

# "No Child Is Ours" The Absence of Motherhood as Reflected in Women's Poetry

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**Abstract:** Motherhood is a mental organization that includes biological, sociological, and emotional elements that come into being in the mother's psyche with conception, during pregnancy, around birth, and throughout life. This article explores the significance of motherhood, including historical and cultural perspectives, and considers how women who have not created a child can explore their creativity through poetry.

**Keywords:** motherhood, pregnancy, birth

## Motherhood

A woman becoming a mother and the relationship between her and her children are both personal and universal experiences (Perroni, 2009). The relationship with a mother is one of the longest relationship that a person experiences in his life. Palgi-Hecker (2005) adds that motherhood can be viewed as a mental, physical, and behavioral experience that builds the basic pattern of "the foundation for containing conflicts," that is to say, the possibility of keeping different feelings of the self and the other together without erasing the self or the other, and without having to decide between them. Motherhood gives the mother a second or a further opportunity of creating and expanding identity. The meeting between the mother and her child and her devotion to him offer new

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challenges to her mental options. The mother has to work hard on herself in order to create a possible mental space for both her child and her motherhood (Palgi-Hecker, 2005).

Psychoanalysts have emphasized every woman's deep desire to realize the passion of motherhood in her life. Those dealing with the subject draw attention to the importance of motherhood and its centrality in the child's development, as well as the complexity of this experience.

In his 1933 article "*Femininity*," Freud speaks about women's special need to produce a baby as a substitute for "the missing sexual organ." For Freud, the castration complex is a major factor in the development of femininity.

From analytic observation of women Freud developed the notion of "penis-envy," which he generally described as "the wish with which the girl turns to her father is no doubt originally the wish for the penis which her mother refused her and which she now expects from her father. ... if the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby ... the baby takes the place of a penis in accordance with an ancient symbolic equivalence" (Freud, 1933, p. 347-348).

Freud concludes the paper by expressing some doubt: "If you want to know more about femininity enquire from your own experiences of life, turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information" (Freud, 1933, p. 432).

As opposed to Freud's description of female sexuality as focused on the father, Helen Deutsch (1944) examined the psychology of the woman, of motherhood, and described pregnancy and nursing from the woman's perspective rather than the child's. In her view, the achievement of a baby enables women to reconstruct their early relationship with their mothers. She views birth as the crowning female sexual achievement.

Daniel Stern (1985, 1998) regards the woman's transformation into a mother as a decisive stage in her development, a new opportunity for her to process her past on behalf of her future and that of her baby. The mother is the child's first attachment object. After birth, a unique organization takes place in the mother, which builds a new axis in her psyche.

Winnicott (1965, p.39), in one of his famous statements writes: "There is no such thing as an infant ... when one finds an infant one finds maternal care and without maternal care there would be no infant." The mother is the first facilitating environment, the person responsible for providing the holding and equipping, and enabling the feeling of self-realization. In Winnicott's view, a "good-enough mother" is one who adapts herself to her baby's needs and can identify with him in his initial stage of absolute dependence.

The mother's ability to adapt is part of her prenatal preparation for taking care of her young infant. Winnicott (1956, pp. 300-305) refers to this special state of heightened sensitivity in the prenatal period as "primary maternal preoccupation."

This is a mother who is capable of devoting herself for a limited period to safeguarding her baby's ability to continue living. The mother allows herself to be created by the baby, and the baby is able to experience the illusion of creation that later will serve as a source for a constant creative life.

In the second stage of development, the mother gradually reduces her level of adaptation in accord with the infant's needs. Only when the baby begins to experience the mother as a separate object and not as part of his fantasy, can she then expose him gradually to the environment and to a level of frustration that he is able to bear. This is the beginning of separateness. The path is that of almost absolute dependence at the beginning, which changes gradually to relative dependence on the way to independence.

When independence is achieved, the acceptance of reality begins – a never-ending task in which the infant begins to build up what may be called a "continuity of being" (Winnicott, 1965, pp. 37-55). Failure on the mother's part in the early stage could lead to the infant developing primitive defense mechanisms that are connected to the threat of annihilation (Winnicott, 1956, p. 304)

In her book, *Stabat Mater* (1985), Julia Kristeva examines the question of what lies behind women's desire to be mothers. In her view, "pregnancy is a dramatic experience ... a type of natural psychosis ... love of another person with whom the ego merges ... a slow process of attentive and delicate coming into being ... motherhood can be a genuinely creative act" (249- 273).

### **Pregnancy, Birth, and Care of the Baby**

Pregnancy, birth, and care of the baby arouse diverse and sometimes extreme emotional strengths, and also provide an opportunity for the woman to get to know herself. The combination of the physical and the mental, the blurring of the boundary between her and the "other" who is her child, force the mother to deal with a wide range of emotions. The need to process the different experiences sometimes leads to overwhelming anxiety that threatens the feeling of love and attachment. The mother has to relinquish the fantasy of a perfect child, an important and healthy process. An emotional space is created in which the mother can feel love, concern, and compassion towards her child, but also anger, disappointment, and frustration, all of which create a new, rich, and diverse layer of her selfhood. Maternal ambivalence, underlying which is her splitting mechanism and her feelings about the split, enable the

mother to develop genuine love for her child. By means of the split, the mother can build within herself a gradual internalization of her child. In coming to terms with the disappointment of her child "not being perfect," the mother can begin to recognize him as a separate subject (Palgi-Heker, 2005, pp. 85-87).

Furthermore, the birth of a child is an exceptional event for the mother because it revives the mothering of her own mother and her relationship with her mother, with herself and with her femininity. It is important to mention that giving birth can at the same time arouse in the woman her emotionality and her own previous complexes. Motherhood often creates massive expectations in women for compensation or repair of what is perceived as a defect in their past and their femininity (Perroni, 2009).

### **A Woman without a Baby Through the Eyes of Creative Artists**

This article deals with the situation of "a mother without a baby," the opposite of Winnicott's concept of "there is no baby without a mother." It is interesting to observe how the absence of offspring is expressed by women poets in their poetry – echoing Freud's view in his article on femininity that one should look to poets for elucidation of this issue.

This article looks at two women from the Bible, Rachel and Hannah, both of whom were infertile and prayed for children. In addition, two Hebrew-language poets are considered, Rachel Bluwstein and Leah Goldberg, both of whom express the absence of the experience of motherhood.

### **Two examples in the Bible of the desire and the inability to achieve motherhood**

- Rachel, the wife of Jacob: "But Rachel was barren ... So Leah conceived and bore a son ... Now therefore my husband will love me ... And Leah said God has endowed me with a good endowment ... because I have borne him six sons ... Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son, and said: God has taken away my reproach" (Genesis 29, 30).
- Hannah, mother of the Prophet Samuel, pleads with God: "So Hannah arose ... And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish. Then she made a vow and said, 'O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Lord all

the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head” (Samuel 1: 1:11). As a sign of thanks for having been granted sperm, Hannah relinquishes her right to express selfhood as an autonomous individual.

In Biblical times, infertility was considered a curse, a weakness, and a failure on the woman's part. Motherhood was every woman's wish and infertility her great tragedy. In the Bible, the woman has two roles, motherhood and saving souls. The Halachic tradition regards the role of the woman as giving birth. Society too views the woman's contribution mainly as a mother; this is her admission ticket to the collective, and her contribution to the national effort (Perroni, 2009).

### **Rachel Bluwstein – Hebrew-Language Poet 1890-1931.**

Rachel Bluwstein was born in Russia. In 1909, she came to Palestine, then part of the Ottoman Empire, and later joined a collective group, Kvutzat Kinneret. In 1913 she went to France to study agronomy and drawing. A year later the First World War broke out and Rachel was forced to return to Russia. In 1919, she came back to Palestine and joined Kibbutz Degania. When she was diagnosed with tuberculosis she was forced to leave the kibbutz, and lived her final years in solitude and misery.

Her poems deal with unrequited love, infertility, and the deep connection to nature and the country. Her poetry is loved, often quoted, and many of her poems have been set to music.

#### **Barren (Rachel, 1927)**

Had I son – a little boy  
with black curls and clever  
whose hand I could hold and stroll through the park  
a little boy.

Uri, I'd call him, my Uri,  
a short name, lucid and soft  
a dewdrop of brightness  
for my dark child

Uri! I'd call ...

Yet I will weep like Mother Rachel  
Yet I will pray like Hannah at Shiloh  
Yet I will wait – for him...

Translated by Vivian Eden

The subject of the poem is barrenness, and expresses love, longing, and loneliness. In simple words the poet expresses the strong desire for a child. This poem has autobiographical roots. At the time Rachel was in

her thirties, ill with tuberculosis, living on her own, in isolation, in poverty and without children.

In the last stanza of the poem she compares her fate to that of the Biblical Rachel and Hanna, as they are quoted above, who were barren and turned in prayer to the Almighty to open their wombs and allow them to experience motherhood. What are Rachel's chances that He will open her womb if she continues to hope and to pray?

A year later a poem was written in which the poet, who has come to terms with her fate of being childless, requests that her name be kept alive "at a distance" with a daughter that is not hers.

**Name after me** (Rachel, 1928)  
Oh do name your little girl after me,

That I may live when I am gone.  
    'Tis woeful forever to pass on.  
        My orphan song  
        My twilight song gone mute,  
May she sing and revive at morrow's dawn.  
May my thread that was snapped  
    Connect once more  
    Through her daughter,

Translated by Haya Simkin

### **Lea Goldberg 1911-1970.**

Lea Goldberg was born in 1911 in Koenigsberg in East Prussia. She spent her early childhood in Russia, returning to Kovno (now Kaunas, in Lithuania) after the Revolution. Her father suffered from mental illness following abuse by the Lithuanian authorities, and left his family, never to return. While in Russia, Leah's mother gave birth to her brother, Emanuel, who died from meningitis before the end of his first year of life.

Lea received a PhD from the Universities of Berlin and Bonn in Semitic Languages and German. In 1935, she settled in Tel-Aviv where she became one of the country's leading intellectuals and poets. In 1954, she moved to Jerusalem with her mother and they lived together until Lea died in 1970 from cancer at the age of 59 (Lieblich, 1995).

A central place in Lea Goldberg's poetry is devoted to love and closeness to children for whom she wrote many stories. Despite the volume of her work and her active life, Lea had a deep inner feeling of loneliness. She never married, had no children, and lived all her life with her mother. The following poems are from Goldberg (2015).

### There Are Many Like Me

There are many like me: lonely and sad,  
 one writes poems, another sells her body,  
 a third convalesces in Davos,  
 and all of us drink thirstily from the bitter cup.  
 And all of us know:  
 in the wilting rays of autumn-morning  
 the dream of a kiss becomes vapor and rises... not toward us.  
 And all of us see  
 the world's warmth in the mothers' eyes,  
 and no child is ours.  
 And all of us meet dark and cold wastelands  
 in the doorways of abandoned rooms.  
 And it's one and the same—  
 to renounce body or spirit,  
 or to die slowly in the sanitariums of Davos—  
 so vast is this cup  
 so abundant its polluted drink,  
 and from the love of life and its loneliness  
 there is no escape.

Translated by Rachel Tzvia Back

A sad poem of a lonely woman whose words describe in clear, human, and incisive language the desire for closeness – a dream – a kiss, and the longing to feel the motherhood that is absent – she emphasizes "and no child is ours." In the poem she describes three types of women: a poet, a prostitute, and a terminally ill patient. Possibly this is a single woman with three different faces. The feeling the poem elicits is that of desolation and loneliness, and a hopeless, bitter fate that awaits them.

### White Days

White, long days, like the sun's rays in summer  
 Long, solitary peace on the riverfront,  
 Windows wide open to azure silence  
 Straight, tall bridges between yesterday and tomorrow  
 My heart got used to itself, it counts softly its beats  
 And to the sweetness of the soft rhythm, is pacified, yields and calms  
 down  
 Like a baby singing his own lullaby before closing his eyes  
 once the tired mother had shut hers, fell asleep.  
 Your silence, empty white days, is so easy to bear,  
 See, my eyes have learned to smile. They long ago stopped  
 rushing the slender ones on the clock face.  
 Straight, tall bridges between yesterday and tomorrow

Translated by Yuval Ben-Ami

The poet is a lonely woman who is able to express her feelings in her poem. The poem creates a feeling of apparent tranquility. In the middle the poet, without children of her own, expresses tenderly and intimately a special, deep closeness between the mother and her baby. The baby nurses contentedly from her breasts but she, collapsing with fatigue, leaves him to do with her body whatever he wishes. The baby remains alert "singing his own lullaby" before falling asleep, while she, fatigued [in Hebrew the word *leah*, the poet's name, means fatigued], falls asleep to her own lullaby.

### Conclusion

"And no child is ours" (Lea Goldberg) – this article deals with women who were infertile or did not produce children. The woman becoming a mother is an important and healthy experience that begins with pregnancy, followed by birth, and continuing throughout life. In psychoanalytical theory, the desire to give birth is inborn and natural. The meeting between the mother and her child and her devotion to him offer new challenges to her mental options. The mother has to work hard on herself in order create a possible mental space for both her child and her motherhood. This is an opportunity for the mother to become familiar with herself, her femininity, to relive her relationship with her mother and to broaden her psyche and her personality. A wide range of feelings is created in which the mother can feel love, concern, and compassion toward her child, but also anger, disappointment and frustration, which create a new, rich and diverse layer of her selfhood (Palgi-Hecker, 2005; Perroni, 2009).

As the article shows, in Biblical times infertility was considered a curse, a weakness, and a failure on the women's part. Motherhood was every woman's fervent wish, and infertility her great tragedy. Halachic tradition regards woman's role as giving birth. Even today it seems that society views the woman's contribution mainly as a mother. Today too, the desire to produce offspring is very strong. Changes have occurred in the options for realizing this wish for a child. We see single women, couples, and same-sex couples exerting considerable efforts to being able to raise a child.

The extracts and the poems presented in the article emphasize the intensity of the pain, the feeling of desolation and deprivation, loneliness, and a strong desire to experience the absent motherhood. The feeling that emerges from the poems is that without a child a bitter, hopeless fate awaits these women, in addition to the impossibility of intergenerational continuity.



Can sensitivity, empathy, capacity for containment, creative ability, etc. exist even among women who will not be mothers? It seems that women who have never been pregnant can experience deep closeness, as in Lea Goldberg's sensitive description of a nursing mother. She falls asleep holding a baby who continues to nourish himself, "Like a baby singing his own lullaby before closing his eyes and, once the tired mother had shut hers, fell asleep."

It would seem, however, that the experience of motherhood has no substitute; it is unique and unconditional, even if it sometimes comes at the expenses of the women's self. As one of the mothers said to me: "Giving birth forced me to redefine myself."

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