

The Children of the Dream

by Bruno Bettelheim
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ONE of the central issues of feminism is the question of the limits imposed by a woman's biological role. Is there a necessity for full-time motherhood, presumed to be crucial for the welfare of the child? What happens when women release themselves from this exclusive responsibility? What are the alternatives? The solutions suggested are three (i) Let society take care of the children partly if not fully, and provide daycare centers, crèches. (ii) Let fathers also become full-time parents. (iii) Let society recognize mothers' contribution and reward it concretely with economic allowances and changes in the work-rules to keep women at par with men. All these need more debate.

In this context, Bruno Bettelheim's careful study of child-rearing in the Israeli kibbutz is important for feminism and for theories of human development. It is a balanced appraisal and the only one of its kind. Basing his study on three generations, he arrives at some startling conclusions. While the analysis is cast entirely within the psychoanalytic frame, he exposes the links between the nature of the society and the way its children are raised. Defenders of the traditional notion believe that without the benefit of a single mothering person caring for a child exclusively, disaster will follow. They look upon all communal arrangements with horror. Bettelheim shows how the Israeli experiment is a radical and apparently successful experiment.

How do these children manage so well through infancy and childhood even though they spend most of the day and all of the night away from their parents? What experience is provided educationally, socially, emotionally, to enable them to grow up so well – in fact much better than children in middle class Western homes?

Part of the success arises from the origin of the kibbutz. The kibbutz was the product of necessity, created by women wanting an equal life with men, outside the home, and by the need of the Israeli economy for the labour power of both men and women. The kibbutz freed the women and enabled them to derive their deepest satisfaction not from being mothers but from being creative human beings. But the guilt remained. However, for the generation of mothers who had themselves grown up in the kibbutz, there were no doubts or fears. They were offering their children the best of what they had.

The most important factor in the success of the experiment, according to Bettelheim, lies in the faith in the kibbutz ideal that parents shared. To a child the education system is a very

important part of society and her or his view of society is coloured by parental values. The parents' belief in the fundamental values of the kibbutz, for instance, in the community's right to shape one's life and that of one's children, is perceived by the children, and wholeheartedly accepted by them.

This has profound implications for our theories of human development as it proves that given certain basic conditions, alternatives to exclusive mothering by a single person do work and work very well. Trust is necessary for growth and it depends on two elements: assurance of supply of physical necessities and emotional security. Both are amply provided in the kibbutz. Can the kibbutz be re-created in other societies? It depends what kind of individuals the society wishes to produce. If individual achievements is regarded as more important than group welfare, the answers will be different. It is not therefore simply a question of who does the rearing, but also a question of rearing for what personal and social goals.

Analysing the childcare system of the kibbutz, he demonstrates in what ways, immense emotional and physical support is provided to the children. The essential features are : (a) trained caretakers dedicated to the ideal of the kibbutz (b) relayed and permissive growing up in infancy in matters of feeding, cleanliness, toilet-training (c) constant company of other children of the same age group so the child is never alone (d) no exclusive ties with parents to create possessiveness or jealousy (e) assurance that all basic needs will be met without the threat of withdrawal by displeased parents (f) plenty of stimulation, living in the midst of real life activity of adults (g) no separation of child's life and adult's life like in the West. The child can observe the labour that provides sustenance for all of them unlike in advanced countries where it is hidden (food comes from tins) (h) growth in self-regard for children are left to settle their own disputes without adults interference (i) absence of competition and hence no inferiority feeling, no "I have no place anywhere" feeling. (j) high value placed on comradeship and relationships of children with each other, yields immense emotional satisfaction.

Let us come back to the question we began with. If society takes the responsibility of bringing up the next generation, what happens? The answer depends on how the group rearing is done, on what premises it is based. Now that we are demanding *Balwadis* and daycare centers to help women cope better with their heavy work loads, we must ensure that they are run well.

Our existing crèches are run either by people out to make money or by careless and indifferent charity-doers. The state, the whole society must take the responsibility for bringing up its children as the founders of the Israeli state took the responsibility because they felt that in the welfare of the children lay the possibility of the good society.

- Maitreyi Krishnaraj