Book Review
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Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America

Rebecca Jo Plant. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 264 pages

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Tracing the development of white middle-class motherhood, Rebecca Jo Plant vividly captures how the shifting dynamic of the concept of motherhood in 20th century America affected the rise of second-wave feminism. Examining the transformation of the perspective on white middle-class mothers, Plant investigates how American society perceived the notion of "mother" from almost a sacred being for the nation by the 1920s to a private individual during the 1960s. Different from what many historians pointed out, Plant argues that it was in the 1940s when a substantive and actual change in the gendered realm took place.

Traditionally, from the Revolutionary Era to the Progressive Era, the image of the American mother had revolved around the positive moral influence that they could exert into childrearing in order to raise virtuous citizens for the nation. Although there were different layers of projections depending on the characteristics of the era, the positive perception of mother's moral influence was never denied. During the 1920s, it was believed that the entrenched idea of mother's influence as a moral guide was weakened by woman's suffrage. Many historians claimed that, with the Nineteenth Amendment, the era of a separate political culture had ended.

Diverging from this traditional view, Plant considers both William Allan Neilson's satirical remarks on "mother love" in 1937 and the contentious reactions toward his remarks as proof of continuing emphasis on motherhood as a gendered term, especially emphasizing mother's selfless role in society. According to Plant, even during the 1920s and 1930s, middle-class women, mostly white, still actively participated in voluntary activities. Furthermore, she presents "patriotic maternalism," which shaped and developed with the campaign for gold star mothers' pilgrimages during the early 1930s, as evidence of viable maternalism even after the 1920s. Plant argues that stress on patriotic maternalism, different from the previous "progressive maternalism," did not disappear, but rather, intensified in some ways.

Highlighting the tendency to admire patriotic mothers who devoted their lives to raise their sons who had died in Europe during World War I, Plant believes that mothers' sacred image, as self-sacrificing and morally superior, continued.

However, when Philip Wylie presented an anti-maternalist sentiment in his book, *Generation of Vipers*, in 1942, coining the term "momism," Plant argues, the established idea of motherhood began to be under siege. Wylie's momism critique, appropriated further by psychiatrists and other social scientists, attacked the self-sacrificing image of motherhood. Despite Wylie's misogynist attitude, Plant thinks that he had a valid point by mentioning that he "challenged the idea that women should be regarded as morally superior beings, entitled to special prerogatives and deserving of influence simply because of their sex or their status as mothers" (p. 21). From Plant's perspective, Wylie's accusation of American mothers represents growing antipathy toward maternalism.

Plant also points out that a gradual process of pathologizing mother love represented anti-maternalism sentiment during the time. As opposed to the existing notion of motherhood, postwar psychological experts emphasized the more critical role of mothers during infancy and early childhood, and child's independence and a sense of responsibility in later life. In this regard, mothers' strong influence over the later life of their offspring, especially sons, might have a negative impact on their sense of independence. Analyzing various representations of the time, such as films, scholarly accounts, and journal articles between the 1930s and 1950s, Plant shows a growing tendency to blame mothers for their son's immaturity. An excess of mother love became an illness, or at least, a potential cause of maladjustment to society. Almost worshiped in earlier times for their self-sacrificing efforts to fulfill their civic duty by raising soldiers, mothers came to be viewed as less sacred or noble after World War II.

Furthermore, Plant argues that the power of gendered motherhood waned because the notion of painful and lofty childbirth was also challenged with the medicalization of childbirth. Once childbearing became safer and less painful, Plant argues, "the association between childbearing and self-sacrifice grew more tenuous, and claims to maternal authority premised on pain and suffering lost credibility" (p. 144). Through the normalization of childbirth, childbearing was no longer self-sacrificing task for mothers. The role of mothers as a main dedicator to the future of the nation

weakened. This shift, consequently, led to the perception of childbearing for mothers as exciting and self-fulfilling rather than dreadful and excruciating.

In this regard, Plant, in her last chapter, perceives Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* as an attempt to undermine the traditional meaning of motherhood in order to strengthen her feminist claim. Plant demonstrates that Friedan's criticism could be a signal of the pursuit of individualized female identity or self-realization that left mothers in a somewhat contradictory position during the time. To a large extent, Plant convincingly demonstrates how the traditional idea of motherhood eventually came to be shattered by anti-maternalist efforts from various quarters and how a new identity led to the second wave feminism in the 1970s. Yet there might have been room for further consideration on the therapeutic ethos regarding how the fragmented concept of motherhood could be utilized to form a changed female identity.

Biographical Note: **Namhee Lee** is a Ph.D. candidate in American social and cultural history at Syracuse University, USA. She is currently working on her dissertation, "Evolution of Control: Benjamin Spock and His Therapeutic Ideals in the Mid-Twentieth United States." Her dissertation examines Dr. Benjamin Spock's childrearing advice and its influence on American society, with particular attention to the question of self-control as psychological remedies to American society during the mid-twentieth century. E-mail: nhlee79@gmail.com