



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume VI: Biology and History of Ethnic Violence and Sexual Oppression

Motherhood: Biological Asset or Social Liability?

Guide for Curriculum Unit 02.06.03
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The following unit will explore gender-based oppression. Motherhood and the notion of it as both an asset and a liability will be studied.

Oppress-1 to weigh heavily on the mind, spirits, or senses of; worry; trouble 2 to keep down by the cruel or unjust use of power or authority: rule harshly; tyrannize over 3 to crush; trample down b) to over power; subdue

The dictionary offers the above definition of oppress. Oppression based upon gender is omnipresent throughout history and in contemporary times. While it is subtler in some societies than others it occurs nonetheless. It can easily be identified and protested yet rarely are explanations offered for this practice. This unit will explore themes of female oppression and consider the biological and social aspects of gender based oppression. Biological aspects and social constructions of motherhood will be identified and analyzed in a number of fictional and nonfiction works. Various issues and questions will be discussed throughout the unit. Research, journal writing and reading will all be included while studying these themes. In this manner students will learn to identify sexual oppression in its many forms and will begin to formulate theories as to its origin and to articulate reasons for the perpetuation of such oppressions.

The unit includes three novels that deal with themes of motherhood and sexual oppression: *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherejee, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

These novels are covered in the unit yet several others may be substituted and included. Sociological and political issues concerning women's rights and reproductive issues also provide a broader approach to the issues presented.

(Recommended for English, grades 11-12.)

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