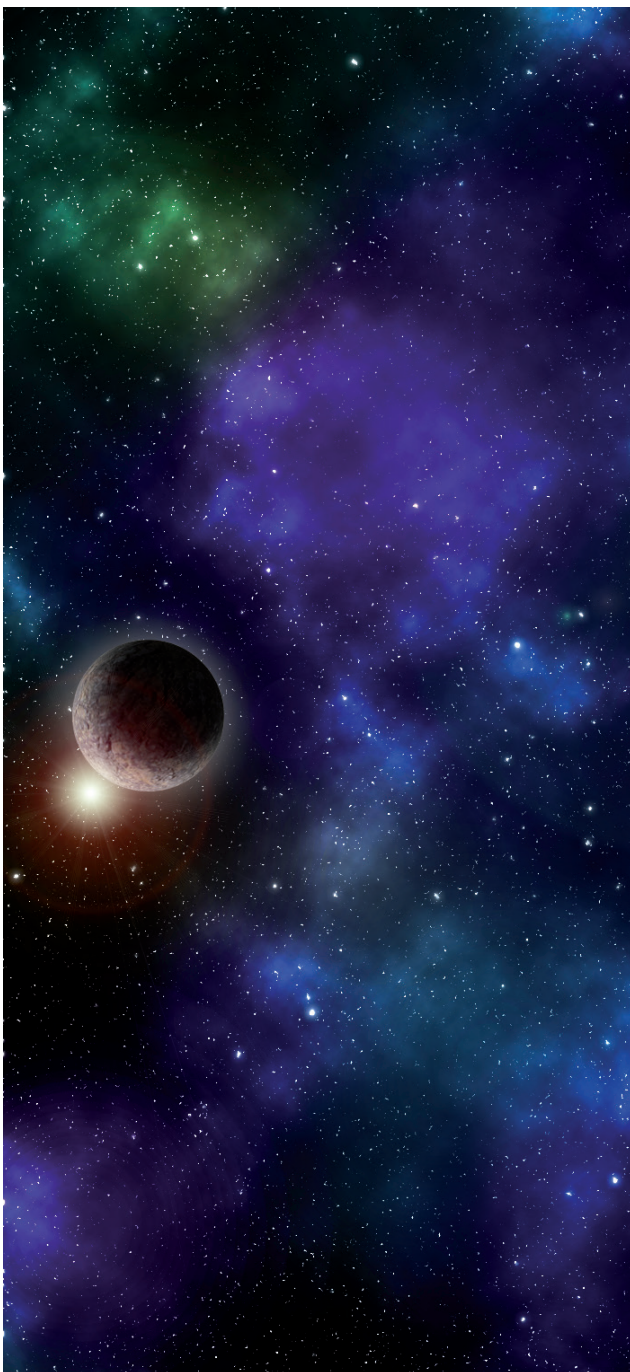


Anticipating the Modern Mother: *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Naomi Mitchison



Yuliia Benderska

At the beginning of the 21st century, the issue of motherhood is an integral element of the global pop culture. Undoubtedly, the question of the importance of childbirth has been current and vital for centuries, yet the last sixty years have seen the emergence of various new approaches to the image of motherhood and its role in society. Along with the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s, many new ideas and perceptions about femininity were born; women all over the world also widened their knowledge about sexuality and freedom. “The struggle for the control of women’s bodies originally meant”, Kaplan explains, “freeing women from the culturally imposed and not necessarily desired reproductive role—the main role open to women up until the 1970s” (1992: 211). Gradually, women in different corners of the planet discovered other angles of their femininity and new possibilities for (sexual) self-expression. Newly provocative, and simultaneously progressive, images of women were created in feminist cinema, theatre and literature. The genre of science fiction also unveiled brand new visions of women, mostly by female authors.

One of the pioneers in the field was Scottish author Naomi Mitchison and her novel *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, published in 1962. In her book *Motherhood and Representation* E. Ann Kaplan provides readers with an overview of Mitchison’s “utopian future world” where women are able to decide,



Anticipating the Modern Mother: *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Naomi Mitchison

based on any number of criteria, with whom they want to have children. They usually decide among human males, but Mary, the spacewoman, has two interesting reproductive experiences with 'Others'. She participates in an experiment that involves a graft that grows on to a living body—a sort of exterior womb without a womb. The grafts produce in Mary a great deal of motherly love, and the whole experience is presented positively. There is no need to reject the 'other' form. (1992: 211)

Due to the influence of feminism and its reflection in scholars' works as well as in literature, there arose numerous progressive ways in which women could engage in mothering from the 1960s onward. More recently, "A new generation of feminist scholar-mothers schooled in poststructuralist gender theory have begun to explore the possibilities for expressing their feminist commitments through and in their mothering" (Kawash, 2011: 973). Motherhood is now no longer seen as a burden though it is not seen, either, definitely, as the main aspect of a woman's life but just as one important element among others

The character of Mary, Mitchison's spacewoman, was created a few years before the onset of the second-wave feminist movement with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In those times, the image of a successful female space explorer, who is also a mother and who happens to engage in free sexual relationships with handsome men and other outer space dwellers, must have seemed scandalous and unreal. Ironically, the mood of the story is absolutely the opposite of scandalous; on the contrary, the events unveil in a very calm and balanced way. Mary herself gives the impression of being a woman perfectly refreshed by and satisfied with her life from the very first pages. The first words of the story already reveal that the most precious items in Mary's life are her very special children: "I think about my friends and the fathers of my children. I think about my children, but I think less about my four dear normals than I think about Viola. And I think about Ariel. And the other" (Mitchison, 2011: 5).

The most remarkable fact about Mary, however, is her awareness of her female sexuality and total freedom when enjoying it. Mary is free to choose her sexual partners because all the characters treat sex as an absolutely natural part of their existence; this is one of the most progressive ideas presented by Mitchison in *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*. This freedom reflects Mitchison's progressive feminist views on the image of a woman who is extremely self-confident and who possesses the miraculous power of balancing all parts of her enjoyable life, every day. Mary is never scared either of interacting with the alien 'other' on her missions to space and on Terra. Interestingly, her sexual contact with the Martian T'o, though 'unusual', is also mundane. Sarah Shaw shrewdly observes that "The genre of science fiction, in which not only technological but also social norms are transgressed as a matter of course, allows Mitchison to make the relationship between Mary and T'o, and the birth of their 'curly, coffee-coloured daughter', explicitly unremarkable" (2002: 145), thus transforming even the very idea of alienness.

Mary is free to choose her sexual partners because all the characters treat sex as an absolutely natural part of their existence; this is one of the most progressive ideas presented by Mitchison in *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*.



Anticipating the Modern Mother: *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Naomi Mitchison

Mary the spacewoman does not seem terrified of giving birth to a child conceived with a gender-fluid man of a dark-skinned complexion, which vividly displays Mitchison's desire for the eradication of racial discrimination as well as promotion of total freedom in sexual contacts. The society on Terra proves to be, like the author, very progressive, as shown by its acceptance of wide-ranging sexual relations and acceptance of women into all sectors of life, including science and space exploration. Presumably, this open, egalitarian attitude is one of the factors which helps Mary and many other women to feel secure and confident about their present and future. As a result, they feel completely free to decide what to do with their lives without any concerns about public judgement or strict social limitations. Furthermore, Mitchison brings into sharp focus the feelings of a woman who is a scientist and a nurturer at the same time. The spacewoman shares the same tenderness towards all her babies after their birth and during her pregnancy. Shaw also notices interesting details about Mary's maternal feelings towards her non-human grafts,

Mary's close relationships with her grafts could be understood as rewriting a cathexis between mother and infant, which were preferred to active female sexual desire in European productions of sexuality during the first half of the twentieth century. When Mary offers herself as a human host in immunological experiments, certain phrases offer themselves to a reading of the nurturing relationship between Mary and the graft as a mother-foetal relationship. (2002: 148)

Indeed, maternal instincts appear to be inherent in women regardless of the experience of childbirth; historical evidence suggests that females are inclined to taking care of all those who are weaker and vulnerable, both babies and animals (as we see in Mary's experiences). Josephine Donovan explains this phenomenon with the help of feminist animal care theory: "Feminists—indeed most women—are acutely aware of what it feels like to have one's opinion ignored, trivialized, rendered unimportant. Perhaps this experience has awakened their sensitivity to the fact that other marginalized groups—including animals—have trouble getting their viewpoints heard" (2006: 306). What is new in current ideas about motherhood, then, is that the instinct to help and care for other is not tied to compulsory motherhood but to an inborn capacity to be empathetic.

The society on Terra proves to be, like the author, very progressive, as shown by its acceptance of wide-ranging sexual relations and acceptance of women into all sectors of life, including science and space exploration

What is new in current ideas about motherhood, then, is that the instinct to help and care for other is not tied to compulsory motherhood but to an inborn capacity to be empathetic



Anticipating the Modern Mother: *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Naomi Mitchison

Mitchison draws a beautiful picture of mothers spending a brief but considerably effective, and enjoyable, amount of time with their offspring to make them “stable” and to help them take their first steps in the adult world. Mary gains a priceless experience with her babies on Terra and embraces the new dimension of her feminine side with glee, though defining it as a thing of the past:

Oh, I felt just like a twentieth-century Mum! I did everything. I sang and danced to them, I fed their measurements into the wools-warm slots; I taught them to handle bees and spiders gently and understandingly, I stabilised them, I whispered to them the binomial and the basic equations and all that, when they were half asleep. I introduced them to their age group, withdrawing progressively as they became integrated. It must have been just like that in the old days, being a Mum. (70)

Of course, fatherhood is an issue inevitably connected with motherhood and that cannot be omitted in its analysis. Men play an essential biological role in the process of conceiving a baby but, in comparison to motherhood, Mitchison does not consider

The absence of fathers and the loss of the classic nuclear family appears to be a side effect of sexual freedom on Terra, yet this loss is not presented as negative

fatherhood to play an extremely important role in the life of children. David Eggebeen and Chris Knoester come to a similarly depressing conclusion in their article about fathers today, claiming besides that “In fact, the consequences of becoming a father for men has been comparatively neglected by scholars” (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001: 381). They later argue, quite conservatively, that a good father is the one who provides the family with financial support, disciplines children and serves as a role model. On the other hand, these scholars omit a very important issue: the emotional connection between father and children and the ways they both can benefit from it.

In Mitchison’s book men do not seem to contribute much to the process of bringing up babies, perhaps because this is basically a social process. They are interested in having children but seem basically concerned by passing on their genetic material to the next generation and nothing more. Nonetheless, Mary is always asked by men whether she would like to have a child with them, a respectful gesture which undoubtedly brings fresh air into the book’s view of men. Mitchison also presents, albeit briefly, a father quite willing to fulfil his role as a parent, Peder Pedersen, a man whom Mary does trust: “He would be a parent at hand for any of my children, and he would take Viola with him one day to visit her father” (85). The absence of fathers and the loss of the classic nuclear family appears to be a side effect of sexual freedom on Terra, yet this loss is not presented as negative. Rather, Mitchison makes it perfectly clear that it does not matter who brings up babies as long as he or she “stabilizes”, comforts and gives them love and care.

The process of making babies “stable” is displayed as mutually satisfactory interaction between parents and their offspring. The fact that parents do not spend their entire life taking care of children or communicating with them does not seem to be damaging the younger generation, nor to stunt their growth in any way. Mary herself provides a positive example with her own mother. She remembers spending time with her when she was little, but then no further memories of the mother follow, about which she never complains. Parents on Terra give their children all the necessary love and care in the first few months after their birth, but later they teach their kids how to survive on one’s own and how to take their first personal steps. Children have freedom, even though they always can refer to their parents for a piece of advice:



Anticipating the Modern Mother: *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Naomi Mitchison

It is odd, nowadays, for a parent to have so much responsibility towards a child. (...) One does not yearn tenderly, owningly, over one's children, not at least after the first few months. One treats them as human beings, individuals, with the inalienable right not to be owned, to have their own space and their own time. Even the earth-bound, the non-explorers, realise this, dissociating children and guilt. (152)

Mitchison's views on parenting could seem quite odd back in the early 1960s, but in the 21st century they are part of modern personal philosophy and of the lives of thousands of contemporary women (and men). Pamela Druckerman, an American journalist and a mother of two children, based in Paris, focuses on the autonomy of children and their development as independent personalities, presenting the French as ideal parents:

Yet the French have managed to be involved without becoming obsessive. They assume that even good parents aren't at the constant service of their children, and that there's no need to feel guilty about this. "For me, the evenings are for the parents", one Parisian mother tells me. "My daughter can be with us if she wants, but it's adult time". (2012: 16)

Accordingly, we may suggest that a basic aim of a progressive parent is to give his or her offspring a character, or in other words, to build a full human being out of a little baby. Furthermore, autonomy appears to be something very fundamental among a child's needs. Not only does it open a world of opportunities to the young, but also lets them feel themselves respected and potent from the early age. Mitchison's novel is then a pioneering text for suggesting that with just the proper foundation supplied by a caring mother (in most cases) or a father (in fewer), a child can successfully mature and reach out for others in the future with confidence.

As for the mother herself, having built a life foundation for her baby, as Mary does for hers, she can easily proceed with her life, concentrating on her needs, dreams and career goals. A mother, like any other human being, deserves to live her life to the fullest, devoting herself not only to her children, but also to her interests. Mitchison provides us with a wonderful example with Mary, who is obviously happy to raise her children but at the

What was Mitchison's fantasy sixty years ago is now a basic right for any woman in the civilized world

same time has no pangs of conscience whenever she abandons her maternal responsibilities to plunge into the world of space exploration. Her beloved job is also an integral part of her life: "It must have been just like that in the old days, being a Mum. Only I could get away, that was the difference. How marvellous it was, in spite of tiny prickles of regret, to be back in a ship, among my instruments and tables, thinking intently and uninterruptedly" (70). Obviously, combining these two different aspects of her life does not stress Mary, who sets an amazingly early example for the 21st century women intent on pursuing their careers and also nurturing their babies at home. What was Mitchison's fantasy sixty years ago is now a basic right for any woman in the civilized world, though still too few women can give birth to a child and spend the first few years looking after it not worrying about losing her position at work or ruining her career opportunities.

In *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, to conclude, motherhood is shown from a progressive point of view and we can affirm that Mitchison created already in the early 1960s a prototype of a modern 21st century mother. As Mitchinson shows, motherhood needn't be considered a burden. It is, rather, a unique female capacity but also, above all, a choice which only women have the right to make and for which they should be respected. Mary's fresh ideas about combining mothering and being a successful independent woman, offer supporters of women's rights a model still valid today. Although less known than it deserves to be, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* makes an invaluable contribution to feminism, thanks to its celebration of sexual freedom and its progressive image of a modern, successful, and independent mother. ●

Anticipating the Modern Mother:
Memoirs of a Spacewoman
by Naomi Mitchison

Works Cited

- DENOVAN, Josephine (2006). "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogue", *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31.2: 305-329.
- DRUCKERMAN, Pamela (2012). *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting*. New York: Penguin.
- EGGEBEEN, David J. & Chris KNOESTER (2001). "Does Fatherhood Matter for Men?" *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63.2: 381-393.
- KAPLAN, E. Ann (1992). *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. London: Routledge.
- KAWASH, Samira (2011). "New Directions in Motherhood Studies." *Signs*, 36.4: 969-1003.
- MITCHISON, Naomi (1962, 2011). *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*. Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd.
- SHAW, Sarah (2002). "Monstrous Sex: The Erotic in Naomi Mitchison's Science Fiction", *Michigan Feminist Studies*, 16: 141-168.

