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## A STUDY OF MATRICENTRIC FEMINIST THEMES IN FRIENDS

**Dr. Daryl Cressida**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chengalpet.

darylcr@srmis.edu.in

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the popular American sitcom *Friends* through a matricentric feminist lens, focusing on how the show portrays motherhood, female friendship, and women's experiences in both personal and professional spaces. Matricentric feminism, which places motherhood and mothering at the centre of feminist analysis, allows for a unique examination of the maternal figures in *Friends*, particularly Monica Geller, Phoebe Buffay, and Rachel Green. While the show is celebrated for its humour and depiction of young adult life in the 1990s, it also presents traditional gender roles, particularly in relation to the pressures of motherhood and domesticity. This paper will critically assess how *Friends* reflects, subverts, or reinforces societal expectations around motherhood and the ways in which women form supportive communities. By applying a matricentric feminist framework, this project aims to reveal both the limitations and the potential progressive aspects of the show's portrayal of women's lives, relationships, and the balancing of career ambitions with societal expectations of family life.

The study of popular culture, especially through television, has long been a fruitful area for feminist analysis. In this literature review, key scholarly works on feminist theory, matricentric feminism, and their application to media studies will be discussed to provide a foundation for analysing *Friends* through a matricentric feminist lens. Feminist scholars have examined the portrayal of women in television for decades, arguing that TV both reflects and reinforces cultural norms. Early works, such as *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Brunsdon, Spigel, 1997), highlight how television often perpetuates traditional gender roles. However, more recent feminist media critiques have explored the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which shows depict women's independence, empowerment, and struggles with societal expectations. *Friends* has garnered scholarly attention, particularly regarding its portrayal of gender dynamics and relationships, with researchers like Rachel Moseley (2003) noting its progressive potential alongside its reinforcement of patriarchal norms. Matricentric feminism, a branch of feminist theory developed by scholars such as Andrea O'Reilly, focuses on the experiences, identity, and subjectivity of mothers and mothering as a central aspect of feminist analysis. O'Reilly's works (*Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, 2016)

argue that traditional feminist discourse has often marginalized or neglected motherhood, treating it as a secondary issue. This theory re-centres motherhood, asserting that motherhood is a significant source of identity for many women, shaping their social, political, and economic experiences. In the context of television, matricentric feminism helps examine how mothering, reproductive labour, and caregiving are portrayed and valued (or devalued). The sitcom format itself has been critiqued for both its limitations and its progressive potential in representing gender roles. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (1995) in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, explores how sitcoms can either reinforce or resist traditional portrayals of women, often through humour. Shows like *Friends* tread a fine line, with characters like Monica Geller, who exemplifies traditional domestic roles, and Phoebe Buffay, who challenges them in her eccentricity and alternative lifestyle. The tension between comedy and societal expectations of women makes sitcoms a complex site for feminist analysis. Several studies, including those by Deborah Jermyn (2003), have focused on how *Friends* portrays women's struggles to balance career ambitions with societal and personal expectations of motherhood and family life. Monica, for example, represents the 'maternal nurturer,' who is both professionally ambitious as a chef and increasingly pressured by the desire to become a mother. Rachel Green, on the other hand, transitions from a dependent, spoiled daughter to an independent working mother, raising questions about the complexities of career versus motherhood in a post-feminist world. Phoebe, with her unconventional surrogate motherhood and non-normative relationship with her biological family, offers an alternative take on maternal roles. The literature also points to the importance of female friendship in *Friends*, a key aspect of matricentric feminism that emphasizes community and support among women. Scholars like Christine Geraghty (2005) have explored how shows like *Friends* offer alternative family structures, with the central group functioning as a surrogate family. The nurturing relationships between Monica, Rachel, and Phoebe, as well as their complex relationships with their mothers and maternal figures, reflect broader themes of emotional labour and caretaking, which matricentric feminism places at the center of its analysis. The study of maternity and motherhood in literary theory is often referred to as matricentric feminism or maternal theory. These frameworks examine motherhood, maternal experiences, and maternal identity in literature and culture. They explore how motherhood is represented, constructed, and interpreted in texts, often addressing issues like gender, power, identity, and the intersection of motherhood with socio-political contexts. Scholars like Adrienne Rich (in *Of Woman Born*) and Julia Kristeva (in works like *Stabat Mater*) have contributed significantly to maternal theory, exploring the complexities of motherhood as a critical lens within feminist and psychoanalytic theory. Matricentric feminism is a branch of feminist theory that centres on the experiences, roles, and representations of mothers and motherhood. Unlike broader feminist theories that often focus on women's experiences in general, matricentric feminism specifically addresses the unique social, cultural, and political issues related to being a mother. It emphasizes the ways in which motherhood is shaped by patriarchal structures, the challenges and pressures mothers face, and the need to reframe how motherhood is valued and understood in society.

### **Key themes in matricentric feminism**

1. Revaluation of Motherhood: Challenging the traditional devaluation of motherhood in patriarchal societies and advocating for the recognition of mothering as a vital and empowering

experience.

2. **Motherhood and Identity:** Examining how motherhood shapes women's identities and the ways in which it intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other social categories.
3. **Motherhood and Power:** Critiquing how maternal figures are often depicted in literature and culture as either idealized (the "perfect mother") or demonized, and how this reflects broader societal attitudes towards women's roles.
4. **Social and Economic Justice:** Advocating for policies and practices that support mothers, including maternity leave, affordable childcare, and equal pay, recognizing that these issues are deeply intertwined with women's rights.

Matricentric feminism is closely connected to maternal theory and shares similar concerns with ecofeminism and care ethics, as it also addresses how caregiving and nurturing roles have been historically marginalized but are essential to human society. Scholars like Andrea O'Reilly have been instrumental in advancing this perspective, particularly through the development of the field of maternal studies.

Friend is a popular American sitcom co-created by Marta Kauffman and David Crane along with Kevin S. Bright as an executive producer. It aired on NBC from 1994 to 2004 and remains one of the most iconic TV shows in history. The series follows a group of six friends—Rachel, Ross, Monica, Chandler, Joey, and Phoebe—living in New York City as they navigate life, relationships, and careers. The show became a cultural phenomenon, noted for its humour, and strong character development. Friends revolves around six main characters:

1. **Rachel Green** (played by Jennifer Aniston): Initially a spoiled, rich girl, Rachel matures into an independent woman throughout the series. She works her way up in the fashion industry, starting as a waitress at Central Perk and eventually becoming a successful executive.
2. **Ross Geller** (played by David Schwimmer): Ross is a palaeontologist and Monica's older brother. He's known for his awkwardness and multiple marriages. His on-and-off relationship with Rachel is one of the central storylines of the show.
3. **Monica Geller** (played by Courteney Cox): Ross's sister, Monica, is a chef and known for her obsessive cleanliness and competitive nature. She eventually marries Chandler, her long time friend.
4. **Chandler Bing** (played by Matthew Perry): Known for his sarcastic wit, Chandler works in corporate that he hates for much of the series. He eventually quits his job to pursue a career in advertising and marries Monica.
5. **Joey Tribbiani** (played by Matt LeBlanc): Joey is an aspiring actor and known for his lovable but dim-witted personality. Despite his lack of success in his acting career, he remains a loyal and caring friend.
6. **Phoebe Buffay** (played by Lisa Kudrow): Phoebe is quirky, eccentric, and has a unique sense of humour. She works as a masseuse and plays guitar at Central Perk, often singing her peculiar songs like Smelly Cat.

Applying matricentric feminism to the American sitcom Friends involves analysing how motherhood and maternal roles are represented in the show, as well as how these roles reflect broader societal attitudes about motherhood. While Friends is largely known for its comedic focus on friendship and

relationships, several characters experience motherhood in different ways, and these experiences can be examined through a matricentric feminist lens. Here's a breakdown of key maternal figures and themes in *Friends*:

### **1. Phoebe Buffay – Surrogacy and Unconventional Motherhood**

Phoebe serves as a surrogate for her brother, carrying and giving birth to his triplets. This storyline challenges traditional notions of motherhood, as Phoebe acts as a maternal figure but does not raise the children. Her experience shows how women can redefine motherhood outside of the typical biological or nuclear family structure. Matricentric feminism would highlight Phoebe's empowerment in choosing surrogacy and her complex emotional journey, questioning how society views 'natural' motherhood versus alternative forms like surrogacy. But the show doesn't explore her deeper emotional connection to the pregnancy. It also doesn't challenge or deeply question the societal expectations placed on women to take on motherly roles, whether biologically or through surrogacy.

### **1. Rachel Green – Single Motherhood and Career Balance**

Rachel's journey into motherhood is a central plot point in the later seasons when she has a child, Emma, with Ross. Rachel's storyline reflects many of the pressures placed on modern mothers, particularly balancing a demanding career with single motherhood. Matricentric feminism would examine how Rachel's character navigates these challenges, offering a critique of societal expectations that often force women to choose between professional success and motherhood. The show presents Rachel as a capable and independent woman who can be both a mother and a career-driven individual, reflecting a more progressive view of motherhood. However, matricentric feminism would critique the fact that Rachel's experience as a single working mother is not thoroughly explored. The show glosses over the societal pressures Rachel might face as a single mother, focusing instead on her friendships and career without diving deeply into how motherhood reshapes her personal identity or her social standing.

### **2. Monica Geller – Infertility and Adoption**

Monica's storyline touches on the emotional pain of infertility, and eventually, she and Chandler adopt twins. Matricentric feminism would explore how Monica's desire for motherhood shapes her identity and relationships throughout the series. Her adoption experience also highlights the diverse paths to motherhood and how societal expectations can place undue pressure on women who cannot conceive naturally. The show portrays Monica as a nurturing figure, suggesting that motherhood is about care and love rather than biological connection, aligning with feminist views that challenge traditional family structures. Yet, even this storyline is somewhat side-lined by the show's emphasis on Monica and Chandler's relationship and their journey toward parenthood is wrapped up quickly in the final season without much focus on the complexity of adoption or Monica's emotional journey as an adoptive mother.

### **1. Carol and Susan – Lesbian Motherhood**

Ross's ex-wife, Carol, and her partner, Susan, co-parent their son, Ben, representing lesbian motherhood, another unconventional family structure. Matricentric feminism would look at how Carol and Susan's relationship challenges heteronormative models of family and parenting. Their storyline offers a progressive portrayal of same-sex parenting, which was less common in mainstream media at the time. However, the show's handling of their relationship is often played for humour, which can undermine a deeper exploration of the complexities of lesbian motherhood; the show doesn't focus deeply on the challenges or societal judgments they might face as co-parents in a same-sex relationship.

## **2. Critique of Motherhood Tropes**

Throughout *Friends*, there are both idealized and problematic portrayals of motherhood. For example: Monica's mother, Judy Geller, often reinforces traditional, judgmental views of what a 'good' mother should be, constantly criticizing Monica for her choices. This reflects societal pressures and maternal guilt often placed on women.

Janice, a recurring character, is portrayed as an overbearing and stereotypical mother figure, which can be seen as a humorous exaggeration of motherhood but also reflects negative stereotypes of women who don't conform to idealized, quiet maternal roles.

Through a matricentric feminist lens, *Friends* offers a mix of traditional and progressive portrayals of motherhood. While it addresses important issues like surrogacy, adoption, single motherhood, and same-sex parenting, the show often frames these through a comedic, sometimes stereotypical lens. However, it does provide examples of how women navigate the complexities of motherhood in diverse ways, challenging traditional, patriarchal narratives of what it means to be a mother.

Matricentric feminism in *Friends* can reveal how cultural attitudes about motherhood evolved during the 1990s and early 2000s, reflecting both the pressures and the possibilities for women redefining their roles as mothers.

### **CITATION**

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