

Monika Bokinić¹

Voices of motherhood: feminism, motherhood and narrative identity

Motherhood is one of the most crucial aspects of female identity. It is more or less an ubiquitous issue in any discussion focusing on women or feminism, and translates into all every conceivable area of women's lives whether physiological (the body is being transformed), practical or philosophical. In this essay, I am going to concentrate upon the relations which exist between motherhood, narration and identity within the context of philosophy and feminism, while focusing on specific issues such as the body, autonomy and patriarchy. I will refer to various classical thinkers and their writings on motherhood, such as Simone de Beauvoir or Adrienne Rich.

I have used the framework set out by Rich who clearly highlights the distinctions between motherhood as an institution and experience, and my focus was on the way “the masks of motherhood are cracking through” and women's narratives organized around motherhood proliferate. It seems that the need to express and share their experience in a narrative form (literary, personal, essayistic) is appropriated as a means that will help solve the social and structural issues at the level of biography. Autobiographical narration also becomes a form of projecting one's life and work through the kinds of changes women face when becoming a mother, such as self-enhancing knowledge, and through the construction of a new identity. I identified three areas of women's narrative activities which contribute to the creation of “a collective description of the world which will be truly ours” as proclaimed by Adrienne Rich. The first area includes numerous literary narrations by professional writers and thinkers. The second is composed from the blogosphere and popular narrations. The third includes the growing body of scholarship, philosophies written “in different voices”, extensive research projects, collections of essays, however, this area has not been discussed in my essay, since its focus was on personal, literary and popular narratives.

Key words: motherhood, Adrienne Rich, blogosphere

¹ University of Gdańsk, Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Journalism; wmsmbo@ug.edu.pl.

I am a woman giving birth to myself.
Adrienne Rich (1995: 184)

Introduction

Motherhood is one of the crucial aspects of female identity. It is almost a ubiquitous issue in any discussion about women and/or feminism. It is an element of social definition of a 'real woman'; it is a political bargaining chip; it is a significant aspect of every woman's medical history – questions about past pregnancies or lack of them is a part of every medical examination of a woman (Spar 2013). Bodily processes related to fertility and reproduction influence every woman's life on a daily basis, whether she realizes this potential or not. "A huge part of keeping women in their place has to do with creating a really limited definition of what a 'real' woman is like. And a ton of that what-makes-a-woman nonsense is attached to motherhood. Apparently, by virtue of having ovaries and a uterus, women are automatic mommies or mommies-to-be", writes somewhat sarcastically Jessica Valenti in her *Full Frontal Feminism; A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (Valenti 2007: 102). The point of this essay is to outline a theoretical background for the proliferation of new ways of narrating women's experience of motherhood. The first part describes a complicated relationship between women and their bodies in the context of patriarchal culture, especially in relation to their autonomy. The second part is focused on the ambiguous attitude towards motherhood within feminism and philosophy, followed by Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and experience. The last part contains several examples of the ways women make sense of their own experience of motherhood, recovering it from the midst of 'expert culture' in the form of personal narratives, such as autobiographical stories, personal essays and blogs.

Women are labeled according to what kind of mothers they appear to be (Miller 2005: 7), and not having children requires explanation (By choice? Infertility?), whereas having them does not. Perhaps it should be stated that parenting is a significant aspect of every person's life, especially for people who actually have become parents, but if we seek for the measure of significance in the complexity and multidimensionality of parent-child relations, we observe that in the case of fathers we are now witnessing the process of incorporating fatherhood into the male identity. Traditionally, male identity was built on the elements outside of home (professional, public, social), whereas female identity was perceived as relational – related to the caring for significant people in women's lives and building the relationship with them. In other words, women thought of themselves as daughters/wives/mothers (which was socially expressed in the majority of Western cultures by not giving women their own names: a woman received her father's name and then her husband's), whereas men described themselves in relation to their profession, status, or position.

Even if now there is a clearly visible trend of diverging from this traditional model, it seems that motherhood is a turning point for female identity at the most fundamental level. If we perceive a human being as a psychosomatic whole, the physiological aspects of fertility, pregnancy and the early stages of motherhood leave a much more distinctive mark on women's lives. In the history of philosophy, one of the first to emphasize this fundamental dependence was Simone de Beauvoir, who blamed reproduction and motherhood for the ambivalent ontological status of women: already not being-in-itself, but not entirely being-for-itself either. For her, the incomplete humanity of women results from the non-identity of their bodies. This non-identity is especially evident during pregnancy (am I one body or two?). The existential condition of a young mother in which the overwhelming sense of guilt plays an important role, is often related to the sense of non-identity of their bodies and the lack of a borderline between their bodies and their children's bodies (pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding).

Body, autonomy, patriarchy

One of the most problematic issues for women in the context of motherhood is the problem of autonomy, both in the physiological and philosophical dimensions. Women's bodies in general are the spaces of ambivalence and conflicts – social and individual. Motherhood and reproduction are particular instances of these conflicting interests. The body conflict and the social ambivalence of motherhood is often regarded as structurally rooted in the human/female condition. Therefore, public debates also often fixate on the bodily aspects. One example is a very ambivalent manifest of Western societies regarding public breastfeeding. On the one hand, the naturalistic offensive agitates for women to become quilted while breastfeeding, even if they are not comfortable with it (which may have various reasons), but on the other hand this attitude does not support women who do apply to this recommendation and accuses them of breastfeeding in the spaces other than their own homes or public toilets, because the most natural (if we want to stick to this nomenclature) sight of a female breast producing milk is often commonly regarded as disgusting – an uncivilized demonstration of bodily fluids. In the background of these contradictions and at the source of most of these struggles lies the patriarchy and its characteristic attitude which Elisabeth Spelman calls 'somatophobic' (Spelman 1982).

In her essay *Woman as Body* Elisabeth Spelman emphasized the analogy between the philosophical attitude towards the body and towards women. The philosophical tradition (with few exceptions) can be described as 'somatophobic', i.e. resting on the body/mind distinction, where the physical aspect of human existence is perceived as either spiritual or intellectual one. Combined with the image of women as closer to nature and more bound by their physiology than men, this philosophical presupposition may provide a justification for the denigration

not only of women, but also of children, animals, slaves, etc. Spelman argues that many feminist philosophers, especially classical ones, adopt this 'somatophobic' perspective in their own theories. As she puts it: "(...) various versions of women's liberation may themselves rest on the very assumptions that have informed the depreciation and degradation of women (...). Those assumptions are that we must distinguish between soul and body, and that the physical part of our existence is to be devalued in comparison to mental" (Spelman 1982: 125).

In the recent history of deliberation on women we can find two opposite traditions. The first one aims at 'liberating' women from what is perceived as constraining elements of their bodies which limit their lives (e.g., Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Badinter, Shulamith Firestone), and the other one is focused on the body (criticized by Badinter as 'the assault of naturalism', see Badinter 2011, and represented, for example, by Sylvianne Agacinski) and accepts its potential as the way to elevate women's status and as the source of their self-esteem. Between these two extreme positions there are several intermediate positions trying to make sense of this crucial issue. They are represented by such figures as Adrienne Rich (1995) or Naomi Wolf (2002) who tried to navigate this complex middle ground in the form of peculiar, yet fascinating, auto ethnographies.

One example of the paradoxical line of thinking where the feminist arguments become a justification for the very oppression feminists supposedly object to, discussed also by Spelman, is the work of Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir is commonly regarded as a pioneer of anti-naturalism and anti-motherhood. She is also one of the founding mothers of the modern feminism. However, her attitude towards motherhood is more complex. Indeed, quite early at the beginning of the rise of feminism, she poignantly addressed the philosophical ambivalences of pregnancy and motherhood. Her descriptions of female body, especially a pregnant body, border on being repelling: "Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, an egg; (...) a human being, a conscious and free individual who has become life's passive instrument" (1997: 512–513).

Even if considered to be on the anti-essentialist side (with the famous "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"), she states that "It is in maternity that woman fulfills her physiological destiny" (1997: 501). Taking women into philosophical account revealed the male-oriented roots of such notions as subject or identity (especially personal identity). It seems that the traditional philosophy cannot adequately incorporate feminine perspective and the uniqueness of women's experience, and Simone de Beauvoir's notes on women and motherhood exemplify perhaps the difficulties it presents. One way of dealing with this problem is to reject the given perspective. De Beauvoir rejects the idea of women's creative power, since creation can only originate from liberty, whereas a child resulting from pregnancy is "a product of her generalized body, not her individual existence" (1997: 514). It seems to be a 'dictated' moral choice, and as such, not a moral choice at all. The pregnant woman is reduced to "ego surrendered, alienated in

her body” (1997: 513). In all fairness, later in the chapter on motherhood, the author moves from the physiological dimension and its existential consequences, and after a detailed analysis of pathological relations between mothers and their daughters and sons, she claims that it is all a social problem and could possibly be resolved on that level².

De Beauvoir is definitely not alone in her point of view. The bodily and physiological otherness of women (most of all, its aspects related to reproduction) has been ruthlessly exploited by both sides: those who argue against the emancipation (not necessarily men, also conservative women), and those who refer to these reproductive powers in search for validation. One of the popular weapons in the struggle is the idea of maternal instinct (which will be explored in the next section). Women’s bodies have always been exploited in terms of eroticism and reproduction. In the patriarchal culture, female body is experienced as objectified and passive. On the other hand, feminists who seek validation in sexual difference, such as Sylvianne Agaciński, perceive the idea that female procreative powers are the obstacle on the path to emancipation as interpretative violence. In her interpretation of de Beauvoir, Sylvianne Agacinski observes a certain trap: “[A woman] is a *biologically trapped* being, above all a victim of her place in a species that destines her to fertility and procreation and thus dooms her to passivity. (...) the fabricated and alienated woman is the woman who remains in her *natural* alienation. In reflecting on this biological destiny she rejects, Simone de Beauvoir might just as well have said: *one does not become a woman, one remains woman*” (2001: 54–55). The problem lies therefore not in women’s physical attributes, but in their social evaluation.

From the dualistic culture standpoint, Agacinski continues, built on binary oppositions, associating women with bodies leads to their ‘metaphysical degradation’. Such a perspective should be abandoned. De Beauvoir depreciated femininity and reduced motherhood to its biological dimension. If only, however, we gave it an appropriate existential meaning, motherhood could just as well become a project according to which humanity could be shaped. Eventually, parenthood could become a model project for both sexes and a realization of the fundamental value. According to Agacinski, de Beauvoir’s thinking about pregnancy and breastfeeding as alienating experiences is based on adopting the male perspective on freedom as an autonomy of a subject (or, in other words, adopting the male narrative), and at the same time excluding the most fundamental human experience – love and the relational concept of a subject.

It is clear that a body, especially a female body, becomes a disputed area among various options within feminism. There is a fairly common agreement as to the idea that women lost their bodies within the patriarchal culture, but there is a dispute concerning various possible ways of how to reclaim them. One of them is the

² More discussion on the complex attitude of Simone de Beauvoir towards philosophical, social and physiological dimensions of female body in the context of philosophies appreciating the corporeal aspects of existence can be found in Bokinić 2011.

creation of new narratives about women, their bodies and experience. “The re-possession by women of our bodies – claims Adrienne Rich – will bring far more essential change in human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers. The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out of life. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body” (Rich 1995: 286). Both Badinter and de Beauvoir seem to have adopted patriarchal narratives about motherhood, even though each in her own way. To some extent, they both use the colonizing mental shortcuts, as described by Adrienne Rich, they make no attempt to change the patriarchal narrative about motherhood, but only negotiate the widening of the space assigned to women within it. To some it may be the feminist guerilla within the patriarchy, to others it is rather paying the imposed tribute to the system.

Patriarchy is also reproduced in the micro power a mother has over her child – it is the only power she has and it is one of the sources of pathological relations with a family. If so, abandoning the patriarchal organization of relations between men and women – a change of the narrative about the sexes – would also contribute to the healing of the process of education and strengthening the subjectivity of not only women, but also children. In this context, Badinter’s criticism and rejection of the ‘assault of naturalism’ (expecting mothers to breastfeed, use cloth diapers, prepare co-food, give birth without any medication to ease the pain, but it also includes the ideology that a mother is the best caretaker by nature, etc.) may lead in the false direction. In patriarchal culture, the consequences of such ideologies for women may be as Badinter indicated, but the point should be to change the rules of the game, to change the main heroes of the story. Perhaps in this new narrative becoming a mother would not conflict with being a woman (here I refer to the original title of Badinter’s book, *Le Conflit. La Femme et la mere*) – a conflict which is not experienced by men. The new story would be about a woman who undergoes a change when she becomes a mother, just as a man undergoes a change when he becomes a father. Otherwise, it remains the same old patriarchal story in various versions. According to this view, women accept the pseudo-emancipation within the patriarchal structure and charge themselves with a double burden, thus strengthening the unfavorable rules of the game instead of undermining them.

Feminism, philosophy, mothers

These ambivalences regarding motherhood result in the self-contradictory attitudes within feminism towards motherhood. Motherhood becomes a point of intersection between various approaches of feminism. There are several issues disputed in this context. One of them is the relationship between mothering and emancipation: whether becoming a mother has to hinder emancipation or, on the contrary, may it reveal the proper ‘feminine’ way of emancipation. The latter

is sometimes called 'the mystified motherhood' and criticized as a form of compensating the lack of actual power. Another controversial issue is the maternal instinct: whether there exists a biologically grounded instinct or not. There is also a third option in which it is argued that even if maternal instinct exists, it becomes socially and politically manipulated against women.

The fact remains that reproduction, in the most corporeal meaning of the word, is the key issue for feminism and reproductive rights allowing women to have control over their own bodies, and remains the basis for every other kind of freedom. This fact led some feminist thinkers and activists into a blind alley of reducing motherhood to being the instrument of enslavement of women, and suggested to some that the main point of feminism is the struggle for the right not to be a mother. Reclaiming control over reproduction allows women to regain their autonomy, gives them the power of self-determination and independence from the need of care (care for others and of others). But the control over reproduction should also be understood as the right to be a mother and all other rights resulting from it. Making decisions about women's bodies also means the right to experience pregnancy, give birth and care for the newborn the way they want to. However, as remarked by many feminists discussing the issue in their writings (see, e.g., Rich 1985; Wolf 2002), women often learn about themselves from the male 'expert culture' narratives, which, especially in the context of the deeply feminine issues concerning pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding, is particularly striking. For example, childbirth – one of the most intimate female experiences – is felt as unnecessarily medicalized, the hospital space and the personnel is often described as dispossessing women of their bodies, women feel infantilized, treated as children who do not know what is best for them, sometimes feel reduced to some unthinking meat, devoid of their own identity. For example, women in maternity wards are often addressed as 'mama' instead of their proper, individual name. Social policies are addressed to women mainly as mothers, also parenting guides and the press are addressed almost exclusively to mothers. Women are raised as mothers, future mothers, and potential mothers. One of the arguments for accepting these regimes is the lack of autonomy, but paradoxically, often presented in this context as something joyful and positive: "You are now responsible for another life" (see Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

This would mean that it is not motherhood or pregnancy as such that alienate women (as Simone de Beauvoir would say), but it is the male discourse and the patriarchal organization of culture that transforms this experience into an alienating one. Adrienne Rich explains that "the identity, the very personality of a man depends on power, and on power in a certain specific sense: that of power over others, beginning with a woman and her children" (1995: 64), and "the powerful (mostly male) make decisions for the powerless" (1995: 64). Some interpretations of women's situation in this sphere give a historical account of the process in which the patriarchal narrative supported by the medicalization of women's experiences (including what Naomi Wolf describes as 'birthing industry', Wolf

2002) alienated women from their own bodies. Consequently, they were handed over to the hands of male experts (in this case doctors) who, so to speak, hijacked this sphere of their lives from female experts (midwives). The same could be said about the contrast between the instinctive parental love and care for a child juxtaposed with 'expert culture' of upbringing with its professionalized parenting industry, guidebooks, supernannies and must-have gadgets.

These are instances of a more general phenomenon that women experience through male narratives about women, because until recently these were virtually the only narratives available. It has been expressed as early as in 1405 by Christine de Pizan, called the first professional female writer in the Western history. She asked the question repeated later by many intelligent and creative women: How can we know anything about women, their history or experiences, if all books are written by men (Pizan 2005). One of the most famous expressions of similar concerns can be found in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Of course, nobody expects an ornithologist to be a bird, but the neglect of women's voices and experiences in the intellectual history of the Western culture seems undeniable. As a result, male narratives about women, often driven by fear, disregard, contempt or, at best, total lack of understanding, dominate the way they understand and perceive each other. And male narratives are by nature informed by a certain 'intellectual defect': "the assumption that women are a subgroup, that 'man's world is the 'real world'; that patriarchy is equivalent to culture and culture to patriarchy, that the 'great' or 'liberalizing' periods of history have been the same for women as for men, that generalizations about 'men', 'human kind', 'children', 'Blacks', 'parents', 'the working class', hold true for women, mothers, daughters, sisters, wet-nurses, infant girls, and can include them with no more than a glancing reference here and there, usually to some specialized function like breastfeeding" (Rich 1995: 16).

In fact, not all books were written by men, but those written by women suffered from the so-called 'disappearing ink' – they disappeared from history. They do not make it to the canon, they are not read, discussed, or included in the intellectual circulation of ideas, and therefore, disappear (O'Neill 1998). The history of philosophy is dominated by male perspective and male experience disguised as universal. As the editors of one of the most interesting collections of philosophical paper concerning pregnancy and birth *Coming to Life. Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*, Sarah La Chance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist noticed in their introduction: "Feminist philosophers contend that a significant portion of human experience has not been properly attended to in most historical philosophy" (2012: 5). In the foreword to the same book Eva Kittay asked the following question: "If men got pregnant, and were expected to get pregnant, bear children, and feed them from their own bodies, would a philosophical discourse created by men fail to feature the generative capacity of their bodies? Would they blightly ignore the doubling of bodies in pregnancy, the indeterminacy of the pregnant person as one or two? Would they so easily relegate the body functions by which humans reproduce to our animal or abject nature – regarding them

to be of little importance to the distinctiveness of humans?" (2012: XII). It has been changing, as the quoted collection proves, but such works still remain on the margin and are not considered 'serious' mainstream philosophy and the attitude towards 'feminine' issues in philosophy can be described as, at best, tolerant. Even equality-oriented philosophers and some feminists instead of incorporating women's perspective saw the chance for women's liberation in liberating them from being mothers, even intellectually.

I believe that the most significant result of all these (and many other) inner conflicts and disputes within feminism about mothers, motherhood, relations between motherhood, freedom, emancipation, autonomy, etc. is (or can be) defying the mainstream discourse about women and their experiences. Bursting the dam of the dominant male-oriented narratives with the flood of women's stories: individual and collective, professional and intimate, academic and popular, created the space for women who build their identity on experiences shared with other women and interpreted by them. Motherhood is one of these experiences. Perhaps it may lead to a solution of what I would call the de Beauvoir dilemma: either a woman abandons this experience and imitates the male-oriented idea of subjectivity (which she cannot fulfill completely anyway, because of her latent physiological potential of being turned into a plant) or she must agree to her unspecified and ambiguous ontological and existential status.

Motherhood, both potential and actual, translates into all dimensions of women's lives: from physiological (the body becomes transformed) to practical and philosophical. Perhaps it can be reduced to the way society deals at the practical and theoretical levels with the biological fact that women give birth and (usually) nurse children. This is regarded as the only sphere where women have monopoly and even childless women (no matter if by choice or necessity) are perceived through these lenses. Every woman and her choices are filtered through the fact that she is a potential or actual mother. It is difficult to decide the extent to which this is an internalization of the romantic and naturalized myth of motherhood epitomized in the idea of maternal instinct and to what extent the direction is actually opposite. Our current historical and cultural knowledge demonstrated that this naturalistic and romantic is neither common nor necessary (see, e.g., Badinter 1982). Perhaps one of the premises supporting the claim about internalized myth would be that of high frequency with which women point to the role of a mother as the most important one in their lives.

Motherhood releases in women unbelievable reserves of emotions, positive, but also negative – guilt, anger, fear – but these negative emotions and feelings still remain a sort of taboo. There is the lack of safe space to express them in everyday life. At the same time, when women become mothers, they immediately become the object to 'endless moralizing', to quote Judith Warner's foreword to *Motherhood: Philosophy for Everyone* (2010: X). She claims that "ours is an age where philosophies of motherhood abound. They clash. They compete. They battle for preeminence. They are not, for many of their adherents, mere matters of

personal preference or individual parenting style” (2010: X). I believe, however, that in their popular versions they often become nothing more than instruments of social control, which has nothing to do with philosophies. The society is immeasurably critical towards women who dare to express a different attitude. In the introduction to a later edition of her book Rachel Cusk admitted that many times she had regretted writing *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, a somewhat gloomy, sincere account of her first months as a mother, because of unjustified attacks (Cusk 2003). Ayelet Waldman wrote her book *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace* in response to violent criticism after publishing a newspaper article in which she admitted that she loved her husband more than her four children (Waldman 2009). But if mothers usually declare that being a mother is the most important role in their lives, fathers are often simply not asked the question. As a result, the other side of romanticizing the mother is ignoring the father.

The connection between motherhood and identity in women's lives is even more apparent recently since it has become a matter of choice. The decision about becoming a mother becomes a fundamental choice which is unceasingly entangled politically (the control over reproduction as an instrument of the control over women), symbolically (social and cultural reduction of women to mothers), ethically (total responsibility for another human being) and existentially (the issue of autonomy).

Motherhood as an institution and experience

The multifarious entanglements of motherhood in ideologies, discourses and interests result in a situation in which this constitutive aspect of women's identity is often experienced as 'lost'. The writer who observed this phenomenon most acutely was Adrienne Rich in her famous essay *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995) – one of the most important books on motherhood. Her fundamental claim is the distinction between motherhood as an experience of the relation with a child, and the institutionalized motherhood in which this intimate relation is appropriated by culture and politics. Her criticism towards the invented motherhood of patriarchal culture where this relation has been taken over by the patriarchal system of control which deprived half of the humanity of the right to decide about their lives. It also liberated (and deprived) men of being fathers and the fatherhood in the proper sense. The institutionalized version of motherhood is presented as natural, as women's destiny and fulfillment. But Rich argues that the way it functions in the patriarchal society is nowhere nearer the natural human condition than slavery (Rich 1995: 33), but it has succeeded as an instrument of social control in alienating women from their bodies 'by incarcerating us in them' (1995: 13). The biological dimension has been given the magical or mystical interpretation fueled by male fears. The essence of the patriarchal organization of society, which is the control over women and motherhood, becomes

yet another instrument in the process. The ideology and practical organization of the care for children is designed to keep women out of workforce and without economic security. The same could be said about feeding the fear of rape which is an instrument that makes men – the potential oppressors – seem like actual defenders, which gives them the power over women in public spaces and facilitates placing them in the private sphere.

Rich demonstrates on her own example and in reference to a wider cultural context, how women's identities reduced to mothering and a home become her and her children's microcosm in which a man is only a visitor from the outside world who, if a 'generous' one like husband, wants to help. "But it was clearly understood – recalls Rich – that this 'help' was an act of generosity" (1995: 27). Having given life to her three children is referred to as the beginning of a struggle to give life to herself. Thus, having presented her own struggle in the background, she tries to explain the reasons of fear of women who take control of their own bodies and lives. To describe the relations between men and women in the patriarchal culture she develops a powerful metaphor of colonizing minds: "To hold power over others means that the powerful is permitted a kind of short-cut through the complexity of human personality. He does not have to enter intuitively into the souls of the powerless, or to hear what they are saying in their many languages, including the language of silence. Colonialism exists by virtue of this short-cut – how else could so few live among so many and understand so little?" (Rich 1995: 65).

The distinction between experience and the patriarchal institution proposed by Adrienne Rich is important, because in the dispute on whether women should abandon or embrace motherhood in their quest for emancipation it can be helpful in conceptualizing the critique without denying the significance of experience. Such an approach, however, may raise concerns about whether shifting the feminist focus towards motherhood, relation and experience would result in the transfer of the issue back to the private sphere and the abolishment of the rest of the 'official' world from holding the responsibility. In other words, there is a fear that what all this strategy can achieve is creating another mental ghetto. But Rich does not share these concerns: "I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours" (1995: 16) – which seems that the way for women to inhabit the world as equally represented inhabitants is to change their narrative.

‘The masks of motherhood are cracking through’
(Rich 1995: 25)

The approach expressed by Rich perhaps explains the proliferation of women's narratives focused on motherhood. It seems that the need to express and share their experience in a narrative form (literary, personal, and essayistic) is an appropriate way to solve social and structural issues at the level of biography. Au-

tobiographical narrative also becomes a form of projecting one's life and working through the changes a woman faces with when she becomes a mother, by enhancing the self-knowledge and thus building a new identity. The world seen as composed of intertwining stories often becomes an impulse for a qualitative approach in the research on motherhood – opening to mothers' narratives about their experiences. This, for example, is the premise of an interesting qualitative study *Making Sense of Motherhood. A Narrative Approach* by Tina Miller whose reflections were inspired by the idea that people are embedded in discourses shaping our experiences, and these discourses – 'meta-narratives' – influence our own ontological narratives, the stories we produce about ourselves (Miller 2005: 3).

Making sense of one's own experience, recovering it from the midst of 'expert culture' in the form of personal narratives, is related to the fact that becoming a parent is one of the most transforming experiences for any human being. Perhaps the personal nature of these narratives provides a way out of the institutionalized expert culture which is shaped to fit the male-oriented culture and to avoid male narratives and female experience. The most explicit accounts – personal, but set in a wider context – can be found in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. In the first chapter Rich quoted her personal journal from the times of her pregnancies and early motherhood where she described intimate negative emotions concerning her children, emotions of pain, irritation and anger; resentment at being confined to a limited space of home and places available for small children, of yearning for a moment of solitude, of dying intellect and lost creative power. And immediately afterwards – the sense of guilt and being a bad mother resulting from the commonly shared idea of the mother-child relationship as essentially different from every other relation. It is indeed a different relationship, argued Rich, but mothers still have the right to experience irritation and frustration and not to be crucified for it (fathers never are). And she remarked: "I knew I was fighting for my life through, against and with the life of my children (...). I had been trying to give birth to myself; and in some grim, dim way I was determined to use even pregnancy and parturition in that process" (Rich 1995: 29).

It seems that more and more women feel the same need. To provide only some examples: Ayelet Waldman's *Bad Mother*, Deborah Spar's *Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection* or Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions*, as well as more personal and literary *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, by Rachel Cusk or Joyce Maynard's *Domestic Affairs* (1987) – both are professional writers (fiction writer and journalist) who felt the need to document their early motherhood experiences in order to transform creatively the experience of becoming a mother and what it did to them and their lives. Cusk's account is much more bleak and ironic, perhaps also more distanced. It encountered the lack of understanding and widespread – undeserved – criticism I mentioned earlier. Maynard's book was composed from the texts she had written for a column and are therefore much more cheerful, even though definitely not without an insight. In Poland the debate around motherhood was kindled by the publication of *Matka feministka* by

Agnieszka Graff (2014), also partly composed of a column she wrote for a popular parenting magazine.

All the authors mentioned above are professional writers, even though coming from various areas of writing, from poetry and fiction to non-fiction and scholarly works. Perhaps if one is a thinker, a writer, or work in any other so-called creative professions, the need to transform this new situation into a creative project, to work through it by the use of a narrative is particularly strong. It seems especially true in the case of motherhood where a person is not equipped with thousands of years of notions and ideas of traditional philosophy and the intellectual heritage of the culture, as we are in the case of other transformations or borderline experiences such as, for example, death. There is almost nothing there to help to navigate through shifts and changes almost every element of your identity go through, from body to intellect, and what is there seems rather unhelpful (such as de Beauvoir's derogatory descriptions of pregnant women, not to mention all the men-written tradition starting with Plato and Aristotle).

A similar need for expressing and sharing experiences is widely manifested by women who are not professional writers. This phenomenon is clearly present and noticeable in the space which makes such a public statement accessible to anyone who feels the need for it, namely the blogosphere. Their literary or artistic qualities or even intellectual value is perhaps often far from what might be considered a standard. Nevertheless, they still remain an authentic expression of identity dilemmas. These narratives often take the form of a story of identity crisis which follows becoming a new mother and overcoming the crisis. Such blogs – chronicles of life changes – are often later edited into books. Even though they are a culturally patterned construction of individual narratives (Miller 2005: 8), these books attempt to dismantle these meta-narratives and confront them with an actual experience. Popular blogs written by mothers not only result in popular books, but they also have the power to create dialogical communities around them. Collections of excerpts from parenting blogs with meaningful titles such as: *Sleep is For the Weak* or *I Just Want to Pee Alone*, often use humor and irony in their description of everyday reality of motherhood, which opens their readers and commentators to sharing unpleasant feelings and the dark side of this experience in a safe way.

Blogs written by mothers about mothering, especially personal, unprofessional ones, as well as dialogical activities of communities around them can be interpreted as a collective attempt to reclaim the experience of being a mother by narrating, transforming it into a story, often quasi-auto-ethnographic, and by engaging into a dialogue with people in a similar situation, irrespective of whether it is intentional or unintentional. It is most noticeable in personal blogs written in the form of autobiographical episodes. There are also 'how-to' blogs, review blogs or specialized blogs devoted to particular issues (e.g. breastfeeding). They also include autobiographical narratives that reveal the identity dilemmas, but these are less clearly noticeable.

The majority of these blogs are written in the early period of motherhood, and serve as a platform for solving problems or projecting lives by means of a public (even if usually anonymous) autobiography. They also include a kind of invitation to contact – perhaps as a response to an acute feeling of loneliness declared by many young mothers, especially from big cities, with scarce extended family and neighborly relations. The same applies to mothers who were professionally active before the childbirth – for them blogging is a way of satisfying the need of expression and contact. Blogs create one of the scarce safe spaces to express negative emotions about motherhood, without judgment or criticism. Often sharing such emotions encounters understanding and support, even if just anonymous.

The blogosphere of mothers reveals a particular community organized around several popular and widely read blogs (they change with time), with thousands of blogs created, abandoned or closed according to their writers' needs and abilities. The mothers who read, write and comment, look at themselves as if in the mirror, in search for understanding, support, place for free expression and contact, and they engage and project their lives in a creative dialogue. These activities on a mass scale create a space for negotiation of a new identity among the fading power of traditional patterns and roles.

Summing up, there are three areas of women's narrative activities which contribute to creating "a collective description of the world which will be truly ours" as proclaimed by Adrienne Rich. The first area includes literary narratives by professional writers and thinkers. The second one is composed of blogosphere and popular narratives. The third one was not represented in this essay, because it is more hermetic and its translation into everyday life and the situation of mothers is less direct, but its impact is nevertheless worth mentioning: the growing body of scholarship, philosophies written 'in different voices', extensive research projects, collections of essays. Two papers surveying the scholarly literature on motherhood notice insufficient interest in this area of studies, even though they both observe the increased number of studies in the recent decades (see Arendell 2000; Kawash 2011). Especially Kawash demonstrates a wide range of motherhood related topics and issues covered recently in the academic literature, but practically silent in the mainstream culture: poor and unmarried, lesbian, adoptive, absent (migrating for work or incarcerated) mothers. All these voices and narratives are intertwined and appear at the time that will contribute to changing the perception of women, mothers and their identities. Of course, they are not all revolutionary manifests against patriarchy, some even incorporate patriarchal mentality³, but as long as women speak their minds, feelings and experiences, all these voices deserve to be heard.

³ Paradoxically, often those which are written against it. For example, in the chapter on sexual revolution Spar argues that because of sexual liberation women deprived themselves of the power over men (see Spar 2013).

Conclusion

Pregnancy, birth, childcare, breastfeeding (or not) – these are all physiological facts, but not only. They are also cultural and deeply intimate, individual ones. Contemporary mothering, and parenting along with it, considered a significant aspect of identity, becomes more problematic than before, partly because it has become a matter of choice and not a chance or necessity. At the same time, traditional ways of mothering and fathering are fading away and every parent (mothers in particular, but not exclusively) has to shape their identity anew, searching for an individual path to their own parenting among the multiplicity of narratives, including those indicated in this essay.

The effort they represent is a work towards dignifying the dimensions of everyday life neglected in the intellectual history. Perhaps these accounts may be interpreted as the part of ‘herstorying’ this history by adding value to what we are made of and what constituted our existence. All these narratives may be read as examples of (sometimes folk) versions of autoethnography, as developing the self-understanding which enters into a creative and meaningful dialogue with other people in a similar situation. They can have the liberating potential of becoming an alternative to both oppressive mainstream meta-narratives on mothers and motherhood, and the patriarchy-rooted and driven so-called ‘mommy-wars’.

The experience of motherhood is at once universal and deeply personal, individual, intimate; it is one of the most overwhelming experiences in life. And the commitment to another human being is incomparable to any other commitment. Despite what Simone de Beauvoir claimed, we *do* make people, in many (all) different meanings of this phrase. And we deserve to be the ones who tell this story.

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