

The Trauma of Memory: Maternal Ambivalence in Burnt Sugar.

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Abstract: Maternity comes with unrealistic notions attached to it. In any culture, mothers are expected to show selflessness, unconditional love, and emotional consistency; however, the truth is much more complicated than that because being a mother is never an easy task. Academics and scholars who examine motherhood have recognised the gap for several years now and found out that there exist feelings associated with this identity, known under the term maternal ambivalence. Mothers are said to harbour both positive and negative emotions toward their offspring at the same time. In India, maternal ambivalence is especially complicated because mothers receive the status of being divine and holy figures; therefore, acknowledging such feelings seems to be akin to treason. The novel *Burnt Sugar* by Avni Doshi dares to explore a topic that is forbidden to most Indian women. This paper attempts to show how maternal ambivalence is reflected in the novel and why it appears the way it does. It shifts back and forth between the perspective of the mother and her daughter, depicting ambivalence in relation to motherhood for both individuals – being a mother and being mothered poorly, respectively. In conclusion, this paper will show that denial of any negative feelings in connection with maternal relations within cultural constructs of motherhood leads to passing these experiences across generations in a manner of trauma, influencing women's perception of self, loving and parenting others...

Keywords: ambivalence in maternity, transgenerational trauma, motherhood

Introduction

It is known that Betty Friedan felt compelled to write *The Feminine Mystique* due to her realisation of a discrepancy between reality and the ideal of woman that society perpetuated. In a similar way, Adrienne Rich talked about the disparity between how women feel while raising children and what they are supposed to feel like within patriarchy. Unfortunately, those ideas have not lost their actuality. The prevailing myth about motherhood represents mothers as selfless creatures, full of unconditional love and joy from giving life. However, the reality is far from this. In India, the cult of motherhood takes yet another turn, becoming sanctified through its association with the iconic image of Bharat Mata, a representation of India which, since the beginning of its existence, influenced the image of femininity in India.

The idea of femininity as motherhood is not novel. However, it continues to be prevalent today, reinforcing traditional gender roles by making motherhood one of the core aspects of a woman's identity. The concept of mater-normativity introduced by author and activist Amrita Nandy reflects

the cultural ideology that assumes every woman to become a mother and lays down specific guidelines on how she needs to perform her role as such. Little room for ambiguity and uncertainty of the complex emotions associated with parenthood is allowed.

However, such emotions do exist and are experienced by most mothers. Maternal ambivalence involves complex emotions of anger, guilt, and resentment intertwined with the love of a parent. Such emotions are common enough among mothers; however, cultural ideologies of motherhood make it impossible for women to admit such feelings. Susan Maushart describes them as feelings which women are expected to hide behind a mask of motherhood. This creates expectations that nobody could ever live up to, making guilt and shame a consequence of failing to be ideal. The same theme has been reflected in literature. Scholars who study feminist literature have observed that in women's writing, the mother becomes more of a supporting character — one who is only present through her influence on the protagonist, i.e., the daughter. The tendency has been termed "daughter-centricity" in the field, and the call has been made to transition into "matrifocality," which focuses on depicting the psychological state of mothers themselves.

This paper explores how Avni Doshi's novel *Burnt Sugar* (2020) is a step in that direction. The book discusses maternal ambivalence in a way that is not often seen in Indian women's literature, addressing issues like the psychological burden mothers and daughters bear when they know there are imperfections to motherhood, as well as the complexities surrounding mothering with those memories inside oneself. First, the paper will discuss the author's approach to switching between daughter-centricity and matrilocality in her work. Secondly, the focus will shift to how the ambivalence in question is informed not only by individual psychology but also by the society around the woman. Finally, it looks at how feelings that go unexpressed and unresolved impact later generations, leaving their mark on women's romantic relationships and motherhood well beyond the point where these feelings have been forgotten.

From Daughter-Centricity to Matrilocality

Scholars from India have made considerable contributions to bringing attention to the ways in which nationalism and the goddess motif have been used historically as a means of linking female identity and value to an ability to sacrifice oneself. However, there has been far less written about the actual emotional experience of being a woman and a mother in India. This is perhaps because of the difficulties involved in writing about these issues candidly in an Indian context. Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Jhumpa Lahiri paved the way toward bringing out the interior life of women in Indian literature. But despite this, mothers continue to show up in these novels as absent and frightening figures who exist only as objects of their daughters' complex emotions.

This is what Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy refer to as "daughter-centricity" — namely the practice, common in feminist writing and criticism, of focusing primarily on the daughter's experience of being raised rather than the mother's experience of raising her child. It is a reasonable practice indeed, but it has a consequence. It puts the mother in her paradoxical position without providing any room for narrative redemption. In their turn, theorists such as Andrea O'Reilly, Silvia Caporale-Bizzini, and Elizabeth Podnieks have asked for more matrifocal literature that would narrate maternal experiences from within while being sensitive enough to deal with all the intricacies of this issue, including the cases where the mother fails to fulfil all cultural expectations. *Burnt Sugar* is a powerful answer to that demand.

Speaking about the reason for such a challenging piece, Doshi explained in one of her interviews that, in order to write about this, she had realised the importance of the threat posed by maternal ambivalence: if the relationship perceived as instinctive and natural can be ambivalent, it opens the door to some serious questions about the degree to which a woman's inner world is allowed to exist at all. In essence, it creates a novel that is more willing than any other Indian woman's fiction has been previously to face squarely the reality of mothering.

At first blush, *Burnt Sugar* appears to be a daughter-oriented novel. It features Antara telling a story about her painful childhood, in which she suffered from an emotionally distant mother, the constant absences of that mother, her abuse and neglect. Through the eyes of the wounded daughter, we meet Tara, the mother — an adult who pinches and slaps, who mocks her offspring's appearance, who leaves her with others at will. As the story starts, the tone is instantly set by the first line: "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure." And, indeed, the antagonism between the two characters is mutual — Tara, for instance, responding to the useful reminder notes from her daughter whose memory fails because of her dementia, states: "I cannot believe any child of mine could have such bad handwriting."

However, the novel takes an interesting turn after Antara falls pregnant. Now, Antara not only understands her life as a daughter but also as a mother coming face to face with the unexpected: violent tendencies, feelings of shame and disgust, even an uncomfortable ambivalence about her newborn child. For the first time, she sees how much she and Tara share. "How do I keep from doing the same thing?" she asks. "How do I keep that little girl safe from the same thing?" Neither of the two women ever stopped to consider if becoming a mother was really what they wanted, seeking some sort of validation, acceptance, or sense of meaning in their lives. It is this unexplored choice that taints their bond and sets up the next generation. Through such shifts, the book moves from being a tale centered on daughters to becoming a more genuine story told through a mother's perspective.

What Makes "Bad" Mothers?

The mother who abuses her children through negligence or by actively resenting, scheming against, thinking violently towards, or attacking them is, undoubtedly, a difficult figure for culture to assimilate. This is something myths have been aware of for a very long time: Medea, Kunti, and countless other names feature prominently in the mythologies that different cultures construct around themselves. But unlike in mythology, the abusive or resentful mother is seldom understood within the framework of difficult personal choices and circumstances; instead, she is seen as a failure on the deepest possible moral level.

There have been many great strides made by researchers working on the topic of motherhood. One psychoanalytic tradition, for example, represented by figures such as Rozsika Parker and Barbara Almond, posits that a mother-child bond is just as likely to be a love-hate relationship as any other relationship because human beings, by nature, tend to harbour both emotions toward those who are close to them. It becomes problematic when the ambivalence is allowed to fester and take over the bond. This notion has since been expanded by the sociological perspective, represented by Martha McMahon, Sharon Hays, and Andrea O'Reilly, among others. According to these experts, ambivalence in mothers is not only caused by internal factors but also by the context in which the mother happens to live. Research shows a direct correlation between cultural pressure and ambivalence.

In a culture where expectations are as high as those in India, the pressure is particularly intense. Mothers who are ambivalent towards their roles find themselves not just dealing with the common issues faced by an intimate couple but with the standard of perfection that is set up in such relationships, making them feel completely inadequate. This leads to a sense of shame which can itself cause problems. As has been stated by Almond, what is problematic is the impossibility of discussing one's feelings openly in such societies.

The Ambivalent Mother: Tara

In a society where motherhood is considered to be the ultimate achievement for women, a woman choosing not to bear a child will always be seen as a deviant. Thus, motherhood ceases to be a choice and takes on the mantle of a duty — the way to belong and to earn respect and love. Neither Tara nor Antara wishes to be mothers because of personal reasons. While Tara believes that following in the footsteps of a good wife would enable her to enter the world, Antara's fear of abandonment drives her to think that having a child will secure her husband's love. Forced into motherhood instead of being attracted to the experience, neither of these women finds herself embracing a role for which she was never quite prepared.

It is not something that Tara hides. Several times throughout the story, she tells Antara outright that she did not want her, as in the statement, "I always knew having you would ruin my life." That is a shocking statement to come out of a mother's mouth; however, instead of allowing us to turn away from Tara for such statements, Doshi allows us to see that parental regrets like that are a natural part of parenthood but rarely acknowledged as such because of societal taboos.

Before becoming a mother, Tara lived a life full of rebellion against anything society expected of her because she was a woman. However, when she decided to go along with what was expected of her, she found herself married into a relationship without love due to the strict and controlling nature of her mother-in-law, who had learned to channel all of her life purpose through her son. The daughter-in-law was seen as a threat to this relationship, and Tara was treated as such. The woman would control everything related to her son's marriage and house affairs. According to psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, the traditional Indian society sees a woman's purpose only as a means of providing her family with sons, which should always be protected and cared for. In this case, the marriage is viewed as a deal made by the mother-in-law and controlled by her at all times. Tara, who lived in this terrible environment, would hit her head on the wall and yell silently, just to cope with the situation.

However, once her dreams of creating another future for herself and her husband were thwarted by her mother-in-law, Tara found out that she was pregnant. The timing could not be worse. Moreover, when she tried to turn to her own mother, she faced rejection. This is an integral part of the cultural code in India: after getting married, a girl becomes a member of her husband's family, and her unhappiness is seen as her fault. In spite of the absence of any form of support and the lack of escape routes, Tara returned to her past ways of rebelling. She ceased being the idealistic wife and started spending most of her time in the ashram. She got distanced from her pregnancy, smoking even though she knew that it would hurt her unborn child and, later on, ignoring her infant for hours when she was nursing her.

Her reason for taking her daughter along with her was the fact that the little one had no one else who wanted to take care of her. For the fact that Antara was a girl meant that she was not loved or appreciated in the family, and so Tara ended up being a mother – whether by choice or by force. In other words, motherhood accompanied her from her marriage to the ashram, although she could never fully accept this role as a wife had been denied her. It seems that according to Adrienne Rich, society only labels mothers who get broken down by motherhood as either mentally unstable or monsters. Little analysis goes into the conditions under which they have come to such an emotional state. Indeed, Tara's aggression against Antara is real and does harm; the novel does not shy away from portraying this aspect. At the same time, it challenges us to look beneath the surface and consider the reasons behind Tara's despair, her inability to cope with the past that she cannot change, but which continues to affect the present.

There are some gentler moments as well. Though Tara did not want children, she named her baby Antara, which means "without Tara," a child unlike her mother. Her desire was to provide her daughter with a completely different fate than what she had lived through. In her studies of maternal ambivalence, Rozsika Parker described such a state not as a combination of positive and negative emotions but as a very tumultuous state when both love and hatred are present simultaneously, feeding each other. This is what Doshi shows us on pages of her book. In fact, when Antara calls her mother selfish, Tara simply replies that there is no harm in considering one's own interests. *Burnt Sugar* does not expect us to forgive Tara. *Burnt Sugar* demands that we know Tara completely.

Antara, The Ambivalent Daughter and Mother

Tara, Antara's mother, relates to her daughter the abuse she underwent at the hands of her own mother with almost clinical detachment. She has developed certain coping skills that harm none other than herself, namely overeating and cutting herself. The wounds that Antara carries into adulthood are both emotional and physical. The quest for love and fulfilment that Tara undertakes throughout her life makes her always feel unappreciated and angry.

When Antara decides to get married and have children, she does not do so out of true desire, but from desperation; she hopes that in doing so, she will finally find stability after all those years of insecurity. Marriage ties her financially and emotionally to a man who is not entirely trustworthy. When her mother threatens to reveal her affair, Antara is afraid and believes that having a child is the only thing that can stop her from being abandoned by him. "Maybe then I will be sacred. He can never leave me now that I am going to have his baby." This is a harsh reality of life, but Doshi portrays it as such in a world where the lack of opportunities available to a woman has forced her into the position where she must resort to motherhood for sustenance.

The experience that follows – the pregnancy, childbirth, and the early days of nurturing an infant – is depicted in a manner that shies away from idealisation. The author does not romanticise it as she tells us of the hardships, exhaustion, and physical stress of being pregnant. Doshi depicts Antara in a state of weariness and the feeling of being turned into an instrument for another. Antara is devoid of any of the ecstasy she was supposed to feel after holding her daughter. In her weariness, Antara does not feel love but rather resentment for the demands of her daughter: "She demands too much, always hungering for more". Antara has violent thoughts; she imagines throwing the infant out the window. She refers to the screaming baby as "rude little bitch." These are not the musings of a monster; these are the musings of a woman who has been driven to the edge, who lacks proper resources, and who has never had the chance to realise that being a mother isn't all it was cracked up to be.

These sentiments cycle between protectiveness and affection. If others are holding her baby, she feels resentful towards them. "The violence dissipates instantaneously into an opposite sentiment, an insistent wish to keep her close to me forever." Maternal ambivalence in its truest form – not the diplomatic acknowledgment that parenthood is difficult, but a literal switching back-and-forth between love and the appearance of the opposite sentiment.

Perhaps the most damning part about this is the comparison she makes to her husband. "While I am a wreck," she writes, "he comes out of all of this virtually untouched – proud and composed, even socially acclaimed for his role as a father." Her husband walks away without scars from the experience, while she is physically and emotionally broken. "He looks smug, proud of himself or his family. I want to confront him and ask him what he has done for any of us." This cultural model of dividing the woman in the private sphere of domesticity and reproduction, and the man in the public sphere of productivity and politics, is an integral part of Indian perceptions of motherhood which, unfortunately, has continued for generations in households where mothers continue to do everything and be grateful for the chance.

Fathers throughout the novel are absent or inactive. There is no attempt on their part to shoulder any responsibility, nor are they criticised or accused of anything by anyone. Antara is the one whose wrath is unleashed against her mother despite having been let down in equal measures by her male relatives. She recognises this in therapy although she denies it at the same time saying: "I don't blame my mother – though I know I do and always have". However, becoming a mother herself seems to bring about some change. All the feelings that she finds herself unable to articulate now seem to be somewhat familiar. She finally gets an inkling of why her mother behaved the way she did.

The guilt that accompanies their experiences as mothers is not incidental. It arises directly from the standard they have internalised. Having been taught that they should feel nothing but love and gratitude, they take their more complex feelings as a sign of failure. Tara's guilt ultimately becomes self-loathing – naming her daughter Antara "Un-Tara" was not an act of love, but a manifestation of her hatred towards herself and a desire to have a daughter that was different from her. Tara's ambivalence, exacerbated by the constant accusations and judging from her daughter, turns into resentment – what Parker identifies as a form of defensive projection when you turn your feeling of inadequacy outwards onto your child. This creates a vicious circle: the more Antara humiliates Tara, the more Tara resents her. The more Tara resents her daughter, the more ashamed Antara needs to be.

This pattern repeats itself in Antara's parenting as well. While her intentions to provide her daughter with the same love she had lacked in childhood seem noble, she is unable to do so since motherhood is not about giving unconditional love, as one expects it to be, but also about facing and

dealing with numerous challenges. She had always been afraid of this even before her pregnancy because she was scared that being a mother to a daughter would hurt her even more and because the pain of her own past could ruin her parenting abilities. Tara herself was always considered a warning example.

Unresolved Ambivalence and Transgenerational Trauma

According to Rozsika Parker, mothering is a multigenerational process – all women mother with the eyes of their mothers watching either from behind or from within. This is particularly true for Tara and Antara. Both girls were raised with a desire to provide something else to their daughters than they themselves were given. However, both fail to escape the pattern to a certain extent.

Tara was doing everything possible in order to ensure that her daughter's life would be different from hers. Antara herself decided to become someone else, someone completely different from Tara. The very nature of her determination made her connected to her mother – she became "pitted against" Tara in an attempt to separate from her in some way. According to Parker, guilt serves as the catalyst for deeper ambivalence and shame emerges when that ideal becomes unattainable. Tara was never capable of meeting cultural expectations of a mother. With each of her odd decisions Antara reminded her of her failure as a mother in front of the whole world, constantly humiliating her and making her aware of her flaws. Thus, Tara could never make peace with her mixed feelings, since her insecurity eventually turned into hate directed toward herself.

However, with the progression of the disease and weakening memory some bizarre things start happening to Tara. Sometimes in her confusion she thinks that Antara is still a baby – leaving plastic sheets for her to sleep, taking care of the plan to pick her up after school. When Antara gives birth to Annika, Tara starts believing that she is taking care of a little Antara and feels the need to nurture her the way she never managed to do before. Perhaps it could be considered an attempt of her to fix the mistakes she made.

Antara acknowledges the sense of guilt that consumes her as well. For her, it's a burden that comes from previous generations of women, ingrained in the stories that mothers share with daughters, in the lessons that are passed down along with them: "These stories have been told from mothers to daughters since women had voices and could tell stories. They all carry a moral message, rites of passage. But there is also the feeling that all mothers get before it's too late. Guilt." Her mother-in-law further complicates her life by judging all her actions according to her experience of motherhood, and by finding her wanting. In one moment, Antara finds herself wanting to kill them all – all the voices judging her – and imagining herself happy, free, more present with her daughter without them. She can't escape her burden. And since she can't escape it, she can't escape from the ambivalence that goes along with it.

The reason why the novel is so impactful is that there isn't a resolution to all of this. There is none. Tara never recovers. Antara never arrives at any kind of forgiveness or peace. The hurt carries on to the next generation, and there is little anyone can do about it. However, *Burnt Sugar* shows that the whole truth about motherhood needs to be acknowledged – the love and the violence, the kindness and the fury, and the guilt that is never lifted – within a culture that demands nothing but silence. This attempt to see everything as it is in all its complexities is itself a gesture of resistance.

Conclusion

Motherhood can be viewed as the unfinished business of feminism, as Andrea O'Reilly notes. It would be hard not to agree, since most women enter motherhood with many burdens – from financial worries to health problems and personal history to social expectations. And then comes motherhood, which is not always as rosy as it seems. It is very easy to understand that not all women are capable of embracing their motherly role with joy and passion. However, the idea of women who are always devoted to their babies without any doubt is far from being true. Moreover, it does serious harm to

many women. At the same time, no society can admit that the concept of the perfect mother is nothing more than fiction.

However, the price to pay for buying into that fantasy is that the real-life experience of mothers – with all its anger, ambivalence, loss, despair, exhaustion – gets pushed into the dark. Mothers come to learn how to feel guilty about the very human emotions they should be allowed to have. This is why feminism, which seeks to speak to the reality of all women's experiences, must be able to take an honest look at this issue, too. Otherwise, it would be ignoring some of the most fundamental issues in women's lives.

This brings me to my final point: matrifocal writing and reading. The literature that puts mothers center stage as fully realised human beings with their own needs, contradictions, and inner world is an important step towards recognising the complexity of mothering without being bound by institutions that seek to limit and control it. Matrifocal writing and reading can thus enable us to recognise our own flaws, contradictions, and imperfections as women, as mothers, and as feminists. In order to accomplish this, however, writers must have the courage to be truthful – something not encouraged in today's culture.

Burnt Sugar will have no part of such complacency. As Doshi reveals in her novel, the realities of mothering are brought starkly to life in all their gritty, difficult truth. We see what the experience is like for women whose choices are not voluntary, for whom their roles as mothers bring pain and suffering for themselves as well as others. And the repercussions do not stop there. The scars of such experiences run deep, affecting the ways in which people love, parent and think about themselves within the generations to come.

Why, then, is Doshi's novel so powerful? Part of the reason lies in the way she manages to convey two sides of the story at once. We see Tara's mothering through Antara's eyes, but we also see Antara's perspective on what it means to be Tara's child. We are able to recognise, in other words, the damage done by mothering and the damage done by its failure equally. As such, it peels back the mythology of motherhood in India and brings the real, complicated human truth to the surface.

But that honesty is difficult to be comfortable with. Nevertheless, it is important. "Burnt Sugar" provides neither answers nor consolation. Instead, what it provides is clarity – the recognition that motherhood must be looked at for what it truly is, rather than how cultural forces try to dictate. Such recognition requires great courage in itself – a courage required by literature and feminism alike.

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