

Single Motherhood and Empowerment: An Ethical Interpretation Reflected Through Indian Knowledge System

Dr. Sayani Bhattacharya

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Silda Chandrasekhar College (Vidyasagar University),
Silda, Jhargram, West Bengal

Abstract

In the early stages of creation, there may not have been any distinction between men and women, but the moment men realized that their physical strength was greater than that of women, they asserted dominance over women, leading to the formation of a patriarchal society. This patriarchal society is an institution that dictates women's roles, constantly determining the scope of their activities. It elevates motherhood to a divine status, yet deprives women of many of their rights. They claim that motherhood is innate to women, so from birth, the concepts of family and childbearing are ingrained in their minds. According to this patriarchal view, motherhood through the act of mothering is viewed as the most important trait. However, in the current era of women's empowerment leading to empowerment of motherhood, mothers, independent of the patriarchal family have developed their identities based on their own freedom and rights. By relying on economic self-sufficiency and mental strength, a mother has formed a new family free from patriarchy and male dominance. In this family, she is both the giver and bearer of life. By balancing her profession and motherhood, she has made motherhood multidimensional. She has established that patriarchal-free single motherhood is not inherently bad. Therefore, in today's time motherhood outside the boundaries of patriarchy has established itself on solid moral standards. In the traditional discourse of the four divisions of Indian philosophy, following the path of dharma, women have engaged in appropriate duties. The highest principle of the four divisions, moksha, understood as liberation from the bonds of karma. In this context, single motherhood has also achieved liberation, but from the shackles of patriarchy and the bonds of subjugation. Motherhood is not only properly expressed within the family; even beyond the family, single mothers can successfully nurture their children's growth. Just as a company flourishes through the proper execution of duties, a single mother can appropriately nurture her motherhood, thereby being recognized as a good mother according to moral standards. Keywords: patriarchy, single motherhood, empowerment, morality, moksha.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Motherhood, Empowerment, Moksha, Dharma

Introduction:

As soon as a child becomes aware of their surroundings, the primary relationship they form is with their mother. The actions a mother takes to ensure the overall development of her child are expressions of her motherhood. Motherhood plays a crucial role in a child's development. In ancient and medieval times, motherhood was marked by subjugation, where mothers had the joy of having and rearing children but

had no rights beyond it. Gradually, the idea encompassing motherhood began to change. As women came out of their homes to work outside to earn a living, the conception of the idea of motherhood witnessed a transformation from its earlier connotation. What was once confined to the home began to manifest in the workplace. With the entry of women into the workforce, which enabled them to earn a living for themselves, they gained a sense of confidence and independence. As a result, the idea of motherhood being the sole responsibility of women had to be readjusted and redefined in this new context. So, with the fusion of womanhood and motherhood, women moved steadily towards freedom. Even within the institution of patriarchal society, women as mothers gained some level of rights with their economic empowerment becoming a reality. Thus, a change started taking place. The economic empowerment facilitated change at various levels. Just as the idea of motherhood changed with the movement of women from the private to the public sphere, its forms have also evolved. The idea of motherhood is usually associated with being an inherent trait present in a women and it can also be said to be related to women's desire to experience motherhood. This conception gets amply reflected through various examples of women becoming mothers through different paths when failing to experience motherhood following the biological process. Sometimes, women become mothers through surrogacy or adoption. But in the current era, other methods have also emerged. As women's lives have become more independent, motherhood has reached the pinnacle of freedom. Even within a patriarchal framework, women have embraced motherhood without the involvement of fathers. All these developments have culminated in the rise of the idea of single motherhood.

Literature review:

In the context of discussing single motherhood, the topic of family comes up. For discussing this family context, I have tried to evaluate some parts of the book "The Family" by Burgess and Locke. The ethical evaluation of single mothers becomes much more relevant when we present one or two real-life examples. I have used several magazines to present interviews of some notable individuals.

1. Burgess, E. W. and H. J. Locke. The Family. New York: American Book Company, 1953. P.81
2. Different case studies

Objective:

In locating the idea of single motherhood within the family and beyond, the idea has been analysed and evaluated from three different contexts in light of ethical standards and Indian epistemology with three different objectives. These are –

1. This study mainly focused on comparative discussion with family to explain what single motherhood is and its relevance.
2. I have assessed how single motherhood can be empowering.
3. I have analyzed single motherhood in terms of ethical standards.

Methodology:

In assessing the advantages or disadvantages of single motherhood, I have primarily used the content analysis method within the qualitative method. Additionally, for practical applicability, I have tried to explain some case studies of notable individuals.

Single Motherhood

The first question that arises is, what do we mean by single motherhood? Single motherhood refers to a mother who gives birth to a child without the presence of a father or who takes full responsibility for raising a child (such as physical, mental, social, and financial responsibilities) without the father's assistance. Therefore, it can be said that a woman can become a single mother without the father's involvement, either through adoption or sperm donation. Conversely, a mother can also become a single mother by raising a child on her own while retaining the father's identity. Hence, it can be said that breaking free from the constraints of patriarchy and maintaining personal independence and individuality within the family unit, one can become a single mother. Similarly, widows, divorcees, or women who have children through a husband or another man but raise them without their assistance can also be considered single mothers.

When discussing single mothers, we cannot overlook the broader societal context. By “broader context”, I refer to society, the state, and the family. So, is a child's holistic development possible within the family, or does something remain lacking? Or are single mothers more supportive of a child's overall development? We will discuss which is more supportive or if both are equally so.

Family vs. Single Motherhood

Before discussing how a child's development is possible within the family, it is essential to discuss the family itself. The question arises: how did the concept of family come into existence? When humans felt the need for a collective life, society was created. To strengthen blood ties, humans created the family. Regarding the definition of family, Burgess and Locke stated, “Family is a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, consisting of a single household, interacting and intercommunicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, creating a common culture.”[1] In other words, a family is an institution where communication occurs between individuals through marriage, blood relations, or adoption processes, and everyone coexists within a shared culture. The family is built through the mutual relationships of husband-wife, parent-child, and siblings. The main issue is the relationship between the family and motherhood.

While a child's development can occur under the care of a mother, the family is still essential. Just as a woman does not achieve completeness without motherhood, a child's development is incomplete without a family. When a child begins to grow after birth, they seek to gain various experiences from their surroundings. The family helps provide these formative experiences. Through these experiences, a child's mental and intellectual development is possible. As a child grows, they learn many things from their family. A child's behaviour, speech, and ability to adapt to others stem from their family relationships. The family influences the child's decisions about which path to take for success. The family not only aids in the child's physical and mental development but also in their spiritual development. Influenced by these experiences, the child decides which values to uphold and which to discard in life.

These are not just words or facts; I can say from personal experience that the importance of family in my life is immense. The role of the family begins from the very start of life and continues until the last day. If it weren't for the role of my parents or elders in my life, I might have achieved success, but I wouldn't have gained values. Therefore, the family is of utmost importance for the proper development of values and for being recognized as a proper human being. The soil is essential for the creation of a tree, but without water, light, and air, the tree cannot grow. Similarly, while parents are crucial for a child's development,

the cooperation of other family members is also necessary for the child's development. Therefore, the role of the extended family is indispensable for a child's progress.

Currently, there has been a change in the social structure, which we ourselves have brought about. Women have learned to think of motherhood independently, separate from the family unit. At one time, joint families, where parents and other elderly members lived together, were desirable. However, due to the demands of work and lack of time, the preference for joint families has decreased. In joint families, women often had to carry the expectations and dominance of multiple men, resulting in a loss of their freedom. Therefore, women now feel more comfortable living in nuclear families, where the presence of a single male allows for some level of preserved independence.

Now, let's focus on the discussion around single motherhood. Does giving birth to a child without a husband fall under the category of single motherhood, or is it solely about raising a child without the involvement of a father? Single motherhood involves taking complete responsibility for the child's upbringing and establishment, without relying on any form of support—whether physical, mental, social, or financial. Women are choosing single motherhood not just to escape familial bonds but also to maintain their personal independence.

The Emergence and Diversity of Single Motherhood in the Empowerment of Motherhood

The most important aspect of empowering motherhood is discussing single motherhood. Those who choose to become single mothers without entering into marriage, who believe that a man's presence is not essential at the head of a family, and that a family can be built on the strong foundation of the mother-child relationship, are the ones who primarily choose the path of single motherhood. Society has always looked down on women, opposed their progress, and resisted their freedom. By 'society', we mean an institution shaped by patriarchy. Nonetheless, in defiance of this system, many women are becoming mothers without acknowledging a husband's presence. Women are opting for single motherhood, committing to the happiness of family life and children without a husband.

Becoming a single mother is impossible without economic self-reliance and mental preparation. While the number of single mothers can be specifically determined in the West, it is not possible to do so in India. However, to explain the concept of single mothering, a few examples are necessary.

In this context, as an example, we will highlight the journey of documentary filmmaker Anindita Sarbadhikari, who chose to become a single mother, independent of a family or husband. Her single motherhood journey is explained in her own words: "We always fear society's reaction. But when my son Aarush came into my life, the reception amazed me. We were showered with love. All the people I know — even middle-class Bengali women, traditionally considered troublemakers — were protective of my son. I didn't face a single negative experience all through my pregnancy and the past year since his birth. I've also had school principals calling me up, asking me not to worry about his admission." As for her decision to become a single mother, Anindita said, "We live only once, and I wanted to be a mother, but there was no man in my life." [2]

From the above discussions, including the examples like Anindita Sarbadhikari's, it is clear that becoming a single mother requires standing up against societal norms because society is inherently patriarchal. Women living in this society have also been brainwashed by it to uphold patriarchal values. Therefore, alongside economic strength, mental strength, and a willingness to protest against society are also necessary.

With the changing social background, many middle-class women are also choosing the path of single motherhood.

herhood. Let's explain this with a couple of examples. Government employee Kalidasi Haldar gave birth to a daughter through IVF. She said, "I am unmarried but wanted to become a mother. Though I dilly-dallied for two-three years fearing societal reactions, after giving birth I realized that there were two types of people—those who looked away and those who welcomed us with open arms. My colleagues not only took me to the hospital but also got me discharged and looked after us. Yes, support was less, but it was not non-existent. I think it's very important for girls to be financially independent to take such a step," Kalidasi added.[2]

Just as nuclear families have emerged from joint families to escape the dominance of patriarchy, single motherhood has emerged to free women from male-dominated families and the dominance of a single man. As society changes, women are voluntarily choosing the path of single motherhood to escape the influence of patriarchy. They have learned to think of the family unit as just themselves and their children, without the presence of a man in their lives or their child's life. Their family may include their parents, and they may even have a male partner, but the single mother stands at the head of the family. Therefore, the power to determine the well-being of the family rests entirely with her. While this brings stress, it also brings novelty. Families are built on a blend of success and failure, and single mothers have triumphed over patriarchy, establishing their dominance. Through mental strength, economic success, and the establishment of personal freedom, they have asserted their existence. In their families, they hold sole authority, eliminating the need to judge others' faults or merits.

Throughout history, motherhood has been subordinate to men. Breaking free from this subordination, a single mother has brought freedom to her motherhood, raising her child as she sees fit. She is not influenced by other family members, becoming both the child's biological mother and father. She is the one who shapes the future of her child in her own way. Free from patriarchy and male dominance, she has built a new family in a new era. Single motherhood has thus become intertwined with change. Therefore, single motherhood is not inherently bad. Raising a child alone does not mean that the child will not succeed or that the mother is inadequate. Hence, single motherhood should be embraced as part of societal change. Single mother undergoes an inner transformation, which leads her to oppose the patriarchal system as a single mother. We will now discuss how single motherhood is connected to the Indian knowledge system. The essence of the Indian knowledge system lies within ancient Vedic literature, which primarily discusses the four goals of human life: Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (desire), and Moksha (liberation). In Indian ethics, Dharma emphasizes the Varna-ashrama system. Essentially, Dharma refers to duty-bound actions based on moral standards. These actions are not for self-interest but for the universal good. Good outcomes are associated with actions that benefit everyone, while bad outcomes are those that do not. At the pinnacle of all actions is the concept of Moksha or liberation. Therefore, if a person acts morally, they can achieve liberation from the cycle of karma.

The concept of motherhood has changed from the perspective of women's empowerment. There has been a liberation from traditional patriarchal constraints. However, this liberation is not similar to the concept of Moksha discussed in Indian philosophy. Initially, women were confined within the household due to patriarchal norms. Later, through empowerment, they entered the workforce, gave birth, and raised children without a husband's presence. Thus, while they may not have freed themselves from the bonds of work, they have certainly freed themselves from patriarchal institutions.

In our discussion, we have shown that the working mothers do in raising and nurturing children contributes to the welfare of society. Therefore, they perform their duties according to Dharma. This right action leads them toward liberation. However, this liberation is freedom from patriarchal constraints, the bonds of

subjugation, which grants their motherhood immense freedom and freedom from the chains of subordination.

Conclusion on Ethical Ground:

The assessment of the goodness or badness of single motherhood by ethical standards – A mother's actions are judged as good or bad through the proper development of the child. A single mother is dedicated to raising her child as a good citizen through her appropriate duties and actions. Therefore, single motherhood receives the crown of goodness by ethical standards.

References:

1. Burgess, E. W., & Locke, H. J., “The family: From institution to companionship”, American Book Company, 1953.
2. Agarwal, S., “I am a single mother and proud of it”, Entertainment Times, October 30, 2015. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/parenting/i-am-a-single-mother-and-proud-of-it/articleshow/46491872.cms>