

# Isadora as a Mother in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*

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## Abstract

*Fear of Flying* is a novel that has changed lives of many people. Even after 44 years of its publication, it is read and appreciated. The novel deals with a significant number of problems related to women in the early 1970's and which are still present in the society. One of the issues discussed in *Fear of Flying* is motherhood which was an imposition on women. This paper will focus on the social obligations of women regarding motherhood prevailing in 1960's. It was the time when women were not at all free but the protagonist of *Fear of Flying*, Isadora Wing rejects to accept this. She wants to establish herself as a writer but her wishes are hindered because of the expectations of her family, society, culture and also her own apprehensions. In order to come out of all these apprehensions, the protagonist goes through an emotional journey in which she has an extra-marital affair and ends up in search of her peace of mind. This paper focuses on how a person in spite of all problems and so many social obligations achieve what one wants to, in this case being a writer.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, Writer, Social Obligations, Peace, Relationship, Self-Identity.

## Introduction

1960 was the time of social and sexual revolution and Isadora, the protagonist of *Fear of Flying* could not escape from it. She was from the age where the women were not at all free but she would take herself as totally free from all the obligations and restrictions of the society. Isadora, since her childhood yearns for freedom and she always wanted to be writer. But her family wanted her to settle down like her other sisters for which she was not ready. She felt that she cannot play both the roles in her life that is being a writer as well as a mother. Isadora felt being a mother was a hindrance in her career as a poet which she shares, "Like being told that if I had babies I'd never be an artist, (...) like being asked by some dough-faced boy if I planned to be a secretary. A secretary!" (Erica Jong 407).

This paper will mainly focus on Isadora's role as a mother and role played by her parents in this respect. The family represents the rules of society on motherhood. We cannot ignore her primary concern is being a writer and not a mother. The present paper will analyse both the issues mainly focussing on Isadora's role as a mother. This paper will try to depict that norms and rules of society on "a woman's being a mother or not", affects a woman's life badly. The women who never became mothers because of their choice were not only judged but they experienced guilt for no reason. We can see that the gender roles play a crucial role in *Fear of Flying*. Women started enjoying their rights but the pressure of society and its rules were difficult to disobey. The females were supposed to have children and look after their homes but we come to know the fact that all women did not follow these notions like Isadora. She was the perfect example of freedom and refuses to abide by the rules and regulations set by

the so called society. We can see this conflict throughout the novel but the Chapter 3 named “Knock Knock” focuses on this issue the most. Isadora struggles a lot in her mind about getting pregnant because it was the most difficult decision for her to make. She thought of how women accepted such life without giving a second thought. For her, it was too difficult to take this decision as she was not meant for all the domestic things. She wanted to achieve a lot in her career and hence was not ready to take the responsibility of a mother, “I always wanted to be in control of my fate. Pregnancy seemed like a tremendous abdication of control. Something growing inside you which would eventually usurp your life” (Erica Jong, 53).

Isadora has to face a lot many questions raised by society regarding her decision and that voice is raised by not any other person but her own family. Randy, Isadora’s sister and her husband Pierre continuously asks her to have baby and settle down. For them having a baby was a sign of settling down, the woman was incomplete. Randy had four sons and five daughters and she would take pride in that. Moreover, because of this she felt free to lecture Isadora. But these things did not disturb Isadora and is expressed later, “Despite her numerous pregnancies, Randy continued to act as if she were the first woman in history to have a uterus” (Erica Jong, 322).

Randy, being a housewife and not being able to achieve anything good in life is irritated by Isadora’s works and lectures her a lot for that. She feels that Isadora needs to understand that Randy wants to help her but when Isadora is not ready to understand anything, she becomes a bit aggressive. Still she wants to convince Isadora in her sweet tone, “It’s just that you’re still my little sister and I really think you’ve gotten off on the wrong track! I mean you really ought to stop writing and have a baby. You’ll find it so much more fulfilling than writing...” (Erica Jong, 64).

The result of the conversation ends up fighting and Isadora runs to her mother for some peace. Once Isadora is out of this situation, she has to listen once again to Randy and Pierre. This time Pierre takes the place of Randy and insists Isadora to have a baby, “But Isadora, that’s exactly it, we’re trying to help you” (Erica Jong, 69).

The torment for Isadora doesn’t stop here. It’s not only Randy and Pierre who are preaching her but even Isadora’s younger sister Lalah who had five babies writes, “As for Lalah, she writes me once a year to ask why I don’t stop ‘farting around with poetry’ and ‘do something meaningful’ like having quintts” (Erica Jong, 59).

Isadora knew one thing very well that if she paid any heed to them, then she had to follow the rules and regulations of family as well as society. As a result, she will have to quit writing which was her first love. She felt that the family indirectly wanted her to stop thinking and accept whatever was expected of her- to be submissive and a mother.

Isadora was not ready to lose her identity as a writer and she explains the reason for this through the example of her mother who was a painter. Isadora tells us that her mother wanted to become a painter as well as she was a good dancer. She would have achieved great heights but for her pregnancies. Isadora did not want to put her career as writer at stake. She had the example of her mother and was frightened to meet the same fate which could be understood through the following extract: A little gold chain chained my mother to her mother, and me to my mother. All our unhappiness was strung along the same (rapidly tarnishing) gold chain. Of course my mother had a rationalization for it all – a patriarchal rationalization the age-old rationalization of women seething with talent and ambition who keep getting knocked up. “Women cannot possibly do both, you have to choose. Either be an artist or have children” With a name like Isadora Zelda it was clear what I was supposed to choose

everything my mother had been offered and had passed up. How could I possibly take off my diaphragm and get pregnant? (Erica Jong, 56).

Isadora later tells the readers that her mother though angry at times, always appreciated her for her poetry. She could do this as she herself was an artist but could not fulfil her wishes. Now she started looking that future for her daughter. She knew that Isadora had a bright future and that's why she never forced her to have a baby. In spite of all these qualities of her mother, Isadora does not want to be like her mother but she agrees that her mother was not a bad influence on Isadora.

In midst of all these influences, Isadora has her own personal thoughts about motherhood. She is totally confused in her thoughts and they fluctuate between rejection, panic, repentance and an ambiguous, conditioned wish for pregnancy.

There are lot many quotes which show her unwillingness towards pregnancy. First and foremost is that she will have to quit writing and she could even think of doing so. Secondly, she was not ready to share her baby with his/her father. She wanted the baby all to herself if she ever had one. There is an episode which clearly describes the reason behind not having a baby. For Isadora, being a mother and being a woman were one and the same thing. She found no difference between the two and thought that she had to do the following if she listened to the others, I was fourteen and starving myself to death (...) What could be the reason my periods had stopped? A mystery. 'Because I don't want to be a woman. Because it's too confusing. Because Shaw says you can't be a woman and an artist. Having babies uses you up, he says. And I want to be an artist, that's all I've ever wanted. (Erica Jong, 216).

We can even say that Isadora had a phobia regarding pregnancy. Though Isadora wore a diaphragm, she would think that she was pregnant and she knew that it was unreasonable to think so but could not help herself. She would often check if her diaphragm was in the perfect position. Her diaphragm is very important for her as it is the only way for her to control her life. When her friend Pia takes her off, Isadora pities her.

In one of Erica Jong's interviews in 2013, she discusses about how the sexual revolution in 1960's brought about birth control as it became legal. Nowadays, wearing a diaphragm is very common thing but at the time of the publication of *Fear of Flying*, it was considered to be an act of empowerment and to avoid pregnancy intentionally. It is very difficult to break the set pattern of rules and regulations in a patriarchal society. Isadora is very clear in her mind about not having children but sometimes she feels herself guilty of not having a baby at the age of 29. Perhaps this all happens because of the expectations of the family and society. Sometimes, she even thinks that she is a failure as a woman. Such thoughts run into her mind when she rests in her mother's closet, "What was wrong with me? Was I unnatural? I just hadn't the normal female compulsion to get knocked up. All I could think of was me and my restlessness, with my longing for zipless fucks and strangers on trains – being tied down with a baby" (Erica Jong, 53). Isadora is a lady of strong character and she knows that she is not at all wrong and there is nothing to feel guilty. She knows that she is a free woman and can live her life the way she wants to. But still she says, "It was absurd. I knew it was absurd. But something in me repeated the catechism. Something in me apologized to all the people who complimented my poems, something in me said: Oh, but remember, I have no children..." (Fear of Flying 66) Isadora does not want to think as such because she knows that she is right. But the family (Randy's behaviour) and social pressures make her think and feel she is wrong. Later, when Randy is at good relation with Isadora, Isadora tells herself that she does not want to be a woman if being a woman was like her sister, Randy.

We cannot ignore the fact that Isadora never wanted a baby. There are two instances when Isadora yearns for a baby when she feels very lonely. Firstly, she says so when she is with Adrian and both sleeping by a roadside in France. There she wakes up and thinks, I wanted a child with my whole heart. Adrian's child. Bennett's child. My child. Anyone's child. I wanted to be pregnant. I wanted to be *big with child*. I was lying awake in Adrian's pup tent and crying. He went on snoring (...) That was how lonely I felt, how utterly bereft. 'No one, no one, no one, no one...' I moaned, hugging myself like the big baby I was. I was trying to rock myself to sleep. (Erica Jong, 347).

Here, we see a transition in the thoughts of Isadora. Earlier, Isadora was not ready to have a baby and if she had one, she did not want to share him/her with the father of the baby. But now she wanted a baby badly. The reason behind this was Adrian Goodlove who could not comfort Isadora and she would feel very lonely even in his company. To overcome that loneliness, she wanted a baby without caring about the baby's father.

Whenever she felt lonely, she had only two options: either to turn to men or to dream about her hypothetical daughter. The same is portrayed flawlessly at the end of the novel, *Fear of Flying*. Isadora has a conversation with herself and she analyses her present situation:

ME: None of that makes a dent in my loneliness. I have no man; I have no child.

ME: But you know that children are no antidote to loneliness.

ME: I know.

ME: And you know that children only belong to their parents temporarily.

ME: I know. (Fear of Flying 382)

At the end of the novel, this dialogue seems to be of great help for Isadora. She realizes at the end of the novel that turning to men or having a child is of no help to come out of the loneliness. She comes to a new or the third solution and that is turning to herself and her art if she wanted some comfort. Nothing else could help her at that stage and it (turning to herself and her art) was the only solution to her loneliness.

If we discuss about Isadora's dream child, we come to know that Isadora is too possessive of her dream child and she explains that she wanted a baby girl. She also wishes that her daughter to be independent and not like her mother, Isadora who could not live independently. She describes her daughter in a very affectionate manner:

"A very wise and witty little girl who'd grow up to be the woman I could never be. A very independent little girl with no scars in the brain or psyche. With no toadying servility and no ingratiating seductiveness. A little girl who said what she meant and meant what she said." (Fear of Flying 65)

As already discussed, Isadora's dream daughter is the depiction of her own self-improvement and her quest for emotional stability. Therefore, Isadora writes,

"What I really wanted was to give birth to *myself*, the little girl I might have been in a different family, a different world." (Fear of Flying 65)

Lot of discussion could be done on whether Isadora finally succeeds and becomes this ideal dream girl or not. We know that in the end, Isadora returns to Bennett but her mind is temporally in peace. Erica Jong has been successful in creating a character like *Isadora* who is a combination of both mind and body.

*Fear of Flying* is a timeless novel as it deals with a number of issues related to women in the early 1970's and which prevail till date. Motherhood is still a gender role with which we have to break with but time has changed and motherhood is not imposed as such, as compared to 1970's. Women own their bodies now and are free to take their decisions without interference of the male dominated society. The novel is very inspiring but it was looked down upon and

the character of Isadora was misinterpreted. Her deep, artistic aspect was totally ignored due to her independent thoughts and lifestyle in that age. If we think that Isadora possessed an independent and carefree nature, still she had her individual right to do so. She was free to live her life in her own way. With the change in time, a day will come when Isadora will not be looked down upon and would be respected as she is.

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