

THE HUMAN MANUAL

MA Contemporary Dialogues: Confirmative Praxis (ADAA7002)

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Word Count: 5091

(Excluding bibliography list. Includes in-text quotations and titles)

Submission Date: Thursday 11th January 2024

The Institution of Motherhood

Introduction

'Motherhood, when looked at as a set of laws, traditions, religious practices, and economic structures, appears to be designed to produce the highest number of new humans at the lowest cost'. (Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 1976)

Rich writes, "*and we like to believe that the home is a private place*". One can talk about the mother when we talk about the home space and raising children - this is the traditional environment in which this image is found, but it can also be mentioned in a wider context, for example, related to Christianity or the creation of new, modern concepts of the Motherhood "The labor of childbirth has been a form of forced labor" ((Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 1976)

The image is of great importance in shaping society's attitude to any phenomenon, in this case, to one person in the family - the mother. The aim of the work is to reveal the meanings of the image of the mother and the impact of patriarchal structures and the societal expectations placed on women. The following essay serves as a valuable research document aimed at providing support to my project, *The Human Manual*.

Unveiling Maternal Myths: A Critical Analysis of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*

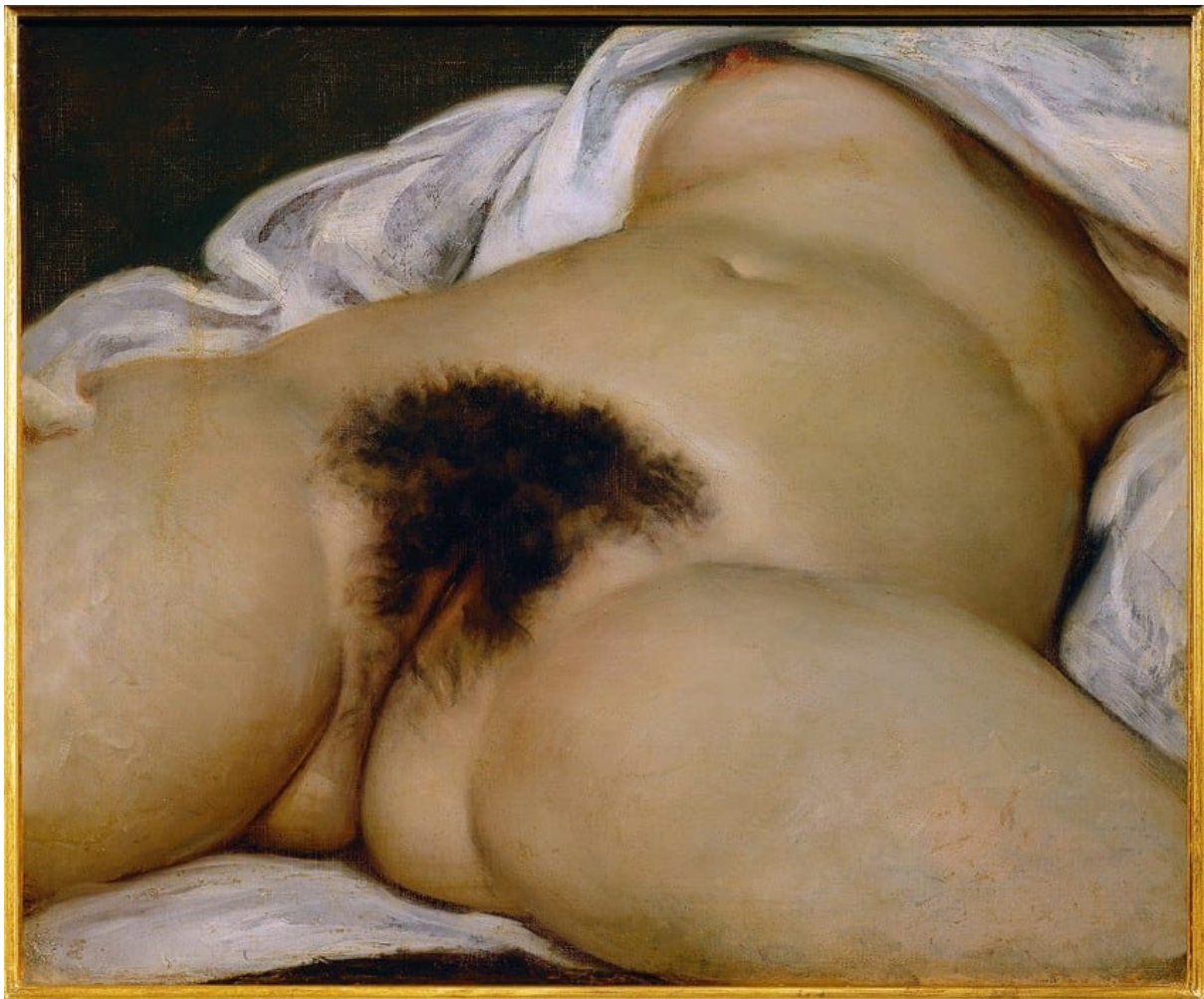


Figure 1, Courbet, '*L'Origine du Monde*' (*The Origin of the World*), 1866

This iconic and controversial work of art was created in 1866 by Gustave Courbet. The painting is an explicit and unapologetic representation of female genitalia. Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* was created during a period of cultural and social upheaval in France. The mid-19th century witnessed a shift towards realism in art, challenging traditional academic conventions. 'The title of the painting pays homage to women's capacity to give birth, thereby propagating the species (the world) but also refers to Courbet's own obsession with sex and fascination with seeing female nudity' (Honigman, *L'Origine du Monde painting by Courbet*, Britannica).

However, we can clearly see that Gustave Courbet's painting *L'Origine du Monde* does not explicitly convey a message about women's ability to give birth. Instead, the painting is a close-up and explicit representation of female genitalia. Its focus is on the raw and unapologetic depiction of the female body, particularly the reproductive organs. Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, in her seminal book *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Mulvey, 1989), describes the concept of the Male Gaze, which refers to the masculine point of view in which the female is a passive object to be observed. The male gaze often involves the objectification of women, reducing them to mere objects of desire. The male gaze is rooted in power dynamics, reflecting a societal structure where men historically held and wielded power. When women are portrayed through the male gaze, they are often positioned as subordinate, reinforcing traditional gender roles and power imbalances. In the context of human biology, the primary reproductive organs differ between males and females and play a crucial role in the continuation of the human species.

'I have come to believe, as will be clear throughout this book, that female biology-the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body-has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications'. (Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 1976)

Adrienne Rich's ground-breaking work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published in 1976, remains a seminal text in feminist literature and maternal studies. In this comprehensive analysis, we delve into Rich's exploration of motherhood, dissecting her intricate examination of both personal experiences 'As soon as I was visibly and clearly pregnant, I felt, For the first time in my adolescent and adult life, not-quilty. The atmosphere of approval in which I was bathed-even by strangers on the street, it seemed-was like an aura I carried with me, in which doubts, fears, misgivings, met with absolute denial.

This is what women have always done'. (Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 1976)

Rich says, 'And the broader socio-political context '...the cultural and medical and economic practices that define motherhood and exposes how our everyday experience of mothering is shaped by this enduring institution'. Through an in-depth exploration of key themes such as the institution of motherhood, the impact of patriarchal structures, and the transformative potential of maternal identity '*Within the intertwined institutions of motherhood and heterosexuality, men are not expected to do "real" parenting, only to play a supporting role. This hurts fathers, but it also helps them*'.

'Women have always been seen as waiting: waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wars, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new child, or for menopause' (Rich, 1976). Rich challenges the traditional, romanticised notion of motherhood as a universally fulfilling and joyous experience. She introduces the concept of motherhood as an institution, arguing that societal norms and expectations impose a set of roles and constraints upon women who become mothers 'And by social expectations that burden mothers with the primary responsibility for the education, health, nutrition, safety, and overall well-being of their children' (Rich, 1976). Rich contends that the institution of motherhood is deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures, perpetuating prescribed roles that limit women's autonomy and self-fulfilment.

‘The conditions of workplace are determined in part by the institution of motherhood, which is upheld by economic system where the work of caring for children is almost always unpaid or low-paid. The institution is upheld by traditional gender roles in which housework and the work of caring for other people is women’s work’. (Rich, 1976)

Rich delves into the ways in which patriarchal structures influence the experiences of women as mothers. She argues that patriarchal societies perpetuate myths surrounding motherhood, promoting an idealised image that serves the interests of the dominant male power structure. Rich critiques the societal pressure on women to conform to a predetermined maternal role, emphasising that this pressure reinforces gender inequalities.

‘The women were not only pregnant for much of their lives, but doing heavy labor: scrubbing floors, hauling basins of wash, ironing, cooking over coal and wood fires which had to be fed and tended’. (Rich, 1976)

Rich declares, ‘The institution of motherhood is the psychic and physical condition of one half of the human race’ (Rich, 1976). Here, she underscores the magnitude of the impact of motherhood as an institution on women's lives. By viewing motherhood through the lens of an institution, Rich exposes the power dynamics that shape women's experiences and choices within this societal framework.

Rich's (1976) assertion that "the suppression of the mother is a central item in the perpetuation of the power structure" highlights her belief in the interconnectedness of motherhood and the maintenance of patriarchal dominance. By scrutinising the ways in which patriarchal norms infiltrate the institution of motherhood, Rich urges readers to question and challenge the existing power dynamics.

Central to Rich's exploration is the idea of maternal identity as both a source of constraint and a potential site of resistance'...I realise that I was effectively alienated from my real body and my real spirit by the institution-not the fact-of motherhood' (Rich, 1976). She contends that the expectations placed on mothers can stifle their individuality, yet within this complex role, there exists the potential for transformation and self-discovery. Rich challenges women to reclaim their maternal identities and recognise the value of their experiences.

Rich's concept of "motherhood as experience" emphasises the individual and unique nature of each woman's journey through motherhood. By encouraging women to embrace their maternal identities on their terms, she advocates for the reclamation of agency within the context of the motherhood institution. Rich's call for the acknowledgement of the personal dimensions of motherhood serves as a catalyst for broader societal change.

An integral aspect of Rich's analysis is the examination of the intergenerational transmission of maternal roles and expectations. She introduces the concept of the "mother-daughter continuum," emphasising the ways in which "societal norms are passed down through generations". Rich argues that breaking free from restrictive maternal roles requires a conscious effort to challenge and redefine these inherited expectations.

Rich contends that the "mother-daughter" connection is a powerful force that can either perpetuate or disrupt established norms. Rich's insistence that "we need to envision new ways of rearing and teaching children and envision new ways of education for the daughters of mothers" underscores her commitment to transformative education as a tool for social change (Rich, 1976). She urges women to critically examine the legacies passed down to them and actively engage in reshaping the narrative surrounding motherhood. This aspect of her analysis underscores the importance of collective action in dismantling oppressive structures.

By placing motherhood within the broader framework of feminist pedagogy, Rich advocates for a reimagining of societal structures to create more equitable spaces for women.

Conclusion:

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* remains a pivotal work in feminist scholarship, challenging societal norms surrounding motherhood and exposing the intricate web of patriarchal influences. Through her examination of motherhood as an institution, the impact of patriarchal structures, the complexities of maternal identity, the mother-daughter connection, and the potential of feminist pedagogy, Rich provides a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the multifaceted nature of women's experiences.

'The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through'. (Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 1976)

As we reflect on Rich's insights, it becomes evident that her work serves as a call to action for individuals and society at large. By dismantling myths surrounding motherhood, embracing diverse maternal identities, and actively engaging in feminist pedagogy, Rich invites us to envision a future where the institution of motherhood is liberated from oppressive structures, fostering a more equitable and inclusive world for women.

My Body, My Choice

'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'-Simone de Beauvoir's.

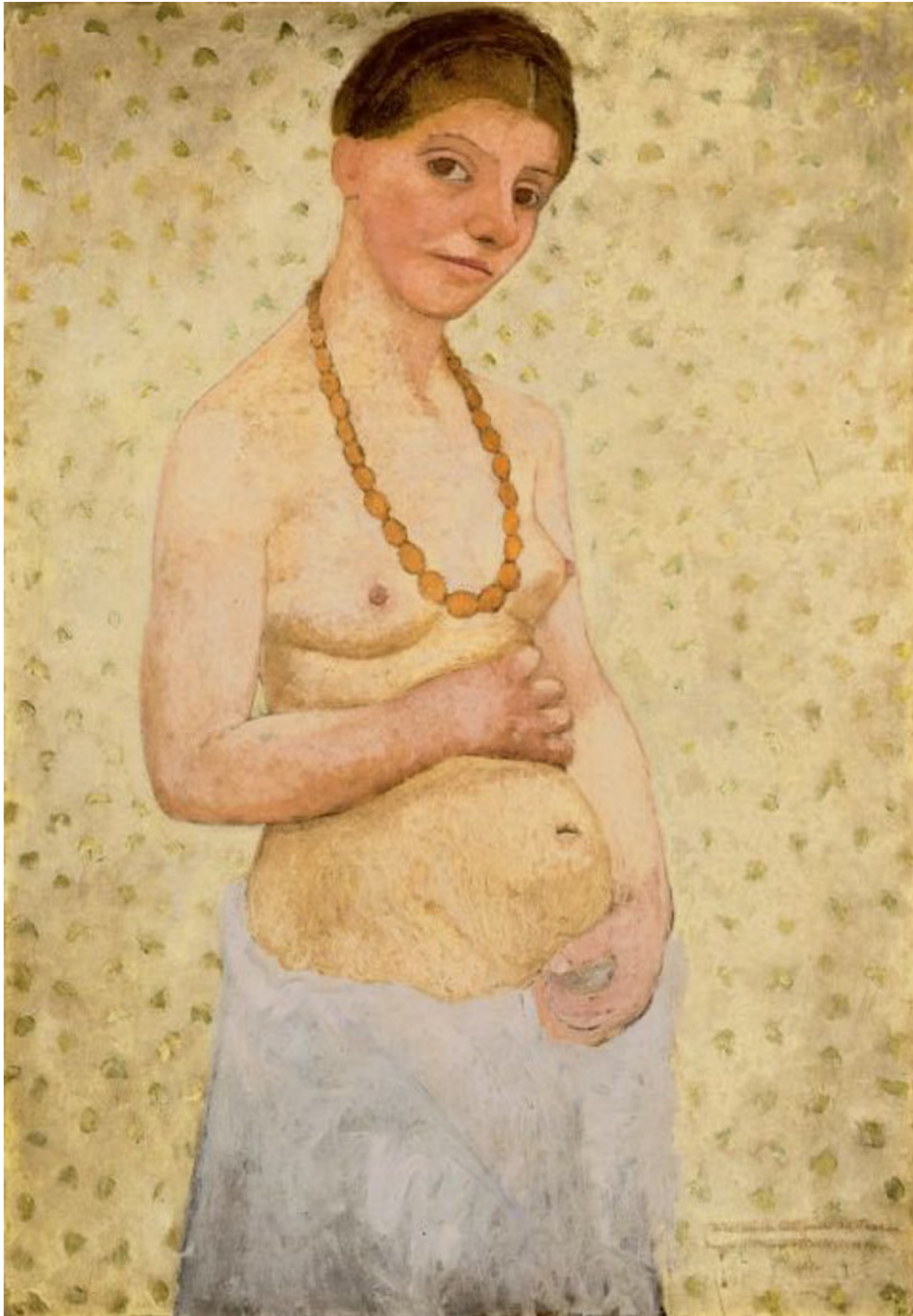


Figure 1, Becker, *Self-Portrait on her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, 1906

This piece of art, created by Paula Modersohn-Becker on May 25, 1906, when she was thirty years old, transcends being merely a self-portrait of a nude woman; it symbolises emancipation. It represents a liberation from the responsibilities and societal expectations of marriage, as well as the social norms prevalent during Paula's era and within her social class. Paula wrote to her friend, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, before she went to Paris, declaring that "I am myself..." (Hubbard, 2007). Within this painting, she portrays herself as blossoming and serenely exhaling, enveloped by the dappled greenery of spring leaves. In this portrayal, she is living life on her own terms, at peace with herself, and on the verge of realising her full potential as an artist.

Although it may seem like Paula is pregnant in this painting, she was not. In fact, just a month before she wrote that she did not want to have a child. This painting is a metaphor for Paula's feelings as a young artist - she felt fecund, ripe, and ready to create and paint freely in her own style for the first time in her life. What she is about to give birth to is not a child, but her mature and independent self 'She gives birth to the expression of her new fearless, artistic self' (Hubbard, *Paula Modersohn-Becker Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, The Independent, 2007)

In the past, nude portraits of women were often painted to please the male gaze, but Paula's painting presents a new concept: a woman who can nurture herself outside of marriage and does not require a man to feel fulfilled.

Pregnancy often carries symbolic significance, serving as a metaphor for renewal, but on the other hand, the meaning of pregnancy is a rich tapestry woven from biological, psychological, cultural, and societal threads.

'If being a woman is one cultural interpretation of being female, and if that interpretation is in no way necessitated by being female, then it appears that the female body is the arbitrary locus of the gender 'woman', and there is no reason to preclude the possibility of that body becoming the locus of other constructions of gender'. (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*, 1986)

Understanding its multifaceted nature requires an exploration of the diverse ways in which individuals interpret and navigate this transformative experience 'Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual.' (De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973)

From the biological continuation of life to the psychological intricacies of bonding and identity formation, the question arrives, of whether a woman's body belongs to her is a multifaceted and nuanced inquiry that spans human rights, societal expectations, legal frameworks, and intersectionality. Legal frameworks play a crucial role in shaping the extent to which a woman's body is recognised as her own '...the body is coextensive with personal identity ("I am my body")'... (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*, 1986)

The right to bodily autonomy is often enshrined in legal protections, such as the right to choose in matters of reproductive health. We will seek to explore this complex and contentious topic through the lens of feminist discourse, examining key perspectives and arguments.

'Reproductive justice is about three interconnected sets of human rights: 1) the right to have children; 2) the right not to have children; and 3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments, free from violence by individuals or the state'.

(Ross, *Reproductive Justice Beyond Biology*, American Progress, 2017)

This perspective forms the basis for arguments in favour of acknowledging a woman's "Other" right like all individuals, should have agency over their bodies and reproductive choices.

'Woman is enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the Other-and the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation.... The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek self-fulfilment in transcendence'. (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*, 1986)

De Beauvoir contends that women have historically been treated as "the Other," defined in relation to men, and objectified in the process. This objectification extends to women's bodies, which are often viewed as societal property rather than individual entities with inherent rights.

‘Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.’ And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.’ (De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973)

The objectification of women's bodies becomes a foundational challenge to their ownership, as societal norms dictate the parameters within which women are expected to conform, limiting their agency over their own physical selves.

De Beauvoir critically examines the societal expectations surrounding motherhood and how it contributes to the erosion of women's bodily autonomy ‘women is a womb’. The imposition of motherhood as a woman's destiny reinforces the idea that her body is not entirely her own.

In her influential work, de Beauvoir discusses how women have historically been objectified and defined in relation to men, with their bodies subjected to societal expectations. One of the central themes explored by de Beauvoir is the challenges women face in asserting ownership of their bodies and the right to abortion. This historical context raises questions about whether women's bodies have been perceived as their own or as entities shaped by external forces ‘If motherhood becomes a choice, then what else is possible? This kind of questioning often engenders vertigo and terror over the possibility of losing social sanctions, of leaving a solid social station and place’. (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*, 1986)

Despite the conceptualisation of bodily autonomy as a human right, women face persistent challenges to the ownership of their bodies. In fact, we can see in *The Second Sex* an effort to establish an embodied notion of freedom.

‘This response seeks to universalise a cultural option, to claim that it is not one's choice but the result of an organic necessity to which one is subject. In the effort to naturalise and universalise the institution of motherhood, it seems that the optional character of motherhood is being denied; in effect, motherhood is actually being promoted as the only option, i.e. as a compulsory social institution’. (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*, 1986)

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* lays bare the intricacies of women's challenges in asserting ownership of their bodies and securing the right to abortion within a patriarchal framework. The objectification of women's bodies, the imposition of motherhood, and societal judgments against those who defy traditional norms emerge as significant barriers to women's bodily autonomy.

Conclusion:

At its core, pregnancy is a biological phenomenon marked by the conception, gestation, and birth of a new life. Biologically, it represents the continuation of the human species and the intricate dance of genetics. Renowned geneticist and biologist Richard Dawkins articulates the significance of pregnancy in this context, stating, "In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces, and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice."(Dawkins, *Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, 1995)

This biological perspective emphasises the role of pregnancy in the perpetuation of life and the continuation of the human genetic lineage.

The Good Mother

*'It is also clear, however, that contemporary representations of the good mother are not uniform, nor are they stable'. (Goodwin S. and Huppertz K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)*



Figure 3, Whistler, *Whistler's Mother*, 1871

James McNeill Whistler's painting commonly known as *Whistler's Mother* is officially titled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*. Painted in 1871, it is one of Whistler's most famous works and is an iconic portrayal of a mother in a restrained, contemplative pose. The painting depicts Whistler's own mother, Anna McNeill Whistler.

The painting captures a profound sense of maternal grace and dignity. Whistler's mother sits upright on a wooden chair, her hands folded in her lap. The portrayal is characterised by a calm and contemplative demeanour, evoking a sense of quiet strength and introspection. The expression on her face is enigmatic, inviting viewers to interpret and project their own emotions onto the canvas.

Whistler's Mother is often celebrated for its simplicity and the eloquence with which it conveys a universal maternal sentiment. The absence of elaborate details directs attention to the essence of the mother-child relationship.

'When Whistler finished the picture and murmured "**Oh Mother ... it is beautiful...**" (Hughes, *Whistler's Mother review-a painting that's not what it seems*, The Guardian, 2018)

'Finally, good mother discourses are shown to shape the identities of mothers and the meaning of mothering for individual women, constructing and defining how mothers feel. 'A good mother is a happy mother; an unhappy mother is a failed mother. This myth attributes responsibility for the conditions of motherhood to the individual, not the system (Johnston & Swanson 2003: 23)'. (Goodwin, S. and Huppertz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

There is a general understanding that the concept of the 'good mother' is somehow connected to the subordination of women. However, the use of this phrase often elicits wry smiles and guilty looks, which suggest that it has a complex and powerful effect on discourse. This perspective encourages an examination of the societal pressures on women to conform to traditional roles of motherhood and the impact of these expectations on women's autonomy and identity. The postpartum period becomes a focal point for feminist analysis, as it represents a time when women navigate societal expectations and grapple with the transformation of their identities.

The "Good Mother" Paradox: Navigating Societal Expectations and the Postpartum Experience

The term "Good Mother" encapsulates a complex web of societal expectations, cultural norms, and individual experiences surrounding motherhood. This concept, deeply embedded in social discourse, often intersects with the postpartum period—a critical phase marked by physical, emotional, and psychological changes for women. We explore the intricacies of the "Good Mother" delving into its historical roots, societal implications, and its impact on the postpartum experience.

‘Despite decades of feminist critique of dominant representations of mothers and motherhood, images of ‘the good mother’ appear as prevalent as ever. These images persist in public policy, the media, popular culture and workplaces, and saturate everyday practices and interactions. They continue to powerfully shape women’s lives’. (Goodwin, S. and Huppertz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

Postpartum experiences encompass a range of physical, emotional, and psychological changes that women undergo after giving birth. These experiences have been a subject of growing interest within feminist discourse as they intersect with broader discussions on women's health, autonomy, and societal expectations. 'Thus the good mother is known as that formidable social construct placing pressure on women to conform to particular standards and ideals, against which they are judged and judge themselves'. (Goodwin, S. and Huppatz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

To understand the contemporary discourse surrounding postpartum experiences, it is essential to delve into the historical context. Historically, postpartum challenges were often dismissed or pathologised, reflecting deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

'Motherhood, no matter how closely conducted in accord with the ideological dictates, does not elevate its performers to the social and economic status experienced by men collectively. Rather, hegemonic motherhood remains subordinated to and under the force of hegemonic masculinity'. (Goodwin, S. and Huppatz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

The concept of the "Good Mother" has evolved over centuries, shaped by cultural, religious, and societal norms. Historically rooted in notions of virtuous womanhood, the archetype was often associated with self-sacrifice, nurturing, and the prioritisation of children's well-being. Early depictions of motherhood were influenced by religious iconography, reinforcing the idea of the maternal figure as a paragon of virtue.

Reproductive functions led to the distribution of power in the family and the imbalances within it. The basis of this imbalance is assumed to be the principle of hierarchy, which determines the psychosexual development of individuals and their mutual dualism, inequality, and the exploitative relationship of a more valuable group in relation to a less valuable group, which determines a certain social organisation.

‘Men are disproportionately represented in positions of power and authority across occupations and accrue a disproportionate proportion of economic and social rewards for their work’. (Goodwin, S. and Huppertz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview highlights the stigmatisation and misrepresentation of mothers, particularly those receiving income support, through government policy and societal discourses. This phenomenon underscores the intersectionality of gender, class, and labour, revealing how certain mothers are marginalised and subjected to negative stereotypes. Mothers receiving income support without engaging in paid work are labelled as 'bad mothers.' This label is attached to their perceived failure to conform to societal expectations that often prioritise women's participation in the workforce, and mothers are not only judged for their employment status but also accused of setting bad examples for their children.

‘Parents receiving income support were constructed as ‘not employed’ rather than participating in the previously culturally valued work of caring for children. In addition they were portrayed, through welfare dependency discourses, as ‘unmotivated’ and ‘immoral’. Furthermore, women receiving income support without engaging in paid work were constructed as ‘bad mothers’ who set bad examples for their children, and were possibly responsible for a new social scourge: intergenerational welfare dependency. What is particularly alarming in this account of the regulation of mothers through government policy is the extent to which the promulgation of a new good mother on income support discourse depended on the misrepresentation of mothers’. (Goodwin, S. and Huppertz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

We need to underscore the importance of critically examining societal attitudes, governmental policies, and discourses surrounding motherhood, employment, and income support. Also, it must be emphasizing the need to challenge stereotypes, recognize the value of caregiving work, and avoid perpetuating harmful narratives that contribute to the marginalization of certain groups of mothers. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of gender, class, and social policy.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the intersection of postpartum experiences and feminism provides a rich terrain for critical analysis. Through the lenses of historical context, medicalisation, intersectionality, motherhood, social support, and reproductive rights, feminists have offered insightful perspectives on the complexities and challenges faced by women during the postpartum period. As we continue to engage with these issues, it is essential to amplify women's voices, recognise diverse experiences, and advocate for policies and societal attitudes that empower women in their reproductive journeys. The ongoing dialogue between feminism and postpartum experiences contributes to the broader mission of dismantling patriarchal structures and fostering a society that values and supports women in all facets of their lives.

'Mothers themselves take on the aspirations, norms and desires that are being articulated by wider political forces and "through a process of subjectification in the Foucaultian sense, take on the twin tasks of conforming to the norms that are prescribed to her, and taking on her own self-regulation" (Spigel & Baraister 2009). This, in essence, is the power of the good mother: mothers want to be good'. (Goodwin, S. and Huppatz, K., *The Good Mother in Theory and Research: An Overview*, 2010)

The Human Manual

The Dual Struggles of a Mother Artist Documenting Motherhood and Postpartum Realities



Figure 4, Miksys, *The Human Manual*, 2023

The journey, as a mother and an artist, engaging in the profound task of capturing mothers during pregnancy, after childbirth, and challenging postpartum experiences through photography, is laden with dual struggles. Not only did I grapple with the inherent challenges of motherhood, but I am also confronting the complexities of documenting the raw, unfiltered narratives of other mothers during their most intimate and vulnerable stages. The Human Manual explores the intricate tapestry of these struggles and joy, delving into the emotional, artistic, and societal dimensions that converge in the creation of such a project.

As a mother artist, I embarked on a multifaceted journey that demands a delicate balance between the demands of motherhood and the creative pursuit of my art. The very act of documenting other mothers' experiences became intertwined with my own as I navigated the challenges of sleepless nights, kids' illnesses, and the constant juggling of responsibilities. The struggle lies not only in the logistical aspects but also in the emotional toll that motherhood extracts.

Managing the intricate dance between nurturing my own family and nurturing my artistic vision required resilience and adaptability. The struggle is deeply personal, as I grappled with the tension between self-identity, maternal responsibilities, and the pursuit of my creative passion.

The project's intent to capture the vulnerable stages of pregnancy, childcare, and postpartum experiences demands a heightened sense of ethical responsibility. As a mother artist, I threaded a fine line; I was aiming to authentically portray the raw and unfiltered moments while maintaining the dignity and privacy of her subjects.

Navigating the ethical considerations involves open communication, consent, and a deep sense of empathy. I must be attuned to the emotional landscapes of the mothers I photographed, recognising the potential impact of revisiting these vulnerable moments later in life. The struggle lay in finding the balance between creating evocative art and respecting the emotional boundaries of the subjects. The struggle is not only external but internal, involving a continuous dialogue between my vision and the emotional resonance I aimed to evoke in my audience.

Photographing mothers during their postpartum phase, especially those experiencing depression, adds another layer of complexity. The struggle intensified as I became a witness to the multifaceted emotions that accompany postpartum challenges.

Empathy and understanding became paramount as I grappled with capturing the nuanced narratives of resilience and struggle without exploiting the pain of my subjects.

I struggled to create a safe and supportive environment for the mothers, acknowledging the depth of their experiences without sensationalising or stigmatising postpartum depression. The balance between artistic expression and ethical representation becomes an intricate dance that demands emotional intelligence and sensitivity.

Despite the struggles inherent in this artistic journey, there is immense potential for empowerment through representation. As a mother artist, I became a conduit for voices that are often marginalised or silenced. By authentically documenting vulnerable mothers, I contribute to a broader conversation that normalises diverse maternal narratives.

The struggles I faced became a catalyst for empowerment, fostering a sense of solidarity among mothers who may see their own experiences reflected in the art. The project transcends individual challenges to become a collective statement challenging societal norms and advocating for a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of motherhood.

The delicate balance between personal and artistic endeavours, the ethical considerations of capturing vulnerability, and the challenges of challenging societal perceptions all contribute to the complexity of this artistic journey.

Yet, within these struggles lies the potential for transformative art that not only captures the raw authenticity of motherhood but also challenges societal norms and empowers women to embrace their diverse narratives. The Human Manual tells a story and navigates the complexities with grace and resilience, creating a visual testament to the strength, vulnerability, and beauty inherent in the multifaceted journey of motherhood.

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