

Ambivalence in Motherhood: The Need for Female Partiality in Children's Literature

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Abstract: The paper reviews the popular maternal theories that have developed in the 1960s. Each theory, while exploring the mother-child relationship from various viewpoints, heeds to an infant's maternal dependence as the prime factor behind inducements of antipathetic feelings like that of fear and jealousy towards the mothers starting from the early stages of childhood at an unconscious level. Triggered in the later stages of a person's life in the form of gender biases, masculine identity crisis, male misogyny and patriarchy, it causes greater complications in the overall psychic growth. The paper intends to identify and analyse the literary root causes of propelling this problem down south and subsequently aims for a solution to this quandary by explicating the possibility of changes that can be brought about in children's literature, particularly picture books.

Keywords: maternal feminism, Canadian literature, children's literature, psychoanalysis, omnipotence, gender studies.

Introduction

Motherhood: A State of Ambivalence

Mothers have always been considered the all inclusive abode of comfort and affection for an infant .While this bond has been considered the safest and the most harmless bond within mankind, there exists a fair share of complications that authority of motherhood can engender. These problems that have been generally overlooked to be part of a temporary rebellious phase of growing up, actually have serious and permanent consequences that aggravate with the coming years and form a part of their personality.

I begin by analysing the theories that have observed parental patterns and their effect on the toddler's psyche which subconsciously play an integral role in their turn of mind. These theories, delving on the active role played by the mother during the phase of infancy derive the cause of various gender oriented biases to lie in the ways of parenting.

Thereafter, I peruse the role of children's literature in further bolstering the feelings of aversion towards their mothers, through the analysis of popular picture books of Canadian children's author Robert Munsch.

Fear and Envy Hypothesis

Formulated primarily by Ernest Jones, Melanie Klein and Karen Horney, this theory in its earliest stages began by opposing Freud's phallogocentric views. Contrary to Freud's "penis envy theory", these theorists claimed that men and not women are jealous of the opposite gender because of her birth-giving 'powers'(Johnson, 202-203). This argument can be supported by the overcompensation on the behalf of men to prove to the world and more so, to themselves that they are entitled to more authority over their child than the mother through adopting the use of patronyms and paternal surnames for the child. This, along with their other efforts at male dominance and women subordination can be traced back to the early childhood experiences, a phase during which they entitle their mother with an absolute control and power over them.

Dorothy Dinnerstein, explicating this hypothesis further claims that sheer maternal dependency, while also generating gratitude and intimacy towards the mother, sows the seeds of fear of abandonment by her. This unconscious fear takes the shape of subconscious jealousy and an inherent revulsion towards the mother, which creates "a need in us for a more bounded authority"(Johnson, 204), inciting revenge driven domination on women.

In the case of girls, these feelings of fear and envy, as they evolve into women, transform into an instinctive sense of insecurity and distrust towards other women(204).

The emanation of phrases like "A woman is another woman's biggest enemy" substantiates this prevailing animosity.

Secondly, they take to subordination, as Dinnerstein opines by "offering themselves to male vindictiveness"(qtd. in Johnson204).This assistance of men by women in their exercise of domination against them by giving in to male dominance is an effort to satisfy their subconscious feelings of revenge from the mother for her control over their childhood.

The Tenuous Masculine Identity Hypothesis

This theory observes the effect of maternal presence on the infant. The all around presence of the mother connects them to the femininity associated with the mother. While this early "feminine identification" offers girls a smooth metamorphosis into women, for boys the same cannot be claimed. With the arrival of preteen years as they begin to differentiate between the genders, the sudden realisation of identifying with the wrong gender creates an urge to compensate for their past by proving their masculine side. Their indulgence in overly violent and tough acts to attain "compulsive masculinity" becomes their holy grail (Johnson 207). This has particularly been observed in cases where the father figure has been absent during their period of childhood as observed by Walter Miller in 1958 in a case study of lower class father deprived homes in which frequent

cases of boys 'susceptibility to extreme harshness and violence was recorded. In a similar study, Talcott Parsons traced the growth of the "bad boy pattern" where boys in their teenage years attempt to be masculine by acting in complete contradiction to the feminine characteristics. In the absence of a paternal idol to look up to, they end up blindly following the anti-feminine attributes. They've been a witness to their mothers' affection and nurturing, but have no acquaintance with the masculine traits. So for them to be masculine would mean taking the exact opposite road and embracing violence and the process of detachment in order to avoid the "tenderness taboo" (Johnson, 206-207).

Ruth Hartley made another interesting remark, based on his study, where boys in the age group of 8-11 years, define "adult women as weak, afraid, easily tired, in need of help, squeamish, inadequate, making an undue fuss over things, not very intelligent and demanding and jealous of their husbands"(208). This projection of women in negative light can be viewed as an effort at reassuring themselves that by disassociating from their mother and their feminine side consequently, they are heading in the right direction. It is more like breaking up with a genuine person with the need of a constant reminder to you of the incidents where they were wrong. In extreme cases, where the person is unable to find any fault in the other, the egoistic mind might start skewing things to one's favour.

In "Family Structure and Feminine Personality", Nancy Chodorow further explains how in order to convince themselves of this distancing, they start associating superiority with the male oriented activities(208). Patriarchal setups are outcomes of promoting this machismo and its vicious circle serves the purpose of revenge oriented male dominance.

Omnipotence

Addressing the early dependence of the infant on the mother, Dinner stein again opines that the infant projects omnipotence upon the first person whom they start viewing as their caretaker. This complete dependence discussed earlier in the "Fear and Envy Hypothesis" takes the form of omnipotence that the kid projects onto the caretaker, this caretaker in majority of the cases, being the mother. With this, they start attaching transcendental value to the mother, oblivious to the fact that she is fulfilling the duties of a caretaker, which would have been carried out by anyone in her position. They start considering them as an essential entity, whose interminable presence is necessary for their survival. While the expectations of omnipotence cannot be practically met, it then takes the form of envy and contempt towards the mother. On growing up, they shift the authority on to the father with an aim of taking away the omnipotent power from the supreme mother, this being another pillar giving strength to patriarchy (Benjamin, 574-591).

The theories in discussion reveal the total dependence on the mother and the absence of father as the mainspring for fraught man-woman and woman-woman relationships.

While for females the sole maternal parenting brings jealousy and insecurity towards fellow women, for males it has more damaging effects, beginning from identity crisis and slowly turning into the desire for power over women in the form of dominance.

The solution to the all problems in question was suggested in the practice of co parenting, where fathers need to come forward to bear the physical as well as emotional brunt of parenthood, which might help in mitigating the maternal issues to some extent(Johnson 205,207).

Analysis:

The three theories-Fear and Envy, Tenuous Masculine Identity and Omnipotence, share the common ground in highlighting the unavoidable ramifications of motherhood arising from children's overdependence on mothers. Even the most dedicated efforts at mothering cannot cease them from being an evildoer in the eyes of kids. This pattern of narration can be witnessed in the picture books of Canadian children's writer Robert Munsch, popular amongst the toddlers and the parents alike, for his simple yet striking tales. While most of the theorists found a solution of co-parenting for these maternal issues, mass implementation of this unconventional practice in a society might take ages to happen. An alternative approach can be adopted by attempting to mould the younger minds instead of altering fully matured brains. The influence of animation and stories on kids and their common habit of imitating this animated fiction into their lives is a well known fact. I analyse a few of Munsch's famous stories published from the year 1980 to as recent as 2017, discerning how the current narrative has played a role in inciting the majority of maternal problems and how a cautious recasting of these narratives could turn around the needs and demands of children and also smoothen out relations with women in adulthood .

Published in 2006, "I'm So Embarrassed" is one such story which revolves around the fuss created as a reaction to a mother's complete and sole involvement in children's lives. Narrating the story of a preteen boy, Andrew who is apprehensive of accompanying his mother to the mall in the fear of facing embarrassment as a result of her over caring habits and jovial nature, the plot portrays buffoonery displayed by the mother. From spitting on his hair to set them up, to talking to his aunt who fills his face with her lipstick against his warnings and showing his embarrassing baby pictures to his teacher in the mall, she spares no effort to embarrass him. As he thankfully runs into his classmate Taylor Joe, who faces a similar plight, they plan to come down on them by giving them a taste of their own medicine. The story in totality sends across a message that mothers are troublesome and humiliating, and in need of a lesson. Such accounts validate children's concerns with their mothers, further provoking them to act up against her. She, being her solitary discipliner, has to deal with the tantrums of the kids which makes her vile in the kid's mind.

In 2010, Munsch came up with "Too Much Stuff" , a story that deals with a little girl Temina facing the dilemma of having to leave her toys and dolls behind as she packs

to fly to her grandmother. Against the orders of her mother, who allowed her to carry not more than one doll out of her entire collection of 37, she took help of her sister to pack all her dolls in the one bag and sneak them in the plane. This disobedience, which should have fatefully paid her the consequences, instead transpires her generosity as she comes to the rescue of other children on the plane by lending them her toys, thereby subsiding the mess they would have created had Temina's toys not diverted their attention.

Not only is the mother, in being a restrainer, acting in accordance to the established narrative, she also is betrayed, which ends up with no repercussions. She is rather portrayed as the villainous figure who kept her daughter from doing the greater good.

Then in "It's my Room"(2012), she is also viewed as the control freak who dictates her terms to her child. Matthew, who complains to her mother for needing a break from her guests is witnessed as the victim of his mother's dictatorship by the readers. As he explains how her cousins snore, his mother curtly replies: "You snore too and they are my cousins and that's that", stimulating the enmity against the mother as a reaction to her oppression (Munsch 78).

The ambivalence discussed earlier is triggered when aside from the fear factor, the mother is also the figure of love and affection, whose presence is essential for the existence of the child, as observed in the story "Hugs"(2014), which unfolds the misadventures of Thea, who leaves the house after getting mad at her mother, taking along with her, her younger brother, Tate. As Tate longs for a hug and they try receiving a perfect one from various animals, varying from a snail to a skunk and a porcupine, they eventually realise the irreplaceability of their mother's hug, which they find is the perfect blend of all the warmth and comfort that they ever need. This narrative feeds the overdependence on the mother, which added to the negative feelings towards the mother produce ambivalent feelings in the kids, mentally conditioning them of their mother's dependence while at the same time making them adversely conscious of maternal control over their lives.

There are also stories where fathers have a role in the parenting, like in "The Enormous Suitcase" (2017), where the protagonist, Kelsey has to keep switching between the homes of her separated parents. As she keeps adding on to the list of things that she tosses from one house to another, she starts to include her pets too, which lands her in trouble. But again the father's presence in the plot doesn't really help as her mom is again painted as the problematic person who severely prohibits her from taking her dog along to her father's place. As she sneaks him inside his suitcase instead and goes to her dad's by taking a bus, it is her mother she is at loggerheads with, for disobeying her in the first place. Her father still gets to play the cool parent role that doesn't really have a problem with her actions except out of concern that she might receive a scolding from her mom. This again portrays her in bad light as an over worrier, fretting over the possibility of her dog picking a fight with her father's pet cat, when in the end they got along really well.

Not only mothers, but even other female roles, like that of the female bus driver in the same story who chided her for bringing a pet on the bus, are painted in an antagonistic vein, always up against children's little whims and wishes. Similarly, in another story "Mmm, Cookies"(2000), it is the female teacher of Christopher who teaches him a lesson for fooling his parents into eating his clay dough cookies.

While mothers have been the picture of authority and righteousness, fathers are portrayed as easy going, always making mistakes, with their children not only overlooking them but also helping them out of their blunders. In most of the cases, these mistakes have not even been highlighted, rather slid in very ordinarily as a mere happening instead of a mistake. "In Give Me Back My Dad"(2011), as Cheryl goes ice fishing with her father, she herself ends up getting caught by the fish through bait served in the form of a candy bar. As her father rescues her and teaches her to beware of the fish and the baits they serve, she plays very smartly, resisting another candy bar and subsequently popcorn and television by the whales. But in the end when the fish attach a bill of \$ 50,000 to their string, it's her father that gets caught in the trap. As she rescues him from the fish, he reveals that he still has the bill and deliberately took the leap because he was confident Cheryl would save her from the fish. The narrative very smartly covers the father's mistake by the daughter's wit to save her father.

Similarly, "Ready set go" (2015) is an account of a girl who gave it all to fetch water for her father, who is about to compete in a race. When he needs to quench his thirst before the race starts, she is under constant pressure to not let her dad down. While helping parents should be inculcated in kids from the beginning, this assistance is generally gender based, biasing against the mothers. If these characters were to be replaced by mothers, the dynamics would differ extremely as the very same mistakes would deem her irresponsible and harsh towards her child.

Robert Munsch's popularity cannot only be attributed to his simple and anodyne plots. He has been in the limelight for breaking conventional roles through his stories too. "Paper Bag Princess"(1980) is one book where he chose to break the stereotypical gender roles through an innovative plot. The book that dwells on the brave and bold character of the princess and rescues her prince from a callous dragon "who turns out to be a real jerk — and deciding she'd rather be on her own" was originally banned for "diversion from fairy tale norms of living happily ever after and having a family created controversy" (Holle). Later, it was largely applauded by critics as one the first feminist children's book and went on to become a bestseller. Its inspiration goes back to when Robert Munsch used to narrate his stories to children in a day care where toddlers had single working mothers at their homes. These mothers suggested a story in which females were the real heroes. Hence emerged the story "The Paper Bag Princess"(Feely592).

This one attempt by Munsch was a tiny step at changing the narrative. His wide reach of audience can be used more often than once to bring about a change in the minds of children and what they ask of their parents.

Kids reading children's literature are at a very impressionable stage, where they

absorb whatever piece of information and fiction they are fed with, without much interrogation. Writers need to use this opportunity in a positive direction by painting more admirable image of mothers without synchronously escalating infant's dependency on them. This might provide a solution to the hypotheses that have been digressing towards the strained relationship of women with men as well as with other women.

Firstly, the solution of co-parenting suggested by theorists discussed earlier can be materialised in the stories through fathers helping and raising their fictitious characters. When kids read these stories and learn about their fantasy characters being raised, fed, supervised, guided and even corrected by their dads, they would demand similar roles from their own, irrespective of their fathers' disposition to do so. Their childish stubbornness, which is hard to resist, of wanting their dads around them, influenced by the stories, would ultimately force fathers to spend time with their toddlers. This approach of 'life imitating art' not only directs the responsibility and burden but also love, anger, hate, envy, and dependence onto the father, subsequently diverting a considerable share of issues away from the mothers and bringing them some respite.

Secondly, this practice benefits boys to a greater degree as through these animated characters and consequently through their fathers, they find a paternal figure as an ideal image of masculinity, a manhood in touch with sensibility and replete with caring and nurturing qualities, which makes them impervious to Talcott Parson's "bad boy pattern" and "tenderness taboo".

Now, alternatively if Munsch had chosen the role of a father for the "Hugs", the young readers would have had a chance to imagine their dads in the role of a comforter, thereby fostering a sense of paternal yearning within them. Likewise if in "I'm So Embarrassed", the mother had not been depicted as the kid's source of embarrassment, worthy of a lesson, or the villainous character who kept Temina from doing a great deed in "Too Much Stuff", or even still the dictator of her terms in "It's My Room" the dynamics of narration would have swunged in mothers' favour, no longer making them the assailants of the tortures exercised on kids.

"The Enormous Suitcase" could have made a better use of the father's presence in the story by shifting the role of impeder from the mother to him, where she gets to play a neutral role and he gets mad at Kelsey for sneaking the pet out of his house. The lesson-givers in the form of the bus driver and the teacher could have instead been males.

And lastly, the quality of lending a helping hand should not be restricted only towards fathers as in the episodes of "Give Me Back My Dad" and "Ready Set Go".

Conclusion

Literature has witnessed an inclination towards men in all its spheres. While equality is the ultimate goal, achieving it through equity is the way to go. Therefore, narratives tending to female partiality, overlooking their slip ups, appreciating their efforts, putting them off the radar of criticism, while simultaneously shifting its focus on to men is the need of the hour. This particularly pertains to the women's role in the domain of children's literature which is certain to serve as an asset for both, mothers

and children by providing emotional, mental and physical respite to the mother and concomitantly improving children's nurturing.

It is beneficial for the upbringing of children irrespective of their gender. If for males, it solves the problem of masculine identity crisis and the urge for male domination, for girls it alleviates the inter-female issues, that of jealousy and insecurity and the tendency to give in to man's dominance as detected by Jones and Klein. In totality, we can reckon that this simple female-favouring narrative technique, by shooting multiple maternal problems through a single shot, holds much power in itself.

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