in the most unexpected moments, the infant opens her eyes and seemingly monitors the surrounding searching for her presence. According to Cusk, these moments of the baby waking up and usually screaming for an adult’s attention is not very joyful as many women claim it to be so:

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

Cusk also encapsulates the traumatic experiences of the mothers when they are with and away from their kids. She depicts the mental and psychological transformations that prevent mothers from engaging in activities that are not related to their children. She admits that being involved in any plans, thoughts or activities that are not associated with the child makes her feel guilty, and she states, “It is not love that troubles me when I leave the baby, like a rope and harness paid out behind me wherever I go. It is rather that when I leave her, the world bears the taint of my leaving, so that abandonment must now be subtracted from the sum of whatever I chose to do” (92-93). With several references, she opines that mothers who appear to be always contend with the activities of mothering are suppressing their ambivalence for the sake of social acceptance. As the narrative progresses, Cusk introduces the term “motherbaby” (100), which suggests that mother and baby are seen as a single entity, inseparable, and she states that this claim unnerves and threatens her with insanity. She refers to every minute detail of mothering and exemplifies the trauma of breastfeeding by elaborating the fact that this activity is not as easy or comfortable as it is commonly represented, but a skill to be mastered with effort. During this period of lactation, which never satisfies her, she suffers from what Roziska Parker, the British psychotherapist, art historian and writer, refers to as “maternal depressive anxiety” (88) in her text *Mother Love/ Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* that generates apprehensions in mothers for being unable to mother as per conventional expectations. Her concern about losing her own individuality and the compulsion to appear to be happy despite all the adversities deranges her, and she laments:

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

In the chapter titled “Hell’s Kitchen”, Cusk speaks of servitude and impressively draws an analogy between a mother traveling with a child and a traveller moving around with a large rucksack. She says that, similar to how people generally ignore and pass comments on travellers who are clumsy with the straps and luggage, a mother with her child is also stared at and sympathised with without offering any assistance. She further compares the life of a couple without kids to that of a couple with kids, and, based on her observations, reveals that those with kids quarrel among themselves to stay awake and set timetables to monitor sleep hours. She argues that, particularly for mothers, childbearing and nurturing are akin to taking on new projects that demand constant attention through cleaning, washing, feeding, and carrying. Cusk emphasises that the pressure to attend to the child in the most befitting manner turns the mother into an “untended garden” (139) with her tasks undone, calls unanswered and bills unpaid. On a heartbreaking note, she confesses that she would love to get back to her non-mother self “before the winter of old age sets in” (140). Based on her experiences, Cusk lets slip the truth that women’s lives turn chaotic upon becoming a mother:

From the irreconcilable beginning, it seemed to me that some kind of slide into deeper patriarchy was inevitable: that the father’s day would gradually gather to it the armour of the outside world, of money and authority and importance, while the mother’s remit would extend to cover the entire domestic sphere. It is well known that in couples where both parents work full-time, the mother generally does far more than her fair share of housework and childcare and is the one to curtail her working day in order to meet the exigencies of parenthood. (11-12)

On realising that the major share of parenting is considered a mother’s duty and that she is powerless to monitor the child who begins to crawl, pull, jump off steps, and throw things around, she confines herself, along with the child, to the kitchen. Here, she struggles to do the domestic chores by holding the baby in one hand, which she illustrates as a silent serfdom that women never voice:

One does not, it is true, often hear a woman observe with incredulity that her baby won’t seem to go away, not even for a night so that she can get some sleep, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t think it, hasn’t always thought it. I often think that people wouldn’t have children if they knew what it was like, and I wonder whether as a gender we contain a Darwinian stop upon our powers of expression, our ability to render the truth of this subject. People without

children certainly don't seem very interested in anything that people with have to say about it: they approach parenthood blithely, as if they were the first, with all the innocence of Adam and Eve before the fall. (136)

At this juncture, Cusk critiques the archetypal representations of motherhood and mothering in fairy tales and other popular cultural narratives in which mothers and grandmothers are depicted as being always overwhelmed by the childishness of their children. In these types of narratives, mothers are portrayed as women whose sole happiness depends on attending to their children throughout the day and night. Here, Cusk raises her protest in the misrepresentation of the lived experiences of motherhood due to which women are often unaware and unprepared for the actuality of the experiences on accepting motherhood. Her attempts to find an apt person to take care of her child are illustrated in the chapter "Help", and she becomes aware that every child minder comes with their specific styles and predetermined notions to monitor the child and, contrary to her expectations, none of them seems to be efficient in this task. Additionally, even when the child is engaged by another person, Cusk becomes overly conscious and suspicious of the child's contentment in that person's presence. Her frenzy at leaving the child in the maid's care to spend some time on her personal needs exposes her ambivalent attitude and separation anxiety as she fails to utilise the time in a productive manner:

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

In the chapter titled "A Valediction to Sleep", Cusk depicts the trauma and insanity caused by sleep deprivation: "The day was sometimes a sticky mire to be laboriously crossed, the air unbreathable glue; and sometimes a frantic, untethered cloud speeding across the sky, upon which I could never gain a foothold" (184). She elaborates on the impacts of such agonising experiences, leading to hallucinations as:

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

Despite all the cataclysms, the concluding chapter, “Heartburn,” highlights the mother's longing for the child as the child grows into independence and becomes less demanding. At this point, she observes: “Stairs are just stairs again. Nights are once more vague and soundless. Time is no longer alarmed and trip-wired: things can wait, can be explained, and deferred. My body has lost its memory of her birth, and sometimes I feel surges of girliness, of youth and lightness” (214).

Cusk employs a range of images, symbols, and metaphors to vividly portray her experience of motherhood. One dominant metaphor that recurs throughout the text is one of imprisonment, underscoring a pervasive sense of confinement. Across the different stages of pregnancy and early motherhood, she represents the entire process as a trap that binds women to the domestic sphere. In this way, she casts herself as an inmate, with pregnancy and motherhood functioning as her prison. Pregnancy brings about physical transformations and being powerless to control these changes, she comments, “It is as if I have been arrested or called to account, summoned by the tax inspector, isolated and searched” (40) and in her helplessness, she surrenders her solitude to escape this claustrophobia caused by the “rising mountain of [her] stomach” (39). Her depiction of childbirth by C-section conveys her sense of losing all significance in both her physical and emotional state. In that moment, attention shifts entirely to the baby, who is released from confinement like an “uncaged animal” (70), while she herself feels imprisoned—confined to exist under the constant demands and surveillance of the child.

With regard to the metaphor of confinement, writer and critic Alice Braun, in her article on *A Life's Work*, characterises this comparison as an “arbitrary form of confinement” (n. p), suggesting that it arises less from biological processes associated with pregnancy and childbirth than from patriarchal expectations imposed upon women. Such a representation, which challenges institutionalised ideals of motherhood, has unsettled many readers, particularly because popular culture tends to portray and glorify motherhood as the most fulfilling experience available to women. Cusk resorts to such wayward imagery as she feels that very little of the truth has been revealed in fictional and non-fictional representations. Hence, Cusk dares to present an honest picture in the article titled, “Shakespeare’s Daughters”, published in *The Guardian* in 2009: “So the woman writer looking for work will still find plenty in the task of demystification, of breaking the silence that forms like fog around iterative female experience. She won’t win the Man Booker prize for writing the book of repetition: she will, as De Beauvoir perceived, irritate, and antagonise rather than please” (n. p). These statements highlight the purpose of writing, as upheld by many feminists: that women should write to reveal their genuine experiences, not to repeat what is already established or to please readers who glorify women rather than being compassionate towards them.

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

A Life's Work did seem neglected to me when I picked it up, dusty and unstrung, like an old violin lying forgotten in a cupboard. How pleasant, then, to draw the bow across and discover that its notes still sound true to me, its music sincere, its core of love undamaged. I no longer expect this music to speak to everyone, but I retain the hope that for those who want to hear it, it is at least preferable to silence. (6)

A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother can be conclusively seen as a text that honestly presents the trials and tribulations of women on becoming mothers. The concepts presented by the writer are perfectly in tune with the point made by the British clinical psychologist Harriet Lerner in her work, *The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life*, which highlights the concerns with which every woman should be prepared before becoming a mother:

I would not advise any woman to slide haphazardly into motherhood. It's not a good idea to close your eyes, hold your nose, and jump. There are things to be considered, not the least of which are how a baby fits into your own life plan and whether or not you feel prepared to rear it. Indeed, there are countless questions to reflect on if you are contemplating having children. For example, what are your short and long-term work and career goals? Where do you most want to invest your time, talent, energy, and money? What is the condition of your marriage, if you have one, and your overall support system? What are your fantasies about what you will gain or lose from having a baby? How much responsibility are you ready to take on? How will you and your partner decide how much time each of you will spend on childcare? Are you prepared, if necessary, to care for a child with a severe emotional or physical disability? The list goes on and on. (13)

Critical texts on womanhood and motherhood across diverse cultural and geographical contexts have highlighted the necessity of deconstructing gender-biased norms that create dilemmas for women. In the article, "The Motherhood Memoir and the 'New Momism': Biting the Hand That Feeds You", Andrea O'Reilly promotes the reading of these types of non-fictional writings to "prepare women for the truths of mothering and to enable mothers to feel less guilt, anxiety, and stress about being a mother" (209). Similarly, in *Motherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*, Pragya Agarwal highlights the importance of distinguishing societal expectations of motherhood from the actual

experience of mothering to reduce the pressure on mothers. She asserts that “the cultural tyranny that forces the morass of motherhood and womanhood can be untangled, leaving women free to shun the social oppressiveness that shackles them into these ambiguous liminal roles” (320). In the light of these perspectives, Cusk's autobiographical narrative presents the stages of an existential dilemma for mothers who are largely misguided about motherhood and mothering before becoming mothers themselves. Through the narrative, Cusk successfully shatters the taboos around mothering by affirming that the actual experiences of bearing, birthing, and rearing children are excluded from popular narratives and discourses that smother the mothers' shriek with lullabies of love, tolerance, and sacrifice.

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