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Author(s): Cheryl Walker

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# Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa<sup>1</sup>

CHERRYL WALKER

(University of Natal, Durban)

*This article attempts to move the debate around the political significance of motherhood beyond the two dominant themes in the literature, that of 'collusion with patriarchy' and 'difference' in black and white women's constructions of motherhood. The first privileges political discourse over an examination of women's own practice and social identity as mothers, while the second ignores historical evidence for overlapping meanings and common cultural influences among black and white women in the twentieth century. Motherhood cannot be reduced simply to a role imposed on women by men. While the proponents of 'difference' recognise this, they tend to apply this insight to black women only and to assume that black and white women have operated within quite separate and pure cultural domains. A more useful analysis of the significance of motherhood requires greater definitional complexity and more attention to history, which this article begins to do. While the values of peace and nurturing associated with motherhood may be historically and culturally specific, this does not negate their appeal to South African women and hence their political relevance.*

Motherhood has been a central theme of women's political organisation in South Africa during the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> A quick reading of the documentary material on two organisations as diverse as the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU) and the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) suggests a remarkable congruence of attitudes concerning the social and political identity of women as mothers, despite the very different constituencies, political agendas and historical contexts of these organisations. For instance, a 1912 pamphlet of the Women's Enfranchisement League of Cape Town (an affiliate of the WEAU) argued:

There are many who cannot realise her [woman's] position in its dual capacity of homemaker and of citizen, and who believe that in trying to fulfil both duties she must fail in one. Yet it

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- 1 This article is based on a paper I presented at the African Studies Association 36th Annual Meeting, Boston, 4–7 December 1993. The support of the Centre for Science Development and the University of Natal University Research Fund is gratefully acknowledged.
  - 2 See, *inter alia*, E. Brink, 'Man-Made Women: Gender, Class and the Ideology of the *Volksmoeder*', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, London, 1990), pp. 273–292; S. Hassim, 'Black Women in Political Organisations: A Case Study of the Inkatha Women's Brigade, 1976 to the Present' (MA thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1990); D. Lewis, 'Theorising about Gender in South Africa' (African Association of Political Science/Southern African Political Science Series Conference on 'South Africa: Which Way Forward', Cape Town, 1992); J. Schreiner, 'Women Working for Their Freedom: FCWU and AFCWU and the Woman Question' (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986); C. Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1982 and Cape Town, 1991); C. Walker, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement: The Politics of Gender, Race and Class', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa*, pp. 313–345; J. Wells, 'The History of Black Women's Struggle against Pass Laws in South Africa' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1982); J. Wells, 'The Rise and Fall of Motherism as a Force in Black Women's Resistance Movements' (Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, University of Natal, Durban, 1991).

is through the sacredness of her calling in the home and the strong maternal instincts born in every true woman that we shall find the more she rises to the full development of her nature, the better will she take her position in the destinies of the world and the country of which she is part.<sup>3</sup>

Some 80 years later, Gertrude Shope, president of the ANCWL, argued:

Women bring life to this world and they have a duty to make sure that this life is preserved and protected. There is a need for us to come together regardless of our colour to look at the situation in the country and respond as women and mothers.<sup>4</sup>

Both speakers assume that motherhood lies at the core of women's identity, shaping their political choices. More noteworthy, there is also a degree of agreement on the content – the work and the responsibilities – of motherhood: it is to nurture, to preserve and to protect. Women are mothers, are life-givers. Where significant differences do emerge is in the political application of this universalist vision, which is not evident in the rhetoric. Whereas for the WEAU the universal mother was in fact quite unselfconsciously the white mother,<sup>5</sup> for the ANCWL women's common identity as mothers gives them, as a group, a specific moral agenda and a unifying set of concerns that could (or should) transcend other divisions, in particular, those of colour.

In a society wracked by division and violence, this is an appealing vision. But how substantive is it? Could or would 'the violence' abate if women were more centrally involved in political struggles? And is it possible to speak of motherhood as providing a unifying – and emancipatory – political identity for women? We know how deeply divided South African women have been historically. But, the specifics of the South African situation aside, is it in any case valid to construct a notion of an overarching 'motherhood' encompassing all mothers? Should not the appeal to motherhood as providing a common identity for all women be seen, rather, as evidence of misguided sentimentality, or false (patriarchal) consciousness, or political opportunism – and my own linking of the two statements at the start of this article itself a product of a false universalising? Alternatively, are the two polar extremes – the universalist and the particularist constructions of motherhood – the only possible formulations, or might it be possible to construct a more multi-dimensional account, one which takes seriously the claims of a unifying, nurturing motherhood, as an historically specific *and* historically influential ideal, while acknowledging the workings of 'difference' in the interpretations that mothers themselves make of their experiences?

This article begins to explore these questions, firstly, through a review of some of the recent literature engaging with 'the politics of motherhood', and secondly, by attempting to define and historicise 'motherhood' in twentieth century South Africa more carefully than has been done to date. I argue that while we do need to take the arguments of anti-essentialism and difference seriously, the *historical* construction of women and of motherhood in South Africa in the twentieth century has cut across rigidly racialised cultural boundaries. At the same time, while particular, limited constructions of 'motherhood' have been appropriated within various patriarchal discourses, these discourses should not themselves be seen as definitive of women's actual identities and experiences. It needs to be stressed, however, that I am at the very beginning of a research project, with more

3 Women's Enfranchisement League, 'Our Claim for Enfranchisement' (Cape Town, 1912) (in the South African Library, Cape Town).

4 Gertrude Shope, ANCWL President, April 1991, quoted in S. Hassim, 'Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics in South Africa', p. 65, *Transformation*, 15 (1991), pp. 65–82.

5 See C. Walker, *The Woman's Suffrage Movement in South Africa* (Communications 2, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1979) and 'The Women's Suffrage Movement: The Politics of Gender, Race and Class'.

questions than firmly grounded answers. Simply to define and periodise motherhood in South Africa requires a great deal more research than I have undertaken to date. In this article I am risking still tentative ideas. Hopefully, this will provoke further discussion and refinement or reassessment of the broad claims of my argument.

## Debates and Perspectives on Motherhood

Until recently, most political analysts and social observers in South Africa would probably not have found the juxtaposition of quotations with which I start this paper sufficiently provocative to warrant comment. Sociologists and social historians have tended to accept as a given, as natural and/or normal, women's social and self-definition as mothers, without feeling compelled to probe their own, culture-bound assumptions about the content and meaning of this dense identity-cum-occupation. Certainly, I would regard my earlier work in this light – motherhood was used to explain women's behaviour, it was not something that itself needed explaining.<sup>6</sup>

In the last two decades, however, feminist theory has succeeded in problematising 'motherhood', and some of those theoretical debates are beginning to engage researchers and political activists here. The international debate has exposed shortcomings in common-sense views of motherhood(s) as 'naturally' the role of women, but there is no consensus on how to conceptualise and theorise this now controversial but seemingly intractable institution. (The attempt to theorise 'the mother' involves more than intellectual energy – it also involves an engagement with one's own intimate experiences of being mothered and, in many cases, of mothering.) White, western feminists have oscillated along a spectrum that stretches between attacks on motherhood as a patriarchal construct and affirmations of it as a valuable identity and responsibility that must be defended against male control and masculinist values. Black and third-world feminists have sharply criticised what they regard as the ethnocentrism of much of this debate while, most recently, post-modern social theory has subjected the unitary concept of motherhood to a radical deconstruction.<sup>7</sup>

In South Africa this debate is still fairly muted, but there are indications of growing interest in the issue, spurred in part by the larger political opportunities that have opened up for women since February 1990. However, the growing respectability of the study of women and gender has also seen a fierce challenge by black women to white researchers, to reflect more critically on their ethnocentric assumptions about gender relations and identity, as well as to confront their privilege within academia; these concerns can be seen as a sub-text running through much of the debate on motherhood.

In what follows, and at the risk of being overly schematic for the sake of my argument, I am identifying two dominant themes in the literature on motherhood, around which a number of important articles can be grouped:

- (1) what may be termed the 'collusion with patriarchy' theme, and
- (2) what I am labelling the 'difference' theme.

While these are not mutually exclusive approaches, in practice they have tended to operate separately in the literature.

Although there is clearly some echo of the divergent approaches of the international literature in this characterisation, the local treatment of both themes is embedded in very

6 C. Walker, 'The Woman's Suffrage Movement in South Africa'; *Women and Resistance in South Africa*.

7 See, *inter alia*, H. Moroney, 'Embracing Motherhood: New Feminist Theory', in R. Hamilton and M. Barrett (eds), *The Politics of Diversity. Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (London, 1986), pp. 398–423 and E. A. Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation. The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London, 1992) for overviews.

specific preoccupations, in particular, the struggle by blacks against apartheid and white supremacy. The context in which motherhood has most often been discussed, the aspect which continues to hold the most interest for researchers, has been its expression in political organisation and campaigns, rather than the day-to-day experiences of mothers. Thus the theoretical debates have been grounded mainly in discussions of political campaigns or organisations: notably, the anti-pass campaigns of the early twentieth century and the 1950s, Afrikaner and African nationalism, women's trade union organisation, and contemporary political mobilisation, within the ANC and Inkatha in particular.<sup>8</sup>

Of the two perspectives, the theme of colluding with patriarchy has been the more dominant to date. It links together those analyses which regard women's endorsement of motherhood in and through various political organisations as evidence of a deep-seated conservatism, at least in relation to gender roles. While certainly influenced by feminist critiques of compulsory motherhood and critical of biologicistic analyses of women's subordination to men, this literature is also revisionist in its attempt to rein in the romanticism which gallops through so much of the historical and political analyses of the 1970s and 1980s on (black) women's resistance to oppression.

Perhaps the clearest exposition of this approach is Wells's 1991 paper, 'The rise and fall of motherism as a force in black women's resistance movements.' Referring specifically to the women's anti-pass campaign of the 1950s, which she characterises as a 'motherist' movement, Wells argues:

Motherism is clearly not feminism. Women swept up in motherist movements are not fighting for their own rights as women, but for their rights as mothers.... Motherist movements must be recognised as limited in scope, duration and success in achieving their goals.<sup>9</sup>

Women's rights are distinguished from mother's rights, with only the former being the legitimate object of feminism. In similar vein, I have criticised the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) for failing to make this distinction:

Even amongst the FSAW leadership, where women's rights and the abolition of sex discrimination were strongly endorsed, women's domestic role as wife and, more often, mother was continually being stressed.<sup>10</sup>

Within this framework, the failure of progressive political organisations to distinguish between 'women' and 'mothers' is seen as particularly regressive, with the emphasis on motherhood characterised as a patriarchal ploy to limit and control women. Thus, in their critique of the papers presented at the *Malibongwe* conference in Amsterdam in January 1990, Charman *et al.* note:

Throughout the Malibongwe Papers women are defined within the mould of patriarchal roles, namely as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters.<sup>11</sup>

Here mothers and the very different social and familial roles and identities of wives, daughters and sisters are all lumped together into the single category of 'patriarchal roles'.

8 See, for instance, I Berger, *Threads of Solidarity. Women in South African Industry* (Bloomington, 1992); E. Brink, 'Man-Made Women'; D. Gaitskell and E. Unterhalter 'Mother of the Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Nation, Race and Motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress' in N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias (eds), *Woman-Nation-State* (London, 1989), pp. 58–78; S. Hassim, 'Black Women in Political Organisations' and 'Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics'; D. Posel, 'Women's Power, Men's Authority: Rethinking Feminism' (Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, University of Natal, Durban, 1991); J. Schreiner, 'Women Working for their Freedom'; C. Walker, *Women and Resistance*; J. Wells, 'The History of Black Women's Struggle' and 'The Rise and Fall of Motherism'.

9 'Rise and Fall of Motherism', pp. 4–5.

10 *Women and Resistance*, p. 264.

11 A. Charman, C. de Swardt and M. Simons, 'The Politics of Gender: Negotiating Liberation', p. 45, *Transformation*, 15 (1991), pp. 40–64.

Recently some analysts have begun to ask why women should identify with motherhood (as, everyone agrees, most clearly do), particularly if this is characterised as not in their own best interests. Campbell and Posel have both argued that motherhood may empower women, but that this empowerment still takes place within the overriding confines of patriarchal authority and is thus of limited value as a basis for challenging gender oppression. Thus Posel, in her analysis of the extent and limits of women's power within a world dominated by male authority, reproduces the view of motherhood as a patriarchal construct. Again using the 1950s anti-pass campaign as her example, she argues:

Increasingly, women usurped some of men's legitimate powers (authority) as head of the household. Yet, as has often been pointed out, these powers were depicted and defended as necessary extensions of their roles as *mothers* – in other words, within the discourse of patriarchal relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Campbell describes African mothers, especially older mothers, as 'the pivot of family life' in contemporary townships. However, using 'mother' and 'woman' interchangeably, she argues, in similar vein to Posel, that the power women have within the family should not be exaggerated: 'Women's power within the family falls within the boundaries of male dominance, and does not constitute a serious threat to this dominance'.<sup>13</sup> In building her argument, she focuses on the strength of 'township ideology' that persists in seeing the man/father as the head of the household, even though structural conditions make it increasingly difficult for many families to conform to this ideal:

It appears that the respect and authority a woman is accorded comes to her by virtue of her role as a mother – and falls strictly within the sphere of the household. Men speak admiringly of the role their mothers play in their lives, but the praises of their mothers fall strictly within the boundaries of traditionally defined women's roles. These men appear to be prepared to acknowledge the power of women in a restricted situational and locational sense: women are powerful within the home, and in situations involving the nurturing or protection of other people.... but there is often little respect for women's power outside of this sphere.<sup>14</sup>

She points to the need to understand the complex psychological processes by which women come to accept and internalise an ideology and a practice that is oppressive, but this insight is not carried forward and it is ideology that is given the most weight in her analysis of why women collude with patriarchy, as, indeed, is the case with the other analyses within this body of literature.

The literature clustered around the second theme, that of 'difference' in the experience and construction of motherhood, is less unified in approach. What binds these quite diverse analyses together and distinguishes them from the 'collusion with patriarchy' grouping is that motherhood and patriarchy are not seen as necessarily (in the South African situation) linked. Instead, these authors emphasise 'difference' in the experience, the content and the liberatory potential of different constructions of motherhood. What is interesting, theoretically, is the implicit or explicit endorsement of a more open-ended exploration of the meaning and scope of motherhood, in which the possibility of different ideologies or discourses of motherhood under patriarchy, including emancipatory ones, is allowed or asserted, and a more complex configuration of motherhood, gender identity and political organisation is proposed. The way in which 'difference' is mapped, however, is not as open-ended; instead, 'difference' gets plotted quite strictly along the faultline of 'race', with the more progressive constructions of motherhood being assigned exclusively to black women.

12 Posel, 'Women's Power, Men's Authority', p. 22.

13 C. Campbell, 'The Township Family and Women's Struggles', pp. 5, 7, *Agenda*, 6, pp. 1–22.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Thus Jenny Schreiner, arguing in the mid-1980s from an orthodox marxist position on 'the woman question', praises as 'correct' the emphasis on motherhood and community politics that informed the organisational strategies of the Food and Canning Workers' Union in the 1950s. She argues:

... the manner in which 'motherhood' is acknowledged and provided for is central to the *oppression or emancipation* of women in all aspects of their lives.... I will argue that motherhood is an integral part of the definition of women in all societies, and as such the social organisation of women around this issue in terms of maternity rights, childcare etc is central to the emancipation of women. (Emphasis added)<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the restrictive constitution of motherhood in bourgeois ideology, the Congress Alliance and specifically the Food and Canning Workers' Union in the 1950s constructed a 'positive, forceful definition of motherhood', which was also collective rather than individualist. The emphasis in this definition, according to Schreiner, was not on women as nurturers within the privatised family but 'on women collectively as the mothers of the next generation'.<sup>16</sup>

A second example of this approach, somewhat different in its theoretical underpinnings but similar in its empirical account and broad political sympathies, is that of Gaitskell and Unterhalter, who analyse the conception of motherhood in both Afrikaner and African nationalism. They conclude that any apparent similarity in the treatment of women as 'mothers of the nation' within these two nationalisms is a superficial one: historically, the two formulations have developed very differently. Whereas in the case of Afrikaner nationalism, motherhood has been conceived of as home-centred and an essentially passive activity, within the African National Congress (ANC) motherhood has been conceptualised and mobilised as a militant and active liberatory force – 'a dynamic force for change'.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, eschewing the essentialism implicit in Schreiner's account and drawing on post-modernist and post-colonial writings on subjectivity and eurocentrism, Lewis has delineated an equally stark contrast between 'western' and 'black' concepts of maternity and motherhood. Her argument is complex, since she accepts that black motherhood has been constrained and shaped by patriarchy, but at the same time she insists that women's own understanding of motherhood (as a source of power as women but also as blacks fighting against colonial and racial oppression) must be treated with respect. It is not for white women to define the political goals nor judge the identifications of black women, whose experience they can never fully understand. She criticises Wells's concept of motherism in the following terms:

'Motherism' has been used as a conceptual tool for questioning women's perceived need to assist men in male-centred race and class battles, with critics condemning the evasion of gender in debates on power and struggle in national liberatory rhetoric. However, most critics of the supportive roles of black women are heavily eurocentric and implicitly set up inappropriate goals and strategies for other women. This perpetuates the inadequacies of mainstream feminism: a distinct group is singled out as normative, while other women are believed to have no feasible strategies, standards and agendas of their own. There seems to be little attempt to acknowledge that other women exhibit self-control and self-knowledge in the ways they act, that they are not simply the pawns of men or of patriarchal ideology.<sup>18</sup>

Like Gaitskell and Unterhalter, she also sets up an oppositional discourse of motherhood in South Africa, in this case a broadly 'black' rather than an ANC one, which she presents as

15 Schreiner, 'Women Working for their Freedom', p. 31.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 50.

17 Gaitskell and Unterhalter, 'Mothers of the Nation', p. 75.

18 Lewis, 'Theorising about Gender', p. 6.

independent of the dominant (at the level of social authority) western one. Speaking of women's role within the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s, she argues:

... women's authoritative roles did not automatically challenge the gender hierarchy. Yet it is equally noteworthy that 'motherhood' for black women under BC was very different from the conventions associated with western maternity. As opposed to the authority and active involvement in public affairs that BC associated with motherhood, western middle-class conventions of mothering are underpinned by silence, passivity and women's confinement to the domestic realm.<sup>19</sup>

Later, speaking of black women more generally:

When we turn to women's self-perceptions, it becomes clear that the national liberation movement has defined women with reference to patriarchal ideology as sisters, mothers or wives, and that women's self-perceptions have often been shaped by these constructs. Within these disempowering statuses, however, women often developed new roles of authority and strength. However limited and ambiguous, these identities differ from the conventional passivity and silence of the western, middle-class conceptions of sisterhood, motherhood and wifehood.<sup>20</sup>

The questions raised by these different interpretations are of more than academic interest. There are certainly absorbing theoretical questions about identity, human nature, human agency and socialisation, as well as challenging methodological issues to debate. But there are also very important political questions and applications to consider. Whether motherhood is seen as, at root, a patriarchal or a progressive or potentially or occasionally progressive undertaking will affect how women's political organisations define and implement their agendas and build their constituencies. The extent to which women and mothers are regarded as co-terminous will also affect the extent and nature of political organisations' appeal among women. Hassim has argued that the Inkatha Freedom Party's Women's Brigade has appealed to rural African women precisely because it has worked with their own 'cultural self-definition' as 'mothers and homemakers' – a self-definition that 'is an affirmation of women's strength and solidarity', yet one that has, argues Hassim, been appropriated and manipulated by the Women's Brigade to 'resubordinate' women ideologically.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the important contributions made by the arguments outlined above, I am left with a feeling of dissatisfaction with much of the debate as it has developed thus far. On the one hand, I feel disturbed by the reduction of motherhood to a patriarchal institution and mothering – the relationship between a woman and her children – to a role imposed on women (on me) by men. Linked to this is my concern that the 'collusion with patriarchy' approach is paying too much attention to discourse, in the form of dominant ideologies, and not enough to the multiple and complex meanings mothers themselves attach to their experience, and how these might shape their identities and political behaviour. On the other hand, I reject the starkly polarised dichotomies proposed by Lewis and by Gaitskell and Unterhalter and regard their identification of progressive and oppressive constructs of motherhood according to clearly defined 'racial' markers as both conceptually and historically flawed.

I believe that a more useful analysis of the significance and meaning(s) of motherhood requires (1) greater definitional clarity embedded in (2) a more deeply historicised understanding of motherhood in South Africa. In the following sections I sketch out a

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

21 Hassim, 'Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics', p. 75.

number of elements that I believe need to be taken into account in addressing the definitional and historical issues.

## Towards a Definition of Motherhood

What is striking about the discussion to date is the absence of an explicit definition of motherhood in most if not all the literature. Aspects of motherhood and qualities of mothers, actual and imagined, are described but the concept itself is not subjected to a rigorous interrogation. Despite the commitment to cultural and historical specificity, as well as the scepticism about essentialism, there appears to be a powerful but unexamined assumption at work, that motherhood is so familiar an institution and experience that it does not need rigorous definition. This is itself revealing about the enormously powerful normative authority of the term – and the implicit universalism towards which our common-sense understandings and experiences of motherhood so readily propel us, despite our most earnest theoretical scruples.

The term ‘motherhood’ is in fact a multi-layered one, with a number of different referents. A weakness in the South African literature is that analysts slide between the layers without always being clear about the shifts they are making. Here I want to develop the argument that ‘motherhood’ embraces at least three different terrains, which may be inter-related but nevertheless need to be separated out for analytical purposes. The first two have recently been highlighted by Kaplan,<sup>22</sup> who stresses the distinction between (1) mothering work – the practice of motherhood, and (2) the discourse of motherhood, embracing the norms, values and ideas about ‘the Good Mother’ that operate in any one society or sub-group. To these two elements I wish to add a third dimension: motherhood as a social identity, with ‘social identity’ being understood in Tajfel’s sense as ‘consisting of those aspects of ... [the individual’s] self-image, positively or negatively valued, which derive from his (*sic.*) membership of various social groups to which he belongs.’<sup>23</sup>

These three dimensions of motherhood are, of course, located in particular (historical) social formations, with particular family systems and productive systems, which also impact on their content, power and meaning. In the South African context they are embedded in a particular system of gender relations, in which women as mothers but also as workers, citizens and political activists are devalued and subordinated in relation to men.

### *Practice*

With regard to the practice of mothering, Moroney has pointed out that motherhood embraces both the ‘apparently pre-social reality’ of procreation and childbirth and ‘its political and historical institutionalisation’ within specific – and diverse – social and cultural formations.<sup>24</sup> The work of mothering embraces a number of different activities, not all of which need be present in any one configuration. Major elements are:– the act of childbirth (yet biological motherhood may not necessarily lead to social motherhood, nor is social motherhood strictly dependent on biological motherhood);

- physical care;
- emotional care and involvement (nurturing, loving – i.e. not simply caring for in the sense of looking after, but caring about the child);

22 Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*.

23 H. Tajfel, ‘Intergroup Behaviour: II Group Perspectives’, in H. Tajfel and C. Fraser (eds), *Introducing Social Psychology* (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 443.

24 Moroney, ‘Embracing Motherhood’, p. 398.

– socialisation, the transmission of the particular society's or sub-group's values, including those to do with gender and kinship relations. The practice of mothering, as Chodorow amongst others has argued, has a profound effect on the gender identities of children, informing not only their conscious choices but also their deepest psychological drives.<sup>25</sup>

It is possible, depending on the society or sub-group within a society, for a 'mother' to be primarily responsible for all or only some of the above tasks. (Even childbirth, as noted, is not mandatory in order to become accepted as a 'mother'.) Thus, in South Africa, physical care of the children is often not the sole or primary responsibility of the mother, but is delegated – for instance, in the case of many middle-class women, to a domestic worker or nanny, or, in the case of many working-class women, to other family members, such as grandmothers or older female siblings.

### *Discourse*

The discourse of motherhood embraces not only ideas about 'the Good Mother', but is also bound up with ideas about womanhood and female gender identity as well as childhood and the nature/needs of children. It informs and orders the practice, but is not, analytically, the same as the practice, as the above example of childcare illustrates: arguably, the dominant discourse of motherhood today, at least for white and middle-class women, still defines 'the Good Mother' as someone who does care physically (as well as emotionally) for her children. On the other hand, the discourse of motherhood in many black, working-class communities may not emphasise women's involvement in the day-to-day care of their children as much as their responsibilities for financial support and discipline. The content of, as well as the degree of overlap or conflict between practice and discourse becomes, then, a matter for historical investigation.

It is also important to note that at any one time there may be a number of different, overlapping or quite separate discourses operating alongside the dominant discourse, including oppositional and marginal ones which may be more or less successful in resisting the dominant construct. Both Gaitskell and Unterhalter and Lewis make this point.<sup>26</sup> An example can be found in Gaitskell's earlier account of the resistance by Christian African mothers at the turn of the century to church urgings that they assume responsibility for their daughters' sexual behaviour. This was not part of the 'traditional' responsibilities of African motherhood, and was strongly opposed by the church women – so that while they endorsed much of the Christian discourse of motherhood, they nevertheless did not accept all of its strictures, in this case drawing on an alternative discourse of 'tradition' to legitimate their practice.<sup>27</sup>

In South Africa most research on motherhood has in fact focused on the workings of discourse, with the implicit assumption that an analysis of the discourse of motherhood (dominant or otherwise) constitutes an analysis of motherhood. Motherhood as practice and as social identity have been neglected and this, I argue, has limited the analysis. Furthermore, as already noted, it has been the discourse of political organisations and their deployment of 'motherhood' for political goals which has been most privileged (although Gaitskell's work is important in directing attention to motherhood in church organisations<sup>28</sup>). Yet political organisations' construction of the permissible scope and content of

25 N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, 1978).

26 Gaitskell and Unterhalter, 'Mothers of the Nation'; Lewis, 'Theorising about Gender'.

27 D. Gaitskell, 'Female Mission Initiatives. Black and White Women in Three Witwatersrand Churches, 1903–1939' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1981).

28 *Ibid.* and D. Gaitskell, 'Devout Domesticity? A Century of African Women's Christianity in South Africa', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa*, pp. 251–272.

motherhood, while influential within political discourse and indicative of social attitudes more generally, does not dictate the terms of the self-image and meaning women – mothers – themselves create in negotiating their daily lives. Neither mothers' practice nor their self-image can simply be 'read off' from political rhetoric, a point which leads to a consideration of the third element in my definition.

### *Social Identity*

Social identity, is perhaps the most difficult aspect of motherhood to measure and analyse as well as being the least theorised; it remains a challenging area for further research and theoretical development. It involves women's own construction of an identity as mothers – informed by the discourse of motherhood, mediated by the practice of mothering, but not a simple derivative of either. (The admittedly culture-specific and class-bound illustration of these distinctions that comes to mind is of the nappy-bucket: sanctified in the advertisements, messy in the utilisation, but nevertheless bound up with the wellbeing of the infant and the mother's responsibilities, frustrations and pleasures in that.)

Bringing social identity into the picture allows us to address women as agents, as well as probe the interplay between individual and collective processes in the construction of subjectivity and the determination of behaviour. It draws attention to the subjective dimensions of motherhood and how women who are mothers themselves feel and think about this role and relationship. This self-image is personal and individualised, but is nevertheless grounded in a social context and mothers' recognition of themselves as part of a distinct social group, that of mothers.

Also important to the understanding of group membership is the recognition of multiple social identities, which may or may not be in conflict (realised or potential) with each other. Women are not only 'women', nor are they only 'mothers' (or deviant non-mothers). They have a range of other identities – including 'wife' (which should not be treated as a synonym for mother) but also including identities which, if always gendered, are not specifically female, such as worker, student, christian, black etc. In particular contexts other identities may come to the fore or interact with the social identity of mother, shaping women's choices in complex and not necessarily consistent or highly reflexive ways. While these other identities co-exist with the identity of mother, and may be restricted or refashioned by that, they have their own discourses and practices, which are different from those of motherhood, and may, in turn, restrict or refashion the expectations, attitudes and behaviours associated with being a mother. A well-documented example of this would be the intersection of motherhood and waged employment.

Women's identity as mothers includes both conscious and unconscious levels of operation (which may also not necessarily be in harmony). Psychoanalytic feminists such as Nancy Chodorow have paid considerable attention to the unconscious structuring of motherhood as an identity, and have explored the question why women want or choose to mother through an analysis of the psychic structuring of children's gender identities as boys and girls, in and through their experience of being mothered by women.<sup>29</sup> Related types of research have not been undertaken in South Africa; one major concern has been whether psychoanalytic models can be applied to the very different cultural and historical contexts in which the majority of South African women operate. The unconscious dimensions of identity, as well as the significance of the relationship between infants and their primary caregivers in the construction of gender identities, are, however, important issues to investigate in the South African context, where the discussion of gender roles has been so

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29 Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

dominated by accounts of external forces – ‘socialisation’, ‘ideology’ – as producers of gender conformity. Although Chodorow has been accused of mistakenly taking the white, western, heterosexual, nuclear family as a universal, she in fact does recognise that family forms are culturally specific, arguing rather for the recognition of certain psychic capacities as innate in all humans (for instance, that of the infant to internalise its primary relationships), while accepting that their ‘form and mode of operation’ are not.<sup>30</sup>

With regard to the conscious dimensions of social identity, it is here that the possibility of degrees of creativity, reflection and choice in the way in which people construct and relate to their social roles can be located. In his analysis of *Modernity and Self-identity*, Giddens draws attention to the part played by ‘reflexivity’ in the construction of identity:

the ‘identity’ of the self ... presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the individual is conscious ‘of’ in the term ‘self-consciousness’. Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given ... but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual.<sup>31</sup>

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reaction of others, but in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*. (Emphasis in the original)<sup>32</sup>

Although he is talking about identity as a totality, rather than identity in relation to particular group memberships, the concept of reflexivity can be usefully applied to particular social identities as well. The idea of narrative and the stress on the individual’s role in the construction of identity allows for the possibility of change in the storyline: it is not a precast given. And while agency may be directed at sustaining a particular narrative, it may also extend to amending it.

Also important to consider here is the role of the social group, which may serve as an extremely important reference point and support network for the individual in defining and consolidating an identity – developing the storyline – and engaging in particular behaviour. Gaitskell’s work on the *manyanos* demonstrates the importance of these church-based organisations in the early twentieth century in forging a collective social identity for their members as Christian mothers,<sup>33</sup> one which, I argue, became significant in shaping the political agenda of activists within the ANCWL and the FSAW in the 1950s. Similarly, the Garment Workers’ Union in the 1930s and 1940s created a space in which working-class Afrikaner women were able to engage collectively with the idea of *volksmoeder* (‘mother of the nation’) propagated by Afrikaner nationalism and work creatively with it, in this case subverting the nationalist ideal into something more compatible with their radical trade unionism.<sup>34</sup>

Speaking about Marxist theories of ideology generally, Michelle Barrett has noted the impact of post-structuralist criticisms on overly determinist interpretations of human subjectivity:

It is now widely recognised that, at the very least, we need a more sophisticated analysis of the ways in which such processes of ‘subjection’ work, including a consideration of partici-

30 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

31 A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 52.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

33 Gaitskell, ‘Female Mission Initiatives’.

34 Brink, ‘Man-Made Women’. Brink’s work on the different deployments of the idea of the *volksmoeder* by Afrikaner garment workers and members of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie* points to different uses of the same ideal by a white and supposedly homogeneous group (in terms of ethnicity and colour), but despite this interesting perspective on the ‘difference’ theme, her analysis remains within the ‘collusion with patriarchy’ approach overall.

pation in the construction of ideology that goes beyond the notion of collusion in what is ultimately not in one's interests.<sup>35</sup>

A more interactionist understanding of subjectivity and social identity has obvious relevance to an attempt to understand why and when and the degree to which women might 'collude' with patriarchy. Kaplan poses the problem of collusion in relation to motherhood thus:

How can any historical (i.e. 'real life') mother know whether what she thinks she wants really reflects her subjective desire, or whether she wants it because it serves patriarchy (that she has been constructed to please)? Since patriarchy wants women to want children, in other words, how can a woman distinguish between her desire for the child from that imposed on her?<sup>36</sup>

In attempting to answer these difficult questions, she argues that women's identity as mothers should be seen as embracing both resistance and complicity with dominant norms:

I argue here that women's activist capacities and resilience in the face of oppressive institutional positioning exist alongside the centrality to their lives of the intra-psychic and unconscious terrain, which often produces women's complicity with patriarchal norms.<sup>37</sup>

The point is not to deny the role of patriarchal discourse and the unconscious in the construction of women's identity as mothers.<sup>38</sup> But Giddens's concept of reflexivity and Barrett's plea for a 'more sophisticated' analysis of subject-formation remind us of the part played by social actors themselves in the construction of their identities. Exploring and theorising this process and its relationship to external forces are major challenges facing researchers interested in moving away from seeing women as simply the passive recipients of 'ideology' or 'discourse' or driven solely by unconscious motivations and desires.

## Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa

Sophisticated definitions, on their own, mean very little: they need to be tested in specific contexts. Hopefully, the foregoing will allow one to re-examine 'motherhood' in South Africa in the recent past in a way that will better illuminate its complexity, as an institution but also as a relationship, as well as deepen our understanding of its significance for women and its impact on their political choices.

It is striking that the debate on motherhood in South Africa has not, for the most part, been concerned with historical development and periodisation, despite the interest in historical case studies. This is reflected in the tendency to project an inappropriate continuity on historically widely separated constructions of motherhood (which I can certainly see in my own work), so that the motherhood appealed to by female anti-pass campaigners in the Orange Free State in 1913 is presented as essentially the same as the motherhood of the FSAW in the 1950s and even of the ANCWL in the 1990s. In the literature reviewed here, only Gaitskell and Unterhalter attempt to periodise African and Afrikaner nationalist constructions of motherhood.<sup>39</sup> However, they treat these as two already distinct and fully constituted categories, so that their periodisation is internal to each

35 M. Barrett, *The Politics of Truth. From Marx to Foucault* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 10.

36 Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, p. 4.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

38 As Roberta Hamilton points out, the problem of how people 'become tractable to social discipline' is not only a problem for feminist theorists addressing women's conformity (apparent or otherwise) to prescribed gender roles. It is a general problem for all social theorists, since to be human always involves a degree of submission to social discipline and group norms. R. Hamilton, 'The Collusion with Patriarchy: A Psychoanalytic Account', p. 386, in R. Hamilton and M. Barrett (eds), *The Politics of Diversity*, pp. 385–397.

39 Gaitskell and Unterhalter, 'Mothers of the Nation'.

category, while a fundamental continuity (of passivity among Afrikaner women and assertiveness among African women) underpins their account.

Yet we know that massive disruptions and reorganisation of social relations took place during this period, directly affecting the position of women, family structures, gender relations and the social, economic and political ordering of society more broadly. Given these far-reaching changes, the presumption of a fundamental continuity in the construction of motherhood in this period says more about the imprint of naturalist assumptions about motherhood on the social sciences than it does about the politics and experience of motherhood during this time.

This untested presumption of continuity can be explained, in part, by the failure to distinguish between the three different elements of motherhood outlined above and the preoccupation with discourse. For, at the level of discourse, I would agree that it is possible to see a consolidation of a dominant construction of motherhood fairly early on in the history of modern South Africa and a continuity in its major tenets into the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, this discourse was not the exclusive property of whites but spread to embrace the African elite and, through the churches, reached out to reshape the discourse of motherhood among the African populace more broadly.

However, although the information is skimpy, it is clear that there were massive shifts and discontinuities in the practice as well as the social identity of motherhood during this period: and these will have to be analysed if one is to understand the actual political appeal of motherhood as well as probe its potential for empowering women. To confirm the relevance of practice, one need only contrast the experience of feeding, educating and nurturing children in an agriculturally-based, subsistence economy, within a patriarchal homestead located in a well-defined network of kinship relations and community linkages, with that of undertaking the same broad set of responsibilities in an urban slumyard in the 1930s or 1940s, as the unemployed or self-employed wife or abandoned wife or partner of a migrant worker. Some of the responsibilities might be the same. The broad assumptions of women's roles might be couched in traditionalist language. But the actual work involved, the degree to which the social expectations could be met, and the choices women were being forced to make in relation to this role, would have been radically different. Newly urbanised and proletarianised women were negotiating (to different degrees and in different combinations) a whole range of new social identities, involving major shifts in consciousness and new demands on their time and energy: wage worker, union member, squatter, African, church member, etc.<sup>40</sup> All of this had to have impacted on women's consciousness, their self-image as mothers, and the meaning they attached to this work. And while the above example refers directly to African women, similar contrasts and processes of adjustment could be developed for other categories of women as well.

In what follows I am not being so rash as to attempt a 'history' of motherhood; that is a much larger task, still to be undertaken. Rather, I am trying to substantiate my earlier criticisms of the literature by highlighting some selected themes in the historical material that challenge key presumptions in both the 'collusion with patriarchy' and the 'difference' analyses. These themes are (1) the enduring value placed on fertility among African women, (2) the uncoupling of African marriage and motherhood during the course of the twentieth century, (3) the importance of Christianity in the construction of African motherhood in the twentieth century, and (4) the evidence against a single construction of white motherhood (characterised as passive, domestic and conforming to patriarchal gender

40 For an in-depth investigation of these processes, built around a range of individual life histories, see B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng. Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900–1983* (Johannesburg, 1991).

roles). In discussing these themes, I point to the interweaving of practice, discourse and social identity and draw a distinction between women's own construction of motherhood and the essentially instrumentalist ideological construction of motherhood among major political parties.

### *The Value Placed on Fertility by African Women*

The pre-colonial mother within southern Africa was located in a society in which, as Guy has argued, the production of people (rather than things) was central and an enormous significance attached to women's fertility as a result.<sup>41</sup> The mother in this period is a shadowy figure, more a projection backwards of later anthropological work or 'reinvented tradition' than a clear subject in her own right. What we do know is that the practice of motherhood in precolonial society was very different from that operating in European society, the source of the dominant colonial discourse of motherhood – embedded in a very different economic and cultural universe, in which the responsibilities of childcare were dispersed across a number of female kin, and motherhood carried considerable social status.

With specific reference to precolonial (and matrifocal) Igbo society, Ifi Amadiume has argued that ethnocentric and patriarchal concepts in western anthropology and history have obscured the high status and distorted the role of women in precolonial African societies. Like Lewis,<sup>42</sup> she claims that the indigenous formulation should not be equated with oppression:

It is a common error which stems from a definition of reproduction derived from a European patriarchal paradigm which sees woman as an object of exchange. Marriage is consequently presented as a mechanism of physical and social reproduction of the group. Woman in this formulation starts off as an object in a patriarchal exchange and transaction. She is not seen in her autonomous status as mother. Yet, the motherhood paradigm is culturally recognised as an autonomous unit in indigenous African constructs of kinship.<sup>43</sup>

While the evidence for precolonial southern Africa indicates it was settled, at least in the main, by patriarchal societies, the general point is useful. Guy makes a similar point concerning women's precolonial status in this region which he attributes not to motherhood *per se* but to the centrality of women's fertility in the social reproduction of society. As a result, he argues, the position of African women was very different from its contemporary manifestations:

We cannot impose our contemporary image of oppression on the life of women in precapitalist societies. The fact that value was created by fertility gave women a significant role in society, not only as the objects of exploitation, but as bearers of value in the technical as well as the wider, non-technical sense.<sup>44</sup>

The social and economic context in which motherhood was lived in the precolonial period was first undermined, then destroyed as the region was engulfed by the related forces of capitalism and colonialism. Yet what has persisted with remarkable tenacity from the precolonial period into the present is the importance that continues to be attached to women's fertility, not just by patriarchs but by African women themselves: and this, I suggest, structures a certain continuity in feelings of self-worth, celebration and power in

41 J. Guy, 'Gender Oppression in Southern Africa's Precapitalist Societies', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa*, pp. 33–47.

42 Lewis, 'Theorising about Gender'.

43 I. Amadiume, 'Kinship Ideologies and Socio-Cultural Systems in Africa and Europe: Theorising Matriarchy in Africa' (Workshop on Women and Work, Centre for Basic Research, Kampala, 1992), pp. 20–21.

44 Guy, 'Gender Oppression in Southern Africa's Precapitalist Societies', p. 46.

many African women's social identity as mothers. Fertility – the capacity to bear children and assume the social identity of motherhood – continues to be very highly valued by women and to inform their choices around motherhood.

By way of illustration, in a recent study of contemporary attitudes towards abortion among a sample of Primary Health Care Nurses (PHCNs) in Soweto, Elizabeth Walker has found that the great majority were hostile to abortion, an attitude she explains in terms of their attitudes towards motherhood:

In the language of PHCNs, the terms 'women' and 'motherhood' are almost synonymous. The way in which they represent women revolves primarily around women's experience of mothering, and their roles and responsibilities as mothers. For the PHCNs, the relationship between being a woman and being a mother is automatic. The biological ability to bear children, in other words, a woman's fertility, lies at the root of a mother's status and identity.... To be a woman then is to bear children. Women who do not want children are denying their roles as mothers, their dignity and rejecting their identity as women.<sup>45</sup>

She goes on to note:

If burdensome, the role of mother for the PHCNs is also enormously powerful. Their fertility accords them powers as mothers: they exercise considerable control over their children and, further, they command tremendous power within their homes.<sup>46</sup>

This view is borne out by another study by Preston-Whyte and Zondi of African teenage pregnancy in Durban. They found that the teenage mothers in their sample did not view their pregnancies as shameful disasters but, rather, as an affirmation of their womanhood:

An extremely high value is placed on children for and in themselves. We suggest that the value placed upon children is so high that marriage is, in some contexts, quite irrelevant to the bearing of children.<sup>47</sup>

These studies suggest that the value ascribed to fertility, which Guy identifies as central to precolonial society, as well as the fusion of meaning around motherhood and womanhood has persisted as a major feature of African women's social identity as women, despite the very different circumstances under which the capacity to bear children is realised. But while in precolonial society fertility was, following Guy, clearly harnessed in the service of patriarchal marriage and lineage politics, today this is less clearly the case for growing numbers of women, who do not equate having children with being married.

### *The Uncoupling of Marriage and Motherhood*

This leads to the second theme I wish to highlight – the way in which, increasingly during the course of the twentieth century, motherhood and marriage have been uncoupled for and by African women, at the level of both practice *and* social identity if not so clearly at the level of discourse. (And here one would wish to probe the tensions and discrepancies between the dominant discourse and more marginal ones.) There is a large literature documenting and commenting on the rise of female-headed households in the course of the twentieth century. There is also evidence that the stigma of single motherhood has continued to decline, to the point where many women look upon it as a preferable option to marriage. As the Preston-Whyte and Zondi study cited above illustrates, growing numbers of young women are increasingly sceptical of marriage but are not relinquishing

45 E. Walker, 'The Responses and Understandings of a Group of Primary Health Care Nurses, based in Soweto, to the Issue of Abortion' (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1993), p. 77–78.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

47 E. Preston-Whyte and E. Zondi, 'To Control Their Own Reproduction: The Agenda of Black Teenage Mothers in Durban', p. 55, *Agenda*, 4 (1989), pp. 47–68.

their desire to have children. This separation of motherhood and marriage, as well as the assertion of choice in relation to marriage rather than to children, suggests that the simple equation of motherhood with a submission to patriarchal roles is inadequate. Motherhood cannot be equated with or analysed in the same terms as wifedom, but has to be viewed as an identity which for women is infused with a separate meaning and carries an independent appeal. Amadiume's point about the cultural definition of motherhood as an autonomous unit is worth exploring further in the South African context.

It is worth noting here that in the 1950s women in the anti-pass campaign rallied not in defence of their roles as wives – which were already under considerable pressure – but in defence of their roles as mothers. It was the impact of the pass laws on their children, rather than on their marriages and husbands, that was the main focus of concern, as reflected in FSAW and ANCWL speeches, reports and pamphlets condemning the new legislation.<sup>48</sup> In this regard it would be interesting to investigate the extent of single motherhood among the women who participated in the anti-pass campaign.

### *The Importance of Christianity*

At the same time, the argument for the persistence of meanings whose origins are rooted in the precolonial past has to be tempered by the recognition of the profound and destructive impact of colonisation and industrialisation on gender relations in southern Africa. Much more research is required on the destabilising impact of this incorporation into the periphery of a global capitalism on indigenous gender relations, the position of women and the construction of motherhood. What I want to draw attention to here, however, is the ambiguous significance of Christianity in the shaping of the dominant discourse of motherhood in the twentieth century, as well as the social identity not only of white but also of black women.

Amongst black women, church membership grew significantly in the first half of the twentieth century and by 1946 over half of the African population were church members, with arguably an even greater proportion of African women than men in the church.<sup>49</sup> With the consolidation of a Christian notion of motherhood among African women, the overlap between white and African constructions of motherhood became more marked, to the extent that the distinction between a pure 'white' and a pure 'black' motherhood becomes increasingly hard to sustain.

The dominant discourse was centred on Euro-Christian and Victorian notions of 'the Good Mother' as the emotional centre of the family and motherhood as women's destiny, the source of their deepest fulfilment. However, as it moved out from its centre, this construct became infused with significant elements from indigenous formulations, and was reshaped and rearticulated in ways which have not yet been clearly identified in the analysis. Gaitskell describes the ideal that Victorian Christianity offered to African women in the late nineteenth century, based on the notion of women as wives and mothers in service to their families, focused on the domestic world and separated from the world of work and citizenship.<sup>50</sup> She argues, however, that despite major differences with indigenous attitudes, the stress on reproduction and childbearing in the colonial-Christian ideal overlapped with and reinforced the indigenous attitudes already discussed. At the same time, she argues, the church offered its converts a way of coping with the immense stresses

48 See C. Walker, *Women and Resistance*.

49 Gaitskell, 'Devout Domesticity?', p. 252.

50 *Ibid.*

of a rapidly changing world turned upside-down: 'the burdensome and painful responsibilities of motherhood were at the heart of *manyano* spirituality.'<sup>51</sup>

But her account makes it clear that the motherhood embraced within the churches was not simply a European and specifically Victorian import – an imposed ideology. Rather, Gaitskell provides evidence that female African converts fashioned their own syncretic understanding and expression of motherhood out of an intermingling of African and European identities and practices.

Motherhood was central to African women's personal and cultural identity as well as their social and economic roles long before the advent of Christian missions in South Africa. But church groups served to transform, elevate and entrench the importance of marriage, wifehood and motherhood for women. They were among the powerful ideological forces contributing to the ongoing centrality of the notion of motherhood in African women's organisation in the twentieth century – although arguably the state's onslaught on their children has latterly been an even more powerful force mobilising mothers.<sup>52</sup>

### *Conflicting Constructions of Motherhood Among White Women*

At the same time as colonialism and Christianity were beginning to reorder African society, the exigencies of life on the frontier meant that for white women too, the drawing-room ideal of Victorian domesticity was possible only in the larger urban centres, and then only for the wealthier classes. Thus the ideal of women among Voortrekker and frontier societies was not the passive, delicate 'angel of the house' suggested by Lewis's ahistorical account of white motherhood, but, more accurately, its resolute, stoical, and far from passive centre.

The emphasis was on domestic competence, resilience, and engagement with the survival of the family and community, and these values, too, persisted into the twentieth century, informing the social identity and the political choices of many white women in more complex ways than Lewis allows. While Afrikaner nationalism stressed service and submission in its interpretation of Afrikaner motherhood, in the form of the *volksmoeder* ideal, it was possible for working-class Afrikaner women in the Garment Workers' Union in the 1930s and 1940s to fashion a different narrative out of the story elements of Voortrekker women braving the wilds in the interior and challenging British colonial power in Natal. 'We, workers of our state and for all the women in our country, shall take the lead and climb the Drakensberg again', asserted Anna Jacobs, a garment worker, in 1940,<sup>53</sup> invoking a famous challenge made by a group of Voortrekker women to the British High Commissioner in Natal in 1843<sup>54</sup> – hardly an image of passivity and delicacy.

### *Patriarchal Discourses of Motherhood in Twentieth Century Politics*

This is not to deny that a dominant discourse of motherhood as submission to patriarchal authority was developed and consolidated during the course of the twentieth century, nor that it has been influential in shaping not simply the political choices made by women but also the political options open to them. This discourse, rooted in that nineteenth century Victorian ideal of motherhood already described, was elaborated within a context which defined women's political roles as subordinate to and supportive of male initiative and male agendas; during the twentieth century it adapted to major social changes such as the increased participation of women in waged work outside 'the home' after World War One

51 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 271–272.

53 Quoted in Brink, 'Man-Made Women' p. 288.

54 C. Walker, *The Woman's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*, p. 18.

and especially World War Two without being fundamentally undermined. (Adaptative shifts can be seen in the debate over the enfranchisement of white women in the 1920s, in which white women's voting rights were reconciled with motherhood without the dislodgement of motherhood as women's primary role.<sup>55</sup>) Arguably, it is only in the recent past that this discourse has begun to be radically destabilised, by the cumulative impact of women's increased economic independence and/or isolation in relation to men, as well as the related rise of female-headed households, the emergence of a more assertive women's movement in the 1980s, and the declining authority of the church.

But this dominant discourse, I would argue, far from being racially bounded, shaped the political construction of motherhood within both the Congress Alliance as well as white political parties in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>56</sup> Certainly at the level of leadership, one can see a significant degree of convergence around the meaning of motherhood. Popular discourses were more fragmented but there, too, there was not a simple black/white dichotomy with class, increasingly, becoming an important factor in differentiating not only among black women but among white women as well.

Thus Gaitskell and Unterhalter are right to emphasise the differences in the *experience* of mothering for black and white women – a point which, as I have noted elsewhere,<sup>57</sup> remains undeveloped in their argument and links in with my own discussion of the significance of practice in the construction of motherhood. However, given the complexity of the processes whereby motherhood was reshaped in the twentieth century and noting the significance of especially the church in articulating a conception of motherhood that appealed and applied across the colour (and class) divide, the polarisation they suggest at the level of discourse is too extreme. *Afrikanerdom* is treated as a monolith and oppositional reworkings of the *volksmoeder* concept, as in the Garment Workers' Union, are overlooked. Equally, their insistence on the progressive character of the meaning of motherhood within the ANC's political agenda seems to be based less on an analysis of gender relations within that organisation than on their commitment to its national liberation project.

While recognising the deep political differences separating the ANC and the National Party, I would argue that in both organisations the understanding of women's roles, and especially their equation of that with 'motherhood', reflected a deeply ingrained and shared commitment to male authority and patriarchal family forms on the part of the male leadership. Where the construction of motherhood within *Afrikaner* and African nationalism differed was in the larger political project to which it was harnessed: and here one has to broaden the analysis to include a look at women as agents as well as at social identity more broadly. To understand why black and white women put convergent notions of motherhood to very different political uses, one would need to look beyond their identity as mothers to incorporate a more complex understanding of social identity as multi-faceted. Initially, as Brink has shown, *Afrikaner* women put the *volksmoeder* ideal to both conservative and radical uses in terms of both gender relations and general politics. However, by the late 1940s most of the *Afrikaner* members of the Garment Workers' Union had been won over to the camp of *Afrikaner* nationalism – by appeals to their racial privilege and ethnic identity. In relation to motherhood, what is worth considering here is what role the practice

55 C. Walker, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement'.

56 Several other strands can be identified in the ANC's conception of motherhood, including indigenous elements such as the value placed on fertility (already discussed) and 'western' ideas more broadly, including communist understandings of motherhood as espoused by the Communist Party of South Africa and the Women's International Democratic Federation. (On the WIDF see C. Walker, *Women and Resistance*.) Unravelling these different strands would be a useful research project.

57 C. Walker, Review of *Woman-Nation-State, Agenda*, 6 (1990).

of motherhood played in encouraging these women to identify with Afrikaner nationalism and white privilege, a privilege which, in the form of access to cheap black domestic labour, excused them from namely the more onerous aspects of motherhood, the physical care.

Equally, many black women could identify with the call of African nationalism to end white supremacy because it fitted in with their interests as black South Africans, and also because white supremacy was putting their identity as mothers, which, it has been argued, lay at the core of their identity as women, under extreme pressure. From this perspective, there was no contradiction for them to join the ANC as African mothers – the two identities complemented each other. Thus women's endorsement of African nationalism cannot be construed merely as the consequence of a meek submission to roles developed for them by others. The issue of patriarchal dominance within both the home and the Congress Alliance is a related but separate issue which emerged, as my work on the FSAW has indicated, as a point of tension and attempted negotiation for women activists within the ANC during the 1950s.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Where does this admittedly very sketchy account of motherhood and its development in twentieth century South Africa leave us with regard to the literature I discussed earlier? Firstly, I believe it shows that the 'collusion with patriarchy' approach is too unidimensional, failing to accommodate the complexity of women's construction of motherhood as identity and through practice, rather than simply shaped by an imposed discourse. The equation of motherhood with patriarchal roles provides only a partial insight into the complexity of the relationship between a woman and her children, a relationship which may be circumscribed by her relationship to the husband/father but cannot be reduced to that. Wells's opposition between women's rights 'as mothers' and their rights 'as women' misrepresents the way in which these identities overlapped for many women, while the claim that women's endorsement of motherhood and their political mobilisation in defence of their maternal roles was a consequence of patriarchal socialisation exaggerates the role of a hegemonic patriarchal discourse. In an earlier piece I have suggested that 'women invest in motherhood (and the family) and this needs to be understood – understood not simply as the product of their socialisation or patriarchal ideology but as something mediated by their own experience of this role':

I am not suggesting that women have not suffered oppression or that patriarchal ideology has played an insignificant role in shaping women's roles and views of themselves. Rather, I am wanting to question the explanatory force that I and others have attributed to this with regard to women's political behaviour.... What I am trying to develop is a view that recognises women's agency and begins to take their demands seriously, on their own terms, as an expression of their particular location in society and their active engagement with that.<sup>59</sup>

The 'collusion with patriarchy' approach pays insufficient attention to the meanings that women themselves give to motherhood: to identity. It collapses the maternal role into that of the matrimonial one – but while these roles may overlap, they are not the same conceptually or in practice and meaning for large numbers of women. While 'agency' should not be conflated with resistance, there is historical evidence of different groups of women constructing identities for themselves *as mothers* which challenged the dominant conception and strengthened them in relation to oppressive state and employer practices as well as domestic gender relations.

58 C. Walker, *Women and Resistance*.

59 C. Walker, 'Preface to the Second Edition', *Women and Resistance*, p. xxii.

Secondly, with regard to the proponents of 'difference' in the construction of motherhood, there are several points that emerge. One is that more careful attention to the historical material suggests a much more complex configuration around the experience and meaning of motherhood than that suggested by either Lewis or Gaitskell and Unterhalter: 'eurocentric' ideas have not been the property of South Africans of European descent only, but have been absorbed and refashioned in complex ways by black South Africans as well. The opposition set up between a white = western = oppressive discourse of motherhood and a black = non-western = emancipatory discourse, is overly simplistic and does not appear to be based on a serious engagement with the available literature or primary sources. Again, part of the problem lies in the preoccupation with dominant ideology and the neglect of practice and social identity as a result.

In any case, I have problems with the *a priori* assertion of 'difference' as a theoretical principle that obviates the need to engage with the theoretical possibility of commonalities and the empirical evidence for overlapping identities and discourses in the South African context. Lewis's argument rests on an *a priori* projection of the notion of 'difference' onto the historical record, based on an overly purist and ahistorical construction of black 'culture'. This theoretical reliance on a problematic concept of 'difference' does have major political implications. At one level, of course, she is right – difference between black and white in life chances is dramatically apparent in our polarised society. But, as the above discussion indicates, the evidence is also compelling for an historical intersection of cultures, as well as a far more complex stratification of society during the course of the twentieth century, embracing class, ethnic identity and region and not only 'race'.

In arguing this, I am avoiding the larger theoretical debates about biology, essentialism and the universality or otherwise of motherhood as a gendered and specifically female experience, and am concentrating on the specifics of the South African context in the past 100 years or so – where the evidence for overlapping constructions of motherhood specifically and porous and syncretic rather than pure cultures generally is overwhelming. There is clearly a diversity of meanings, and undoubtedly much of the academic (and popular) writing on motherhood has been guilty of an unproblematic and essentially western conceptualisation of what it is to be a mother – including writing emanating from black political organisations. But there is also sufficient evidence of overlapping understandings, common concerns and even common experiences among women from diverse backgrounds to suggest that those who argue that there are now, in the 1990s, quite separate meanings of motherhood amongst blacks and whites have been driven more by political concerns to challenge white hegemony than the evidence concerning motherhood.

Does this mean that motherhood is an empowering identity for women and an appropriate issue round which to mobilise? The above material suggests that it may be so, under particular conditions and in particular combinations with other identities. It is not 'motherhood' as such which is the problem but, rather, the specific way in which it has been institutionalised and where it is located in the reproduction of society. Motherhood as a social identity has, as we have seen, provided particular sections of women with a strong enough sense of self-worth from which to challenge various forms of oppression and, in the process, develop new strengths and capacities. It is, furthermore, possible to imagine a society in which motherhood not only plays an important part in informing a positive and assertive self-identity among women but is generally valued; Guy and Amadiume both argue that in different ways this was the case in different regions of precolonial Africa, at least to a degree.

But in any case, the labels 'conservative' or 'progressive' are not particularly useful for understanding women's behaviour. They are normative, as Lewis has argued, and they discount both process (the way in which identities may shift and change in relation to

concrete historical developments) and women's own part in constructing their identities as mothers – identities which, as has been noted, extend beyond relationships with men.

Finally, does the construction of motherhood as embracing values of peace and caring have anything to offer women and the larger society politically today? Jacklyn Cock has argued against the view of women as peacemakers as a result of some innate mothering instinct/capacity, pointing to the many examples of women's collusion and identification with military agendas, if not in the frontline, then in a supportive capacity behind the lines.<sup>60</sup> It seems, however, that one does not have to resort to biological essentialism in order to argue that the values of peace and nurturing and the assumption of universalism associated with mothering in our society *do* offer a welcome alternative to values of war and aggression, and are also values supported by many women. Furthermore, the social identity of motherhood has the potential of crosscutting other more narrow, ethnic and 'racial' identities – just as the ideology of working class unity has the potential to rally workers from very different cultural backgrounds. One can argue this without getting bogged down in swampy debates about essentialism, biology and culture: here one is talking about historically specific, historically constructed phenomena.

The values attached to motherhood resonate with women not simply because of the power of patriarchy but because they mesh with aspects of their own (historically and materially grounded) experience and identity, as mothers. Mothers in the most fundamental sense *are* lifegivers: this is a capacity which could be celebrated without endorsing women's submission to men or the tyranny of particular under-resourced domestic and childcare regimes. The idea of peacemaker and the values of nurturing associated with the motherhood ideal are, in any case, surely worth protecting and extending – even, as Chodorow suggests,<sup>61</sup> through the extension of the tasks and qualities associated with mothering, as an active relationship of responsibility and care for the next generation, to men.

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60 J. Cock, *Colonels and Cadres. War and Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991).

61 Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*.