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## **Critiquing Friedan's Concept of Motherhood from the Indian Perspective: A Study**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims at critiquing the western concept of motherhood with a special focus on Betty Friedan's epoch making book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan's concept of motherhood has been compared with the Indian concept. The paper explores the significance of motherhood by illustrating some mythological, historical and even contemporary women figures of India and their contribution towards nation building and the growth of their family. In Indian culture, motherhood as an essence of femininity becomes instrumental in elevating the status of women rather than making them handicapped in the society. It also projects the advantages of the mother-child bond and resolves the question of identity for women.

**Keywords: Cultural Perspective, Femininity, Feminine Mystique, Identity, Motherhood.**

### **Introduction:**

**“I think women are foolish enough to pretend they are equal to men, they are far superior and always have been”.**

– William Golding

This article makes an attempt to critique Friedan's view on feminine mystique from the Indian perspective. It focuses especially on the concept of housewife and motherhood in American and Indian cultures. Friedan's diminishing attitude towards American suburban housewives is presented in striking contrast to the esteemed position of Indian women (mothers).

Motherhood refers to the state of being a mother but it does not denote biological mothers only. This state is achieved by different processes like giving birth to a child, adopting a child, through

surrogacy, etc. Married women, who cannot become biological mothers, feel themselves cursed and try every possibility to be mothers. Even the society does not allow them to live in peace without motherhood. Indian society being a traditional one, attaches some beliefs with marriage and motherhood. Marriage is institutionalized because every family wants to grow. Marriage would lead to procreation and as a result the blood line will also continue.

The question of femininity and motherhood has been well analyzed from a multi-cultural dimension in various disciplines ranging from medical science to social science. If analyzed culturally, in India, motherhood is regarded as one of the greatest achievements for a woman. In the view of Ambica Dutta,

Motherhood as a shade of womanhood is paradoxically related to the concept of empowerment. At one end motherhood as a gender role restricts woman in active participation in the public sphere because of her primary responsibility to children; on the other hand motherhood in the private space somehow helps her to regain her status and better her position. ... In fact, it is the only private role in relation to gender identity that regardless of a woman's caste, class, religion or regional background holds a distinct identity that enhances her status, position and recognition and relates to hegemony in the discursive contexts (par. 14).

### **Friedan's view of "Feminine Mystique and its impact" on women:**

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) accounts the problems faced by American suburban housewives. This problem deals with the issue of individual identity which those suburban housewives feel they lack. Being unaware of the actual reason behind their unhappy condition they make themselves busy in housework and extra marital affairs to get rid of it but in vain. Friedan blames the patriarchal society and its orthodox view on feminine mystique that dissuades women to achieve individual identity using their full potential. She feels that the American's perception of feminine mystique is so rooted that it prevents women to acquire higher education and forces them into early marriage and motherhood. Instead of elevating the status of women, feminine mystique puts them in a degraded position. This is not only the view of Friedan but the central idea of second wave feminism that women are enslaved by their domestic roles as housewives and mothers.

Friedan considers housewives as parasites on their family and children. Their dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment forces them to see themselves through their children, especially sons. "The male outrage is the result, surely, of an implacable hatred for the parasitic women who keep their husbands and sons from growing up, who keep them immersed at that sickly level of sexual fantasy" (Friedan 326). Since, these women's unfulfilled self seeks sexual and emotional fulfillment through their sons, those sons' individualistic nature is replaced by their mothers. They even go to the extent of loving some men because their mothers love them. This leads to homosexuality. Friedan is of the view that those women, who wish to make their

dreams come true, become parasitic preventing the growth and development of their sons. In the words of Friedan, “The boy smothered by such parasitical mother-love is kept from growing up, not only sexually but in all ways” (329).

Friedan opines that feminine mystique is not only deterrent for the growth of women but also for the growth of the future generations (their children). It does not allow a woman to go beyond her family bondage to earn an individual identity for herself and forces her to accept housewifery as her ultimate occupation and identity. Since those unfulfilled and unsatisfied housewives tend to find their fulfillment through their children and often remain attached with them, such filial love makes those children acquire the qualities of their mothers. The weaker qualities like lack of commitment in education, work and life, influence and de-motivates their children (sons) in achieving goals. Those homo sexual sons also find an affinity with the young housewife sex seekers. Friedan says,

This lack of personal commitment in work, in education, in life outside of sex is “hauntingly feminine”. Like the daughters of the feminine mystique, the sons spend most of their lives in sexual fantasy; the sad “gay” homosexuals may well feel an affinity with the young housewife sex seekers (329).

### **Critiques of Friedan’s Feminine Mystique:**

Friedan goes on to say that feminine mystique does not help a woman achieving any status or identity except the sexual one. “For the woman who lives according to the feminine mystique, there is no road to achievement except the sexual one: the achievement of sexual conquest, status as desirable sex object, identity as a sexually successful wife and mother” (316). This may be Friedan’s view on American suburban housewives. But coming to some eastern cultures like India, women are highly revered in society for their femininity. They are given an esteemed position due to their ability to procreate and properly nurture a new life. Like Sigmund Freud, some of the western cultures analyze men and women as active and passive respectively. This passivity in a woman refers to her sexual passivity. As per Freud, healthy femininity takes place when a woman surrenders herself before a man, or in other words, when a woman becomes submissive after the realization of her physical lacuna (absence of a penis) that she can’t perform any activity like males. This results into penis envy where the woman desires to have a phallus (metaphorically stands for power). “But her inherent deficiency and resultant penis envy is so hard to overcome that the woman’s superego – her conscience, ideals – are never as completely formed as a man’s” (Friedan 127). Such a consensus of Freud regarding penis envy is the result of his observation in his family and contemporary Victorian culture which used to confer a secondary position to women. Freud’s concept of men and women is in polarity with the orthodox *Samkhya* philosophy of India which believes in the concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* – the respective passive and active part of a being. *Samkhya* philosophy considers *Purusha* as the ‘conscious principle’ and a ‘passive enjoyer’ and the *Prakriti* as ‘ever-active’, ‘imperceptible’ and ‘eternal’. In Bhagwat Gita, *Prakriti* is described as the ‘primary motive force’. It is the

essential constituent of the universe and is at the basis of all activity of the creation. *Purusha* is the male principle and the passive force of the universe while *Prakriti* is the female active force. The union of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* generates the universe. Indian culture allocates equal position to women along with men unlike the western or to be more specific the Euro-American culture. In Hinduism, no religious ceremony is said to be complete by the husband without active participation of his wife.

A mother-child attachment is something very natural and obvious. A child always stays connected with its mother because the father is the bread winner for the family and stays out of home for most of the time. A mother is considered to be the first teacher of a child and the qualities or the learning which the child acquires, is from the mother. She lays and strengthens the foundation of a child's future. So it's not apt to blame the mother-child connectivity as the reason of a child's low esteem. Supporting the mother-child bond, Prof. Charles Smith, a specialist in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at the Kansas State University views that a mother can best empathize with the child because she is emotionally attached with him/her. Since this relationship is based on the biological connection, its power is beyond human comprehension. Implying the importance of a mother in her children's life Smith says,

She teaches her son how to be good to a woman by way of her relationship with the father. She's very important in teaching her son respect and about the importance of love and affection. For young girls, she's very important in serving as a model for when her daughter grows up and one day becomes a woman like her (par. 8).

Still, to condemn the mother-child bond Friedan says, "Psychiatrists have explained that the key problem in promiscuity is usually "low self esteem", which often seems to stem from an excessive mother-child attachment" (331).

Irrespective of Friedan's repeated accusation that American suburban housewives seek fulfillment in their sexual role, she later admits that sexual satisfaction is not a mark of fulfillment for either sex. She supports her statement by quoting Erich Fromm who says,

Often psychoanalysts see patients whose ability to love and so be close to others is damaged and yet who function very well sexually and indeed make sexual satisfaction a substitute for love because their sexual potency is their only power in which they have confidence. Their inability to be productive in all other spheres of life and the resulting unhappiness is counterbalanced and veiled by their sexual activities (332).

As per Fromm, only those people get involved in sexual activities (homo/heterosexual) or become sexually promiscuous who lack confidence that they can do something productive except satisfying someone sexually. If being promiscuous for a person, is a matter of lacking self-confidence, then how far a mother is held responsible for such act of the child? A family is collective unit where other members like father and other elders also reside. Don't they have any

responsibility towards the child? If the father and other elderly members are so confident and thus, productive why can't they make the child like themselves? Why only the mother is held responsible if anything wrong happens to the child?

While interviewing a suburban woman Friedan feels, "She started painting which she did not finish, raised money for concerts she didn't listen to, said she had not "found her medium yet" (308). This is an example of such women who are not sure about either their dream or ability. They just try their hands in different areas without a proper hold in any of them. Neither they are able to be good housewives nor good professionals which results in their failure in domestic and professional life ultimately making them a community joke. Such uncertainty regarding the choice of a proper platform leads those women to find satisfaction in their sexual role. Friedan goes on to criticize the feminine mystique for the promiscuous nature of American women and says, "In terms of feminine mystique, if a woman feels a sense of personal "emptiness", if she is unfulfilled, the cause must be sexual" (309). If according to Friedan the feminine mystique prevails among the suburban women and has kept them within its clutches, does the same mystique encourage and allow women to have affairs outside their marriage? Extra marital affair is a taboo considered in every society. If the American women are trapped in the feminine mystique, they would never have gone beyond the limits of this mystique to satisfy their quest for identity. Feminine mystique does not propagate extra marital affair or sexual relation with many men as a solution or substitute for individual identity.

### **Indian concept of Motherhood:**

Like every other feminist Friedan too accuses the patriarchal society and its formulation of feminine mystique for the degrading condition of women. But in contrast to the notion of the second wave feminists especially Friedan, Indian philosophers and intellectuals venerate women and feminine mystique. It earns an esteemed position for women considering them as the source of great feminine power. While discussing about feminism or feminine mystique, feminists or the critics usually stress upon the western concept of feminism overlooking the fact that the eastern world has some concept and belief on the same issue. In the words of the South Asian feminist writer Sarojini Sahoo,

Femininity is thus considered as *Shakti* or a source of energy in ancient Indian Philosophy. It is a regrettable and astonishing fact that while discussing "femininity", we discuss Christian ideology or psychoanalysts' point of view but never has anyone addressed the idea of this Indian philosophy in these discussions. (69)

Indian philosophy believes in the concept of *Ardhanareesvara* which signifies, 'The symbolic unity of Nature and Knowledge' (Viswanathan). It represents "the perfect synthesis of male and female forms" (Vishwanathan). If according to Hindu philosophy, *Prakriti*, the manifestation of woman is the active part and also constructive in nature, then how can a mother be destructive for her children (son)? (This is in opposition to Friedan's opinion that suburban

house wife mothers make their children homosexuals and unproductive by suppressing their individuality).

Indian culture worships femininity and motherhood. Beginning with mythology to modern India the significance of femininity and motherhood is worth mentioning. Indian mythology not only provides an ideal and composed picture of Hindu Goddesses but also portrays them as assertive characters. It presents them as instrumental in establishing peace on earth. Where Gods (men) fail in annihilating the demonic forces, they seek help from Goddesses (women). These are the same dutiful and obedient Goddesses who are often seen sitting beside their husbands and valorizing them. Such pictures of Goddesses forming ideal couples with their husbands are epitomes of Indian women with feminine mystiques. In Hinduism, the images of the Gods and Goddesses like Shree Vishnu and Lakshmi, Brahma and Saraswati, Shiva and Parvati are depicted as the replica of the society. Goddesses are sketched as the delicate deities, sitting on the swan or Lotus contently serving their consorts or simply sitting beside and valorizing them for their gallantry.

The feminine mystique which is considered by Friedan and other second wave feminists as deterrent for the growth and personal achievement of American women is admired in India irrespective of gender, class or educational background. Indian women with delicate feminine qualities also exhibit their prowess in time of need like their mythological icons. If some epic heroines, mythological female characters or Goddesses are admired and worshipped for their characteristics, then why their replica (women) can't be placed at the same dignified position for same characteristics? Indian society looks towards Goddesses (women) as mothers. Hence, the achievement of motherhood is revered in India. Those women, who cannot achieve this noble status, are often looked down upon by the society and the woman feels herself cursed irrespective of her status and position in the society. For these women achievement of motherhood is not an excuse or a medium to keep themselves engaged. Rather they want to raise their children in such a way so that they can take the family, society or the nation to a highest point. Indian culture and history is crammed with ample examples of women who irrespective of their educational background could able to ignite the patriotic feeling in their children making them legendary figures for the time to come. Draupadi, Queen Madalasa, Jijabai, Putlibai, etc. are some of the notable mothers to be reckoned with respect. Similarly, the social workers Sudha Murthy, Phoolbasan Bai Yadav, etc. are some of the prominent women whose effort made either their husbands or society to be recognized in the country.

### **Iconic Indian women; epitomes of motherhood:**

Beginning with Indian mythology, the *Markandeya Purana* sings the glory of Madalasa. Madalasa, the queen of the king Ritadhvaj is said to be the guide and philosopher for her sons. Since she herself was inclined towards asceticism, she imparted the same knowledge to her first three sons initially through lullabies and then through teachings. She believed that there is

nothing in a name, race or status. A person is identified through his/her deeds. Due to her teachings her sons became ascetics renouncing the worldly matters. The disheartened king requested Madalasa to spare their fourth son Alarka to be the successor of his throne. On his request, Madalasa taught worldly matters to Alarka who eventually became the successor of Ritadhvaja and also a great warrior. Madalasa blessed Alarka and said, “You are blessed my son because you will rule the earth without obstacles. Now cultivate in your heart the desire to do well to others. Never cast your eyes on women other than your wife. Always contemplate on *Murari* to destroy the evil thoughts in your heart” (*Birth of Sons of Madalasa*).

Mahabharata, the famous Indian epic too eulogizes motherhood. Draupadi, the queen of *Pandava*-s is presented as an idol of motherhood. She shows her motherly instincts at a situation when her all five sons are killed by Asvatthama. Although she herself was in grief by losing her sons, she didn't want the mother of Asvatthama to bear the same trauma like her. That's why when Arjuna attempts to punish Asvatthama by killing him, Draupadi says,

I am suffering because of the death of my sons, and this rascal is the son of our guru-maharaja, Dronacharya, who has done so much for us. If Asvatthama dies, then Dronacharya's wife, our mother guru, will be very much unhappy. So release him and let him go away. (Swami Bhaktivedanta 41)

The bravest Maratha ruler Shivaji could become the *chhatrapati* of Maratha Empire due to his mother Jijabai's inspiration and dedication. Little is known about Shahaji Bhonsla's (Shivaji's father) influence on Shivaji, because after his second marriage he remained oblivious towards Jijabai, Shivaji and the Maratha kingdom. It was Jijabai's sole responsibility to take care of the kingdom and her son. She didn't lose heart and tried to live through Shivaji turning the Maratha kingdom into an empire. Whenever Shivaji lacked courage and turned towards his mother, Jijabai unlike the doting mothers always persuaded him to face the enemies with courage. Shivaji is known as the son of Jijabai.

Coming to the modern Indian history, we have Putlibai, the mother of Mahatma Gandhi as our inspiration. Mahatma Gandhi's parental influence (especially of his mother) is marked throughout his life. It was Putlibai's devotion and religious practices that infused a kind of moral and spiritual value in Mahatma Gandhi.

As a boy, Gandhiji admired the “practicability of his father” but loved his mother Putlibai and was greatly influenced by her “saintliness” and her “deeply religious” nature which helped him to possess an unquenchable faith in God and made his life a lesson for all ages to come. (Mathew 55)

Being a religious lady, Putlibai was instrumental in imparting the essence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism to Mahatma Gandhi. It was due to Putlibai's constant effort and personal characteristics that Gandhiji had formed a loving and sacrificial image of women in his mind.

Gandhiji's father and mother, both of them played an important role in his early life, especially the mother, Putlibai made a spiritual foundation in his life. Thus, the mother had played an important role in their children's spiritual life. Her daily life must be very careful as the speech and deed of mother greatly influence the children. They have a tendency to imitate their parents' every movement. Hence, family is said to be the great school and mother, the best teacher (Mathew 74).

According to Friedan's point of view patriarchy as well as the feminine mystique forces suburban women to accept housewifery as their fate making them handicapped to realize their dreams. But India treasures such a woman who irrespective of her educational and economic status chooses to be a housewife paving the way for her husband to prosper. Sudha Murthy, a prolific writer and social worker begins her career as a computer scientist and engineer. Later she leaves the job due to her domestic responsibilities. She is the person behind the success of her husband N R Murthy, the founder of Infosys. Although a computer engineer herself, she unhesitatingly agrees with her husband's request of not joining Infosys. In her words,

It took me a couple of days to grasp the reason behind Murthy's request... I realized that to make Infosys a success one had to give one's 100 percent. One had to be focused on it alone with no other distractions. If the two of us had to give 100 percent to Infosys then what would happen to our home and our children? One of us had to take care of our home while the other took care of Infosys. I opted to be a homemaker, after all Infosys was Murthy's dream. It was a big sacrifice but it was that had to be made (Youthopia).

After becoming a complete housewife, Sudha instead of wasting her leisure time in irrelevant matters kept herself busy in social service and writing. Although she was qualified, capable and more efficient than her husband to run Infosys, she chose to be at home taking care of her family. Behind every successful man there is a woman and Sudha Murthy is the support system for her husband who could be able to lay the foundation of Infosys. Her husband praises her, "Sudha, I stepped on your career to make mine. You are responsible for my success" (Youthopia).

Here is an example of not a suburban but a poor housewife from a rural area. Phoolbasan Bai Yadav belongs to a socially and economically backward family of Chhatisgarh. Married at a tender age of 10, she could be able to acquire education only up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard. Not only her but the poverty stricken life of other families motivated her to join and later form Self Help Groups in her areas. She vowed to improve the status of women and their families by making them self employed and elevating their economic standard. Due to this noble service, Phoolbasan Bai has been conferred with Padma Shri award by the Indian Government. Her life says, social, economic or educational background cannot form any hindrance if someone is determined towards achievement of goal.

## **Conclusion:**

A woman's effort in shaping her children's future or securing a better place for her husband cannot be underestimated. May it be a happy and peaceful husband, children with decency and noble qualities – a woman in the form of a wife or mother is found to be behind them. "Woman is the maker of the human race. She is the first Guru, guide and mentor of humanity" (Chavan 48).

Friedan bases her view regarding feminine mystique on the case studies she conducted on American suburban housewives. She feels that since those women are less educated, have got married and achieved motherhood at an early age they cannot get into professional organization and earn an identity for themselves. As a result they make themselves child producing machines so that they can stay busy for a significant amount of time. Moreover, when the children grow up and the mothers lose their reproductive capacity they again become idle and lose their value in the family. To make themselves feel indispensable for the family, they tend to stretch their domestic works unnecessarily or get involved in extra marital affairs to fill the time available; whereas, in India, such unemployed middle class housewife mothers make themselves involved in some social or religious activities so that they can transfer the same moral values and teachings to their children. They emerge as reference points and source of inspiration for others. These mothers always think and work for the betterment of their children and family for which they don't get much of leisure hours to feel lonely and bored.

A child starts learning from its mother's womb. That's why doctors and experienced personnel advise the parents to create a healthy and peaceful surrounding so that the child would learn the noble qualities and dispositions. Such claim of medical science has been proved in case of all parents. However, this is not a recent discovery of science. Indian culture holds this view in its great epic *The Mahabharata* where Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna learns about *Chakravyuh* being in his mother's (Subhadra) womb. While Arjuna was narrating the story of *Chakravyuh* before Subhadra, she got slept in between and so the baby Abhimanyu; for which he could not learn about the complete procedure and it brought the fatal end for him. Thus, it is advised that mothers should always be active and to have some good practices so that the same can be incorporated in the baby. It is a known fact that children learn many things from their mothers. So how a child grows to be, depends mostly on the mother's learning and practices. Friedan too holds the same view regarding mother-child bond but at the same time she feels that women who have acquired less formal education and are housewives, don't prove to be ideal mothers as compared to the working mothers because housewives don't get satisfied with the unproductive (as per Friedan) and routined work of housekeeping and child rearing. Friedan opines, since women become sex seekers, their children (sons) start loving the same person as their mothers resulting into homosexuality.

While looking towards the western idea on women and femininity, we should also have a glance at the glorious past and culture of India which gives an equal and esteemed position to

women along with men. If we look at the mythological or historical India, we could find numerous women as intellectuals, warriors or mothers of warriors. In modern India too, we have some women who are notable social workers vis-a-vis ideal home makers. When we think of a woman, the immediate image that comes to our mind is of a mother. It's because Indian culture and philosophy reveres mothers and motherhood unlike the American culture of Friedan which holds mothers as victims of feminine mystique, affecting the growth and development of their children. But in Indian context, it does not make women submissive and handicapped rather emerges as powerful tool to protect them from social comments.

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