

Undoing Motherhood: How IVF Breeds ‘New’ Mothers

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Abstract

The following article addresses the gender norms inscribed in the institution of motherhood through biological construction. Using the anthropological scholarship on processual kinship, we aim to outline how kin formation and performance defy the a priori biological imperative. Focusing on how the in vitro fertilization (IVF) method, as assisted reproductive technology (ART), recombines biological and social identities, we intend to discuss the new premises that the institution of motherhood can attain after the deconstruction of the events that establish motherhood as a patriarchal source of subjugation. Using a feminist perspective and a generous body of ethnographic research concerned with IVF experiences of women, we deploy the reconceptualization of motherhood in the new era of advanced technologies and re-established gendered roles and expectations.

Keywords: *motherhood, assisted reproductive technologies, kinship, biological, good/bad.*

Introduction

The conceptual ‘maternal body’ is an identity thoroughly constructed to be related literally and figuratively to the family, but most of all to describe gender norms (Albury 1997; Miller 2005; Rich 1995; Young 2005). Biological motherhood surrenders to the natural conceptual relationship between a mother and her child, to define a form of control, delimitation and condemning the order or disorder of the society itself. By perceiving the reproductive body as a site of invoking power to embody patriarchal prescription, motherhood establishes the division between two large



conceptions of “good mothers” and “bad mothers.” For an institution that demands stringent requirements, it is quite easy to fall under each category and the stakes considerable. A woman who diverges from the social expectations inscribed in the process of becoming a mother is stigmatized as a bad mother simply because her reproductive decisions do not meet the gendered role criteria (Abrams, 2015, 179). However, what defines the biological standards of motherhood can be transformed according to the new reproductive methods revolutionizing the traditional notions of mother-child relationship. In the past decades, the assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) have given birth not only to children for those naturally unable to procreate, but also to a revolutionary perspective over what has been previously defined as ‘natural’ for reproduction, conception and kinship. Besides their capacity to convert childlessness and infertility into life, assisted reproductive technologies have the potential to undermine the centrality of nature (biology and genetics) as grounding condition for the emergence of kinship by detaching conception from filiation. ARTs incorporate a diverse range of technological reproductive methods such as in vitro fertilization-embryo transfer (IVF-ET), gamete intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT), frozen embryo transfer (FET) and surrogacy; all these methods are promising and have the capacity for displacing the biological element from the experience of motherhood. Embracing a processual and experiential view of kinship (Carsten 1995, Rich 1995), locating it as an individualized choice (Strathern 1992), we aim to discuss how ARTs (with a focus on in vitro fertilization treatments) can redefine motherhood and its relation to maternity and conception. It is not a matter of complementing or assisting nature through technology; instead we argue that ARTs breed new understandings of motherhood, fluidifying both social and biological boundaries that encapsulate it. Expanding the debate around biology’s centrality in defining kinship, we examine the potential of ARTs to transgress and defy the patriarchal chains wrapping the motherhood institution. Analyzing several ethnographic accounts on IVF experiences from a feminist perspective, we aim to outline how ARTs enabled versatile ways for motherhood to be performed.

This article is divided in three main sections. Firstly, we will address the biological and social construction of motherhood and the power implications of this role as a gender norm. By considering maternity as a femininity trait, its role and expectations will constitute the axes of good and evil through the established differences between femininity and masculinity. Secondly, we aim to stress how biology has been fallaciously attributed as a primordial precondition for kinship, drawing mainly on the anthropological and ethnographic accounts of Schneider, Carsten,

Strathern. We will focus on how ARTS recombine biological and social identities and the roles associated with them, birthing new ways of performing kin by cutting it. The last section analyses from a feminist perspective, a generous body of ethnographic research concerned with in vitro fertilization experiences of women, meaning to deploy the reconfigurations of motherhood in the new era of advanced technologies and re-established gendered roles and expectations.

The Magical Womb of Patriarchy

In the following section we are going to present motherhood as a patriarchal institution, initiated as a promising premise for every girl-child, from the first menstrual evidence, culminating to the moment she gets impregnated or decides to have a child. The experience of mothering a child differs from women of different occupations or backgrounds, and it is grounded on the relationship between the mother and her child. However, motherhood is an established institution from which no girl or woman can find an escape-route and every one of them has been affected at least once in their lives directly or indirectly by the pressure of desiring or refusing to have a baby. Even though childbearing is the reason why human life continues to exist, mothers were not recognized legally until the middle of the nineteenth century and motherhood had no legal status or existence (Smart 1996, 44). The very interpretations of desiring or refusing have been regulated by policies and social norms that every woman is obliged to submit. Since a fragile age, while playing with their baby dolls, little girls learn that their purpose in life and their greatest accomplishment would be bearing and raising children. This rushing over the biological hour, to catch it before it fades away, puts women under humiliation, shame and alienation for those who want to procreate, but biologically aren't capable and also for those who refuse to become mothers. Making sense of motherhood is an overly complex and hard responsibility. Feminist theorists have been trying to understand whether motherhood is established firstly through pregnancy, or the biological factor does not count (Rich 1995; Sanger 1956; Abrams 2015; Miller 2005)? Can a mother be also a woman, or keeping both identities is dangerous and lead to the inescapable journey of bad-mothering? What provides the crossroad between bad-mothers and good mothers into motherhood?

If we let our imagination flow towards the idealization of Western motherhood, the first symbolic representation we would recount would be the embodiment of Madonna, the Virgin Mother, a timeless figure, mostly depicted with a scarf over her head, bowing to her baby child that she is

holding to her breast. She is the incarnation of goodness and purity, a sacred model of motherhood. Yet the patriarchal order has reframed her power of giving life; she has to remain pure, an impossible divine model to follow for other women who will always try to reach her, but they never will. Having Madonna as the primal identity for maternal representation, everything that crosses beyond these boundaries, constructs clear identities which are framed as good/bad, outside/inside, pure/impure, sacred/profane (Young 2005, 84-5). Idolizing a divine model as a pure representation for maternal love, undoubtedly will cause frustration and pressure towards the relationship between a mother and her child, a mother in relationship with other mothers and mothering as a processual event. Even though models of good/bad mothers differ culturally according to different rituals, beliefs, expectations or norms, the role of mothers and their predisposition to mothering is “not written in the stars, the primordial soup, the collective unconscious, nor in our genes” (Thurer 1995, XV). The mommy myths never cease to surprise us, even though what is understood by good and bad changes through time, motherhood that we know remains strong and unyielding defining the exception, becoming the central oppressor for women and an instrument on patriarchal hands. This is how Adrienne Rich would consider motherhood, as a patriarchal institution. Furthermore, she distinguishes between two possible meanings of motherhood that conform one another: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential- and all women- shall remain under male control” (Rich 1995, 13). What follows this definition is the certain understanding that motherhood is instituted under biological circumstances and these biological circumstances are subjected under the power of the patriarchy. The conception that motherhood is solely limited to female biology has narrowed women’s perspective and expectations of their bodies, regarding their reproductive power, or the lack of reproductive power as a destiny, rather than a resource of physicality different from every woman.

On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir (1953) approached motherhood under the terms of otherness and women in this case are tied forever to their role as the Other¹. According to de Beauvoir, women are used to connect motherhood to their essence of life and being, but the decision to become mothers does not come freely as it should, but rather as an enforced maternity. Her approach has raised many speculations and criticism over the essentialism of her theory,

¹ It is not in the aim of this article to develop a further explanation on the concept of otherness and womanhood. For further reading Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

however they still agreed on her perception on maternity and how motherhood perpetuated the inferiority of social and economic status of women (Neyer și Bernandi 2011, 165). Pateman (1988) insisted in her book “The sexual contract” that motherhood as an institution established a clear sexual separation as a means for patriarchal construction that is according to her a sexual contract, created and preserved by men as equals between them. Given this, the contract, claims Pateman, demands natural childbearing since this is the natural call for women. Shulamith Firestone sustains through a more radical stance that love along with childbearing are the main oppressors of women in the male culture. She asks: “What were women doing while men created masterpieces? Women were barred from culture, exploited in their role of mother. Or its reverse: women had no need for paintings since they created children...women are not creating culture because they are preoccupied with love” (Firestone 1970/2015, 113).

Judith Warner found a metaphor for motherhood; she called it - the mess. This mess comes by being consumed for the children in mind, soul and body, leaving only small chunks to themselves (2005, 19). Love can come at a cost, to be left in weariness and in oblivion, disappearing day by day as a result of intensive mothering which demands unrealistic expectations. Nevertheless, the focus of the mess has serious implications on biological determination and comprehension as a universal event. Carol Smart (1996, 37) states:

Motherhood is not a natural condition. It is an institution that presents itself as a natural outcome of biologically given gender differences, as a natural consequence of (hetero) sexual activity and as a natural manifestation of an innate female characteristic, namely maternal instinct. The existence of an institution of motherhood, as opposed to an acknowledgement that there are simply mothers, is rarely questioned even the proper qualities of motherhood are often the subject of debate. Motherhood is still largely treated as a given and as a self-evident fact rather than as the possible outcome of specific social processes that have historical and cultural location which can be mapped.

Considering motherhood an institution invests it with a specific function in the wider context of society, having attached a prescribed set of practices. Motherhood is instituted by a series of events, defined by specific narratives in the patriarchal context; without each one of them, the institution of motherhood may cease to exist. Maybe we can relax the dominant constraints that categorize

women as bad or good mothers to dismantle the internal structures of motherhood from its oppressive functions. The series of events unfold as follows: sexual activity – leads to pregnancy – leads to birth - leads to mothering; the sequence as a unity leads to the instauration of motherhood (Smart 1996, 39). Rich recounts one of the letters in Margaret Sanger’s *Motherhood in Bondage*¹, where a woman writes about seeking advice for birth-control after she had intercourse with her husband, fulfilling her matrimonial duty as a wife and as a mother: “I am not passionate, but try to treat the sexual embrace the way I should, be natural and play the part, for you know, it’s so different a life from what all girls expect.” Rich emphasizes the contradiction of the role of women: to be natural and play the part at the same, under the institutionalized heterosexual marriage which treats them as mere bodies to be used for sexual (male) satisfaction and procreation. She compares the experience of maternity with sexuality which according to Rich has been interconnected to serve male interests. Motherhood in the patriarchal context cannot survive without heterosexual intercourse (Rich 1995, 41-2). Any other alternative behavior such as abortion, adoption, new reproductive technologies, lesbianism would undermine the institution and therefore are considered as undesired since they have the possibility to defy the gendered norms which perceive women as natural bearers or as outcasts who refuse to obey the institutional structure of motherhood. Even women who want to bear children, but due to their biological construction are struggling with uterine problems, damaged fallopian tubes or ovulation disorders are recognized as *persona non-grata*, since there is a possibility in their non-aptitude to challenge the gender norms. Their biological condition is translated as a social dysfunction and therefore they are labeled as deviationist from their classical motherhood path. On the other hand, abortion as an escape-route has been made difficult in order to preserve the natural chain of sex-pregnancy-birth. However, being associated with stigma and strong rejection, the abortion debate continues to cause controversy, especially because the campus of the claimed ‘pro-lifers’ still cannot comprehend the importance of women’s humanity or prefer to fully neglect it. By fully human, feminists understand that “women’s activities are as social, as consciously, intentionally, historically organized as men’s. Thus, reproduction, which includes sexuality, family forms, and domestic life, as well as the consciously mediated process of birthing that continues the species, is a fully human

¹ *Motherhood in Bondage* (1928/1956) is a compilation of confessions from women from different social and economic positions that found themselves trapped into maternity and sought advice of birth control from Margaret Sanger who was a nurse and women’s right advocate at the time.

activity; it is not merely natural (Harding, 1984, 204). As a result, these gendered norms considered so far as natural or as a biological destiny, are blind to those who really belong to the decision and what are the cultural and social implications behind every biological argument. It is not a surprise that women are usually perceived through their ability to bear children, this ability is transformed as an expressive power for biological and social functioning, separating them from men who are defined by their rationality and their “transcendence of purely biological.” This is where the separation of public/private sphere begins; women are bound to the private sphere of the family, distancing themselves from the sphere where the decisions about their bodies are taken (Albury, 1997, 524).

Both pregnancy and feeling like a mother represent a private experience, but also a public event. There are specific practices to be followed if you want to become a good mother, which demonstrate the risky and the moral path to responsible motherhood (Miller 2005, 47-8). After carrying the baby for nine months “a woman gives birth to herself”, through a painful, but purposive process that demands “the creation of the new ” (Rich 1995, 156). The creation of the new seeks a new place which can calculate and survey the whole experience under the gaze of an expert. This is how childbearing was transferred from home to hospital under a male-dominated care which regards pregnancy as illness but is accepted as a safe and responsible practice which any good mother would agree with (Miller 2005, 50). Even if the medicalization of pregnancy and childbearing should make the whole process easier for women, enduring pain during labor is still the crucial and magical ingredient for division and love expression. Rich asks if there is a difference between pain that creates anew and the pain that destroys. The answer she constructed asserts that patriarchy has convinced women that their suffering has a meaning that surrounds their existence and the new creation, and from that pain they gain value (Rich 1995, 158-9). After birth, the new mothers are required to be willing to sacrifice, to love their child unconditionally every single second of the day, to succumb maybe in anger, but never cease to smile and cherish their child’s activity, yet not too much, otherwise spoiling will do no good. Though mothering can be as oppressive as other events mentioned above, even if social norms can be extremely demanding on how to raise your child properly, we consider that mothering can be a very intimate and personalized experience that may follow or defies the rules of motherhood. We have claimed that mothering is a relational experience between a mother and her child, but the relationship between them does not have to be essentially biological and materialized in the female womb. Firestone

believed that the development of cybernetics and new technologies would free women from the biological family (Firestone 1970/2015, 193). Alternative forms such as ARTs have the potential to substitute the natural component of the sacred womb within which patriarchal motherhood as we know it, takes form and power or at least to alter the persistent normativity of producing life. For women to be released from the biologic and oppressive tyranny, we have to revise the events that have established the institution the way it is and rebuild it.

Is blood still thicker than water? An anthropological account on reproduction

“Kinship is whatever the biogenetic relationship is. If science discovers new facts about biogenetic relationship, then that is what kinship is, and was all along.” (Schneider 1980, 23) – at the core of this sentence lays not only the essence of American kinship, as analyzed by Schneider, but, primarily, the prevailing view that dominated kinship conceptualizations up until him. Starting with Morgan, McLennan and Rivers¹, the anthropology of kinship has always been centered around biology as the universal natural basis defining kinship (in terms of consanguinity and predetermined blood ties enabled by sexual reproduction between male and female). Whether from the functionalist perspective of descent theory voiced by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) or the structuralist theory of alliance articulated by Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1940]), kinship was understood as the social recognition of biological facts, consisting of a given set of biogenetic relationships to which given social functions correspond. How anthropologists have almost religiously treated kinship as a theoretical notion undeniably biologically grounded has been highly contested by Schneider (1972), who argued for a cultural relativist perspective that has the potential to address more comprehensively the specifics of kin in each culture. However, his argument did not dismantle the “natural basis”, rather it endorsed a view of kinship as based in nature and fertilized through culture. For him American kinship has been seen as a mix of substance (order of nature) and code for conduct (order of law, norms imposed by men on nature) (Schneider 1980) in a similar way in which for Strathern (1992) English kinship has been constituted as an overlap between nature and culture, with biogenetic relations as the raw materials to be molded under the influence of cultural norms. These views are still rooted in the nature/culture dichotomy, the only difference is that they grant more agency to

¹ For more information on the genesis of kinship studies in anthropology: Morgan, L. H. (1871). *Systems of consanguinity and affinity of the human family* (Vol. 218). Smithsonian Institution; Rivers, W. H. R. (1910). *The genealogical method of anthropological inquiry*. *The Sociological Review*, 3(1), 1-12.

the cultural inferences, diminishing the influence of biological determinism. It was only with Carsten that kinship ceased to be perceived as an ascribed set of biologically predetermined relationships; by advancing the concept of relatedness instead of kinship, she contended that kin is not given, but produced through different experiences (Carsten 1995).

Kinship depicted as a process of becoming has significantly questioned biological primacy, broadening the circumstances under which relations can receive the value of kin. Whether considering the examples of non-Western comprehension of kinship (Malay, Zumbaguan, Indian, Melanesian) or the cases of Western adoption and divorce, processual kinship implies a myriad of possibilities of configuring and recombining relationships and ties. The kernel of such kin relationships no longer resides in the blood ties, but in how people create intimacy and interdependence under various social and cultural instances. In Langkawi, Malay kinship is based on the transfer of substance, that is made possible through living together and commensality which transform blood into food and vice versa. Substance is transferable because of its mutability and fluidity, which thus makes kinship performative since relations are developed in time (Carsten 1995). The transfer of substance that defines Malay relatedness is constructed from both the acts of procreation and living and eating together, blurring the differentiation between what is social and what is biological in defining the kin relationships. Similarly, in Ecuador, Zumbaguan kinship entails the consumption of food and its transformation in the body, most kin relations resulting from adoption and fostering, rather than originating in a single moment of sexual procreation (Weismantel apud Carsten, 2004). Consequently, “natural links” between kin no longer express a biogenetic basis, but they are gradually generated through co-residence, feeding and sexual relationships. In spite of the Euro-American naturalized view over family and kin, where substance is immutable and permanent, Strathern (2005) develops a supporting argument for processual kinship based on the examples of adoption and divorce. She asserts that both adoption and divorce have the potential to recombine parts originating in families that dissolved themselves, reproducing kin relationships in a different manner. In the case of adoption, parenthood manifests itself even though it is neither rooted in the biological processes of procreation and conception nor it reflects a genetical descent. Examples discussed by Strathern show how bonds with the adopted children develop in time emotionally and affectionately, acquiring the same significance blood ties “supposedly” imply. Likewise, family constellations derived from divorces entail the development of similar bonds between all members (former parents, stepparents, step siblings, children resulted

from the new marriage). Against the backdrop of increasing numbers of divorces and adoption cases, Euro-American kinship appears to be reordered by a cycle of connection and disconnection, cutting and stitching kin, that generates what Franklin (apud Strathern, 2005) designated as recombinant families.

If kin is no longer limited by biology, one might question its relevance in discussing parenthood roles. Since there is so much anthropological evidence contesting the biological essence out of which kin relations spring, the debate on whether there is an intrinsic biogenetic nature after all has become pivotal to further kinship analysis, bringing into the spotlight the potential of assisted reproductive technologies to create or replicate that kind of nature. Several scholars (Franklin 2013; Strathern 2005; 1992; Peters 2003; Ross and Moll 2020) have outlined how In Vitro Fertilization has been enriching the debate around the social preconditions and fixed roles imposed on parenthood and how it is performed. By infringing *a priori* kinship boundaries, biotechnology such as ARTs is shaking the basic Western notions of motherhood and the natural call, biogenetically inscribed, to perform this role. As Lock and Nguyen suggest, “it is now possible to “do” kinship rather than simply fulfill an ascribed role, so that biological elements assumed to be relevant to kinship and socially meaningful kinship categories are now undermined, in particular when use is made of gestational surrogacy and IVF with ovum donation” (Lock și Nguyen 2018, 267). ARTs nowadays relocate biology in the parenthood spectrum; undoubtedly ovum, sperm, genes still play a crucial role in breeding life, however they do not breed parenthood or kin relations axiomatically and, consequently, personhood and identity. In Western view (Carsten 2004; Franklin 2013; Strathern 1992), parenthood would be traditionally described as a successful passing through a sequence of phases, starting from the desire for children (imprinted in the parents’ identity from their childhood through socialization), conception (sexual reproduction between a male and a female) to building filiation based on this through nurture and care of the newly born child. Through technological manipulation of the biogenetical facts, ARTs are breaking the ‘natural’ cycle of parenthood fulfillment into unrelated separated phases (Strathern 2005; Franklin 2013). Not only does biology become relative in the process of reproduction, but also parenthood is redefined. ARTs accentuate the contrast between the genitor, biological parent, and the social parent, distinction present also in the cases of fostering, adoption or blended families emerged from divorce. It involves similar ‘cutting’ and ‘recombination’ procedures in the conditions allowing kin performance, generating a hybrid constellation of relations rooted in the

very choice of having a child: “by taking apart different components of motherhood and fatherhood one is also putting them together in new ways, in both conception procedures and in rearing practices, and then all over again in combinations of the two” (Strathern 2005, 25).

Miracle Mothers¹. Questioning the IVF motherhood

It is anthropology’s duty to ask what constitutes motherhood anymore if the biological ground is not inherently producing the social bonds between parents and children— is it merely a choice, a process, both? In the Euro-American landscape, motherhood has been constructed as a natural fact, linking the mother’s identity axiomatically to giving birth and thus to the creation of a ‘natural’ relationship with her child, whereas fatherhood is defined as a social/cultural phenomenon, involving an artificial bond, preconditioned by the mother-child relation (Strathern 1992). The Euro-American mother exists first and foremost because of her biological construction that enables pregnancy and giving birth, the fundamental experiences for becoming a mother. Yet, as explained before, ARTs are altering the reproductive cycle, transforming the motherhood from a natural process to a “technological achievement” (Franklin 2013, 751). The ‘natural’ sequence of events in the maternal development are reordered as distinct and discontinuous stages - genetic, gestational, social, revealing different meanings for motherhood. ARTs have given mothers more opportunities to (per)form their identities by creating a fluidified conceptual space for motherhood to emerge through the ‘helping hand of technology’ (Becker 2000, Franklin 1997, Thompson 2005). Whether it is perceived as a process of becoming or as a choice, as contended by Strathern (1992; 2005), IVF (as well as other ARTs) has invested motherhood with versatile dimensions. Extracting, exchanging and substituting previously fixed biogenetic material by means of IVF has engendered new inclusion and exclusion possibilities for performing kin (Ross and Moll, 2020). Instead of confronting the stigma associated with their reproductive flaws, ARTs are thought to have empowered women to actively express their agency in becoming mothers. By means of biotechnology, women are seen as having the power to tame the previously uncontrollable nature. Suffering from diverse forms of infertility or lacking a partner no longer represent a dead end for motherhood. Whether one cannot fulfill the genetic, gestational or social role, ARTs offer the

¹ In the beginning of the assisted reproductive technology era, IVF babies would be referred to as “miracle babies”. At the same time, ‘miracle mothers’ alludes to the first chapter of Franklin’s 2013 book (Biological relatives: IVF, stem cells, and the future of kinship) called Miracle Babies.

solutions for these women - frozen embryo transfer, in vitro fertilization or gestational carriers and using sperm donors and IVF treatments if one wants to become a single mother.

But is IVF for real this technological breakthrough breeding miracles for mothers? There is a whole different anthropological scholarship arguing against its liberating force from the biogenetical imprisonment, contending instead that it only reinforces the conceptualization of motherhood as social expectation, reproducing as well all the hardship and stigma that comes alongside with it. Through the looking-glass, IVF is not diminishing the primacy of biogenetics in constructing and performing kinship and parenthood, functioning as a dismantling instrument, rather it stresses their importance through the technological assistance it provides as an adjuvant tool, that ‘helping hand of Nature’. The imperative of motherhood is entrenched through the assisted reproductive technologies, argues Greil (1991 apud Bell, 2019), since they transformed infertility from the previous despair of childlessness and failure into a liminal stage of “not yet pregnant” (483); those intending to become parents and resorting to ARTs are neither parents nor childless, but child seeking (Becker 2000). “The promise of happiness” as designated by Franklin (2013), involves massive costs - financially, temporarily, psychologically, physically, which individuals are willing to undergo despite the non-arbitrary high chance of lack of success¹. Assuming these exacerbated risks by appealing to IVF reflects, as Bell’s study shows, the high value placed on biology in creating kinship by her respondents. Thus, the IVF industry not only rests on the cultural understanding of biogenetical primacy in producing parenthood, it instrumentalizes it for its benefits. Comparing and contrasting adoption and IVF treatment for infertile couples desiring to have children, Bell (2019) outlines how adoption is treated as the last resort in favor of IVF, since it is perceived as unable to offer neither a biological bonding with the child, nor the pregnancy experience. This view augments the costs of the adoption procedure in the eyes of desperate individuals seeking biological parenthood, which are considerably smaller than the ones estimated for IVF. Yet their magnitude pales since the value of the IVF achievement is immeasurable.

Why is IVF the exact opposite of a blessing in disguise for women, especially for those seeking this treatment because of infertility reasons? Several studies discuss the stigma associated with women’ infertility and its costs (Sternke and Abrahamson, 2015; Bell, 2019; Ulrich and Weatherall

¹ According to American Pregnancy Association (2018), on average there is a 70% failure rate for IVF treatments (Bell, 2019). [v] Ulrich and Weatherall (2000)’s research findings in New Zealand, as well as Bell’s (2019) and Sternke and Abrahamson’s (2015) in the US support this claim (to quote a few).

2000; Peters 2003; Paxson 2003; Ross and Moll 2020). ‘Blocked Fallopian tubes’, ‘incompetent cervix’, ‘hostile mucus’, ‘failure to conceive’ - these are only a few examples of the reasons outlined for women’s infertility which ultimately define it as a physical impairment marking fundamentally their identity since it hinders their potential to ascribe to the normative expectations of Euro-American womanhood. Womanhood and motherhood are intertwined as depicted by the scholastic tradition on the matter, thus breeding children is perceived for many as an ultimate ‘natural’ goal for achieving parenthood identity and conforming to social norms. “Children are social goods” asserts Franklin (Franklin 2013, 749), and the lack of them attracts “high social penalties” such as alienation, social exclusion, stigmatization and so forth (Peters 2003). Consequently, it becomes a matter of social responsibility for women to overcome the inadequacy of the failure of infertility in their lives (Sternke și Abrahamson 2015). This artificial agency imposed on women is exploited by IVF technique, which is promoted as a means to create “a child on one’s terms” (Bell 2019, 490), a mechanism for infertile people to regain control over their reproduction. But the extraordinarily little rates of success of the method show how limited individual control there is in it, despite all the tremendous efforts these people are orthodoxly going through, constantly and unceasingly, residing on a trace of hope. And this is not limited only to Euro-American cultural environment, similar tensions for women undergoing IVF can be found in the Middle East, South Asia or Africa, where in Islamic communities ARTs are seen as treatment not only for infertility, but also for social and psychological suffering caused by it against the backdrop of the women’s social role as birthing life (Ross and Moll, 2020; Hampshire and Simpson 2015). In addition, as Paxson’s Greek fieldwork shows (2003), for some women resorting to IVF treatments is still a source of internalized shame and guilt. Paxson’s respondents would confess concealing undergoing an IVF treatment because the use of such methods would expose the biological inability to fulfill the prescribed motherhood roles, a sign of weakness. Following these scholastic voices indicates that despite the fact that IVF procedure is investing mothers with agency and control over their bodies and reproductive choices transgressing biological boundaries, it does not succeed in a like manner at transgressing social norms imposed on motherhood. As the ethnographic findings outlined previously depict, all the effort put in undergoing IVF is concealed in the illusory envelope of personal choice, despite being de facto a struggle to comply with societal expectations on achieving and performing motherhood.

Discussion: Undoing Motherhood?

It appears that there is no consensus on the emancipatory role of IVF for mothers, even though it certainly disrupts the ‘natural’ reproductive cycle, redesigning the reproductive maternal body. Yet, as outlined before, IVF does not diminish the role of biology in performing parenthood, it only replaces it in the sequence of reproductive events. It remains debatable whether undergoing this procedure is genuinely liberating women from the imposed patriarchal social norms of motherhood or it allows them the freedom of choice for shaping their mothering identity. In this article we have tried to analyze how kinship can be understood beyond the biological boundaries, focusing on motherhood fulfillment. Our endeavor aimed at broadening the discussion on what constitutes a good or bad mother against the backdrop of interventionist technologization of reproduction by means of IVF treatment.

Under the Western cultural umbrella, producing and enacting parenthood have been coined as biologically grounded and regulated; the implications for women of this determinist view have been more adverse in the patriarchal setting characteristic for this environment. The gradual practice that begins with intercourse, pregnancy until the moment of the painful division that results with birth has had an internal component that tied women under the control of male culture not essentially, but partially and intrinsically through social norms and behaviors. This point indicates that procreation has fundamentally changed women’s emotional lives, mental representations of their bodies and their concrete bodies from their first menstruation to menopause. Girls are taught to use their space differently from boys, whereas boys are inclined to use outer space, for girls inner space represents the feminine core-gender-identity (Welldon, 1992, pg. 43-4). This crucial dichotomy between inner and outer finds application when it comes to heterosexual intercourse which sometimes melts its boundaries when one body meets the other, the ovulation happens even though the ovum might not meet a spermatozoon, however only and only through penetration which happens internally, a zygote formation gets materialized and parenthood comes into being. By ‘inserting’ and ‘forming’ and therefore ‘possessing’, it is established the duality between those who own the power and those who are powerless. In a patriarchal society power always belongs to men; he owns the power to insert his spermatozoon through penetration by intercourse, if the zygote is formed since his spermatozoon was strong enough to resist through the ovulation and finally the zygote, which will develop into a human

form, would again be owned by his/her father (preferably a his). Adoption and assisted reproductive technologies have made possible an alternative to deconstruct this ‘natural’ understanding of motherhood that subjugates women to male power by invading over her inner space and claiming it as their own territory. IVF, in this case, disassembles and reassembles the natural reproductive flow of substances, combining the formerly prescribed constitutional elements in a more flexible fashion. One of the main consequences of this biotechnological adjustment is the new elastic framework of motherhood that weakens the intransigent patriarchal chains defining this institution. By introducing new mothers, the traditional institution of motherhood yields from its maternal power; the ideal model of motherhood is now shattered because the maternal power is distributed to every woman who desires to have a child, releasing them from the constraint of the traditional family, or from the ‘divine endowment’ of functional ovaries.

Even though IVF may revolutionize the prospect of the family and the process of parenthood emergence by relaxing the dichotomy between the one who has the power over the other who remains powerless, it is debatable if it has left such a progressive footprint on the way we define kinship. By offering the promise of creating biogenetic kinship where it is not naturally possible, the IVF method reinforces the primacy of biology for performing the ‘right’/’good’ motherhood. Although fertilization happens outside the female womb without the need for sexual intercourse, pregnancy and birth in the canonical form, it entails a continuation of the biological process, despite the technologized intervention. Instrumentalizing the desire for being tied biogenetically with their children, IVF method may also involve a continuation of the social expectations pressing onto mothers’ identity. Moreover, the endurance of the biological process can produce clear distinctions between fertile women and their natural womb and infertile women who must struggle to obtain an artificial one. The artificial womb may be considered a possession of men who are the one to condemn women for their infertility.

Natural calling, patriarchal institution, personal choice, technological achievement - the versatile ways of perceiving motherhood have led to even more diverse ways of performing kin. Whether or not IVF procedure manages to disregard the patriarchal norms appointed to motherhood, operating by dint of a technologized logic of inclusions and exclusions in the reproductive cycle facilitates a processual perspective over the course of becoming a mother. Changing and

interfering in the sequence of biological events leading to the establishment of motherhood identity in the patriarchal framework, IVF, alongside other ARTs forms have dissolved the fixed boundaries between good and bad motherhood conduct, emphasizing an highly individualized process of becoming, conditioned merely by a high degree of personal involvement, which can take diverse forms. There is still much further research and ethnographic evidence needed to give a more conclusive answer to this dilemma.

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