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## “Pleasure of the Damned”: Reading the Static Iconization of the Christian Mother with Julia Kristeva and Adrienne Rich

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The paper tries to locate the traditional western institutionalized Motherhood as distinctly different from the real physical and psychosexual experience of motherhood by reading Julia Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” and Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*. It also tries to analyze how the image of the Christian Mother has been consecrated and iconized into immutability, essentially removing it from feminist theories and practices. The paper tries to look into the religious model that requires the institutionalized Mother as a receptacle, promise and redemptive possibility for the immortalization of the patriarch. In iconizing the Mother as a weeping or silently ‘standing’ scapegoat, Motherhood is turned into a reminder of Woman’s primary sin and therefore turned into a functionally eternalized apology, a damnation without joy or sexual fulfilment. This is contrary to the actual pleasure of motherhood as Nancy Chodorow tries to examine. Both Kristeva and Rich try to locate a possibility of liberation of mothers, not in abandoning the pleasure of birth, but in rejecting the icon of institutionalized Motherhood as presented by the Father.

Keywords: Kristeva, Adrienne Rich, Chodorow, Christian mother

Adrienne Rich’s book *Of Woman Born*, published in 1976, was one of the first theoretical treatises on motherhood, which was surprisingly late in the wake of numerous movements surrounding suffrage, property and sexual rights of women. Clearly, something had made the ‘Mother’ a category excluded from the general concerns surrounding women’s emancipation. Rich herself remarks that the area of Motherhood has remained virtually unexplored and the crucial necessity of formulating a feminist theory on Motherhood is what made her choose to write. While the characteristics of being a good mother ensured a particular segment of women the prestige and ‘support’ of the patriarch, the privilege granted by a master to the best servant; there were certain ‘signs’ of Motherhood that

distanced the 'woman with a womb' from the goals of feminism. The paper tries to analyze some of the implications of Motherhood on the body of the woman, how Motherhood functions as a sign or receptacle of the patriarch's pleasure alone. Further, it poses the problem of the pleasure of the so-called primary sinner. Can the Mother, bearing the burden of the tears of mankind in her own eyes ever find 'pleasure' in childbirth? The problem of 'static iconization' of the Mother may be addressed by comparing Rich's book with Julia Kristeva's iconic image of the weeping Mother, the "Mater dolorosa" ("Stabat Mater" 143). It may be possible to locate the signs of hidden 'damnation' in the structures that confine Motherhood as a domain that existing theories of feminism seems to need to necessarily evade. Thereafter, Kristeva tries to remodel these theories framing the icon of the Mother in such a way that it may embrace Motherhood as a situation of 'pleasure' instead of as a punishment for sin.

Rich finds two meanings of the term 'Motherhood', both of which, though distinct in their expressions or usage, overlap to give rise to the total cultural significance of the Mother. One of them is the 'potential relationship' of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to her children. The second aspect of Motherhood is the institutional meaning imparted to it to retain paternal control over instinctual Motherhood. Rich defines Motherhood as an institution as one that is excluded from the female will, as one that is controlled and continued exclusively by the authority of the Patriarch so that the myth of institutional Motherhood becomes intertwined with the woman's real potentialities of relationship with her body and her child. In the essay, Rich talks of her own childhood experience of being locked in her closet when she was four years old for playing pranks. This was done on her father's order. It was the father who would hold the ultimate authoritative voice, whereas the mother would carry out the orders of the father in her 'duties' of Motherhood.

The alternative to the father's voice, according to Rich is formed by the "outlaws from the institution of motherhood." (Rich 195) The 'institution' is the model produced by the patriarchs of the family by citing the Divine Patriarch—a model which essential situates the woman in an iconic role. An alternative motherhood, as opposed to the institutionalized and iconographic Motherhood, is that of an outcaste-mother. Mother-work in this alternative allows a complete fulfilment of female potentiality not just as a reproductive identity but also as a work-identity. The extra-institutional mother is socially useful in development of culture through childbearing according to feminist ideals and also by influencing the world through active socio-economic participation. Motherhood as mother-work thus can be a means of experience, liberation, and confrontation.

In the course of history of the nature of Motherhood as understood by men and women, repeatedly a pattern of twin meanings comes up, as exemplified in Rich's essay. The pattern of creating dichotomies like instinct/institution, nature/culture, personal/social etc. are commonly elaborated in patriarchal understanding of any of the 'differences' in gender, including but not restricted to mothering. Also, the body of the woman was the mysterious unknown—milk and menstrual blood, the changing shape of the woman's womb, the sudden tears of uncontrolled emotion—translated into the extended substance of change, comparable to the moon's cycle, a matter of fear, a matter that needed to be governed. It was the matter of the father's "envy" (Rich 103). The Father's version of the institution of Motherhood is one of control and surveillance over the tendency of the relationship of the mother-child to spill over into intense female potentiality; the threat of the downfall of the civilization based on patriarchal institutions, necessitated the capture of the familial space by the Christian Patriarch so that both hemispheres of the personal and the public can remain under his wing.

Julia Kristeva attempts an understanding of the nature of the mythical Mother, the institutional Mother created and reinstated by the Church the figure of the Virgin Mother in her essay, "Stabat Mater". Her essay provides a remarkable exploration of the history of theologizing of Motherhood, the limit of Patriarchal institutionalization of a female experience, and an appropriate exemplum of the 'capture' of female experience by rationalizing tendencies of the Patriarch. At the same time, Kristeva provides her own account of pregnancy which forms the final emergence of order due to the *nous* bringing the ceaselessly motile *chora* to rest. Like Derrida, Kristeva draws the concepts of the *chora* and *nous* to develop her semiotic theory in "Revolution in Poetic Language" (*The Kristeva Reader* 89-135) from Plato. The idea simulates the movement of the fetus in the womb, as Plato called it the receptacle and the nurse of all the generations. This was, however, an unbalanced power, a 'swaying' power that held the elements in it being churned till the directive influence of the '*nous*', a powerful command restrains its movement to allow the emergence of the Symbolic. While the expression of Kristeva's perception of pregnancy and birth is steeped in the wilfulness of the semiotic, the instinctual outburst of maternal joy, the study of the Madonna is starkly contrasting, being sacrosanct with paternal logos.

Interestingly, Rich's *Of Woman Born* was published only a year before "Stabat Mater" which was published in 1977. The title Kristeva uses is drawn from the popular Catholic hymn '*Stabat mater dolorosa*' which is translated as 'standing still, the mother cried', which clearly emphasizes the figure of the Virgin Mary, her face washed with tears, standing aggrieved but helpless and stoic while her son, the

son of God is being crucified. The consecrated feminine is a constructed icon, a glorified fancy of eternalizing the primary narcissism of the male child that is otherwise lost in growth and foreboding death. The virgin Mother is a 'link' or 'surrounding' that allows a prolonged identification of oneself in a state of completion or wholeness through the Mother who is the epitome of feminine perfection as represented by the Patriarch, the Hebrew God or the Word. The Virgin Mother 'stands' eternally because she cannot break down as she is permanently located in the pure Symbolic that does not permit her the passion to find bodily expression. Expression has to be either codified in language or she must be situated in eternal silence. Moreover, she is asexualized because the Mother is the only fancyfulfillment of avoiding Death. Reminiscence of mother-love is a reminder of the womb, that arena which situates a primary narcissistic 'I' that is, a being in another being, and therefore presumably protected from death of the individual 'I'.

The attributes of the Mother that the Christian saints glorify as the very attributes of Motherhood are reduced to a few symbols of submission to God, the Patriarch. The 'tears' of Mary, the 'ears' of Mother Mary and the 'breast of the Mother' constitute of the whole physicality of Mary. There is no other 'body' other than these disjointed parts that venerate three principle qualities of ideal womanhood: the tears that cover the face of the woman completely; the ears that would be the receptacle of the Word; and the breast that symbolizes endless promise of nourishment to the son. The mouth that might threaten with a feminist countercurrent of instinct is wiped out from the image and so is any trace of sexuality with a long matronly gown. The fascination with reposition of paternal power in the hands of the daughter without risking a loss of familial lineage might have led to the creation of the vast cult of the Virgin. Therefore, the revered Mother must serve as an example of the ideal set for the English woman—the ever-sacrificing, weeping, meek keeper of the Word of the Holy Spirit. Also, the nature of the Virgin Mother is hardly mentioned in detail in the Bible. Yet, the cult of Mary developed into a passion chiefly through glorification in hymns and songs. The Annunciation event was explicitly rendered as one in which the Word became alive, quietly passed to enrich the womb. 'Stillness' is opposed to carnal lovemaking. Using a centrifugal thought pattern, the seed-bearer of Mankind, the bearer of Man's pain, the Mother meekly takes the brunt of Man's fall. Clearly, it is the language of the Father that is instilled in the womb so as to ensure the perpetuation of the paternal language. Kristeva mentions that the semiotic is lost completely to propagate a purely symbolic Motherhood: "Any trace of matrilinearity is explicitly disavowed, leaving only the symbolic tie between Mother and son." (Kristeva, *Stabat Mater* 135)

The problem of feminism is the problem of this misappropriated image, the sacrosanct, immutable and static icon coerced on the woman. A rejection of Motherhood by feminists is a rejection of the institution and not a rejection of the instinct. Kristeva remarks that when feminists deny the association of femininity to 'maternity', they seem to recognize maternity with this idealized misapprehension; and feminism, because it "rejects this image that this fantasy abuses, side-steps the real experience that this fantasy obscures" ("Stabat Mater" 133). What then comprises of the non-institutionalized motherhood? If institutionalization imposes the symbolic to obfuscate the semiotic from motherhood, then a feminist motherhood would imbibe a scope for the semiotic projection through bodily expression that finds evidence in the language of the mother. Such a projection, Kristeva seems to hint, can be approximated but not completely achieved because of an inherent disjunction evident in rational language that limits the irrational or pure semiotic by repression. She calls it the "impossibility of existing without legitimation (without books, map, family). Impossibility depressing possibility—Of transgression" (143). The French word '*enceinte*' meaning pregnant also means 'walled off', she mentions. The phrase implies separation of the mother-child duo from the 'Other' which comprises of the outer world. The idea of the unique nature of mother-child relationship can be traced in language. Being 'walled off' bears definite reference to the pre-Oedipal state in a mother-child relationship wherein the child and the mother were no separate identities because the child identified completely with the mother prior to a knowledge of sexual inadequacy.

FIIn "StabatMater", she also writes poetically of her own experience of pregnancy, which she found to be a rational experience as well as one that involved inner desire. She finds that the distinction between the self and the Other melts in pregnancy and as such the relation between the mother and child is a relation before language. According to Kristeva, child's access to order of the Father depends on its repression of its desire for the mother, the desire for what considers to be maternal *jouissance*: "(A)s if I had brought not a child but suffering into the world and it, suffering refuses to leave, coming back on me, insisting on me, insisted on, haunting me, permanently" (138).

She repeatedly uses the word 'Flesh' in her poetic prose and clearly situates the existence of the woman free from the mere Symbolic in her experience of motherhood. This is possibly a dissolution of the borders of selfhood in the moment of birth:

[T]he heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's ar-

rival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility—but not the certainty—of reaching out to the other, the ethical). Those particularities of the maternal body compose woman into a being of folds, a *catas-trophe* of being. (*The Kristeva Reader* 182)

Such a dissolution of borders is necessary to her in order to be incorporated into the greater ethics of being, as the self in the process of being in connection with the oth-er. As a feminist, it is unique that she hints upon an ethical ideal. Kristeva's idea of the ethical is what she calls "herethics" ("Stabat Mater" 152) or 'heretical ethics', the reformation of law so that it would include flesh, language and *jouissance*, and which would inevitably require the contribution of women. She incorporates her concept of the ethical in the possibilities presented by motherhood so that motherhood is free from dogmatized institution and envisioned in binding subjectivity in love as well as language and not mere Law. It can therefore be noted that in spite of being completely different approaches to motherhood, Rich and Kristeva seem to agree upon the point that the Patriarchal tendency to 'consecrate' or 'institutionalize' motherhood was not what defined the true nature of the mother-child relationship or even her own relationship to her body and subjectivity. The desire for being a mother is the desire to complete the female Oedipal complex, by desiring to bear the father's child. It is for this reason that she will marry a man to replace the image of the father. At the same time the mother also remembers the time of resolution of her own complex which had led to her discovery of the lack of the sexual organ in her own mother and thereby she had had to turn to her father for fulfilment. The loss of the primary narcissistic identification with the mother took place with her 'abjection', a key concept in Kristeva's system.

The 'subject' discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body. It hates that body but only because it can't be free of it. That body, the body without border, the body out of which this abject subject came, is impossible. (McAfee 48)

The new mother attempts to relive the state of narcissistic identification, this time by bearing the child herself, while reverting back to her own desire for her mother. Nancy Chodorow calls it the "Reproduction of Mothering" in her seminal work of the same title—a woman becomes a mother in order to regain a sense of being mothered and in order to compensate for a heterosexual relationship with a man, which can be a means to work out her unresolved relationship to her own mother. Thus there is a double identification within a woman during mothering: she im-

bibes in her selfhood the sense of being a mother as well as that of being a child. A heterosexual commitment to a man is insufficient for completion of the Oedipal desires of the woman as she also re-quires a return back to pre-Oedipal relation with the mother. This results in sexual jealousy on the part of the male lover which translates into punishment to the child by imposing the linguistic Law. In other words, if the Law governing the limits of mother-child relation is not imposed by the man, then, he fears a loss of her desire for him to a desire for the child. This translates into the immense institutionalization of mother-hood. Since the semiotic and the symbolic aspects of motherhood coexist in Kristeva's model, the semiotic is not formed after the infiltration of language, but is formed along with the Symbolic and occurs concurrently with it, therefore it does not predetermine maternity as a mere biological instinct but something that cannot be isolated from the paternal Word. The disruption of normal linguistic tendencies arose with the stifling of the semiotic by paternal impositions and they do not allow a proper assimilation of the experience of motherhood for the woman. If the desire for maternal fulfilment is natural for the development of selfhood, then a distaste for Motherhood (understood only as a symbolic language of the Father) would result in a perversion of the woman's self.

A dissociation of the semiotic and the Symbolic is what results in psychosis according to Kristeva. Such a state can possibly develop after childbirth when the fear of the Symbolic results in its rejection as it is interpreted as the language of institutionalized Motherhood. At the same time, it becomes paradoxical for a mother to reject Motherhood (due to misrepresentation of maternity in its ideal representation) and also to desire a return to the *chora* experienced in the mother's womb and re-experienced in pregnancy, by rejecting symbolic subjectivity. Kristeva considers psychosis as that state of the psyche when the former of the 'semiotic' and the 'Symbolic', constantly in mutual aggression, becomes dominant over the other so much so that it eventually supersedes the other. In normal social circumstances, the construction of subjectivity is continuously formed and reformed by heterogeneous language. In this respect, the 'I' or the subject is never statically definable. The symbolic will build up a translatable language for expression of bodily sensations that are otherwise chaotic and perennially in movement. They have to be structured in a logic that can be deciphered by the 'other', that lies beyond the border of the semiotic self. At the same time, the symbolic, by permitting interaction prevents regression into narcissism and creates a separate ego. In a disruption of the normal processes that form subjectivity, (and this is a continuous process, not merely restricted to infancy), the situation where the semiotic overpowers the symbolic causes a failure of language. In the process of continuous development

of the self, the subject will be swept by biological or physiological charges but this does not limit him to a pre-linguistic or pre-symbolic barbarian nature if he can negotiate with the charges within him to permit 'domestication' by the Symbolic. A stable subject neither lapses into silence nor utters sounds that are like the babblings of a baby, but pro-nounces expressions in codified rules that retain nuances of his semiotic urge but also casts them in sobriety so that there is no explosive chaos. Speaking beings must keep the non-expressive drive in continuous motility, but in control by syntactical expression. In Kristeva's system, a psychotic individual is one who is out of touch with meaning and their relevance to the semiotic, and therefore at a loss of the selfhood that places him in a rational context.

However, Kristeva observes that the Virgin Mother is the one who stands and says nothing, does nothing. She is the silent wife of the giver of Laws, the God of the Ten Commandments. She does not even collapse to see her son on the cross. She does not embrace chaos or the pure semiotic and is always tied to the Father's Word. Glorified and venerated in the Church, she is also the fearful face of cold, asexual rejection of 'Man's' sexual desire. As Kristeva states in her essay, she has known no other man except the Son, which at once alienates her from whole of Mankind, who has sinned by consuming the fruit of knowledge. Her ignorance is at once vilified and esteemed. In any case, she is incomprehensibly '(M)other'.

In the absence of a mother-deity which cleaves the dichotomies of rationality and irrationality, of Symbolic and semiotic, of nurture and nature, the Western ideal of Motherhood is the Virgin Mary who is predestined to weep but never break into madness. No Mother in this system can break the Patriarchal code of language and rational discourse. As such, as Kristeva questions, "Who calls this suffering ecstasy? It is the pleasure of the damned" ("Stabat Mater" 144). She implies that the western idealization of the Mother, is a false glorification, one that hinges the eternal shame of sin onto the secret pleasure of childbirth which is the feared and abhorred moment of an alien ecstasy to the Patriarch. The promise of redemption is also the consolation of forgiveness, a promise of complete redemption by the Son of God, without which there would be no core towards which all the words of the scriptures may gravitate. She is a repository of sorrow and shame who can never be permitted 'pleasure' for the sake of the memory of disgrace. A woman steeped in the ecstasy of maternal jouissance is contrary to this very purpose of compensatory glorification. She is so content that she would not weep for man, being one who has forgotten the past in her embrace of the present moment. She has forgotten the motive of the future. By forecasting the motive of the Son, the triad of the Father-Child-Mother is completely in the clasp of the Heavenly Patriarch. If women's emancipation wishes to be inclusive of all

important aspects of female existence, it must not forego motherhood completely by rejecting or alienating it. Rather the sign of the Mother must be turned the right side up on its strength. By pointing out the missing bodily parts in the image of the Mother, or by emphasizing the lost voice of the woman in the family triad, Rich or Kristeva have located the bias with which the western ideal of the Mother subjects feminism to a regressive politics. There are, of course, models of potent and vocal motherhood in other cultures which are, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, these observations have played an important role in disclosing the loopholes of the theories of emancipation which precondition 'liberated' existence into mandatory rejection of specific sexual, familial or social choices.

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