

# A CHILD IS BORN

Germaine Greer

GERMAINE GREER (b. 1939), born and educated in Australia, is a famous feminist writer. In her well known works *The Female Eunuch* (1970), *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (1984) and *The Change* (1991), she explores the social and cultural aspects of life of women. She believes that socio-cultural practices are designed to suit male interest; at the same time they further subjugate women. The present piece 'A Child is Born' is an extract from her book *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility*. It explores the cultural peculiarities of the East and the West regarding child-birth and parent-child relationship.



## A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. Where do the members of your family go for 'childbirth'?
2. The arrival of a new-born in the family is celebrated in different ways. When is (after how many days) such a function normally held in your family?
3. What is the name of the function? Is it a religious function or just an occasion for merry-making?

## A CHILD IS BORN

- 1 The ways of managing childbirth in traditional societies are many and varied; their usefulness stems directly from the fact that they are accepted culturally and collectively so that the mother does not have the **psychic** burden of reinventing the procedures. Even though the **potential catastrophes** are alive in the memory of her community and the index of anxiety high, a **ritual** approach to pregnancy which **hems** the pregnant woman about with **taboos** and **prohibitions** helps make the anxiety manageable. A woman who observes all the prohibitions and carries out all the rites will be actively

involved in holding the unknown at bay. She will have other **reinforcements**, for many of the ritual observances of pregnancy involve the participation of others who should support her, primarily her husband, then her kinsfolk and then the other members of her community. Some of these behaviours will be sensible and useful, others magical, but they will all increase her sense of security and her conviction that she is conducting the pregnancy, not that it is conducting her. The **remnants** of this kind of **prophylaxis** can be found in the persistence of old wives' tales about pregnancy even in our own superrational and confused lifestyle. One university graduate of my acquaintance who approached her pregnancy as if it were her term assignment, meticulously footnoting every development, clung to her **pre-natal** exercises as a form of ritual observance as well as a helpful preparation for the **physical exploit** of childbirth, performing them in deep silence and total recollection at the same time every day come hell or high water. As well, she observed the old diehard superstition that acquiring equipment and apparel for baby before the birth was bad luck, and so one of my godchildren shot into the world without crib or napkins. Considerable effort had gone into seeing that the mother had every opportunity to enjoy her baby, but, after her training for unmedicated childbirth for months, in the event the hospital refused to believe she was in second stage labour until her daughter's head had appeared ... The hospital staff was so uncooperative about breast-feeding that mother and daughter discharged themselves after two days.

2 This birth was virtually unattended. In non-technocratic societies, except for remarkable accidents, birth is always attended.

3 Clearly infant and mother mortality is greater in traditional births, but in our anxiety to avoid death we may have destroyed the significance of the experience for the vast majority who live.

*No one would deny that each infant and particularly every maternal death is a tragedy to be prevented if at all possible, nor that modern obstetric care, which has developed in the hospital setting, has been at least partly responsible for the dramatic decrease in both maternal and pre-natal mortality over the past half century. But it is not necessarily perverse to question whether our present priority should be to reach minimum figures for perinatal mortality at any price when this includes giving up things which free human beings have often felt to be more important than their own survival – such as freedom to live their own lives their own way and to make individual choices in line with their own sense of values. (Kitzinger, Sheila, and John A Davies (eds) **The Place of Birth** (London 1978) p.v)*

4 In many societies women still go forth from their mother's houses at marriage to live with a mother-in-law and the wives of their husbands' brothers. It is a truism of **anthropology** that such women do not become members of their new family until they have borne a child. If we consider that in such societies the marriage was quite likely to have been arranged, it is understandable that the bride too longs for the child who will stand in the same intimate relationship to her as she with her own mother. The western interpretation of such **mores** is that they are backward, cruel and wrong; it is assumed that the sexual relations between the spouses are **perfunctory** and **exploitative** and that all mothers-in-law are unjust and **vindictive**. One of the greatest difficulties in the way of feminists who are not **chauvinistic** and want to learn from women who still live within a female society is the tendency of those women to withdraw into silent opposition when participating in international **fora** conducted in languages which they cannot speak with fluency; women officials of the Sudanese government told me that they had given up going to international conferences, even though the trips were a tremendous treat, because they were tired of being told about their own lives instead of being consulted.



5 Thus we in the West would regard it as **outrageous** that a woman could lose her own name and become known as the mother of her first-born, once she has borne it—although of course most of us do not protest against the sinking of the woman's lineage under her husband's name at marriage. In many traditional societies the relationship between mother and child is more important than the relationship between husband and wife: in some, indeed, the child's relationship with the rest of his family is as important or even more important than either.

*... a number of social usages may stress the child's relationship with the rest of his kin-group at the expense of that with his parents. His aunts and uncles may be permitted greater physical intimacy with him in public than his parents. In many traditional societies in Africa and India the biological family is deliberately weakened, by enforced abstinence or actual separation of parents, in order to strengthen the extended family - thus children are not born at the whim of the parents, but in response to a broader pressure from the whole group. (Caldwell, J.C., "The Economic Rationality of High Fertility: An Investigation Illustrated with Nigerian Survey Data", **Population Studies**, vol. 31, No. 1 (1976) p. 5-6)*

**B.1.1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:**

- i. In a traditional society, a pregnant woman has to follow the conventional procedure of childbirth.
- ii. Even taboos and prohibitions help to manage anxiety.
- iii. Western women suffer mostly because they have to manage everything on their own.
- iv. In traditional societies, childbirth is a family affair.
- v. The family support and conventional procedure lessen the mother- infant mortality.
- vi. Freedom to live our own lives is more important than prenatal mortality.
- vii. Western people do not think that all mothers-in-law are unjust and vindictive.
- viii. Silent opposition in international conferences is not a major difficulty in the way of feminists.
- ix. In many traditional societies the relation between mother and child is more important than that between husband and wife.

**B.1. 2. Answer the following questions briefly :**

- 1) How are the ways of managing childbirth in traditional societies useful?
- 2) A pregnant woman in a traditional society does not feel that she is alone. Why?
- 3) What is the superstition associated with acquiring new clothes and instruments for baby before the birth?



- 4) 'In our anxiety to avoid death we may have destroyed the significance of the experience...' What is the 'experience' the writer refers to ?
- 5) What is the 'truism of anthropologies' that the writer talks about?
- 6) What compels women to withdraw into silent opposition in international fora?
- 7) Why had Sudanese women officials stopped going to international conferences?

6. The woman who satisfies the longings of her peers by producing the child they are all anxious to see, finds her achievement celebrated in ways that dramatise her success. Among the few first-person accounts of how this works in practice is this one from a young Sylheti woman:

*If a girl is lucky, and her parents are alive, she goes to her mother's house for the last few months of her pregnancy and about the first three months of the baby's life. There she gets a lot of love and care. She is asked, "What would you like to eat? What do you fancy?" All the time she is looked after. The whole matter of pregnancy is one of celebration. When the baby is born it is an occasion of joy for the whole family. The naming*



*ceremony is lovely. It is held when the boy is seven days old. A new dress is brought for it and a new sari for the mother. There is feasting and singing until late at night. The women and girls gather and sing songs. Garlands of turmeric and garlic are worn to ward off evil spirits. That's when the name is chosen ... The ceremony is held for the birth of a boy or a girl. Of course it is considered better to have a boy, but the birth of a girl is celebrated with the same joy by the women in the family. We sit together eating pan and singing. Some of us might be young unmarried girls, others aged ladies of forty or fifty. There are so many jokes, so much laughter.*

*People look so funny eating pan and singing. The men don't take much part. They may come and have a look at the baby, but the singing, the gathering together at night – it is all women. The songs are simple songs which are rarely written down. They are about the lives of women in Bengal.*

(Wilson, Amrit, *Finding a Voice : Asian Women in Britain* (London, 1978) p. 22)

- 7 Among the rewards of pregnancy in this case, as in many others, is that the woman gets to go home to visit her mother and sisters; the **nostalgic** tone of the description, which is clearly **tinged** with rose, may be the product of the contrast that this young woman finds in England. Another of the Asian women who found a voice in Amrit Wilson's book gives a similarly-rosy picture of rearing a child in Bangladesh:

*In Bangladesh children under the age of five or six are looked after by the whole family. All the children of the joint family are looked after together. They are taken to the pond for a bath perhaps by one daughter-in-law, and she bathes them all. Then they all come in and sit down to eat. Perhaps the youngest daughter-in-law has cooked the meal. Another woman feeds them. As for playing the children play out of doors with natural objects. Here people say that Asian children don't play with toys. In Bangladesh they don't need toys. They make their own simple things ... In the afternoon they love to hear Rupthoka (fairy tales). Maybe there is a favourite aunt, she tells them these stories. But at night when they get sleepy they always go to their mothers and sleep in their embrace. But other women do help a lot, in fact, they have such strong relationships with the child that it is not uncommon for them to be called Big Mother or Small Mother ...* (Wilson, Amrit, *Finding a Voice : Asian Women in Britain* (London, 1978) p. 25)



\* \* \*

- 8 All technological change causes social problems; the impact of Western medicine in traditional societies is one of the most problematic areas of modernization. The prestige of the white-coats is **enormous**, the respect for their **miraculous hypodermics** total. The pressure of expectation makes for aggressive and dramatic procedures even when the health status of the patients is too poor to withstand them. Allopathic doctors in peasant communities are dependent upon expensive drugs, sparkling equipment

and lots of electricity, most of which they have not got in sufficient quantity. Where foreign aid has established that temple of our religion, the hospital, it must make a ritual display of its power with horrible results: Sheila Kitzinger visited an enormous modern hospital for "Bantu patients" in South Africa, and this is what she saw:

*The delivery ward was full of groaning, whirling women - the majority labouring alone. Oxytocin drips and pumps were in widespread use. This was the meeting-place of the old Africa and the new technology of the West. Pools of blood lay on the floor like sacrificial out-pourings, and Bantu nurses were happy to leave them there as a witness of the blessings of the earth, while they busied themselves with technologically sophisticated modern equipment and ignored the labouring women as far as possible, which it was not so difficult to do as they did not speak the same languages anyway ... Birth was very far from normal here and it was conducted in such a way that I had seen before in American hospitals catering for black "clinic" patients from large urban ghettos: impersonal conveyor-belt obstetrics accompanied by a plethora of technical innovations and machinery. (Kitzinger, *Women as Mothers*. P. 109)*

9 If we turn birth from a climactic personal experience into a personal disaster, it matters little that the result is more likely to be a live child. Women will not long continue to offer up their bodies and minds to such brutality, especially if there is no one at home to welcome the child, to praise the mother for her courage and to help her raise it. In fact peasant communities are more levelheaded and sceptical of us and our methods than we realise and they have resisted the intrusion of our chromium plated technology more successfully than we like to think. They know that death attends too frequently in the traditional birthplace, but they also know that there are worse fates than death. Nevertheless, all that stops our technology from reaching into every hut and hovel is poverty: the cultural **hegemony** of Western technology is total.

10 The voices of a few women raised in warning cannot be heard over the humming and throbbing of our machines, which is probably just as well, for if we succeed in crushing all pride and dignity out of child bearing, the population explosion will take care of itself.

**B.2.1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:**

- i. A Sylheti woman may not visit her mother's house during pregnancy.
- ii. For Sylheti women, the whole matter of pregnancy is one of celebration.
- iii. Garlands of turmeric and garlic are worn to please gods.
- iv. The songs they sing are about the lives of women in Bengal.
- v. Visiting mother's house is one of the rewards of pregnancy.
- vi. In Bangladesh, Rupthoka is a kind of sweet dish.
- vii. All technological changes cause social developments.
- viii. Child birth in modern hospitals is more brutal.

**B.2.2. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the lesson:**

- a) The potential ..... are alive in the memory of her community.
- b) She will have other ....., for many of the rituals ..... of pregnancy involve the participation of the others who should support her.
- c) In ..... societies, except for remarkable accidents, birth is always attended.
- d) The description provided by the Amnesty for Women of typical Muslim marriage was no more than a coarse .....libel.
- e) In many traditional societies in Africa and India, the biological family is deliberately weakened by enforced.....

**B.2. 3. Answer the following questions briefly :**

- 1) Where do Sylheti women go to stay during the last stage of pregnancy?
- 2) What is the reward of pregnancy for a young Sylheti woman?
- 3) How are children of the joint family in Bangladesh looked after?
- 4) What is the worst impact of Western medicine in traditional societies?
- 5) What is the immediate impact of poverty in medical field?



**GLOSSARY AND NOTES**

**psychic** (adj): mental, related to the laws of the mind

**potential** (adj): possible

**catastrophes** (n): disaster, extreme suffering

**ritual** (n): activities which are part of a religious ceremony

**hems** (v): surrounds or hedges something to control

**taboos** (n): culturally forbidden activities

**prohibitions** (n): works not allowed by law to be done

**anxiety** (n): worry or nervousness

**reinforcements** (n): acts of making something stronger

**remnants** (n): remains

**prophylaxis** (n): action which is taken to prevent a disease

**prenatal** (adj): before birth

**physical exploit** (phr): a brave, exciting act

**obstetrics** (n): branch of medicine concerned with birth of children

**anthropology** (n): the study of human race (the origins, beliefs etc)

**mores** (n): conventions

**perfunctory** (adj): done as duty without real interest

**vindictive** (adj): spiteful, harmful

**coarse** (adj): rough, not fine

**ethnocentric libel** (n): accusing others from the point of view one's own culture

**chauvinistic** (adj): related to an aggressive belief that one's own country or culture is better

**fora** (n): places of meeting for exchange of ideas

**outrageous** (adj): shocking and unacceptable

**nostalgic** (adj): related to fascination for the past

**tinged** (v): added

**enormous** (adj): huge, immense

**miraculous** (adj): like a miracle, extraordinary

**hypodermics** (n): related to the science of injection

**sophisticated** (adj): advanced and of a higher standard

**ghettos** (n): suffocating separations

**plethora** (n): excess

**hegemony** (n): dominance

**C. 1. Long Answer Questions**

1. What is the role of rituals in managing childbirth in traditional societies?
2. Experience of childbirth is very significant. But modern technology has deprived the potential mother of this significant experience. How?

3. Describe the western interpretation of a bride's longing for a child in a traditional society.
4. How do languages come in the way of a better understanding of the women's problems?
5. Describe the rewards of pregnancy as experienced by Sylheti women.
6. Does the writer want to say that the use of western medicine in childbirth is producing horrible results? Do you agree with her views?
7. What could be the worse fates than death for a pregnant woman?
8. What are the problems of a modern woman in matters of pregnancy and childbirth?

## C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Childbirth is not the responsibility of the pregnant woman alone; it is a matter of family concern as well.
2. Relationship between mother and child is more important than the relationship between husband and wife.

## C. 3. COMPOSITION

**Write a paragraph of about 100 words on each of the following:**

1. Rituals: their value in our cultural life
2. Family is the hub of our social life

## D. WORD STUDY

### D.1. Dictionary Use

**Ex. 1.** Correct the spelling of the following words:

anjeety	usefulness	bahaviars	acquintance	neccesarily
seccratariet	techanological	comunities	sofisticated	equippment

### D.2. Word-formation

**Read the following sentence carefully:**

*'... a ritual approach to pregnancy helps make the anxiety **manageable**.'*

The word '**manageable**' is made of '**manage**' (v) and '**able**' (suffix)

Add suffix '**-able**' to the following words and fill in the blanks with the new words to complete the sentences (in some cases the final 'e' is to be dropped).

work	knowledge	consider	understand
accept	agree	use	deplore

- i. We did not find Varsha's proposal .....
- ii. Safdar has already spent ..... amount in the repairing work.
- iii. The act of violence is quite .....
- iv. The refills are not .....
- v. Everyone found his behaviour quite .....
- vi. .... knowledge of a car cannot make you a good mechanic.
- vii. Nikhat is quite ..... ; you can seek advice from her.
- viii. Since he has been ill for a long period, his irritating nature is quite.....

### D.3. Word-meaning

Ex 1. Fill in the blanks with suitable phrases given in the box

At bay	at the expense of	in order to	in response to
to ward off	look after	take care of	look at

- a) Pragya's fever was not severe; but it was the doctor's assurance which kept her fear .....
- b) It is not proper to ask others to ..... your new born babies.
- c) This time team India played seriously ..... to win the match.
- d) Development of a nation can never be achieved ..... common people's aspirations.
- e) Many women and children joined the freedom struggle movement ..... Gandhiji's call.
- f) The teacher infused confidence in the children ..... their fear of darkness.
- g) Everyone admiringly ..... the paintings.
- h) The new gardener ..... the plants with great affection.

### E. GRAMMAR

Ex.1. Read the following sentences, taken from the lesson, carefully:

- a) *In many traditional societies the **relationship between** mother and child is more important.*
- b) *'... a number of social usages may stress the child's **relationship with** the rest of his kin group...'*

In each sentence, the word '**relationship**' is followed by a different preposition, i.e. '**between**', and '**with**' to convey different meanings.

**Read the text to find out appropriate prepositions and fill in the blanks to complete the sentences:**

- a) All the members ..... family participate ..... the function.
- b) The scientists were actively involved ..... holding the natural calamities ..... bay.
- c) Pregnant women are advised to cling ..... a proper diet habit.
- d) The nurses were quite cooperative ..... breast feeding.
- e) Modern obstetric is responsible ..... the decrease ..... maternal mortality ..... the past century.
- f) The west thinks that .....many traditional societies, the relations ..... spouses are exploitative.

## F. ACTIVITY

- Ex. 1. The writer is obviously not happy with the intrusion of western technique and medicines in managing 'childbirth'. Do you feel there is also an invasion of western culture on our life particularly through the electronic media? With the help of your class teacher, organise an inter class discussion on 'Popular Soap Operas do not reflect Indian way of life...'
- Ex.2. It is medically established that women cannot be held accountable whether they bear male or female child. Still, in many traditional societies, a woman is considered a success if she has only male children. Organise a group discussion to explore the reasons that support such a gender bias.
- Ex.3. Meet some of the women in your locality who have only male/female children. Ask them about their experiences as well as the troubles they might have to face because of this. Prepare a report on aspects of having only male/female children, listing their views and opinions under such heads/titles:
  - i. Economic
  - ii. Social and cultural
  - iii. Religious

