

## **A Personal Perspective on the Relation between Creativity & Motherhood**

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### **Introduction**

In 2011, while living in the UK a war started in Syria, my home country, and tore it to pieces. In response, I took a refuge in creativity while following an organised plan and a predicted timeline to explore my questions. After dealing with war and death for too long, a new life started in my family with the birth of my daughter on 12<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2018. Since then, I have been trying to reoccupy my creative space and similarly to the previous project, let this life-changing event take over my creative interests. However, this turned to be not a straightforward path, but a challenging and interrupted one, in which creativity started to slip away and inspiration became distant.

In this paper, I would like to take a personal approach to explore the ways in which creativity is manifesting itself (or not) while being a mother and how to try and revive it in the midst of the emotionally and physically challenging environment of motherhood. By looking at a number of theories, the emotional and physical challenges of becoming a mother, and at the act of creativity, I discuss the relation between the latter and new motherhood. A number of artworks I made before and after pregnancy is discussed. Also a few paintings made recently are brought to the conversation, to demonstrate examples of the different stages creativity goes through while being a new mother. Interviews with new creative mothers were carried out to enrich the debate and to try and answer the following questions; what happens when we try to separate our sense of motherhood or “having a baby” from our creative identity? And is there a way in which both creativity & motherhood can work and inform the meaning of each other?

When I became a mother for the first time, little did I know that creativity will become a distant and unreachable aspiration. That was not obvious at first, but I came to this realisation gradually when my attempts to create anything were ending up in the trash bin. I did not know where to start from, it felt like I was desperately trying to learn a new language. However, this time the purpose of the new language was not clear. “Is it to express thoughts and

imagination?” I remember asking myself, “but I have just created the most perfect little human being!”, an inner conversation I had while trying to justify my struggle in reconnecting with my old self, before realising that the old self has long gone and a new self has been emerging since the birth of my daughter.

Shortly after experiencing motherhood for the first time, a mixture of different emotions merged with my existing ones, generating a new self-identity. This identity was being manifested through different novel behaviours. For example, I experienced for the first time the feel of overprotection of my new born, the anxiety about her survival whilst checking on her if she is breathing, the desire to feed her constantly so she survives, as well as the longing to breastfeed and endure difficulties that come with it, the overwhelming feeling of guilt that carries on all day long, straight after we drop her at the day-care until the minute she goes to sleep and above all, the worry about the future of the relation forming between us. All these feelings are new, never experienced before, which all are inherently transferable to active emotions that most likely lead to actions (Lerner et al., 2014). Emotions contribute vastly to the way we think, and consequently to the way we behave. Hence, the experience of becoming a mother and especially for the first time, will unavoidably leave its mark on the type and direction of our thinking, and naturally on our creativity.

Achieving creativity has notably faded away progressively after becoming a mother. On the surface, this was instigated from a sense of achievement, a sense of fulfilment. However, upon reflection, I do not believe that that was the full picture. The act of creativity resembled what felt like a new challenge, and with the drastic physical and emotional challenges a new mother faces (Stern et al. 1998), an additional defy was not fully embraced, at least not whilst in the first few months of motherhood.

It is important to mention also that the lack of sleep has a dramatic impact on the brain. Depression and anger caused by deprivation of sleep are more likely to happen than when one has a fully rested and functioning brain (Harvey, et al., 2006). Thus why, in this situation, we begin to practice our selectivity and end up prioritising our needs and desires, resulting with having creativity in a late position on our priority list. Let’s not forget that the list of priority changes again, when the working mother goes back from maternity leave to the work force. Then whatever left of her emotional and physical energy is being challenged further and consumed by a demanding job, especially if that job is full time.

Working full time straight from maternity leave has unavoidably a negative impact on the mother and her relationship with her new baby, studies have found “there are some concerns that maternal employment may have negative consequences for child development...Recent US findings suggest that there are negative effects where mothers work full time in the first year of life but positive effects where children are aged over one” (Han et al., 2001; Waldfogel et al., 2002 cited in OECD 2003). I went back to my full-time job when my

child was 8 months old, and still breastfeeding. It was a big challenge for baby and me physically and emotionally. After baby turned one, we started to get used to new the routine and we both developed some kind of acceptance to our reality. Although there are multiple benefits to the working mother and baby later in life (J.Poduval, J. Poduval, 2009), the act of creativity by the mother suffers as a result of the added pressure on her, due to work, as well as due to the lack of time and physical energy.

Creativity—although it could be a manifestation of pure selfishness—it could be an action of generosity; sharing emotions and reinterpretation of information with an unknown audience, who might or might not choose to fully comprehend what has been communicated. Whether it takes a form of visual, textual, or verbal act, creativity is a fragile exploit. To be true to the reader, once has to be true to themselves, which inherently requires transparency and openness, all qualities make us delicate and fragile. This all resembles a known emotional state that most mothers experience after giving birth, due to the drastic hormonal changes that occur during and after pregnancy (Johnson, 2017).

The above thought could be another indirect reason as to why new mothers could feel the need to be distant from any source of emotional triggers, which exactly what a creative output would usually initiate. We can see as a result why after becoming a mother, the perspective on the whole world could change, after going through all the physical and emotional change of becoming a mother, which consequently changes our creative output.

As an attempt to revive the old self, should we try to compartmentalise the new experienced emotions and consciously apply an absolute division between these, and our sense of self? Following my attempt to do so, confusion and disorientation were immediate and the creative results were enforced and meaningless. It was extremely unnatural to try and apply the separation, it felt like rejecting or pushing away the reality of having a baby and being a mother from my active consciousness. Having said that, the creative results were reflective of the confused state of mind, as well as the changing part of my identity. In some ways, they represented the impossibility of separation and confirmed my conclusion; once one becomes a mother, she will always be a mother, even and sometimes especially, whilst she is trying to be something else.

### **Artwork & New Mothers Speak**

Examples of artwork I have produced during and after pregnancy are found in Appendix 1. Figure 1, *One Minute Old* (Georges, 2018), is an attempt to create a denotation of the baby's arrival. The creativity here is limited to present the new reality, rather than to represent it. This has been done by presenting a portrait of the baby and simplifying facial details.

Figure 2 *Mother and Daughter in Recovery Room* (Georges, 2018) is capturing a magical moment that gathers the mother and baby for the first time after giving birth. Similarly, there is an attempt to present the reality rather than adding anything new, or expressing any emotions through the work. Colours are non-existent in both images, instead, we have black and white to keep them factual and emotionless.

In comparison to Figures 1 and 2, a painting was made before these two images, whilst I was pregnant, see Figure 3, *Waiting to Meet You* (Georges, 2018). Here the differences are multiple. To start with, the title of the image carries obvious emotions, excitement, and anticipation for the mother to meet her baby in comparison to the titles of the previous two images, which are descriptive and merely stating facts. Secondly, the style of the painting is realistic, trying to introduce bodily details and particularly her physical changes while pregnant, that is through exposing the baby's bump and the enlarged breasts. The other physical change that has been celebrated here is the growth and shininess of the women's hair, another change usually occurs during pregnancy. We can also notice the colours used are powerful and bright, especially when they are used to represent the hair, artwork has obviously been made to celebrate the pregnancy, and leave a message of excitement and longing from mother to baby. Whilst the other two images made after giving birth are colourless, factual and less detailed. In other words, they are less emotional and expressive. Does that mean, they are less creative? Perhaps. But certainly, they are less creative than generally all the artwork I produced whilst pregnant and before that.

There is clearly a focus on the new life event in Figure 1 & 2, which is the baby and the new mother's relation with her. From my personal experience, it was extremely difficult to shift the focus from this to any other topic. There was almost a sense of resistance to represent the new reality and instead opting to present it in literal sense. This new reality existed in powerful terms and nothing else was possible to exist besides it, nor in relation to it. Perhaps in that way, the new creative mother tries to find her new self, which she never knew existed. The strong sense of the new identity is powerful, graceful, and in some ways magical, it makes one feels complete. Biology surely plays a role here, and makes mother falls head over heels in love with her baby, so she gives them the care they need to survive (Small, 1998).

In other words, it was impossible for me—especially in the first few months after giving birth—to apply a separation between my motherhood and creativity. That was simply unreasonable ask. As a result of this experiment, I discovered, I do not want to separate “it” from my creative existence, because on many levels, it was actually fulfilling my existence and informing my new sense of creativity.

The question that comes to mind here, why do we have to try and apply that division in the first place? To try and answer that question, I have conducted a number of interviews with creative new mothers (see Appendix 2). The mothers were asked the above question in addition to the following

one: Is there a way in which motherhood and creativity can work and inform the meaning of each other?

The most common elements I found from speaking to the four participants is that they are all longing to create after they became a mother, but none of them actually made any art—yet. It is clearly challenging to create whilst baby is still months old, in these cases babies ages range from 8-12 months. The division between the two notions of creativity and motherhood, is an attempt by new mothers to restore some of the old desire-to-create back, or in other sense, to restore some of the old self back. Participants talked about a fusion between the two notions, which is more likely to help be productive and reflective of the new reality. As we notice from Cormie's interview, even when the mother is creating, her focus is again, on the baby and their needs through designing for instance, their playroom, toys, customs, etc. The change in all mothers' attention is evident, it is a transference from creative individuals to emotional and occupied mothers who long to create.

Going back to my personal experience, I have started painting again since my baby has turned 20 months old. This time my artwork is abstract, conceptual, and representative. These three following examples show what I mean.

Figure 4 *Home Warm Home* (Georges, 2020) is representing the warmth of my home country Syria and the different elements of beauty and heritage that comes with it. It is abstract and distant from my motherhood experience. Figure 5 *New Beginning* (Georges, 2020) and Figure 6 *Roots* (Georges, 2020) represent a fresh new beginning in the UK, implanting my roots in this country, and accepting it as my new home.

The transference is unblemished. After 20 months of becoming a mother, I am finally gaining my ability to think in abstract method again. I am able to represent new events and make statements away from my motherhood experience. It needed time. Now after reflection, although it felt overwhelming at the first 18 months or so, and nothing else was possible to be thought of, this stage was absolutely necessary for the survival and thriving of the new mother and baby.

This leads to ask the following question; can creativity and motherhood work and inform the meaning of each other? After the above discussion, the answer is clearly yes. Jayita and Murali Poduval in their research finds that our motherhood does not only inform our creativity but it can also revive our womanhood, that in return will lead to great successions and most importantly great creations. (J.Poduval, M. Poduval, 2009).

If we accept the notion that any type of work besides childcare requires some sort of creativity, imagination and the capability of problem solving, then we should be able to accept replacing the words *work, working, etc.*, by *creative, creativity, etc.*, in the following quote—all replaced words are written in italic:

It is possible to be a woman, a mother, and an achiever. Many  
have done it with help from society, and others have battled

endless odds to prove the same. In today's world it is both desirable and incumbent upon mothers to be *creating*...a *creative* mother is not a good mother, a *creative* mother can, in fact, be a better mother. She not only feels better about herself but is also forced to take better care of herself in order to make an impression. Along with motherhood, *creativity* adds to the completeness of being a woman. The major stresses of being a *creative* mother remain lack of time, and a feeling of guilt, due to perceived neglect of the parenting role. The rewards are many, including personal benefits, financial rewards, and improved family life. (J.Poduval, M. Poduval, 2009:66)

Creativity can enrich our motherhood and womanhood. It can make us more fulfilled and interesting, and more intellectually stimulated. Collectively this make us without a doubt happier humans, women and mothers, reflecting positively on our families, communities, and countries. Although it takes time to come back to our conscious after becoming mothers, creativity remains in our subconscious, waiting for the right time to arise.

### **Conclusion**

Upon the above discussion, I can state that a new self emerges after becoming a mother, which will leave its mark on the type and direction of our thinking, and naturally on our creativity. Also that the act of creativity suffers as a result of the added pressure on the mother, due to her work, lack of time and energy—especially if she works full time, as well as due to the hormonal, emotional and physical challenges she faces after becoming a mum.

Once one becomes a mother, she will always be one, even and sometimes especially, whilst she is trying to be something else. A separation between the sense of the new self “being a mother/having a baby” and what we want to create about and for can be very challenging in the first few months of motherhood. Examples of personal artwork post birth confirm that. Interviews with new mums also confirm that it is generally challenging to create after giving birth, and the mother’s focus is most likely to be on the baby and their needs. They also showed that a fusion between creativity and motherhood is more likely to work for the new mothers rather than an application of division between the two notions. What will be interesting to do to expand this study, is to speak to the participants again in different stages in future, and ask the same questions, that is to see if their creativity is still distant.

The examples of my recent artwork bring the personal experience back to discussion. It shows that creativity and the ability to think in abstract way will come back and it is possible, however it takes time. In my experience it took over 20 months. The early stage of being taken over by motherhood and not

able to think about anything else, was absolutely necessary for the survival and thriving of the new mother and baby.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that creativity and motherhood can work together, and in fact, they can enrich each other. Creativity as mothers makes us happier and more fulfilled, which consequently reflects positively on our well-being, families, and communities.

## Appendix A



Figure 1, *One Minute Old*, Digital Painting, Hala Georges, November 2018



Figure 2, *Mother and Daughter in Recovery Room*, Digital Painting, Hala Georges, November 2018



Figure 3, *Waiting to Meet You*, Oil on Canvas (Georges, May 2018)



Figure 4 *Home Warm Home*, Acrylic on Canvas, Hala Georges, July 2020

Figure 5 *New Beginning*, Collage on Canvas, Hala Georges, July 2020







Figure 6, *Roots*, Collage on Canvas, Hala Georges, July 2020

## Appendix B - Script of Interviews with participants;

*Q 1: What happens if we try to separate “it” (having a baby/becoming a mother) from our creative identity and consciously, apply a division between the two practices?*

*Q 2: Do you feel that we have to apply this separation in order for us to create?*

*Q 3: Is there a way in which motherhood and creativity can work and inform the meaning of each other?*

### Mother and Designer – Participant 1

“You mentioned about a division between motherhood and creative practice. I am consciously trying to fuse them together and ignore the divide. I have tried to orient myself so that my personal life is the creative outlet and this divide is a grey zone rather than a line. Besides getting to hang out with [baby], my creativity has been channeled through the design and the making process of our house, designing and making toys and costumes, designing her room and playroom etc. I guess these past 15 months have been an exhausting luxury, luxury in that it has been good to have time away from a more formal/paid role in an architecture firm, but also exhausting as it is 24/7 with no holiday.”

“Perhaps I am post-rationalising now, and somehow justifying to myself about not having returned to work as soon as possible, as there was definitely pressure to do so ( not sure if it was external or internal pressure, or maybe a

combination). Anyway, the financial pressure is fully on and I have recently returned to the office part time to ease that pressure slightly (very slightly-depressingly so). It has been nice to be back in the adult environment, and have been able to focus a bit on work. It's different work to what I was doing before becoming a mom, so it is hard to make a good comparison and to contrast before and after, as pre-post motherhood isn't the only variable." (Cormie, 2020)

### **Mother and Artist - Participant 2**

"My motherhood has changed me completely; I feel that my attention at work has moved from a singular perspective to multi-points perspective if that is even possible. I am thinking of everything I have to think about and acting upon it, but simultaneously, I am thinking of my baby, who is with the child-minder whilst I am at work, is he well, is he eating well, does he miss me, and other million questions. These questions distract me sometimes, but they mostly make me more sympathetic towards people in my working environment, in a way motherly, and understanding of their personal circumstances. I feel my motherhood made me more creative in some new ways; i.e. I am capable of multitasking more than I used to, I can come up with solutions to problems faster. But in other ways, I feel sometimes it limited my ambitious plans, for example, I was offered to travel on a business trip for several days, which I had to decline. I was breastfeeding and I couldn't leave my baby for several nights in a row. I know how that might have helped in advancing my career, however, I believe it is about balance. I try all the time to create a balance between my job and family life and some days are more successful than others. (Jones, 2020)

### **Mother and Illustrator - Participant 3**

T.A. said that her motherhood experience for the first time "made her world stop." Since she suffered from Post-Partum Depression after giving birth, her energy was focused on hers and the baby's survival "I couldn't think of anything work related. The depression was severe that it affected my ability to cope with breastfeeding, so I gave that up after three days. I still feel bad about it. Creating art at this point was something like a fantasy, I knew I would have loved to do it, but I couldn't. Now 10 months in, things are getting better, I believe I can think about art again, but it will take some more time to actually create any." (Alexander, 2020)

### **Mother and Artist - Participant 4**

Another participant said that her little boy made her appreciate life in a new way, which made her perspective on whatever she took for granted change. "I wanted to celebrate all the ordinary things that we have and

previously took for granted, because my boy's new existence taught me how precious life is. My very modest attempts to create art were to express gratitude and celebrate life. Unfortunately, I did not have time nor energy to do so. But if I did, I would be celebrating life and creating life through my creativity." (Lissamore, 2020)

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