

Review

Uma Dhupelia Mesthrie

Academic Mothers. Venitha Pillay. Pretoria and Stoke on Trent: Unisa and Trentham Books, 2007.

The topic of Venitha Pillay's book is a welcome one. Few of us women who are academics and mothers speak publicly about what it means to juggle these two roles. For motherhood is not a topic raised readily at work; to talk about children and the home is almost not kosher. Speaking about the domestic space, one sometimes fears, may be to the detriment of one's intellectual image.

Pillay's book highlights some key issues that academic women face when pursuing both career and motherhood. She sets out her goals and methodology quite clearly. At the core of the book is what she calls the "perceived oppositional identities" of academic mothers. They are women engaged in intellectual work generally conceived as "rational, unemotional and logical", yet they are mothers, and with that comes "nurturing, loving, emotions and sensitivity" (Pillay, 2007: 1). So how do these two identities inhabit a being and how are they played out in daily life, at home and at work?

To answer the question, Pillay focused on three academic women and asked each to keep a diary, into which they poured their thoughts about the daily stresses of combining several roles. She also interviewed them, communicated by email, in corridors and even at meetings. She kept a research diary of all these communications herself. The women, named rather blandly and anonymously Ann, Sue and Sally, are all achievers at university: they have doctorates, publication goals, awards, post-doctoral projects and post-graduate students, and they attend international conferences. They are also mothers with very young children – infants and toddlers. They are all white.

Pillay defends her decision to interview these white women. She argues that general research agendas are driven by whites studying blacks. She wanted to be "oppositional" (2007: 18). Furthermore, she did not want to complicate her sample by focusing on different races, as she "wanted to eliminate the external noises of race" in the discussion around motherhood and academia (2007: 19). Yet Pillay fails to explain why a sample of three would be adequate, or why she settled on three women from her own

institution. She discusses her perception of power relations between her and the subjects of her study in a polarised way that almost makes one cringe. She also makes generalisations about her subjects. Interestingly, in the fascinating epilogue, the women talk about what she has written. They did not see the power relations quite as Pillay did. The women's personalities, intelligence and their motivations are powerfully present in this epilogue and it is this chapter that makes the book worthwhile and gives it strength.

Pillay devotes one chapter to each mother and then brings together all three stories, making the crucial links and connections. This she does fairly well. From these stories, we learn about difficult choices the women had to make while their children were young. Should they go to an international conference or forsake this? Should they take a sabbatical in a foreign country or not? How are the daily stresses of motherhood managed? It is interesting to learn how the conflicts are resolved – some take their babies with them, others find alternate caregivers or rely on their partners. There were no easy solutions. Each had some drawback. What is common to all the stories are the feelings of guilt and the constant attempts to find a balance.

Pillay's conclusions are interesting and forceful (2007: 141). She argues that it is futile to seek that balance that most women try to accomplish. Not one of her subjects felt the calm of the successful balancing act – it simply can not be achieved and should not be seen as a goal, she says. Guilt over perceived failure as mothers, she argues, is “externally created and internally reinforced”. Her answer to the dilemmas that women academics face as mothers is to challenge “the socially constructed notion that mothers are responsible for nurturing”. This would do a lot to get rid of ever-pervasive guilt and would be liberating for fathers as well as children. She argues strongly for a banishment of the “two lives” approach that many women take. “Academic mothers”, she argues, “need to recreate thinking in ways that inscribe mother and academic into a sense of wholeness” (2007: 11).

While Pillay makes these arguments well, she is less successful in demonstrating how “motherhood is implicated in intellectual work” – the intertwining of the personal and the intellectual – a key aim of her book (2007: 1). Her subjects were themselves not able to relate to this point, though they did reveal that motherhood influenced how they related to students facing similar stresses.

I also think that the nature of academic work could have been given due attention by the author. What distinguishes academic work from other work?

How are women lecturers at a university different from women lawyers and women doctors, for instance? The stories do provide an idea of the nature of academic work as told by the women themselves but the author could have provided some key analysis around this.

The early chapters of the book are written in a tone that jars, but the book gets better and the epilogue effectively provides a debate among the participants in this project. The book is welcome for opening debate over motherhood in academia.