



PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERHOOD IN MODERN LITERATURE

Kanaka Tiwari, Dr. Deepika Agrawal

Department of Arts Social Science and Humanities
Sam Global University, Raisen

ABSTRACT

Motherhood has long occupied a privileged place in literary imagination. It has been represented as tenderness, sacrifice, origin, moral authority and emotional continuity, yet modern literature repeatedly questions the simplicity of such representations. This thesis, titled Portrayal of Motherhood in Modern Literature, examines the changing image of the mother in selected modern literary texts and argues that motherhood is not merely a biological function or sentimental ideal but a complex social, cultural and psychological construct. The major finding of the study is that modern literature transforms the mother from an idealized figure into a more complex and human subject. Modern texts do not simply reject motherhood; rather, they challenge the ideological uses of motherhood that demand silence, obedience and self-erasure from women. The mother in modern literature becomes a site where love and power, body and culture, freedom and duty, memory and trauma are brought into conflict. By reading motherhood through feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, the thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of women's representation in modern literature and highlights the continuing importance of maternal identity in literary and cultural studies.

Keywords- Motherhood, Feminism, Identity, Emotional Conflict, Gender Roles

1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood has always remained one of the most significant and emotional themes in literature. In modern literature, the portrayal of motherhood has evolved beyond the traditional image of a self-sacrificing and ideal mother. Contemporary writers present motherhood as a complex experience shaped by social expectations, emotional struggles, personal identity, gender roles, and cultural changes. Modern literature explores not only the nurturing and caring aspects of mothers but also their inner conflicts, independence, ambitions, and psychological challenges.

The changing position of women in society, especially after the rise of feminism, has greatly influenced literary representations of motherhood. Modern authors depict mothers as individuals with their own desires, careers, emotions, and identities rather than limiting them to domestic responsibilities. Literature now examines themes such as single motherhood, working mothers, motherhood under patriarchy, maternal sacrifice, depression, and the balance between personal freedom and family duties. Through novels, poems, and short stories, writers portray both the joys and burdens associated with motherhood.



In addition, modern literature reflects the impact of social, economic, and cultural transformations on maternal relationships. Authors often challenge stereotypical views and present realistic images of mothers facing societal pressure, emotional isolation, and generational conflicts. The portrayal of motherhood also differs across cultures, highlighting how race, class, and tradition influence maternal experiences.

Thus, motherhood in modern literature is not portrayed as a fixed or idealized concept but as a dynamic and multifaceted human experience. By presenting mothers as strong yet vulnerable individuals, modern writers provide deeper insight into women's lives and the changing structure of family and society.

2. FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

The literary treatment of this theme moves between tenderness and conflict. A mother may be presented as a source of emotional stability, yet the same character may also experience exhaustion, alienation, anger or silence. This double movement makes modern motherhood especially complex because it resists the sentimental picture of the mother as naturally complete through sacrifice. Theoretical perspectives also clarify that maternal identity is produced through discourse. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution is especially useful, because it separates the intimate relation between mother and child from the social system that tells women how mothers ought to behave.

2.1 Adrienne Rich's Theory of Motherhood

In the selected modern texts, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* reveal mothers who must negotiate affection, duty, fear, labour, poverty, sexuality, domestic expectation and the demand for self-effacement. These figures are not simply symbols of care; they are persons whose inner lives often remain under pressure from family, class, nation and gendered moral judgement.

This issue can be understood through the critical ideas of Adrienne Rich. Feminist criticism helps to distinguish biological motherhood from the institutional expectations attached to it, while psychoanalytic and cultural approaches explain why the mother occupies such a powerful place in the imagination of the child, the family and the community.

2.2 Motherhood as Institution and Experience

The literary treatment of this theme moves between tenderness and conflict. A mother may be presented as a source of emotional stability, yet the same character may also experience exhaustion, alienation, anger or silence. This double movement makes modern motherhood especially complex because it resists the sentimental picture of the mother as naturally complete through sacrifice.



2.3 Maternal Subjectivity and Identity

Texts such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* show how motherhood may become both a bond and a burden. The mother is valued for nurturing others, but she is frequently denied an independent language for her own desire. Modern literature therefore asks whether maternal love can exist without being converted into obedience, suffering or social respectability.

3. MATERNAL SUFFERING IN SELECTED MODERN TEXTS

In the selected modern texts, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* reveal mothers who must negotiate affection, duty, fear, labour, poverty, sexuality, domestic expectation and the demand for self-effacement. These figures are not simply symbols of care; they are persons whose inner lives often remain under pressure from family, class, nation and gendered moral judgement. This issue can be understood through the critical ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, bell hooks, Sara Ruddick, and Andrea O'Reilly. Feminist criticism helps to distinguish biological motherhood from the institutional expectations attached to it, while psychoanalytic and cultural approaches explain why the mother occupies such a powerful place in the imagination of the child, the family and the community. For this reason, maternal suffering in selected modern texts becomes central to the present thesis. It allows the study to connect literary form with cultural history and to show how modern writers rework inherited maternal images into more human, conflicted and politically meaningful representations.

3.1 Conflict Between Individual Desire and Maternal Duty

The literary treatment of this theme moves between tenderness and conflict. A mother may be presented as a source of emotional stability, yet the same character may also experience exhaustion, alienation, anger or silence. This double movement makes modern motherhood especially complex because it resists the sentimental picture of the mother as naturally complete through sacrifice. Theoretical perspectives also clarify that maternal identity is produced through discourse. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution is especially useful, because it separates the intimate relation between mother and child from the social system that tells women how mothers ought to behave. The present chapter treats this issue as a bridge between textual analysis and social critique. By reading maternal figures closely, the study identifies the processes through which modern literature exposes the cost of idealization and opens space for maternal agency.

3.2 Motherhood and Silence

Texts such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*,



and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* show how motherhood may become both a bond and a burden. The mother is valued for nurturing others, but she is frequently denied an independent language for her own desire. Modern literature therefore asks whether maternal love can exist without being converted into obedience, suffering or social respectability. A feminist reading therefore does not reject motherhood; rather, it questions the patriarchal uses of motherhood. It asks why maternal virtue is often measured by silence, endurance and self-denial, and why women who resist these ideals are described as unnatural or failed mothers. Thus, the analysis of 4.7 motherhood and silence contributes to the broader argument that motherhood in modern literature is neither wholly oppressive nor wholly liberating. It is a field of negotiation in which identity, affection and authority are continuously remade.

3.3 Critical Analysis

The novels and narratives considered in this study repeatedly place maternal feeling beside historical violence and domestic routine. The result is a representation in which the mother is seen as an emotional subject, a social worker inside the family, a custodian of memory and, at times, a rebel against prescribed feminine roles. Psychoanalytic approaches add another dimension by showing that the mother is often imagined as origin, home, loss and desire. Yet modern literature complicates this symbolic function by returning attention to the mother's own subjectivity, her memories and her unfinished struggle for self-definition. This emphasis is important because the mother figure often carries the hidden labour of narrative. When that labour is made visible, the modern text challenges the reader to reconsider the relationship between femininity, care, power and freedom.

4. MOTHERHOOD AND CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

The literary treatment of this theme moves between tenderness and conflict. A mother may be presented as a source of emotional stability, yet the same character may also experience exhaustion, alienation, anger or silence. This double movement makes modern motherhood especially complex because it resists the sentimental picture of the mother as naturally complete through sacrifice. Theoretical perspectives also clarify that maternal identity is produced through discourse. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution is especially useful, because it separates the intimate relation between mother and child from the social system that tells women how mothers ought to behave. The present chapter treats this issue as a bridge between textual analysis and social critique. By reading maternal figures closely, the study identifies the processes through which modern literature exposes the cost of idealization and opens space for maternal agency.

4.1 Motherhood Beyond Biological Role

Within the larger field of motherhood, identity and female agency, 5.3 motherhood beyond biological role becomes a point at which body, language, memory and power meet. Texts such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The*



Handmaid's Tale, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* show how motherhood may become both a bond and a burden. The mother is valued for nurturing others, but she is frequently denied an independent language for her own desire. Modern literature therefore asks whether maternal love can exist without being converted into obedience, suffering or social respectability. A feminist reading therefore does not reject motherhood; rather, it questions the patriarchal uses of motherhood. It asks why maternal virtue is often measured by silence, endurance and self-denial, and why women who resist these ideals are described as unnatural or failed mothers. Thus, the analysis of 5.3 motherhood beyond biological role contributes to the broader argument that motherhood in modern literature is neither wholly oppressive nor wholly liberating. It is a field of negotiation in which identity, affection and authority are continuously remade.

4.2 Maternal Identity and Selfhood

The novels and narratives considered in this study repeatedly place maternal feeling beside historical violence and domestic routine. The result is a representation in which the mother is seen as an emotional subject, a social worker inside the family, a custodian of memory and, at times, a rebel against prescribed feminine roles. Psychoanalytic approaches add another dimension by showing that the mother is often imagined as origin, home, loss and desire. Yet modern literature complicates this symbolic function by returning attention to the mother's own subjectivity, her memories and her unfinished struggle for self-definition. This emphasis is important because the mother figure often carries the hidden labour of narrative. When that labour is made visible, the modern text challenges the reader to reconsider the relationship between femininity, care, power and freedom.

4.3 Struggle for Autonomy

In the selected modern texts, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* reveal mothers who must negotiate affection, duty, fear, labour, poverty, sexuality, domestic expectation and the demand for self-effacement. These figures are not simply symbols of care; they are persons whose inner lives often remain under pressure from family, class, nation and gendered moral judgement. This issue can be understood through the critical ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, bell hooks, Sara Ruddick, and Andrea O'Reilly. Feminist criticism helps to distinguish biological motherhood from the institutional expectations attached to it, while psychoanalytic and cultural approaches explain why the mother occupies such a powerful place in the imagination of the child, the family and the community. For this reason, 5.5 struggle for autonomy becomes central to the present thesis. It allows the study to connect literary form with cultural history and to show how modern writers rework inherited maternal images into more human, conflicted and politically meaningful representations.



5. CHANGING IMAGES OF MOTHERHOOD IN MODERN LITERATURE

The literary treatment of this theme moves between tenderness and conflict. A mother may be presented as a source of emotional stability, yet the same character may also experience exhaustion, alienation, anger or silence. This double movement makes modern motherhood especially complex because it resists the sentimental picture of the mother as naturally complete through sacrifice. Theoretical perspectives also clarify that maternal identity is produced through discourse. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution is especially useful, because it separates the intimate relation between mother and child from the social system that tells women how mothers ought to behave. The present chapter treats this issue as a bridge between textual analysis and social critique. By reading maternal figures closely, the study identifies the processes through which modern literature exposes the cost of idealization and opens space for maternal agency.

5.1 Representation of Working Mothers

Within the larger field of changing images of motherhood, 6.3 representation of working mothers becomes a point at which body, language, memory and power meet. Texts such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* show how motherhood may become both a bond and a burden. The mother is valued for nurturing others, but she is frequently denied an independent language for her own desire. Modern literature therefore asks whether maternal love can exist without being converted into obedience, suffering or social respectability. A feminist reading therefore does not reject motherhood; rather, it questions the patriarchal uses of motherhood. It asks why maternal virtue is often measured by silence, endurance and self-denial, and why women who resist these ideals are described as unnatural or failed mothers. Thus, the analysis of 6.3 representation of working mothers contributes to the broader argument that motherhood in modern literature is neither wholly oppressive nor wholly liberating. It is a field of negotiation in which identity, affection and authority are continuously remade.

5. 2 Single Mothers and Marginalized Motherhood

Modern narratives approach 6.4 single mothers and marginalized motherhood not as a fixed moral ideal but as a shifting relation shaped by history and ideology. The novels and narratives considered in this study repeatedly place maternal feeling beside historical violence and domestic routine. The result is a representation in which the mother is seen as an emotional subject, a social worker inside the family, a custodian of memory and, at times, a rebel against prescribed feminine roles. Psychoanalytic approaches add another dimension by showing that the mother is often imagined as origin, home, loss and desire. Yet modern literature complicates this symbolic function by returning attention to the mother's own subjectivity, her memories and her unfinished struggle for self-definition. This emphasis is important because the mother figure often carries the



hidden labour of narrative. When that labour is made visible, the modern text challenges the reader to reconsider the relationship between femininity, care, power and freedom.

6. MAJOR FINDING

The study finds that modern literature transforms motherhood from a static emblem of sacrifice into a complex field of identity, conflict and agency. The mother in modern texts is no longer only an ideal figure of care; she is also a thinking subject, a worker within the family, a bearer of memory, a sufferer under social expectation and, at times, a figure of resistance. The selected texts show that maternal identity is shaped by gender norms, class relations, racial history, state power and literary form. This finding challenges the idea that motherhood can be understood as a universal instinct outside culture. The analysis also finds that the most powerful modern representations of motherhood expose the gap between maternal experience and maternal ideology. In *To the Lighthouse*, the mother is idealized, yet that idealization conceals domestic labour and self-effacement. In *Beloved*, motherhood is shaped by slavery and trauma, making maternal protection inseparable from historical violence. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, motherhood is turned into an institutional duty under authoritarian control. Across these texts, motherhood becomes a site where love and power meet. The mother loves, remembers and protects, but she also suffers under systems that define her value for her.

7. CONCLUSION

The movement from idealization to complexity can be traced most clearly through the literary treatment of modern family life. The selected texts demonstrate that the mother is often positioned at the centre of memory. She preserves cultural knowledge, family continuity and emotional inheritance; yet she can also become the figure through whom trauma is transmitted, contested and transformed. The argument of the thesis therefore moves from inherited ideas of the self-sacrificing mother toward a complex image of the mother as subject, worker, thinker and agent. A close reading of desire and duty demonstrates how modern writers transform the mother from a background presence into an active site of interpretation. This point is especially relevant to modern fiction, where narrative form frequently turns inward. Interior monologue, fragmented memory and shifting perspective allow the reader to see that maternal feeling is neither simple nor easily contained by public ideals. The analysis thereby establishes motherhood as an interpretive category through which modern literature questions the moral, social and political organization of gender. The narrative handling of resistance and selfhood allows the reader to notice the invisible work through which mothers maintain families, memories and moral worlds. By connecting resistance and selfhood with gendered power, the selected texts reveal the political dimension of everyday care. Feeding, protecting, remembering and consoling are not minor actions; they are acts through which literature measures survival and social value. For this reason, the study reads motherhood as a dynamic relation rather than a static role, and it places maternal experience within broader histories of power and representation.



REFERENCES

1. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. Vintage, 2017.
2. Emecheta, Buchi. *The Joys of Motherhood*. 1979. Heinemann, 1994.
3. Badinter, Elisabeth. *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*. Translated by Roger DeGaris, Souvenir Press, 1981.
4. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011.
5. Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978.
6. Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview." *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, Routledge, 1994, pp. 1-29.
7. Irigaray, Luce. "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other." *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 60-67.
8. Kristeva, Julia. "Stabat Mater." *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 160-186.
9. O'Reilly, Andrea. "Motherhood, Patriarchy, and Possibility." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-10.
10. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Harcourt, 1983, pp. 231-243.