CHAPTER FIVE

PORTRAITS OF SURROGATE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

[Nanny] was in many ways not only the person who looked after me but also my closest companion, the person with whom I spent the most time in childhood and adolescence.

Leila Ahmed¹

The Theme of Nurturance in Feminist Writing

“Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough,” argues Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born.² Not only is the mother’s power too limited to give her daughter the protection and support she needs, but it is through the mother that patriarchy instills in the young daughter her proper, conventional expectations. For Rich, this type of mothering, which transmits to the daughter a legacy of victimization and exploitation rather than of equality and worthiness, is fundamentally deficient: “The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed ‘mothering,’ even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive.”³ What a daughter needs is not the old, institutionalized, sacrificial, mother love which men have demanded, but rather courageous mothering which empowers her, enhances her self-esteem, and expands her sense of actual possibilities.⁴

The issue of nurturance is central to the dynamics that develop in the relationship between mothers and daughters. Broadly defined as “the degree of warmth, support, and acceptance that is expressed toward the child,”⁵ nurturance is the most vital resource for individual

¹ Ahmed, A Border Passage, p. 64.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., p. 246.
⁵ Anderson and Sabatelli, Family Interaction, p. 205.
growth and development. For Phyllis Chesler, nurturance is “the consistent and readily available gift of physical, domestic, and emotional support in childhood, together with the added gift of compassion and respect in adulthood.” Chesler observes that most women are “motherless daughters” in patriarchal society. By this she means that daughters are not mothered into heroism and do not inherit power or wealth; rather, their legacy is one of capitulation and deprivation.

“Female children,” she writes, “are quite literally starved for... physical nurturance and a legacy of power and humanity from adults of their own sex (‘mothers”). Using the term nurturance in the sense of “unconditional love and care,” the feminist theorist Jane Flax suggests that “what women want is an experience of both nurturance and autonomy within an intimate relationship.” This wish is for many women unattainable because psychological development occurs within the patriarchal family in which the mother is the primary nurturer and the father is the symbol of authority. In this context, learning about one’s gender means recognizing that men and women are not valued equally and that men are socially more esteemed than women. This knowledge affects a woman’s feelings about herself, both as a person and as a mother, which, in turn, influence the type of mothering she provides a child. Flax argues that mothering is not gender neutral and that women relate differently to male and female children. This is the basis for many daughters’ complaints that they did not receive enough nurturance, support, and encouragement for autonomy from their mothers. “It is not that women totally lack the experience of being nurtured,” Flax remarks, “but it is rather that their experience takes place within a context in which the mother’s conflicts render the experience less than optimal and, in some cases, profoundly inadequate.”

Many women in Arab societies find themselves in a similar bind. Cultural values as well as age-old customs and traditions make it difficult for a mother to be fully available and responsive to her daughter’s

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8 Chesler, Women and Madness, p. 58.
10 Ibid., p. 175.