

## Re-Inscribing the Mother within Motherhood: A Feminist Reading of Shauna Singh Baldwin's Short Story *Naina*

**Basudhara Roy**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Karim City College  
Jamshedpur

“The fetus in utero has become a metaphor for "man" in space, floating free, attached only by the umbilical cord to the spaceship. But where is the mother in that metaphor? She has become an empty space.” (Katz-Rothman, 1986: 114)

Katz-Rothman's concern over the articulation and revelation of the silenced and invisible mother within motherhood discourse has, ever since Rich, been a pivotal agenda in feminist thought. Adrienne Rich, in her path-breaking work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) was the first to identify the two aspects allied within the concept of motherhood – motherhood as an institutionalized patriarchal narrative, emphasizing maternity as the biological destiny of women and therefore responsible for the ghettoisation and degradation of female potentialities and motherhood as a subjective female experience of empowerment and fulfillment. Feminists since Rich have taken up this theoretical framework and used it to emphasize on the one hand, the institution of motherhood as a male-defined site of oppression and on the other as a positive force which can go a long way in restructuring female identity, unleashing creativity and in establishing strong female ties in society. Using Foucault's ideas that ideology works through disciplinary power (Foucault, 1997) “by monitoring and controlling bodily movements, processes and capacities” (Sawicki, 1999, cited by Conlon and Carvalho), feminists have pointed out how patriarchy attempts to naturalize and therefore trivialize motherhood by suppressing maternal subjectivity:

“...the maternal from the mother's perspective has been stifled because motherhood is considered obvious and trivial from patriarchal and supposedly more enlightened points of view. Paradoxically, yet in fact holding the same status, motherhood is too obvious in the sense of being too visible, too seen, and thus turned into the obscene.” (Liss, 2009: xvi)

They also identify patriarchal containing, controlling and regulation of the mother through enmeshment the ‘phenomenon’ of motherhood within a host of patriarchal mini-narratives which overwrite, undo or dismiss experiential maternal accounts:

“Birth experience is articulated through pre-existing medical, social and cultural narratives that are reformulated, transformed and eventually shattered through embodied experience” (Maher and Souter, 2002, cited by Chadwick)

This ideology is in fact so pervasive that women, even in their own birth-narratives, tend to cast their birthing experiences in patriarchal terms. Chadwick points out on the basis of research evidence that women constantly privilege the outsider's view of their birth over their own concrete bodily experience with the result that “real birth is often seen as located within this outsider's perspective” and becomes “more real for those with the outsider gaze than those with the lived bodily experience of it.” (Chadwick) Feminists, therefore, call for alternative woman-centered maternity narratives in order to re-inscribe woman within the domain of her own biology in terms which challenge the hegemonic phallogocentric maternity narrative. The French Feminists- Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray are especially one in their idea of locating an

empowered female identity and reservoirs of female creativity within the site of maternal experience and the maternal body. They contend against traditional Freudian psychoanalytic theory which fixes motherhood firmly within the structure of male dependence and dominance by interpreting it as the fulfillment of the oedipal desire to bear a child by the father and emphasize the need to bring the devalued umbilical relationship to the centre of motherhood discourse.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's short story *Naina* which this paper attempts to read in terms of a feminist discourse on motherhood, was first published in the *Priarie Fire* magazine in Canada in June 2000 and won the third prize in its competition. Re-published in 2004 in the *Harper Collins Book of New Indian Fiction* and included in her 2007 volume of short stories *We are not in Pakistan*, *Naina* narrates a magic-realistic tale of Naina, an Indian girl brought up in Canada who solitarily undergoes the experience of motherhood out of wedlock, both her Canadian lover and her patriarchal, conservative Indian family having deserted her, and carries her child within her womb for fourteen years, refusing medical assistance of every kind till she is cajoled by her doctor into a session of hypnotherapy which finally occasions her delivery. This paper proceeds with the hypothesis that Naina's inability to come to terms with her maternal status and give birth to her child owes itself to her internalization of the patriarchal ideas associated with motherhood. Her mental stasis, her abandonment of all control over life and her persistent questioning:

“Who sent you baby? Where shall I deliver you?”(p.180)

and

“When I know who sent you baby, then I'll know to whom I must deliver you. But till then, you stay with me, achcha?”(p.177)

point to her misgivings and fears associated with the social gaze of unwed motherhood which implicitly brings to our mind its whole discourse – from its classification as deviant female behavior to its current legal but stigmatized status. Unwed motherhood is socially identified as a purely female transgression for there is “no deviance labeling of unwed fathers”, (Moorman, 1998: 34) and the female is looked upon as the sole impetus and victim of her own crisis (Rolfe, 2001). However the hypnotic conversation that Naina has with her unborn daughter becomes crucial in enabling her to re-assess her status and identity in terms of her own subjectivity and by liberating her from male ideological domination, it brings about Naina's birthing and her active re-engagement with life.

This paper attempts to look at Naina's experience of motherhood as a deconstruction of the patriarchal maternity narrative and an attempt to reclaim the subject-position of the mother through four paradigms:

- 1) Dependence/Independence of motherhood from the father
- 2) Paternal authority over the maternal subject
- 3) Mother-Daughter relationship
- 4) Linking Gestation and Creativity

### **Dependence/Independence of motherhood from the father:**

Patriarchal discourse seeks to centralize the father in all patterns of organization, conduct and behavior. Within the institution of motherhood too, the father remains dominant since the woman is forever Beauvoir's 'Other' and can be recognized as wife or mother only with reference to him. Katz-Rothman points out that since patriarchy privileges kinship bonds fostered only

through paternal succession in the name of the father, the blood tie (nature) gets more privileged than social relationship (nurture) (Rothman, 2000). Seen in this biological context, the mother's body becomes a passive object impregnated by the life-seed of the father, and the child, a triumph of male fertility. Motherhood within marriage, in acceptance of patriarchal codes, therefore, reinforces patriarchy. Unwed mothers, however,

“violate dominant patriarchal ideals of family, sexuality and motherhood through their achievement of conception and maternity outside of marriage” (Wegar, 1997, cited by Peitsch) and are therefore either disguised by constructed religious narratives or branded as samples of deviant and immoral female behavior. In *Naina*, however, the patriarchal myth of the dependence of motherhood on the father is subverted by the negotiation between Naina and her unborn daughter. Naina's fears pertaining to her unwed motherhood are not her daughter's for the postmodern foetus recognizes her life as independent of the absent father. Living in her mother's womb for several years, the child knows her mother intimately but the father is relegated to the margin and remains unspoken about. The child does not acknowledge any dependence on a father - she is sent by the Unknown and desires to be delivered to life and to the world. The idea of the father as progenitor and therefore, owner of the offspring, is dismissed here altogether. Naina's preoccupations with the sender and receiver of her child are thus dissolved as the foetus dissociates itself from all ideological ties with the father, and as the mother and child unite to affirm a life and identity independent of the father, a new feminist discourse of motherhood is established.

#### **Paternal authority over the maternal subject:**

Feminists have, for long, identified and resented patriarchal attempts to control and regulate the maternal body through technological and pathological means. The colonization of the womb by patriarchy has led to its identification as ‘dominated space’, “which is to say a space transformed and mediated by technology.” (Lefebvre, 1994: 164). It has been pointed out that one of the main principles and effects of the ideology of technology is neutrality:

“Technology as a neutral event produces the segmentation of space and blinds the relationship between space and its contents. Consider the use, and images, of ultrasound screening in pregnancy wherein the body of the mother is considered completely isolated from that of the baby.” (Conlon and Carvalho)

In ‘Naina’, the over-pathologization of reproductive experience is challenged by the protagonist's rejection of all medical assistance in bringing her child to birth. Ever since her fullness began, Naina has known the foetus in her womb to be a girl. She does not need the doctor's reports “pieces of sky collaged to black plastic” (p 174) to prove it. Her firm refusal of a Caesarean birth overriding the prescriptions of the medical fraternity and her insistence on her daughter coming when she is ‘ready’ to be born show Naina's assertion of control over her maternity. “I am not a case,” (p. 174) she repeatedly lashes out as her strange pregnancy catches medical attention through medical journals and tabloids. While the doctors are baffled at the failure of all medical techniques on her unharmed fourteen-year pregnancy ‘case’, Naina herself is sure of her birthing once her queries as to the sender and receiver of her child are pacified, a birthing which eventually does take place. Again, Naina's experience of childbirth by emphasizing on it as an active and powerful, physical and emotional process challenges patriarchal notions of it as a purely passive, biological, ‘animal’ event - “I too worked all night,” (p. 185) she tells Celeste. Further, by giving birth all alone at home through an unwitnessed private labour – “labour that was joy and joy that was labour” (p. 184), Naina

reclaims the centrality of the mother within the process of childbirth and attains to the semiotic experience of Jouissance which according to Kristeva and Irigaray makes motherhood a source of enrichment and empowerment.

### **Mother-Daughter relationship:**

Traditional Freudian psychoanalytic theory sets up an opposition between Mother and Daughter caused by the Father. Freud states that at the Oedipal stage, the daughter experiences her first lack of penis and blames the mother for it, thus moving away from the mother and towards the father. Feminists, however look upon the mother-daughter relationship as central to the fostering of close female bonds in society. Irigaray argues for a "...rebuilding of the mother-daughter relationship, the construction of a female genealogy and a woman-to-woman sociality." (Ed. Jon Simons) She believes that :

"Without a maternal genealogy the mother cannot transmit respected images of women whilst the daughter can only see her mother in one of two ways: 1) as an omnipotent phallic mother whom she must flee in order to retain some autonomy or: 2) as a castrated mother to whom she does not wish to turn, turning instead towards the father" (Irigaray, cited in Simons)

In *Naina*, we come across an intimate mother-daughter bonding for Naina and her unborn daughter share the umbilical relationship for fourteen years without injury to either. Not only does Naina's awareness of her daughter not require medical confirmation:

"she was sure it was a girl. Only a girl could be so comfortable in her mother's womb so that coming out and needing to grow would spoil her world." (p. 174)

which places their relation within the realm of Kristeva's 'Semiotic', but the text's statement "...Naina had talked to the baby...so many years...that if the baby hadn't been a girl before she took residence in Naina's womb, she surely became one" (p.174)

points at the maternal desire to foster and perpetuate female bonding through a daughter. Also within the magic-realist framework of the story, it is the daughter who brings about the mother's ideological liberation from patriarchy by opting for an identity independent of the father and leads to Naina's re-assessment of her motherhood in the sense of 'procreating' (creating one's own) rather than of 'delivering' (transmitting without ownership). The story, thus, privileges the mother-daughter bonding and by emphasizing the reconstruction of maternal identity through the daughter, works towards the recovery of what Irigaray calls the 'feminine symbolic' against patriarchal symbolism.

### **Linking Gestation and Creativity:**

The use of gestation metaphors in descriptions of creativity has been quite common even in male creative writing but feminist theorists like Cixous in her concept of 'écriture feminine' and Irigaray, in her insistence on 'writing the mother' have emphasized the special relationship between female biology and female creativity. In *Naina*, the text draws a remarkable parallel between gestation and artistic creation, - the birthing of Naina's daughter and the completion of Celeste's sculpture, her 'babe', are both aspects of female creation and the women's understanding of each other is implicit. Naina's fourteen-year pregnancy may shock and puzzle the medical fraternity and Dr. Johnson who is located within it but Celeste is well aware of the mystery of the creative process:

"Some things, they take years. This one, I work on now - a lifetime. A lifetime it take me. I try and I try, mais..." (p. 176)

Celeste's art, it is told, is realist, and recreating life is a mysterious and long-drawn out process. Finally, Naina's child and Celeste's art are born in the same night, both out of joyful labour which reaffirms the link between maternity and creativity.

Irigaray laments:

"...the phallic penis takes back from the mother the power to give birth, to nourish, to dwell and to centre. The Phallus erected where once there was an umbilical chord? It becomes the organizer of the world." (cited in Simons)

In *Naina*, however, the Phallus is replaced with the umbilical cord which sustains and nourishes, independent of paternal control, for a period of fourteen years to the utter bafflement of the technological and medical institutions of patriarchy. The Naina that the end of the story leaves us with is a confident mother, aware of her own potentialities, her empowered identity and assertive of her position in society. She no longer needs to fear countenancing her 'Family' or Stanford (both being agents of patriarchy in her life) for she has achieved the joyful state of motherhood without their help and her daughter desires no other identity than that which her physical coming to birth will give her. Baldwin's tale, therefore, ends in a triumphant celebration, reclamation and repositioning of the silenced and marginalized mother within the narrative of motherhood and by its establishment of a matrifocal family unit through a firm mother-daughter bond, the story envisages an enlightened feminist future.

#### Primary Source:

Singh, Khushwant, ed. *The Harper Collins Book of New Indian Fiction*. (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2005). All references to page nos. are to this edition and are cited parenthetically.

#### Works Cited:

Katz Rothman, B. *Recreating Motherhood*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Rich, Adrienne Cecil, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. US: Norton, 1995.

Foucault, M. *Power, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*. Trans. Robert Hurley et al. New York: The New York Press, 1994.

Sawicki, J. "Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. J. Price and M. Shildrick, eds. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Deirdre, Conlon and Marcos Carvalho, "Spaces of Motherhood". [reconstruction.eserver.org/031/conlon.htm](http://reconstruction.eserver.org/031/conlon.htm)

Liss, Andrea . *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Chadwick, Rachelle Joy. "Between bodies, cultural scripts and power: The reproduction of birthing subjectivities in home-birth narratives". [http://uct.academia.edu/documents/0175/8111/SUB\\_sub20091\\_5B1\\_5D\\_1\\_.pdf](http://uct.academia.edu/documents/0175/8111/SUB_sub20091_5B1_5D_1_.pdf).

Moorman, M. *Waiting to Forget*. New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1998.

Rolfe, D. "Adoption: Solution or Sentence?" (essay presented at the Association for Research on Mothering, May 2001, York University, Toronto, Canada).

Wegar, K. (1997). "In Search of Bad Mothers: Social Constructions of Birth and Adoptive Mothers". *Women's Studies International Forum* 20(1): 77-85.

Pietsch, Nicole, "Possession: A Feminist Phenomenological and Poststructuralist Analysis of Illegitimate Pregnancy, Pregnant Embodiment and Adoption" <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/17389/1/pietsch.pdf>

Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*. Trans. D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

Simons, Jons, ed. *Contemporary Critical Theorists From Lacan to Said*, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

The Criterion