Maternal Performance: Deconstructing the Concept of Motherhood as Performative

Anika Kaundal and Irshad Ahmad Itoo

Abstract

Motherhood is defined as the state of assuming maternal responsibilities, which most commonly occurs after the birth of a child. However, it can also transpire through avenues such as adoption, marriage, or entering a relationship with someone who already has children. It is essential to recognize that motherhood is a term associated with feminine parenting. Distinguishing between the performance of motherhood and its performativity is crucial. The former implies the execution of a role, while the latter suggests an active engagement in shaping one's identity and public presentation. Parenting, when viewed as performative, initiates a series of consequential events. Motherhood extends beyond childbirth, encompassing the nurturing of a child from infancy to maturity. The experience of (M)otherhood involves a transformative journey of assuming a distinct identity to tend to a child's needs and household responsibilities. This transformation, in turn, introduces performative elements, as it brings about substantial shifts in a woman's life, which may require adaptation. Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, vividly illustrates a dystopian world where women are coerced into the role of motherhood, ultimately leading to an institutionalized form of oppression.[1] This article will explore Judith Butler's performative gender as applied to motherhood, as exemplified in Mahashweta Devi's works, particularly in the stories "In the Name of the Mother: Stories of Sexual Abuse" and "From Dawn to Dusk," as well as in *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* by Pragya Agarwal.

Keywords: motherhood, parenthood, performative, performance

Introduction

The term motherhood typically encompasses the biological dimension of maternal identity, predominantly associated with a woman's role as a mother, a role primarily actualized through the process of childbirth. However, as Adrienne Rich astutely points out, the encompassing experience and societal construct of motherhood extend far beyond the act of giving birth.[2] Motherhood predominantly involves the nurturing and care of infants until they attain maturity. This responsibility extends to adoptive mothers and those within non-traditional family structures, encompassing the care of children post-birth. Essential tasks such as feeding, diapering, and providing overall infant care are integral facets of this maternal role.

Anika Kaundal is a research scholar at Department of English, Chandigarh University. Email: anika.e10489@cumail.in. Irshad Ahmed Itoo is an Assistant Professor, Chandigarh University. Email: irshad.e12842@cumail.in.
[1] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Harper Collins, 2023), pp. 22-24.
[2] Andrea O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 124.

Additionally, duties like clothing, bathing, nurturing, instructing, and a multitude of other continuous responsibilities are imperative for the child's well-being. Fulfilling these responsibilities demands substantial emotional, intellectual, and physical exertion, emphasizing the performative nature of motherhood. In essence, this article contends that motherhood should be viewed as a performative act. This perspective underscores women's agency by focusing on their purposeful actions rather than their biological predisposition. Consequently, the concept of performativity forms a robust foundation for comprehending maternal identity. Simultaneously, applying performative theory to motherhood prompts critical reflection on the binary assumptions that may underlie Judith Butler's predominant account of performativity and, more broadly, liberal feminist theory.

Motherhood encompasses both a woman's biological attributes and the influence of culturally constructed gender norms, thereby challenging the clear dichotomy posited in Butler's theory that juxtaposes biological determinism against cultural performativity. Furthermore, motherhood complicates the distinction between reinforcing and resisting agency. Martha Nussbaum's contributions to the discourse on performativity and biological sex, particularly in the context of women's bodies, are noteworthy.[3] She contends that, unlike Butler's assertion that the natural female body engenders a secure environment, feminist advocacy necessitates a developed sense of self.[4] This encompasses a wide range of issues including rape law, domestic abuse, women's employment, sex trafficking, and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, all of which are integral to theoretical and practical feminist endeavours.

Therefore, the significance of maternal health for women's rights cannot be overstated, especially given the staggering statistic of over 500,000 women losing their lives annually due to pregnancy or childbirth worldwide. It is notable that all these challenges exert a profound impact on women's bodies. Consequently, Butler posits that a woman's identity is more a product of cultural expression than any inherent essence, challenging prevailing assumptions that biological sex dictates gender.[5] In essence, she argues that gender is not an inherent product of one's biological sex. Rather, it is shaped by pervasive cultural norms surrounding masculinity, femininity, and the societal markers that signify heterosexuality. Individuals are identified based on the cultural roles they enact, rather than their biological underpinnings.

Mothering and Motherhood

The imperative lies not only in being productive but also in fostering creativity. From the moment of birth, we are imbued with gendered norms, affecting how we perceive and embody stereotypical expressions of masculinity or femininity. This extends to our choice of names, attire, mannerisms, and communication styles, as well as our aspirations for our children. According to Butler, if motherhood is understood as performative, mothers are characterized not by their biological functions, but by the culturally mediated constructs of reality they embody. The depth of maternal emotional engagement with their children and the multifaceted adjustments motherhood necessitates in areas such as employment, interpersonal relationships

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[3] Martha Nussbaum, "Women and Equality: The Capabilities Approach," *International Labour Review*, vol. 138, no. 3 (1999), pp. 12-15.

[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 56.

[5] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp. 20-24.

with men, friends, and partners, as well as participation in public activities, significantly influence women's political perspectives.

Without acknowledging the nuanced phenomenology of motherhood, the analytical power of feminist scholarship to fully grasp the breadth of women's contemporary experiences is compromised. Viewing parenthood through this unconventional lens permits an interpretation that encompasses not only its natural aspect but also its contextualization within gendered societal norms and structures. It is acknowledged that social constructs shape the prevailing perception of female child-rearing. However, according to Butler, this cycle of repetition establishes the conditions for potential disruption. Parenthood emerges as a societal framework that simultaneously reinforces and challenges established gendered ideals within familial and societal constructs. The argument posits that actual experiences of subjugation can potentially generate agency, drawing upon Michel Foucault's idea of the interplay of subjectivities.[6] Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that organizational possibilities are inherently intertwined with existing power dynamics and structures. The argument suggests that tangible experiences of subjugation have the capacity to paradoxically cultivate agency, a possibility that can be enriched by Foucault's insights into the interplay of subjectivities, particularly when considered in the context of the performativity of motherhood.

Foucault's conceptual framework on the interplay of subjectivities offers a valuable lens through which to analyse how the performance of motherhood can intersect with experiences of subjugation. Performativity, as introduced by philosopher Judith Butler, emphasizes that identity and social roles are not innate but are constructed through repetitive and culturally influenced actions. In the context of motherhood, women are often subjected to societal norms and expectations that prescribe how they should perform this role. Foucault's notion of subjectivities as dynamic and constructed entities within power structures dovetails with the idea that mothers are not passive recipients of expectations but actively engage with them. Women who experience subjugation or marginalization within the context of motherhood may navigate and resist these oppressive forces by creating alternative subjectivities.

In the realm of motherhood, experiences of subjugation can emerge from various factors, such as gendered expectations, economic disparities, or societal pressures. For instance, mothers may face criticism or ostracism for their choices related to work-life balance, parenting styles, or reproductive decisions. Foucault's framework allows for an exploration of how these experiences of subjugation can lead to a heightened consciousness of power dynamics and the active construction of alternative maternal subjectivities. Empirical studies and qualitative research can be utilized to examine the lived experiences of mothers who have grappled with subjugation, illustrating how they negotiate and resist societal norms and expectations. Through these examples, one can demonstrate how the performance of motherhood becomes a site of active agency, as mothers navigate and redefine their identities and roles in response to oppressive forces. In summary, the intersection of Foucault's insights into the interplay of subjectivities and the concept of performativity in motherhood reveals how experiences of subjugation can paradoxically cultivate agency. This nuanced perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of how women actively shape their maternal identities

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[6] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), pp. 109-134.

and roles in response to societal pressures, ultimately highlighting the complex dynamics at play in the performance of motherhood within the framework of power and subjectivity.

The organization of motherhood is characterized by a strong emphasis on standards, a process facilitated through performativity. This approach serves to both promote and, at times, challenge or reinterpret prevailing norms. Given that norms attain the status of standards through repetition, each reiteration of motherhood presents an opportunity to reinforce or diverge from these established benchmarks. It is important to note that repetition does not guarantee exact replication. The limitation of this approach arises from its tendency to resist, contest, or disrupt the norm as a form of organizational validation. Butler cautions against the inclination to tether the significance of organization to a predetermined teleology of emancipatory politics. Furthermore, her advocacy for constructing a political praxis in response to the violence associated with heterosexist norms results in an approach that underscores the dual facets of subjugation and disruption. As the adage goes, standards are "enacted, possessed, and experienced in a multitude of manners."[7] Specifically, it should signify an organization of women who establish standards that serve to both unify and seemingly reinforce norms, which liberal feminists identify as misanthropic, fundamentalist, and severe.

Butler contends that "disentangling the concept of organization from the objectives of progressive politics is imperative."[8] What may initially appear as a pattern of submissive acquiescence, according to a progressive standpoint, could be a form of organization, albeit one that can only be discerned from within the discourses and structures of subjection that validate its conditions. This underscores that motherhood, encompassing its internal and external dimensions and its corporeal manifestation and enactment, must be recognized as performative. Consequently, the postpartum body emerges as a potent locus of cultural contestation, a space for vision and debate. Manuals and theatrical performances crafted by male authors for playhouses, male actors assuming female roles on screen, individuals of various genders composing for publication, and women penning journals and petitions in private quarters all contribute to the conveyance of the culture's complexities and ambivalence surrounding motherhood. This underscores that motherhood has been culturally and historically constructed, rather than being a straightforward, objective experience.

This research delves into motherhood as a performative practice, examining the enactment of gestation, postpartum experiences, maternal authority, and maternal disregard. It meticulously scrutinizes motherhood as an explicitly performative phenomenon, with a keen focus on the intricate interplay of influential factors found within the diverse array of dramatic, medical, personal, confrontational, and literary texts under investigation. These sources illuminate that motherhood is not only enacted but also performative, occurring both within the theatrical realm and in everyday life, influencing the construction and portrayal of motherhood and the maternal physique. Drawing from Butler, gender is conceptualized as "a bodily style, an 'act', that is intentional and performative, with 'performative' indicating a staged and context-dependent construction of meaning." Butler underscores that "gender activism necessitates a continuous and prominent performance." Building upon these ideas,

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[7] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 55.
[8] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 139.

Elin Diamond posits that it encompasses both an active performance that disrupts conventional gender norms and a pre-existing, suppressive category.[9]

By characterizing early modern motherhood as 'performative', we align with scholars in performance and cultural studies who explore performativity as a cultural endeavour undertaken by performers on stage and by individuals within a society. This perspective provides a valuable framework for understanding the nuanced complexities inherent in the portrayal and experience of motherhood during this period. Diamond contends that these cultural activities either uphold established societal norms or fervently reinvent the concepts, symbols, and gestures that shape social existence. She further characterizes performance as a "risky and perilous negotiation between... someone's body and the conventions of embodiment."[10] In examining the works of authors from the early modern period, it becomes evident that they grappled with prevailing norms dictating the representation and regulation of the maternal body, as evidenced by their actions, suppressions, and explorations of maternity. Drawing on Butler's framework, the portrayal of female witches can be viewed as the result of an amalgamation of cinematic experiences and rhetorical discourse.

Similarly, the maternal body, subject to continual discourse processes and conspicuously visible, can be analysed within this framework. During this period, both popular fiction writers and those crafting frameworks for personal observations engaged in rhetorical dialogues regarding parenthood. The dramatists, pamphleteers, practitioners, and diarists featured in this collection frequently challenged conventional notions of motherhood while expanding the scope of maternal responsibilities. Scholars like Valerie Wayne have noted that the maternal role in early modern English society afforded women a more empowered position compared to other female roles. This notion served as a cornerstone for many dramatists. However, mothers were still confined by patriarchal economic and religious constraints. Despite the overuse of the term 'role', its anthropological significance remains crucial. Numerous writers diligently worked to delineate maternal roles, emotions, and behaviours by regulating their physical, spiritual, and ideological representations. These distinctive duties and 'special obligations' were intimately tied to their maternal status, influencing their social standing and spiritual contributions to reproduction and pregnancy. However, it is essential to acknowledge that attempts to prescribe behaviour also highlight its contentious nature.

Motherhood Through the Lens of Media

In early modern theatre, the maternal body was employed to elucidate, arbitrate, develop, comment on, and reflect society's fascinations, concerns, and aspirations. Figures like William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and John Webster portrayed motherhood as a delicate blend of obedient and discordant parenthood. In reality, men depicted all aspects of the feminine role in gestation. A grasp of the symbolic gestures associated with maternity was imperative for crafting the maternal figure, including costumes, prosthetics, and other elements seen in pregnancy depictions (such as a hand resting on the belly). Motherhood was not only

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[9] Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 122-130.
[10] Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, p. 136.

portrayed but also constructed as a role by authors and performers alike. Consequently, it provided an early modern perspective on maternity while undoubtedly contributing to its evolution. Early modern plays frequently draw on language from other popular genres when depicting motherhood, reinforcing and reshaping prevailing societal perceptions about women and their roles as mothers. Women writers, like their male counterparts, use their writings to model parenthood. Expanding on Wendy Wall's idea of civil interaction and the significance of the stage, this includes mothers' reflections on childbirth, child-rearing, and child loss. Wall's assertion that "plays not only license strong expression of affect but are especially well-suited for airing incompatible social discourses because they imagine a wide range of positions put in conversation with each other" underscores the importance of including women's voices in the portrayal of parenting. While most women's maternal writings were not intended for public performance or publication, they were not entirely private. Women were cognizant of their role as parental figures, observing themselves as they were observed by family and neighbours. They carved out unique positions for themselves in the literary sphere, often passing these down within families. Educated women, such as Dorothy Leigh, recognized the potential impact of their parental memoirs, diaries, and spiritual autobiographies on future generations.

Maternity is not generally viewed as a fixed, constant condition, but rather as an assortment of liquid and context-oriented perspectives and ways of behaving. To talk about "mothering" is to underline the dynamic part of maternity: a significant stage, given Western culture's typical view of the mother as inactive and vulnerable. Emily Jeremiah is weak. It is likewise intended to prepare for a more profound comprehension of moms' way of behaving as performative (a term examined further underneath) and possibly incendiary. Here I contend that the possibility of maternal performativity is both helpful and risky, and that it should consolidate morals to be powerful. I will follow the progress "from parenthood to mothering," before continuing to performativity, morals, and, lastly, feeling, which, I contend, situates "maternal," moral commitment. Women's activists often disregard nurturing concerns, yet they neglect to re-examine the ideas or change the framework. Many (yet not all) women want to stop parenthood based on conventional conditions, without either the weighty obligations or the extraordinary delights of having children.

Adrienne Rich's conceptualization of parenthood as an "encounter" and "organization" may subsequently be viewed as a watershed point. Rich's clever *Of Woman Born* is a blend of scholarship and memoirs; thus it depends on the idea that "the individual is political."[11] It underscores the maternal subject as diverse, and scholarly, and in exchange with previous maternity thoughts, what Rich alludes to as the "foundation" of parenthood. Womens' male-centric perspectives, as per Rich, shape this association. Rich's story has shortcomings; which women's activist way of thinking grants us to perceive. Rich's contrast between "experience" and "establishment," while imaginative, will in general darken the connection between subject and philosophy, and it recommends an unadulterated sort of parenthood hiding under male-controlled society's overlay. As we will see, the ongoing maternity reasoning has been drawn intensely crafted by Judith Butler, who sees orientation as a progression of performative ways of behaving. Parenthood, as per Butler's work, is training, and maternal subjectivity is not static, but rather moving, continually created or "played." Critics of early second-wave

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[11] O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born*, pp. 14-32.

women's activist essentialism have featured the distinctions between women; and this idea has been vital to postmodern woman's rights, which underscores variety and variety. What is the significance of considering a mother's experience as a "development" or an "execution"? A liberal humanist could view all of this language as trivial and inquire, "What might be said about the experience of real mothers in the field?"

This mothering technique likewise calls the women's activist psychoanalytic idea of the mother as a beginning into question. The idea of women acting parenthood as though it were a drag goes against the regularizing ideal of the intrinsically sacrificial mother, who should exist before society. Kristeva utilizes Lacanian ideas like "the semiotic" to guarantee that the last option is a part of language framed by the maternal body, that works as a rebellious element within the symbolic as beautiful language. Kristeva "depicts the maternal body as conveying a bunch of implications that go before culture itself," as per Butler, in this manner "protecting society as a male-centric system and delimiting parenthood as a truly pre-social reality." There are issues with the possibility of maternal performativity. What might be said about the (somewhat later, Western) thought of "decision" mothering?[12] Butler claims that agency is not the same as voluntarism or individualism, and that it does not entail a choosing subject; rather, it is "reiterative or re-articulatory practices, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power." Gendering, for example, is understood as the matrix through which the "I" evolves. Maternity, therefore, serves as the context within which the maternal "I" emerges. However, the issue of voluntarism arises here; the production of a maternal subject might be the outcome of an individual woman's decision-making, that is, a decision to become a mother. This is not to subscribe to liberal notions of choice and individual freedom; rather, it is to call into question performativity as a manner of comprehending mothering. "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be identified in the arbitrary link between such acts [that determine gender], in the potential of failure to repeat, a deformity," Butler asserts.[13]

Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond

Children must be cared for, and caregivers should feel compelled to provide care; in fact, to "reject to refuse." Acceptance of motherhood requires social, economic, and political respect since if we are to construct a concept of maternal performativity, it must incorporate the concept of mothering as a type of ethical behaviour. Even though it influences each woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be held back in the signifier detonates with pregnancy (the social and normal edge) and the introduction of the baby (which extricates the woman out of her unity and gives her the chance however not the assurance of contacting the other, the moral).

This view reverberates in Nancy Chodorow's thoughts on the mother-newborn child association, considering Butler's hypothesis. She recommends the accompanying as "the two solicitations and requests." To comprehend parenthood as performativity is not to think about it simply in desultory terms.[14] Parenthood's genuineness is intently attached to its desultory exercises; as Butler contends, "language and materiality are neither indistinguishable nor

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[12] Julia Kristeva and Liesbeth Brouwer, *Julia Kristeva* (Stichting Te Elfder Ure, 1986), pp. 14-18.
[13] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 45.
[14] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 24-30.

entirely different."[15] That is, the real acts of parenthood, the activities done by mothers, cannot act as the establishment for a hypothesis of maternity. Materiality, as per Butler, is framed and cannot be isolated from connoting activities, since "language both is and alludes to that which is material."[16] To advocate for maternal performativity is not to excuse "the material," but instead to prepare for a desultory (ideally performative) re-assessment of the material tasks of parenthood and maternity. The utilization of writing is one methodology for completing such an update. Such performativity, which might result in new "distinguishing pieces of proof," can thusly be seen as a maternal, moral demonstration. In addition to other things, this act problematises customary masculinist ideas of information creation, which have been founded on the origination of oneself as contained and sane, as well as a progressive subject-object qualification among perusing and composing, as empathic demonstrations, uncovering subjectivity as social and importance as dialogic.

In Mahashweta Devi's short story "Ma, from Dusk to Dawn," the narrative delves into the poignant tale of a nomadic woman unexpectedly thrust into the enigmatic role of a mystical mother, whose purported mystical abilities are rooted in her unconventional rejection of providing maternal care to her son during daylight hours. This story serves as a compelling exploration of the hardships endured by a childless woman, compelled to assume a role traditionally not assigned to her, in order to safeguard the offspring of others. As Radha Chakravarty aptly observes in her preface to *In The Name of Mother*, the protagonist experiences dual abuse in these contrasting roles: in her saintly persona as Thakurni, she is expected to offer solace to anyone who seeks her blessings, while as Sadhan's shanghai shocker Ma, she is burdened with the responsibility of satisfying his insatiable hunger for rice, even beyond the realm of mortality. Mahasweta Devi's narrative artfully navigates the intricate balance between the inherent hypocrisy often concealed within societal discourses on motherhood and the enduring values of love, care, and responsibility that have traditionally been associated with the maternal role. This is a compelling case study of the broader context of motherhood, transcending conventional boundaries to shed light on the complex interplay of societal expectations, gender roles, and the multifaceted dimensions of maternal identity.

The truth, according to Devi, lies between the "hypocrisy so latent in maternity discourses" and the values of love, care, and responsibility "traditionally associated with the maternal role."[17] Motherhood/mothering is frequently the central experience that awakens women to a greater understanding of society and its evils, and it provides them with the strength to sustain themselves and fight for justice even when the odds are stacked against them. Devi exposes a wide range of mothers, from the poor but caring mother to the ideal motherhood stereotypes of the spiritual mother, the exploitative mother, and even the professional mother. Each mother's relationship with her child is also distinct. This mothering also refers to the imposed customs of society as well as their sacrifice for society. Jati Thakurni does not become Thakur overnight or by her wishes. She transforms into a spiritual figure to sustain life and raise her son. She is from the Jaara nomadic tribe, who were unwelcome and untouchable from the start due to a sinister attempt to worship Lord Krishna. They move from place to place and

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[15] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp. 30-38.

[16] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 32.

[17] Radha Chakravarty, *Radha. Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity* (Routledge India, 2016), pp. 14-15.

live in a community. Jati, on the other hand, marries Sadhan's father from another community and is rejected. Jati comes out, but in the end, her husband dies, leaving her all alone except for her only child Sadhan. Jati is unable to return to her community after the death of her husband. As a result, she transforms into a spiritual mother who lives for people from dawn to dusk, but for her son, she transforms into a human mother from dusk to dawn. Her spiritualism is based on her denial of her motherhood as a human being. It also represents her rejection of domestic life, which means rejecting the normal life to survive. The violation of herself causes the abjection to exist and hold a position in society. Her burning becomes sacrosanct and ritualistic, but deeper examination reveals that her presence defines a person "who positions [herself], isolates [herself], contextualises [herself], and therefore strays instead of obtaining [her] bearings, yearning, belonging, or refusing," showing that her whole existence is predicated on her renunciation of self-activities, and embracing the devangshi way of life to prepare for her son's future.

In Devi's narrative, the role of motherhood is performed. We identify persons based on the cultural categories in which they "perform," not on who they are physiologically. Rather than merely performing in stereotypically male or feminine ways, performativity requires living our awareness fully and profoundly. From the time we are born and given gendered names, the clothes we wear, the pace of our walk, the manner of our speaking, and the goals and aspirations we have for our life all reflect the performativity of sex and gender. How we exist in a civilization eventually determines our identities. If motherhood is performative, mothers are defined not just by biological function but also by culturally encoded experiential experience, according to Butler. Anthropologist Ellen Ross views mothers as performative "subjects" entailing "teaching them about the specifics of their everyday material work; about the quality of their emotions for their children; about the changes mothering brings through partnerships with job positions, men, relatives, and lovers; about just the public activities and political positions stimulated by women's experiences as child caregivers." Societies reinforce the popular concept of female parenting.[18] Thus according to Butler, this process of reiteration creates the conditions for challenging the status quo.

Motherhood emerges as a social institution that simultaneously supports and challenges dominant patriarchal families or societal ideologies. Pragya Agarwal accepts that women have more choices than any other time in recent memory, yet society applies the disgrace and tensions of a less edified period to labour, characterizing women by whether they embrace or reject parenthood, and regardless of whether they can have children. Agarwal's comprehensive analysis explores the intricate interplay of cultural and intellectual variables that significantly influence our perceptions and discussions surrounding parenthood. This examination encompasses factors such as education, socioeconomic status, women's rights, race, and various others. Her work, *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman*,[19] argues for the urgent necessity of addressing society's fixation with women's bodies and their fertility. This earnest and meticulously researched book is a captivating narrative, in terms of its content and

[18] Ellen Cronan Rose, *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 22.
[19] Pragya Agarwal, *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2022).

scholarly depth. The book mirrors the multifaceted identity of diaspora women, transcending convention and defying classification, while addressing the dimensions of the subject matter.

The book's title, *(M)otherhood*, subtly alludes to the multifaceted experiences that mothers undergo, a role often perceived as innate and instinctual, yet intricately complex, especially in the context of performativity. Agarwal's work distinguishes itself from the conventional genre of academic, measurement-based "parenthood manuals;" instead of delving into prescriptive discussions about one's relationship with parenthood or urging readers to contemplate their "biological clocks," Agarwal adeptly debunks these myths while dissecting the societal constructs that perpetuate them. While the book is peppered with personal anecdotes and reflections on Agarwal's journey with parenthood, it transcends the confines of a traditional memoir. She exercises the flexibility to selectively share facets of her experiences, resulting in a candid vulnerability that underscores the richness of the narrative. As a behavioural and data scientist, Agarwal unpacks the research on parenthood, noting that despite women having a wider array of lifestyle choices today, they are still largely defined by society based on their decisions concerning motherhood.

Agarwal also underscores the profound impact of gendered language in educational materials on the early formation of gender identity, particularly with regard to sex, menstruation, and pregnancy. She thoughtfully challenges conventional notions by shedding light on the more equitable relationship that emerges after fertilization, which contradicts prevailing narratives. She also tackles the societal pressure placed on women to procreate, shedding light on how this not only affects their self-esteem but also influences their standing within their social circles. Personal agency is a recurring theme throughout the book, as Agarwal explores the complex dynamics of choice and privilege. Her honest accounts of her own challenging experiences, including an unplanned and arduous first pregnancy resulting in preterm birth, a second pregnancy that she chose to terminate, and the subsequent path to surrogacy, provide a candid window into the complexities of reproductive decision-making. Her exploration of privilege, socioeconomic status, citizenship, and the legal acknowledgement of her children as hers offers a thought-provoking perspective on the intricate web of factors that influence individual choices.

Ultimately, *(M)otherhood* is an illuminating and thought-provoking exploration of the intricacies of human reproduction. It is a valuable resource for individuals at various stages of their parenthood journey, whether they are mothers, aspire to be, or have no intention of becoming parents. It underscores the concept of performativity in the context of motherhood, highlighting the societal expectations and performative nature of the role. It challenges conventional narratives and invites readers to critically examine our perceptions of parenthood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of motherhood, as elucidated in this discourse, should be profoundly acknowledged as a performative act. This perspective not only emphasizes the critical role of self-reflective autonomy in the journey of motherhood but also underscores its intricate connection with women's bodies. It is imperative to recognize that motherhood possesses a unique potential, not only to nurture and sustain life but also to inadvertently reinforce patriarchal structures, as it frequently carries the burden of perpetuating traditional gender

roles. The duties and expectations placed upon mothers are both exceptionally demanding and profoundly complex. Mothers are expected to exhibit remarkable stability while also demonstrating an extraordinary sensitivity to the needs of those around them. They are required to continually clean up after their loved ones, compensate for their inadequacies and self-centeredness, and work tirelessly. Moreover, mothers are often held accountable for addressing an extensive array of societal issues, from the world's most pressing challenges to the less glamorous but equally crucial aspects of shaping children's minds. This multifaceted role necessitates an enduring reservoir of patience and resilience, encompassing the ability to navigate the countless demands for care and affirmation with a strong stomach. The argument presented here contends that motherhood should be viewed through the lens of performativity.

This perspective shifts the focus from the natural attributes of motherhood to the intentional actions and choices that mothers make in the process. By doing so, it empowers mothers and underscores their agency in defining their maternal identity. Performativity, as a concept, provides a robust framework for understanding the complexities of maternal identity in the contemporary world. In essence, the examination of motherhood as a performative act invites a profound reconsideration of the roles and expectations placed upon mothers. It challenges traditional narratives and opens up avenues for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between women, motherhood, and societal structures. This perspective encourages further research into the multifaceted dimensions of maternal identity, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and empathetic society.