

RETHINKING MOTHERHOOD IN THE 21ST CENTURY: NEW FEMINIST APPROACHES

INTRODUCTION

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To cite this article / Para citar este artículo:
 Blasco Herranz, I. y Serrano-Niza, D. (2023).
 Rethinking Motherhood in the 21st Century:
 New Feminist Approaches. *Feminismo/s*,
 41, 13-20. Rethinking Motherhood
 in the 21st Century: New Feminist
 Approaches [Monographic dossier]. María
 Dolores Serrano Niza & Inmaculada Blasco
 Herranz (Coord.). <https://doi.org/10.14198/fem.2023.41.01>

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Motherhood has been one of the central themes of feminist research and debate since at least the 1960s. Feminist views on this issue have been, however, diverse and changing, and have been linked, in turn, to the different ways of understanding feminism and its theoretical elaborations on sexual difference. Without reflection on the question having stopped since then, in recent years, and in the context of the reactivation of the feminist movement worldwide, there has been a proliferation of publications on maternity or, to be more precise, one should speak of maternities. Publications, it should be said, which have been developed from new approaches, permeating different academic fields. As an example, and with a similar vocation to that which guides our proposal, we highlight the dossier entitled «La maternidad es personal y política. Construyendo un nuevo discurso en torno a las maternidades» (Moreno Hernández, 2020). That same year, the collective volume *Maternidades*

cuir (Abril & Trujillo Barbadillo, 2020) was published, which implied a broadening of the look at maternities from the perspective of bodies and subjectivities that transcend gender binarism and the heterosexual norm. Decolonial feminism has also been proposing to rethink motherhood considering the problematization of modern and Western constructions of gender, as boldly exposed in the monograph *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (Oyěwùmí, 2016). In turn, historians have not ceased to be interested in and produce relevant contributions to the knowledge of the socio-historical construction of motherhood, not only related to its normative aspects but also to subjective experiences, which is evidenced in the collective volume *Motherhood and infancies in the Mediterranean in antiquity* (Sánchez Romero & Cid López, 2018).

Consequently, this special issue seeks to add to and contribute to the interdisciplinary academic reflection on motherhood or motherhoods today. Our starting point is understanding that the concept of motherhood is ever-changing, historically variable, both in its meaning and content, as well as in the identities and experiences to which it refers and generates. At the same time, the cultural burden it carries in different societies and historical contexts does not cease to raise controversy as to its appropriate meanings and the practices that derive from them. To support this reflection, we have relied on specialists in gender and feminist studies who, from their different fields, investigate and discuss the diverse dimensions of motherhood, considering it, as already stated, as a cultural and historical construction that is in constant reshaping. This constant reconsideration is present, in one way or another, in each of the contributors to this special issue since, from their respective fields, they address maternity as a discourse that, on the one hand, normalizes and generates exclusions, but which, at the same time, allows action, occasionally making possible the transformation of experiences and meanings associated with maternity.

Therefore, we can say that the papers that make up the present special issue can be ascribed to three main thematic axes that we will explore in detail. In the first of these we find the contributions that provide historical analysis, carried out within the framework of a broad chronology (16th to 20th centuries) and based on a great diversity of documents. In addition, it

should be noted that most of them make use of the novel approach of the history of emotions and affections. This is the case of Ana Aranda Bernal's article titled «Maternal rule. Affection, power, and patrimony expressed through testamentary wills (15th-16th centuries)». Her paper analyzes the wills of three women of the Castilian elite of the kingdom of Seville in the 15th-16th centuries. The concept of *emotional community* is used by the author to explore the affective maternal experiences that the wills express; in them, the subjectivity of the mother facing death must be highlighted. In the author's opinion, this is due to her desire to maintain, even after death, the influence, and sometimes control, over her respective offspring.

Along the same documentary typology, Dolores Serrano-Niza and María Eugenia Monzón Perdomo construct their «Afectos maternos: los objetos de ajuar en la herencia de las mujeres (siglo XVI)». This paper follows the theoretical trail of the history of emotions, to which material culture studies are added, taking the notarial protocols granted in the Canary Islands in the 16th century as a primary source, with a particular interest in wills. A particularly attentive reading, guided by the previously mentioned theoretical frameworks, reveals that there was an interesting plurality in the way of feeling maternity, dissociating it from the purely biological fact of conception and childbirth. In this sense, the authors conclude that there was a feeling that could be called *maternal affection* and that was translated into practice in the form of last wishes. Together with this, they formulate the concepts of *deferred maternities* and *subaltern maternities*, and they do so by analyzing those objects, mostly elements of trousseaus, which appear in the last wills of women who wish these things to end up in the hands of other women.

María Elena Díez Jorge's paper, entitled «Power and motherhood in the 16th century: Perpetuity and memory through architecture» is also located in the 16th century, but in Granada. Her proposal leads to a reflection on the meaning of motherhood, far removed from the conceptions that linked motherhood and upbringing from the European Enlightenment onwards. Her analysis of archival sources, on the other hand, brings us closer to a different mentality in which motherhood is not only expressed through childbearing, but also to bequeath a lineage, a family name, property or a house, without it necessarily being a matter of women of high social status. Particularly interesting is how the study broadens to the experience of women who do

not belong to the elite, but whose maternal concern will be the defense of their house, even if it is not their own property, for the purpose of protecting their offspring under the protection of a roof.

With the contribution of Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, «The power of motherhood [...], free of obstacles, will amply fulfill its eternal mission'. Feminism and motherhood in the early 20th Century Spain», we move to the Spain of the early 20th century. The author sets out from the analysis and debates of historical feminism in Spain, conceptualized as a social feminism, in whose articulation motherhood had a main role. Her central contribution lies in unraveling how the social constituted an epistemological framework that, influenced by the ideas of medicine and hygiene, modeled the notions of maternity expressed by the feminists of the time, through press articles, essays, conferences, etc. Consequently, feminism, on the one hand, was constituted as a movement for social and national reform through women-mothers; and, on the other, motherhood served to legitimize and demand civil and political rights.

Mónica García Fernández's contribution, «Representations of motherhood in late francoist Spain: From catholic discourses to early feminist critiques», sets us in the late Francoist period in Spain. In this work, an analysis of the discourses and their emotional components is applied to a wide corpus of sources of the period (films, advice literature, medical discourses). The author shows a plurality of rhetorics that breaks with the monolithic vision of motherhood and the family that prevailed during the Francoist period. This article explores three of the prevailing representations of motherhood: the apparently modern but extremely reactionary Opus Dei, the advice literature that promoted «painless childbirth» and, finally, the renewed Catholic discourse following the Second Vatican Council. Particularly interesting is her presentation of the critique that was beginning to emerge from an incipient second-wave feminism that made visible the discomfort and violence associated with the experience of motherhood. This contrasted with the emotional standards of invariable optimism that defined the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother.

The papers that integrate the second of our thematic blocks coincide in addressing certain burning topics related to motherhood that have been emerging in contemporary societies, societies defined by the cultural

diversity of an increasingly globalized world. Among the contributions that make up this axis is Delfina Serrano-Ruano's «¿Qué fue del *niño dormido*? Consecuencias de la reducción de los plazos máximos de duración del embarazo en la jurisprudencia y la legislación islámicas contemporáneas». This paper deals with the transformation that contemporary legal systems in countries with an Islamic majority have undergone by adapting, in a biased and partial manner, scientific advances, particularly those coming from embryology, gynecology and genetics. This transformation has meant, as the author proves, a greater vulnerability for certain groups within Maghrebi societies: single mothers and their children, those who become pregnant after being widowed and those who are rejected or abandoned by their husbands. This diagnosis becomes particularly clear when comparing the current situation with the practices prevailing in these same societies prior to the 20th century, which, to a certain extent, served to protect these groups of women through the acceptance of long-term pregnancies, thanks to the legal doctrine of the *sleeping child*. This work allows us to open a window from Gender Studies to very specialized sources and theories within Arab and Islamic Studies.

M. Aránzazu Robles Santana, with «Ethnographies of migrant mixtec women in California. An anthropological approach to narratives of transmigration, transnational motherhood and pregnancy in the context of western medicine», takes us to another geographical and cultural setting, focusing on transnational motherhood derived from international migratory processes. The source materials for this paper are the narratives of Mixtec women from Oaxaca (Mexico) who have migrated to Oxnard (California). This is a decolonized investigation in which the protagonists of these narratives, the indigenous women, do not conform to the models traditionally formulated by classical feminism. In the first part of this paper, the transmigration narratives are studied in relation to those aspects linked to gender roles. Later, the complexity of transnational motherhood in the society of destination is explored, analyzing the situations of inequality and oppression that affect these women, exposing, in turn, their capacity for agency and their strategies of resistance.

Silvia Almenara Niebla invites us to travel from migration to diaspora with her article «'You have raised me between two worlds': Mothers,

daughters, and emotions in the Sahrawi digital diaspora in Spain». This work emphasizes the emotional links that are established between the geography of destination and origin in diaspora situations, dealing, in this case, with the situation of Sahrawi women in Spain. In this paper, the author studies the concept of digital diaspora considering how the Internet has influenced the construction of social and family relationships, particularly those established between mother and daughters. In fact, an interesting methodology of social network ethnography allows her to examine the tensions derived from the cultural preservation of the place of origin versus those derived from socialization in the place of destination.

Along with transnational and diasporic motherhood, we return to the Western world and other current challenges, such as those related to the construction of non-motherhood and the postponement of motherhood. On the latter issue, with her article «Imagining motherhood and becoming a mother after egg freezing. An anthropological study in the French context», Yolínliztly Pérez-Hernández conducts an empirical study on egg freezing. Her work is based on a large sample of in-depth interviews with white middle-class heterosexual French women who imagine motherhood, but who, for various reasons, are forced to postpone it, resorting to freezing their eggs. The author analyzes the distance between imagined motherhood (constituted by the referents of nuclear family, heteronormative couple and genetic motherhood) and the reproductive trajectory of the women interviewed, when infertility or illness burst into their desire, using the concept of «ontological disruptions». An interruption that Pérez-Hernández interprets as a modification of some normative patterns, but which does not represent a questioning of the prevailing model.

In her article «Impossible motherhood: from the *desire for motherhood* to non-motherhood», Mercedes Bogino Larrambebere describes the process of those cisgender women who, although they have a strong desire to become mothers, do not succeed. To unravel this complex trajectory from the desire for motherhood to non-motherhood, the author analyzes a series of biographical narratives that relate the experiences of women who have suffered miscarriages, multidimensional infertility and the medicalization of their bodies as a result of the use of assisted reproduction technologies. These stories also express the importance of living the socially denied mourning

of non-motherhood. In this sense, mutual support groups are of great relevance in achieving the difficult and complete transition to non-motherhood. A transition that, the author concludes, implies challenging the imaginary of hegemonic motherhood.

The third and last axis of this special issue has different contemporary artistic expressions of motherhood –specifically theater, audiovisual and cinema– as a common link between the articles that comprise it. On this matter, Hadara Scheflan Katzav's article, «The theater of motherhood», makes visible the experience and creation of an Israeli artist-mother, Mali De-Kalo. The author carries out a detailed feminist critique of the representations of motherhood in the history of art and in Israeli society. In doing so, she shows the deep change that the image and representations of motherhood have undergone in the last two decades. According to the author, this is due to the work developed by mother artists, such as the above-mentioned De-Kalo, who have challenged the models established until then. In fact, Scheflan adopts the matricentric perspective developed, among others, by researcher Andrea O'Reilly (Motherhood Studies), which allows her to place mothers at the center of feminist analysis.

Adriana Nicolau Jiménez, in «To be or not to be a mother: Doubtful, fraught, and denied access to motherhood in contemporary Catalan theatre», analyzes four plays written by two Catalan playwrights, Núria Planes and Cocha Milla. Present-day Catalonia constitutes the socio-historical framework (very similar to the European context) in which these creations have been conceived, characterized by deep transformations in the demography of the birth rate, as well as by a growing attention to identity issues and those related to reproductive rights. These plays address topics already dealt with in other articles in this special issue such as the experience of perinatal death, the consequences of infertility and the use of assisted reproductive technologies, doubts about the desire to become mothers and the desire to be a mother in women with intellectual disabilities. The author concludes that these plays and their creators urge us to rethink the hegemonic conceptions of motherhood to the extent that they open a space for the visibilization of previously denied experiences, as well as the tensions that emerge between social norms and personal experiences of motherhood.

Finally, Irene Baena-Cuder in her article «*Mama: An exploration of gender and motherhood in contemporary Spanish horror film*» explores the treatment of motherhood in current Spanish cinema. The author takes as a reference for her work the film *Mama*, as a case study that reflects, on the one hand, the recent interest that horror films have had in incorporating motherhood as a central theme. On the other hand, she exposes the influence that the socio-historical context has had on the above-mentioned film. Baena-Cuder's study focuses on the nature of the transformations that the protagonist undergoes, as well as on the effect produced by the dichotomous representation of motherhood based on the figures of the good and the bad mother. All this leads her to conclude that the film reproduces and promotes an imaginary about motherhood that is already outdated and, in fact, linked to Franco's ideals about motherhood. In addition, she adds, the film penalizes, by exposing its terrible consequences, the defiance of patriarchal norms.

In conclusion, the special issue «Rethinking Motherhood in the 21st Century: New Feminist Approaches» brings together studies from a wide variety of disciplines, methodologies and analytical approaches. We hope to contribute to the reflection on motherhood in different cultural contexts, in diverse past and present, in order to think about a plural, diverse future, filled with reflection and the ability to engage in constructive feminist conversations about social norms, emotional codes, experiences, practices and realities surrounding motherhood.

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