



Blackmore, Mary Jayne. (2020). Balancing Bountiful: What I Learned about Feminism from My Polygamist Grandmothers. Halfmoon Bay: Caitlin Press.

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Mary Jayne Blackmore's book, "Balancing Bountiful" is an autobiographical recount of how the author went from being born and raised in a polygamist fundamentalist Mormon community to being a feminist and activist who fights for the polygamist community she was raised in. Blackmore weaves a story of her own development through her childhood, marriage, and years after that showing the importance of fighting against abusive powers, finding identity, and building community. Blackmore shows through her memoir how being indoctrinated into a strict religion can withhold a woman's independence, but through education and with strong community support, freedom of choice can be taken back. This memoir challenges the mainstream views on what constitutes a family, a woman, and a feminist and how these factors intersect.

Blackmore's polygamist lifestyle challenges the nuclear family which has been the Western standard since the 1920's. But as Blackmore shows, through comparing similar family structures in other areas like New Zealand, family is a concept that cannot be legally defined because there are countless ways in which people structure their relationships. Through personal accounts of having to defend her family and community to outsiders, Blackmore clearly shows how the normalization of nuclear family structures has led to the demonizing of any family that is not

formed in kind. After having to validate her family to strangers, Blackmore reflects, “I find it hard to build a life and feel safe in a world where an irresponsible media is depicting my family as abusive and grotesque. It is unsettling that complete strangers speak as violently as self-proclaimed vigilantes without asking questions or confirming their information” (p. 195).

This demonization opens the door for prejudice and for harmful government intervention against family forms that diverge from this normalcy. The criminalization of polygamy by the government has not stopped this expression of relationship formation or reduced the abuse that is prevalent within these communities as explained by Blackmore, “people living within the culture are made more vulnerable because they are less likely to seek counselling, health services or even friendships outside of their community because of fear of exposing family members and loved ones to repercussions from the law” (p. 273). Criminalization offers the potential for women to lose their husbands to the prison system and for their children to be taken into government care, leaving these women without any support from government social or financial services, and from social persecution by the community that must keep their lifestyle hidden.

Blackmore offers a different solution than criminalization:

If a polygamist family structure were legal in society, those who practise it would have access to the same resources and support systems as the rest of society and fall under the same regulations concerning common-law entitlement and child support when a marriage breaks down. This would create a safety net for the vulnerable people in this demographic to access health and wellness services as well as advocate for their families without feeling like they would be putting family members at risk of criminal charges. Additionally, this would give community services and law enforcement the avenue to focus on harm prevention rather than getting hung up on the criminal nature of the family structure (pp. 272-273).

Blackmore uses vivid imagery to encapsulate the sense of childhood innocence and whimsy of her formative years and how important social influences are in creating concrete ideas of gender roles and maintaining gender double standards. Blackmore subtly shows how being a woman in this type of community offers obvious issues in regard to not just the level of vulnerability women find, but with issues of gender roles, biases, and double standards. Although the strict fundamentalist Mormon teachings are prevalent for both the men and women in the community, women, and young girls especially, are given the strictest rulings over their agency. Blackmore shows how the onus of improper and immoral behaviour is almost entirely bestowed on the girls of the community. From her childhood, Blackmore recalls being told “how challenging it is for boys to keep their feelings in check and not have lusty thoughts about girls they like. We girls are reminded often that chaste priesthood women can play an important part in helping our men with their struggle to stay clean and moral” (p. 95). Boys are expected to behave impulsively and have little control over their actions, whereas girls are told that it is their fault if a boy is unable to control his impulses. The onus is thus taken away from boys and their emotional responsibility is placed on to the girls of the community.

Although the roles were made clear, the rules and expectations were more critical, and oftentimes contradictory, for women. Blackmore explains, “we had to work like boys but we couldn’t cuss like them. Our clothes needed to be modest and functional for hard physical labour but somehow we had to be feminine. We had to think and prepare our hearts for marriage but never become indulgent in fantasies about the men we would wed. We had to be sweet, helpful and

nurturing, but never self-righteous or bossy” (pp. 267-277). The double standards were overlooked by Blackmore during her childhood but became more obvious and questionable as she grew older and gained the ability to challenge those standards in her own life and with her own children, hoping to break the cycle of unfair expectations.

Questioning these gender roles lead Blackmore on the path to learning more about feminism and challenging her views to broaden her understanding on the inequalities of men and women. Blackmore explains, “I’ve struggled feeling that distinctly separated gender roles reduce the role of men to simply breadwinners and authority, rather than being part of a team to contribute to community and family in a meaningful way” (p. 304). This role reduction leaves all choices in the hands of the men and negates the needs of the women of the community. Strictly having men in power denies women the ability to have freedom of choice and gates the social standards that keeps women in subservient positions in society. Blackmore recalls, “when I challenge myself to be honest about the harm done to me, whether directly or indirectly, I guess it feels the most true to say it was abuse of power... and when I think about the feminist fire, it feels relevant that these positions of power were mostly held by men, whether in the media, law enforcement, religion, family or just tradition” (pp. 296-297). The media portrays the women of Bountiful as simple and uneducated, as child brides and child bearers, and as being brainwashed by their religion, husbands, and fathers. This portrayal perpetuates gender roles and maintains prejudice against women of this community. These portrayals also negate the work that women do in the community and their education, and work experience.

Although these women are powerless in forms of authority in their community, Blackmore

makes it obvious that these women are powerful forces in building and maintaining a community that focuses on its level of togetherness and reliance on its members (p. 10). These women are not immediately viewed as typical feminists as they live in a patriarchal society and are devoted to their children and family, but these women have a history of aiding women who are unable to care for themselves and for fighting for their rights as polygamist women to be valued and validated in the eyes of the media and in others. This book shows that being a feminist is not simply turning away from traditionally feminine ways but rather, working to empower women and strive towards a more equal society (pp. 272-273). Feminism can be multifaceted and trying to create one specific category for what marks a feminist is denying people the ability to find their own way of dismantling gender disparity in their society.

Blackmore is using this memoir as a platform to break down the stereotypes of polygamist family structures, of women in these family structures, and of what constitutes a feminist. This book successfully serves as an insider perspective into a polygamist community and in what ways those in the community are effected by patriarchal power structures. This read also allows offers alternative considerations on how the legal system can impact those in the community, which is a helpful view for any reader who is interested in community activism, sociological perspectives of family structures, and political and media influences on society.