

RECLAIMING MATERNAL IDENTITY; A MATRICENTRIC FEMINIST STUDY OF MILCHMAN'S *THE SECOND MOTHER*

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Abstract

The study analyzes contemporary dimensions of motherhood literature in The Second Mother (2020) by Jenny Milchman. The research explores the reclamation of maternal identity of a mother. It addresses the matricentric concerns of mothers, a progressive research trajectory in motherhood studies. This study examines the novel through theoretical lens of Matricentric Feminism, mainly the matricentric thoughts of Andrea O'Reilly. She addresses the difference between the dichotomous terms, "motherhood" and "mothering", rectifying the misconception of considering the both terms synonymous in previous maternal studies. She also revolutionised the motherhood studies by redefining the term "mothers" by arguing that the word mothers is not limited to biological mothers but any woman having natural instincts of nurturing, care and protection should be considered a mother. The research reinforces O'Reilly's demand of allocating maternal status for childless mothers. This study analyzes Milchman's protagonist, Julie Weather's journey of reclaiming her maternal identity after losing her daughter, Hedley. This research also accentuates the excruciating pain and trauma that a mother experiences after losing a child and how she solitarily battles loneliness in the patriarchal world that strips off her marital status when she loses her maternal status. The study analyzes Julie's perilous journey of reclaiming maternal identity and healing her loss by helping an emotionally disturbed boy in discovering himself, which surprisingly proves to be reciprocal process of vulnerability and empowerment in which both Julie and Peter heal each other. This research predominantly intends to invigorate the motherhood stratum by reinforcing the inclusive approach of mothering experiences that are not limited to biological mothers. The future researchers can apply this framework to explore modern dimensions of motherhood studies in various literary works, especially through intersections of race, class and culture.

Keywords: Motherhood, Mothering, Andrea O'Reilly, Maternal Identity, Matricentric, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Motherhood studies is a distinct field of academic enquiry and one of the most evolving theoretical concepts which can be traced back to 20th century. It has transformed from essentialist ideas of patriarchal motherhood to empowering domain of mothering. In contemporary era, Andrea O'Reilly revolutionised the field by proposing a progressive dimension through her theory of Matricentric Feminism. This theory centres the contemporary concerns of mothers. It addresses the inclusive approach of the practice of mothering, that is not limited to biological relations. Along with theory, literary works have also aligned with this transformation. The works of previous

writers focused on mothering as natural instinct. The contemporary theorists and writers challenged the patriarchal nations of dichotomous terms, motherhood and mothering. O'Reilly argued that mothering is not limited to biological mothers. O'Reilly's activism demanded her theory not to be constrained to the books but to be practised. This research analyzes Milchman's novel, *The Second Mother* through the theoretical aspects of Matricentric Feminism.

Jenny Milchman's *The Second Mother* is a hemmed-in mystery novel that revolves around the story of a wretched woman, Julie Weathers who had lost her baby, her infant daughter, Hedley, due to which she faces emotional and psychological turmoil, aggregated by the societal pressures and loss of support of her hapless husband, ultimately due to marriage breakdown. Julie taking a courageous step, to forget her tragic past, escapes to a remote island off the coast in Maine upon discovering an advertisement for teaching job in a one-room school house on Mercy island, an alienated community in Maine. Upon reaching island, she senses a deeply mysterious atmosphere, where she notices weird behaviour of residents who exhibit their resistant attitude towards strangers through their fleeting dispersion. Julie, after some time, learns that the island is ruled by an influential and conservative family of Hempsteads, who control all the societal structures and life activities of people of island by enforcing oppressive traditions.

Julie meets Peter Mayers, an eleven years old student with distorted, traumatized behaviour due to his grief of his father's recent death. Maryanne Hempstead, Peter's grandmother and the matriarch of the ruling family of the island, is the most treacherous character who curtails all the minor fluctuations in the traditional lifestyles of the residents of island. She warns Julie regarding all the rules and restrictions. Julie, being a mother, having natural instincts of care, nurture and protection, senses the abrupt behaviour of Peter and rigid attitude of Hempsteads that doesn't give Peter any space to grow and heal his grief and trauma. Julie fights for Peter against Hempsteads representing Milchman's radical idea that motherhood is not limited to a biological mothers. Julie, like a surrogate or second mother of Peter takes extreme measures to save Peter's innocence and growth. Consequently, all her struggles for Peter allow her to heal her maternal grief of losing her child and developing her maternal identity. While fighting for Peter, despite all her efforts to create sense of belongingness to the island through romantic bond with the handyman, fisherman, Callum, who was also on the island due to same cause, to escape. Julie ultimately realizes that the Mercy island possesses deep underlying darker realities, merely having a fake facade of tranquillity and serene space for all the escapists.

This study approaches Milchman's *The Second Mother* through O'Reilly's contemporary theory of Matricentric Feminism. Milchman's story aligns with O'Reilly's matricentric thoughts and concerns, particularly when focused on the newly developing relationship between the protagonist of the novel, Julie and her student, Peter. Their mutual relationship, their grief-stricken pasts and their loss help them in connecting their lives and seeking solace in each other. Julie regains her maternal status and suppressed emotions through her efforts to help Peter overcome his grief of losing his father, leaving him alone with his rigid, conventional and unsupportive family especially his grandmother, Maryanne Hempstead.

Milchman aptly represents O'Reilly's challenge that motherhood is not a natural instinct that is only natural and innate to a biological mother while it is an activity or practice that is associated with feelings of care, nurture and protection. This study also addresses O'Reilly's stance that motherhood is a political institution which is socially constructed through patriarchal world.

This study is a minimal effort to contribute in O'Reilly's demand of acknowledging and inclusion of Matricentric Feminism as a distinct field and theory; its practice and activism, addressing all the maternal dynamics and concerns of mothers. This study aims to empower mothers who can relate to these unarticulated stories and help them in healing their maternal griefs by reclaiming their diverse maternal identities and mothering experiences.

1.1 Research Questions

1. In what ways contemporary motherhood literature focuses on reclamation of maternal identity for childless mothers?
2. How does Julie's relationship with Peter heal her maternal grief?
3. How does Matricentric Feminism have been empowering the motherhood stratum?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The research, aligning with O'Reilly's theoretical perspective of Matricentric Feminism, argues that mothering is a practice that is not limited to biological mothers. The study analyzes the journey of a mother, Julie in Milchman's *The Second Mother*, who reclaims her maternal status and identity after losing her biological daughter. The study examines how Julie regains her maternal status through her relationship with her student, Peter, despite living in patriarchal society.

1.3 Significance of Research

This study addresses the unaddressed concerns of mothers who claim a distinct space for their maternal identities shaped through various factors, social, political, economical, emotional and psychological. This research raises the significant matricentric challenge that motherhood and mothering are two distinguished terms. Motherhood, being a socially constructed institution, oppresses mothers while mothering, being a diverse practice and phenomenon, empowers mothers. This research also aims to expand the matricentric academics by emphasizing that motherhood is not just limited to the biological mothers, empathising with childless mothers or women who have same maternal instincts as the biological mothers. This research can be a great medium for mothers to heal their maternal melancholy and empowers them by focusing on dynamic maternal identities.

1.4 Delimitations

This research explores the narrowed aspect of reclaiming the maternal identity out of the broad theoretical framework of Matricentric Feminism, by analysing Milchman's *The Second Mother* (2020). The study focuses on the protagonist, Julie's tragic journey of losing her maternal status due to loss of her infant daughter, Hedley, to regaining her maternal identity through her relationship with her student, Peter.

2. Literature Review

O'Reilly (2019), the pioneer of the theory of Matricentric Feminism in her well-documented article *Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers* (2019) explains all the conceivable questions regarding her newly constructed theoretical domain, Matricentric Feminism. She acknowledges that feminism has addressed all the issues of gender discrimination and equality of women but she asserts that mothers are distinct species who need separate discourse to address their concerns. She explains that her aim is not to replace traditional feminism, but to expand feminist discourse by including mothers. She explains that Matricentric Feminism aims to challenge patriarchal institution of motherhood by allowing diverse mothering practices. She describes that matricentric feminism is matrifocal in its nature that it's main focus is on mothers where mothers are the centre of the all spheres of life countering traditional perspectives that focuses on children and society

and a mother's duty towards them. O'Reilly focalizes mothering as a practice or skill that is not limited to natural or biological instincts.

Bueskens (2016) in her scholarly article *Matricentric Feminism Is a Gift to the World* (2016), comprehensively reviews O'Reilly robust book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice* (2016). She acknowledges that O'Reilly is the pioneer of the theory, practice and activism of the discipline of Matricentric Feminism and her efforts procured a separate discipline of Matricentric Feminism for mothers. She broadened the field by establishing an independent room for mothers from various social and ethnic groups. O'Reilly battled against the Essentialist ideology of the patriarchal world, that constructed the myth of good mothers, that constrained the identity of mothers by compelling them to comply with the pedagogical rules of the myth of good mothers, which stated that good mothers must forget their own existence, they must restrict themselves to the domestic sphere and they must be responsible and held brutally accountable for all the issues faced by children otherwise their motherhood identity and status must be confiscated. O'Reilly also grappled with various challenges to win mothering license for childless mothers, especially the ones who have lost their children or those who are facing fertility issues because O'Reilly believed that the term mothers is not a narrowed one, but an inclusive term that involves diverse mothering experiences and childless mothers as well. After consistent decades of hard work, O'Reilly initiated the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI), an activist and academic organisation focused on motherhood studies, previously named as the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM), and its journal, entitled as, the Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering (JARM). Bueskens proclaims that all the forthcoming achievements and advancements in the field of motherhood studies, especially in the field of research and community activism are the results of O'Reilly's perpetual pursuits.

Maroney (1985) presents a critique of motherhood as a patriarchal institution. She highlights that motherhood has been socially constructed and historically controlled by patriarchal systems, rather than being merely a biological or natural fact. Maroney conceptualizes motherhood as an institution has had three major effects. It excludes the concept of motherhood from something purely biological and placed it within social and historical dimensions. Secondly, scholars developed a clear distinction between matriarchal and patriarchal forms of motherhood. Matriarchal motherhood is imagined as cooperative, peaceful, sex-positive, and promoting equal involvement of men. It refers to the society where motherhood is considered a source of social influence and leadership while patriarchal motherhood refers to the modern system where men control the rules of motherhood. Thirdly, it clarified feminist demands. It argued, even though patriarchy assigns childrearing to women, it has stripped them of authority over important matters, childbirth and childraising (Rich, 1976). Rich, in her seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), strongly opposed the essentialist approach that patriarchal motherhood is natural or necessary. Rich draws attention to how motherhood is shaped by medical, legal, and political systems that devalue women. Many feminist scholars challenged mainstream historical narratives by mentioning that female-centered, mother-led societies (matriarchies) prevailed in ancient times. Stone examined that the decline of women's status, was a consequence of military conquest by invaders who enforced patriarchal, patrilineal societies, which replaced earlier female-led systems with male-dominated religious and political structures (Stone, 1976).

Baldwin (2021) undertook a detailed qualitative study on particular group of mothers, imprisoned mothers. Baldwin embarked on a thorough research on post released, forty three criminalised

mothers, through one-on-one interviews and letters. Baldwin's research expanded the matricentric feminist discourse by including criminalised mothers and addressing their distinctive concerns and needs and this research advocated for change in the prison systems to help mothers in sustaining their maternal status and identity. Baldwin explored the challenges and emotional toll that afflicted mothers while being separated from the children for several years. She also explored that the trauma that criminalised mothers face is a generational one, that it impacts the children and even grandchildren of the criminalised mothers as their identity gets stigmatized that they are criminals and so must be their children. Baldwin demands more empathetic prison systems for mothers that can help imprisoned mothers and minimize the pain of separation between mothers and children. She also advocates for better support for mothers even after imprisonment.

Esnard (2019) explores the matricentric domain by focusing on the Caribbean black mothers. Esnard explains that the issues of racism and colonialism marginalise black people and a lot of research has been done addressing this issue, but the reality marginalization of black mothers and their particular issues and challenges remained unexplored and unaddressed. Esnard explains that by addressing the concerns of black mothers, we can expand the epistemological and ontological frameworks of matricentric discourse by advocating for more policies and support systems for black mothers. Esnard's views align with O'Reilly's theoretical ideas of matricentric feminism that it is an inclusive framework that includes mothers from all cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds and endorses diverse styles of mothering to empower mothers and invigorate the motherhood stratum.

Lee (2016) explores the similar matricentric concerns in her novel *The Expatriates* (2016). She addresses the heart-breaking story of a woman, Margaret Reade who loses her maternal status and identity with the loss of one of her children but the loss of only one child confiscates her maternal status labelling her as a bad mother, like Milchman's character Julie. Lee explains that even the mothers of upper class are vulnerable to the oppression of motherhood institution rooted in patriarchal norms. Lee conscientiously demonstrates how the patriarchal world only blames her for the loss, revealing that the blame policy is always aimed at the mothers. She portrays the agonizing journey of a mother trying to handle loss and regain her identity. Lee also addressed the matricentric notion that mothering is not a natural instinct limited to biological mothers, represented through another character, Hilary Starr, who faced some fertility issues, adopts a child after facing adverse challenges she gains the maternal status.

3. Research Methodology

The research employs qualitative methodology, particularly a close textual analysis to investigate the matricentric concerns and struggles of protagonist Julie in Milchman's *The Second Mother* (2020). This approach facilitates the examination of how the text presents the perilous journey of a mother, reclaiming her maternal identity and liberating herself out of the emotional torments and shackles of the oppressive institution of motherhood. Thematic analysis and close reading of selected passages highlights that patriarchy impedes the empowering practice of mothering. The research is grounded in Andrea O'Reilly's theory of Matricentric Feminism. This theoretical lens is implemented to critically analyse the challenges and trauma of childless mothers, especially Julie in the patriarchal world.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Matricentric Feminism is a philosophical and critical approach developed by Andrea O'Reilly in her book, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice* in which she coined the term

“matricentric feminism”. O’Reilly proposes that Matricentric Feminism is an unfinished business of feminism. (O’Reilly, 2019). She explains,

Matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers’ needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women’s empowerment. This repositioning is not to suggest that matricentric feminism should replace traditional feminist thought; rather, it is to emphasize that the category of mothers is distinct from the category of women and that most of problems mothers’ face – social, economic, political, cultural, Psychological and so forth are specific to women’s roles and identity as mothers. (O’Reilly 2019)

She argued that mothers have been side-lined in all the feminist studies. She explains that like women of different ethnicities, colours and races needed separate domain for addressing their distinct issues and needs, similarly mothers are different entities altogether from other women so they must have separate room for their issues, concerns and needs out the entire feminist discourse. She aims to empower mothers by placing them at the centre of the feminist discourse. O’Reilly addresses unique concerns and needs of mothers. She claims that the issue of mothers are widely distinct from the other women. Following the legacy of Adrienne Rich’s maternal ideas and studies, O’Reilly immensely contributed to the maternal studies through her significant act of redefining the dichotomous terms, motherhood and mothering, which were fallaciously considered synonymous in all previous maternal studies. She explains that motherhood is a socially constructed institution in the patriarchal world that oppresses mothers by confirming to the pedagogical myth of Essentialism and the notion of good mothers’ ideology while mothering is a diverse practice and phenomenon that empowers mothers by creating space for all styles of mothering unquestionably. O’Reilly also redefined the term, “mothers”, as she says, “When I use the term “mothers”, I refer to the individuals who engage in motherwork, as Sara Ruddick theories maternal practice. Such a term is not limited to biological mothers but to anyone who does the work of mothering as a central part of their life.” (O’Reilly, 2019). O’Reilly even gave space to all unorthodox experiences of mothering, majorly the inclusion of childless mothers and the women facing fertility issues, she advocated for them to be the substantial candidates of being mothers because mothering is not a natural instinct only limited to biological mothers, but any women who can feel like mothering, should be recognised as a mother. She also included maternal perspectives of mothers from different cultures, ethnicities, races and colour employing their own unique style of mothering. O’Reilly mainly focused on the community activism and research related to motherhood studies. She advocated respectful status for working mothers. She advocated for more salary and policies to support and empower working mothers.

By employing the lens of Matricentric Feminism, a mother’s journey of reclaiming her maternal identity has been analysed in this research work. The novel, *The Second Mother* by Jenny Milchman is an accurate execution of O’Reilly’s matricentric ideas. Milchman presented a robust character of a mother, Julie, who rebuilds her maternal identity and status after losing her infant daughter, Hedley. Her journey portrays various challenges that childless mothers often tolerate. O’Reilly comprehensively explains all the fundamental principles of Matricentric Feminism in her book and she aspires to develop maternal theory and motherhood studies as a certified and autonomous scholarly discipline and hopes for expanding the field and devising a more robust definition of Matricentric Feminism. (O’Reilly, 2019).

4. Discussion and Analysis

This work analyzes the reclamation of maternal identity of Julie Weathers, the protagonist of Milchman's novel, *The Second Mother*. The study explores the aspect of reclamation of identity that substantially aligns with O'Reilly's theoretical ideas of motherhood and mothering. The novel intricately portrays the journey of a mother who regains her status of being a mother after losing her infant daughter, Hedley. Julie is married to David and they live in Wedeskyull. It's been a year that the traumatic tragedy of her daughter's death occurred. Julie endured insurmountable pain that affected all her life activities and she secluded herself from the entire world in her house. Milchman explains the pervasiveness of her trauma that, "as of five days ago it had been exactly a year, which meant that Julie had already lived this date, another July 28, without Hedley. Each day in which her daughter didn't taken part was a new ordeal to be gotten through, a fresh cut in Julie's skin. (Milchman, 2020, p.14). Julie was a teacher by profession before her marriage but she left the job after her daughter who became the centre of her life, the centre of her entire attention.

4.1 Julie's unfathomable agony of being a Childless Mother

The novel *The Second Mother* gives an intricately detailed explanation of the insurmountable pain and trauma that a childless mother goes through, represented through Julie. Milchman diligently carved all the details explaining how a mother's every aspect of existence gets stigmatized and traumatized after losing a child, how her entire universe collapses. Julie's character After Hedley, spending an excruciatingly painful year, Julie decided to start teaching again and she searches for teaching job, because for Julie teaching was not just a profession for financial gain because her original motivation for this career was being close to children for she had natural instincts of caring, nurturing and protecting even before becoming a mother as O'Reilly also argues that mothering is a practice that is not limited biological mothers. Julie herself describes, "I saw my students struggle to connect and I struggled to assist them. I would not find it hard now. I am prepared to help a new crop of children forgetting connections, not only with their peers, but within themselves." (Milchman, 2020, p.35). Julie undertakes teaching as a golden chance to reconstruct her identity to regain her maternal status. Julie opens bookmarked tab for Opportunity.com and fills job application form online. The job form again reminds her of the loss that shattered her maternal identity which represents that how all the activities of her life reminded her of the loss, the loss that disoriented her entire existence and turned her life into meaningless chaos, as Milchman explains,

She clicked on the first box and typed in her last name. Then came first, middle initial, address, marital status. Married Julie entered. She stumble over the tiny box into which you could enter your number of children-the drop-down went as high as twelve, good Lord—before leaving it blank and moving on. Choosing "0" seemed an erasure too cruel to bear. Were you still a mother when you weren't a mother anymore? What became of the role, the identity, once the child was gone? (Milchman, 2020, p. 24).

The stillness of her life after Hedley can be explained through her feelings of exhaustion that she thinks that after an entire year, after just filling the form online might help her along with the pills to get asleep. The loss of Hedley not just confiscated her status of being a mother but it also severely weakened her marital status and Milchman writes, "She and David had lost the ability to talk in normal tones." (Milchman, 2020, p. 28).

Moving out of the house was a perilous job for Julie since she hasn't ever been out of the house alone even before Hedley, David accompanied her, but in the entire year she didn't ever step out, she just lived under psychological weight of trauma, as its stated in the text,

When had she last been out on her own? After, David was with her. And before it would've been Hedley, tiny in age and size, but huge in terms of the space she took up in Julie's life. Since her daughter's birth, Julie hadn't experienced much in the way of aloneness, had even resented that reality, fighting for hard-won fractions of time like every new mother. Can I just take a shower, finish a cup of tea, or better yet, a night cap without being interrupted by this sudden, all-consuming presence? (Milchman, 2020, p.16).

This comprehensively explains the demands of the job of being a mother that a mother following the Essentialist ideology of the motherhood institution entirely forgets her own existence but she nurtures and cares for her child all the time that she doesn't even get enough time for simplest things. Julie could not cope with this sudden change, abundance of time and loneliness after Hedley to such extent that its haunting effects shattered her identity and her sense of life around her. Julie gathers the strength to leave her house after an entire year to get some stuff from market since she decides to leave Wedeskyull to start her life again to find her lost maternal status and identity. She takes out her Ford, in which she hasn't sit in for over a year; to go out but her car also reminds her of Hedley because all the things in her life carried the never-ending memories of Hedley, "Hedley's car seat that was still belted in back." (Milchman, 2020, p. 16). Julie goes to The Everything Store, that she herself has named it so because it is a kind of super store where one can find all necessities of life. Julie enters the section of babies' stuff like, cloth diapers, tiny onesies miniature sweaters, sock animals, corn-husk dolls, organic teething biscuits and herbal remedies for nursing mothers, all these things hit her memories and loss of Hedley intensifies to such extent that, "Julie spun around, turning her back, but it was too late. Memories began swarming her like wasps. She tried to but them away, fight them off, but failed and dropped to her knees." (Milchman, 2020, p. 20). Upon seeing all the stuff Julie's eyes blurred and the squares of white cotton diapers fell in pile on her lap and she leans down to smell the heap which might help in slightly healing her lost senses and suddenly a pregnant woman with a large belly approaches Julie to help her when Julie looks up at the pregnant woman, her trauma turns into highest fit of anger and she tries to harm the pregnant woman by throwing a ball of cloth on her belly, as described in the text,

Julie bunched up the white drift of cloth in her hands, squeezing it tighter and tighter. It was like a ball, an object that could be thrown. Thrown at this horrible person with her immense belly, and her innocent, concerned face, just trying to help because she hadn't yet learned that there were some situations that could never, ever be helped. (Milchman, 2020, p. 20).

This creates a chaotic scene and Tim Lurcquer, Julie's friend and a police officer, arrives at the store and politely takes Julie from the store and drives her back to her house. Tim tries to pacify and motivate Julie to move ahead in life by explaining her that Hedley's death was not her fault as he says, "It's not the loss that kills you. It's the guilt. I see it all the time on the job. Guilt makes it so there are at least two deaths for everyone. But I can't imagine less reason for guilt than you have, Jules. There was just nothing you did wrong. Not one goddamned thing." (Milchman, 2020, p. 22). His words felt her like an unrecognisable hope because no one else, not even David ever consoled her in such empathetic manners since she lost Hedley. She comes back to house with a firm decision to leave Wedeskyull and move to the Mercy Island. Upon her return, David harshness and his decision to divorce her shattered her life and eliminated all the reasons to stay in

Wedeskyull. David's words again align with the matricentric thoughts as he says, "Whereas what I really want is a permanent change. David went on. I don't want to be married anymore. Did you know that the loss of a child ends marriages in five out of ten cases." (Milchman, 2020, p. 33). This evidently explains that mothers in most cases bear grave consequences of losing a child than men, mostly for men it is easier to move out of the pain of loss and in many cases the loss of child not just strips off a mother of her maternal status but even her marital status as well. The shedding of maternal and marital status adversely impacts a woman's identity making it back-breaking for a woman to survive in patriarchal world. Julie tells David about her job and that she has informed them that she is married but David cruelly taunts her by saying, "Who would want such a person to teach their children". (Milchman, 2020, p. 49). This evidently explains the psyche of patriarchal institution of motherhood that confiscates the identity of a childless mother, blaming her and labelling her as unworthy of ever being a mother again. It also portrays that how the patriarchal world isolates a mother in the world to cope with the pangs of losing a child. In few days, after David informs Julie of his decision of divorce, she gets call from the school informing her about her selection and interview date and ultimately Julie moves to the Mercy Island along with her packed stuff, her lovely loyal dog, Depot and obviously Hedley's last photograph because, "The last photograph ever taken of Hedley was something Julie couldn't imagine ever living without." (Milchman, 2020, p. 85)

4.2 Julie's Journey of Reclaiming Maternal Identity

Julie finally arrives in the strangest Mercy Island and the island coldly welcomes her with its eerie atmosphere and weird happenings. Julie starts living alone in an apartment given to her by the school administration. Julie meets Ellie Newcomb, a woman who was appointed to give Julie a tour of the Island. Julie develops a friendly bond with her. She warns her about the Hempstead family who absolutely rules the entire island and mysteriously overpower the personal lives of all the inhabitants. Ellie explains to her that, "This is a small fiefdom, but the Hempsteads rule over it, like feudal lords, and Mrs. Hempstead holds the real power of the clan. They are the wealthiest family on island, they've kept that richness here on Mercy." (Milchman, 2020, p. 321)

Ellie is later revealed to be very mentally disturbed alcoholic person due to Maryanne Hempstead's oppression. Julie also meets Callum, a man with whom she develops a romantic bond but still it doesn't heal her trauma, it's through an eleven-year-old boy Peter Meyers through whom Julie heals her past trauma. When Julie starts to live at Mercy Island, even before starting the school Julie meets Peter, when an unknown distressed woman appears suddenly at her apartment and asks Julie about her son. She tells Julie that her son is an eleven years old boy who has no friends. Julie, Ellie and Peter's mother, Martha search him around and ultimately spot him standing on the dangerous edge of the roof of Julie's house. Julie suggests Martha that instead of ordering Peter sternly to step back she must make him feel confident to do things. She says, "An eleven-year-old needs to feel like he can do adult things. Acting worried about his safety and giving Peter an order will accomplish the exact opposite." (Milchman, 2020, p. 119). Her plan successfully executes and Peter handling a child in her own way other than Martha's rigid orders. She makes Peter befriend her dog, Depot. In the moment of magic Peter feels happy with Depot but Martha thrust him away and Julie notices Peter's hesitant and fearful attitude upon hearing, "Time to go home." (Milchman, 2020, p. 123). Julie upon sensing her disturbed attitude later when she finds Peter standing late at night inside her apartment, she asks him whether he would like to go on a walk with her, while walking Julie makes up her mind to help Peter in healing his disturbed state, she thinks, "You don't

mind, Lilypad, do you? Julie whispered to the photo. I think he might need me.” (Milchman, 2020, p. 140). During walk Peter asks Julie about Hedley’s photograph and she forwarded the first time tells someone about her daughter and it doesn’t feel shattering because she felt it right to share with Peter, because she wanted Peter to know that she trusts her and he can also trust him and share anything with her. When she drops him back at his grandparent’s house which is near to Julie’s apartment, Julie feels the cold attitude of Peter’s grandmother towards Peter. The school begins and Julie on the very first day feels herself complete around all the children. “She felt like she was home again, in a body and a life of her own. She felt the feeling of completeness settle over her then started to count.” (Milchman, 2020, p. 203). During classes Martha observes Peter’s behaviour and she feels that she must discuss it with her mother, Martha. Julie visits Martha at her home to discuss regarding Peter’s disturbed state and she asks her, “Not a fan of the free-range kid movement? I would’ve thought island kids tended to roam.” (Milchman, 2020, p. 221). She explains that Marta wants to pull him back wants to push her overly protective and rigid attitude like other tweens but she harshly replies,

It’s a mother’s job to look after the child. Martha sounded like she was parroting a 1950s parenting manual. I’m sure most of our children do wander...Just look at the Cowry boy. Attending a gathering where he was clearly unwelcome without his parents’ supervision. But my mother taught me to keep a closer eye. (Milchman, 2020, p. 222).

She then asks Julie to come inside her house. Julie feels it weird that Martha’s colourful house contrasts her rigid and stern personality and Julie gets worried upon seeing white and grey room of Peter and she asks Martha that whether it was Peter’s choice but she tells her that the paint got finished so she decided to let it be white and grey, and this makes her feel as if Martha’s controlling nature hides something else. Julie gradually gets to know that Peter’s father had died and the apartment in which Julie lives his was his parents house and that’s why Peter felt an emotional bond with the apartment so he used to visit it especially at night. Julie develops an emotional bond with Peter gradually especially when one day at school, Julie finds the ailing bird that she kept in cage and used to take care of it, missing and she feels as if Peter killed the bird but he tells her that he actually released it as he felt that he doesn’t belong here and then she sees Peter angrily and emotionally charged, tearing the papers that he might have written himself, expressing his inner feelings, in a violent manner that he gets painful paper bruises. Julie, feeling his pain, her natural instincts arouse and she tries to stop him and she herself also being so emotionally charged, caresses him like her own child. The author very beautifully described the scene of meeting of two emotionally broken vulnerable souls, a union of a childless mother and a disturbed child without motherly love, care and attention, empowering each other, healing their pain through each other, as the writer describes, “Julie reached out, wrapping her arms around Peter’s biting, clawing, flailing body from behind, a hug of restraint and shared desperation, until finally he began to still, and the remaining riot of paper settled over the two of them like a shroud.” (Milchman, 2020, p. 260).

Julie engages Peter in a play, helping him discover himself for the first time he independently chooses to play the character of Rapunzel in the play and his acts garner him a lot of praises from his fellows and Julie. Peter’s grandmother intervenes and firmly refutes his participation in the play. Julie visits his grandmother and tries to convince her but she denies her explanations by saying that she believes that such activities like play distract children from fulfilling their dynastic obligations to their roots and she tells her that Peter has to start lobstering business like his father

but Julie asks her that decisions should not be imposed upon children but the grandmother mocks Julie by saying that has she decided to built a theater for children but she says, “My goal is to help the island children discover themselves, who they really are, as they learn. Sometimes it’s easiest to engage kids by speaking their language, appealing to updated tastes.” (Milchman, 2020, p. 283). Julie than devises a plan and she contacts with the old teacher of the school and other people to gather information regarding Hempstead family and Peter and she gets to know about Martha’s sister Melinda and her husband, Bobby Croft who live far away from Mercy Island and she plans to meet her to delve deep into the mysteries of Hempstead family to help Peter. Upon her visit to them, it is revealed to Julie that Melinda and Bobby are Peter’s biological parents and they had a love affair in adulthood and had Peter before marriage and this infuriated Maryanne Hempstead and she took Peter from them and compelled them to sign off their parental rights and they didn’t react against her because they were helpless as Maryanne blackmailed them. She took Peter from them and gave him to her elder daughter, Martha who was struggling with fertility issues and that’s why Martha never treated Peter as her own child and Peter was emotionally disturbed due to lack of parental love and care. Julie ultimately plans to let Peter meet his real parents at any cost. On the day of final execution of the play in school, she plans with Callum and Depot to secretly take Peter away with them. After a lot deadly hurdles, grandmother’s attempt to kill Julie and halt Julie and Peter’s way but finally she gets arrested. Julie successfully unites Peter with Melinda and Bobby. Julie gets emotional upon thinking about leaving Peter. Her dog, Depot and Callum also arrive after a lot of hurdles. Callum and Julie unite. Peter meets Depot and Julie overhears Peter while talking to Depot. He tells Depot that, “My whole life for me... I had another mother. I had a second mother the whole time.” (Milchman, 2020, p. 437). This exquisitely portrays that Julie finally regained her maternal status as Peter calls her, the second mother, which depicts Milchman’s and O’Reilly’s matricentric thoughts that the term mother is not limited to biological mothers and that mothering is a diverse and inclusive phenomenon or practice that includes and gives space to various styles of mothering that empower mothers and reinvigorates the motherhood stratum, like Julie’s unique style of mothering Peter silently while helping him in discovering himself, by taking decisions of his life and by protecting him from the oppressive shackles of motherhood displayed by Martha’s rigid attitude towards Peter.

5. Conclusion

This research successfully explores the author depiction of journey of a mother, Julie who reclaims her maternal identity after loosing her infant daughter, Hedley through her emotional attachment with an eleven years old boy, Peter, without parental love. The research also examines how vulnerability played significant role in empowering both a childless mother, Julie and disturbed boy, Peter. This study analyses the difference between two dichotomous terms motherhood and mothering by explaining how the pedagogy of motherhood institution always marginalises mothers, like David’s act of divorcing Julie and secluding her in the midst of her traumatic state while going through insurmountable pain of loosing her maternal status and identity while her unique and diverse style of mothering Peter by empowering him in developing to discover himself by freeing him from the shackles of oppressive motherhood institution represented through Maryanne Hempstead and Martha. This research majorly focuses on invigorating the motherhood stratum by claiming space for childless mothers and by spreading hope of healing for the mothers who had lost their children. This research very intricately yet vigorously addresses the matricentric concerns of mothers.

Recommendations

This novel can be examined through theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and trauma theory, through which the trauma and pain of a mother losing her child can be analysed. This research can be also be scrutinized by applying the Marxist perspective on the same literary work, through which it can be explored how the Hempstead family of the Mercy Island exploit and overpower even the personal lives of the inhabitants of the island. This novel is academically significant as it can also be explored through a lot more theoretical frameworks, mainly through Foucault's theory of Power and Knowledge by examining how the Hempstead family, especially the grandmother, Maryanne Hempstead overpowers the teaching practices of Julie and how she refutes her idea of co-curricular activities like performance of play and the way she restrains Peter from playing the character of Rapunzel, a girl. This research can be widely expanded in future by examining the intersections of race, class and culture in motherhood studies

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