

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Voicing the Silences: Reading Motherhood Memoirs on Postpartum Depression

Ishab Mishra¹, Research scholar, Dept. of English, R.D. Women's University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Prof. Madhusmita Pati², Professor & Head, Dept. of English, R.D. Women's University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Article Received: 12/4/2022,

Article Accepted: 28/04/2022,

Published online: 30/04/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.4.44

Abstract

Motherhood is mostly projected by the popular culture as a joyful experience which fills the mother with a sense of satisfaction for bringing about a new life into this world. Something which is never talked about is the 'dark side' of motherhood which is painfully accompanied by sleep deprivation, anxiety, restlessness, fatigue etc. that make it really a tough and complicated business. Literary focus has been lent to glorify the motherhood, but not to voice the mental turbulence that some of the mothers go through in the process of rearing the child and striving hard to meet the social expectations. They majorly suffer from Postpartum Depression (PPD) which squarely requires medical intervention. Ironically, their experiences of PPD is either ignored or taken for granted as an odd behavior. Thereby, it fails to draw enough scholarly attention and discussion. The paper investigates into two motherhood memoirs on PPD: *Down came the Rain* (2005) by Brooke Shields and *Inconsolable: How I Threw My Mental Health Out with the Diapers* (2005) by Marrit Ingman. This paper employs a feminist model to examine how both the mothers lend voice to their experience of PPD. Mothers tend to suffer mostly in silence because of the 'guilt' of not being able to do what must be natural to them and 'fear' of being branded as a 'bad' mother. It, thus, argues that PPD is not just a malfunction of female hormones, but is often caused out of the very guilt of failure at mothering, as construed by the society.

Keywords: Postpartum Depression, Memoir, Motherhood, Feminist Study, Motherhood Memoirs

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introduction

The representation of mothers in literature achieves a considerable amount of reservation and focus down the ages. Mothers as characters have taken diversified dimensions and polarities like good/bad, selfless/selfish, respectful/ disrespectful etc. From old classical literature to modern times they are celebrated or rejected, criticized, blamed and considered dangerous. We have abundant examples of mothers who are synonyms of love, nurture, patience, selflessness and protectiveness. For example, Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Mrs Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Mrs. March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* are epitome of the above mentioned qualities. On the other hand, images of mothers who are selfish, cruel or even murderous also abounds literary canon. For instance, Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* are dominant and erratic, often murderous mothers. Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens' *Bleak House*, Tolstoy's Anna in *Anna Karenina*, exhibits mothers who are selfish. Gertrude Morel in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is too deeply in love with her sons that she becomes too restrictive and possessive, Tony Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved*, on the other hand, murders her daughter to free herself from slavery. Thus mothers always have occupied certain amount of textual space but mothering as an experience or motherhood as an institution have become a literary focus only on the 21st century with the rise of motherhood memoirs.

Feminist movement has always given a focus to motherhood from the time of its inception. In *Motherhood and Feminism* (2010), Amber E. Kinser points how motherhood has been used as a case by many first wave white maternalist feminists for attaining voting rights, property rights and educational rights. After they attained the right to vote their focus shifted to arguments such as whether motherhood is a women's primary source of identity and power or not. In 1960s they reconsidered ideas like mothers are the only appropriate caregiver, working moms are hazardous to the child etc., and demanded prohibition of sex discrimination in employment, equal division of labor between men and women at home and shared responsibility for child care. After 1970s, feminist started giving more emphasis to motherhood as an institution and site for oppression. 1980s saw a boom in the conversation about motherhood, mothering and reproduction. The beginning of 21st century saw the advent of New Momism, an epoch which glorified motherhood and celebrated it. The 2000s also saw the explosion of the motherhood memoirs, the type of writing which foregrounds mothering experiences rather than the institution and projects everything that is felt and experienced by a mother in reality. Though feminism is intricately intertwined with the issues of women and motherhood and has dealt with almost all major issues, it has relatively sidelined few utterly private issues of mothers like

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postpartum Depression (PPD). As PPD affects just 5 to 10 % of the new moms and generally goes unacknowledged and under-diagnosed, it remains marginal. Feminist theory, though have provided enough scope of discussion for maternal experiences in general, had given PPD a marginal treatment. This paper will explore the silenced reality of PPD with greater focus by studying the motherhood memoirs on PPD.

PPD is a major depressive episode with an onset within twenty-eight days of delivery (Ingman, 2005). It comes with many symptoms that include several mood disorders following childbirth along with tearfulness, sleep disturbance, anger, fatigue, anxiety, obsessive worry about the baby's health, afraid of being alone with the baby and thoughts about harming the baby (Burns, 2003). It remains under-diagnosed probably due to the social stigma of being labeled an 'unhappy' or 'unfit' mother or the fear of having their baby taken from them. Women attempt to hide their distress out of shame, fear, embarrassment and guilt. They continue to suffer, mostly in silence and bewilderment (Thurgood et.al, 2009). The memoirs on PPD voice this long preserved silence of mothers and act as the first hand resource to give us a picture of the reality of PPD.

In this paper I will discuss two memoirs on PPD namely *Down came the Rain* (2005) by Brooke Shields and *Inconsolable: How I Threw My Mental Health Out with the Diapers* (2005) by Marrit Ingman. I will explore what they have told about their experience of motherhood, what factors have triggered the PPD and what kind of coping mechanism they have adopted. The discussion will be charged with feminist analysis to observe whether they are just narrating their experience or are critically analyzing their experience on the backdrop of motherhood as an institution which has set unattainable standards.

Analysis of the Texts

Down came the Rain by Brooke Shields narrates her deeply personal experiences like her struggle to become pregnant, miscarriage, birthing experience, breastfeeding difficulties and later a crippling PPD in a very poignant and heart touching manner. She wanted a perfect motherhood where she had expected a natural childbirth, instant and easy breastfeeding and immediate connection with the baby. The problem started when nothing matched her expectations. She felt like a failure: "I felt like I was somehow not performing up to speed as a woman. My body was not doing anything I asked of it, and I was starting to think I would never get the hang of this mothering business" (51). The discrepancy between expectation and reality made her life stressful, frustrated and guilt ridden, ultimately spiraling down into a tormenting depression. She was unable to do simple chores for her baby like changing the diaper as her fingers were numb

RESEARCH ARTICLE

because of carpal tunnel syndrome. Her husband tended their daughter effortlessly and this again filled her with frustration and pain: “I felt guilty for not being the one tending to my daughter” (66). Like everyone, her idea of a perfect mother is the result of the images present in popular belief. She feels as if she is unable to do something which must come naturally to her. When she cannot fit into that popular image of an ideal mother she suffers: “I was failing at things that, according to popular belief, were supposed to be the most natural in a women’s life” (66). The high, unattainable standards of motherhood left her feeling crippled and trapped. Her inability to continue her work which gave her autonomy and confidence also left her shattered and contributed to be another factor for PPD. Her baby’s cry also acted as a trigger for her panic attacks which mostly ended her in wailing. She acknowledges that she was told of being weepy or emotional after having the baby but the magnitude with which she felt the emotions were far from being just emotional. Describing her depression she writes “this was sadness of a shockingly different magnitude. It felt as if it would never go away” (65). Crying, feeling incompetent as mother, not wanting to do motherly chores or be near the baby, thoughts of suicide are some of the prominent symptoms of PPD which were clearly present in her. Though she always tries to rationalize her feelings by thinking that she is tired, sleep deprived, physically impaired, need a break etc., but never realizes that she is having PPD and needed immediate medical care. Even after starting medication she is yet to understand or be informed by the doctor that she is having PPD. She points that lack of knowledge and awareness about PPD aggravated her case and this is the exact reason she picks to write the memoir: to spread the awareness. The healing process started once she read and gained knowledge about PPD, acknowledged her mental condition and started talking to random people. Thus, medication, therapy, back to work information about PPD, spreading the knowledge and definitely time were the major variables which helped Shields overcome PPD.

Looking from a feminist perspective we can argue that Shields, though is aware of the expected image of motherhood and sometimes is critical about the image, also falls trap into the image and thereby suffer a lot. For example, her partner doing his fatherly duties fills her with guilt and regret as she believes that she must be the one doing so. Brown (2006) discusses the recently published memoirs on motherhood in America to analyze “the relationship between motherhood and feminism from the perspective of gender inequality embedded in Western motherhood” (Brown 200). According to her, these books mostly foreground the ambivalence, unpreparedness and overwhelming character of mothering faced by the authors. Also, by “focusing on the bodily experiences of pregnancy and childbirth and on the different natures of men and women in parenting and childcare,” (Brown 200) these memoirs voices how

RESEARCH ARTICLE

motherhood as an institution serves in perpetuating the socially defined gender roles and thereby contributing to the prevalent gender inequality in the society. *Down Came the Rain* definitely falls into such a category.

Inconsolable: How I Threw My Mental Health Out with the Diapers (2005) by Marrit Ingman is a memoir which not just documents the events and emotions of her PPD days, but it also is a critical treatise on various aspects of motherhood as an institution popularized by the popular press, media, expert books etc. She begins her book by making her motto for writing the book very clear, “writing this book kept me alive – creatively, spiritually and literally – during the most difficult episode of my life so far” (vi). She clearly states that she was unable to find any book with which she can relate to. She couldn’t fit into the image of the depressive mother popularized by the popular press: “I wasn’t dying quietly on the inside or crying behind my smile. I was screaming at my kid, who wouldn’t stop crying, and beating up my walls” (vii). Neither the expert books not the doctors could offer her any help on how to pacify a fussy infant, instead they “suggested an attitude adjustment” (vii) for her. Her memoir, she claims is for those parents like her who sought answers but were unable to find any. She wanted to tell them that they are not alone and they were good parents irrespective of everything they felt and did. She points that, “motherhood is not constantly pleasurable, and mental illness is agony” (ix).

The experiences of PPD, which is often ignored or taken for granted as an odd behavior, take a focal point here. She voices her preserved silence subjugated by various socio-cultural and psychological phenomena. She contests the popular myths around PPD and motherhood in general. She delineates that PPD is not a “malfunction of those mercurial female humors” (3). It rather happens with the mother being tired, frightened, isolated, confused and apparently powerless. To her, the very guilt of failure at mothering, as construed by the society, leads to her PPD. The other factors like sleep deprivation, several medical ailments, and an inconsolable child with very less sleep, colic, reflux and so on, which are not generally talked about, have caused her depression. She not only discerns the characteristic and causes of PPD but also outlines certain measures to take, such as, not to wait for the PPD to resolve itself and to get help from anyone. To drive her point home she says, “by sharing our voices, perhaps we will all feel less alone” (14).

Conclusion

This paper examines how Shields (2005) and Ingman (2005) have voiced their silences, in the sense how they have been vocal about their PPD which remain tacit under subjugation or

RESEARCH ARTICLE

stigma. PPD is viewed as a psychological condition ostensible to the mothers at the front of rearing the child in an expected way. The failure of meeting the very socio-cultural necessity has caused PPD here. They have suffered mostly due to lack of personal and social understanding about PPD, lack of social support and high, almost unattainable standards of motherhood projected by the popular culture and society. The ‘guilt’ of not being able to do what must be natural to them and ‘fear’ of being branded as a ‘bad’ mother intensified their suffering. They have suffered mostly in silence, but subsequently they retained their voices to narrate their experiences of PPD. Medication, therapy, back to work, information about PPD, spreading the knowledge etc. have been proposed as the major variables to overcome PPD. In short, through the analysis of the two motherhood memoirs on PPD this paper has surfaced how the long-preserved silence about mothering and the institution of motherhood is granted voice, and set to generate public awareness of PPD to battle it.

References

- Brown, Ivana. “Mommy Memoirs: Feminism, Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature.” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*. 8.1, 2. 2006: 200-12. Web. 14 June 2014. < <http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/jarm/article/download/5026/4220>.>
- Burns, Deane L. *Aspects of Postpartum Depression*. London, Ontario: Middlesex-London Health Unit. 2003. Print.
- Ingman, Marriet. *Inconsolable: How I Threw my Mental Health Out with the Diapers*. Seal Press, 2005. Print.
- Kinser, Amber E. *Motherhood and Feminism*. California: Seal Press. 2010. Print.
- Shields, Brooke. *Down came the rain: My Journey of Postpartum Depression*. USA: Hyperion, 2005. Print.
- Thurgood Sara, M. Avery, Daniel, and Williamson, Loyda. “Postpartum Depression (PPD).” *American journal of clinical medicine*®. 6.2. 2009. Print.

SP Publications

International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)

An International Peer-Reviewed Journal; Volume-4, Issue-4(April Issue), 2022

www.ijoes.in ISSN: 2581-8333; Impact Factor: 5.432(SJIF)

RESEARCH ARTICLE