

Reading the Phenomenon of Motherhood Through Feminist Approaches

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Abstract: By using the division of labour in domestic roles in societies where patriarchal values prevail, women are engaged in childcare and housework and are mostly associated with the private sphere compared to the public sphere. Motherhood is one of the most important duties and responsibilities of women among gender roles. Motherhood, being the most prominent role in the formation of women's identity in different periods and countries, makes it important to analyse the issue from a social perspective. In fact, motherhood does not only involve a biological, bodily transformation but also corresponds to a multifaceted phenomenon that also encompasses a social, cultural, and political context. In the history of feminist thought, there are various theories that make different explanations about the position of women in society, and in this literature, motherhood constitutes a mechanism of control and oppression for women according to some approaches; for some theorists, it fulfils a multifaceted function that liberates women. In this study, the changes in the meaning attributed to motherhood and motherhood in the women's movement in the historical process have been examined, and the views of thinkers on the subject are included. The aim of the study is to conduct a discussion on how the phenomenon of motherhood is handled in different feminist discourses. Firstly, a theoretical framework has been drawn based on feminist approaches to the concept of motherhood, and an attempt has been made to reveal how the meanings attributed to motherhood are grounded in different approaches. In this respect, the study provides a theoretical basis for current debates by comparatively addressing the historical and institutional development of the phenomenon of motherhood in feminist literature.

Keywords: Motherhood, Feminism, Gender

Jel Codes: J13, J16, B54

Annelik Olgusunu Feminist Yaklaşımlar Üzerinden Okumak

Öz: Ataerkil değerlerin hüküm sürdüğü toplumlarda ev içi rollerde iş bölümüne başvurularak kadınlar çocuk bakımı ve ev işleriyle uğraşmakta, kamusal alana kıyasla daha çok özel alanla ilişkilendirilmektedirler. Toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri arasında kadının en önemli görev ve sorumluluklarından biri de anneliktir. Farklı dönemlerde ve ülkelerde kadının kimliğinin inşasında en belirgin rolün annelik olması toplumsal açıdan konunun analiz edilmesini önemli kılmaktadır. Nitekim, annelik yalnızca biyolojik, bedensel bir dönüşümü içermeyip; aynı zamanda toplumsal, kültürel, politik bir bağlamı da kapsayan çok yönlü bir olguya karşılık gelmektedir. Feminist düşünce tarihinde kadının toplumdaki konumuna dair farklı açıklamalarda bulunan çeşitli teoriler mevcuttur ve bu literatür içerisinde annelik bazı yaklaşımlara göre kadın için bir denetleme ve baskı mekanizmasını oluştururken; bazı teorisyenler için ise kadını özgürleştiren çok yönlü bir işlevi yerine getirmektedir. Bu çalışmada, tarihsel süreç içerisinde kadın hareketinde anneliğe ve anneliğe yüklenen anlamda ne gibi değişimlerin olduğu irdelenmiş ve konuya ilişkin düşünürlerin görüşlerine yer verilmiştir. Çalışmada, farklı feminist söylemlerde annelik olgusunun nasıl ele alındığına dair bir tartışma yürütülmesi amaçlanmıştır. Annelik kavramı ekseninde feminist yaklaşımlardan hareketle öncelikle bir kuramsal çerçeve çizilerek, anneliğe yüklenen anlamların farklı yaklaşımlarda nasıl temellendirildiği ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu yönüyle çalışma, feminist literatürde annelik olgusunun tarihsel ve kuramsal gelişimini karşılaştırmalı biçimde ele alarak, güncel tartışmalara da teorik bir zemin sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Annelik, Feminizm, Toplumsal Cinsiyet

Jel Kodları: J13, J16, B54

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1. Introduction

In social life, the institution of family and the phenomenon of motherhood are considered fundamental in terms of the continuation of lineage and the integration of new generations into society. In patriarchal social structures, particularly motherhood is a phenomenon that needs to be addressed in conjunction with gender relations. This is because the role of motherhood assigned to women is often seen as one of the most important roles of women according to patriarchal cultural values. Additionally, motherhood is defined as one of the characteristics thought to be 'feminine,' thus it is accepted that women naturally possess this trait. According to patriarchal cultural assumptions, women are distinguished from men by attributes such as delicacy, weakness, nurturance, and sacrifice, and this distinction is attributed to the nature of men and women. The role of motherhood is the most significant argument supporting this approach.

The phenomenon of motherhood has been seen as the most important social role for women in social and cultural life and has frequently been addressed in feminist theory in the analysis of women's positions. The phenomenon of motherhood has been discussed by feminist thinkers from different approaches, and solutions have been proposed for the problems that motherhood brings to women's lives. Accordingly, motherhood has sometimes been considered a passive state that relegates women to a secondary position and sometimes as an important attribute that adds value to women (Gilman, 2018; Beauvoir, 2019; Millett, 1987). In the historical process, views and approaches to motherhood have also changed according to the conditions of the period, and in different feminist approaches, the category of motherhood has sometimes been a central element in theoretical analyses explaining the position of women, sometimes excluded from inquiries, and sometimes completely rejected (Firestone, 1993; Mitchell, 2006). From this perspective, the aim of this study is to reveal how the phenomenon of motherhood has been addressed in feminist approaches throughout the historical process and how this phenomenon has changed in the context of different analyses. Since there are different periods and perspectives in the feminist literature, the study has taken as a basis the first, second, and third wave feminist periods, which are a general division, and some feminist theorists accepted in these periods who expressed their thoughts on motherhood have been included in the study.

In this study, the views of one of the leading figures of the first wave feminist movement, women's rights advocate Wollstonecraft, will be briefly expressed. Then, the views of cultural feminists such as Cady Stanton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman on motherhood in the first wave feminist period will be described. In the second wave feminist period, the views of Simone de Beauvoir, a representative of French feminism, on motherhood will be examined, and then the views of Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, accepted as representatives of radical feminism, on how they addressed motherhood in the context of women's liberation will be presented. The differing views of Adrienne Rich, one of the last representatives of the second wave, from radical feminism will be addressed in the contexts of 'motherhood as an experience' and 'motherhood as a social institution.' As is known, in third-wave feminism, the transformation of women's identity and the emphasis on differences come to the fore, and therefore, the way motherhood is addressed changes. The perspective on motherhood of Sara Ruddick, one of the pioneers of this change, and the views of Shari Thurer and Elisabeth Badinter, who discuss changes in the contemporary understanding of motherhood, will also be expressed within this period. In the context of the differences in the third wave feminist movement's approach to femininity and the phenomenon of motherhood, the historical change and transformation of the meaning attributed to motherhood and motherhood will be analyzed based on thinkers related to the topic.

2. First Wave Feminism and Motherhood

Toward the end of the 19th century, the first wave women's movement, which became more pronounced, progressed on a line fundamentally advocating that women should have equal rights with men. With the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in England in 1792, and Olympe de Gouges, the author of *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* published in France in 1789, the writers advocated that women were also human and should have equal citizen rights like men (Rochefort, 2020). Therefore, the thinkers of the period made a great struggle by demanding equality in fundamental areas such as voting, education, and working life, trying to prevent the marginalization of women.

The inclusion of women in fundamental citizen rights such as voting and education rights within the women's movement could only be realized after the Industrial Revolution. Besides, the clearer definition of the private/public sphere distinction emerged in the same period. With the emergence of industrial capitalism after the Industrial Revolution, the areas of work/production and home/household became two separate areas, causing a separation. This situation led to an economic, institutional, ideological, and political separation, causing the 'market' and 'household' to separate spatially and resulting in the formation of gender orders that could be considered 'new' compared to the previous period (Sancar, 2009, p. 51). After the separation of home and work, bourgeois class men participated in production while women were associated with the home and excluded from production. The mass struggle that women began in the 19th century, excluded from universal values such as equality, freedom, and justice, reached a societal dimension (Çakır, 2018, p. 417). During the Enlightenment period that began in the late 17th century and continued until the late 18th century, principles and rules concerning the structure of the world were put forward, and it was argued that only rational beings could accomplish this. Those considered rational were only men, and since women were not associated with rationality, they were not considered entitled to various rights; thus, it was argued that women should not benefit from human rights. According to thinkers like Locke and Rousseau, who were pioneers in the development of human rights thinking in the 18th century, the emphasis on rights and equality was only applied to men (Günindi Ersöz, 2015; Lloyd, 1996; Michel, 1993).

Women were excluded from fundamental principles such as liberty, equality, and fraternity during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution because they were not considered rational. Liberal feminism, one of the currents that approached this issue critically, reached a consensus that women should benefit from the same rights as men, based on the view that women were physiologically like men and, therefore, rational beings. According to liberal feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor, the prerequisite for benefiting from the rights predicted by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution was access to education. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, one of the pioneers of feminist theory, Mary Wollstonecraft, criticized women's tendency to obey men unconsciously instead of using their intellect and emphasized that both sexes are inherently endowed with similar abilities. However, she criticized women for submitting to tradition by perceiving themselves as inferior to men. She also questioned, in the context of parental attitudes, the upbringing process where boys are granted freedom while girls are raised with the understanding that they must serve and obey men. According to Wollstonecraft, escaping from this situation is only possible through reason-based education (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p. 73). Calling for women to become autonomous individuals capable of making their own decisions, Wollstonecraft argues that the most important and concrete step towards achieving this can be realized through education (Tong and Botts, 2021, p. 33). We encounter this emphasis as well in the preface of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

“...if woman is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice” (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p. 3).

Wollstonecraft, emphasizing the importance of women's education, attributed the difference between the education of women and men to women's weak constitution. According to Wollstonecraft, who took a harsh stance against Rousseau in her work *Emilie*, Rousseau attempts to prove that women are weak and passive by limiting their role to domestic chores and ensuring the comfort of their husbands. Rousseau bases this idea on the physical inferiority of women compared to men and argues that women were created to provide pleasure to and be subordinate to men (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p. 120–121). He also states that the virtues and characteristics of women are secondary, and these statements are harshly criticized by Wollstonecraft, who refers to them as male aristocracy (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p. 133). According to Wollstonecraft, raising women as rational individuals is essential for both social order and the institution of family. In this framework, motherhood is not merely an emotional function but also corresponds to a civic practice that carries moral and intellectual responsibility (Wollstonecraft, 2017). She argues that women should not be confined solely to the roles of wife and mother but should actively and effectively participate in all areas of society. Because being limited to only the roles of wife and mother restricts their potential. Therefore, reducing women to these roles prevents them from gaining a greater place in social life and from acquiring an independent identity. By emphasizing that women must take part in social life as active and effective individuals, she played an important role in the development of the feminist movement.

Wollstonecraft presented an image of a woman who was mentally and physically strong and not a slave to her passions, husband, or children. For her, the ideal woman is not one who pampers herself but one who strives for self-control. She lists women's duties as those of wife and mother; however, she opposes the reduction of women solely to their reproductive function. Although motherhood is at the center of social reproduction, it should not undermine women's autonomy but rather nourish it. Motherhood should not be an obstacle to women realizing their own potential while they are expected to take an active role in social life. Therefore, while Wollstonecraft accepts the role of motherhood, she believes that educated women can become both better wives and better mothers (Wollstonecraft, 2017).

Wollstonecraft's critical thinking about the secondary position of women continued in the early half of the 19th century in the United States through Sarah Grimke and her sister Angelina Grimke, who focused on anti-slavery and women's rights. The Grimke sisters, giving lectures in different parts of America, emphasized the importance of participation in the women's rights movement and anti-slavery campaigns, despite various media censorships (Davis, 1994). Thus, women collectively acted in different parts of the world, organized various campaigns, and made a great struggle to have equal rights with men. In the following years, women achieved significant gains, especially in political rights.

Within the first wave women's movement, it is seen that those advocating liberal feminism were more concerned with public matters such as equal rights, voting rights, the right to education, the right to work, and civil rights. Besides, ideas about motherhood were mostly put forward by those who adopted cultural feminism. Cultural feminism advocates the theory that women's learning style, moral development, worldview, and place in society should be very different from those of men (Brunner, 1996, p. 104). Cultural feminists focus on themes related to institutions such as religion, marriage, family, and motherhood, which liberal theorists do not emphasize much, and fundamentally adopt a matriarchal perspective. They hold the view that women, guided by feminine influence and values under the dominance of mothers, live peaceful, cooperative, and non-violent lives (Donovan, 2016, p. 74). Accordingly, it is argued that

women should not be like men, and the values and virtues associated with women in a cultural context should be emphasized, while the values and virtues associated with men should be de-emphasized (Tong and Botts, 2021, p. 75). Cultural feminism has defined and discussed women's relationship with motherhood in different ways. Accordingly, in cultural feminist thought, motherhood is seen not only as a biological experience but also as a moral and epistemological way of being for women. According to this approach, women's experience of motherhood is affirmed, and this experience serves as a central element of social transformation. Cultural feminists have redefined motherhood in the context of a women-specific ethics and an experience with the potential for social transformation (Gilligan, 2017).

Cultural Feminist Cady Stanton was one of the most important feminist thinkers of the 19th century and a leading figure in the women's suffrage movement. Challenging the gender roles of her time and advocating for women's equality, Stanton's approach to motherhood differs from other feminist thinkers in some respects. Stanton emphasizes the central role of women, especially mothers, in society. She states that motherhood cannot only be seen as a biological function but also represents an important source of power in social and cultural terms. In her work *The Matriarchate* (1891), Cady Stanton views women, particularly mothers, as the determiners of their own destinies, the protectors of their children, and the founders of home life, religion, and governance. Stanton argues that mothers have unique experiences and abilities aimed at creating a peaceful world (Donovan, 2016, p. 86–87). Based on these explanations, we can say that according to Stanton, motherhood is both a source of women's social and cultural power and offers a perspective that allows them to redefine their societal roles. Stanton's main argument in *The Matriarchate* is that the patriarchal system is neither natural nor universal; rather, in early history, women (mainly as mothers) occupied a central place in social life. Although current anthropological findings have rendered the views regarding the existence of matriarchal societies debatable (Lerner, 1986), according to her, in matriarchal periods, women possessed both economic and political authority and assumed decisive roles in organizing social life (Donovan, 2016, p. 87). In this context, motherhood does not only signify a biological reality but also serves as a source of moral authority, cultural transmission, and social solidarity. Stanton's work, with its emphasis on the historical invisibility of women and the political potential of the motherhood experience, is regarded as one of the precursors of cultural feminist thought.

Another thinker among cultural feminists, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, speaks of a mother-centered world, claiming that maternal energy and maternal love are the forces that hold society together. According to Gilman, maternal energy and love are the fundamental forces needed to build a society; the home as an institution is a system that limits women and slows societal change. Gilman, who puts forward radical views such as professionalizing housework and raising children in collective nurseries, differs from the liberal tradition that attributes significance to the sanctity of the private sphere (Donovan, 2016, p. 99–105). According to her, with the presence of women who will govern with maternal qualities, a move away from a patriarchal understanding of society can be achieved.

In *Herland*, one of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's most important works, published in 1915, there are no women who are confined to the home and excluded from the public sphere. In the work, motherhood is presented not as a compulsory and naturalized role imposed on women by the patriarchal order, but as an experience chosen by women of their own free will. Gilman argues that motherhood is not the biological destiny of women, but a responsibility that can be collectively organized according to the needs of society. In *Herland*, childcare has ceased to be an individual burden and has become a public service based on social division of labor. Thus, motherhood is reconstructed as a liberating, valuable, and socially contributive practice, moving away from being merely an experience confined to the private sphere and identified with domesticity (Gilman, 2018). In this context, Gilman aimed not to limit women's productivity solely to fertility

but to bring their economic and intellectual potential into the public sphere as well. According to Gilman, for a woman to realize her potential, she must redefine motherhood and see it not as an individual sacrifice but as a cornerstone of social development. *Herland* is a utopian reflection of these ideas; here, women organize their lives freely as equal individuals, and motherhood is experienced as a conscious choice rather than a necessity (Gilman, 2018, p. 121). Therefore, this ideal society constructed by Gilman represents an alternative social model where women are actively present in both the private and public spheres, and where gender roles are redefined.

As a result, in the first wave feminist movement, a strong critique and objection were developed against the patriarchal structure built by men that subordinated and controlled women. According to cultural feminists who proposed a societal model constructed by women and based on matriarchy, women should be able to break free from the roles imposed on them by their nature, participate in the public sphere without being confined to the private sphere, and benefit from equal rights with men. A woman who reaches the position of an autonomous individual aware of herself should also have a say over her own body. The three thinkers discussed in the first wave feminist movement did not approach motherhood with a devaluing perspective; instead, they sought to produce a feminist ethic and politics by highlighting different aspects of it. While Wollstonecraft viewed motherhood as a responsibility of individuals equipped with reason and education, Stanton reminded of the historical power of motherhood and used it as a foundation for cultural transformation. Gilman, on the other hand, proposed turning motherhood into a collective duty within the framework of economic independence and social production. Although Wollstonecraft, Stanton, and Gilman's understandings of motherhood vary according to their historical contexts and theoretical orientations, they all conceptualize motherhood as a domain for women's empowerment rather than their oppression. All three thinkers made significant contributions to the historical development of feminist approaches by either reinterpreting motherhood on a critical level or by centralizing it as a source of women's unique ethical and social capacities.

3. Second Wave Feminism and Motherhood

The questioning of women's existing positions in the family, working life, and social sphere, with the increased participation of women in the workforce after World War II, influenced the emergence of the second wave (Dominelli, 2002). The second wave of the women's movement, which started in the 1960s and continued until the 1990s, saw significant developments, particularly in sexuality and reproductive rights. As Donovan pointed out, during this period, ideas based on sexism and sexual politics gained general acceptance. The second wave feminist movement not only produced theories but also organized and institutionalized. Many feminist institutions, such as rape crisis centers, shelters, women's studies programs, feminist publications, and global political organizations, became widespread (Donovan, 2016, p. 15).

Second wave feminism, which encompasses approaches such as radical, Marxist, socialist, and existential feminism, corresponds to a movement that presents different views on motherhood. In the second wave, there are interpretations that motherhood is not only about biological differences defined in physical terms but also a social and cultural construct. Especially in the West, before the 1960s, motherhood was generally considered by society as the most fundamental and "natural" part of women's identity. In this period, motherhood was presented as a biological destiny, and it was considered appropriate for women to be defined by their roles as mothers and wives within the home, rather than in the public sphere. Therefore, a sacredness and idealized roles were attributed to motherhood, and the responsibilities of motherhood were fulfilled. However, in the 1970s, motherhood became an area of problematization, and the views that motherhood was instinctive and sacred, which were imposed on women by patriarchal values, were criticized and started to be discussed more. Second wave

feminism is an important period in which the concept of motherhood was questioned more comprehensively, and, in this context, more answers were sought to women's problems.

Two main arguments stand out in feminist discussions on motherhood during this period. The first argument, in line with the views put forward by Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan in the 1960s, posits that one of the greatest obstacles to a woman's freedom is motherhood. Consequently, various theories were developed to reject motherhood. The second argument, starting in the mid-1970s with the contributions of figures like Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Sara Ruddick, and Adrienne Rich, involves critiquing the negative views attributed to motherhood. It is argued that the desire for motherhood is suppressed and prevented from emerging, asserting that motherhood can be experienced as a liberating experience for women.

In this framework, especially Nancy Chodorow's work has added a new dimension to feminist debates by analyzing the social and psychological foundations of the concept of motherhood. Chodorow points out that these explanations are quite inadequate, arguing that the reproduction of motherhood occurs through psychological processes stimulated by the social structure and that it is neither biological nor the product of role socialization. She focuses on the psychoanalytic narrative of personality development to explain the reproduction of women's motherhood. In her work *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, published in 1978, Chodorow examines how women have reproduced the role of motherhood across generations, emphasizing that motherhood is a universal component of gender-based division of labor. According to Chodorow (2021), motherhood is not only a biological process but also a phenomenon shaped by social dynamics and cultural practices; therefore, women are positioned as the primary caretakers of children. A woman fulfilling the role of motherhood not only gives birth but also socializes the child and provides care, thus becoming the child's primary parent or caregiver (Chodorow, 2021, p. 48). While the role of motherhood is among the important components of women's social reproduction, it also serves to sustain gender-based inequalities. Chodorow (2021) argues that women's undertaking of the motherhood role plays a critical role in shaping gender and contributes both to the construction and the perpetuation of male dominance. Chodorow emphasizes that the gender division of labor not only produces gender differences but also constantly reproduces these differences. According to this thesis, she asserts that women's motherhood is cyclically reproduced, and she explains that women raise their daughters with maternal capacities and a desire for motherhood. She states that these capacities and needs are constructed and developed within the mother-daughter relationship (Chodorow, 2021, p. 40). The experience of motherhood and the desire to be a mother are also seen as necessities of gender, and women reproduce motherhood from childhood to adulthood. According to Chodorow, marriage and motherhood are not natural but socially imposed roles on women through traditional values, cultural norms, and belief systems, and these roles become part of a structure that confines women to the domestic sphere, passivity, and immanence.

Chodorow's theory of motherhood, developed from a psychoanalytic and sociological perspective, provides an important foundation for understanding how women internalize gender roles, while Simone de Beauvoir, another influential thinker of second-wave feminism, undertakes a broader existential interrogation of female identity and motherhood. While Chodorow treats motherhood as a process of social and psychological reproduction, Beauvoir focuses on how women are pushed into a secondary position socially based on biological differences and argues that motherhood constitutes an obstacle to women's liberation (Beauvoir, 2019; 2006). In this context, Chodorow's psychoanalytic analyses explaining how women reproduce motherhood and Beauvoir's existentialist perspective can be considered two different but complementary approaches in the discussions on motherhood. Beauvoir's approach,

summarized by her famous phrase “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” asserts that womanhood—and thus motherhood—is not natural but is constructed within cultural and historical processes (Beauvoir, 2019, p. 13). Indeed, according to her, being a woman is not an innate quality but corresponds to a process that is learned over time. As seen in her statement, “The division between the sexes is not a moment in human history; it is a biological fact,” Beauvoir (2019, p. 29) acknowledges the existence of physiological and biological differences between men and women; however, her critique is directed at the way these differences produce hierarchical relationships in the social sphere. These differences, defined through the female body, relegate women to a secondary status within a male-dominated structure and prevent them from becoming free individuals. In this framework, female identity is fixed by socially constructed traditional roles, and by being defined around motherhood and reproduction, women's spheres of freedom are further restricted.

Beauvoir, who argues that women, due to the patriarchal characteristics of the society they grow up in, cannot achieve subjectivity and are seen as inferior, persistently emphasizes that this is not due to birth or the nature of women. In *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 and considered one of the foundational texts of the feminist field, Beauvoir states that motherhood is a structure imposed on women by the system and is not instinctively given to women, highlighting that all feminine attributes ascribed to women must be abandoned as a solution. Additionally, she claims that a space of freedom can only be opened for women within the context of existentialist ethics, and that they can liberate themselves by reconstructing all societal roles assigned to them. Beauvoir (2019) argues that a woman's anatomical structure also shapes her “bodily destiny,” evaluating motherhood as one of the primary factors preventing women's emancipation. She discusses how the nausea and discomfort experienced during childbirth deform the woman's body, and how the breastfeeding process becomes painful and enslaves the woman to the child (Beauvoir, 2019, p. 239-250). According to her, processes related to the female body such as pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum confinement, breastfeeding, and motherhood are among those that prevent women from achieving transcendence and trap them in immanence (Şaşman Kaylı, 2014, p. 67). Thus, highlighting the negative aspects of motherhood for women, Beauvoir criticizes the myth of “sacred motherhood” and denies the existence of a “maternal instinct” (2019, p. 252). In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, where she expresses her views on daily life, Beauvoir states: “Everyday lunch, dinner; everyday dishes; everyday cleaning; hours of endless nothingness; an infinity that leads nowhere beyond nothingness. Could I live like this?” (Beauvoir, 2006, p. 119). As seen in this questioning, marriage confines women to activities of immanence within the home. With housework such as cooking and cleaning predominantly falling upon women, marriage provides men with greater freedom, thereby restricting women's opportunities. In this work, Beauvoir, drawing from an existentialist perspective, brings forward a conception of freedom specific to women. Beauvoir's understanding of freedom, hindered by the institution of marriage and domestic relationships, takes a radical stance against this obstruction. This radical understanding is embodied in *The Age of Maturity*, where she portrays a being who pursues her own freedom, resists living under the domination of another gender, and refuses to be oppressed (Beauvoir, 1991, p. 180). Elizabeth Badinter shares similar views. She argues that the “maternal instinct” is a myth and claims that maternal love is merely an emotion. For her, maternal love corresponds to a learned behavior rather than a natural one (Badinter, 1992, p. 300). According to Badinter, the rhetoric of the maternal instinct distance women from the public sphere, devoting all their energy to housework and childcare. Thus, women dedicated to fulfilling the natural obligations of motherhood are reduced to the private sphere, unable to fully realize their existence and limit themselves. These criticisms against the restriction of women to motherhood turned into a more radical criticism of the system in Second Wave Feminism and led to a questioning of the social structure as a whole.

Representatives of radical feminism, one of the most influential movements of the second wave of feminism, proposed the abolition of marriage and family and the development of extra-uterine methods for reproduction (Donovan, 2016, p. 270). The two seminal works that laid the intellectual foundations of radical feminism and made a significant impact on the feminist discourse of the early 1970s are *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett and *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone; both authors argued that patriarchy exerts pressure on women through motherhood and that the institutions of family and marriage result in women being relegated to secondary positions both within the household and in the public sphere.

According to her, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and child rearing create an unequal power relationship that makes women dependent on male support. For women to be truly liberated, it is imperative that they reject motherhood; according to her, women's liberation is only possible by getting rid of their biological roles, and women's liberation will be realized through a biological revolution (Firestone, 1993, p. 184, 216). Because the physical and social effects of motherhood restrict women and subordinate them in all aspects of life. As an alternative model to motherhood, Firestone advocates for the use of artificial reproduction technology, arguing that this is not a threat to humanity. She believes that through artificial reproduction, "an honest re-evaluation of the outdated value placed on motherhood" (Firestone, 1993, p. 211-214) will be possible, providing women a way out from the institutional pressures of family. Firestone asserts that men could also have children through artificial insemination and artificial placenta, and that this role-sharing would free women from the negative impacts of pregnancy and childbirth. She argues that reducing the birth responsibility, which increases control over women's bodies, is possible through artificial reproduction methods and the public provision of childcare services (Firestone, 1993, p. 209).

Another leading figure of radical feminism, Kate Millett, like Firestone, addresses the pressures motherhood imposes on women's lives, arguing that motherhood must be rejected for women's liberation. In her work *Sexual Politics* (1987), Millett emphasizes that the family is the fundamental institution of the patriarchal order, hindering women's freedom, supporting male authority, and creating a system that does not allow women a voice (Millett, 1987, p. 60). According to her, the roots of oppression against women lie deep within the sex/gender system of patriarchy (Tong & Botts, 2021, p. 70). Millett asserts that due to the meaning attached to virginity, the dual family structure, the prohibition of abortion, and the physical or psychological impossibility of contraception in many places, women are not granted sexual freedom and control over their bodies (Millett, 1987, p. 97). For her, a sexual revolution can be achieved by ending traditional sexual restrictions and taboos, especially those that threaten the patriarchal monogamous marriage system, such as homosexuality, early marriage, premarital, and extramarital sexual life. As part of the sexual revolution, the collective professionalization and development of childcare will contribute to women's freedom and shake the foundation of the family (Millett, 1987, p. 106-107). According to her, the acceptance of male authority in all areas of social life and the denial of basic rights to women lead to the emergence of a privileged order. Millett emphasizes the necessity of radical changes in the patriarchal system, asserting that only through such changes can the oppression of women be eliminated. As long as the norms and values accepted in the patriarchal family order prevail, a sexual revolution in societies will not be possible. Thus, with the occurrence of a sexual revolution and women's attainment of economic independence, the pressure and authority exerted by patriarchy on women will diminish. With the sexual revolution, an egalitarian structure will emerge, and the foundation of the family will be shaken, leading to the "sanctified" institution of marriage being shaped according to individual preferences rather than the desires of others.

In addition to views questioning motherhood in second-wave feminism, there are also perspectives that affirm motherhood and see it as a rich practice for women. Among them, Adrienne Rich, in her 1976 book *Of Woman Born*, distinguished between

“motherhood as experience” and “motherhood as institution” and evaluated motherhood in two different contexts. Rich, who wrote her work based on her own experience of motherhood, argues that motherhood holds an important place for women in social and cultural life. According to her, institutional motherhood (motherhood as an institution) corresponds to a formation that otherizes women, is accepted as instinctual, controls their bodies, and is deemed natural and indispensable for women. For women under the pressure of patriarchal values, motherhood constitutes a restrictive position. The notion that every woman must become a mother is imposed on women as a universal feeling. Institutional motherhood encompasses a system of values that reinforce gender roles associated with femininity in society, point to acceptable motherhood, and contain directives on how motherhood should be. In this context, it can be said that motherhood has turned into a significant tool of oppression over women on a societal level (Rich, 1995, p. 110-115). Mothering as an experience, on the other hand, is defined as a conceptual framework that does not ideologically oppress women, does not impose compulsory actions on their behalf, and is intrinsic to women, empowering them (Rich, 1995; O'Reilly, 2007). Motherhood as experience refers to a woman's fertility and the possible relationship she can establish with her child, without any relation of domination. It refers to the act of motherhood, which emphasizes the practice of motherhood (the interaction with the child, the emotions felt during pregnancy, etc.) as a woman-centered field of experience. This state of experience is a directly lived state of being that emerges from women's own subjective life, emotions, relationships and knowledge, and refers to the motherhood that women experience in individual, emotional, bodily and relational dimensions (Rich, 1995, p. 186). According to her, experiencing motherhood constitutes a perspective that makes women exist and empower women in a system that does not include patriarchal domination relations. As Jeremiah (2006) states, the idea that motherhood is a virtue for women and has a creative function specific to women means that motherhood corresponds to a fundamental area in a woman's life.

Rich's distinction regarding motherhood in *Of Woman Born* holds dual significance in contributing to the ongoing scholarly work on this subject. Firstly, by referring to the daily practice of motherhood, she discusses the importance of the motherhood experience. Secondly, by focusing on the complex structure of motherhood, she approaches the topic from a broader perspective and creates a new area of debate concerning the possible conditions for women's empowerment (Takseva, 2018). Rich's work occupies an important place within feminist thought for initiating discussions on motherhood and contributing to the development of theoretical approaches in this field through her critical analysis of patriarchal understandings of motherhood (Kawash, 2011).

Before the 1960s, motherhood was accepted as the woman's natural and sacred duty; the role of motherhood was seen not as a subject of social inquiry but rather as an existential attribute of women. However, second-wave feminism questioned this idealized understanding of motherhood and sought to reveal that motherhood is a socially constructed institution. The 1970s, unlike earlier periods, did not accept the sanctity and mystery of motherhood unquestioningly but rather opened it up for debate, witnessing a period in which motherhood was critically examined. In the second wave movement, existentialist feminist S. de Beauvoir and radical feminists such as S. Firestone and K. Millet began to question the idea that motherhood was a structure that oppressed women, defining it as a mechanism that restricted women's lives. On the other hand, feminists like A. Rich affirmed motherhood, expressing that it holds an important place within women's social and individual lives and evaluating it as a practice that could liberate women's bodies.

4. Third Wave Feminism and Motherhood

Following the second wave of feminism, the third wave was shaped by the effort to approach women's experiences from a more diverse, multidimensional perspective that considered intersections of identities. Third-wave feminism generally addressed issues such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationalism, politics, and economics; and, adopting the emphasis on "difference" from postmodernism and multiculturalism, analyzed these phenomena from a feminist viewpoint (Donovan, 2016). Emphasizing that the gains achieved by women were insufficient and that more changes were needed to break away from stereotypical clichés constructed around women, third-wave feminism focused more on individual identities. This approach developed a critical stance against the assumption of a universal female identity and the discourses that centered particularly on the experiences of upper-middle-class white women. As Snyder (2008) states, in the third wave where personal narratives came to the forefront, the rise of postmodernism led to a focus on multiplicity rather than synthesis, and on action rather than theoretical validation. Thus, the grand narratives seen in earlier waves were rejected, and efforts were made to build a dynamic and inclusive political ground.

From the 1990s onward, the transformation experienced by third-wave feminism, particularly in the context of intersectionality, made visible the structural differences faced by Black women compared to white women and revealed the necessity of considering diversity among women in feminist theory and women's studies. The intersectionality approach emphasizes that not all women experience inequalities equally and that women from various backgrounds have different experiences (Snyder, 2008). Intersectionality, which became a significant cornerstone of third-wave feminism starting in the 1990s, reopened discussions about the dimensions of discrimination based on the differences specific to women's identities, enriching feminist theory.

Another theoretical orientation prominent within third-wave feminist thought is queer theory. Emerging from the 1990s onwards, the queer perspective provides a theoretical ground at the intersections of feminist studies and LGBT research, questioning the categorical construction of gender and aiming to reconceptualize such classifications (Öz, 2020). This approach critiques the production of binary oppositions such as the male-female categories and the construction of fixed and homogeneous identity assumptions. In this context, Judith Butler (2008), in her work *Gender Trouble*, emphasized the artificiality of the distinction between sex and gender, arguing that both concepts are constructed not through biological reality but through cultural and discursive practices. Butler (2008, p. 20) states that gender is not a fixed identity but a process that gains continuity through repetitive performative acts. Thus, female subjectivity is understood not as an innate and fixed category, but as a performance that is constantly reproduced within social norms.

In third-wave feminism, motherhood is shaped around the discourse of individuality and free choice. The existence of a universal "womanhood" category has been questioned, and policies based on differences have been produced, leading to the development of various perspectives towards those who fall outside singular identities. Instead of a singular discourse of motherhood, a foundation has been laid recognizing that the experiences of mothers from different classes, ethnicities, races, etc., are valuable and unique. Attention has been drawn to the existence of different womanhoods, and great efforts have been made to take empowering steps for women. Thus, from the 1980s onwards, there was a transition to a time when motherhood increasingly became an individual choice for women. This situation can be read as a move toward greater liberation in favor of women. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminist thought adopted two different approaches regarding motherhood. The first approach, continuing the legacy of the previous generation, maintained a critical perspective toward motherhood and the institution of family, while the second approach focused on recognizing and emphasizing the value of motherhood and family from a feminist consciousness (Özta, 2015, p. 93). Within the second strand, which encompasses the third-wave feminist

movement, it is possible to consider motherhood as an important experience for women, to be accepted as a virtue, and as a domain embodying a specifically female act. For example, in her work *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick attributed significance to women's child-rearing and motherhood experiences as the foundation of a moral perspective. Ruddick (1995) regarded motherhood not merely as a biological experience, but as a social practice that grants women a distinct way of thinking and an epistemological perspective. According to her, the practice of motherhood shapes women's cognitive processes and provides them with a position that empowers them both individually and socially. In this context, women undertake a central role in the reproduction of social order, positioning themselves as fundamental actors ensuring the continuity of social structures. Ruddick made two significant contributions to the discussions on motherhood. First, she differentiated between childbirth and motherhood, stating that these are distinct activities. According to her, motherhood should be evaluated not merely as a form of physical and emotional labor but also as an intellectual activity within the framework of a distinct maternal mode of thinking (1995, p. 13–20). Secondly, she opposed the view that maternal love is an innate, instinctual tendency directed by women's emotional impulses, arguing instead that the practice of motherhood brings forth a specific cognitive structure and mode of thought. She asserted that motherhood is an important and enriching source of experience in which maternal thinking materializes, and that it is not biologically determined, but rather a gender-independent experience learned or acquired through continuous practices (Takseva, 2018, p. 188). Thus, by the 1980s, as emphasized in Badinter's work *The Myth of Motherhood* (*Kadınlık mı Annelik mi?*, 2017), discussions increasingly referenced the essence and instinct of motherhood, leading to a renewed focus on the concept of the maternal instinct. Badinter criticized essentialist approaches claiming that "motherhood" and "maternal love" are instinctual (Badinter, 2017, p. 38). She argued that the notion of maternal instinct is a myth, stating that no universal or obligatory behavioral pattern specific to motherhood has been observed historically; on the contrary, she emphasized that mothers' feelings vary depending on the culture they live in, their personal desires, and their frustrations (Badinter, 1992, p. 300).

Throughout different periods, women's practices of motherhood have been labeled with various terms, and particularly the 20th century corresponds to a time when women competed with their motherhood, were judged by it, and asserted their existence through it. For example, in *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari Thurer discusses the new regulations that became standard and rational in childcare and upbringing with the scientific and industrial developments at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. According to her, for the first time, maternal instinct and affection were no longer seen as adequate and appropriate for raising children, and motherhood evolved into a process described as "scientific motherhood." In a way, there was a transition from instinctual motherhood to scientific motherhood, where mothers were expected to know everything (Thurer, 1995, p. 225–226). Although the societal role attributed to the mother evolved over time, the expectation that women should be responsible for the care of children and for raising them as responsible members of society persisted. Societal expectations toward motherhood continued to be shaped similarly even in the modern era, and the influence of scientific discourse on motherhood became a subject of debate. In this context, concepts like the "scientific mother" emerged in line with the social and cultural developments of the time.

The cultural reproduction of women's motherhood identity and role has created pressures on women, leading to discussions around concepts such as "new momism" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) and "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996). One of these, Douglas and Michaels' concept of "new momism," particularly imposed by the media in the 1980s, refers to a set of norms and practices that played a role in the creation of the ideal mother. According to the new momism understanding, women without children are considered incomplete; "good" mothers must constantly, every moment and every

day, devote all their physical, emotional, and psychological resources to their children. Thus, motherhood transforms into a form that consumes women, creates pressure on them, and demands that they dedicate their entire lives to their children (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 4). In the 1990s, Sharon Hays opened the discussion on the concept of "intensive mothering" in examining how women's maternal identity and motherhood were culturally constructed, and evaluated the societal dimension of the motherhood role. Intensive mothering is a form of motherhood that centers on the child, requires intense labor, is highly costly, demands a great deal of time, and requires expert knowledge (Hays, 1996, p. 8). New motherhood is characterized by profound change, a strong sense of loss, an isolated life, and burnout (Rogan, Barclay, Everitt & Wyllie, 1997). The idea that mothers must spend quality time with their children (O'Reilly, 2004) and must dedicate their lives to their children forms the foundation of the ideology of intensive mothering. This new form of motherhood has been accepted by all segments of society, becoming a dominant ideology. As Arendell points out, the ideology of intensive mothering both accepts and reinforces the traditional gendered division of labor (Arendell, 1999, p. 3). With the intensive mothering approach, a form of motherhood is presented where the mother is responsible for the care of the child, fulfills the child's needs and desires, and essentially dedicates herself entirely to the child. The idea that the mother must always and everywhere be involved with her child and devote all her time to the child physically and emotionally exhausts women under the ideology of intensive mothering. Regardless of the woman's circumstances, she is expected to performative actions (Butler, 2008) to be the ideal mother and meet all her child's needs.

The ideology of motherhood, although defined by thinkers with different nomenclatures, is inextricably linked to the gender division of labor (O'Reilly, 2004). All these definitions attempt to demonstrate through conceptual explanations that the ideal image of the mother does not coincide with the actual practices of motherhood. Womanhood and motherhood are often treated as synonymous identities and categories. The processes of giving birth, breastfeeding and rearing children have been associated with femininity and identified with the biological capacity to reproduce. Although in the 21st century there are views that distance the concept of gender, it is possible to say that practices and regulations related to motherhood are still reinforced by the ideology of motherhood and that this ideology continues to have an impact.

In the 21st century, women undertake many roles such as wife, mother, daughter, employee, etc., which requires vigilance in many areas of daily life practices. For this reason, there has been a fragmented plurality rather than a majority in the representation of femininity. Motherhood, which has a gendered structure, is associated with women's instinctual nature in this period, and is depicted as an identity in which childbearing is deified, and almost all child-related work is carried out. As Badinter puts it, with the rise of maternal feminism, the new feminist generation considers motherhood as a crucial experience of womanhood that can form the basis of a more humane and honest world (Badinter, 2017, p. 61).

While the sanctity of motherhood has been debated theoretically within the feminist movement, in practice the role of motherhood has increasingly diversified in late modern societies. In feminist theory, motherhood is accepted, rejected, or negotiated through different discourses. In other words, as Badinter also points out, with motherhood today having become a matter of choice, preference, and timing, women can choose to become mothers, postpone this decision for a time, reject motherhood altogether, or opt for childlessness (Badinter, 2017). Thus, motherhood is no longer a fixed identity; it has transformed into a multilayered phenomenon through new experiences such as voluntary childlessness, single motherhood, late motherhood, and regret over motherhood. For instance, Orna Donath (2022) critically discusses the phenomenon of regretting motherhood, questioning how this feeling is suppressed and rendered invisible under individual and societal pressures. Similarly, Amy Blackstone (2023) positions voluntary childlessness not merely as an individual decision but as a form of

resistance against motherhood norms shaped by patriarchal values. These approaches show that motherhood no longer must be lived in a singular way but rather emerges as an identity shaped jointly by social context and individual choice. Moreover, phenomena such as single motherhood and poverty are important for revealing how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, and family structure. Within this framework, the principle of intersectionality in third-wave feminism has provided the opportunity to comparatively analyze different women's experiences of motherhood, thus deepening the feminist motherhood literature on a contemporary and critical basis.

In conclusion, the concept of motherhood continues to be addressed in an increasingly multilayered manner in feminist writing. With the prominence of women's individual subjectivities and life choices in modern and late-modern societies, motherhood has moved away from being a singular identity or a natural duty and has instead become a social experience that can be redefined in various forms and meanings. The diversity within feminist thought makes it possible to analyze the phenomenon of motherhood through multiple discourses and different lifestyles rather than through a single framework. This situation also allows motherhood to be discussed not only as a biological experience but also as a cultural, ideological, and emotional one. Recent increases in studies in the literature have made visible the various relationships women establish with motherhood, addressing motherhood as a matter of choice, timing, and the broader social context.

5. Conclusion and Assessment

In feminist theory, motherhood stands as one of the most prominent and debated aspects of women's social roles. Throughout history, while motherhood has empowered women to become subjects, it has simultaneously been perceived as a tool perpetuating gender inequality. As women's movements gained momentum, feminist thinkers reinterpreted the phenomenon of motherhood through diverse lenses, reshaping it according to the social conditions of each era. This study examines the perspectives on motherhood held by theorists representing various currents within first, second, and third-wave feminism. It evaluates the interconnections and divergences among these viewpoints. Overall, it's evident that motherhood in feminist theory is not a singular, static concept, but rather one continually reconstructed in line with the prevailing social, cultural, and political conditions.

Pioneering thinkers of first-wave feminism, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Cady Stanton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, regarded motherhood as a means to ensure women's active involvement in decision-making and enhance their presence in the public sphere. Wollstonecraft highlighted the contributions of educated mothers to societal life; Stanton conceptualized motherhood as a wellspring of cultural and historical power; and Gilman underscored the necessity for motherhood to evolve into a collective social responsibility. Their commonality lies in interpreting motherhood not as an oppressive force but as a transformative and empowering domain. The key differences can be listed as follows: Wollstonecraft's emphasis on reason and education, Stanton's reference to historical patriarchy, and Gilman's proposals for institutional transformation.

In second-wave feminism, a broader range of critical and constructive approaches to motherhood coexist. Thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, and Kate Millett criticized motherhood as a patriarchal institution that condemns women to immanence and dependency, while figures such as Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich focused on the role of motherhood in the reproduction of gender and explored how this phenomenon could be transformed. Chodorow reinterpreted psychoanalytic theory to explain how motherhood is constructed within female identity, while Rich conceptualized the institutional pressure and personal experience of motherhood through her distinction between "motherhood as an institution" and "motherhood as an experience."

With third-wave feminism, the phenomenon of motherhood has been reconsidered based on individual choices, identity diversity, and the principle of intersectionality. Third-wave feminism adopted an understanding that included diverse identities, such as women of color and queer women, who were not sufficiently represented in earlier waves, and developed an approach that did not unify women under a single framework. In this context, the third wave emphasized differences and multiple identities instead of similarities, focusing on the local rather than the universal. With contributions from thinkers like Judith Butler, the idea that gender is socially constructed gained strength, and motherhood began to be viewed not as a fixed and natural identity but as an experience diversified across different social and cultural contexts. In this period, figures like Sara Ruddick, Elisabeth Badinter, and Shari Thurer drew attention to the social construction processes of motherhood and its transformation in modern culture.

Overall, motherhood in feminist theory appears as a multilayered phenomenon that is both criticized and embraced. In the first wave, motherhood was generally affirmed in the context of strengthening women's social positions; in the second wave, it was both criticized and restructured; and in the third wave, it was redefined within the framework of diversity, individuality, and identity multiplicity. In this context, feminist theory has evaluated motherhood not only as a biological reality but also as a cultural, ideological, psychological, and political structure, offering different intellectual orientations in analyzing this structure. These orientations have enriched the discussions on motherhood with perspectives that sometimes complement each other and sometimes conflict.

In this study, a comparative evaluation is made of the differences and similarities regarding motherhood, focusing on the views of theorists who have developed approaches to this phenomenon within feminist literature. While motherhood in feminist theory contributes to the empowerment of women, it continues to be debated in the literature due to its ongoing role as a means of reproducing patriarchal structures.

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