THE EFFECT OF FEMINISM ON MOTHERHOOD

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[Assignment: Write an essay in which you describe an attitude you hold or used to hold about race, gender, or ethnicity, and how you believe it was formed.]

Raised by conservative, traditional parents and carefully molded into their image, I assumed the traditional role of wife and mother with great pride. In the process, however, I often felt the need to prove my worth as a productive member of society. Was that simply my own insecurity, or was I actually being challenged to defend my career choice?

It was always assumed that I would go to college upon graduation from high school. Being heavily involved in ballet and modern dance since I was a child, I attended a community college obtaining a two-year diploma in Performing Arts-Dance. While most of the curriculum consisted of Ballet, Modern, Jazz, and Dance Composition, we also studied Music Reading and Analysis, Freehand Drawing, Portraits in Film and Novel, and Dance Teaching Methods. We also had tremendous opportunities to perform in several theaters in the city. Subsequently, I embarked on the pursuit of an education degree at the University of Alberta in the area of early childhood education.

Since I was married to a medical student, we had taken on quite a burden, trying to finance our education while at the same time maintaining our own apartment and living expenses. With the help of the student loan program and summer employment, we were very determined to make it on our own. However, the financial aid committee decided they were unable to continue financing both of our educations. They felt that we were going to amass too great a debt; they were not prepared to loan one couple that amount of money. Their solution was that I should obtain full-time employment while allowing my husband to complete his medical training. Quite a chauvinistic attitude, I thought.

The search for employment was not an easy task; where do you begin? I started with the classified ads in our local paper and went on several interviews. I had some secretarial skills and had done some accounting, but this was either not enough or too much experience for most jobs. Finally, I found what would end up being quite a challenge, a position as a secretary-receptionist-bookkeeper for the Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner Company. This was a major turning point in my life. My parents weren't pleased with my decision, yet they were in no position to assist us financially. Promising them, and myself, that I'd return to college eventually for my degree, I began my new career in the business world. It too was short-lived because two years later I became a mother, another crossroads in my life.

My husband and I felt very strongly about the importance of motherhood. It was an institution we both respected. After all, who would do a better job raising our children than their mother? Who best to help them form values and lasting impressions?
I had been trained very well for this position; it was not an accident that the necessary skills had been honed and polished for the inevitability of eventual motherhood. My father, the breadwinner, was raised by traditional old world parents. His father earned a living for the family while his mother upheld her role as caretaker and homemaker. Dad felt that this was the best way to rear healthy, happy children. Therefore, my mother was not to work outside the house but instead, would maintain the home and family. She did so with amazing grace and talent.

As my mother was a marvelous cook (she made Betty Crocker look totally incompetent), we were blessed with delicious home-cooked meals daily. Often we returned home from school to a plate of warm cookies, every child’s dream. On holiday celebrations our home was filled with the resplendent culinary creations we still anticipate today.

She decorated our home as well as any interior designer could have, sewed our clothes with the finesse and precision of a tailor, groomed our yard with the expertise of a professional landscape architect, and elegantly entertained friends and colleagues. Every aspect of caregiving was attended to. She put her special touch, her love and creative talents into everything she did.

In many ways I was shown how to devote my time, talents, and abilities to my respective family with a generous and loving heart. Ardently striving for perfection in my occupation, I emulated my ancestors, hoping to perform at least as well as they had, yet secretly hoping to do even more.

However, at the very same time that my maternal instincts were in overdrive, the women’s liberation movement was righteously castigating the revered role of motherhood as serfdom. Who needed it? Why would any woman, given a choice, want to spend her life raising a family when she could be climbing the ladder of success, obtaining immeasurable respect and financial rewards? I suppose there are many answers that would be applicable, but I must admit that I was looking forward to the challenge of motherhood.

Perhaps one of the results of feminism has been the devaluation of the role of motherhood. Despite the fact that there is no formal educational training, no salary and no benefits, it is still a noble profession. While it may not be the career choice of every woman, should those who choose it face ridicule? Rather than attempting to trivialize the role of wife and mother, feminists may have been more prudent, setting their own goals without rejecting the goals of others.

How demeaning it is to be asked, especially by another woman, if I work! How can that question be answered? Do I work or not? What else is there? If I don’t work then what do I do each day to pass the time? How do I explain the occupation I have chosen for myself in a feminist-influenced society? Isn’t motherhood a job? Am I just being hypersensitive about this issue or could it be that motherhood has been trivialized by the women’s liberation movement? Perhaps feminism has devalued motherhood, but in whose eyes? Am I really being persecuted or am I simply being defensive? Although these are rhetorical questions, perhaps they are thought provoking.
I think what hurts the most is that women are feeling persecuted by other women—sisters! I would like to think that rather than making each other feel defensive, we should be striving to encourage individuality and self-worth. Whatever role a woman chooses, and who's to say that she won't choose more than one, she should be guaranteed support by her peers and not made to feel that her role is considered unimportant.

Somehow, despite the intense training in "tradition," I have managed to raise an intensely feminist daughter and a son who is very much aware of feminist issues. I take that as the ultimate compliment! While being a real old-fashioned mom, I was still able to instill in my children the notion that anything is possible. I hope that I have been responsible for raising their consciousness. This is not the anticipated result of such a traditional history of ancestors. Should I be discredited or have I somehow managed, within the context of traditional motherhood, to encourage individuality and freedom of expression?

Motherhood, to me, will always remain a noble occupation, but I recognize that it is not the ultimate goal of every woman, including my own daughter. I feel confident that in the context of "doing my duty," I was definitely influenced by the concept of feminism. Perhaps this gave me a sense of balance in the midst of my career as a traditional mom. I still hold the strong conviction that in choosing to be a full-time mother I made the right choice.

Now, as I am embarking on my new career as a full-time student, I am very much aware of my continuing duties as a mother. While my children are still very dependent on me in my traditional role, they are enthusiastic and supportive of the new direction my life has taken. I hope that I have shown them both that diversity exists for everyone and that many choices are available to them throughout their lives. My desires for each of them are much like those of my mother for me: to be the very best that they can be in whatever roles they choose.