

VIRGIN MOTHERS AND PALATABLE WOMEN:  
CAN WE TRANSFORM THE SCRIPT OF INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD?

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis engages with the intersection between motherhood studies and theological studies. It analyses the possibility of writing a script of empowered mothering that both rejects, and transforms, the script of normative motherhood. As Motherhood Studies is a relatively new field, there are areas that require further research. Popular culture and social policy continue to limit women's autonomy in relation to mothering; developing resistance scripts to normative motherhood is therefore essential. This thesis is grounded in both maternal theory and feminist theory, and how these can inform Theological study.

The first chapter engages with hermeneutical analysis of key Biblical texts and figures; 1 Timothy 2:15, Eve, and Mary. The second chapter draws on social constructivism to explore the ways in which normative motherhood limits women's bodies and identities. The third chapter galvanises the methodology used throughout to draw out resistance scripts to normative motherhood. This thesis finds that normative motherhood does indeed place limitations on women's bodies and identities, but these limitations are not restricted to pregnant women and mothers, but instead affect women at every stage of their life. It argues that societal expectations of motherhood become internalised, leading to self-regulatory and damaging behaviours. Crucially, this thesis argues it is possible to denounce the script of normative motherhood and re-write a new one that is reflective of empowered mothering. There is room for an interdisciplinary approach between Motherhood Studies and Theological study, and this thesis demonstrates that religious texts can be an important contributor in writing resistance scripts. As such, there is space for women of faith to critically engage with their religion to create scripts grounded in faith.

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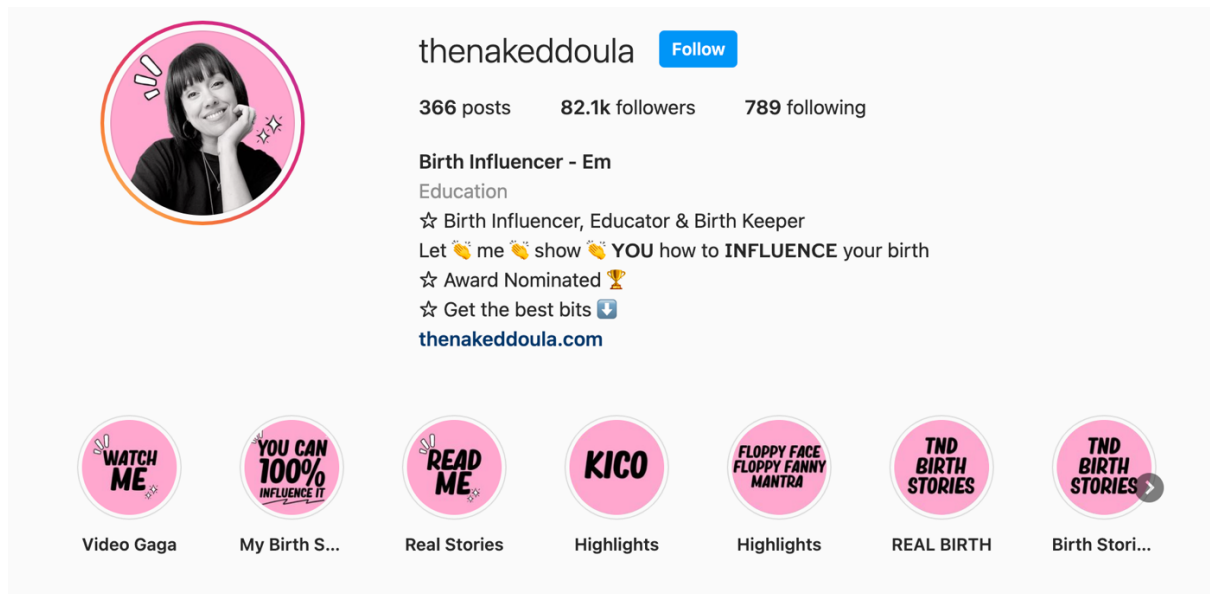


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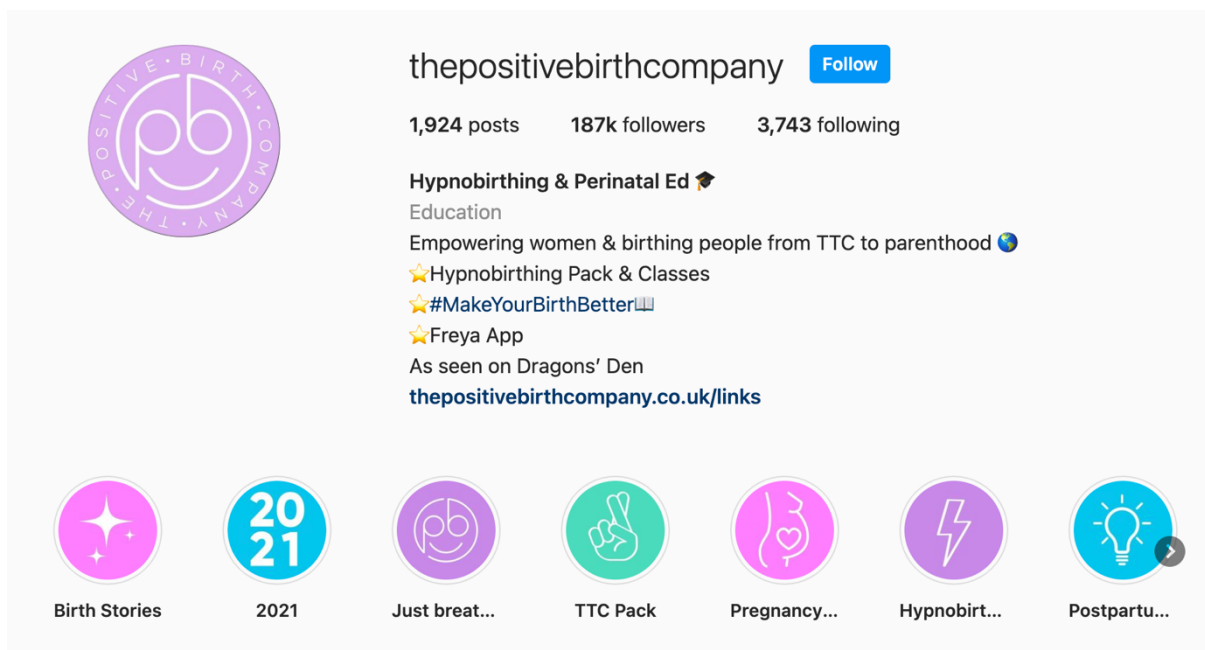


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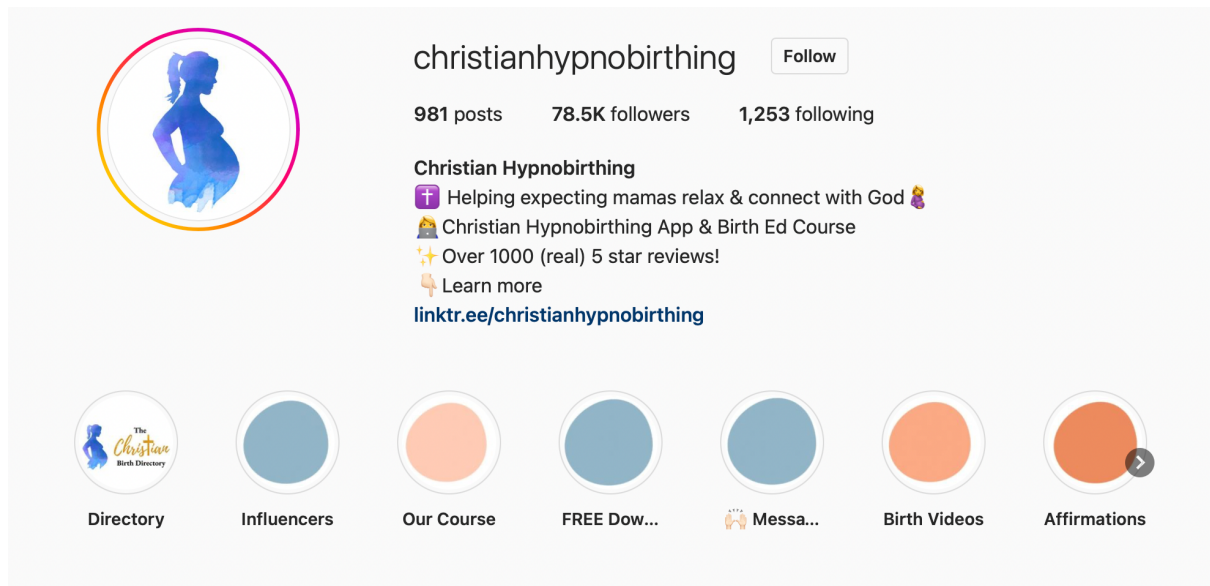


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# INTRODUCTION

## Introduction:

This theological research is situated within the wider field of motherhood studies, drawing on maternal theory to further dissect the practice of empowered mothering. Throughout this research, I will address three research questions, organised into three distinct chapters.

Research Question One: Can we re-read Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering?

Research Question Two: What limitations does normative motherhood place on women's identities and women's bodies?

Research Question Three: Can we create a toolbox for empowered mothering?

In response to my first question, the simple answer is "yes". However, to do so requires a level of intersectionality between maternal theory and feminist theory, drawing on the tools of each to create one's own understanding of theology. In doing so, I realise the possibilities of re-reading Biblical texts in a way that draws on the reader's needs and responses to feminist theory; in the context of this thesis, the reader being mothers. Second, as outlined in maternal theory, the definition of normative motherhood is reflective of patriarchal motherhood, which is defined by Adrienne Rich (1986) in *Of Woman Born*. Rich's (1986) is a huge contributor to the field of motherhood studies, as her work specifically engages with dismantling institutional motherhood by focusing on the experience of mothering. Normative motherhood is intensive motherhood; an institution of motherhood whereby women must devote all aspects of their life to their children, restricting them from experiencing their own

identities as women. In my final chapter, I employ Adrienne Rich's (1986) theory of the experience of mothering, a woman defined script of what it means to be a mother. Alongside this, I draw on understandings and views of Goddess spirituality in order to develop a toolbox for women to utilise – taking what they need – when it comes to mothering.

Together with maternal theory, my research will also be grounded in feminist theory, in that I aim to remove the normative male viewpoint and experience of the world and instead focus on illuminating the female voice throughout. In doing so, I further highlight the inequity that continues to exist between men and women in the modern world. Important to note, however, is that I approach this research from a cis-gendered, white, and educated female point of view and as such I am aware of my own bias when it comes to reflecting upon experience. I am not, however, a mother. I do not have children of my own but as I approach the time in my life where I am beginning to consider these options, I wish to deepen my understanding, and critically engage with, motherhood in the modern world. I feel it important to highlight here that throughout my discussion, my focus is on cis-gendered heterosexual women. That is not to say that the experiences of trans-women and trans-men, or the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community are not vital in our understanding of contemporary motherhood, but rather I wish to approach this research within my own authentic and ethnographic experiences. A final point to note is that my research is primarily concerned with women that do indeed want to become mothers. Central to my own feminist disposition is the importance of choice, and I feel it pertinent to express that I believe women have the absolute right to choose not to become mothers, but as my research aims to examine the practice of empowered mothering, my focus is on the experience of women who do choose, or will choose, to become mothers.

## **Literature Review:**

My research topic situates itself in the broader field of motherhood studies, a term coined by O'Reilly in 2006. Motherhood studies, as a scholarly field, aims to denote the study of motherhood as an area grounded in maternal theory. I am, therefore, particularly interested in the concept of maternal theory and how this links to the wider field of motherhood studies. I am particularly interested in this topic as I approach a certain stage in my life where friends begin to get married and have children, and I find myself drawn to the field of motherhood studies as I battle my own decisions in life. The purpose of this literature review then, is to establish the present state of the field of motherhood studies in order to identify the key areas for further study. As a term coined only in 2006 (O'Brien Hallstein, O'Reilly, Vandenbeld Giles, 2020, pg. 1), I argue that there is indeed much to research in the field of motherhood studies, particularly engaging with the discipline of theological studies, analysing how interpretation of religious texts might be an important contributor to a new script of empowered mothering.

The literature I have selected to review here demonstrate the two areas that I believe dominate motherhood studies. I have chosen this thematic approach as within these broader themes – I argue – more specific fields of research emerge. Alongside maternal theory, I explore the wider theme of the governance of women and mothers, breaking this down into popular culture and social policy and how these contribute to the dichotomy of 'good' mothers and 'bad mothers.' First, however, it is important to understand the meaning of maternal theory as this underpins the field of motherhood studies. As such, I begin with an analysis of maternal theory and its intersection with feminism.

## Maternal Theory

Maternal theory finds its root in the work of Adrienne Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born*. Rich's work ultimately distinguished between motherhood as institution and mothering as experience, the former finding its stronghold in the patriarchal order of society. Rich (1986) is a core voice in the discipline of motherhood studies; despite her work being published in 1986, much of her discussion transfers into contemporary culture, which I will further detail in the final chapter of this thesis. Maternal theory then, draws on this work in the context of the contemporary patriarchal order. What maternal theory does, is continue to distinguish mothering as experience, or empowered motherhood, from motherhood as institution.

Andrea O'Reilly, who coined the term motherhood studies (O'Brien Hallstein, O'Reilly, Vandembeld Giles, 2020, pg. 1), has been writing on the issue of motherhood and mothering for many years. Her work draws on the maternal theory from Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born* and there are two instrumental pieces of work from O'Reilly here; *Maternal Theory:*

*Patriarchal Motherhood and Empowered Mothering* (2020) and *Empowered and Feminist Mothering* (2021). O'Reilly's work is a significant contribution to my wider research and as such it is important to understand her position within maternal theory. These works are modern contributions to the field of motherhood studies, and as such they are pertinent in gaining understanding in motherhood studies in the context of the modern era. I also deal with Joy Green's (2020) *Feminist Mothering* as well as Hayden (2020) *The Politics of Motherhood: Maternal Appeals in the Public Sphere* and finally, Miller-McLemore's (1994) work *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma*. These four academics all contribute to the wider field of motherhood studies but remain situated within their own discipline. O'Reilly is a strong voice within feminism and patriarchal motherhood. Both

Hayden and Joy Green are concerned with politics and governance; Hayden's discipline is within political activism and activities within the public sphere, whereas Joy Green's discipline is rooted within governance in relation to popular culture. Miller-McLemore is a feminist writer within Theological studies. This highlights the idea that the work of exploring empowered mothering calls for a multi-disciplinary approach.

It comes as no surprise there is much consensus with regards to the meaning of maternal theory and all of these scholars share the influence of Adrienne Rich, and, as such, all argue that motherhood – that is normative motherhood – is confined to patriarchal definitions of what a mother is and should be and as such is deeply oppressive to women. O'Reilly (2020) argued that to continue in the separation of mothering from the patriarchal normative motherhood is vital in sustaining a site of empowerment for mothers in the modern day. O'Reilly (2020: 2021) does however take issue with the concept of empowered mothering being defined in terms of something that is opposed to patriarchal motherhood, rather than defining what empowered mothering actually is. I agree with O'Reilly here, there is room for an over-arching definition of empowered mothering. However, I also argue that the danger in strict definitions is that they remove space for nuance leading to a confined understanding of empowered mothering rather than relying on individual authentic experience. A second shared central theme of maternal theory for these scholars is the denouncement of any kind of maternal instinct, specifically in relation to the idea that becoming a mother is fundamental to women. Crucial to maternal theory then, is the separation and complete eradication of maternal instinct from mothering. Again, this builds on the work of Adrienne Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born* whereby she asserted that the very idea of maternal instinct



strips women of the ability to utilise their own knowledge and intellectual ability to experience mothering on their own terms.

O'Reilly (2021), Hayden (2020) and Joy Green (2020) all placed emphasis on the relationship between mothering, or empowered mothering, and political activism. For O'Reilly (2021) to offer a counter-discourse to normative, or patriarchal, motherhood, is to be involved in the political act of catalysing change through the way in which children are raised. Hayden (2020) argued that women have used their maternal status to enact change and create a movement of solidarity. Joy Green (2020) goes that little further, focusing on the combination of feminism with empowered mothering as a political act that overtly challenges patriarchal structures (pg. 36). I agree with this sentiment and argue that to uproot normative motherhood through the act of empowered mothering is in itself a political act. I do, however, find issue here as there does not appear to be a way to carry out empowered mothering. Again, I assert that there are dangers in prescribing a definition to empowered mothering, but I do argue there is a need to establish a set of frameworks that can equip women with the necessary tools to support them with *doing* empowered mothering. It is important to note here that according to O'Reilly (2021) although there may be some similarities between empowered mothering and feminist mothering, they are in fact different. For O'Reilly (2021) empowered mothering becomes a state of mothering defined as a re-definition of normative motherhood, a space where a mother is empowered to make choices based on her resistance to normative motherhood. Feminist motherhood, for O'Reilly (2021) is where decisions are made in response to a feminist disposition rather than a rejection of normative mothering. I disagree somewhat with O'Reilly (2021), both feminist

mothering and empowered mothering stem from a choice to resist patriarchal structures and become a political act of resistance, and as such they should be considered together.

Miller-McLemore's (1994) *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma*

approaches empowered mothering from a different point of view, one that is rooted in her Christian faith. Miller-McLemore's (1994) work is incredibly important in re-imagining patriarchal structures within Christianity and finding a site of empowerment within the Church. I argue that this is immensely important as both feminist mothering and empowered mothering should be cautious not to exclude women based on religious disposition. Miller-McLemore (1994) argued that Christianity has limited women to their 'functions as wives and mothers' (pg. 136) and has created a delusion of a perfect mother. Miller-McLemore's (1994) work goes on a journey to liberate women from their confined definitions within Christianity, and she offers a form of empowered mothering grounded in Christian faith. This allows for a maternal theory to prevail that is inclusive as opposed to exclusive, offering women of faith a key tool in challenging normative motherhood, a huge triumph, I argue, in the field of motherhood studies.

### **Governance**

Much of the literature within the broader field of motherhood studies focuses on sociological and critical theory of the governance of mothers and the different means by which this control is realised in the modern world. Here I focus on two key areas of governance: popular culture and social policy, and how these promulgate the dichotomy of the 'good' and 'bad' mother. I have chosen to explore these particular themes as they have a direct link to the experience of the modern mother. Popular culture – in the form of advertising, TV, film and

news – engulf our everyday lives, and social policy undoubtedly affects the experience of everyday life. The common theme across the literature is that in each instance, it contributes to a discourse of good mothers and bad mothers, categorising women into each; with the overall assertion that the good mother is an unrealistic standard that many women cannot achieve.

### **Popular Culture**

Popular Culture reflects the core beliefs of a society at any given time, it is filtered through our advertising, TV shows, films, and even our news, and perhaps a more recent phenomenon, through social media. To not be engaged with popular culture would mean a complete disassociation with society, which for most is not an option. As such, popular culture inhabits our everyday lives, whether we scroll, watch, or read. Clive Marsh's (2006) *'High Theology'/'Popular Theology'? The Arts, Popular Culture and the Contemporary Theological Task* explored the intersection between theology and popular culture, ultimately arguing that theology and popular culture are 'bound up with one another' (pg. 447). Marsh (2006) explained culture broadly as a 'collection of value systems we inhabit' arguing that religion in itself can be described as a form of popular culture (pgs. 447-449). It is important, therefore, to not separate religion from popular culture, as there is much at play between them. That is, popular culture can indeed be reflective of theological thought, and I argue this is no different for the 'collection of value systems we inhabit' (Marsh, 2006, pg. 447) when it comes to motherhood. Throughout this thesis, I argue there is a connectedness between Biblical interpretations of motherhood and the collective acceptance of normative motherhood; this too can be seen through popular culture. Much of the literature I refer to here shares the belief that popular culture contributes to an idealised and unrealistic

representation of what a mother should be, expressed in the dichotomy of the 'good mother' and 'bad mother.'

In *The Mommy Myth* Douglas and Michaels (2005) analysed the role of popular culture in contributing to an idealised representation of motherhood, asserting that there are enormous disparities between the social representation of motherhood and the experience of mothering. Douglas and Michaels (2005) begin in the 1970s, exploring how film, TV, advertising, and the news have presented a standard of motherhood that is impossible to achieve. Their work is extensive, and importantly, they recognise the variations in the experience of being a mother, showing an understanding they cannot, and do not, speak to the experience of everyone. I agree, however, with their assertion that popular culture cannot be escaped in the modern world, and with their method of engaging directly with images presented to us through popular culture. As I have highlighted above, popular culture is woven into the fabric of everyday life and informs the way people behave. Douglas and Michaels draw closely on the representation of mothers in the media, particularly in the news, and how this further amplifies the good mother / bad mother dichotomy. Douglas and Michaels (2005) argued that mothers are subject to a plethora of images to convey expectations of what a mother should be; for Douglas and Michaels (2005), this exaggerates the 'myth [...] that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding' (pg. 3). These images present a good mother as devoting her whole being to her children, an impossible standard that leaves mothers in a position to never be good enough. Douglas and Michaels (2005) call this the new momism. It is important to note that Douglas and Michaels (2005) are incredibly critical of the postfeminist script of having it all, arguing that this further promulgates the new momism. I agree with Douglas and Michaels (2005) here as the postfeminist sentiment

that women can master all areas of life is ignorant in not considering the bearing of popular culture, social policy and capitalist agendas on lived experiences.

Elizabeth Podnieks (2012) echoed the work of Douglas and Michaels (2005) and argued that the media both 'praises and vilifies mothers' (pg. 14) in that they are constantly categorised into good mothers or bad mothers. Podnieks' (2012) *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture* is a compilation of scholarly work that examines the representation of mothers across media outputs. Her claims are supported by a variety of scholars around the field of motherhood studies, one of which is Fiona Joy Green's (2012) "Real(ity) TV Practices of Surveillance: Evaluating Mothers in Supernanny and Crash Test Mommy" where she explores the representation of mothers in these hit TV shows. Ultimately, Joy Green (2012) argued that these programmes contribute to the dichotomy of the good and bad mother, presenting us with the archetypical bad mother who does not have control of her family. Which, I argue, in line with maternal theory discussed earlier, contributes the normative, patriarchal idealisation and institution of motherhood. According to Joy Green (2012), 'surveillance techniques' are employed by these shows to encourage society to judge the women in the shows as good mothers or bad mothers (pg. 69). I agree with Joy Green's (2012) argument here in that the very foundations of these shows are designed to single out so called bad mothers for their lack of conformity to normative motherhood. I concur that this further contributes to the good mother/bad mother dichotomy portrayed through popular culture. Jo Littler's (2020) *Mothers behaving Badly: Chaotic hedonism and the crisis of neoliberal social reproduction* further examined the latter half of this dichotomy through the mother characters in popular films and TV shows. Littler (2020) argued that modern depictions of motherhood are 'a blend of extreme hedonism and chaos' (pg. 499). She argued that the

image of the mother behaving badly is positioned somewhere between the ‘vilification’ of the welfare mom – ‘breeding’ and draining the system – and the ‘veneration’ of the ‘mumpreneur’ – raising her children and running a business (Littler, 2020, pg. 500). Furthermore, both Hughes Miller (2020) and Bromwich (2020) contest that popular culture has led to a construction of the idealised mother, categorising women into good mothers or bad mothers, and ultimately performing the act of governance whilst doing so. In the emerging field of girlhood studies, there is beginning to be a deeper exploration of the dichotomy of ‘good girl’ and ‘bad girl’, this research however, is focusing on how this contrast emerges in the discipline of motherhood studies.

There is, I propose, a shared belief of these scholars, and across the wider field of motherhood studies, that popular culture can be held responsible for (although not independently) the reinforcement of the idealisation of the good mother archetype. Consequently, it contributes to the good mother/bad mother dichotomy cultivating a standard of motherhood that is normative and unrealistic. This highlights the impact governance has; as society begins to govern mothers, mothers begin to govern themselves. This will be explored in more detail below.

### **Social Policy**

Social policy governs society as a whole and literature within the field of motherhood studies has argued that some policies are discriminatory against mothers and further contribute to the good mother/bad mother dichotomy. Here in, I engage first with Bromwich (2020) *Formal Governance of and by Mothers: Mothers, Public Policy and Law* and Hughes Miller (2020) *The Governance of Mothers*. Both Bromwich (2020) and Hughes Miller (2020) argued

that mothers are formally governed by both social policies, and by themselves. Bromwich (2020) takes a social constructivist understanding of social policy in that societal thought influences policy, which in turn further promulgates the good mother/bad mother dichotomy. She highlights two areas in which this is true: child welfare policies and maternity pay (Bromwich, 2020). Hughes Miller (2020) agrees with Bromwich (2020) also asserting child welfare policies govern mothers. In this instance, both Bromwich (2020) and Hughes Miller (2020) argue that child welfare policies govern mothers through defining them as bad mothers and a risk to their children, resulting in children being removed from their care based on these definitions. It is important to note that neither believe child welfare policies to be inherently negative, but they agree their contribution to definitions of bad mothers needs to be acknowledged.

For maternity pay, Bromwich (2020) explored this in the context of the USA, where there is no federally paid maternity act; whereas the UK does have maternity pay policies. However, Bromwich's (2020) claim that maternity pay reflects social structures is not contextual to the USA. The UK's maternity pay is also indicative of social structures in that it places further expectations on mothers remaining at home as primary caregiver but also the requirement that women should return to work. Bromwich (2020) attested that this contributes to expectations of fulfilling normative motherhood, with many women not achieving these expectations, thus being categorised as bad mothers.

Hughes Miller (2020) goes further, employing Foucault's concept of self-surveillance, or panopticism. Panopticism is the theory of internal surveillance whereby the external gaze of others becomes internalised, leading to self-surveillance or self-governance. Hughes Miller

(2020) argued that the 'institutional and cultural' definitions of what a good mother is becomes internalised by mothers leading them to self-govern, contributing to further perpetuation of the good mother/bad mother dichotomy. Hughes Miller (2020) asserted that this is maintained through popular culture, and more recently through social media. I agree with Hughes Miller's (2020) use of Foucault's panopticism here and agree that this idealisation of what a good mother is becomes internalised, leading to self-governance. The pervasiveness of popular culture, particularly on social media platforms, leads to self-surveillance behaviours of wanting to present a certain persona to the world, one that fits the expected norm. In the same way Naomi Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* argued that women internalise the male gaze, leading to women presenting a persona into the world that fits the male defined expected norm. The same can be said for mothers, they internalise a kind of maternal gaze, resulting in self-surveillance to present a particular version of doing motherhood that conforms to the expected norm.

Another key area in the literature related to social policy is the area of paid work. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) believed that paid work was the key to women's liberation, and in the context of 1949 France, it may well have contributed to women's access to the public sphere. However, the socialist feminist fight against women being limited to the private sphere was only a small step towards liberation. Bryan (2020) in *Mothers and Work: Social Reproduction and the Labours of Motherhood* argued that the role of women as both mothers and primary caregivers has influenced their paid work (pg. 336), and policy continues to contribute to the domestication of women. The ONS statistics for 2020 demonstrate that even though the gender pay gap may be closing, it still sits at a staggering 7.4% (ons.gov, 2020). Miller-



McLemore (1994) analysed the state of women's paid work from a Christian perspective in *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma*. Miller-McLemore (1994) argued that Christian doctrine has emphasised the distinction between men belonging to the public sphere and women belonging to the private sphere, whereby Biblical texts – such as 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – are used as justification for this. Miller-McLemore (1994) attested that the Christian tradition has historically reduced the role of women to mothers with little room for anything else. As a Christian herself, Miller-McLemore (1994) draws on much of her own experience and the experience of her peers and is much like Rich's approach in *Of Woman Born* in that sense. Miller-McLemore (1994) claimed that there are several changes that need to occur within Christianity to enable women of faith to be fulfilled. Firstly, she argues that the mother's voice should be heard, secondly, Biblical texts should be re-read in new ways, thirdly, a maternal image of God is needed and finally, there is a need to destroy the patriarchal definition of motherhood in order to make way for a new one (Miller-McLemore, 1994). In doing so, we are able to address the intersection between religious governance over women's bodies which is a consequence of androcentric interpretation, and wider control through social policy and popular culture.

### **Literature Review – Concluding Thoughts**

Maternal theory stems from the work of Adrienne Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born* and aims to further distinguish the institution of motherhood from the experience of mothering. It deems the normative understanding of motherhood as rooted in patriarchal definitions of what a mother should be; maternal theory therefore attempts to divert our understanding of mothering away from these patriarchal definitions. Maternal theory draws on empowered mothering as opposed to intensive mothering; however, it defines empowered mothering as

an act that is not patriarchal motherhood. There is then, room here to further dissect our understanding of empowered mothering and create a toolbox for women to utilise to do empowered mothering, without the risk of restrictive definitions.

Popular culture's influence has perpetuated our understanding of motherhood to be in line with normative, or patriarchal, motherhood through the images relayed to us through advertising, film, TV, the news, and social media. I argue, which I will further explore in the first chapter of this thesis, that religious figures have also been used to legitimise patriarchal definitions of motherhood. As such, when invoking maternal theory, there is a need to reject these images in order to create new ones that are reflective of empowered mothering. From a social constructivist point of view, policies such as child welfare and paid labour both reflect and perpetuate society's understanding of motherhood as synonymous with normative or patriarchal motherhood. This then leads to *panopticism*, a theory proposed by Foucault, whereby women internalise these images of normative motherhood to monitor their own behaviour.

## **My Research**

As motherhood studies is a relatively new field of study, I feel there is still much to research, particularly in the field of empowered mothering. From the review of current literature, I have identified a key area to further research which underpins my thesis, the area of empowered mothering. Much of the literature does not offer a particular definition of empowered mothering other than it being an opposite practice to the patriarchal defined institution of motherhood. As such, there is room here to further our understanding of what is meant by empowered mothering and how this can be carried out in practice. It is

important not to offer a constrained definition of empowered mothering, but to rather develop a framework of what empowered mothering might look like for women, giving them a toolbox of alternative scripts. Within this key area, it is important for there to be a deeper understanding of the contribution of popular culture, with the intersection religion and governance has on the accepted view of normative mothering and what impact this has on women's identities throughout their life. Finally, as Miller-McLemore (1994) argued, there is a need to address images of motherhood presented to us through Biblical texts and Biblical figures. Before we can create new images, we must first destroy the images of patriarchal motherhood that are presented to us within Christianity. Miller-McLemore (1994) also argued that there is room to further re-read and re-define key Biblical texts in a way that enables women within Christianity to feel fulfilled. I believe this to be incredibly important in developing a framework of empowered mothering that is wholly inclusive.

### **Research Questions and Methodologies**

In response to these identified areas needing more research, I have created three research questions that intersect with the wider developmental understanding of empowered mothering. This research project is therefore divided into three chapters, with each chapter addressing one question. My research is grounded in both maternal theory and feminist theory throughout; each chapter engages with a particular methodology, which I discuss here, that is best suited to addressing the research question.

## Chapter One: Can we re-read certain Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering?

Chapter one therefore, addresses this first research question, using hermeneutical analysis to critically engage with, and re-read, key Biblical passages and figures. All textual references will use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. I also employ the work of Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (originally published in *Screen* in 1975) to argue that in the same way Hollywood movies are created with the male gaze in mind, so too are Biblical passages.

This chapter begins with the problematic text identified by Miller-McLemore (1994), 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

'Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, providing they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty' (1 Tim 2:11-15, NRSV).

This Biblical passage presents us with numerous issues that need re-addressing and re-reading if we are to begin developing a theology aligned with empowered mothering. First, it condones man's authority over women. Second, it reinforces Eve's responsibility for the Fall detailed in Genesis chapter 3. Finally, it asserts that the only way for women to achieve salvation is through bearing children. In this section, I first deal with the issues this Biblical passage presents us in more detail, concluding that when taken out of historical context, this text is incredibly damaging in linking the role of women to bearing children. I then appeal to Kenneth L. Waters (2004) *Saved Through Childbearing: Virtues as Children in 1 Timothy 2:11-*

15 to use allegorical interpretation to re-contextualise this passage into its historical roots, offering a re-reading of this passage.

I then examine the Biblical figure of Eve in Genesis, concluding that she has become used as a figure within Christian discourse to tie women to sin. Eve is an important figure in relation to our understanding of patriarchal motherhood as she is the first mother and is referred to in the text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. I then employ feminist biblical interpretation to reframe the narrative of Eve, concluding that she can be viewed as a woman of agency and power.

Following this, I look to the figure of the Virgin Mary, a key figure particularly within Catholic discourse. I analyse Mary's virginal status and her role as mother concluding that she has become a figure in which women are expected to replicate but can never achieve. I then appeal to the work of Vuola's (2019) ethnographic study examining how mothers in South America relate to the figure of the Virgin Mary, concluding that Mary is a figure in which these women find closeness to the divine. Finally, inspired by the work of Catholic feminist Theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, I offer a re-reading of Mary to demonstrate how she can be seen to reflect empowered mothering.

The final section within chapter one examines the relationship between Eve and Mary in Christian discourse, concluding that these figures have been used throughout history to control female sexuality, condoning the belief that women are innately tied to the role of mother.

## Chapter Two: What limitations does normative motherhood place on women's identities?

The second chapter of my research relies on social constructivism to analyse the role normative motherhood has in limiting women's identities. This chapter is divided into four sections, firstly engaging with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex* before exploring the fertile body, the pregnant body, and the postpartum body. I begin here with Beauvoir (1949) as her work in *The Second Sex* argued that becoming a mother is so closely tied to patriarchal definitions of femininity, women are reduced to their childbearing capabilities.

I then examine the fertile body, or the menstruating body, engaging with the themes of menstruation, contraception, and abortion. Within this section, I deal with the controls placed upon women's bodies and conclude that these are damaging and dangerous. Access to contraception and abortion is often seen as a corner stone of the feminist movement, I assert however, that these must be evaluated more critically. This key part of a woman's life before transitioning to becoming a mother is riddled with shame and anxiety, limiting women's identities. Secondly, I analyse the treatment and representation of the pregnant body. During this stage of a woman's life, the identities of mother and woman become the most blurred. During pregnancy, I argue, women are subjected to extreme levels of control, by both society and by themselves. Appealing to Foucault's theory of *panopticism*, I argue women internalise the expectations placed upon them to monitor and control their own behaviour. Through society's acceptance of normative definitions of motherhood, a woman's identity becomes even more restricted when she experiences pregnancy. Finally, I analyse society's treatment of the postpartum body, the point at which woman becomes mother. I

critically evaluate the intensive mothering that stems from normative mothering, concluding that this is especially restrictive for women allowing for no nuance in experience and identity.

### **Chapter 3: Can we create a toolbox for empowered mothering?**

In my final chapter, I aim to create a toolbox for women who wish to engage in empowered mothering. I draw on both maternal and feminist theory closely here, appealing to Adrienne Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born* to highlight the importance in focusing on mothering as an experience. I then employ feminist spirituality and the Goddess to further shape a framework of empowered mothering that is inclusive and synonymous with belief in the divine. First though, I critically engage with the socialist-feminist movement who argue that paid-work is the cornerstone to women's liberation. Here, I argue that this movement does not anticipate the exploitation women will face in the workplace and its contribution to promulgating the discourse of the good mother and the bad mother.

I recognise that this framework of empowered mothering will not work for all women, particularly in humanitarian contexts where there are other varying factors that would need to be considered, such as maternal death rates. I also do not intend for it to be a restrictive definition of what empowered mothering should be. Instead, my intention with the development of this framework is to offer an alternative script to normative motherhood, highlighting tools for women to use to explore empowered mothering in a way that is either grounded to their faith or their life experiences.

CHAPTER 1  
CAN WE RE-READ BIBLICAL TEXTS IN A WAY  
THAT IS REFLECTIVE OF EMPOWERED  
MOTHERING?



## 1. Introduction

Throughout Biblical texts the complexities of female characters are not necessarily well documented. Women are mostly seen to be mothers or are yearning to be so. I would argue, therefore, that Biblical texts present to us the feminine ideal of being a woman is to be a mother. However, the Bible is written by men, and we must therefore ask if it only works to serve their agenda (Yee, 2012, pg. 43). This is problematic as these texts therefore lack a female narrative, instead the female narrative only exists through the male consciousness and is therefore not a female narrative at all.

To further address the above, I employ the work of Laura Mulvey (1989) who explored how cinematic narrative is positioned to appeal to the needs of a male audience; arguing that this theory can indeed be applied to Biblical texts. Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (originally published in *Screen* in 1975) utilised Freudian psychoanalysis to demonstrate how the male viewer's needs are met first as they are considered the target audience. Crucial to Mulvey's (1989) argument is that cinema is constructed in a way of 'active/male and passive/female' (pg. 19). That is that the women's role in a film typically is to be 'looked at and displayed' and she becomes the 'sexual object' which caters to the male gaze of the audience (pg. 19). Films are set up in such a way where the male protagonist takes control of the narrative in order to appeal to the (heterosexual) male audience, whereas women become the passive object to be looked at (pg. 20). Significantly then, the viewers of a film are subject to watching women from the perspective of a heterosexual male, regardless of their own gender, sex, and sexuality. To summarise, Laura Mulvey therefore argued that cinema reflects the patriarchal systems in which society is structured and thus aims to serve the heterosexual male's gaze, and therefore all viewers must watch accordingly. To apply this

theory to Biblical stories, then, Biblical narrative becomes somewhat of an ancient male gaze. In that, just as cinema production is dominated by heterosexual males and thus serves the desires of a heterosexual male audience, the Bible too can be said to serve the desires of a heterosexual male reader. Henceforth, throughout this chapter, I utilise Laura Mulvey's work in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* to analyse Biblical texts as written to serve the agenda, or desires, of the male reader.

This chapter will primarily appeal to feminist theologians and their claim that women have to navigate the world whilst being subjected to the male gaze. Using Mulvey's work, I argue the male gaze can indeed be applied to Biblical texts. I will engage with feminist hermeneutical theory to support my analysis of key Biblical texts and figures, in order to lay the foundations for the rest of this dissertation. The purpose of this research is to critique the systems, or expectations, that being a mother is the sole identity of women. Beginning with the Bible as my foundation is important as the Biblical emphasis on reproduction and family structures has influenced attitudes throughout the centuries. Dawn Llewellyn's (2019) work *Voluntary Childlessness and Christianity: Rejecting the Selfish other*, whilst focusing on women within Christianity who are voluntarily childless, Llewellyn's study offers interesting insight into the impact Christianity has had on the representation of motherhood as the ideal role for women. Llewellyn (2019) argued that Christianity has indeed informed wider discourse on the role of women, essentialising women as mothers (pg. 149-150). Llewellyn (2019) asserted that motherhood is seen as the 'most meaningful contribution women can, and should make to society' and that such a role has a 'salvific impact on society' (pg. 152). This is particularly interesting in relation to both 1 Timothy 2:15 and the Biblical figures of Eve and Mary Mother

of Jesus, and how such Biblical texts and figures promote the association of salvation with motherhood.

In this chapter I will address the question: Can we re-read Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering? As explored in my introduction and literature review, there lacks a particular and specific definition to describe empowered mothering, and with the aim of this research project to identify a framework reflective of empowered mothering, I am cautious to limit the discussion here to one definition. As O'Reilly (2020:2021) found issue in defining empowered mothering as not being patriarchal motherhood, I too wish to define it as more than this. For this chapter, when I refer to empowered mothering, I am bringing in the wider discussions from Rich (1986), Hayden (2020), Green (2020) and O'Reilly (2021), that describes empowered mothering as offering a counter-discourse to patriarchal motherhood; a way of doing mothering differently, that is woman defined and reflective of women's experiences.

First, I analyse the Biblical text 1 Timothy 2:11-15. This text is important to this thesis because it suggests that through childbirth a woman can achieve salvation. This emphasis on the connection of salvation and motherhood is problematic from a feminist point of view as it entirely reduces the life of a woman to her ability to be a mother. I will appeal to feminist theory to embark on an analysis that is rooted in textual criticism in order to see if such a text could ever be reframed, and if not, what can we do with it? I then engage with two key Biblical figures that have undoubtedly been influential in the collective conception of motherhood. Firstly, is Eve, 'the mother of all who live' (Genesis 3:20, NRSV). I will look closely at Eve's connection to sin and death concluding that through patriarchal defined

interpretations, she symbolises the ordinary woman. Secondly, is the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus. The woman that all women should aspire to be, but no ordinary woman can ever be. I analyse the interpretation that Mary is the new Eve, and through her women can find solace. I am particularly interested in the polarisation of Mary's identities, as both Mother and Virgin, and how these contribute to discourse around normative motherhood. Finally, I will explore the parallels that exist between Eve and Mary and how these two figures have been used to categorise women into 'good' women and 'bad' women and the consequences this has on the modern understanding of womanhood.

### **1.1: Taming texts**

*"The heart of a woman's oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles" (Shulamith Firestone, 1970, pg. 81)*

Is the Bible inherently hostile to women? Or, is the presence of hostility furthered by its interpretation and use within the Church, and wider cultural contexts? Do we need to read and understand the Bible in the context of its historical grounding? Should it be read through a contemporary lens? Mary Daly (1992), in her reading of the Bible, asserted that the women's movement becomes a 'threat' to the Christian order (pg.54). Daly is particularly critical of the way in which Biblical texts have been interpreted to serve the patriarchal order. Within this section, I deal with 1 Timothy 2:11-15; examining its potential impact as a Biblical text, it is particularly damaging to the role women can hold in the Church, and I am specifically concerned with 1 Timothy 2:15 as it is this verse where the connection between childbirth and salvation is highlighted.

### 1.1.1: 1 Timothy 2:11-15

‘Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, providing they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty’ (1 Tim 2:11-15, NRSV).

The text of 1 Timothy 2:15 is of particular interest as it specifically addresses the notion of motherhood, placing emphasis on the ideals of woman being mother and hence forth will be rewarded with salvation. In 1 Timothy chapter 2, there are a series of women-specific instructions that both limit and restrict the lives of women, before culminating into the statement that the woman will be saved through bearing children. This Biblical chapter makes reference back to the Creation and the Fall in Genesis in a bid to support its assertions, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” (1 Tim 2:13-14, NRSV). The closing statement of 1 Timothy chapter 2 then appears as a supposed sigh of relief for woman, that despite her transgressions she still has the opportunity for salvation, however only on the condition that she should bear children. It is therefore not difficult to see how this text becomes problematic for women, a text of terror in need of taming (West, 2004).

The way in which 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is interpreted is intrinsically linked to the role women play not only in the church, but also as part of wider society (Vergeer, 2016, pg. 73), and “taming texts” becomes the cornerstone for how others go on to interpret them (West, 2004, pg. 166). That being said, taming the text in question is an onerous task, its role transcends the religious sphere and has been nodded to across popular culture, perhaps most poignantly in Margaret Atwood’s (1985) *The Handmaid’s Tale* (recently adapted into a

popular television series) (West, 2004, pg. 172) and more modern works such as Louise O'Neill's (2015) *Only Ever Yours*. Both popular culture texts present a dystopian world where women exist purely to produce children. Yet to tame such texts is important in moving forwards with feminist critique, as for women of faith to simply critique texts without any room for nuance negates their faith which I argue can be a dangerous consequence of feminist Biblical critique.

When engaging with 1 Timothy 2:15 I find there are several issues to deal with, firstly such a statement supposes that the only way for a woman to be granted salvation is through becoming a mother which becomes increasingly problematic for women of faith who cannot conceive, alongside alienating those that may choose not to. Kartzow's (2016) "Reproductive Salvation and Slavery: Reading 1 Timothy 2:15 with Hagar and Mary" analysed the implications this text has for the Biblical figure of Hagar, a slave for Sarah, who was forced to birth her child. For Kartzow (2016), 1 Timothy 2:15 is too ambiguous in that it does not specify which types of women are to be saved, and what does it mean to be saved? (pg. 89). In the story of Hagar and Sarah, who is to be saved? Is Sarah saved as mother of the child? Is Hagar saved as she gave birth to the child? The connection of salvation and birth is too ambiguous. According to Kartzow (2016), the text in question is responsible for some of the gender stereotypes and "limitations for women" that we have seen throughout history (pg. 89). In the wider context of Biblical texts, is it only women who bear children through marriage who are the ones to be saved? If this is to be the case it suggests that only women who 'belong' to men can achieve salvation (Kartzow, 2016, pg. 90)? From a feminist point of view, this does not do anything for taming a problematic text. Another issue Kartzow (2016) highlights is the role of surrogacy, when women could not bear their own offspring, they

would use their slaves to do it for them; in such case who is to be saved, the surrogate mother or the one who raises the child (pg. 90)? The pivotal criticism from Kartzow (2016) is that there is too great of a connection between women, childbirth and salvation and as such women become held down in both secular and religious life (pg. 100).

Kenneth L. Waters (2004) in *Saved Through Childbearing: Virtues as Children in 1 Timothy 2:11-15* used an allegorical interpretation of the phrase 'saved through childbearing' (1 Tim 2:15, NRSV) in that he argued it is used simply as a metaphor to relay wider Pauline thought and teaching to the historical audience. In doing so, Waters (2004) offers a re-reading of this particular text, or a way to tame this text, in a manner that is less damning for women. Waters (2004) argued that we should take 'childbearing' metaphorically (pg. 713) whereby the author is appealing to the 'audience's familiarity' to relay Christian teaching (pg. 716). That is, Waters (2004) argued that childbearing should not be seen in the literal use of the term (birthing children) but instead seen as the birthing of particular virtues imperative to the wider context of the Pauline tradition (pg. 713, 730, 734). In its wider Biblical context then, Waters (2004) cites Romans 1:16, 10:9, 2 Timothy 3:15 and Ephesians 2:8 to further his argument. All these verses place emphasis on the connection of faith to salvation, and Romans 1:16 asserts '...salvation to everyone who has faith' (NRSV). Waters (2004) thus argued that 'saved through childbearing' is in fact a metaphor to relay that individuals will be saved through faith as opposed to the birthing of literal children (pg. 734). Waters' (2004) theory is compelling in that it contextualises 1 Timothy 2:15 within the wider teachings of the Pauline tradition, which is a crucial step in re-framing this particular text. In understanding childbearing to be a metaphor for virtue-bearing, I argue that this text can indeed be tamed in a more positive light. Outside of the wider context, this text becomes problematic, but

considering other Biblical texts in relation to the Pauline tradition allows for a more nuanced understanding of being saved through childbirth.

### **1.1.2: Taming texts - Reflections**

Kartzow (2016) asked important questions of the text of 1 Timothy 2:15, and I agree that this text is particularly damaging to women's role within the Church and wider Christian society. However, placed within its context, I argue that Waters' (2004) allegorical interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15 allows us to re-contextualise this verse into the wider history and scripture of the Pauline tradition, giving us the opportunity to re-read, or tame, this text in a more affirming way for women.

1 Timothy 2:11-15 is indeed challenging when considering the question of whether we can re-read this text in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering. I argue that whilst it is somewhat possible to free this text from layers of interpretation and view it objectively in its historical context, we remain in the tenuous space between 'child-bearing' and 'virtue-bearing' as a reader, one that is not particularly reflective of empowered mothering. In order to read this text in a more affirming way, the audience must be aware of the historical context; as such, I assert this text is not reflective of empowered mothering in as much as it *could* be read as not referring to childbearing at all. It does, however, succeed in separating motherhood from notions of salvation, which is important in addressing the script of institutional motherhood.



## 1.2: The First Woman

In order to better understand the root of this connection between women, childbirth and salvation, we must first look to the first woman of the Bible, Eve. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 refers to the role of Eve in Genesis and thus Eve is important in our wider understanding of salvation. Eve's role, alongside Adam, is 'to be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28, NRSV) and as such she is the first woman and the first mother. Genesis 1-3 details the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that comes with it, including the first man and the first woman, Adam and Eve. In this section, I am concerned with the figure of Eve, specifically in Genesis 2-4, and her role in the Biblical construction of womanhood and motherhood. I am interested in further exploring her connection to the themes of sin and salvation in respect of motherhood. These texts are crucial in our modern perception of womanhood and motherhood as they influence western societal thinking (Rooke, 2016, pg. 9). This is due to the timeless nature of the text which 'allows it to function equally well in a variety of contexts' (Rooke, 2016, pg. 9). That being it is not necessarily historically fixed, and therefore continues to have influence. I will appeal to the work of Holly Morse's (2020) *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2-4*. I will engage with the link between Eve and sin, death and sexuality and what implications this has on the Biblical construction of women as mothers. Morse (2020) aims to reframe the story of Eve outside of these, typically androcentric, interpretations that has led to the collective association of Eve with sin and death.

### 1.2.1: Eve, Mother of Death or Mother of All Who Live?



Fig. 1: Franz Von Stuck (1893), The Sin. Currently held Gallery of Modern Art, Italy.



Fig 2: William Blake (1795), Satan Exulting Over Eve. Currently held in Tate Britain.

‘...sexuality, temptation, fallenness and sin’ are themes that have been associated with the story of Genesis and themes that still function and influence in a post-Christian society (that is a society not dominated by Christian belief) (Beattie, 2002, pg. 45). In a cultural sense, the story of Eve is well known without needing textual references, she is the figure who disobeyed God and ate the fruit from the tree allowing sin to enter the world. How she has come to be tied so closely to ideas of sin and sexuality is a consequence of centuries of interpretation that formed a widely accepted narrative tightly packaging Eve into a box of sin and death.

Perpetual stereotypes of women, particularly in literature, are that of whores and virgins and wives and mistresses, and the collective thought of Eve is no different (Morse, 2020, pg. 1). To illustrate, in the Disney film *Snow White*, its premise follows a stepmother so caught up in her own beauty she sets out to kill Snow White. Towards the end of the film, the stepmother gives Snow White a poisoned apple which puts Snow White into a deep and deadly sleep. The only cure? True loves first kiss; depicting this connection between sexuality and salvation. Similarly, the film *Pretty Woman* follows the story of a sex worker who is to be saved through a male love interest, again highlighting a connection between sexuality and salvation.

Through centuries of interpretation, the figure of Eve has become damaged, and for Morse (2020) the most damning interpretation of them all is that Genesis 2-3 proves women to be carnal and foolish (pg. 32). Eve’s maternity is important when considering the connectedness of women with mothers and salvation for two key reasons. Firstly, through interpretation of Eve she resembles a ‘nightmarish image’ of a woman that gives birth to sin and death (Morse, 2020, pg. 49). These interpretations have been depicted through art in various ways, but

perhaps most striking – highlighted by Morse, 2020 – are Franz Von Stuck’s *The Sin* (fig. 1) and William Blake’s *Satan Exulting Over Eve* (fig. 2). These two images are important as they both perpetuate Eve’s connection with sexuality and sin. These two images depict the body of Eve and the implied sexuality between her and the serpent in Genesis 3. Through this, Eve’s maternity becomes closely tied with sexuality as well as sin and death (Morse, 2020, pg. 54). As a result of Eve’s transgressions in Genesis 3, God ‘will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children’ (Gen, 3:16, NRSV), and thus her punishment is directly connected to her sexuality, further tightening the connection between motherhood and salvation. Secondly, in Genesis 4, Eve goes on to birth her first child, Cain. Eve becomes the mother of the first murderer (Morse, 2020, pg. 57). Eve’s maternity therefore is associated with monstrosity (Morse, 2020, pg. 57) as her first offspring goes on to commit the first crime and the first murder. Eve’s story, therefore, is defined by patriarchal interpretation, and her motherhood is interpreted ‘through the lens of sin’ which not only reduces her character (Morse, 2020, pg. 61) but is damaging for women throughout history.

### **1.2.2: The First Woman – Reflections**

The book of Genesis is important within the Jewish scriptures of the Tanakh, forming the first book at the Pentateuch, or Torah. However, through the interpretations of Eve, she has indeed become a complex figure within Christian discourse too; as we have seen references made back to her throughout the New Testament, such as in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. In Christian discourse then, Eve has become tightly bound up in a definition of motherhood that is not just negative, but entirely damning. She is held accountable for Original Sin, and this has consequences on future women, closely connecting childbirth with salvation. As Laura Mulvey (1989) argued that women within film are there to serve the male audience, I argue

the same can be said for Eve. The figure of Eve caters for the male reader – and interpreter – resulting in her being used to legitimise the inferior status of women, and as a symbol of the dangerous woman. In Hebrew, the name Eve (חַוְּהָ) is closely translated as the source of life, rotted in the verb “to live” (לַחִיּוּת), however, she is far more convenient to be used as a symbol to reduce women to sinful pleasures. In response to this, there must be a new Eve. A woman that is not disobedient and rebellious, but one that is obedient and controlled. A new narrative to show women how they really should behave. This new narrative is the Virgin Mary.

### **1.3: The Virgin Mary**

In feminist Biblical literature there is much discussion and critique on the nature of the Virgin Mary. She is often caught up in debates regarding the oppression of women, and what contribution a virginal figure has added to this. However, these discussions have not necessarily permeated into secular life, and the impact a virgin mother has had on society's idea of the role of women. Herein I aim to explore the biblical construction of women as mothers; as such, to explore the connection of Mary to wider society beyond academic debate is important. Perhaps the figure of the Virgin Mary is problematic in scholarship because she represents and solidifies the Catholic ideal of womanhood (Vuola, 2019, pg. 57); arguably the ideal of womanhood is motherhood and this link between women and mothers is not solely a religious ideal bound up by Catholic doctrine. In this section, therefore, I will engage with feminist scholarship on the Virgin Mary and assess her developed narrative in relation to motherhood.

Biblical texts emphasise motherhood as a woman's primary and 'most important function' yet the Virgin Mary 'is an impossible model in practice' (Vuola, 2019, pg. 56); that being that a woman cannot be both a virgin and a mother (pg. 64). With this in mind, why has the Virgin Mary become such a venerated figure within the Church for men and women alike? Much of our understanding of Mary is not given to us from the Gospels, but rather it is a culmination of centuries of thought from Church Fathers and Church Councils (Balasuriya, 1994, pg. 18). Notably then, the collective understanding of Mary is a product of male thought, and we should therefore ask ourselves who's agenda does this serve? Just as Laura Mulvey asserted through her critique of women in film, I argue that Virgin Mary too serves the desires of a male audience.

### **1.3.1: Mary as Virgin**

The virginity of Mary – specifically the virgin birth of Jesus Christ – is a prominent aspect of her identity, particularly within the Catholic Church. That notwithstanding, only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke make reference to the virginity of Mary; it is important to note the accounts of the birth of Jesus within these two Gospels are considered as add-ons to the Gospels (Warner, 1978, pg. 4).

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary” (Luke 1:26-27, NRSV).

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they had lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18, NRSV).

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:23, NRSV).

Notably, in this particular translation, Luke explicitly states the virginity of Mary, whereas Matthew 1:18 only suggests her virginity and Matthew 1:23 is referring back to prophecy rather than Mary herself. An important question we must therefore ask ourselves is why is Mary’s virginity a pivotal doctrine of Catholic theology? There are varying motivations for Mary’s virginity being at the strong hold of Catholic belief that are worth consideration. Firstly, virginity is the direct opposite of sexual activity, and the importance of Mary’s virginity suggests there is a need to directly oppose sexual activity. Throughout history, sexuality has become correlated with notions of evil, and as such, Mary as virgin therefore becomes a figure of a “conqueror” against evil (Warner, 1978, pg. 50). This is important when we take into account life before Christianity, and particularly Rome’s worship of Gods and Goddesses; Aphrodite was considered mother of the people of Rome and associated with sex, fertility and desire. Crucially, sexuality and desire came to be considered a great danger to Church Fathers (Warner, 1978, pg. 50). Thus, Mary’s virginity becomes an instrument to “dismantle goddess worship” and ultimately offer a more palatable woman to support the early Church’s needs (Vuola, 2019, pg. 59). Perhaps the virginal aspect of Mary is more of a hidden text, one bound up in centuries of interpretation. Mary’s motherhood is more explicit within the Biblical cannon, and her emphasised connection with virginity less so.

From this, it could therefore be concluded that Mary’s virginity is revered with the upmost importance as she becomes a new feminine figure for early Christians to worship in order to replace the feminine Goddesses of Rome. Interestingly however, the need to impart virginity on a woman suggests Church Fathers felt a need to control female sexuality. In popular

discourse, virginity is something that is considered to be lost when an individual engages in sexual activity. Arguably, this notion of losing is associated seldom with men, instead they are taking a woman's virginity rather than her giving it. This is of interest to this discussion as Ruether (1983) asserted that the function of Mariology within the Church is to assert their own patriarchal ideal of what a woman should be (pg. 149).

In 1854, Pope Pius IX made belief in the immaculate conception dogma, and therefore it is imperative for Catholics to believe the teaching of the immaculate conception (Warner, 1978, pg. 236); as such, Mary is totally free from concupiscence (pg. 237). Of crucial importance was the dogma that came in 1870 when Pope Pius IX asserted the infallibility of the Pope (Warner, 1978, pg. 237) meaning the validity of the Pope and his word could never be questioned. This came at a critical time as the reformation in Europe was unfolding, and individuals were beginning to question the Pope's authority (Warner, 1978, pg. 237). Perhaps then, this was motivated by the political landscape, and was an attempt at settling the waters in an unsettled Europe.

To make reference back to the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, it is important to note these are quite different from one another in their relation to the figure of Mary; for Matthew, Mary is not a central figure within the account, but for Luke she is (Ruether, 1979, pg. 26). Mary's acceptance of this role to carry the son of God and realise the incarnation suggests a level of autonomy and independence, yet Warner (1978) argues this is not the case. Instead, what is happening is Mary's submission to God (pg. 177). Throughout the Bible, women appear in Biblical stories through their relation to men, predominantly as wives and mothers (Yee, 2012, pg. 43). Mary is no different, in both Matthew and Luke, Mary enters the



story as being engaged to Joseph, she is not introduced in her own narrative, but rather she is positioned into the wider male story. As the infancy narratives progress, Mary plays a role in relation to God, that of carrying Jesus Christ, the son of God. Kartzow (2016) discusses the idea of reproductive capital, meaning that women's bodies within Biblical texts – particularly slaves – become a commodity in that they function to produce offspring for women that cannot procreate them themselves. In this context, this reproductive capital was an "important value of a female slave" however, there was little choice as these slaves were commanded to become surrogates by their masters (Kartzow, 2016, pg. 98). Kartzow (2016) then applied this to the infancy narratives of Mary, did she have a choice? (pg. 98). Perhaps Mary was simply following a command from her master and her agency was ignored (Kartzow, 2016, pg. 98). Henceforth, Mary's virginity becomes problematic as it reflects a standard where a woman's "virtues lie in being obedient to the authority of men and God" (Vuola, 2019, pg. 56). "The virgin in the Catholic Church represents motherhood in its fullness and perfection" (Warner, 1978, pg. 192).

### **1.3.2: Mary as Mother**

The second aspect of Mary's paradoxical identity is Mary as mother, mother of Jesus Christ and mother of the Christian church. In Catholicism, all Christians are united through a belief and worship of Jesus Christ, and Mary is considered the mother of all (Warner, 1978, pg. 225). Mary's experience of motherhood in relation to Jesus Christ is a far cry from the experience of ordinary women. It is therefore difficult to understand how Mary has become this venerated figure as Mother of all for she did not experience the realness of pregnancy and childbirth that the ordinary woman does. Again, there are a few motivations to consider here.

Firstly, Harrington's (1984) paper *Mary and Femininity: A Psychological Critique* engages with this in a rather interesting way. Harrington (1984) explores the mother role of Mary from a feminist psychoanalytical point of view, using Freudian theory to support her argument. Characteristic of societies where women hold a more inferior social status, the mother figure becomes idealised (Harrington, 1984, pg. 205). This is true of the Catholic Church, where women's mobility within the Church is restricted and limited to lay participation. Perhaps then, the idealisation of the mother aspect of Mary is rooted in this deep inequity between men and women within Catholicism. Harrington (1984) then explores Freud's theory in more detail, specifically in relation to popular understanding of femininity. For Freud, femininity is rooted in the discovery that a girl is not a boy and their 'penis envy' is replaced with their desire to bear a child (Harrington, 1984, pg. 205). Hence, femininity becomes "characterised by a sense of inferiority [and] repressed sexuality" (Harrington, 1984, pg. 205). In relation to Mary then, her primary function is to further "reinforce the prevailing false view of femininity" limiting the mobilisation of women within the Church; she echoes the association of women with passivity and dependence (Harrington, 1984, pg. 208). In relation to Freud's theory then, Harrington (1984) goes on to present that just like the child that depends on their mother to satisfy them, Mary becomes the mother figure for all to satisfy the needs of all (pg. 210). Crucial to Harrington (1984) is the critique that Mary is a damaging figure that further promulgates the patriarchal institution where limitations and restrictions on women is the rule (pg. 211, 215). With this in mind then, Mary's identity as mother further consolidates the belief that women are dependent and in need of rescuing.

Many feminist scholars, such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, recognise that Mary has become a figure of idealised womanhood, a mother of all and importantly, a virgin.

However, that is not to say that Mary as mother does not offer positives for Catholic women. Rosemary Radford Ruether, a feminist Catholic theologian who is determined to re-read Mary in a more positive light, ultimately asserted that within Catholicism Mary offers an important female identity for women to look to (1979, pg. 2). There is a tendency to talk about God using “masculine language” whereas Mary offers the opportunity to “speak of the divine” using feminine language (Fiorenza, 1992, pg. 139). Mariology has been used as a tool of oppression throughout Catholicism, yet there is the possibility to see Mary as a “powerful image” (Ruether, 1979, pg. 2-3). Stories of Mary can be seen as offering an image of Mary that is autonomous and against male defined sexuality (Ruether, 1979, pg. 7). Similarly, Vuola (2019) finds issue with the denigration of the Virgin Mary by some feminist Biblical scholars, and whilst she believes critique is necessary, she believes that this criticism is often too simplistic and not reflective of real women’s experience of the Virgin Mary (pg. 57). Crucially, in her ethnographic study, Vuola (2019) found that Mary offered the women interviewed a tangible connection to Mary as she too experienced pregnancy and childbirth (pg. 61). Mary has the power to be “like me” but also “unlike me” as a mother, but also as a divine figure that can protect the ordinary mother (Vuola, 2019, pg. 61). These women attached a sacred element to their own motherhood experience through Mary and this kind of positive experience regarding Mary cannot be ignored (Vuola, 2019, pg. 61). These are important considerations so not to reduce the argument entirely that Mary, both as virgin and mother, is a negative figure.

### **1.3: The Virgin Mary – Reflections**

Catholic theology is responsible for “prolonging a traditional view of women that both idealises and humiliates her” (Daly, 1975, pg. 53). It has used the “ecclesiastical propaganda”

of Mary to place women on a false pedestal that simulates the worship of womanhood but in fact it does nothing more than further restrict women from expressing their true selves (Daly, 1975, pg. 53). Like most other women in Biblical texts, Mary's existence is dependent on her relationship to other men within the text and her autonomy and real experience is framed through the male narrative. According to Daly (1975) then, this offers nothing positive for the ordinary woman (pg. 88). I employ Mulvey's (1989) theory here and assert that Mary's role is to appeal to the desire of the male audience, or reader. Through these observations, I conclude that Mary is seen as the idealised woman, a doting mother, far removed from her sexuality and agency and her identity has been consumed by being a mother.

#### **1.4: Eve/Mary Parallel: Madonna – Whore Dichotomy**

Having explored the key feminine figures within the Bible and their connections to the role of women and their subsequent connectedness with motherhood, it seems Eve and Mary are connected. These two feminine figures within the Bible both compliment and juxtapose each other; through history they have endured innate characteristics that has led to a duality of Christian discourse surrounding female sexuality. Eve is the source of Original Sin, which led to God's sorrow at ever creating humankind, "And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Genesis, 6:6, NRSV) and the need for humans to realign themselves with the will of God and thus return to God. Mary on the other hand, is both virgin and mother and hence perpetuates a sense of goodness rooted in the early Church's definition of evil. On the themes of sexuality and morality, these two figures, therefore, are positioned against one another throughout Christian discourse; according to Vuola (2019) this is still in play in the modern world (pg. 61).

In this section therefore, I aim to explore this parallel that exists between Eve and Mary in order to assess what implications it may have on female identity and its relation to motherhood. Firstly, I will engage directly with Biblical texts in order to ascertain the juxtaposition that exists between Eve and Mary. Then, I will delve into feminist rhetoric to explore how this Madonna-Whore dichotomy fulfils the patriarchal agenda of Catholicism.

#### **1.4.1: Juxtaposition in Biblical Texts**

In the previous section of this chapter, I have dealt in greater depth with Mary's virginity and its implications on the modern perception of womanhood; therefore, in this section I am concerned with Mary's sexuality and its innate link to purity and how this juxtaposes Eve's sexuality and its innate link to sin. As such, I will appeal to Biblical sources that deal with Mary's inferred purity as well as examining Eve's role in New Testament scripture and how this contributes to Christian discourse on sexuality and morality.

- Eve

The account in Genesis 3 states that the woman (later to be named Eve) is deceived by the serpent and disobeys the command of God to not eat off the tree of knowledge of good and evil, resulting in the entrance of sin into the world. This entrance of sin into the world lays in the hands of the woman, to which the man was quick to plea his innocence, 'The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate"' (Genesis, 3:12, NRSV). As such, the opening book of the Hebrew Bible holds woman liable for all sin in the world, and this ideology transfers into the New Testament and Christian discourse alike. 1 Timothy 2:11-14 lays out the implications Eve's transgression has on women.

*“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became transgressor” (NRSV).*

This makes clear that woman alone is responsible for the existence of sin in the world for it was she who was deceived and transgressed. 2 Corinthians 11:8-9 also refers to the role of Eve and Ephesians 5:26-27 emphasises the need for wives to be made holy and “without blemish” through the washing of water.

*“Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man” (2 Corinthians, 11:8-9, NRSV).*

*“in order to make her holy by cleansing her with washing of water by the word so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot of wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians, 5:26-27, NRSV).*

As such then, Eve’s essence is innately linked to the notion of sin and need for cleanliness; this has transferred from the Hebrew Bible into the New Testament as well as Christian teaching.

- Mary

Mary on the other hand is the opposite of all that is sinful, she is the virgin chosen by God to bear the son of God and, as a result of the immaculate conception, is free from sin entirely. The Gospel of Luke emphasises that Mary is the chosen one whom God has favoured among all to bear the son of God, as such, Mary’s steadfast virginity and purity – as discussed in the aforementioned – is pervasive in Christian discourse. Mary, therefore, not only becomes a

symbol of all that is good, but she is a symbol that opposes all that is bad and key to this section, she is a symbol that opposes the essence of Eve.

#### 1.4.2: Sexual Polarisation

‘In patriarchal theology there is a good feminine and a bad femaleness.’ (Ruether, 1979, pg. 3-4). Eve therefore represents this notion of bad femaleness, she is the temptress (Warner, 1978, pg. 60). Mary on the other hand represents the good feminine, she is the ‘ideal feminine person’ (Vuola, 2019, pg. 56). As Eve becomes innately linked to sin (Vuola, 2019, pg. 56) she comes to represent all that is opposite to Mary. Ruether (1979) explained that bad femaleness is femininity that is bound by bodily desires, one that rebels against divine will and thus represents sin (pg. 4). In Genesis 3, it is Eve who first rebels against the divine will of God and consequently has become burdened with the responsibility of the Fall; consequently, Eve represents sin and therefore represents bad femaleness.

Liz Krueger’s (2019) paper, *Reinterpreting Eve and Mary: A Theological Anthropology for Women*, explored the connectedness of Eve and Mary to female sexuality with the aim to reinterpret both Eve and Mary in a way that is guided by women’s voices. For Krueger (2019) the inherent problem with Eve and Mary lies in ‘patriarchal interpretations’ that have characterised ‘Mary and Eve as polarised symbols of sexual purity, or lack thereof’ (pg. 92). This builds on the work of Daly (1975) who asserted that Eve’s role within the Fall of humankind in Genesis 3 was that of temptress and as such was to ascertain ‘beyond doubt woman’s immutable inferiority’ (pg. 76). Eve therefore becomes this temptress, or dangerous woman, that men should be afraid of (Daly, 1975, pg. 88). At the polar opposite then, is Mary, ‘Eve was balanced off with Mary’ (Daly, 1975, pg. 88). Mary is neither temptress nor

dangerous woman. She is the virgin mother that women should aspire to, as the council of Nicea 325 announced, women should aim to follow in the footsteps of the Virgin Mary (Warner, 1978, pg. 68). Mary is the vision of the good feminine, she reverses the sinful work of Eve (Ruether, 1979, pg. 42) and therefore represents the 'virginal ideal' (Vuola, 2019, pg. 59).

In *Mary Versus Eve: Paternal Uncertainty and the Christian View of Women*, Vladimir Tumanov (2011) analysed in great detail the sexual polarisation of Eve and Mary, specifically the link of these two Biblical figures to that of paternal uncertainty and the consequential Christian view on women. In reproduction, the woman is always sure that any children are hers whereas men cannot be so sure (Tumanov, 2011, pg. 508). Tumanov (2011) argued that Eve and Mary come to represent two poles of sexuality and ultimately this discourse, endorsed by Church Fathers, 'made it possible to give male anxieties ideological form' (pg. 520). For Tumanov (2011) the male anxiety is regarding paternal uncertainty and through the characters of Eve and Mary, this anxiety becomes a reality. According to Augustine, a key thinker in early Church theology, original sin is a generational issue, passed on through engaging in sexual intercourse; as such, virginity or celibacy is deemed a moral high ground (Tumanov, 2011, pg. 511). However, outside of the Catholic clergy this is an unrealistic ideal to uphold, resulting in a new Christian discourse that divided women into two, Eve and Mary (Tumanov, 2011, pg. 512). 'Eve epitomises paternal uncertainty' as she is considered not only the starting point of sexuality through her deception in Genesis 3, but crucially, she represents 'female sexual choice' – in so much as her agency in accepting the serpent's deception – which, as Tumanov states, is the 'real source of masculine anxiety' (2011, pg. 512). As a result, an alternative symbol of female sexuality needed to be invented, one that



strokes the male ego so to speak and 'alleviate[s] paternal uncertainty', and this new symbol is to be under male control (Tumanov, 2011, pg. 512-513). Mary therefore becomes this male defined symbol that can alleviate the uncertainty of paternal reproduction (Tumanov, 2011, pg. 507). This Christian discourse gave rise to a new dichotomy, the 'Madonna-Whore dichotomy' which results in the 'tendency to categorise women in terms of two polar opposites' (Tumanov, 2011, pg. 507).

This notion that women become categorised into polar opposites has been discussed within in feminist theology for some time, just as Reuther (1979) expressed, there is good femaleness and bad femaleness (pg. 3-4). What Tumanov (2011) has done, is highlight how this Christian discourse has permeated into the secular sphere, pointing to novels and films that echo the Mary-Eve and Madonna-Whore dichotomy. Carol Christ in 1992 explained that the stories of women within the Bible are not 'adequately told' and hence women rely on stories that are told to them through the male script, resulting in women becoming either Eve or Mary (228-229). What Christ (1992) comments on here is particularly interesting, as I have discussed women have been shoehorned off into two categories of womanhood, and as a result, their own experiences have become neglected; they therefore must fit into these two male defined definitions of women. Over the centuries, the Virgin Mary has become this idealised version of what a woman should be, bound up in the Church Father's definition of evil being inherently linked to sexuality (Warner, 1978, pg. 50). She has been used to 'conquer' bad femininity (Warner, 1989, pg. 50) and as such has become an 'effective instrument of female ... subjugation' (pg. 49). Mary has become an idealised vision of what a woman should be, however this vision is unattainable for real women and consequently

women are left being defined by the narrative of Eve, sinful in nature and tied to bodily desires.

#### **1.4.3: Eve/Mary Parallel: Madonna – Whore Dichotomy - Reflections**

Within this section I have engaged with the contrasting characteristics of Eve and Mary and how they have been used to, in essence, control female sexuality. Mary's virginity echoes purity and is considered to be the model that all other women should aspire to. On the other hand, Eve's suggested responsibility for the Fall has linked her with the creation of sin and thus she is the woman that came to define what a woman should not be. Rather crucially to this chapter, and this thesis, these definitions of being woman are not woman defined, but rather originate from a male defined script and ultimately male led discourse from the onset of early Christianity. These two women embody choice and control, specifically female choice and male control. Female choice therefore has come to signify danger, a threat to all that is good, as the first choice of a female within the Bible led to the damnation of humankind. Male control, however, reinstates all that is good in the world, as Mary is the bearer of the root of salvation, she reverses the work of Eve and characterises a good woman. I would therefore argue this has huge implications on the female identity and ultimately associates a good woman with an unattainable ideal. A woman cannot be like Mary; she cannot be both a mother and a virgin and so she descends ever closer to the identity of Eve. She represents choice and sexual sin, however, should she reproduce under the guidance of her male counterpart she can become that little closer to Mary.

### 1.5: Eve, Mary, and Empowered Mothering

There is indeed space here to re-read both Eve and Mary in a manner that is more reflective of empowered mothering, breaking the shackles of traditional male authorship and interpretation. This is important for all women as the influence of these interpretations has spilled into the secular sphere. We also cannot expect women of faith to simply abandon their Christian faith in the way that Mary Daly has. To refer back to Mulvey's (1989) approach to film, the roles of Eve and Mary have become interpreted to both reflect and appeal to male desire, with centuries of interpretation stemming from the male voice. One can appeal to Vuola's (2019) ethnographic work which emphasises the positive role Mary has in the lives of women of faith as they become mothers, finding solace and the sacred in their own pregnancies. Whilst I certainly champion Vuola (2019) in propagating the impact Mary has on the real lives of women, I argue we need to take this further and challenge centuries of interpretation by reading these texts through a feminist lens. In doing so, we can denounce the 'common' understanding of both Eve and Mary and find women that are autonomous and not defined by the male interpretation of sexuality. As Eve translates to 'source of life', there is something here that is synonymous with empowered mothering, emphasising the power and beauty in the body of woman as the giver of life. Mary births a child without the intervention of a male sexual partner, she too depicts an autonomous woman free from male defined sexuality. In the final chapter of my thesis, I revisit the figures of Eve and Mary, employing the new scripts of empowered mothering in an attempt to re-read both Eve and Mary in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering.

## 1.6: Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which Biblical texts and figures have been interpreted over the centuries in a manner that is dismissive of women. I chose to begin here as Beattie (2002), Rooke (2016) and Llewellyn (2019) claimed Biblical texts and Christian beliefs have had influence on the modern world; as such, understanding the role of women within Biblical texts was a crucial foundation to the remainder of this dissertation. Also, Mary Daly's steadfast belief that women and the Church cannot coexist felt such a drastic statement that it felt important to address the normative and masculine interpretations that have rooted themselves within the Christian faith.

Within this chapter, I chose three key areas of the Bible to explore: 1 Timothy 2:15, Eve and Mary. The connectedness of these to the overarching purpose of this dissertation is what led me to them. The association of motherhood to salvation is stark, and it suggests that the sole purpose of women is indeed to be mothers. The female script throughout the Bible positions women as mothers or defines them by their status of not being mothers; it places women into binary opposites of salvation and sin which is damaging for both women and prospective mothers. At surface level, there is no suggestion of space for empowered mothering. There are fundamental concerns, from a feminist point of view, with the characters of Eve and Mary, and primarily the dichotomy between them. As I have shown, Eve and Mary have come to represent bad femaleness and good femaleness, and I argue this has implications for mothers in the modern world, which I will discuss in further detail through the remaining chapters. Mary is an unattainable figure to replicate, a woman cannot be a virgin and a mother, and therefore through this dichotomy, a woman comes to represent the bad femaleness of Eve. I argue, this contributes to the contemporary script of the male gaze,

whereby women are passive objects for male viewing; and whatever they do will never be enough. Similarly, then, I argue this is linked to the notion of 'good mothers' and 'bad mothers', in that women are expected to be the good mother but can never live up to expectations placed upon them and thus fall into the category of bad mother. I will further illustrate this throughout the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

My research question for this chapter asked, can we re-read Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering? Through application of a feminist reading of the Bible alongside allegorical interpretation, it is possible to reframe these texts and figures outside of androcentric interpretation. Waters' (2004) argument that we should read 'childbearing' in 1 Timothy 2:15 as the birthing of values as opposed to children, or Morse's (2020) attempt to remove Eve from androcentric interpretations, or Vuola's (2019) assertion that the Virgin Mary can offer contemporary mothers an individual to look up to. These are all vital in giving a woman's voice to Biblical texts. It is, therefore, possible to re-read the Bible in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering. To me, this feels like the starting blocks of a marathon, and there is certainly much further to go in confronting normative and institutional motherhood and championing empowered mothering. In the final chapter of my thesis, I explore the possibilities of interpreting empowered mothering in relation to the figures of Eve and Mary, utilising the toolbox I will develop in this final chapter.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT LIMITATIONS DOES NORMATIVE  
MOTHERHOOD PLACE ON WOMEN'S  
IDENTITIES AND WOMEN'S BODIES?

## 2. Introduction

Navigating the journey of motherhood is complex. This chapter lays the foundational work for my final chapter, which will analyse resistance scripts for women to explore when becoming mothers to develop a toolbox for empowered mothering. Within this chapter, I explore three stages of a woman's life: the fertile body (pre-pregnancy), the pregnant body, and the post-partum body. I examine the treatment of women at each stage, to highlight the script of normative and institutional motherhood and pinpoint where being a mother is seen as an innate quality of being a woman.

First, I begin with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir was a prominent French philosopher, and through *The Second Sex* – published in 1949 – Beauvoir contributed a great deal to feminist thought. So much so, the Vatican placed *The Second Sex* on their banned list of books. In this work, Beauvoir pinpointed the oppression of women to their definition as man's Other. She claimed that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.' (pg. 293) and Beauvoir (1949) argued at length that femininity is a socially constructed characteristic of the female sex. Women learn what their role is through social influences which define her femininity. In the context of being a mother, Beauvoir (1949) argued that becoming a mother is seen as the purpose of a woman's life, a key indicator of her femininity. Beauvoir (1949) finds this incredibly problematic as it further validates women's oppression as man's Other. Beauvoir therefore challenged this extensively in *The Second Sex* as women become reduced to their role as mothers. It is important, therefore, to recognise Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex* as a seminal piece of work in the discipline of motherhood studies; although of course, such a term had not been coined back in 1949. However, Beauvoir's (1949) contributions

have been a catalyst for feminist discourse on motherhood, a discourse that is indeed still ongoing.

Beauvoir (1949) supports her arguments with a range of lived experiences throughout a woman's life. As such, I have chosen to engage with three aspects of many women's lived experience in the context of the modern world. Just as Beauvoir (1949) started with childhood in the second part of *The Second Sex*, I analyse the attitudes toward the fertile body, or pre-pregnant body. Starting with an analysis of attitudes toward women's menstruating bodies, I ultimately conclude that society places the menstruating body as being in need of control. Attitudes towards menstruating women are problematic and, I argue, contribute to the oppression of women through the constant need to control women's bodies.

I then explore the *choices* of contraception available to women. This is an important topic to explore, as on the surface it appears to offer women a way to prevent pregnancy, a way for them to not become mothers should they not want to. However, here I argue that the choice of contraception available to women should not be treated as the cornerstone of women's liberation. Firstly, the Catholic Church prohibits the use of artificial contraception, thus a proportion of women are abandoned on this road to apparent emancipation. Second, many of the options available to women are neither wholly safe nor effective. Some are invasive (such as IUD implants), others can have detrimental side effects (such as the contraceptive pill) and others (namely condoms) rely on negotiations with a male partner. I argue that contraception has become the responsibility of the woman, and the options available to us, suggest a level of control over our fertile bodies. Finally, in this section, I engage closely with



the abortion debate. It is important to note here I will not focus on the debate or discussions surrounding pro-life and pro-choice arguments, but rather my aim here is to explore the attitudes to women choosing abortions, ultimately concluding that these women are vilified for not adequately protecting themselves through the dangerous and invasive contraception that is on offer to them.

Secondly, I analyse the attitudes towards pregnant women. A pregnant woman is the embodiment of a mother, she is the physical symbol of a woman carrying out her supposed function. Therefore, as this chapter aims to explore the connectedness between woman and mother, analysing treatment of pregnant bodies is incredibly important. Here, I argue that the pregnant body is where the negotiation of identities become the most complex. The woman carrying a foetus experiences the most pervasive controls over her body, a time where experiencing any other identity becomes fraught. I will analyse the controls and expectations placed upon women during pregnancy, asserting that society sees women during this stage exclusively as mothers.

Finally, I examine the treatment of the postpartum body. When woman becomes mother, what expectations are placed upon her? The attitudes to post-partum bodies are fundamentally important when analysing the connectedness of woman and mother. In this section, I argue that the postpartum body is hidden from view. Through the many expectations placed upon mothers, that are fed to us through popular culture, women are left with two types of mothers, the *good* mother, and the *bad* mother. There are so many expectations with the *good* mother archetype, which are unattainable for women to ever achieve, yet the expectation to do so remains. During this stage of a woman's life, her

identity becomes caregiver. The expectations placed upon her limit her from exploring any other aspect of her identity, as her focus should be on raising her children. Through this chapter, then, I argue that society identifies woman as mother, leaving limited space – or no space at all – to identity as anything else.

## **2.1: Beauvoir and The Second Sex**

For the first part of this chapter, I will engage with, and outline, Beauvoir's contributions to the discussions on women's ambiguous feelings about motherhood detailed within her book *The Second Sex* first published in 1949. Beauvoir's upbringing in France was rooted in the Christian faith, and her deep criticism of Christianity stems from this upbringing. Although Beauvoir identified as an atheist, she does not ignore the power Christianity has had on her own life experience, nor does she ignore the power and influence Christianity has had on Western thought. Later echoed by Carrie La Seur (1999), claiming the undoubtable impact Christianity has had throughout history (pg. 84). As such, I first outline Beauvoir's critique of Christianity, particularly her critique of Biblical scripture and the subsequent interpretations that have followed and the impact this has had on societal views on women. Then, I deal in more depth with Beauvoir's views on motherhood, focusing on her description of motherhood as something women might, justifiably, approach with ambivalent or ambiguous feelings. Finally, I analyse Beauvoir's resolution to the issue of motherhood, with particular emphasis on her assertion that through paid work women will support the cause of women's liberation.

It is important to note that Beauvoir was writing in 1949 and her views on mothers being restricted to the private sphere is not necessarily relatable to modern life. However, Beauvoir

did lay the foundations for feminist writers to come around the ambiguities of motherhood. Beauvoir is still hugely influential in the field of motherhood studies and is often cited as a pioneering figure because of her contribution. Therefore, her body of work in *The Second Sex* is vital to my aim in unravelling the idea that being a woman is to be a mother, and to explore the ambiguities surrounding motherhood as a separate identity to womanhood.

### **2.1.1: Beauvoir and Religion**

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) begins with an emphasis on how woman is defined by man, 'not in relation to herself, but in relation to himself' (pg. 5) stemming from the inherent biological view that to be human is to be male and consequently woman is labelled as man's 'Other' rather than a person in her own right. Beauvoir believed that Christianity played a vital role in the oppression of women (pg. 107), and it was her belief that this came from scripture, religious law, and the Church. Symbolism within Christianity starts with God the Father, the male divine, and this is consolidated through the incarnation of God becoming man (pg. 314) and thus acts as some kind of validation for men that they too are divine. The role of Eve in the book of Genesis acts as a kind of catalyst for the oppression of women; Beauvoir emphasised that Eve was made from the rib of Adam for the benefit of Adam, further citing St Ambrose, who said it was indeed Eve who led Adam into sin (pg. 107). I have dealt in depth with the problem of Eve in my previous chapter; however, it is important again here for Beauvoir's assertion that woman is defined by man. Beauvoir described Eve as 'privileged prey,' she was created for man 'to save him from loneliness' (pg. 165). As such, Eve was not created for herself, further confirming the male defined script that woman is man's 'Other.' Consequently, this has resulted in a construction of woman that is built around

the needs and desires of man, and as Beauvoir asserted, Christianity will praise the virgin, the wife, the virtuous woman (pg. 92).

The idealisation and idolisation of woman, then, is rooted in the male experience of what a woman should be, not in the actual experience of a woman. Melissa Raphael (2014) further echoed this, claiming that the attribution of fertility to women in the Bible has determined the way the ordinary woman is viewed by men (pg. 25). Living up to these ideals of virgin, wife and virtuous woman does not reflect the true authentic experience of being a woman. For Raphael (2014), the only way forward is to destroy this idealisation, otherwise women will continue to experience patriarchal womanhood, a male created experience of woman.

### **2.1.2: Beauvoir's Views on Motherhood**

Beauvoir outlined her thoughts on motherhood through a series of lived experiences, starting with childhood, and ending in old age. Crucially, for Beauvoir, the 'condition' of being a woman is taught from an early age, and it is the intervention of others in a child's life that make them become 'aware' of the differences from each other (pg. 305). Beginning with childhood, Beauvoir concludes that for the girl, childhood is a cacophony of disgust, shame, shock and being seen, and these feelings follow the girl right through into womanhood. Beauvoir discussed menstruation in some depth in this section of her book, and further in this chapter, I deal with menstruation and its relation to fertility and womanhood in greater depth. This is important here as for Beauvoir this lays the foundations of girl becoming woman and mother. Beauvoir concludes that 'she makes her way towards the future wounded, shamed, worried and guilty' (pg. 351).

Beauvoir outlined three key critiques of the idea of motherhood; its reliance on men, its representation as a sole identity, and the way in which mothers are viewed in society. I deal with her critiques in the above order. It is important to note that Beauvoir is not inherently anti-motherhood, and her position is more complex than a simple rejection of it. Yet, Beauvoir finds motherhood not only gives rise to feelings of ambiguity but is also something that is difficult to navigate.

Beauvoir emphasised a point she made in the first volume of the book, the notion that woman is viewed simply as 'Other' to her male counterpart; 'she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as other' (pg. 17). Choice and freedom therefore, from the perspective of a woman, is merely an illusion. All choices that are made are limited to the situation that woman is 'Other' to man, and motherhood is not detached from this. A woman experiences the world from a point of view that is given to her, not one she forms herself (pg. 17). For woman to become mother, then, is to fulfil her 'physiological destiny' (pg. 537). This negates the belief that women become mothers by choice, as this *choice* is confined by the male definition of what a woman is. As well as this, the motherhood 'experience' is wholly dependent on the relationship a woman has with a man, or the father of the child (pg. 550-551). A woman who bears a child out of wedlock is not celebrated as she has not fully submitted herself to a man (pg. 583), her pregnancy is not seen as legitimate and her relationship with a man frivolous. It is only when a woman is a wife, that she belongs to a man, that her pregnancy and motherhood be 'glorified,' her subordination to man in marriage somehow legitimises her supposed desire for a child (pg. 583). It is important to note here that this was perhaps more of an issue at the time of

Beauvoir's writings, and arguably it is more acceptable for women to become mothers before marriage in the modern day.

Secondly, Beauvoir took issue with the concept that motherhood is the sole fulfilment of a woman's life and that to be anything other than a mother would be a disservice to womanhood (pg. 552). It would seem that for Beauvoir, it is this that is the greatest threat to a woman's life. Beauvoir does not sugar coat her feelings towards 'reoccurring' mothers and labels them as 'breeders' as if their desire to only be mothers is somehow wrong (pg. 552). It is worth noting here that I feel this to be quite problematic and further exaggerates the idea that there is a right way of doing motherhood. Herein lies a problem for many prospective mothers, of doing it in the right way, yet still not losing their own identity as a woman and not just a mother.

This brings to me to Beauvoir's final critique of motherhood, the way in which mothers are viewed in society. She emphasised that the societal view perceives mothers as being exemplary, they are the ones who give themselves wholly to a child and give love that cannot be reciprocated by a small child (pg. 570). For Beauvoir, this is problematic for a few reasons, firstly it further strengthens the notion that motherhood should be the sole fulfilment for women. Secondly, Beauvoir points out this perception is not a reality and is therefore extremely damaging for prospective mothers (pg. 570). Perhaps then, Beauvoir's critique of the notion of motherhood is in response to society's idealisation of the archetypal mother, an idealisation that real mothers cannot live up to.

### **2.1.3: Beauvoir's Resolution**

Beauvoir attempts to resolve the issues of motherhood and the idealisation of the archetypal mother, expressing that the key to women's independence is through paid work; emphasising that should women partake in paid work, they are able to 'close the gap that separates her from man' (pg. 737). Here Beauvoir does make a compelling argument in that when women gain financial freedom there is the possibility to close this gap. What paid work does for a woman, according to Beauvoir, is 'remove the masculine medium between [woman] and the world' (pg. 737). This argument is agreeable in that when women become in control of their own assets it could be argued that to some extent, they begin to experience the world from their own point of view, rather than from the point of view they are offered.

That being said, I am unsure as to whether this is a real resolution to the ambiguities women face when encountering motherhood. Beauvoir does acknowledge that there will be many challenges faced by women to balance work life and home life, however she claims that the only power a woman really has in relation to motherhood is to refuse it altogether through the use of birth control (pg. 751). This solution is problematic and does not offer an equilibrium between motherhood and freedom, nor does it settle the ambiguities of motherhood adequately. As such, there is more to be done with exploring the identities of womanhood and motherhood and how these can be experienced in the modern world.

## **2.2: The Fertile Body**

Within this section I explore the treatment of, and attitudes towards, the fertile body. By the fertile body, I mean the menstruating body by which point it is biologically possible for a

woman to conceive a child. It is important to note that menstruation does not affect all women, nor does it affect just individuals who identify as woman (such as transgender males who may continue to menstruate for a time). For the purpose of this chapter, when I refer to menstruation, contraception and abortion, it is in reference to menstruating women that go on to pregnancy.

Beauvoir (1949) asserted that women are viewed as men's 'Other,' not as individuals in their own right. For Beauvoir, society is patriarchal at its core, and I argue this is still the case. That being said, we now live in a society that recognises the fight of women before us, the feminists that worked tirelessly to fight for women's rights. Whilst we may have come a long way from the time of Beauvoir, there is more to be done; we should not take our options of menstruation products, contraception and abortion as icons of the feminist movement. Instead, their purpose and contribution to the discourse of normative motherhood must be scrutinised.

### **2.2.1: Menstruation**

A shared experience of many women is menstruation, and whilst the experiences of menstruation differ from woman to woman, this monthly calling and the societal conformity that arises with it is experienced by all bleeding women. Menstruation is the first sign of the transition from girlhood into womanhood, the moment we become fertile and, as Adrienne Rich (1986) put it, it is associated with 'our pregnability' (pg. 107). Echoing the script of normative and institutional motherhood that all women are destined to be mothers. Despite this, menstruation is shrouded with 'secrecy, shame and lack of knowledge' (Syeinsdottir, 2017, pg. 1391) and its perception in society is 'puzzling' (Laws, 1990, pg. 3). Feminist



discourse has argued there are a few reasons that public perception of menstruation is seen as grotesque and in need of hiding from the public eye. Sophie Laws in *Issues of Blood* (1990) explained that we live in a society that categorise men and women, ultimately putting the category of men over women 'using notions of nature to justify this power' (pg. 3). As a result of menstruation – among other factors such as pregnancy and lactation – women are closely linked to nature and thus inferior to men (Roberts et al, 2002, pg. 131). Consequently, the image of the menstruating woman is not palatable for public consumption and women are responsible for hiding any sign of their menstruating body. Browsing the aisles of the 'feminine hygiene' section in any pharmacy or supermarket we are confronted with a range of products from tampons to pads, 'intimate' deodorants, feminine wipes, washes, gels, daily 'deo-fresh' liners and little scented bags to pop our used products in to; all packaged individually for ultimate discretion. All such products, let's be honest, wreak havoc on our vulvas, and vaginas. Yet the desire to hide our leaky bodies is to scrub with wash, clean with wipes, spray with deodorant and pack out with pads and tampons. But our vulva isn't supposed to smell like a bouquet from a florist. This obsession with feminine hygiene, I argue, stems from objectification theory, meaning women do not experience their bodies from their own point of view (Syeinsdottir, 2017, pg. 1319). Instead, we experience our bodies as if we 'were outside observers,' that being our experience is based upon a feeling of how another individual perceives us (Syeinsdottir, 2017, pg. 1319). This leads us to control our bodies based on an internalised perception of someone else, and hence forth, we make our vulvas smell like a bouquet from a florist, *just in case*.

Roberts et al (2002) carried out a rather eye-opening study analysing the public perception of menstruating women. In the study, a woman was to drop either a hair clip or an unused and

packaged tampon in front of a group of subjects. The subjects were then asked a series of questions afterwards with regards to the woman's competence. In comparison to the hair clip, the subjects who saw the tampon graded the woman as being less competent, liked her less and physically distanced themselves from her when sitting down. Roberts et al (2002) concluded therefore, that the 'sanitised, deodorised and idealised image of women's bodies become the only ones we encounter and accept' (pg. 138).

My original aim within this section was to explore the link between menstruation and fertility, instead I was met with conformity and control. I expected literature to focus on the connection between menstruating women and biological motherhood. I anticipated to find that once girls began menstruating, there would be a greater focus on her child-bearing ability. Whilst gendered girls' toys encourage young girls to play with babies, through products such as Baby Annabell, this does not coincide with a girl's first menstruation. Instead, there seems to be a never-ending desire to keep women's bodies neat, tidy, and controlled. That we should hide that which makes us fertile, which is surprising when we assume society's perception of us is to be fertile, pregnant and mother. Menstruation marks the beginning of our passage into womanhood, and as Beauvoir (1949) said, it starts with disgust, shame, shock and being seen. This demonstrates that the fertile body is in need of control, suggesting the fertile body is in fact a dangerous body. The impact this has upon women as they continue their journey through womanhood, whether that includes becoming a mother or not, undoubtably has an impact on our experience as women. Our next challenge? Reproductive rights and contraception.

### 2.2.2: Contraception

The 1960s have become a cornerstone for the alleged freedom of female sexuality and choice. In 1961, the contraceptive pill became available to women in Britain on prescription and in 1967 the Abortion Act allowed women to access safe and legal abortions in the UK.

*Hurray!* Not quite. The discussion of reproductive rights is incredibly complex, and whilst women have access to an array of contraception, and abortion (albeit this is not a worldwide phenomenon), the notion of freedom and choice only scratches the surface of a multifaceted conversation, and I would argue, creates an illusion of woman centred power and control.

The oral contraceptive pill is the most used form of contraception for women in the UK, USA, Italy and Germany (Johnson et al, 2013, pg. 1). Despite some of the worrying side effects of this oral contraceptive it remains the favoured choice. When we compare this to other alternatives, such as condoms, it is easy to understand why many women prefer the pill; it is in their control. Naomi Wolf (1991) in her book *The Beauty Myth* deals in great depth with female sexuality and the oppressive narrative that consumes women with wanting to be beautiful. Crucially, Wolf points out that female sexuality is indeed real but the systems and institutions we live in lead us to confuse our own sexual desire with being sexually desired (1991, pg. 158). That is to say rather than finding pleasure within our own sexual experiences, our pleasure is projected on to us through male defined experiences of female sexual pleasure. A rather damning side effect of the contraceptive pill is a decrease in libido, and as such our sexuality is 'treated as if it were hypothetical' (Wolf, 1991, pg. 148). This echoes that illusion of power, the woman becomes in control of her reproductive status but at the expense of her own sexuality and desire. Yet the confusion between sexual desire and being sexually desired, means we don't ask questions.

There is still a problematic narrative around a sexually active woman that is realised through 'slut-shaming' discourses that are interwoven into sexual health education in the UK. A recent article in *The Guardian* in 2021 researched into the sexism that exists within sexual health education. They found that teachers across the UK had come together to call out the government for its failure in producing a nation-wide strategy to target sexism within British schools (The Guardian, 2021). Students from schools and universities came forward to report sexual harassment and abuse they had experienced, with the DfE's own report finding one-third of school aged girls had experienced sexual harassment whilst at school (The Guardian, 2021). Teachers had called for an overhaul of the current sex education curriculum, claiming it does not go far enough in addressing sexist discourses within school (The Guardian, 2021). The DfE subsequently updated their *Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment between Children in Schools and Colleges* (2021) to offer guidance for schools on what sexual violence and sexual harassment entails. Interestingly, this report has since been withdrawn.

Emergency hormonal contraception (EHC) is seen as a last resort, a back-up plan should all else fail, but really, one that should never be used. Historically, however, EHC was produced as a form of contraception for women engaging in infrequent sexual intercourse (Murphy and Pooke, 2019, pg. 123). EHC was designed for women to take as a matter of choice after having sexual intercourse rather than a back-up plan because they had not used other forms of contraception (Murphy and Pooke, 2019, pg. 123). However, the narrative of EHC has developed into one of shame, and access to it can be difficult (Murphy and Pooke, 2019, pg. 123). The pharmacy chain Boots actually refused to decrease the price of EHC in 2017 claiming that women would 'misuse the product' and although they eventually backed down, there are still restrictions in place to gain access (Murphy and Pooke, 2019, pg. 123). The

woman who takes herself to a pharmacy in an attempt to access EHC is seen as idiotic for not protecting herself adequately in the first place. On occasion, EHC has been likened to abortion as it is used after intercourse has taken place and this has only contributed to the stigma around EHC (Murphy and Pooke, 2019, pg. 123). As a result, EHC comes with the expectation that a woman should not ever need to use it (Murphy and Pooke, 2019, pg. 124). Again, this clearly demonstrates a level of control over the fertile body, suggesting the fertile body is a 'dangerous body'.

### **2.2.3: Abortion**

"There is no safe, infallible method of birth control" (Rich, 1986, pg. 265). No contraception is one hundred percent effective, nor are the commonly chosen methods of contraception one hundred percent safe for women, therefore I argue it is necessary that women have access to legal and safe abortions. The abortion debate concerns itself with the attribution of personhood to a foetus (Rich, 1986, pg. 266), at what point from conception does the foetus become a person. In parts of the UK, abortion is typically allowed up to twenty-four weeks, or after should there be serious risk to the life of the mother, or the unborn child has a severe disability (Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, 1990). The legalisation of Abortion in England, Scotland and Wales was passed in 1967 and its official purpose was to fix the problem of illegal abortions that were taking place (Stetson, 2001, pg. 136). That is, women – or others on their behalf – were carrying out dangerous abortions regardless. That being said, despite the legality of abortion in the UK, I argue there remains an adverse societal perception surrounding women who decide to go ahead with an abortion. The pro-choice argument positions itself on the belief that the choice solely belongs to the woman as it concerns her body. Whereas the pro-life argument positions itself on the belief that the

foetus is an individual life and therefore an abortion would be the destruction of life. From a feminist point of view, the issue with the pro-life point of view is that it prioritises the unborn life of a foetus over the life of a woman, and crucially, prevents her from making a choice concerning her own body. This is reflective of institutional motherhood, asserting the belief that the life of a foetus is more important than the life of a woman and must be protected at all costs.

In psychosomatic analysis, the choice of an abortion is seen as a defence or a rejection of the true role of a woman; that is to be a mother (Oakley, 1980, pg. 48). For Rich (1986), not only was abortion seen as a rejection of the true role of a woman, but she also believed that legalised abortion was positioned as being irresponsible (pg. 267); much like EHC, a woman who finds herself choosing an abortion should have adequately protected herself in the first place. The issue I take here is that preventing pregnancy is placed on the shoulders of women, and should a woman have an unwanted pregnancy, the perception is that it is due to her irresponsibility. Susan Bordo (2003) explored in great depth the relationship between western culture and the female body in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. She claimed that attitudes and policies emphasising reproductive control typify our unequal treatment of women (2003, pg. 71). Bordo (2003) claimed that women have become constructed as 'foetal incubators' (pg. 72), meaning a woman's purpose is seen as birthing children only. Consequently, Bordo (2003) argued that the 'increased empathy' for a foetus has correlated with a 'decreased respect' for women's choice (pg. 86). This has led to the discussions of 'evil mother archetypes,' of women 'callously and casually scraping foetuses out of their bodies like leftovers off a plate' (pg. 95). This perception of abortion is incredibly harmful as, again, it suggests that the fertile female

body is a dangerous body and in need of control. For Bordo, it reflects 'deep cultural anxieties about women's autonomy' (pg. 95).

#### **2.2.4: The Fertile Body – Reflections**

There are numerous negative attitudes surrounding the fertile female body. Through menstruation, contraception and abortion there are varying levels of disgust and control in regard to women. A menstruating woman is demanded to hide any suggestion of a bleeding body through a plethora of products and scents. Should anyone discover a woman to be menstruating, there is suggestion that their opinion of her will change in a negative way. In relation to contraception, much of the accountability is placed upon women to prevent pregnancy rather than it being a shared responsibility. The options that women are left with when it comes to contraception can be harmful and suppress female sexuality. There seems there is a societal belief that a sexually active fertile female body is a dangerous one, and as such is in need of control. Finally, the right to access legal and safe abortions must be a fundamental right when contraceptives are neither one hundred percent safe nor effective. However, a harmful discourse surrounds abortion, of women being irresponsible and in denial of fulfilling their true purpose of becoming mothers. I argue the treatment of our bodies before we even journey into mothering can only contribute to ambiguous feelings if this journey does begin. The treatment of the fertile body gives further evidence to Beauvoir's (1949) belief that women are man's Other in that their needs are discounted or hidden away.

Much like how Eve and Mary become to reflect a 'good' and 'bad' dichotomy, women in the modern world too face such categorisation based on choices they have made or will make.

Perhaps the most striking finding within this section is the level of control women experience over their bodies, much of which is not necessarily overt. Normative motherhood controls women's bodies well before they become pregnant. Normative motherhood suggests an un-pregnant body is a dangerous body. I argue an un-pregnant yet fertile body is seen as a dangerous body because it embodies the very essence normative motherhood tries to control; a woman with choice over her own body.

### **2.3: The Pregnant Body**

Mostly, the pregnant body is a visible body. It cannot be covered up like a menstruating body, it cannot be hidden from view. The previous section has explored the treatment of the fertile body in society, and I have demonstrated how the fertile body is seen as in need of control. Here, I explore how this is no different when it comes to the pregnant body. A pregnant body is instantly recognisable, and questions that would not usually be asked are deemed appropriate in the context of the pregnant body (Piering, 2012, pg. 178). When finding out about her own pregnancy, Eliane Glaser (2021) explained that she firstly had 'feelings of joy and relief' but other 'mixed feelings' then followed (pg. 105). Pregnancy undeniably marks a huge shift in a woman's life, she suddenly becomes directly responsible for the life of another being and her body goes through enormous changes throughout the nine-month period. The pregnant body is subjected to a new kind of gaze, much like female bodies are subjected to the male gaze. The pregnant body becomes a site 'onto which other people project their investments' (Glaser, 2021, pg. 106), or their judgements (Piering, 2012, pg. 182). In this section, I look at the pregnant body as a publicly available body, as well as the control society places over the pregnant body and how these are interlinked.



### 2.3.1: A Public Body to be Controlled

Through the image of the pregnant body, society reduces women to their womb; women represent the child itself rather than individuals in their own right (Piering, 2012, pg. 179), this is at heart of normative motherhood. Through pregnancy, a woman 'transforms... from autonomous individual to responsible carrier' (Glaser, 2021, pg. 106). As opposed to concern for the woman's body, the concern is situated around the unborn child (Piering, 2012, pg. 184) and through this comes the projection that a woman becomes unable to care for her own body (pg. 183). Just as the male gaze disciplines women's bodies into bodies that need ongoing work and help, the pregnant body too becomes disciplined (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 36-37).

Wiant-Cummins (2014) in her work *Reproductive Surveillance: The Making of Pregnant Docile Bodies* outlines the key ways in which the pregnant body is disciplined. She proposed that the pregnant body is viewed as the body where a 'man's child matures' (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 38). She is therefore viewed as the carrier of a man's child and thus in need of discipline to ensure that she fulfils this duty. Rather than taking care of pregnant women, society is concerned with monitoring her (Glaser, 2021, pg. 121). It is therefore expected that women will be self-sacrificing in order to protect the unborn child (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 38). This expectation means that women must 'avoid any risk to the baby' irrespective of her own needs (Glaser, 2021, pg. 109). As such, Glaser (2021) argues that the foetus becomes far more important than a woman's quality of life (pg. 115), and women are told how to behave in order to protect the foetus at all costs (pg. 119).

Throughout their pregnancies, women are expected to conform to a range of 'risk-adverse behaviours' associated with the development of the foetus (Lupton, 2012, pg. 330). This advice can often be contradictory, leading to the policing of women's bodies by themselves, their partners and wider society (Glaser, 2021, pg. 108). This is problematic as it leads to further control over women's bodies, but perhaps most startling of all is the statistic that 30% of domestic abuse starts at pregnancy (Glaser, 2021, pg. 109). This policing of women's bodies throughout pregnancy is detrimental to women and can lead to more violent and abusive levels of control. For many pregnant women, pregnancy is a time in their life where they 'exist in a state of hyper vigilance' (Glaser, 2021, pg. 113); a time where they are more aware than ever before about what goes in their bodies. Women are then expected to ensure they take whatever measures necessary to protect the foetus (Lupton, 2012, pg. 330). Should anything go wrong during a pregnancy then, the woman can be seen as failing to protect the foetus (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 41) and some women can even blame themselves (Glaser, 2021, pg. 118). Accompanied with this is the onslaught of capitalist advertisement linking notions of being a good mother with the purchase of particular products (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 39), asserting the capitalist agenda of consumerism and compliance.

Control of the pregnant body is heightened using medical intervention technologies. Technological advances have meant that in the modern world, use of technology (such as ultrasound) and medical interventions (such as amniocentesis) have become common place and seen as the norm. Wiant-Cummins (2014) called this the medical gaze. That is in the same way women are expected to conform to the male gaze, pregnant women are expected to conform to the medical gaze. This limits the agency women have over their own bodies,

allowing medical technologies to reign supreme and a 'must-have' in order to protect the fetus (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 43). Lupton (2012) asserted that society has come to fetishize the fetus (pg. 337) and regardless of the invasive nature of some medical technologies, women are expected to undertake them to protect the fetus (Wiant-Cummins, 2014, pg. 43). The result of this, according to Lupton (2012), is that the boundaries between woman and fetus become blurred even for the pregnant woman herself (pg. 333). Medical intervention then goes unquestioned as it is seen as the norm, making women conform to procedures to check up on the fetus rather than check up on the women themselves.

### **2.3.2: The Pregnant Body - Reflections**

Beauvoir (1949) claimed that pregnancy is ambiguous, and therefore feelings of ambivalence are natural (pg. 554). She also stated that pregnancy meant 'enrichment and mutilation' (Beauvoir, 1949, pg. 551). Just like Glaser (2021) admitted, pregnancy for her was an experience of mixed emotions (pg. 105). I would argue that during pregnancy, the separation of woman from mother becomes most blurred. I have demonstrated here how during pregnancy women are subjected to extreme levels of control by herself and by wider society. The fetus becomes the focus, and any distinction between woman and mother becomes difficult. It is during this time that a woman begins to embody the attributes of a mother for all to see. All levels of control placed upon women during this stage of their life revolve entirely around the development of the fetus, it rarely gives space to the needs of the woman. Just like Piering (2012) asserted, the woman becomes reduced to her womb (pg. 179).

Normative motherhood continues to control women's bodies even when they fulfil the assumed duty of becoming a mother. Normative motherhood deems the pregnant body too as being dangerous. Dangerous because of the harm it may cause a foetus, resulting in stricter levels of controls and interventions in women's agency over their own bodies.

Employing objectification theory here, whereby women internalise an observer's perceptions and attitudes, women view their pregnant body through the medical gaze. Likewise, employing Foucault's concept of *panopticism*, the controls and discipline pregnant women encounter too, become internalised resulting in women strictly policing their own bodies.

## **2.4: The Postpartum Body**

When a woman gives birth, there are huge shifts in her hormones that she must navigate alongside new responsibilities. She has a new identity, whether it becomes her whole identity or just part of her, it is new. In this section, I will explore the varying expectations placed upon women when they become mothers. There are expectations placed upon women that maternal instinct will kick in, that she will *just know* what to do. I argue that alongside motherhood, the expectation is there for her to continue to fulfil her other roles, maintain the household and maintain her career. Popular culture has saturated us with the image of who a mother is and what she should be; living up to this is impossible but the expectation to do so nevertheless stands. The transformational shift of becoming a mother amplifies the anxieties of being a woman. And after the first child is born, the question remains, when will you have your next one?

### **2.4.1: The Fourth Trimester**

The fourth trimester refers to the initial period of time after a woman has given birth. In this period of time, a woman experiences a major shift, hormonally and practically. After birth, women experience a huge drop in their oestrogen and progesterone levels, yet at the same time, they must navigate caring for her new-born child and negotiate new family responsibilities. The same can be said for women who adopt a child, there are indeed still new responsibilities that she must navigate. Despite this, Benson and Wolf (2012) argued that there is very little literature regarding care for the postpartum mother, with literature instead focusing on the wellbeing of the new-born (pg. 34). For Benson and Wolf (2012), this is a contributing factor to the oppression of women as it suggests that the mother's needs are no longer important once the child is born (pg. 34). This is particularly important at the intersection of motherhood and feminism, as literature focused exclusively on the postpartum mother is vital in demonstrating society cares about the welfare and needs of women as they transition into motherhood. Just as Benson and Wolf (2012) argued, the distinct lack of this does indeed suggest that the postpartum mother is no longer important, she has fulfilled her purpose of bearing a child and now all concern for care and welfare should focus on the child. This is particularly problematic as it contributes to the notion that a woman's mothering instincts will simply 'kick in' and completely negates the experience of women becoming mothers in the modern world.

### **2.4.2: The Complexities of Motherhood**

As an experience, motherhood is different for everyone, and it would be wrong to generalise on the experience of motherhood. For some, being a mother is their vocation and plays a huge role in their identity; for others, being a mother is just a small part of what they deem

their identity. For me, to suggest either to be right or wrong contradicts what is at the heart of any feminist movement, that women should be free to be who they want to be and do what they want to do. There are, however, many complexities surrounding motherhood, particularly with who or what is a 'good' mother, and these only contribute to ambiguous feelings regarding motherhood. Even then, it is not just about what makes a 'good' mother, but rather it is about being the *best* mother (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 6). According to Douglas and Michaels, there is a new 'highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet' (2005, pg. 4). They call this the new momism, and ultimately it demands so much of women that it becomes unrealistic (2005, pg. 13). Much like Betty Friedan's 1960's feminine mystique, the new momism is the new way to pretend to celebrate women, but in fact it places unrealistic ideas and practices upon them that could never be reached (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 4-5). What this does is set women up to fail.

Over the last three decades or so, the media has become obsessed with two contrasting images of motherhood, 'the dedicated doting mom versus the delinquent bad mother' (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 6-7). What this does then, is pit mothers against one another, creating this unconscious – or even conscious – conflict of who is being the better mother (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 6), not only this, but it sustains the notion that mother alone is responsible for the welfare of her children (pg. 7). Unlike the feminine mystique, the new momism allows women to be free agents, to sustain their own careers and have their own money (Douglas, 2005, pg. 5), coupled with fathers doing their bit in the raising of children too, however, the father's bit is seen as somewhat of a 'bonus' whereas the mother's bit is expected, and expected to be done perfectly (Douglas and Michaels, 2005,

pg. 27). Sherri Irvin (2012) in *Motherhood and the Workings of Disgust* highlighted rather poignantly the difference between motherhood and fatherhood. She begins by outlining that in fact, children are disgusting, but mothers do not necessarily see them as disgusting in order to facilitate finding motherhood more tolerable (pg. 79-80). However, other members of society will indeed see these disgusting factors of childhood and project their assumptions of the good mother or bad mother based on the cleanliness of the child (pg. 80). Irvin argued that this is a 'mechanism through which the oppression of women is maintained' (pg. 80). She argued that fathers do not experience the watchful eye of society in the same manner (pg. 80). She highlighted her argument by illustrating the event of a parent taking their child to the supermarket (pg. 80). Ultimately, when a child is collected from nursery they are going to be disgusting, they will be covered in dirt, snot and other bodily fluids (not necessarily always their own) (pg. 80). If the mother was to take their child to the supermarket after work in their post-nursery state, then she is to be subject to ridicule from onlookers for not taking care of her child properly (pg. 80). However, if the father takes their child to the supermarket in the same state, they are greeted with the onlooker's sympathy instead, look at that father doing his bit and trying his best (pg. 80). This does indeed contribute to the oppression of women and highlights the societal perception that the welfare of a child is indeed the responsibility of the mother alone.

A fundamental of feminism is that woman can and should be able to make their own choices, they can have careers, have their own money, and have children if they choose to. However, what happens here is the expectation that if women are going to *choose* all of these, then society dictates that each sphere should be fulfilled (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 22). This notion of choice is performative, which ever option a mother chooses, society will

dictate that one sphere is left unfulfilled (Sorensen, 2017, pg. 310). A *good mother* will undoubtedly spend time with her children and therefore excelling within a career cannot be an option (Sorensen, 2017, pg. 307). However, the part-time career mother will not excel in work, nor will she excel in motherhood (Sorensen, 2017, pg. 304). Again, this is setting women up to fail. The postfeminist notion of having it all is unrealistic and must contribute to the ambiguous feelings of women embarking on their journey of motherhood. Either way they will lose. They cannot be a *good* mother and excel in their career, the suggestion that women can have this choice is, just as Sorensen (2017) argued, performative. I feel it important to note that any notion of 'excelling' within a particular sphere is restricted to both patriarchal and capitalist ideals of what it means to excel and succeed. Here, I use the word excel to denote the patriarchal and capitalist agendas of women having to fulfil every sphere of life they are engaged within.

#### **2.4.3: The Postpartum Body - Reflections**

The postpartum body is left in the wilderness. A time when women need their support network to rally around them is a time when society fails them. There are never ending expectations placed upon women, and most frightening of them all is the expectation that motherhood will simply come naturally to us, our maternal instinct will back us up. The treatment of the postpartum body does not nurture the mother, it ridicules her. What I conclude here is that it is a lose-lose condition. For society, the role of a woman has been fulfilled, but that is not enough. It must be fulfilled perfectly. Normative motherhood ties women so closely to the function of their womb, that even after they have given birth the expectations and controls placed upon their body limit their identities to mother. The postfeminist script of women having a choice is performative. The *Pregnant then Screwed*



campaign group fights to end maternity discrimination. Their campaigns then to focus on: subsidised childcare from the age of six months, three months salaried parental leave as standard, and flexible working. Their campaigns exist to defend mothers who have been let down by society, who have been set up only to fail. The need for this campaign group highlights the deep inequities that women face when they become mothers.

### **Conclusion:**

‘The female body in western societies has traditionally been understood as symbolically leaky, open, fluid, its boundaries permeable and blurred. Particularly in states such as menstruation, pregnancy and menopause, the female body is culturally portrayed as chaotic, subject to hormonal and emotional fluctuations and instabilities.’ (Lupton, 2012, pg. 333)

This chapter addressed my second research question, what limitations does normative motherhood place on women’s bodies? This chapter has demonstrated that expectations and controls, that stem from normative motherhood, are placed upon women throughout key stages of their life. Beauvoir’s (1949) main criticism of motherhood was the expectation that it should be the sole fulfilment of a woman’s life. I have shown the difficulties in distinguishing between woman and mother as a result of the controls and expectations society places upon women. From their first period, girls are taught to conceal that which makes them fertile. This is not the side of fertility society needs to see. The pregnant body is where the distinction between woman and mother becomes most complicated. The pregnant woman becomes the visual symbol of a mother, and a time where women are expected to do anything to protect the child they are carrying. Society therefore imposes the identity of mother onto women and leaves very little space for them to be anything else.

This space becomes even more restricted after the birth of a child, more expectations are placed upon women and the distinction between woman and mother becomes even more complex. The belief that women are expected to possess a maternal instinct ties them closely to becoming mothers. This limits women from exploring the experience of being a mother on their own terms. There are certain expectations of what she should be doing in order to be perceived as a good mother. She should fulfil her role of mother perfectly. Fulfilling the role of mother perfectly – by patriarchal definition of perfection based on what women should be – is wholly unrealistic and sets women up to fail. It prevents women from navigating any identity or purpose beyond being a mother, and thus the tie of woman to mother becomes ever tighter. I argue, therefore, that the structure of society does not allow women the freedom to experience being a mother as one part of their identity. Even in the modern world there is a belief that becoming a mother is an innate quality of women, the very makeup of what a woman is. There is a need for this script of normative motherhood to be rewritten. A way for women to negotiate their own identities as complimentary to being a mother, not as a conflicting battle ground. The final chapter of this thesis, therefore, will deal with these alternative scripts in order to see how – if at all – we can distinguish the woman from the mother.

# CHAPTER 3

## CAN WE CREATE A TOOLBOX FOR EMPOWERED MOTHERING?

### 3. Introduction

The first chapter of my thesis examined the possibility of re-reading Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering; concluding that whilst this is somewhat possible, more needs to be done to cultivate a more affirming script for mothers that is rooted in Christian faith. The second chapter examined modern life, analysing the treatment of women's bodies throughout different stages a woman's life. At each stage, patriarchal expectations suffocate women to conform to the script of normative motherhood. This script denies women the experience of being a mother in a way that is authentic to themselves. Instead, patriarchal expectations placed upon women make the experience of being a mother more challenging than it already is. There is, therefore, a need to explore and offer alternative scripts to the experience of being a mother in order for women to experience authentic mothering. The purpose of exploring these scripts is not to denigrate any woman that chooses to be a stay-at-home-mom, or who's experience of being a mother is their sole identity. Instead, it is to acknowledge the alternative ways to be a mother in order for all women who choose to be mothers to experience authentic mothering. Inherent to feminism is that women should be free to define and shape their own lives, this is not different in the experience of being a mother. What is crucial, is that women chose to be stay-at-home-moms, or working moms, or not moms at all in response to their own needs and desires, not to conform with patriarchal expectations and definitions of what a woman is.

In this chapter, I begin with the post-feminist script that women can have it all; that is they can be mothers, work, maintain social lives and sexual relationships. I appeal to the socialist and Marxist feminists of previous movements to analyse the link between paid work and women's liberation, a notion positioned by Beauvoir (1949). However, there is a need to

engage with this critically, as I argue paid work for women's liberation is not the ticket to women's emancipation. Without huge socio-political changes across the domestic and public spheres, women will continue to be seen as inferior to men which is displayed through gender pay-gaps and expectations of domestic work.

I then appeal to the ground breaking work of Adrienne Rich (1986), who's work *Of Woman Born* deals exclusively with the experience of being a mother. Important to Rich's (1986) work is the distinction between motherhood and mothering; motherhood as a patriarchal, male defined institution, and mothering as a woman defined experience of being a mother. I argue this alternative script is successful in offering an experience of being a mother that is authentic to women's feelings and desires. Through focusing on mothering as opposed to motherhood, women can reject the patriarchal expectations placed upon them when they become mothers. Instead, they can grow through mothering and learn through intelligence as opposed to maternal instinct. Mothering also allows women the space to experience other aspects of themselves beyond being a mother, it does not define women as mothers, it defines mothering as a part of some women's identities or practices.

I then offer a second alternative script to normative motherhood, that of feminist and Goddess spirituality. This script asserts that androcentric religions have led to the subjugation of women through the assertion of God the Father. Feminist spirituality offers a female face to the divine, a Goddess that can either be experienced as an external force or an internal power. In the context of being a mother, feminist spirituality, much like Rich's (1986) mothering, asserts that being a mother is a realisation of the power within the unique aspects of a woman's body. It recognises mothering as an aspect of a woman's identity,

whilst championing the belief that this is not a fixed or permanent identity; a crucial step in separating the mother from the woman. Crucially, the script of Goddess spirituality offers an alternative script that is grounded in a spiritual disposition, allowing women of faith to draw from when engaging with a feminine face of the divine. Finally, I outline what a toolbox for empowered mothering might look like and explore the ways in which women of the modern world are confronting the script of normative motherhood to write their own script inspired by empowered mothering.

Finally, I re-engage with key Biblical texts in relation to the figures of Eve and Mary, exploring how these may form part of this toolbox for empowered mothering. As my research has indicated, there is a need for an emphasis on a woman defined narrative when interpreting Biblical texts. As such, I will employ the theory explored in this toolbox to re-claim Eve and Mary from androcentric interpretation, concluding that both figures can be seen as reflective of empowered mothering.

Throughout this chapter I will engage with the work of Susannah Cornwall (2017) in *Un/Familiar Theology: Reconceiving Sex, Reproduction and Generativity*. Cornwall's work is of particular importance to this chapter as she deals closely with the institutions within Christianity (marriage and family) positioning her work as not necessitating an entire departure from Christian tradition to drive change and appeal to hope. Cornwall (2017) cites key documents within the Church, alongside influential scholars and academics from history up to the modern day to support her argument. In doing so, Cornwall succeeds in demonstrating that in 're-patterning' – a term she uses throughout her work – the institutions that exist within the Christian tradition, we can highlight the ever-changing

nature of these institutions and in doing so, show the 'less-conventional' re-patterning does not diverge from the changing nature of these institutions.

### **3.1: The 'Go Get It' Moms: Mothers in the Paid Labour-Market**

Over the last few decades, the paid-work labour market has seen an increase in the number of women participating. In the United Kingdom, women's employment sits just above 70% with just over 60% of these women working full-time hours (House of Commons Briefing Paper, 2022). The labour-market area that women typically dominate is in health and social care, education and the retail sector (House of Commons Briefing Paper, 2022). The birth rate in the United Kingdom however is declining, with the United Nations predicting further decline over the coming years (UN, 2015). To suggest that women in waged work has led to a decline in birth rate would be speculation, however, it could be argued there is a relationship between the two. This data is pertinent to this section, as herein I explore the post-feminist script that women can 'have it all.' That is that women can have careers, be mothers, maintain social lives and manage sexual relationships without sacrifice. Post-feminism, in the history of the women's movement, is relatively new and aimed to respond to the older 'outdated' feminism of the first and second wave (Gamble, 1998, pg. 36). Post-feminism generally positions itself to be inclusive of men, where men can hold a place in a woman's life (Gamble, 1998, pg. 36). Key to the post-feminist script is that women can indeed 'have it all' (Gamble, 1998, pg. 42).

First then, I analyse socialist feminism's contributions to the women's movement, namely that paid work outside of the domestic sphere is the cornerstone of women's liberation. The movement of women into the public sphere and the paid labour-market, for socialist

feminists, is at the heart of female emancipation. I then engage with this more critically, asserting that the paid labour-market is not the saving grace for women, especially when it comes to motherhood.

### **3.1.1: Socialist Feminism: Waged Work for Women's Liberation!**

In the previous chapter, I dealt somewhat with Beauvoir's (1949) resolution to the *problem of motherhood* and her assertion that women need to be engaging in paid work to gain financial freedom and independence from men (pg. 737). In its nature, this is a belief grounded in socialist feminist theory, and here I will deal in more explicitly with the socialist background to Beauvoir's statement and later, its shortcomings.

Socialist feminism is concerned with the oppression of women as a direct result of their financial dependence on men. Socialist feminism builds on Marxism in relation to the labour-market and who dominates labour-power within capitalist societies. However, for the socialist feminist, this capitalist society is built by men and hence forth the labour-power is dominated by men, leaving women dependent upon men for financial support. Crucially, Marxist theory asserts that labour-power has become 'exploited' through capitalist agendas, specifically in relation to profit (Colley, 2015, pg. 221). Capitalism responds to productivity, as productivity incites the growth in surplus creation to be sold for profit (Colley, 2-15, pg. 224). As such, the public sphere is concerned with boosting productivity to ensure that surplus creation grows and profit grows (Colley, 2015, pg. 224). Crucially then, Marxist feminists argue that the capitalist agenda relies on the women's body to produce labour-power in the form of bearing children (Colley, 2015, pg. 230). It is therefore vital that women remain oppressed to further fuel the demands of capitalism (Colley, 2015, pg. 230). Women's bodies,



therefore, have become an 'economic resource', vital in sustaining capitalism through their reproductive labour (Colley, 2015, pg. 230). That is without bearing children, the production line of labour-power would halt as the surplus (individuals) would not exist to sell their labour; hence, women's oppression is a necessity of capitalism. Socialist feminists, therefore, argue that women's reproductive labour remains invisible in the labour-power market and hence solidifies women's subjugation. It is necessary, therefore, for women's reproductive work to be recognised as labour-power in their contribution to surplus creation and thus should be remunerated accordingly.

This asserts a feeling of female economic independence from men, something that Beauvoir (1949) fought for, and therefore supports women's liberation. At surface level, the compensation for women to carry out reproductive work is logical in that their reproductive labour further contributes to a functioning society. To some extent, this is seen through maternity schemes offered by governments, albeit such schemes limit economic output. However, what this fails to recognise is that this is a result of an economic structure set up by, and for, men. Surely the feminist revolution must start with changing the very structure of a system that necessitates the normalisation of women's work as reproductive work.

That being said, women are not confined to the private sphere. We hold jobs and engage in paid work. We participate in the labour-power of capitalism and sell our services to employers and consume services from corporations. Mothers also participate in the paid labour-market and consume surplus goods. For some mothers, this is a fundamental aspect of their identity, not sacrificing their career for their child, or children, means they have space outside of the domestic sphere, space where they are not just 'Mom.' This is hugely

important in the context of wanting to create a discourse where women are not just seen as mothers, but as humans with their own desires. However, there are fundamental failures that are rooted in the capitalist agenda of productivity. Productivity means production turn over, and in relation to women, child turn over. As such, smashing through the glass ceiling after bearing children is essential to the emancipation of women. The idea that paid work is the cornerstone of women's liberation positions itself too idealistically.

### **3.1.2: Waged Work for Women's Liberation? Socio-Economic Exploitation of the Working Mom**

In capitalist society then, women must be mothers to ensure reproduction of labour-power continues. There is no room, therefore, for women to be anything but mothers.

Tuula Gordon (1990) in her work *Feminist Mothers* set out to interview women to see how those with 'alternative ideology constructed their lives' (pg. 4). She argued that all women have come to be represented as mothers, thus their 'vocation as women is defined in terms of reproduction' (pg. 49). Ultimately, building on the work of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Gordon stressed that there are extreme disparities and 'tensions' in the lived experience of mothering and societal expectations of motherhood (pg. 60). To note, I detail Rich's arguments in the latter half of this chapter as a tool for revolution against the institution of motherhood. When it comes to working mothers, there were a multitude of reasons the mothers in Gordon's (1990) research chose to work. A common factor though, was the importance of upholding an identity outside of their role as mother (pg. 65). For these women, actively participating in the public sphere formed a big part of their own identity (pg. 65), as well as partaking in other social interests outside the home (pg. 68). That

being said, the kind of paid work some of these women chose to partake in was incredibly important to them, and they considered themselves to have 'vocations' as opposed to careers (pg. 70). These women were both suspicious and critical of advancing 'through a hierarchal structure' at work (pg. 71). Gordon (1990) highlighted here the difficulties women interviewed had in balancing work with children, and instead of presupposing lack of career progression to demonstrate oppression, the women interviewed saw it as a kind of activism against the hierarchical structure of patriarchal work (pg. 75). This is particularly interesting from a socialist feminist point of view, demonstrating the ability to engage in paid work yet revolt against the way in which paid work has been organised (by men). Pertinent to Gordon's research, however, is that maintaining space outside of the domestic sphere was important for these women to cultivate their own identities outside of being a mother. What Gordon (1990) also argued for was that outstanding childcare should be a necessity, not a luxury.

The UK based campaign group, *Pregnant then Screwed*, actively campaign for numerous policy changes to support mothers, such as all work being flexible work and subsidised childcare for children from the age of six months. In the UK, when a child turns three years old, parents are entitled to thirty hours of free childcare; up until that point, childcare costs must be funded by families (Pregnant then Screwed). With the exponential increase in the cost of childcare in the UK drastically outweighing the rise in salary (Glaser, 2021, pg. 219) mothers are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to work. The go get it agenda of having it all doesn't quite match up to the reality of experience; both wider society and the workplace 'haven't yet caught up to facilitate this' (Hogenboom, 2021, pg. 147). The

reality is, 'working mothers are extremely stretched' (Hogenboom, 2021, pg. 144). That is, they are constantly juggling their working life with their family life.

Eliane Glaser's (2021) *Motherhood: A Manifesto* deals honestly with the realities of modern motherhood and the treatment of women throughout their life.

*'If motherhood is the most important job in the world, where is the public recognition? And why isn't it paid?'* (pg. 2)

Glaser (2021) asserted that 'motherhood is much harder than it needs to be' despite all the supposed progression and feminist battles of the past (pg. 3). Glaser's (2021) work is both poignant and thought provoking. Glaser (2021) is a vital contribution to this chapter as she deals directly with the condition of motherhood in the modern world. Here, I deal with her chapter on "The Juggle" where she travels through the state of the working mother. She looks at both the public and private sphere in the context of the working mother, and how the 'motherhood penalty' corners women at every turn. She confessed that having her child made her want to revolt against hierarchical workplace structures (pg. 214). To refer back to Gordon's (1990) study, the women interviewed here echoed a similar sentiment. That being said, getting back into work after prolonged leave is undeniably difficult (Glaser, 2021, pg. 216; Hogenboom, 2021, pg. 118).

In recent years, the notion of gender within the workplace has become somewhat of a battlefield, with the gender pay gap becoming more prominent in societal discourse, women being paid less than their male counterpart is not new information. The key issue in the context of the motherhood penalty, is that on returning to work after children, women can

end up in lower-paid jobs than before (Glaser, 2021, pg. 216). Where mothers grapple with the motherhood penalty, fathers experience somewhat of a boost (Glaser, 2021, pg. 220: Hogenboom, 2021, pg. 127). Citing a 2018 report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, mothers earn a third less per hour than equally educated fathers by the time a child has turned 20 (Glaser, 2021, pg. 221). Not only this, men with children are also more likely to be hired and paid more than their childless male counterparts (pg. 220). To rub salt in the gender pay gap wound, by retirement, a mother's pension remuneration is approximately one fifth of that of a man's (pg. 221). For me, these facts are frightening.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), approximately three quarters are mothers were engaging in paid work in the UK in 2019 (Glaser, 2021, pg. 219). Whether that is full time or part time work, there is often still the need for childcare to be sourced and women continue to juggle their work with their home life. Women are left having to reconsider their working arrangements simply because childcare is too expensive, whereas fathers do not necessarily have the same burden (Glaser, 2021, pg. 222). Consequently, there is a pull between work and home life. The labour market of the UK demands productivity, and so women must excel at work, but the expectation remains that they too shall excel at home (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 203). Overwhelmingly, however, modern mothers feel as though they fail at both (Glaser, 2021, pg. 224). Mothers become stuck between what to do, three days of work becomes too much, but two days is not enough (Glaser, 2021, pg. 218). The system's structure perpetuates women's guilt (Glaser, 2021, pg. 218) and is structured in such a way that encourages women to stay at home (pg. 219). In response to this then, there appears to be a consensus on a 'model of full-time working dad and part-time working mom'

(Glaser, 2021, pg. 227) consolidating the 'parental essentialism' that women are just simply better at parenting than men are (Hogenboom, 2021, pg. 124).

Consequently, this results in the belief that it is mothers who are accountable for raising and socialising children (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, pg. 10). Whether mothers are working or not, societal expectations deem them to be the primary care giver of children. Subsequently, women are doing almost sixty percent more domestic work than men are (Glaser, 2021, pg. 225). The year of 2020 shone a huge spotlight on the disparities of work done in the domestic sphere, with both mother and father working from home during the pandemic, the *Understanding Society Study* from the University of Essex Institute for Social and Economic Research (2021) embarked on a COVID-19 sub-study to assess how the pandemic was impacting lives at home. They found that despite the fact both men and women were at home, women were taking on at least five hours more housework a week than their husbands or male partners (University of Essex, 2021). They also found that women were doing nearly double of the child-care and home-schooling responsibilities, with women doing approximately 20.5 hours a week, and men doing 12 hours a week (University of Essex, 2021). The socialist feminist appeal for women to be in waged labour 'has done very little in addressing the sexual division of all labour' (Bryan, 2020, pg. 336). Women continue to dominate the sphere of unpaid work at home and maternal labour. Accompanied with this physical unpaid work is the invisible labour – or mental labour – which women are typically burdened with over men; remembering dates, activities, to put a wash on, what to buy at the supermarket (Glaser, 2021, pg. 229). These weigh on the shoulders of women generally more than they do for men.

I have dealt with the capitalist view of children being surplus for future labour power in the previous section of this chapter. If motherhood is the most important job in raising the labour power of the future, then Glaser's question is a vital one. Why are women left to fight at every stage, and what can we do about it?

### **3.1.3: The 'Go Get It' Moms: Mothers in the Paid Labour-Market – Reflections**

The socialist feminist fight for waged work for women's liberation was far too idealistic.

Women are engaging in paid work more than ever before, yet women's liberation is far from dealt with. Women continue to be paid less at work than men, and when they return to work after bearing children, I have demonstrated that they are often met with further pay sacrifice. Their progression is limited in comparison to men. Women that are in the paid labour market continue to be exploited at home, carrying the brunt of the domestic work, and the brunt of child socialisation. A common theme throughout is that women blame themselves for leaving either sphere seemingly unfulfilled. This reveals a society that devalues women in the workplace and at home, each sphere does not fulfil a mother's needs, abandoning her to blame herself for supposed 'failures.' Just like Glaser (2021) argued, in order to move forwards to a real liberation of women, deep societal changes are necessary. Until that happens, mothers will remain in the wilderness. Without a light to guide their way, true emancipation does not exist. What is apparent here is that our society is structured in a way to deem all women as mothers, and any resistance against this grain is met with conflict. It is no wonder then that through the patriarchal system in which society is founded on, motherhood is riddled with feelings of ambiguity. There is much to navigate in relation to motherhood, and as we have now seen, at each stage the mother is set up to fail.

A new revolution is needed, the feminist fight that has come before us has paved the way and there is much to be done to keep the flame alive. For the remainder of this chapter, I hope to outline a toolbox to use, or a path to follow, for mothers to demand what they need for themselves to be both woman and mother in whatever way they wish to be. In doing so, I hope this toolbox will contribute to the societal changes that Glaser (2021) called for. Cornwall (2017) described this as a re-patterning of the institutions we are familiar with, in order to drive change and appeal to hope.

### **3.2: Motherhood as Experience and Institution**

Adrienne Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born* explains, in detail, the institution of motherhood; the notion that in patriarchal society there exists expectations on the behaviours of women in relation to motherhood that permeate societal thought, discourse and even public policy. Her work on this will shape much of this section in order to outline the consequences of this institution and importantly, how it can be overcome.

For Rich (1986) it is the institution of motherhood, rather than motherhood itself, that subjugates women, and 'to destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood' (pg. 280). In the context of this thesis, what Rich claims here is incredibly important. The purpose of this thesis is not to be anti-motherhood but to rather recognise that motherhood is not a sole identity for women, and whilst for some women it may be considered their vocation, motherhood should not be seen as a prerequisite of womanhood. I first deal with what Rich means by the institution of motherhood before moving on to the experience of mothering and how this can support women through the transition into mother as simply part of their life experience, not as its sole purpose.



### 3.2.1: The Institution of Motherhood

Typically, the idea of an institution musters up thoughts of buildings – such as universities, or governmental buildings – or at times even religions, but the institution of motherhood is not like this (Rich, 1986, pg. 275). When Rich refers to the institution of motherhood, she does not refer to a tangible entity, but rather the ideals and expectations placed upon women that are so deeply interwoven into our society and how it operates (Rich, 1986, pg. 276). This impacts the way women are expected to behave both as women and as mothers. It places expectations on women to be mothers and to see this as their purpose in life and to enjoy every minute of it. Cornwall (2017) argued that the Church does not recognise the changing nature of institution and relies on a fixed conception of family structures (pg. 157). To contextualise here, this fixed conception would be the expectation that women are innately linked to their biological sex, consequently innately linking women to procreation.

The consequences, then, of the institution of motherhood on women and mothers are numerous. In the institution, being a mother is a woman's sole purpose and identity with no room to experience anything else. The institution of motherhood asserts motherhood to be a 'natural condition' and 'a natural manifestation of an innate female characteristic' (Smart, 1996, pg. 37). The association of motherhood as a natural condition (Gordon, 1990, pg. 31) groups all women as being 'potential mothers' (pg. 49). Rich (1986) and those that came after, aim to disconnect motherhood from womanhood and remove the expectation that all women are mothers or mothers to be. Another consequence of the institution of motherhood is that being a mother should be seen as an innate joy and natural instinct. For Douglas and Michaels (2005) the idea of motherhood as an overwhelming experience of joy is a 'myth' and does not reflect the real experience of mothers (pg. 3). Consequently then,

the experience of ambivalence towards motherhood is mostly unrecognised or seen as 'problematic' (Brown, 2010, pg. 121). Through history, there have been expectations placed upon women on what the ideal mother looks like, and this only further perpetuates ambivalence towards motherhood (Brown, 2010, pg. 122).

Perhaps the biggest myth perpetuated by the institution of motherhood is the belief in a maternal instinct, the belief that certain feelings and behaviours already exist within a woman. The institution 'demands of women maternal instinct rather than intelligence' (Rich, 1986, pg. 42) which only contributes to feelings of guilt if mothers feel ambivalent (Brown, 2010, pg. 122). Maternal instinct is a common discourse and suggests that all women are born with the 'innate knowledge' that they will simply know what to do when a child arrives (Agarwal, 2021, pg. 28). This further perpetuates the belief that motherhood is a natural phenomenon, that women will know what to do as opposed to acquiring knowledge through their own intelligence. This adds to women's feelings of guilt because they are 'told that no matter how they feel now, their maternal instincts will take over' (Agarwal, 2021, pg. 321). Thus, when feelings of ambiguity remain, or feelings of sadness and exhaustion, mothers pit themselves against the idealised image of a mother and feel they are not enough. Some feminist thinkers assert that the discourse of the maternal instinct is in place to continue to oppress women, to limit their intelligence (Agarwal, 2021, pg. 28). To be able to denounce the idea of maternal instinct will allow society to stop seeing motherhood as a woman's destiny, and instead see motherhood as woman's choice (Agarwal, 2021, pg. 320).

In the context of this thesis then, this is incredibly important in separating motherhood from womanhood; to be a mother is to choose to be a mother, not a woman's destiny. Agarwal

(2021) concluded her book *(M)otherhood* with the assertion that women should exercise their own choice, to be a mother or not, without societal expectations intervening; that is, they should neither conform nor rebel, but choose as an individual that belongs wholly to themselves (pg. 341). It is important to note here that separating motherhood from womanhood becomes an even bigger task within feminist debate. This brings in notions of womanhood and the different definitions of woman. I want to recognise the complexities and nuances here, but do not aim to engage with this discourse here as it requires a whole study of its own to do justice to the many voices engaged in this debate. To explain what I mean in the context of my thesis, by separating womanhood from motherhood I mean the two should not be treated as inseparable; motherhood is not an indicator of womanhood.

The institution of motherhood then, expects all women to be mothers. It expects women to know how to be a mother through some form of innate knowledge. It expects women to devote their entire lives to their child/ren. It expects women to love their child/ren unconditionally all the time. It expects women to carry out domestic, unpaid work in the name of their children. It expects women to be mother all the time. The institution of motherhood places expectations upon women that do not match the realities of motherhood. We must then, denounce the institution of motherhood. We must separate the act of mothering, from the institution of motherhood.

### **3.2.2: Motherhood, Mothering, and the Experience of being a Mother**

Adrienne Rich (1986) asserted that being a mother is simply one part of a woman's life and does not make up her whole identity (pg. 36-37). This is an important affirmation when dealing with motherhood and womanhood, and whilst being a mother is so important to

many women, it does not mean that they are just a mother. Rich (1986) wanted to denounce the institution of motherhood not by denouncing mothering altogether, but rather by distinguishing between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering. Whilst the institution places expectations upon women that further oppress them, experience gives women the freedom and space to be and feel whichever way is true to them.

Similarly, Cornwall (2017) attested that an individual can 'participate' to an extent within an institution, such as becoming a mother, and contribute to its re-patterning (pg. 164). For Rich (1986), there needs to be a world where it is accepted that women have knowledge over their own bodies more than external (patriarchal) agencies (pg. 285). To 'boycott' does not solve the issues entrenched in patriarchal society (Rich, 1986, pg. 282-283). In the context of being a mother, women should have complete autonomy and control from contraception to conception to pregnancy and birth. Brown's (2010) assertion that patriarchal expectations placed upon women makes being a mother difficult to enjoy (pg. 132) rings true. It is important to note that I am in no way wanting to belittle women's experiences of postpartum depression, and such experiences should be treated as true and with care. But for women who do not experience postpartum depression, being a mother can become less enjoyable when time is spent on anxieties of doing things 'right'. Instead, according to Brown (2010) some women do in fact remove themselves from institutionalised motherhood and follow Rich's (1986) model of focusing on mothering (pg. 134). In these instances, women focus on the relationship they have with their child without adhering to external pressures, they engage in activities they enjoyed before they had a child, and they built themselves a support network of trusted friends and family (pg. 134). This focus on the experience of

mothering can help women to focus on their own needs as human beings, rather than on the patriarchal expectations forced upon them. Shifting the focus onto the experience of mothering then, is crucial in separating motherhood from womanhood, or the woman from the mother.

For Gordon (1990), women should not be placed under pressure by society to have children in the first place (pg. 44). Gordon (1990) was very clear about the task of a modern feminist in the context of motherhood; we must question the

*‘politics of reproduction, motherhood as an institution, analysing the complex desires involved in mothering, considering the right of women not to be mothers, and how those who make a positive choice to have children can combine their parenting with other activities including paid work.’ (pg. 47-48).*

We are in a time that feels like the feminist task of emancipating women should have been finished long ago, yet it continues to feel like there is much left to do; questioning the institution of motherhood seems a good place to start. That being said, Gordon (1990) made it clear that even criticising the institution of motherhood does not necessarily make it is easier to offer alternatives, however, we can explore our options (Gordon, 1990, pg. 62-63). Through emphasis on the experience of mothering, I draw on Rich (1986) and others to explore these options.

First then, the experience and feelings of ambivalence attached to mothering must become an accepted norm. In order to breakdown the ‘good mother’ ‘bad mother’ dichotomy, ultimately freeing women from feelings of guilt, there needs to be an acceptance of the differing emotions women experience through their journey of mothering. As Douglas and

Michaels (2005) said, we need to remove the myth that mothering is 'eternally fulfilling and rewarding' (pg. 3) and accept the roller-coaster of emotions as the norm. I argue that doing so allows perpetuated feelings of guilt and anxiety to lessen. This allows women to explore the journey of mothering through their own experience rather than the experience they are expected to have. It allows them to pursue other interests beyond the sphere of raising children, as taking a break from this will no longer be seen as a failure. To dismantle the illusion that raising children is easy and fun allows women the space to breathe and to be themselves. This is a crucial factor when breaking the link between womanhood and motherhood; allowing women to explore themselves, their feelings, and their interests – both hobbies and careers – alongside raising a child.

Importantly, mothering – as opposed to the institution of motherhood – draws on the strengths of women, an area that gives women the space to deepen their knowledge (Smart, 1996, pg. 38). Rather than the damaging myth of the maternal instinct, mothering gives women the space to use their intelligence to learn and grow into mothering rather than knowing what to do from the start. Freeing women from the myth of the maternal instinct is an important first step. In order to do this then, there must be an environment created of women supporting women, a nurturing environment where questions can be asked, where individuals are supported to grow into mothering. Patriarchy causes women to pit themselves against one another for who is the best mother, whereas the experience of mothering encourages women to share experiences to strengthen one another. Whilst this idea of a non-judgemental world seems utopian, this is where Brown's (2010) assertion of a trusted support network becomes so important.

To illustrate, in the BBC show *Motherland* we see a group of women navigating motherhood alongside other responsibilities. We see women pitting themselves against other women, trying to be the best mother. But what we also see is a group of friends in a space where mistakes are accepted, and advice is shared. Of course, the premise of the show is that of comedy, but perhaps the show works as a comedy because it depicts the realities of mothering. That being said, Glaser (2021) is critical of the portrayal of the male character in *Motherland* and his depiction as the primary care giver as comedic does not take advantage of the opportunity to deconstruct gender norms. I agree here with Glaser (2021) and contest that this character could well have been used more effectively to denounce stereotypical gender roles. Instead of accepting 'the model of full-time working dad and part-time working mom' (Glaser, 2021, pg. 227), an acceptance of family structures outside the heteronormative idealised family is important. Whilst the show does this to a limited extent, the comedic aspect of this male character only further validates the patriarchal construction of masculine archetypes and is therefore unhelpful in challenging the heteronormativity that surrounds gendered parental roles. Relinquishing the domestic sphere as the woman's sphere allows for a more nuanced exploration of family dynamics, one where all household members, not just women, carry the weight of the domestic sphere. This will enable a liquidation of the notion that only women are expected to socialise children, thus severing the link between womanhood and motherhood.

### **3.2.3: Motherhood as Experience and Institution – Reflections**

Through the exploration of the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, it is clear to see that it is the institution as opposed to the act of being a mother that is so damaging for women. To suggest that women should simply not be mothers – such as

Beauvoir (1949) did – I believe is to miss the point. Just as Rich (1986) expressed, to avoid or ‘boycott’ certain experiences of life is to boycott fixing the problem (pg. 282-283). The feminist task is to question the institutions that subjugate women, and the institution of womanhood continues to do this in the modern day. It is our task therefore, to critique the institution of motherhood not by refusing to become mothers altogether, but by exploring a different way of being mothers. Cornwall (2017) argued that ‘at the heart of un/familiar theology’ is that things which ‘disturb and provoke us’ do so ‘because they are violent or unjust’ and we must therefore challenge and change this to make it feel familiar (pg. 173). I believe the institution of motherhood to be both violent and unjust. I have demonstrated in the second chapter the micro-aggressions that lead to control over women’s bodies, whether they are pregnant bodies or not. I agree with both Rich (1986) and Cornwall (2017) that this institution needs to be challenged, but not abstained from, in order to make the deep societal changes Glaser (2021) called for.

Focusing on the experience of mothering can allow for a huge shift in discourse around motherhood. For Agarwal (2021) becoming a mother felt like an act of resistance, a space where she became more of herself through being aware of, and rejecting, the institution of motherhood (pg. 61). Without major policy changes, which women continue to fight for, the institution of motherhood will continue to devalue and subjugate women. Another way to fight against the institution of motherhood then, is on an individual level, whereby women carry out and experience mothering in a way that is true to them, without fear of living up to cultural expectations of what mothering should look like. This is a key act of resistance, and a way for being a mother – or choosing not to be a mother – to be an act of resistance rather than influenced by the institution of motherhood.



Distinguishing between motherhood and mothering is important in making a distinction between the patriarchal, male defined motherhood as different to the female defined experiences of mothering (O'Reilly, 2020, pg. 20). This enables the act of mothering to become a site of empowerment as opposed to oppression (O'Reilly, 2020, pg. 29). This empowered mothering, on the whole, allows women to find the act of mothering as rewarding through 'affirming maternal agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism' (O'Reilly, 2020, pg. 31). That is, mothering does not become a sole identity, but rather women experience identity 'outside of motherhood' whilst also allowing 'her power within motherhood' (O'Reilly, 2020, pg. 31). Rich's (1986) distinction between motherhood and mothering allows for the resistance against patriarchal motherhood without women having to denounce mothering all together.

### **3.3: Feminist Spirituality and the Experience of Mothering**

Thus far, this chapter has aimed to illustrate alternative ways for women to experience being mothers that allow them to negotiate their own sense of self. I have demonstrated the dangers of the postfeminist script of having it all, and the failings of the socialist feminist claim that paid work will liberate women from subjugation. However, these alternative scripts should not be wholly dismissed, as paid work for women does form an important part of their identity. Rich's (1986) denouncement of the institution of motherhood, I argue, allows for a more active response to the problem of motherhood that encompasses a range of patriarchal dominated life. The focus on the experience of mothering from an individual point of view is immensely important in eliminating the expectations that patriarchal society demands of her, thus allowing her to live freely as mother (or not).

However, I assert there is another script to explore. Given the task of the feminist is to offer alternatives scripts, I believe this one to be important. That is the script of feminist spirituality. Feminist spirituality is centred on the power of the female body, the divineness within. Feminist spirituality is an interesting alternative script as it transcends, and transfers over to, patriarchal and dogmatic institutionalised religion. By this, I mean those within a particular faith path can utilise feminist spirituality complimentary to their own religious feelings or values, but in a way that is more female centred. Alternatively, women that do not belong to any particular faith path, or have no religion at all, can benefit from the script of feminist spirituality in the context of becoming mothers.

Here, I engage closely with feminist spirituality in order to offer an alternative script to the problem of motherhood. I begin with Carol Christ's (1992) work *Why Women Need the Goddess* before moving onto the potential feminist spirituality has in honouring the female body.

### **3.3.1: The Goddess**

The Goddess means different things to different people; the meaning of the Goddess is an 'affirmation of female power, the female body, the female will' (Christ, 1992, pg. 276). The symbol of the Goddess plays a huge role in reaffirming women's bodies when patriarchal society has told us they are 'dangerous and inferior' (Christ, 1992, pg. 278). Perhaps most importantly, the symbol of the Goddess is not confined within dogma, it is not limited to those of religious persuasion (Christ, 1992, pg. 274). The pervasive imagery of God the Father does not stop at institutionalised religion (of Christianity, Judaism), but permeates deep into a cultural bias (Christ, 1992, pg. 274). Christ (1992) argues that it is not enough to reject the

androcentric symbols of religion and society, they must be replaced (pg. 275). The Goddess then, replaces the symbolism of God the Father for a female centred symbol that reaffirms female power rather than rejecting it (Christ, 1992, pg. 277). Women no longer need to look to male power to rescue them, for the power to rescue her is within herself (Christ, 1992, pg. 277). In the context of becoming a mother, this rejection of the female body as dangerous and inferior, and instead reassert the female body as a place of power, is a powerful alternative script allowing mothers to break free from the institution of motherhood. The symbol of the Goddess allows women to take their bodies back from patriarchal hold; in the context of mothering, women are no longer passive objects impregnated by men, but they are able to take control of the whole birth process (Christ, 1992, pg. 280).

The symbol of the Goddess allows for female reproduction to be divinised (Raphael, 1996, pg. 55). When a woman conceives and births a child, her body transforms 'into the vehicle of new life' and one that will 'sustain life' (Raphael, 1996, pg. 56). In Goddess symbolism then, the woman's body is not a passive vessel that bears the child for her male counterpart. Instead, the woman's body represents the incredible power she has in creating and sustaining life. The symbol of the Goddess allows the experience of mothering to be jubilant (Raphael, 1996, pg. 133-144), whilst also recognising the reality of other feelings and experiences that come with it (Raphael, 1996, pg. 57). The Goddess symbols of maiden, mother and crone are not fixed states of life; instead, Goddess spirituality recognises the fluidity between them. A mother can be the crone or the maiden, that is she is allowed to feel ambivalent about her role as mother (Raphael, 1996, pg. 57). This alternative script allows for mothers to have the space needed to experience mothering in a way that is real for them. It removes any expectations or myths of maternal instincts and steadfast love.

Whilst steadfast love may be present, Goddess spirituality recognises and accepts the reality of other feelings and experiences.

Feminist spirituality invokes the power of the female body, in all its forms, to come forwards. Christ (1992) emphasised the incredibly 'unique position' of women as 'menstruators, birth givers' (pg. 279). The patriarchal positioning of menstruation in particular as dangerous is denounced through Goddess and feminist spirituality. Each aspect of a woman's bodily experience is celebrated as an innate power within, allowing her to bring forth life (or chose not to). Washbourne (1992) emphasised the experience of menstruation should be seen as 'enrichment of self' (pg. 255). That is rather than the process of menstruation being a hidden secret, it is celebrated as 'life power' (Washbourne, 1992, pg. 256). Goddess spirituality and feminist spirituality, therefore, allows different bodily experiences of women to be considered as powerful. This is important in the context of this thesis, as for women to invoke the power from within during their experience of mothering, it must be lived through every stage of their life.

The symbol of the Goddess, as all three concepts – Maiden, Mother and Crone – allows women to navigate the different aspects of their identities and feelings freely. Goddess spirituality allows the birthing process to be woman centred, in her control, not as a process in need of intervention, but a process of women creating and sustaining life in the most beautiful way. What it also offers, importantly, is the space for a woman to realise her role as mother as one part of her wider identity, giving her the freedom to explore other interests in life. I argue, therefore, that Goddess spirituality and spiritual feminism can offer an

alternative script for mothers to navigate and negotiate the experience of mothering on their own terms.

### **3.3.2: Feminist Spirituality and the Experience of Mothering – Reflections**

Feminist spirituality offers an alternative script to patriarchal motherhood that is woman defined and places emphasis on the removal of androcentric religious symbols. This allows for women to feel power within themselves, giving them the confidence to experience mothering in a way that is authentic to them. Importantly, the symbol of the Goddess is not limited to individuals who are religiously inclined. The symbol of the Goddess emphasises female power in all women, giving them agency over their own bodies both through mothering and beyond. This compliments Rich's (1986) distinction between motherhood and mothering, and Goddess spirituality is too female defined. Crucially, each alternative script allows the experience of being a mother to be female defined and controlled. They assert that mothering is simply one part of being a woman, giving space to other identities outside of mothering.

### **3.4: A Toolbox for Empowered Mothering**

The final stage of my dissertation is to draw upon all of my research in order to create a toolbox for empowered mothering; a selection of techniques (or tools) that could be applied to confront institutional motherhood. I feel it is important to note that creating a toolbox is not with the intention of developing a dogmatic approach that should be adhered to strictly. Rather, it is to weave together alternative scripts to institutional and normative motherhood that may, or may not, be useful to women whether they are mothers or not.

As outlined throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout this thesis, normative or institutional motherhood refers to the expectations that are placed upon women which impacts the way in which women are expected to behave. Normative motherhood seeks to control women's bodies as soon as a woman begins menstruation, it demonises the woman's body as dangerous, whether she is pregnant or not. Whatever form empowered mothering may take, it must challenge the script of institutional motherhood, and the work must start early. Empowered mothering is not just about the physical experience of being a mother. Empowered mothering is about changing the script that limits women's lives whether they are pregnant or not. I argue that this change will come about as more and more individuals resist the script of institutional motherhood. Resist the expectations and control placed upon women and champion a script that is defined by women's experience.

Goddess spirituality has an important role in this, particularly as is it anti-dogmatic, and is open to women both of faith and of none. For me, Goddess spirituality plays an important role in challenging a society that deems women's bodies as dangerous. Goddess spirituality allows women to draw on this idea of the feminine divine, perhaps a notion that many women have been starved of. It emphasises the feminine power within, and the strength and beauty of the female body. Through the figures of Maiden, Mother, and Crone, Goddess spirituality advocates for the fluidity of life, the fluctuating reality of emotions and identity, allowing women to be mothers, and allowing them to be many other identities too.

Another key tool of empowered mothering is asserting intelligence over maternal instinct. As we have seen above, the notion of maternal instinct is so deeply rooted in institutional motherhood that it ties a woman so closely to her womb the two become indistinguishable.

The belief that women will just simply know what to do when they have their child is the most terrifying belief to come out of institutional motherhood. It perpetuates the notion that a woman's purpose is to become a mother, and it places the responsibility of rearing a child solely on the shoulders of the mother. Empowered mothering, however, emphasises the importance of a woman's intelligence and freedom to learn (and unlearn for that matter) about their bodies as they become mothers. This idea is slowly starting to take off, particularly in the world of social media. Here I will explore three different Instagram accounts and their supporting businesses, from the public domain, to explore the ways in which social media is contributing to the rejection of maternal instinct. The Naked Doula (@thenakeddoula) is an example of a social media platform dedicated to inspiring women to harness their intelligence to learn, and unlearn, everything about birth and motherhood. The Positive Birth Company (@thepositivebirthcompany) is another example of championing the intelligence of women over the notion of maternal instincts.

Cornwall (2017) explored how in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, birthing women were given opiate drugs which left women disconnected from their birthing bodies and unable to remember their birthing experience (pg. 77). She argued that still today, the use of epidurals and other pain relief have a similar affect (Cornwall, 2017, pg. 77). One of @thenakeddoula's Instagram posts – and supporting materials to purchase – details birthing without assisted pain relief; exploring how boosting oxytocin through different methods (such as darkness, breath work, privacy) can drive labour without the need for medical intervention, allowing for women to be connected to their birthing bodies. Hypnobirthing is becoming a far more common term in birthing discourse, and @thepositivebirthcompany even appeared on Dragon's Den, bringing the term further into popular consciousness. Swencions et al (2012) conducted a study on

the outcomes of hypnobirthing, comparing a survey of women who utilised hypnobirthing during their labour to two surveys of women who did not. They found women who were using hypnobirthing experienced fewer medical interventions in the form of inductions, foetal monitoring, IV fluids, and the need for epidurals (Swencions et al, 2012, pg. 120). The phenomenon of hypnobirthing is not limited to the secular sphere, with @christianhypnobirthing also galvanising a huge following on Instagram. @christianhypnobirthing employs hypnobirthing techniques alongside Biblical scriptures to support women of faith on their own birthing journey. Perhaps crucially, @christianhypnobirthing, similar to secular birth positive Instagram accounts, displays real-life images of women giving birth in various locations including their own homes, championing the need for women to be informed when it comes to their birthing agency. There are also real-life pictures of women breastfeeding, and different family structures that are involved in the birthing process. This highlights how women of faith are moving beyond the institution of motherhood to reclaim their own birthing stories and experiences.



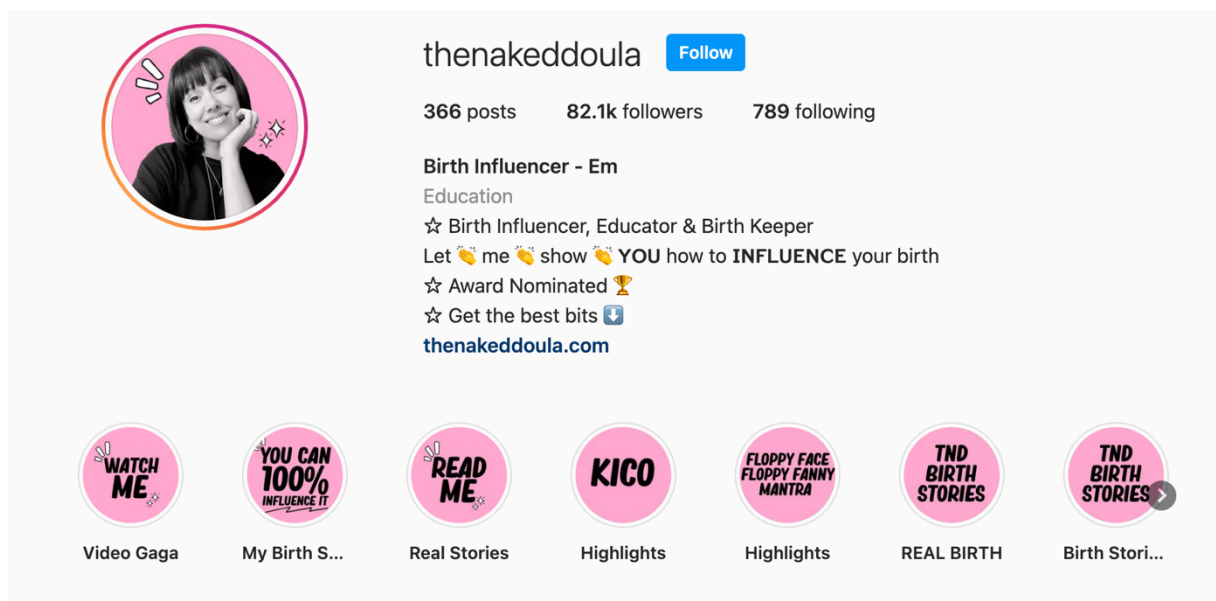


Fig. 3: Instagram, 2022, @thenakeddoula

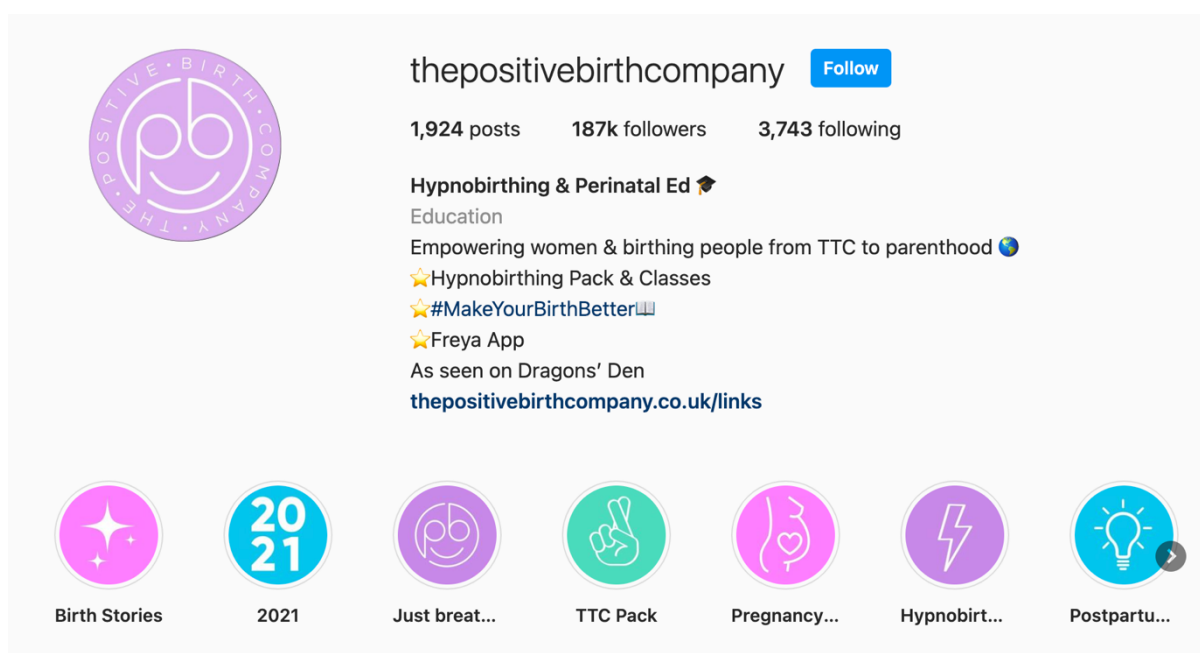


Fig. 4: Instagram, 2022, @thepositivebirthcompany

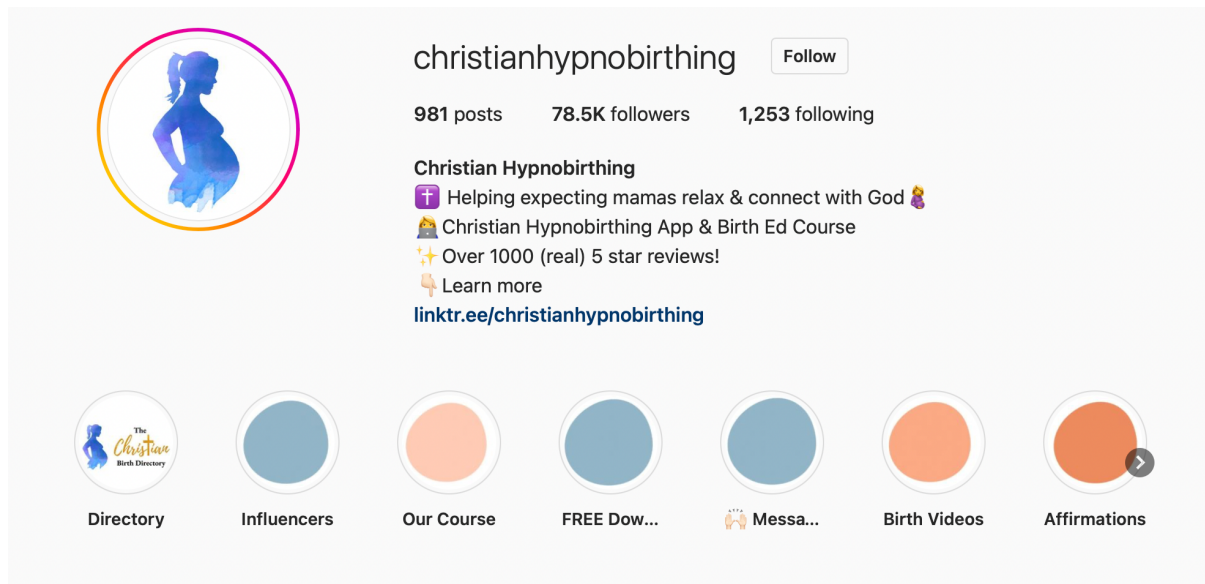


Fig. 5: Instagram, 2022, @christianhypnobirthing

### 3.5: Reclaiming Eve and Mary

The first chapter of my thesis explored the possibilities of re-reading Biblical texts in way that is reflective of empowered mothering, ultimately concluding that these texts can be freed from androcentric interpretation to an extent, but it is particularly challenging to re-frame these texts in a way that is wholly reflective of empowered mothering. Perhaps the key challenge here is, as I have previously argued, Biblical scripture lacks a female defined narrative whereby women only exist in the context of a male figure. Consequently, we are presented with women figures that perpetuate the male defined feminine ideal.

Eve, through interpretation, becomes entangled with the themes of sin and death, highlighting the connection between birth and salvation we have seen echoed in the text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Mary on the other hand, I have argued comes to represent the ideal 'good' femininity that women should aspire to. Both a product of male authorship and thought, and

neither giving way to a woman defined narrative emphasising women's experiences.

Together, I argued the dichotomy of Eve and Mary further exaggerates the discourse around good femininity and bad femininity, which has been echoed through categories of 'good' mother and 'bad' mother as Douglas and Michaels (2005) argued.

Towards the end of this first chapter, I attested that we must challenge these interpretations of Eve and Mary by reading these texts through a feminist lens, and whilst we can draw on the works of Vuola (2019), Fiorezna (1992) and Ruether (1979) as I explored, this can indeed go further. Krueger (2019) claimed that patriarchal interpretations are what must be overcome, and Christ (1992) called for an emphasis on women's experience. Dawn Llewellyn's (2017) *'But I Still Read the Bible!': Post-Christian Women's Biblicism* details a qualitative study of post-Christian women who continue to engage with Biblical texts despite their departure from Christianity. Llewellyn (2017) interviewed thirty-six women aged twenty-one to eighty who were once Christian but made the decision to leave, partly due to their feminist dispositions, and their sustained relationship with Biblical texts. Participants in Llewellyn's (2017) study were critical of the Bible due to its patriarchal nature (pg. 582). That being said, women in the study continued to sustain a relationship with Biblical texts. Despite these women having made the decision to depart from their Christian tradition, the impact their faith would have had on their lives is undeniable, so it comes as no surprise that a text that was once nourishing for them should not be denounced entirely. Llewellyn (2017) found that these women were 'filtering' Biblical texts, drawing on texts that were suitable for their own, new, spiritual disposition and 'screening out' texts that weren't (pg. 582). Llewellyn's (2017) study highlights the significance Biblical texts continue to have for post-Christian women as a space to continue to find nourishment.

As such, this highlights to me the deep need to continue to re-read and re-interpret Biblical texts for the women that have chosen not to depart from Christianity entirely. As the Bible continues to be a source of nourishment for many, to simply write it off would do a disservice to women of Christian faith. The latter half of this chapter, therefore, will draw on the toolbox for empowered mothering as a starting point for re-reading the Biblical figures of Eve and Mary. This toolbox offers a way for key Biblical texts to be approached from a new, and different, starting point; one that is not bound up in androcentric interpretation, but rather drawing focus back to textual analysis.

### **3.5.1: Reclaiming Eve**

I will deal with key text fragments from Genesis chapters 2 – 4, employing the feminist theory utilised throughout this thesis and the toolbox for empowered mothering to use re-interpretation to dismantle discourses that have connected Eve with sin and death, applying Goddess spirituality to introduce a woman centred voice that is otherwise not present.

*“Therefore a man leave his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis, 2:24, NRSV).*

This text fragment comes at the end of the second account of creation in Genesis in chapter 2. Comparatively, in other translations, the word ‘clings’ is often interchanged with ‘joined’ or ‘united’ so we can assume this to be interpreted as a man joining with his wife. Typically, across other translation, ‘become one flesh’ remains the same. First, I will explore the use of the term ‘one’ within other Biblical scriptures.

*“The Father and I are one” (John, 10:30, NRSV).*

*“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that may be one, as we are one” (John, 17:11, NRSV).*

*“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians, 12:12-13, NRSV).*

*“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ” (Galatians, 3:28, NRSV).*

*“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians, 4:4-6, NRSV).*

*“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians, 2:1-2, NRSV).*

We can infer, therefore, that use of the word ‘one’ can be interpreted as ‘whole’ or ‘unity’, ‘connection’ and even ‘equal.’ To ‘...become one flesh’ then, is to be joined in equal unity.

This kind of interpretation allows for a more nuanced discussion to prevail around the discourses of Eve being created to serve Adam; instead, the two are joined in unity, as one.

Employing Goddess spirituality here, when an individual chooses to spend their life with another (whether through marriage or not), they do so on the understanding that the two enter the relationship as equals, as one, but also as individuals already whole. Eve, therefore, joins Adam in a relationship built on equality.

Next, I will deal with two key passages within Genesis that deal with the concept of Original Sin.

*“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate”* (Genesis, 3:6, NRSV).

*“The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate’”* (Genesis, 3:12, NRSV).

In the first chapter of this thesis, I drew on the work of Holly Morse, arguing that androcentric interpretations of Eve have led to her close association with sin and death. Genesis 3:16 closely ties Eve’s punishment for disobeying God with her maternity, ‘...increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children’ (NRSV). I observed how this sexualisation of Eve can be seen in artwork and in popular culture. The text extracts above are in relation to Adam and Eve disobeying God and eating the fruit from the forbidden tree. First then, to re-read Genesis 3:6 in a more affirming way, Eve is not alone in eating the fruit. Adam is both present and able to decide for himself to disobey God and eat from the tree. In Genesis 3:12, we see Adam pass all blame onto Eve and absolve responsibility entirely. This is depicted rather nicely in Domenichino’s *The Rebuke of Adam and Eve* (1626).



Fig. 6: Domenichino (1626), *The Rebuke of Adam and Eve*. Currently held in National Gallery of Art.

Here we can see God approaching Adam, and Adam gesturing toward Eve, passing the blame straight onto Eve. Rather crucially, when we think about the importance of Eve within Christianity and her role in the New Testament, Romans 5:12 offers a rather enlightening turn of events,

*“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned”*

Within this text fragment in Romans, Adam is held responsible for sin entering the world, not Eve. Re-reading these texts from Genesis allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the role of Eve in Original Sin. Crucially, what can be said is that Eve did not commit this first sin as an isolated affair, and rather, Adam was quick to pass blame over to Eve when confronted by God. And the rest was history as the saying goes. A history of men passing blame over to women that is. The Salem Witch Trials in 1692-93 perhaps the most famous, and damning example.

As explored in the first chapter of this thesis, Eve translates as ‘source of life’ and in Genesis 3:20, she is deemed ‘mother of all who live’ (NRSV). Employing Goddess spirituality here, Eve can be seen as a figure of reclaimed sexuality. Sexuality that is woman defined, championing the power of the female body. As I affirmed in the above section, Goddess spirituality is instrumental in challenging patriarchal society that deems women’s bodies to be dangerous. Eve’s body, therefore, is a site of empowerment, not a site of danger. To be mother of all

who live can be interpreted on a biological level, but also on a creative level. Mother of thought, and of creativity. A new script of Eve defined by women's experience.

### 3.5.2: Reclaiming Mary

The first chapter of my thesis engaged with the figure of Mary in response to centuries of androcentric interpretation. Crucially, her virginity is important to her identity as a mother, and it is certainly challenging to reconcile this. I argued that her virginity has become so pivotal as it creates a male-defined script of the ideal woman, passive, virginal and void of agency. As collective thought on the role of Mary is a consequence of interpretation, herein I will return to the text to see if we can reclaim Mary. Important to note, however, as I have argued Biblical texts are the product of male authorship and therefore serve a particular agenda. That being said, my aim here is to offer a different, woman-defined interpretation of Mary.

Firstly, Mary is the catalyst of Salvation. As mother of Jesus, she is responsible for bringing the incarnation of God into the world. *"She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"* (Matthew, 1:21, NRSV). This extract from Matthew explicitly links Mary's maternity to the salvation of humankind. John 14:6-7 emphasises the belief that Jesus is the way to God and thus to salvation,

*"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him'"* (NRSV).



To offer an alternative script here to the one of passive, virginal mother, I employ Goddess spirituality here, and argue this highlights both the strength of Mary's maternal body and the notion of the divine being within, concepts at the heart of Goddess spirituality. As Christ (1992) maintained, we cannot simply reject the androcentric symbols that exist within institutional religion, we must replace them (pg. 275). In highlighting the strength of Mary's maternal body, it becomes possible to reject the patriarchal assertion that the female body is a dangerous body – as I explored in the second chapter of this thesis – and instead reaffirm the power that exists within. As Christ (1992) asserted, in doing so, women are not passive objects that become impregnated by men, but instead take control of their own birthing process. The same could be said for Mary, she is not the passive, virginal figure that is often presented to us, but rather a strong woman within the Biblical cannon, exuding the power of her maternal body. Mary's Song of Praise found in Luke 1:46-55 echoes this, particularly verses 46-49,

***Mary's Son of Praise***

*"And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God  
my saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the  
lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations  
will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things  
for me,  
and holy is his name.'"* (NRSV)

Mary's Song of Praise details Mary's rejoice in God for her role in the birth of Jesus. It could be argued this demonstrates agency, not passivity. I am particularly interested in the verse, *"Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed"* (Luke, 1:48). For me, this shows

Mary recognising her own divine power. Irene Oh (2009) in “The Performativity of Motherhood: Embodying Theology and Political Agency”, whilst citing Margaret Miles, explored the lost concept that images of Mary as a nursing mother were once reconciled with life, yet have since become erased as the female body has become objectified (pg. 10). Oh (2009) goes on, exerting these could now be used to resist the patriarchal objectification of women’s bodies (pg. 10). When employing Goddess spirituality onto the figure of Mary, to further champion the image of a breastfeeding Mary recognises the power of Mary’s maternal body. Likewise in Goddess spirituality, a woman’s body is celebrated in her ability to sustain life.



Fig. 7: Lucas the Elder Cranach (1530), Virgin Mary suckling Jesus. Currently held in Dom Museum Wien, not on view.

Another key thread to explore in relation to Mary's maternity is found within John 19:26-27,

*"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (NRSV).*

This text consolidates, I argue, Mary's connection to humanity's salvation. As Jesus declares Mary mother of one of his disciples, Mary becomes mother of all who follow Jesus. To have known Jesus is to have known Mary, and to have known Mary is to have known Jesus. As such, Mary was a pivotal figure in bringing salvation into the world, not just from her maternity. Cornwall (2017) believed the Mary can also be seen as a catalyst for denouncing the connection between being a woman and biological motherhood (pg. 20). John 19:26-27 is a perfect example of where this can be referenced with textual evidence. Here Mary becomes mother of the disciple but not as a biological parent. Not only does this champion women who become mothers through adoption or surrogacy, but it also furthers the discourse around women not solely functioning to be biological mothers. Cornwall (2017) argued that we need a much broader understanding of generativity (pg. 93); I argue this text extract can go some way in supporting this claim.

Whilst I recognise the power of the work done by Vuola (2019) and her predecessors, Fiorezna (1992) and Ruether (1979) as hugely important in challenging the status quo when it comes to the interpretation and representation of the figure of Mary, I argue that re-reading the texts through a feminist lens alongside drawing on elements of Goddess spirituality allows for a more affirming and 'divine within' figure to emerge.

### 3.5.2: Concluding Thoughts

Exploring the figures of Eve and Mary within Biblical texts, I argue, further demonstrates the gulf that exists between the two Biblical figures and their legacies. For me, it has become even more apparent that the figures of Eve and Mary have been utilised to serve the patriarchal agenda of the Church, to serve the progress of men. Offering a woman centred voice onto the interpretation of Eve and Mary that is rooted in textual analysis, allows for the new reading that Miller-McLemore (1994) called for. In doing so, it is possible to affirm the power of women's bodies. The figure of Mary could also be said to be in tune with the symbol of maiden, mother, and crone; Mary embodies all three. It is therefore possible to use the toolbox for empowered mothering to reclaim Eve and Mary in a more affirming way for modern motherhood.

### 3.6: Conclusion

This chapter addressed my final research question, can we create a toolbox for empowered mothering? Building on the work of the previous chapter, this chapter has aimed to offer alternative scripts for women who are mothers, or for those who want to become mothers. As such, it is indeed possible to create new scripts that can contribute to a toolbox for empowered mothering. From these scripts, I assert that Rich's (1986) distinction between motherhood as patriarchal institution and mothering as female-defined experience is a crucial step in moving away from a society that deems being a mother the fundamental definition of being a woman. It is clear here that the expectation that all women are, or will be, mothers, stems from patriarchal definitions of what it means to be a woman. Rather than the flexibility of women to be mothers and other things, patriarchal or institutionalised motherhood confines women to just mothers. The scripts offered throughout this chapter

offer a way to break free from institutionalised motherhood and focus on the experience of mothering. It enables women to be mothers, but importantly, the freedom to be other things too. These scripts do not confine women to the domestic sphere, and instead recognise mothering as simply one aspect of a woman's identity.

Importantly, women should not have to pick one script as their sole way of life. Much of the alternatives offered here can be weaved together to form a new script. Goddess spirituality, whilst offering empowerment of women's bodies, may not be the right script for everyone and this is important to recognise. What I take away from these alternative scripts is that women should be free to experience mothering on their own terms, in a way that is activism against institutionalised motherhood without abolishing mothering altogether. This is important for women who do want to be mothers, as well as those who choose not to.

These scripts play an important role in creating a toolbox for empowered mothering, which I believe is an on-going endeavour. Cultivating and celebrating a script of empowered mothering, I believe, will be a cornerstone in the way society treats women's bodies.

Empowered mothering is women-defined, from women's experience and women's needs; a voice that has otherwise been neglected.

# CONCLUSION

## VIRGIN MOTHERS AND PALATABLE WOMEN: CAN WE TRANSFORM THE SCRIPT OF INSTITUTIONAL MOTHERHOOD?

In a society that is deemed progressive and ‘developed,’ the word *feminist* still feels like a dirty word. To identify as a feminist in everyday conversations in a café or at the pub comes with whispers of being a difficult woman; not a palatable woman who will sit quietly. *What a nuisance.* I have no desire to be a palatable woman. In a society with a gender pay gap, unsafe contraception, where women around the world fight for their reproductive rights, where women die at the hands of the institution that promises to care for them, *I have no desire to be a palatable woman.* Ultimately therein lies the importance of this research, and as I approach the age where I begin to think about my own journey into mothering, challenging the narrative of normative motherhood felt like the right place to start.

This thesis aimed to unravel the discourse of normative, or institutional, motherhood in an attempt to assess how this script can be transformed into one that is reflective of empowered mothering. Beauvoir wrote about this in 1949, and here in 2022, it seems there is indeed work still to be done, as I have evidenced throughout this thesis. I began this thesis exploring key Biblical texts as the influence these have had on the modern narrative of womanhood and motherhood cannot be ignored (Beattie, 2002, pg.45: Rooke, 2016, pg. 9: Vergeer 2016, pg. 73: Morse, 2020, pg. 32). Secondly, Mary Daly’s testament that women and the Church are not compatible is inherently damaging to women of Christian faith; women that do not wish to abandon their Christianity in the way that Daly did, but who want to make sense of their own power and autonomy within their faith. In order to unravel the discourse of institutional motherhood, it was essential to gain a deeper understanding of the limitations institutional motherhood has placed on women’s bodies. Hence, the second

chapter of this thesis engaged with the treatment of women's bodies throughout three key stages: the fertile body, the pregnant body, and the post-partum body. Finally, in doing this, the third chapter of this thesis aimed to transform the narrative of institutional motherhood into a toolbox of empowered mothering.

I argue this research has shown that a consequence of male-anxiety led patriarchy is the need to control the bodies and autonomy of women, and this can be seen throughout history and throughout the Church, using Biblical texts as justification. Patriarchy continues to function, I argue, because of the success of the internalisation of the male-gaze. Just as Laura Mulvey (1989) employed Freudian psychoanalysis, and Hughes Miller (2020) with Foucault's self-surveillance and panopticism, and Syeinsdottir's (2017) objectification theory, women internalise the male-gaze resulting in control of their own bodies without the need for overt male intervention.

### **Chapter 1: Can we re-read certain Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering?**

The first chapter of my thesis has shown that it is possible to re-read Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering. There are numerous ways to do this, texts can re-read employing feminist hermeneutical techniques whereby Biblical texts are read and interpreted from the viewpoint of women in resistance to centuries of male-interpretation. Mulvey (1989) used Freud's psychoanalytical theory to illustrate how cinema appeals to a male viewer's needs, the same can be said for Biblical texts. Feminist hermeneutics allows us to read these texts to appeal to a female reader's needs instead. A second way this can be done is through allegorical interpretation, a technique used by Waters (2004) when engaging



with 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Allegorical interpretation assumes that Biblical texts have different meanings allowing for layers of interpretation. Waters (2004) applied this technique to the text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15, re-contextualising it within the time of writing. This particular text places emphasis on the notion that women are saved through birthing children. Through allegorical interpretation, this text can be interpreted in a way that is reflective of the time in which it was written allowing for the birthing of children to be understood as a birthing of values and faith. Allegorical interpretation does, then, allow for texts to be re-read in a manner that denounces the script of institutional motherhood. Whilst this text cannot easily be read to reflect empowered mothering, we can indeed remove the connection assumed between childbirth and salvation.

When dealing with Biblical figures, I argue they are more challenging to re-interpret as they have often been under the scrutiny of centuries of interpretation. Biblical figures are more recognisable within popular culture than particular extracts of scripture, as such, there are many more layers of interpretation to negotiate. Eve is known as the bringer of sin into the world, or mother of sin. The story of Genesis, and Eve's role within it, is well known in popular culture and explicitly connects women to sin. Morse (2020) argued that through these centuries of interpretation, the discourse surrounding Eve becomes far more negative than the scriptural story of Eve within the Hebrew Bible. Throughout the New Testament of Christian scripture, the narrative of Eve as sinner and bringer of death continues and through centuries of interpretation, she becomes polarised with the figure of Mary. Mary's virginal status has tied her with non-sexuality and as the mother of Jesus, her maternity has been closely tied to salvation. I have argued that consequently, this dichotomy of maternal sin and salvation plays into the script of good mother / bad mother, which continues to prevail in the

modern world. Through centuries of patriarchal interpretation, employing Mulvey's application of Freud's psychoanalysis theory, I have argued the figures of Eve and Mary have been interpreted to meet the male audience which has dominated contemporary understanding; they elucidate male anxieties around female sexuality and choice. However, through feminist hermeneutics and scrutiny, they can indeed be reinterpreted to both denounce institutional motherhood and reflect empowered mothering. Vuola's (2019) ethnography demonstrated how Mary allows for women of faith to reveal the divine within when embarking on their own journeys of mothering, feeling connected to Mary's power in their own maternity. Ruether (1979) has shown that Mary can become a feminine face of the divine, allowing for women of faith to connect themselves to the divine. Eve (חַוָּה) in Hebrew is closely translated to the source of life, and this is how she should be understood. Eve depicts female agency, and when centuries of patriarchal interpretation is removed, her story can represent freedom of choice.

In this first chapter I argued that re-asserting the lost female voice to Biblical texts and Biblical figures allows for a re-reading that denounces institutional motherhood and can champion empowered mothering.

## **Chapter 2: What limitations does normative motherhood place on women's identities and women's bodies?**

The second chapter of this thesis sought to both highlight and further understand the limitations that the script of normative motherhood has placed on women's bodies. This chapter dealt with three key experiences of women's bodies: the fertile body, the pregnant body, and the post-partum body. I began this chapter with the work of Simone de Beauvoir's

(1949) *The Second Sex*. I began here as Beauvoir argued that femininity is socially constructed, and that motherhood became an indicator of a woman's femininity. As such, Beauvoir argued that women became increasingly reduced to their roles as mothers, and that this was considered the sole fulfilment of a woman's life. Whilst much has changed from 1949, I have argued there is still a consensus in popular thought that a woman's role is indeed to bear children, and this script of normative motherhood has placed limitations on women's bodies.

I have argued in this second chapter, that in each of the three experiences of women's bodies, controls are placed upon women in order to *manage* their bodies, their agency; presenting the female body as the wild body in need of control. Much like we have seen with patriarchal interpretation of Biblical texts, female agency reveals male anxiety and is therefore placed under control.

As an indicator of maternity, when investigating menstruation, I had expected to find expectations placed upon women that ready them for a life of motherhood. However, it quickly became apparent that this was not overtly the case. I argued the fertile body has become a microcosm of male anxiety. The fertile body is pervasively under scrutiny in response to these male anxieties, and the pseudo-choices that women, at this point in their life, must navigate further perpetuates the control placed upon women's bodies. As a woman's body progresses into a pregnant body, this control further tightens. I have argued that at this point, the foetus becomes more important than the agency of a woman and the expectations placed upon women is that they are to sacrifice their own needs for the needs of the foetus. The woman becomes reduced to the womb. This is seen explicitly in what

Wiant-Cummins (2014) termed as the medical gaze. A consequence of the medical gaze is the further reduction of a woman to her womb, whereby invasive medical procedures are considered the norm resulting in a woman losing agency of her own body. These procedures are often for the benefit of the foetus and not the mother, and to deny such a procedure would categorise women as bad mothers. Here I employed Hughes Miller's (2020) application of Foucault's panopticism, whereby the discipline placed upon the pregnant body becomes internalised by women, resulting in a self-sustaining script of normative motherhood. I argued this panopticism is particularly apparent in the post-partum body. The body of the mother is placed under extensive expectations to be categorised as a 'good mother' which leads to an internalisation of these expectations and disciplines.

In this second chapter, I have argued that normative motherhood places unrealistic expectations, and disciplines upon women's bodies. These expectations become internalised, and employing objectification theory, I argued this leads women to experience their own bodies from an external point of view. Consequently, normative motherhood continues to persist. To denounce normative motherhood, then, resistance scripts are necessary for women to take back control of their bodies.

### **Chapter 3: Can we create a toolbox for empowered mothering?**

My final chapter, therefore, dealt with resistance scripts that can be employed to allow women to take back control of their bodies and do empowered mothering. I began here by appealing to socialist feminism, which is anchored in the belief that paid work is a fundamental of women's emancipation. Socialist feminism asserts that within capitalism, women's bodies become an economic resource whereby their ability to produce offspring

sustains the power of the labour market; women's bodies produce labour power. As capitalism is dependent on productivity, which in turn is dependent upon production turn over, capitalism is therefore dependent upon child turn over. Whilst I agree that participating in the paid labour market is key to women's emancipation in the sense of it offering financial independence, I argued that to rely on this in its own right is too idealistic. The post-feminist script of women having it all is reminiscent of socialist feminism, however, I have argued this concept of women having it all only further consolidates normative motherhood placing added expectations upon women. As a script for empowered mothering, then, I have argued this to be unsuccessful in wholly denouncing normative motherhood.

Adrienne Rich's (1986) *Of Woman Born* has been a crucial text in the final chapter of my thesis. Here, I agreed with Rich's (1986) assertion that to destroy the institution of motherhood is not to destroy mothering, and to not do mothering altogether does not solve the problem. The institution of motherhood, or normative motherhood, refers to the expectations placed upon the behaviour of women that is reflective of patriarchal society and therefore reflective of men's needs. Rich (1986) argued instead there must be a focus on the experience of mothering, that is a woman's own experience of being a mother as opposed to the experience she is expected to have. The experience of mothering is grounded in freedom and agency, championing women's knowledge and ability to seek knowledge over an innate maternal instinct. Crucially, I have argued that employing Rich's (1986) mothering as an experience model is successful in denouncing institutional, or normative, motherhood and the 'good mother' 'bad mother' dichotomy that comes with it. For me, this is at the heart of any toolbox of empowered mothering.

Another script I explored here was that of feminist spirituality and Goddess spirituality. I argued these scripts are important for women of faith and women without faith as it champions women's agency and power and the divine power both of, and within, women's bodies. Much like Rich's (1986) emphasis on focusing on mothering as experience, I have demonstrated how feminist spirituality and Goddess spirituality emphasise the real experience of mothering over the expected experience. Where women's bodies have been labelled dangerous and in need of control, the Goddess (whether literal or metaphorical) reaffirms the power that exists within women's bodies. As such, I have asserted this script to also be successful in creating a toolbox for empowered mothering.

Finally, I have demonstrated how these new scripts may be utilised to support a re-reading of key Biblical texts in a way that is reflective of empowered mothering. As theological research, it was important for me that this thesis did not exclude women of faith, and as I mentioned in the introduction to my thesis there is a need for an inclusive maternal theory to prevail.

#### **Directions for Future Research:**

It feels an obvious direction for future research is to embark on fieldwork research, exploring the possibilities of applying empowered mothering in the real world. Perhaps taking an ethnographic approach, researching the ways in which women who have resisted the script of normative motherhood, experience and do mothering. This would be particularly interesting as it would allow for a deepening into what empowered mothering looks like, further contributing to the toolbox of empowered mothering.

Secondly, another key direction for future research is to explore the ways in which feminist mothering and empowered mothering can be seen across social media outlets, and whether these contribute to a wider discourse surrounding empowered mothering. This research could be carried out in conjunction with the social media handles I have referred to within this project. With the rise of women-centred birthing with the use of doulas and home births, it would be particularly interesting to work with these companies to explore the impact their work is having to the script of empowered mothering.

### **Concluding Thoughts:**

My research has been approached from a cis-gendered, white, and educated point of view, focusing on women who do indeed want to become mothers. I recognise that my position allows me for a level of privilege whereby I can explore resistance scripts to denounce institutional motherhood, and that the same cannot be said for all women. In the field of motherhood studies, intersectionality is incredibly important, and I have a steadfast belief that feminism is only feminism if it is intersectional. Whilst my research is positioned from my own world experience, the field of motherhood studies needs to focus on the experiences of women beyond the white and middle class. It must encompass transfeminism, as well as LGBTQ+ mothering, and importantly, a multitude of ethnicities.

My research has highlighted the limitations normative motherhood places upon the bodies of women, and how these have become internalised resulting in a self-sustaining script of patriarchally defined motherhood. Much like Rich (1986) had argued, to denounce mothering in its entirety is to miss the point, and crucially, does nothing in solving the problem. This research is important for women like me, who want to become mothers, but want to do so in

a way that resists the script they are expected to follow. This research is important for women of faith who, like Mary Daly experienced, are experiencing a lack of synergy between their faith and their desires, but who, unlike Mary Daly, do not wish to denounce their faith altogether. My research has demonstrated the possibilities in denouncing the script of normative motherhood. I have presented a range of scripts that can be used to champion the real experience of mothering as opposed to the experience mothers are expected to have. Employing these scripts, I argue, we can resist the consequences that have come out of normative mothering. We can denounce the theories that have been shown through Freudian psychoanalysis, Foucault's self-surveillance and *panopticism*, objectification theory where women internalise the male-gaze resulting in control of their own bodies without the need for overt male intervention. In doing so, institutional motherhood can collapse.

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