

SOCIETAL ROLES AND SENSE OF SELF: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MOTHER FIGURES IN THE NOVEL JANE EYRE AND THE FILM MONA LISA SMILE

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Abstract: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* traces human relations and analyses them in great detail. One crucial point of the text is that mothers are limited. There are adoptive motherly figures, for example Miss Temple and Mrs. Fairfax, but the only actual mother that we see (alive) is Mrs. Reed, and she is not a good mother, considering that she treats Jane very cruelly and Jane swears to never forgive her for her wrongdoings or see her face again. Moving on in life Jane becomes an independent and compassionate person because she experiences the same kind of kindness through other surrogate mother figures. Similar patterns can be observed in the film *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) where actual mothers are either absent or inconsiderate towards the needs of their daughters and a surrogate mother figure leads her students to the path of self-realization. 1953, a time when women's roles were rigidly structured, the free-spirited, art history professor Katherine Watson starts teaching at the prestigious all-female Wellesley College, which despite its academic reputation, is an environment where success is measured by 'how well' the students marry. Encouraging these women to strive for a more enlightened future, Watson challenges the administration and inspires her students to look beyond the image of what is, and consider the possibilities of what could be, even at the expense of earning a bad name and being on the verge of losing her job. This paper attempts to explore how the concept of motherhood is not limited only to an actual mother, bound by societal obligations to be so but it expands to and includes within its nexus, any woman who cares to nurture those around her, while keeping her sense of self alive.

Keywords: Motherhood, Identity, Self, Individuality.

Introduction: While in societal terms, motherhood is regarded as an important marker of a woman's identity; various texts, over the years, have discussed and proven that a woman's selfhood may include but is not limited to notions of motherhood alone. With universal terms like 'Motherland' and 'Mother Nature' being used all the time, we realize that a certain list of qualities are attributed to what we understand as a mother; giver of bounty, nurturer, benevolent being, caring, full of sacrifices and perhaps most importantly, someone who almost effaces the self to bring out the best in others. Furthermore, motherhood may be seen as a condition that accomplishes the prerequisite of becoming a mother. However, both these understandings, while right in a limited sense, also possess some loopholes. Literature and the celluloid have proven to us, time and again, that 'motherhood' need not be ascribed only to a biological mother but to any woman who loves and cares for those who need her and who gives them a positive direction as she would to her own kin and they also tell us that a mother is also a 'person' in her own right. Author Jess Wolstenholm says of motherhood:

"Being a mother actually has very little to do with birthing a child from your body. That might be the most obvious scenario, but motherhood is so much more than a physical happening. I have known some expert "mothers" who never birthed or raised any children of their own, and I have known some mothers with a brood of children who shouldn't be

allowed to come anywhere near them. I don't think motherhood can be simply defined by having or not having little people under your care." [p. 01]

At the same time, a very loving motherly figure can be equally independent and possess a strong sense of self. Becoming a mother in name does not automatically endow us with the kind spirit to undertake the difficult task as well. In fact, we see through many examples in literature and celluloid that sometimes, actual mothers fail in doing their part and surrogate mother figures that might actually know nothing of the biological condition of motherhood, become almost redeeming figures.

Taking the point of motherhood ahead, a woman's identity gains texture through traits of motherhood. While a woman's identity need not essentially be limited to acceptance and celebration of the role of a mother, the behavioural traits of motherhood do add to the persona of a woman. Motherhood need not entail forgetting the self though and it need not require one to forego their personal aspirations of fulfillment to serve a societal role. The quest for identity and the role of motherhood can be very well balanced and be given equal importance to as we see in many texts. An understanding of identity will add to our benefit here. Weinreich defines Identity as follows:

"A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future." [p.26-34]

This basic concept of Identity adds further to a more specialized kind of Identity, which we call Gender Identity. Gender Identity forms an important part of identity in psychology, as it dictates to a significant degree how one views oneself both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature as explained by Weinreich and Saunderson [2003, p: 26-34]. This concept then further adds to our better understanding of the 'self', that is, how we see ourselves from any given lens. It is this psychological concept of Gender Identity with its inclusion of motherhood in it that shall enable us to understand the relations in the novel *Jane Eyre* and the film *Mona Lisa Smile* better.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* traces human relations and analyses them in great detail. One crucial point of the text is that mothers are limited. There are adoptive motherly figures, for example Miss Temple and Mrs. Fairfax, but the only actual mother that we see (alive) is Mrs. Reed, and she is not a good mother, considering that she treats Jane very cruelly and Jane swears to never forgive her for her wrongdoings or see her face again. Moving on in life Jane becomes an independent and compassionate person because she experiences the same kind of kindness through other surrogate mother figures. Similar patterns can be observed in the film *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) where actual mothers are either absent or inconsiderate towards the needs of their daughters and a surrogate mother figure leads her students to the path of self-realization. 1953, a time when women's roles were rigidly structured, the free-spirited, art history professor Katherine Watson starts teaching at the prestigious all-female Wellesley College, which despite its academic reputation, is an environment where success is measured by 'how well' the students marry. Encouraging these women to strive for a more enlightened future, Watson challenges the administration and inspires her students to look beyond the image of what is, and consider the possibilities of what could be, even at the expense of earning a bad name and being on the verge of losing her job. This paper attempts to explore how the concept of motherhood is not limited only to an actual mother, bound by societal obligations to be so but it expands to and includes within its nexus, any woman who cares to nurture those around her, while keeping her sense of self alive.

A look at some important figures in the novel *Jane Eyre* and *Mona Lisa Smile* might be beneficial for the reader. Bessie, the housemaid at Gateswood is the first maternal figure in "Plain Jane's" [Jane Eyre: p.72] life. We see Bessie right at the onset of the novel where she and her foil Miss. Abbot are called upon to witness Jane's so-called unbecoming behaviour against John. The difference in language and tone between Miss Abbot and Bessie is immediately evident. Whereas Miss Abbot is quick to condemn Jane for being "an underhanded little thing" [p.11] and remind her to repent lest "something bad might be

permitted to come down the chimney" [p.12], Bessie is more even-handed. Bessie is the one who asks Jane, "Do you feel as if you should sleep, Miss?" [p.17] Despite her minor role in the novel, Bessie, is all the more important because she was the first mother figure for the beleaguered Jane. She is the only model of female kindness seen by Jane as a child. Jane is enormously grateful for her attention – and the reader believes that Jane's fate might be very different without it. She is the first person in the novel that helps Jane believe that something like humanity or concern exists and should be bestowed on fellow humans around us. Without this influence Jane would have grown to be a rather insensitive and detached person. The initial portion of the novel is replete with generous words and sometimes even quiet concern from Bessie's side. It is Bessie, who comforts Jane after her terrifying experience in the red room and who tries to convince Mrs. Reed to let her out early. Here we see the difference of character between Bessie, who has never given birth to or reared children before meeting Jane and Mrs. Reed who is already a mother of two. The stark contradictions between their behaviour show us that motherhood cannot be linked to the biological paradigm of birth giving.

Furthermore, this can be compared to Betty Warren's mother's attitude in *Mona Lisa Smile* and that of Katherine Ann Watson. Betty's mother visualizes her daughter only in a role limited to twentieth century British convention and has also conditioned her daughter into believing that she only wants a home and hearth and nothing more from life. She reiterates at least thrice in the film that she is Betty's mother and mothers give the best advice to their daughters, they wish the best for their daughters and they also decide for their daughters. While explaining Betty how to "deal" with her husband, she says, "make him think that your decision is actually his decision. Do it!" She even decides to not take her daughter back in when she comes home dejected after her husband begins to cheat on her. She says, "Go back now! And he will accept you. Take care of your home." Katherine however, by way of her art classes sends across a much larger message to her students. She pushes them to look beyond the 'prescribed syllabus' of life and explore newer avenues that not everyone might be comfortable with. She helps her students to get out of their comfort zone and tries to take them away from the same old classical and medieval art that they have been asked to study and instead also develop a taste for the 'modern'. She takes them out for field trips to see new art. She says that there is no compulsion to stay and experience art, for students who are uninterested. But all the students stay back. This democratic attitude of hers, enables students to look at life and art differently and with a more open mind. These parallels between a change in appreciation of "what is art" and what one wants from life are interesting.

Miss. Temple is the maternal presence that guides and helps Jane in Lowood once she is away from 'home'. Miss Temple takes Jane under her wing. Miss. Temple's "God bless you, my children," [p.63] is by far the most comforting thing for Jane. Within days of Jane's arrival at the school Miss Temple treats her to cake and clears her name of any smudge Mr. Brocklehurst may have put on it. Miss Temple, who has no power in the world at large, but possesses great spiritual strength and charm. Not only does she shelter Jane from pain, she also encourages her intellectual development. Of Miss Temple, Jane writes: "she had stood by me in the stead of mother, governess, and latterly, companion". [p.71] Jane also finds a comforting model in Helen Burns, whose lessons in stamina teach Jane about self-worth and the power of faith.

Miss Temple treats Jane and Helen as her daughters and calls them as such when she hugs them. She however becomes lost to Jane after her marriage to a clergyman. An interesting point to notice here is that Miss Temple's surname with a religious connotation and her choice of a clergyman husband go hand in hand with her humble profession. This suggests that perhaps Jane's failure at her wedding with Rochester in the first attempt was because she was being an over-reacher and going on to expect more than her position as governess permitted her in societal framework.

Miss. Temple can be looked at in direct comparison to Katherine because unlike Miss. Temple, Katherine never calls the students her children or shows unmeasured affection to them. She does her job first; she loves art and she teaches it with passion. In fact, even though she has her favourites, we see that she is a tough task master with all of them and polite but firm. Katherine does not possess the blind benevolence of the clergyman's wife and does not preach or possess biblical characteristics of a

compassionate teacher. But all the same, Katherine is concerned at all times that her students do not lose their identity in trying to fulfill roles of wife, daughter or later mother. She goes to all extents to help Joan apply to Yale because Joan has immense potential to become a competent lawyer.

Later, Katherine is stumped to hear Joan's 'compatible' fiancé say that he is relieved that Joan won't go to Yale because he likes his "dinner at five". Katherine sits up for long hours searching every place that Joan can apply to and still manage to serve her husband dinner at five. Katherine is not an overtly radical teacher who wishes to see her students overthrow the structure and rebel against societal roles. She only wishes for women to have 'a room of one's own' as well. She does not want Joan to not cook dinner for her husband, she just wants to help her find a law college as well so that she has no regrets some years later. This motherly concern for her student's future anxieties and her feeling of lack of confidence is completely missing in Joan's actual mother whose only job seemed to be to find her a rich and socially acceptable husband. In comparison to Miss Temple's married life, one also notices that Katherine refuses to marry her former fiancé, because she is not ready and then leaves her boyfriend because he has been dishonest regarding facts about his past. This is a mild suggestion perhaps that asserting selfhood for a woman, comes at a cost that must be paid. Katherine could either enjoy marital bliss or be her own self. Even in the case of Betty we notice that she decides to embark on a journey to finally find herself only after she has filed for a divorce from her unfaithful husband. This certain aspect of the film could have been better tackled, because Katherine clearly possesses all qualities to be a stable and caring parent and a reliable partner. Perhaps her wedding would have given the audience more ground to believe that a woman can fulfill societal roles while she accomplishes her own dreams as well.

A dimension that the movie lends to its characters and that Brontë's novel explores through Miss Temple is that of different notions of 'selfhood'. While Joan just said once that she would like to pursue law at sometime, she is actually more invested in family life and marital bliss than she is in a career. Katherine cannot digest this because she has had different aspirations in life. It is there that Joan reminds her of what she always says to her students about selfhood and discovering who we are and what we want. Joan asserts that not every woman feels more emancipated with a career or with more degrees; some find fulfillment by nurturing the home alone. This opens Katherine's and the 21st century audience's eyes to a newer perspective as well which states being a homemaker does not always mean that a woman is a doormat. It can indeed be a very fulfilling space for a woman who likes to invest her energy in it. It is only after Katherine is also more enlightened that she begins to notice how Betty, who always seemed to be enamoured by marriage and home making is actually in need of guidance to get out of her unhappy marriage and leave behind a mother who refused to hear her problems or solve them. Betty is the woman who Katherine needed to assist in making a career. Betty is all set to leave for New York in the end, along with her non-conformist friend Giselle indicating a breakthrough from restrictive norms. Joan and Betty go through a role reversal in the film, so to speak and display two very different kinds of notions and beliefs in selfhood for a woman.

Mrs. Fairfax provides more of a stern; matronly concern for Jane and Jane even tries to follow her composed and yet affectionate attitude towards Adele. Jane's thoughts about Miss Fairfax shows her admiration for the woman and how she looked up to her, "Mrs. Fairfax, I saw, approved me: her anxiety on my account vanished; therefore I was certain I did well". [p.231] Jane's confidence at receiving an unsaid approval from Mrs. Fairfax shows us a recurrent pattern of those younger to us always finding solace and succor in our appreciation of how well they are doing. A recent Bournvita commercial, for example, gives us an old mother, speaking to her young daughter about her son and she says that to measure their benchmarks of success, kids will not go back to their report cards but their mothers. We see a very similar idea in *Mona Lisa Smile* in the last scene where all the students are cycling on and on after their favourite teacher's moving car because all that she has taught them and all that she thinks of them is what matters most to them at that point. It is through her confidence in them that they have tried to pave their ways and have found their voice. Their academic results have nothing to do with how they have grown as individuals in that semester.

After she leaves Thornfield, Jane eventually finds sanctuary at Moor House with her then unknown cousins St John, Diana, and Mary. Here, it is Diana to whom Jane attaches herself. Diana provides yet another aspect of the mother figure Jane was lacking as a child. Jane feels subordinate to her, but with limits that were unseen with the others. Jane tells the reader,

"Diana looked and spoke with a certain authority: she had a will, evidently. It was my nature to feel pleasure in yielding to an authority supported like hers, and to bend, where my conscience and self-respect permitted, to an active will". [p.169]

This is almost the final evolution in the mother-daughter relationship, when the daughter has enough independence and free will to acknowledge the mother's position yet remain their own person at the same time. Surprisingly, it is on almost very similar grounds that *Mona Lisa Smile* also nears its close, there is a willful submission of love from all the students, especially Joan and Betty to Katherine who realise her value in their life and how different they would have been had she not happened to them. And yet, Katherine does not try to mould their minds like their 'mothers' do. She lends them support, education with a higher purpose, concern, and a listening ear. She lets them explore their individual self and so, while they both love her and adore her, they do not lose their own self in trying to be 'her'. In fact, through her, they learn to be more of themselves. This can be compared to Adrienne Rich's statement on Jane Eyre as quoted by Christine Alexander:

"Jane Eyre, motherless and economically powerless, undergoes certain traditional female temptations and finds that each temptation presents itself along with an alternative- the image of a nurturing or principled or spirited woman on whom she can model herself, or to whom she can look for support". [p.173]

She does look up to Helen Burns and Miss Temple but Jane has neither the unquestioning piety of the former, nor the moderation and careful repression of the latter. She learns much from both of these women but she does not mould herself into either of them.

These examples of freedom to explore one's sense of self are in stark contrast to Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* whose Jean Brodie is autocratic and authoritarian. She has six ten year old girls assigned to her and she seeks to completely reform their minds and make them her clones by tutoring them art history, classical studies and most importantly, fascism. Brodie singles out her students as the elites in the class and they are known through her name; they are famously called the 'Brodie set'. Jean's students stand out from the rest but the novel also shows that one of them ruins her career in the end, suggesting that cunning begets cunning. Jean perhaps makes good duplicates but does not nurture good human beings.

Jane is strong willed and independent in her mind even before she becomes independent financially. She tells Mrs. Reed when she is very young that she is cruel and horrible and she will never forgive her or call her mother. However, the novel beautifully captures how Jane changes as well and in the end she does forgive her and move on as well perhaps suggesting that sometimes, parents, whether real or surrogate, might not fare well with us but as humans we should all learn to let it go.

We see the earlier Betty of the film, all arrogant and unrelenting and savage with the words in her editorial. But later, she decides to forgive her mother and move to New York, away from her. Betty's changed approach towards Katherine and her new way of looking at life, her teacher and how she should be as a person, show us how important over all growth is and we see a very similar mature change in Jane as the novel progresses.

It is duly noted that Jane, as the narrator presents it, marries for love, not out of duty or just for the reproduction of a patriarchal family unit. One should also note that Adele, who might have been a daughter-figure, is conspicuously absent when the novel concludes, and we do not hear of Jane embracing motherhood, biologically. We see a different phase of Katherine's life at the end of the film

where she is moving to Europe to explore a far freer life where she has liberty to teach as she likes. There is no mention of raising a family or setting in marriage. These are two characters that actually possess all the characteristics to be caring mothers but do not formally accept those roles. It can be read that they will perhaps choose to be mothers at a larger level, but are not personally ready to take on the role.

In conclusion it can thus be seen that motherhood is more a state of mind than a biological accomplishment and it can be both witnessed by one and bestowed by another in any circumstance no matter what relation they hold with each other. In both *Jane Eyre* and *Mona Lisa Smile* we see that people experience motherly figures and motherly concern, from unexpected quarters and the so-called actual mothers fail the children in more senses than one. It has also been understood that the idea of motherhood may only be a part of who a woman is. A woman can be more than a motherly influence and can assert her selfhood, live at her own terms, aspire to do things that do not always please society's normative walls and yet be compassionate and helpful. The idea of motherhood then, is not one that binds women to narrower rooms, it is in fact emancipatory because it gives love and adoration in return for their concern and in many cases, also aids them in exploring their own self better like we as viewers see in the case of Katherine.

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