Feminism and the ‘Woman Equals Mother’
Discourse in Reproductive Politics
in Australia

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Abstract

This thesis explores the persistence of a ‘woman equals mother’ discourse within the terrain of reproductive politics in Australia. It finds that women are reduced to an essentialised maternal subjectivity through the deployment of an underlying ‘woman equals mother’ discourse across a range of feminist, medical/health and media discourses in Australia. Using abortion and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) as case studies, this thesis suggests that dominant feminist and mainstream discourses on abortion and ART remain located within three main frameworks, those of ‘rights/choice’, ‘moral/ethical’ and ‘health/medical’. All three discourses privilege a view of maternal subjectivity as essential to normative womanhood. While abortion and ART are often situated as separate or even opposing areas of reproductive politics, examining these two sites of reproductive practice alongside one another draws attention to the connections between these two seemingly disparate fields of reproductive practice. Specifically it enables us to identify the strength and persistence of a ‘woman equals mother’ discourse across these realms of reproductive practice. This thesis analyses the contributing factors behind the persistence of this discourse.

The first three chapters in the thesis examine key feminist approaches towards abortion and ART in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, focusing in particular on the liberal philosophical tradition, the neo-liberal context and its influence upon feminist and mainstream approaches in these areas. These chapters explore the shift within some feminist arguments toward a ‘moral’ defence of abortion, based upon values arising from mothering and motherhood. The last two chapters examine the theoretical dilemmas and contradictions arising out of the approaches examined in the first part of the thesis in relation to two specific debates surrounding abortion and ART that took place in Australia between 2000
and 2007. They examine public discourses contained within newsprint media coverage of
debates concerning lesbian and single women’s access to ART.

Utilising a feminist discourse analysis approach and drawing upon the work of Ferree,
Gerhards, Gamson and Rucht (2002) and their concept of *discursive opportunity structure*,
the thesis explores how particular meanings and social problem definitions come to be
privileged within public discourse. It is argued that the combination of a strong liberal legacy
within feminist arguments combined with particular elements of the social-political context
in Australia in the period under consideration reinforced a ‘woman equals mother’ discourse
in reproductive politics. Central to this discourse are ideas centred on notions of ‘good’,
‘bad’, ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ women based upon essentialised notions of
(heterosexual) women as mothers and informed by an increasing ‘moralisation of health’.
The pregnant body and, by extension, women’s bodies are reduced to those of ‘mothers’,
‘potential mothers’ or ‘non-mothers’ within these debates. This thesis considers the
implications of these understandings for alternative feminist accounts of women,
reproduction and ‘family’ within reproductive politics in Australia.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the conditions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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_______________________                                                   _____________________
Angella Duvnjak                                                      Date
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