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The Shackles of Institutionalized Motherhood: The Concept of Motherhood in "The Colorless"

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Abstract: The term "institutionalized motherhood" underscores that motherhood is both a lived experience and a systemic construct, interacting with other social institutions. Ariyoshi Sawako's novel "The Colorless" centers on the theme of racial discrimination, depicting the hardships faced by "war brides" who crossed oceans to live in the United States. This paper examines the survival conditions, identity traits, and dehumanizing constraints imposed on mothers under racialized institutional structures from three perspectives: the contradictions of institutionalized motherhood based on racial identity, the absence of maternal agency, and the loss of reproductive rights. Drawing on Western motherhood theories and the lived realities of ethnic minority mothers in the novel, the analysis explores Ariyoshi's critical reflections on institutionalized motherhood, revealing her profound philosophical engagement with the concept.

Ariyoshi Sawako (1931-1984) was a renowned Japanese female writer of the postwar era. In 1959, funded by a Rockefeller Foundation grant, she studied theater at Sarah Lawrence College in Yonkers, New York, for one year. She returned to Japan in 1963 via a Eurasian overland route. Profoundly affected by the racial discrimination she encountered during her stay in America, she later remarked: "In the United States, I became acutely aware of being an Oriental." This experience inspired her to write "The Colorless" and "Puerto Rico Diary". "The Colorless" was serialized in the journal "Chūō Kōron"in 1963 and published as a single-volume work by Chūō Kōronsha on August 8 the following year. This work is regarded as Japan's first significant literary depiction of "war brides."

The novel is set against the dual backdrops of Tokyo and New York, following the experiences of its protagonist Hayashi Emiko, who marries Tom, an African-American soldier from the occupying forces. Through Emiko's story, the work explores the theme of racial discrimination, revealing the hardships endured by "war brides" as they crossed oceans to build lives in America. Ariyoshi deliberately constructs "The Colorless" around Hayashi Emiko, a Japanese woman married to an African American soldier, Tom. The novel opens in postwar Tokyo, where Emiko works as a cloakroom attendant at the "Palace" bar—a makeshift establishment for occupation forces near Yūrakuchō Station. This setting facilitates her fateful encounter with Tom. Following his military discharge and return to America in 1951, Emiko, now burdened by her identity as a "war bride," immigrates with their daughter Mary on April 27, 1952. Her journey mirrors that of three other war brides: Takeko (married to a Black soldier), Shimako (to an Italian), and Reiko (to a Puerto Rican). Through their intersecting narratives, Ariyoshi systematically exposes the systemic injustices faced by these women in 1950s America.

1. The Paradox of Institutionalized Motherhood through the Lens of Racial Identity

"Motherhood—though absent from histories of conquest and serfdom, war and treaties, expansion and imperialism—possesses its own history, an ideology more potent than religious dogma or nationalism." The term "institutionalized motherhood" was first introduced by Adrienne Rich, who emphasized that motherhood constitutes both a personal lived experience and a social institution that interacts with other systems of power (including race, religion, and class). In “Of Woman Born“—particularly in the section affirming maternal experience—Rich observes that men harbor both envy and fear toward women's reproductive capacity. She argues that the root of women's oppression lies not in their biological ability to bear children, but rather in the political and economic structures of society. By conceptualizing motherhood as an institution, Rich calls for a critical examination of the cultural and systemic mechanisms behind it. This critique exposes the oppressive logic of patriarchy embedded in maternal norms, which is essential for liberating mothers from institutional constraints. Such emancipation allows for the unleashing of maternal power and makes possible the reconfiguration of maternal subjectivity. From a feminist perspective, compulsory motherhood represents the ultimate destiny imposed upon all women under patriarchal rule.

Institutionalized motherhood presents a paradox: while it often obstructs maternal self-actualization, it simultaneously serves as a structural framework enabling maternal empowerment. However, influenced by Western feminist thought and activism, mainstream motherhood studies have predominantly centered white women's experiences, framing their analytical perspectives and care-oriented demands through a white-centric lens. This homogenized approach has resulted in insufficient attention to women of color and those in the Global South, exposing a critical limitation in feminist scholarship. Within Western mainstream society, white women—whose realities anchor these studies—largely perceive institutionalized motherhood as a mechanism of capitalist oppression and constraint. Consequently, their feminist praxis seeks to dismantle or even reject this institution entirely. Yet this perspective fails to account for racialized maternal realities: although Black mothers gained legal recognition of their maternal status after abolition, systemic racism continues to jeopardize the security of that status.

2. The Absence of Traditional Motherhood: The Non-Normative Maternal Experiences of Black Mothers

In African American families, mothers have always occupied a central position. During slavery, Black women’s reproductive capacity granted them higher utilitarian value than Black men, making them crucial to sustaining and expanding slaveholders’ economic interests. By the late 19th century, Black women had greater access to employment than Black men. In the 20th century, as many Black families migrated from the U.S. South to the North, mother-centered household structures became increasingly common.

The novel depicts Hayashi Emiko’s life upon arriving in New York: she lives with her husband and child in a basement apartment in a Black neighborhood. Her husband Tom works night shifts as a hospital nurse, earning thirty-two dollars a week. Exhausted from work, he sleeps through the day upon returning home, rendering his presence as both husband and father nearly negligible. The burden of childcare falls entirely on Emiko, who works days as a waitress in a Japanese restaurant while leaving her daughter in the care of an elderly Black neighbor. This arrangement was far from unusual in Black communities.

The harsh realities of Black women’s lives often stripped them of the basic privileges of motherhood—being a full-time parent was a luxury survival rarely permitted. Working mothers frequently relied on communal childcare, making parent-child separation a widespread phenomenon.

Unlike in traditional family structures, rigid gender roles were uncommon in Black households, as Black women had to balance both work and domestic responsibilities.

Faced with systemic adversity, African American women developed a collective ethos of mutual aid dating back to slavery, giving rise to the concept of **"**community mothers.**"** This institution became a defining feature of Black life—a product of intersecting forces of gender, race, and class.

Like other mothers in the Black community, Hayashi Emiko wields greater influence within the household than male members. After quitting her job at the Japanese restaurant, she begins working as a waitress at the newly opened Naitō Restaurant—an upscale Manhattan establishment catering exclusively to wealthy white patrons, where "men arrived impeccably dressed, and women adorned in lavish attire." With generous tips included, Emiko earns $400 monthly, tripling her husband Tom's income. This economic advantage solidifies her dominant position in the household. A parallel dynamic unfolds with her coworker Takeko, also married to a Black man. As Takeko's earnings increase, her husband grows indolent, abandoning productive work. These cases exemplify a broader sociological pattern: the ascendance of maternal authority within Black families correlates directly with women's financial contributions.

They are characterized by the following typical traits: enduring hardships without complaint, lacking physical and emotional needs, being entirely family-centered, working hard to earn money, remaining docile and compliant, expressing maternal love in an overly rigid manner, and ultimately becoming nothing but "happy slaves." The "matriarchal mother" archetype, while establishing a mother's absolute control over her children's upbringing within the family, simultaneously makes her the target of blame for any problems that arise with her children. The mother's perceived omnipotence influences every aspect of the child's psychological, social and political development, thus holding her accountable for the uncontrollable outcomes of human nature.

The label of "superstrong Black mother" reflects how American society both expects and constructs this image of Black motherhood. While superficially portraying Black mothers as positive, admirable and all-capable figures, this is in fact a controlling designation that over-idealizes both the mother image and maternal power. It obstructs Black mothers' realization of self-subjectivity, completely tying women's worth to their familial roles, representing an insidious form of control under institutionalized motherhood. This controlling designation serves as a variant of racial oppression that actually undermines normal family ethics. It places crushing chains of responsibility upon Black mothers, shifts societal problems onto the Black community, and allows racial discrimination to persist in more covert forms. The glorification of this maternal image masks its true function as an instrument of social control that perpetuates systemic inequality.

Due to the tremendous energy Black mothers must devote to both work and family, they often exhibit emotional coarseness and a lack of nurturing in childrearing. Less than a month after giving birth to her second child in New York, Hayashi Emiko had to return to work, leaving childcare responsibilities to her eldest daughter Mary, who was not yet six years old. Mary served as a mother substitute, caring for the newborn infant continuously until she entered elementary school at age seven. Even after starting school, "seven-year-old Mary would care for Barbara like her own daughter the moment she returned home...whether feeding her, changing her clothes, or holding her." Mary also took care of the third child, Betty. By age nine, Mary not only substituted for her mother in looking after her younger sister, but also handled laundry, cooking, household chores, and even budgeted like a housewife to purchase cheaper chicken.

After giving birth to her fourth child Sam, Emiko completely abandoned her maternal responsibilities, "single-mindedly wanting to escape the household, even beginning to resent motherhood itself." She entrusted the month-old infant to Mary, who also managed the family finances, while Emiko took a full-time job as a nanny for the Reardon family. Although Emiko felt guilty about her selfishness, "Mary seemed to accept this responsibility effortlessly, having likely

prepared herself mentally since Sam's birth." With the biological mother absent from childcare, Mary assumed the role of "surrogate mother" in the household, raising her three younger siblings. This situation illustrates how the "superstrong Black mother" stereotype creates intergenerational cycles of parentification, where eldest daughters prematurely assume maternal roles due to systemic pressures on Black mothers. The text reveals this not as individual failure but as structural violence - where economic necessity and racialized gender expectations distort natural family dynamics. Mary's forced maturity embodies both the resilience and the hidden trauma of this survival strategy.

In 1950s America, although slavery had been abolished, the living conditions of Black mothers showed no improvement. The unconventional maternal experiences of "community mothers" and "surrogate mothers" became distinctive cultural markers within Black communities. While these maternal roles were not fulfilled through biological reproduction, they nevertheless performed essential mothering functions, thereby expanding both the scope of maternal identity and the conceptual boundaries of motherhood itself.

3. The Loss of Abortion Rights: Institutionalized Reproductive Control

Another manifestation of institutionalized motherhood's constraints on women is seen in the restriction of abortion rights. During World War II, the Japanese government implemented pronatalist policies that encouraged early marriage and frequent childbearing to replenish wartime population losses. Women who bore sixteen children were officially honored with the title "Mother of the Military State" The Japanese government emphasized the self-sacrificing and nurturing aspects of motherhood while implementing a dual reproductive policy: on one hand promoting high fertility to replenish "human resources," and on the other strictly prohibiting abortion and contraception. This institutional control persisted through the postwar period until June 24, 1949, when - influenced by American feminist movements - the Japanese government legalized abortion under restrictive conditions: only couples who could prove financial inability to raise children might obtain approval for the procedure. In “The Colorless”, the author dedicates substantial narrative space to portraying women's anguish and helplessness when confronting abortion decisions. The protagonist Hayashi Emiko experiences seven pregnancies—undergoing three abortions and delivering four children; her counterpart Takeko endures five pregnancies with two terminations; while the most tragic figure, Reiko, ultimately commits suicide after failing to procure sufficient funds for the prohibitively expensive abortion procedure. Their repeated cycles of pregnancy and childbirth become inescapable burdens, exacerbated by the absence of safe, reliable contraception options.

If it can be said that Japan's wartime abortion ban aimed to boost population growth, then the postwar legalization of abortion occurred because the United States sought to prevent Japan's resurgence. Under the pretext of feminism, the U.S. pressured the Japanese government to enact abortion legalization laws, with the ultimate goal of controlling Japan's population.

However, when examining abortion debates within the context of a nation like the United States, one must necessarily consider the significant religious dimensions. “The Bible “contains numerous passages that explicitly or implicitly oppose abortion. In “Psalms“139:13-16, David praises Jehovah, saying: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb...My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." This passage suggests that individuals are known and understood by God even before birth, having been divinely chosen prior to creation - implying that no life should be terminated.

As the wife of a Puerto Rican, Reiko ultimately paid with her life under this oppressive system.

Puerto Ricans constituted the most marginalized and destitute community in American society, suffering even more severe racial discrimination than African Americans. "Spanish Harlem"—the Puerto Rican enclave in New York—was described as "filthier than Harlem, poorer than Brooklyn," its inhabitants uniformly "pale with sickness." Barred from gainful employment, men were relegated to menial and perilous jobs like trash collection or high-rise window washing, while women, driven by economic desperation, were forced into prostitution. Reiko became one of these tragic figures. Originally the only daughter of a prestigious confectionery owner in Tokyo's commercial district, she crossed oceans for love, only to discover her lover belonged to the most despised racial group in American society. With her striking beauty, Reiko stood out among restaurant hostesses and earned the highest tips. Yet no matter how hard she worked, her husband Manny's family exploited her relentlessly. Secretly asking Hayashi Emiko to save money for her, Reiko clung to the dream of returning to Japan - a fragile hope that collapsed when she became pregnant. In desperate need of abortion funds, Reiko accepted Emiko's invitation to perform traditional Japanese dance at a "Japanese Cultural Evening." The meticulously prepared performance was abruptly interrupted by sudden morning sickness, leaving her uncompensated. This final disappointment became the last straw. At five months pregnant, having lost all hope, Reiko chose to end her life.

The violence of institutionalized motherhood has exacted the ultimate price from women - their very lives. Women's rights have been systematically excluded from legal protections, while the devaluation of female lives has been enshrined at the core of patriarchal theology, embedded within family structures, and enforced through paternalistic ethical frameworks. This political and social oppression strips women of bodily autonomy, as both theologians and so-called "pro-life" advocates employ hypocritical rhetoric to fabricate debates about fetal "right to life" - a smokescreen that obscures the fundamental human right of women to govern their own bodies.

4. Conclusion

Ariyoshi, through her nuanced portrayal of motherhood’s complexity and diversity, restores the maternal power of Black women while exposing the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, religion, and class that suppress them. The unconventional maternal experiences of community mothers and surrogate mothers emerge as distinctive cultural markers within Black communities. Though these roles are not defined by biological reproduction, they fulfill maternal functions, thereby expanding the very definition of motherhood and enriching its meaning.

Conversely, the label of the "superstrong Black mother" ultimately obstructs Black women’s self-actualization, serving as a disguised mechanism of institutionalized motherhood that shackles them with unbearable responsibilities and perpetuates racial discrimination in insidious ways.

Simultaneously, the denial of abortion rights reflects a profound disregard for female agency and a trivialization of motherhood’s solemnity. "Throughout human history, laws and social attitudes surrounding contraception and abortion have fluctuated in response to military expansion, labor market demands, or cultural shifts like Puritanism and ‘sexual liberation’—all under the control of patriarchal society."Under this system, women are stripped of bodily autonomy, their wombs reduced to political instruments.

In the closing scenes of “The Colorless“, Hayashi Emiko resigns from her job as a nanny and, like other women in her community, commits to working within the Black world before ultimately returning to her children. This suggests that Ariyoshi’s vision of motherhood does not seek to outright reject institutionalized motherhood, but rather to critique the patriarchal norms that render it oppressive. By breaking free from these constraints, mothers may reclaim their subjectivity. Here, the author demonstrates a dialectical understanding of institutionalized motherhood, offering a

valuable framework for advancing maternal theory.

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