

Alison Stone
Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity
New York: Routledge, 2012
ISBN: 978-1-138-78818-3

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In *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*, Alison Stone considers the idea that the rejection of the maternal is integral to the development of subjectivity. She argues that to become a modern subject has meant to be an autonomous, independent agent, largely free of dependency on others, and therefore separated from one's mother. This means that maternal subjectivity has arisen in the paradoxical position of needing to both create and reject a maternal identity. Her analysis is situated within the contemporary context, considering the impact that culture has on psyche. She draws primarily from psychoanalytic theory, from the classical to the contemporary feminist.

Stone reconsiders the process of achieving maternal subjectivity based on her own definition: "To be a subject, one must not only have or live through experience, one must also *author* the meaning of that experience, and one must exercise some *autonomy* in doing so, departing from given horizons of meaning to regenerate new meanings adapted to one's own situation and history" (2; emphasis in original). To be a subject in this sense is not something everyone can achieve. Certain conditions are required, including the time, space, and intellectual ability to discern the meaning of one's experiences. It would be insufficient to accept a hegemonic account of one's situation or to be otherwise overly influenced in one's self-understanding. This means that one would have to reflectively contend with (not merely reject) the modern notion of a subject, as Stone has done in her book.

According to Stone, a variety of both practical and psychic constraints make maternal subjectivity fraught with barriers and contradictions. When one becomes a mother, she reenters a realm of bodily intimacy that she has not experienced since she was a child, a time of intensive interdependence that she had ostensibly overcome. Achieving a sense of subjectivity will already have been thorny for a girl, since becoming a grown woman involved some amount of identification with her mother. And yet, since the mother is perceived to be the source of one's dependence, the girl must also reject the maternal figure in order to become independent. Her subjectivity, in Stone's terms, would require that she autonomously author the meaning of her adult self without her mother's undue influence. However, since her mother is presumably the most closely related example of womanhood in her life, then she cannot help but make sense of her own life in terms of her mother's.

Upon becoming a mother, a woman is thrust back into the intensive intimacy and interdependence that she had last experienced when she was a child herself. Her sense of dependency on others is reinforced by the fact that the care of children is so taxing. Her care work will need to be supported or shared so that it does not become overwhelming. Since women infrequently receive sufficient support and collaboration in the care of children, they are almost constantly interrupted by children's needs. It follows that mothers experience diminished autonomy and authorial agency as a result, not having the time, space, or concentration for ongoing self-authorship. This difficulty is culturally specific insofar as the social role of mothers indicates that they should set aside their own agenda in favor of their children's care.

Stone posits that many of these challenges may be inherent features of mothering, due to some of its embodied aspects, chiefly that gestation occurs in a female body. She claims that "the *psychical* significance of the maternal body and the mother's *social* position" can be distinguished from each other (63; emphasis in original). According to Stone, the psychological significance of the maternal body is that it acts as the *chora*--an environment encompassing both mother and child, wherein the infant's energy and drives are moderated through the establishment of patterns and rhythms of "coming and going, weaning, feeding, toilet-training, and so on" (66). These "civilizing activities" are the source of emerging differentiation. The ex-utero chora extends from the uterine environment: "We can hypothesize that there will be a tendency of infants to perceive as maternal figures those particular carers who are, at a bodily level, most continuous with the maternal environment as it was experienced *in utero*" (81-82). Stone believes that infants can discern sexual difference and posits that they will find the female body to be more similar to the uterine environment than the male body (82). This familiarity will lead them to prefer female caregivers: "given their uterine history, sexual difference may well acquire the immediate significance for infants of a difference between bodies that are more continuous with the (maternal) uterine environment and those that are less continuous. Plausibly, then, infants will gravitate towards experiencing those of their care givers who have female bodies as embodying the maternal figure" (82).

Stone is not arguing that mothers or other women ought to be the primary caregivers. On the contrary, she believes that these features of the relationship will persist even with gender equity. She writes:

My assumption, however, is that mother-child relations would exhibit this relational, civilizing character even if women were not the sole or main caregivers empirically. Thus, even if (as I believe desirable) fathers and men were equally involved in child-care, mother-child relations would still have the characteristics that I describe here--although, as I see it, these characteristics do not exclude but ultimately create an opening towards full participation in child-caring by men and fathers. (63)

Stone is aware that the gender binary is socially constructed and enforced, that gender could in fact exist on a continuum rather than a binary (106-07). Nevertheless, she reasserts that the bodily differences between male and female remain critical to parenting.

I find this last series of claims to be her least convincing. I am not persuaded that an infant would necessarily bond more closely with his gestational mother, or with those who are most similarly embodied to her, than to other caregivers. It seems more likely that the child will connect to

whomever is caring for his needs most regularly, regardless of embodiment or gender expression. It seems to me that life ex utero is too different from intrauterine life for an infant to connect the female body to life in the womb where sensory experiences are muffled and needs are met seamlessly--where there is (I presume) no hunger, exhaustion, cold, wetness, and so on. Generally speaking, it seems to me that there are more similarities between male and female bodies than between the intrauterine environment and female bodies. Moreover, I am not aware of any research indicating that infants have a preference for women when caregiving is shared equally. Ultimately, I am unconvinced that the social and the psychical can be separated in the manner that she claims.

In spite of all this, Stone does advocate for equity at the social level, that the maternal and paternal need not be treated as binary, hierarchical figures, but may be construed as more continuous and ambiguous. This belief could transform the culture in favor of more egalitarian child-care arrangements. Giving mothers and children some space from one another would make room for the establishment of subjectivity. This is the case because although the psyche has "inherent tendencies" (29), these can take on a variety of forms depending on how they are shaped by the culture: "I have suggested that our psyches can only take on stable organization in the first place by drawing on cultural resources and coming to cultural expression . . . we can re-organize our psyches by changing our culture, or at least its most influential strands" (27). Improvements could also be achieved by understanding subjectivity in relational terms and by "providing mothers with a much richer range of resources with which to understand themselves as subjects *as mothers*" (32).

One of the great strengths of Stone's work is her discussion of how one might find a sense of authorship through reinhabiting a mostly unconscious past. The key to this is understanding how one lives the past through an embodied present. She writes: "the mother can only remember her maternal past in light of this novel present, a present that bestows upon the past new meanings that it did not originally have. The maternal past returns, but never simply as it was" (9). When one becomes a mother, the embodied, habitual, affective past of interacting with one's mother as an infant and small child re-emerges.

This return takes place because the mother's relation to a new baby and young child is (perhaps uniquely) immediately corporeal, sensuous, tactile, non-verbal, suffused with scarcely articulable emotional depth. The sensory experiences unique to this relation--its special smells (milk, spit-up, poo), sounds (cries, gurgles, giggles), feels (the softness of the baby's skin and hair)--arouse in the mother varying levels of memory of her pre-verbal bodily past. (120)

One does not re-inhabit bygone times in precisely the same manner one lived them initially. As she lives out the significance of the mother-child dyad from the maternal role, the mother's change in perspective brings new understandings. Imagination plays a powerful role here as well. When one's own mother is reimagined not merely as a figure of fusion, but also of differentiation, then the meaning of one's interactions with her can also be transformed.

To summarize her view of how others participate in maternal time, Stone writes:

Our relations with others remain structured by our pasts; our current relations tend to reproduce our past relations. . . . But, crucially, the present reproduces the past

with a difference. As the mother reproduces her past relation to her mother with her child, the new encounter constantly changes what that past consisted in. The past can be reproduced only in being transformed, as the mother adjusts its content in response to the child in his or her novelty. The past that reappears is no longer as it was; it has been remodeled by the mother's interactions with her child. (145)

One's self-authorship is more or less collaborative, or at least dialogical. New interlocutors--including one's children, one's adult self, and one's reimagined mother--suggest new interpretive possibilities. This makes sense given that our very capacity to make meaning comes from our early, playful interactions: "it is in the initial context of symbolic play with our mothers that we develop abilities to re-create and re-deploy meanings creatively and critically" (63).

For Stone, maternal ambivalence also yields creative potential to reconfigure maternal identity, "propelling mothers toward a distinctly maternal subject-position, in which they make meaning from the re-animated maternal past" (8). Mothers are especially ambivalent toward daughters, she claims, because "having a girl particularly arouses in the mother those states of mind woven around the internal figure of her own mother" (117). The relationship is likely to involve more projection, identification, clinging, empathy, anxiety, and hostility than with a son (108–20). This emotional intensity means that mother-daughter relations provide the greatest opportunities for "development and self-transformation" (125) as they raise more fodder for meaning-making between past and present.

Ultimately, we can see how expertly Stone describes the ambiguity of the maternal situation. The same relationship that seems to render self-authorship impossible might also enable that very activity. Unfortunately, patriarchal culture exploits and exacerbates these conflicts, threatening to make reflection, development, and self-transformation impossible by overburdening mothers. Nevertheless, even in a fully feminist society, Stone wagers that motherhood would remain an emotionally complex experience.