

Performing Subjective Motherhood: An Analysis of Pop-Culture TV Series

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Abstract

The performative theory by Judith Butler states that all of our designated roles are a product of discourses. This means we perform roles based on socio-cultural inscriptions. Butler argues that all human bodies are gendered from the moment they enter a society. Furthermore, an individual continues to perform these roles, considering them “natural”. However, Butler emphasises that inscribed performativity can be subverted through agency and subjectivity. In addition, they claim that agency over one’s role and identity is essential to practice who we are and how we want to be. This approach may also be applied to the performance of motherhood, which has been ruled by patriarchal notions for many years. Its subjective and liberating experiences can be brought forth if one studies the concept of mothering through the lens of female individual experience. Keeping in mind, this paper proposes to bring out the subjective experiences of mothering that challenge the institutional practices (Adrienne Rich’s idea) upheld by society. For this purpose, popular TV dramas such as *Friends* (1994), *Sex and the City* (1998), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017) are discussed to highlight that mothering can be done in one’s own way. This challenges traditional ideas about motherhood and shows that anyone, regardless of their relationship to the child, gender, or sexuality, can take on a mothering role.

Keywords: *Performing motherhood, Popular TV dramas, Mothering, Gendering, Agency, Subjectivity*

Introduction

Performance Studies aim to inquire into or analyse performances that partake daily, through any art form, cultural values, etc. This discipline of study was first articulated by Richard Schechner in 1965 in his article *Approaches*. The central idea of this work was to closely examine the performances that occur on stages, in rituals, and within cultural systems. From thereupon, the field of Performance Studies has expanded its range, bringing different schools of thought and issues under its analysis. By the late twentieth century, the theory of Performance Studies was not merely concerned with formal stage performances. Rather, everyday life became an integral part of a study conducted by some of the most prominent thinkers in this field. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) by Erving Goffman portrays a well-defined dramatic structure that is present in our daily lives. Goffman argues that we continually perform to achieve a certain kind of standing within the community. Goffman adds that we do so unconsciously; however, this performance is no less than an actor playing his part on a stage. Furthermore, our everyday performances get seeped into reality after being repeated every day.

Another significant change that occurred in Performance Studies is the introduction of speech into this realm. The linguist, J.L. Austin, demonstrated that certain words of our speech also induce performances. In his work *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), he cites an example of the phrase “I do.” Austin explains that the utterance of “I do” in a marriage ceremony is also performative in nature as it emphasises the commitment to a socially sanctioned relationship.

Such interventions in Performance Studies had a deep influence on the American philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler. Butler is considered one of the pioneering figures in third-wave feminism. Besides having several best-known books in their oeuvre, Butler has played a conventional role in expounding the theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). This book takes the discourse of Performance Studies forward in understanding the making of a gender as performance. According to Butler, our gender is not a natural or real phenomenon; instead, it is a well-constructed discourse that establishes the performativity of our gender. They write,

The [gender] act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act

that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (1988, p. 526)

Thus, Butler's breakthrough idea proves that gender is another performative act, just like how a stage play, school assembly, or a vow ceremony is designed, set, practiced, and presented. This means, bodies do or perform their gender according to the cultural inscriptions. It is not something intrinsically natural to us. Rather, it is a fully prescribed notion that we are expected to comply with. These notions are established through language and cultural practices. For example, the words "masculine" or "feminine" connote the gender performativity that is associated with them. Now, the question arises - how can a gender performer subvert these prescribed notions and perform their identity on their terms? In their next seminal work, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler highlights the possibilities of subverting the performance and opens the door for individuality. Butler uses the term "agency" that can subvert cultural ends and allow the existence of liberation, freedom, and control. They add that through agency, a subject can challenge the existing order of conduct.

Motherhood entails the fulfilment of responsibilities such as feeding, caring, and providing, which require an individual's physical, intellectual, financial, and emotional efforts. Thus, it can be seen as a performative act. Additionally, it is a cultural expression of notions inherited from the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The concept of motherhood as an institution was first investigated by Adrienne Rich in her classic work *Of Woman Born*. In this work, Rich explains that the institution of motherhood is a historic and social construct that obstructs mothers in a predefined role. Moreover, the institution does not allow mothers to practice mothering on their own terms. Not just that, it glorifies intensive mothering, leaving little space for women to nurture themselves and their desires. In contrast, Rich initiates the narrative of mothering by sharing her autonomous experiences of mother work. For her, mothering becomes both a subjective and liberating act, allowing women an equal footing in society. Keeping this in mind, the following sections bring out the subversive narratives of mothers who perform mothering, which is away and beyond the regressive motherhood practices ascribed by a patriarchal society.

Friends

Friends is a widely popular sitcom based on a group of single, middle-class, white adults in New York City. The show portrays their interconnected lives and the strong bond they create, forming an unconventional family life together. Since its premiere in September 1994, *Friends* has garnered huge popularity among viewers (US and globally) and critics. This show diverges from the conventional notion of motherhood.

From Carol and Susan as lesbian mothers, Phoebe as a surrogate mother, and Rachel as a single mother, to Monica as an adoptive mother, *Friends* effectively explores a wide array of motherhood, commenting on the feminist agenda of its time. The show highlights how women characters are figures of maternal thinking on their journey to bearing and raising children. Maternal thinking is an idea proposed by Sara Ruddick in which she gives a powerful agency to mother figures who think and act on their terms for the collective benefit of their children and themselves.

Rachel's pregnancy, out of a fling with Ross, challenges the stigmas attached to single motherhood. In the final episode of Season 7, she decides to raise the baby, despite fearing the loneliness that may arise during pregnancy, childbirth, and the later stages of nurturing the baby. Even though her close ones believed that a pregnant woman should immediately marry, she gently rejects their views. She remains adamant on her decision and continues to balance her pregnancy with her dream job. Not for once, does she think of giving up her position as a fashion executive. Instead, Rachel manages to raise her child appropriately along with her work. Rachel's subjective idea of motherhood not only challenges the stereotypical views on marriage but also the importance of holding onto a successful career. Another significant point to consider here is that her mothering is not isolated. It is a collective work of care supported by her friends and sometimes family.

Furthermore, light can also be shed on Monica's and Phoebe's characters. Despite a history of chaotic familial space during her teens, Phoebe decides to become a surrogate mother for her cousin and his wife. Phoebe's decision to choose surrogacy as a mother is bold, as it comes with the emotional repercussions of giving away a child. Moreover, her pregnancy questions the strict views of the time that considered surrogacy as an unethical action. In the

episode “The One With The Embryo,” the makers convinced viewers to accept surrogacy as an ethical choice or a personal choice for a woman. Monica is the most mature among all the female characters who has dreamt of having kids all her life. However, she struggles to conceive a baby with Chandler, which leads to another subversive way of motherhood i.e adoption. After the innumerable unsuccessful attempts to conceive, the couple decides to go for adoption. The episode, “The One With The Birth Mother,” challenges normative beliefs towards adoption. A mother giving away her baby to gain freedom, a couple adopting a baby to start their family. Thus, “The Last One” celebrates Monica’s deeply desired and long-awaited motherhood.

Sex and the City

In the late 1990s, the television content turned into a daring representation of a modern woman who challenges gender performativity and reinforces their identity. *Sex and the City* is one such popular sitcom that rejects stereotypical images of women on television. The characters are believed to be starting a crucial debate on a variety of topics. From raising the bar for sisterhood and reproductive choices of self-independent women to questioning patriarchal, prescribed norms, the show reclaims women’s position and role in society. The four distinct women characters build a bridge between traditional and modern ways in which women live their lives. Critics have tagged this show as being “bold,” “ahead of its time,” “women not afraid to be what they want to be,” and “shocking” in its content and description.

Additionally, the show portrays some alternative choices that women have beyond motherhood. Or even if they chose motherhood wilfully, it is practiced in a subjective way. The blogger Deepa Garwa writes, “The series seemed to have deliberately worked against the myths of motherhood where characters grow in this process of becoming or not becoming mothers” (2024, para. 2). This means that motherly love is not instinctive or natural; rather, one learns it through bitter-sweet experiences. Miranda’s narrative in the show suggests that even the most intelligent woman can lack motherly instincts of love and care. She remains cynical and unprepared to fit into the romanticised version of motherhood that is perpetuated through the media. She takes on a long journey of rejecting motherhood, being ambivalent about taking on the role, and ultimately embracing it. Carrie straightaway says no to motherhood, and

Charlotte boldly raises two daughters, one by adoption and the other by birth. Her mothering opens new ideas for raising children who do not abide by the fixed gender roles. In addition to that, Charlotte's mothering allows her a space to be with her friends, pursue her passions, and work. Similarly, the children also feel a sense of comfort knowing they can express who they are and what they want to be.

The Big Bang Theory

The Big Bang Theory (2007) unearths unconventional perspectives through its portrayal of female characters. The three female main characters — Amy, Bernadette, and Penny — exhibit nuanced feminine and masculine traits, with continuous growth in their identities. They challenge, reject, and evolve throughout their journeys as career-driven women, girlfriends, wives, and later on as mothers.

"The Spock Resonance," the seventh episode of season nine, brings out Bernadette's reason for reluctance towards motherhood. This episode reveals Bernadette's fear of motherhood, stemming from her own mother's tiresome experiences and her spoiled husband, Howard. Motherhood does not come naturally to her. Instead, she feels ambivalent about knowing the burden and responsibilities that would come with the childcare process. She agrees only after her husband assures her that he will also take an equal part in raising the child. This act of rejecting or being reluctant to become a mother can also be seen as debunking the myth of motherhood as a natural phenomenon. Bernadette practices her agency over her reproductive rights and indulges in a conversation to clear away her doubts loudly. Later on, after giving birth to two consecutive children, she ensures that she excels in her career and enjoys her success outside her familial space.

In the show, Penny also engages with the idea of agency. In the article "The Changing Language of Women on *The Big Bang Theory*," author Kimberly Dennin discusses Penny's character as embodying both traditional feminine and masculine identities. Dennin notes that Penny could fulfil the majority of tasks associated with masculinity as she has lived on farms. Penny's character breaks away from gendered prescribed performativity and claims agency over relationships, career, lifestyle, etc. Like Bernadette, she remains reluctant to conceive a child. Not just that, in the finale episode, Penny was shown to be

adamant about not having a baby. This is another attribute of agency that can be seen in Penny's character. Her resisting voice against motherhood subverts the patriarchal norm that a woman must give birth to find purpose in her life. Thus, women characters are seen to yearn for freedom from family, and to attain it, they vocalise their idea of balancing married life with a successful career.

The Marvellous Mrs Maisel

The Marvellous Mrs Maisel premiered in 2017. The show is set in 1960s America with a variety of cultures and art forms like jazz, blues, nightclubs, and lavish lifestyles coming together. Amidst this, the protagonist, Mrs Mirriam Maisel, an affluent Jewish American, feels disillusioned with her much-contended role as a homemaker, mother, and daughter. In the very first two or three episodes, her romanticised life breaks apart, forcing her to return to her parents' home with two children. Afterward, due to her parents' unsupportive and questionable attitude, she juggles a full-time job as a saleswoman while pursuing her talent in stand-up comedy. It is commendable how Mrs Maisel works hard to succeed in the male-dominated comic industry. However, gig after gig, she reaches the top and starts to make a fortune with her extraordinary talent in stand-up comedy. Even though the show does not explicitly comment on Mirriam's mothering, it depicts how, as a single mother, she manages to earn a decent income to place her children in capable hands. Even though the show does not explicitly comment on Mirriam's mothering, it depicts how, as a single mother, she manages to earn a decent income to place her children in capable hands. She rejects the overwhelming idea of intensive mothering, a term coined by Sharon Hays,

Intensive mothering presumes that a woman's primary responsibility is to meet the physical, emotional and intellectual needs of her children regardless of employment or other obligations, or her own needs and interests. There is an unrealistic expectation that her parenting is child-centred, labour-intensive, emotionally absorbing, and guided by the advice of experts. (1996, p. 129)

The ideals of intensive mothering do not allow mothers to seek help through daycares or the community, as they are made to believe that they are the primary and most essential caretaker of their child. However, Mrs Maisel is an anomaly as she emphasises her individualism, self-interest, and independence.

The third episode of the first season is considered the most illuminating one in the series. It pictures Mirriam's earlier stand-up sets where she wonders,

What if I wasn't supposed to be a mother? What if I picked the wrong profession?... I can't change my mind and donate my kids to the library like I'm going to do with this book... Women are supposed to be mothers, it's supposed to be natural... What if someone was supposed to just travel a lot or run 24-hour diners in rural areas [instead of being a mum]? What if some of us were just supposed to talk to adults our entire lives? (Because You Left Me, 36:40)

Thus, it is natural to feel susceptible to motherhood. It is obvious to grapple with many emotions when you are burdened with doing something that you are not meant to do. Mrs Maisel's character challenges the discourse of a "supermom" who constantly remains on her toes while managing work with children. She practices mothering on her own terms and does not consider herself solely responsible for her children's well-being. Furthermore, the show uses the world of stand-up comedy wherein Mrs Maisel performs, or rather subverts her expected roles as a wife, daughter, and mother. She uses her life experiences to question deep-embedded rules that prevent women from being heard. She takes back her agency firstly, by performing in the world of stand-up comedy and secondly, by reinstating her terms in front of her family and friends. She chooses to practice motherhood, experience romantic relationships, and plan her career in a way that feels right to her.

Conclusion

Commonly, the normative motherhood represents heterosexual, married, apolitical, asexual, stay-at-home, and biologically related mother. Furthermore, these same ideals are used to distinguish between good and bad mothers. However, in reality, there exists a plethora of mothers coming from different races and classes. There are single mothers, adoptive mothers, full-time successful mothers, queer mothers, mothers who do not live with their children, communal mothers, etc. Notably, none of the mother roles prescribes or can prescribe to the notions of normative motherhood. Thus, it becomes imperative to highlight the shades of non-normative motherhood so that mothers feel empowered not only as women but also as human beings.

Adrienne Rich coined the term gynocentric to show that in the past, women

had agency over their ability to reproduce and were equally venerated outside their roles as mothers. In other words, the mothers did not passively practice motherhood; rather, they consciously expressed their love and nurturance by asserting their bodily potentialities. Similarly, in the narratives discussed above, women either practice motherhood or completely deny it on their own terms. All four series analysed in this study are performative. They highlight the experience of mothering by individual women in different times and spaces. The mothers portrayed in the shows fulfil Rich's demands of courageous mothering instead of institutionalised and sacrificial motherhood that has been laid down upon us by patriarchy and popular media. Only after learning and practicing this can a woman expand the limits of her life and that of her children as well.

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