

Arijit Mukherjee

Research scholar

Burdwan university

India

arijitmukherjee060287@gmail.com

Motherhood and its varying degrees: From the kaleidoscope of 19th century Bengali society.

It will be rather unwise to confine the marvel called motherhood within the narrow walls of biological happenings. The essential concept of motherhood rests on someone who nurtures. Yes, carrying a child in the womb for months and then giving birth creates a lifelong bond that cannot be broken, even by separation. However, it's the nurturing of the child throughout life that represents motherhood. Children face challenges as they navigate their early years. Even so, if a child knows that there is someone he/she can rely upon during the difficult times increases their dependence on that particular person. Her nurturing presence is symbolized by motherhood, whether that nurturing is provided by the mother, an adopted parent, a grandmother, an aunt.¹ Therefore, in order to secure the existence of human species, an effort should be made to socially strengthen the forces of motherhood.

The history of human evolution began with the process of motherhood and its amelioration is ensured by the omnipresence of this force in the society. However, motherhood has many problematic strings attached to it in a patriarchal society like India which cannot be cornered neither on any single agenda nor on any ethnic ground. In the first quarter of the 19th century, when illiteracy abounded the Bengali '*antarmahal*', the mothers despite dedicating their lives in rearing their children, did not enjoy a elevated position in the eyes of the family members. **The Friends of India** in 1821 reported on the pitiful condition of the 'Hindoo mothers'. The article detailed that the husbands seldom consulted their wives in domestic matters, especially, matters concerning the education of children, the wife's wishes were never entertained. Of course, the wife could never play an active role in the education of the child owing to her own ignorance. Thus, children at a very early age, before being sent to school, were impregnated with the youthful vice owing to the total neglect of their mothers.² How grey the domestic picture could be, the importance of the mother in bringing up her children was diffusely recognized by Tekchand Thakur in his epic work '**Alaler Ghorey Dulal**'. He spoke of the virtues ('sanskaras') that were to be imparted to a child at the time when his mother's influence fully shrouded him/her till the age of twenty- five. Time and

again, he had propagated that it was the mother who could steer her children to the right path for which good education was to be provided, cheek by jowl being observant of the kind of company her children kept. Specifications were made that until the age of twenty-five, the children had child-like thoughts ('cheley- buddhi') and thus, he/she could easily be guided to the right direction. He sounded extremely meaningful when he said that in families where the 'karta' or the head of the family was either a cheat, an alcoholic or a characterless and even uneducated, paying least heed to their children's education and upbringing, in such a situation the mothers usually step forward in educating their children.³

In the mid 19th century, when the rays of western education reached the Bengali household courtyards, the most determining problem faced by the mothers in rearing up the child/children was balancing the western Victorian model and at the same time preserving the Indian root which often posed to be a 'solemn burden' to them.⁴ Those mothers who succeeded in synchronizing it well earned for themselves higher self-esteem. During this period, one of the essential features of Bengali motherhood was midwifery which became institutionalized due to the affluent Bengali families. The children of affluent families grew up on the lap of the midwives. Though this was a normal norm, it had its negative impact as well. Meredith Borthwick had cited a number of examples which showed that the children led a wayward life due to unconcerned guidance from the family and absolute dependence on the midwives. This practice was disliked by many and their disapproval to such an institution is well observed in their various works of later period. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani while recollecting her childhood memories wrote in peppered language about her strong dislike of this practice. She rebuked her mother's action as 'patrician airs' and applauded the efforts of the impoverished mothers who clung their children to their breasts by calling them 'plebian hearts'.⁵

The Indian society is essentially patriarchal with families being patrilineal in descent and patrilocal in residence. In such a society, the institution of marriage was meant to achieve one specific purpose above all else- a man takes a wife in order to beget a son.⁶ The girl's birth was considered to be a sad affair. If she was the first born, the family rejoiced though some cryptic remarks remaining constant.⁷ Prasannamayi Devi in her autobiography '**Purbakatha**' recounted that she was the cynosure of all eyes because she was the eldest of all seven brothers. Thus, as far her childhood memories go, she had a happy childhood and was very close to her mother. On the contrary, on the birth of a son, the family rejoiced because the son took up the family responsibilities and became the torch bearer of family tradition. It was from the day of their birth the mothers' unconsciously helped their children to adopt

normative behavior which later on became the social law. The motherhood towards a girl child was subconsciously selective while in case of a boy it was strategic.⁸ The boy's games usually consisted of imitating the household they lived in. The boys while playing at early childhood, pretended to be the men in the family, and the girls much under the influence of their mothers divided among themselves the roles of mother-in-law, cooking and performing various religious rites and so on.

Motherhood as a woman's duty was not a new idea but the way the duty was redefined was something new.⁹ If Amuki's mother could not resist her daughter's forceful abduction by her stepbrothers for the purpose of *kulin* marriage¹⁰, we find examples of mothers who exerted their rights to ensure the security of their children. Nistarini Devi's mother wanted to take drastic step to keep her daughter's '*kulin*' husband clinched with her daughter throughout the entire life so that her daughter could be happy in the long run.¹¹ Again, another mother's bold step to run away from her house with her young daughter to protect her from the evil claws of kulinism attracts our attention.¹²

In contrast to these mother's, it is rather striking to notice that there were mothers who flexibly adopted the laws of the patriarchal society and injected it in their children's mind, thus, setting examples of differential behavior. Sometimes this patriarchal rigidity became so choking that the essence of motherhood got smashed in the junkyard of male dictatorship leaving a soaring scar on the mother's body and mind but there was none to sympathize with her agony. Such situations often cropped up in 19th century Bengali families. William Ward, the missionary to India wrote that children, who from the astrological point of view, were not destined to live long, were sacrificed by the parents.¹³ Again, if an infant refused his mother's breast, and subsequently declined in health, it was said to be under the influence of some malignant spirit. The mother's emotion was sacrificed at the altar of nightmarish customs and the child was hung in a tree until eaten by ants.¹⁴

The greatest barometer of a socially recognized motherhood was when the child was born out of the wedlock. The male maintained their honorable position by controlling their wives sexuality. Ideologically women were considered inferior, having no significance, no personality, emotionally oppressed and were branded as the one lacking the ethical fiber. In such a vulnerable social position, the married women had to submit to their husband's sexual whim veiled as '*stree dharma*' by the society. The child born out of the process of '*stree dharma*' puffed happily in a socially secured atmosphere. The sense of security became transparent when we find various rituals took place centering the unborn and the expected

mother for their good health and protection from evil. Even, after the birth, the several rituals like the first rice ceremony gave a social recognition to the child.

Motherhood is an integral part of womanhood and the whole society reaps its harvest. The enigma still remains unresolved when we find that despite its overwhelming importance; the society remained cold and repulsive in celebrating the varying degrees of motherhood beyond consortium. For this reason those children who were born out of the wedlock had to face strong social stigmas.

If in one hand, several books like Jogendranath Mukherjee's 'Jibanraksha', Bharatchandra Bandopadhyay's 'Susrusapranali' etc. were published with the motive to confer legitimization of the production of children only through the domain of the family, certain mothers achieved their mothership in ways that remained derecognized by the society. If some chose pregnancy violating the social norm of marriage to enjoy her only natural priced possession-motherhood despite being aware of the thorns of insecurities that will bleed her feet as she will traverse to fulfill her motherhood,¹⁵ some could not sustain the pressure of the society and had to forcefully either abort her pregnancy or abandon the new born.

Ranajit Guha argued that those women who gave birth to children out of their wedlock neither bothered nor belonged to the 'caste bodies' (family was the institution of caste exercising its power to discipline) nor 'government of sexuality' (disciplinary powers resting with the senior members of the uppermost caste). All these disciplinary institutions operated at the village level, punished the deviant woman by taking away her caste and ostracizing her. Once a woman lost her caste, food and water served by her was considered polluting and anyone accepting this would lose caste. Generally these women took recourse to prostitution.¹⁶ In such a difficult society, it was tough beyond imagination for a single mother to bring up her child, ensuring him/her social security, justice and a bright future ahead. An emotionally neglected child who was consistently ignored by the society, rejected, verbally abused, often indulged into corruptive and exploitative practices as they grew up.

In 19th century Bengal, young widows, who failed to guard their emotions against 'the temptations of passion' often hurled herself to the abyss of adultery. Eventually, many became pregnant. Ruthless endeavors were made to abort the child and those who could not be aborted gave birth to the child, only to be thrown away at the roadside. There are plethora of incidents mentioned in contemporary journals citing that mothers carried on pregnancies only to abandon their child after birth.¹⁷

Again, 'kulinism' was a cruel engine of female misery and degradation. In 1836, the **Calcutta Mission Observer** recorded an instance where a '*kulin*' wife turned into a harlot on being

forsaken by her husband. Majority of the '*kulin*' women were not as fortunate as Nistarini devi. They went astray from like shocks to their sensibilities. Much as so, illegal children were even born out to illegal relationship between an European soldier or sailor and an Indian woman. The increase in the number of orphan and destitute children in 19th century Bengal, raised the eyebrows of the missionaries in Calcutta. and in 1809 they opened the Benevolent Institution to give refuge to such children. Other orphanages were later on opened by the Christian missionaries in Bengal, the most notable being the European Orphan Asylum which took care of the deserted girls of European troops and seamen mostly by the Indian women. In defiance of the differences in motherhood as laid by the society, a mother rears up her child with instilling certain subconscious habits (*samskaras*) in the child, preparatory to his/her developing into an ideal human being in the context of performing his/her duties towards family and society. This process in the ideal context was/ is known as '*lalan-palan*' which is certainly different from western social model. This recognizes not only mother-child relationship as a nucleus, but engages the whole social ecology.

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