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MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN SOUTH ASIAN FICTION: CONFLICTING CONTOURS OF GENDER ROLES

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Abstract

In South-Asian region, child birth and child care constitute a woman's fundamental duties towards her husband and family. Her entire life is shaped to embark on an oscillating journey from being an aspiring woman to a fulfilled mother. The act of mothering has been hailed as sacred and sacrificing one even in child stories and epic tales. The image of Yashoda cooing over little Krishna on her lap creates a discourse of unflinching devotion of mother to her child. But the rupture occurs as the same does not happen when the child happens to be a girl. To be a mother and to be a mother of a girl child constitute two diverse discourses in South-Asia where a son holds a far greater social significance. In such social-setup, daughters usually resist the social conditioning into gender norms inculcated in them by their mothers. This situation creates a strong scope for daughters taking over their mothers' authoritative positions and thus subverting the social dichotomy mother/daughter. This paper embarks on a journey to trace in what conflicting sense a daughter responds to her mother's act of mothering; at the same time maintaining how the experiences of the daughter also condition her mother's life and vision. In a more apparent sense, the paper highlights that the mother also needs mothering to enrich her worldview about childcare and devotion.

Keywords: Mother, Daughter, Conditioning, Discourse, Deconstruction

Mother performs the role of the originator, birth-giver, nurturer, and teacher; and thus claims a superior position in her relation to the daughter. Thus, the dichotomy mother/daughter becomes a very significant one as far as power politics is played in mother-daughter discourses. As Michel Foucault puts it, "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?" (119). But if the existing bond between mother and daughter is analyzed under Derrida's observation about the binary of Speech/Writing, it opens up a new arena of understanding. Hitherto it was speech which was privileged against the writing. But Derrida postulates that "Writing is in fact the precondition of language and must be considered as prior to speech" (358). Similarly there is a deep connection between daughter's craving for self-presence and the all-effacing, merging attitude of the mother. Their relationship, though consistent and mutually reinforcing at a certain level, lies open to disruption as soon as one substitutes daughter for mother, as writing for speech, in the conceptual order that governs them. Thus, at one level, a mother relives her daughterhood by bringing up her own daughter and the daughter, in fact, recreates her mother's

personality and understanding about her own self and thus modifies the experiences of the mother. Steph Lawler highlights, "Generation is important here, as mothers and daughters occupy different generational positions and relate to each other across them. Gender, clearly, is central, since the lives of both mothers and daughters are, at least in part, structured in terms of gender positioning and gender identity" (16).

It seems the conflicts shown between mothers and daughters in many novels especially by South-Asian women novelists are part of an undergoing power-play. The social positions of mother and daughter appear to be at war within the patriarchal framework they are part of. The idea begins to take a concrete shape the moment it is envisioned as forming a binary position in which the former is privileged in comparison to the latter. The daughter seeks to search out her own roots, identity and strength through questioning, resisting and interpreting her mother's experiences. In her attempts of self-discovery and self-analysis she challenges, controls and shapes her mother's life, and thus subverts the binary mother/daughter to daughter/mother. The daughter has usually been treated as secondary, subordinate, a mere absence, a shadow of the mother which also remains the most frequently represented worldview of daughterhood, both in life and letters. Gilbert and Webster remark, "Within many of these accounts, mothers are represented as the guarantors of a patriarchal social order: the daughter must struggle against the mother's influence if she is to achieve 'autonomy'" (17). In the power struggle, the daughter has been placed at the periphery in most of the mother-daughter discourses. Application of deconstruction helps subvert the binary mother/daughter to challenge the secondary position in the binary and establish it as privileged as the primary one. The traditional idea is based on the presumption that all women are first born as daughters who later become mothers. The identity called 'mother' is postponed till the time a daughter agrees to attain it. In other words, daughterhood is the absolute phase of a woman's life but motherhood can be a choice or a mere possibility. It implies that all women are daughters and they remain so throughout their life but selectively some of them become mothers too according to their choice and physiology. Even on the psychological ground, some of the impressions as a daughter on the woman's mind are channelized into her personality as a mother and simultaneously also determine her motherhood. Therefore, the present paper attempts to reveal how the 'daughter' both within and without a woman governs her life and actions.

The captive daughter within the personality of the mother, time and again, attempts to claim her meaningful position and for that influences the mother's choices and the nature of her practising motherhood. This theme has been taken up in consideration by many famous South-Asian women novelists like Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Manju Kapur, and others. Among this group of writers, however, Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* has been taken up for a critical scrutiny to trace the diverse and conflicting contours of mother-daughter relationship. *The Binding Vine* published in 1993 clearly depicts how the memories of a lost daughter may haunt the mother on the one hand, and how a mother may wish for her daughter's death on the other. "It is important to note that repression of the mother, and the daughter's unsatisfying relationship with the mother are some of the major issues in Shashi Deshpande" (Uniyal 64). Does it not signal a move towards the conflicting existence of the daughter? Certainly, the daughter, whether dead or living, governs the life of the mother affecting it even to the extent of haunting her. The narrative involves the mother named Urmi who suffers from the guilt of having lost her daughter: "It's all my fault. . . . It isn't nonsense. If I hadn't taken Anu away with me, if I hadn't . . ." (13-14). This bereaved mother tries hard to get rid of the guilt of her daughter's demise but throughout the novel it works as a recurring theme defining her life and actions. After losing Anu, the daughter, Urmi feels only numbness. It seems without the daughter, the mother's life is meaningless. She complains, "Has Anu taken all my capacity to feel away with her? I begin to bang my head against the wall. I can hear the dull rhythmic thud thud. There's nothing else. No pain at all" (15). Thus, the loss of the

daughter begins to govern the life of Urmi making her conscious of her degraded self. She imagines herself as something which has been left out without acknowledgement of its essence. When Harish, Vanaa's husband, enquires about her well-being, Urmi divulges, "Okay. But empty. As if the core of me has been scooped out, leaving a hallow" (17). It is to be noted here that it is the death of the daughter in this novel that occupies the central place in the mother's life. Otherwise, in many other mother-daughter discourses it is usually the mother who is being mourned. However, Harish tries to console Urmi by his sound clinical advice mentioning that "I'm trying to tell you that this – losing a loved one – happens to every human. People recover eventually, don't they?" (18). But for Urmi, her daughter Anu is not only a loved one whose loss can easily be forgotten and compensated for. With Anu, it seems, Urmi has lost her present self and future hope of a companion – the one significant part of her own being.

The memories of the daughter are so strong that they do not free Urmi from their clutches. She feels bound to remember Anu. She is disturbed to such an extent that she imagines her daughter everywhere:

> Let them go? But it's Anu who won't let me go. She comes to me, over and over again she comes to me. I have hallucinations. I wake up to hear that soft snuffling sounds of her breathing by my side; I can smell her sweet baby flesh. Something, as if I have gone back in time, her milky, ammoniac, talcum odour comes back to me; my breasts feel heavy and painful, as if they are gorged with milk. Once again I can feel the softness of her body in my arms, the heaviness of her head flopping over my shoulder; I can feel her toes, scrabbling at my midriff. (21)

The life of Urmi turns into a battle ground where each passing moment asks her to fight the betrayal. She suffers from the guilt that she could have saved her daughter. This element of regret offers her nothing essential but mere pain of betrayal. What she resisted in her daughter when she was alive now appears to her life-affirming sources. And she resolutely says, "No, I must reject these memories, I have to conquer them. This is one battle I have to win if I am to go on living. And yet my victory will carry with it the taint of betrayal. To forget is to betray" (21). Due to Anu's painful memories, Urmi has become distant from the possibility of letting her life go on happily. She misses her previous self and longs to remain associated with Anu too. Her situation has become so pathetic that she says, "Oh God, Amrut, I've forgotten how to laugh – it's almost painful. Isn't it terrible?" (25). Even to laugh seems painful to Urmi. It is because she takes even a simple expression of happiness as a betrayal of her daughter's loss. The memories of Anu affect her motherly life with such intensity that Urmi though seeking to move on in life also wishes to remain stuck to those memories. It seems as if her self-assessment results in self-punishment and ultimately it appears to Urmi that to suffer for her daughter can reduce the pain in her heart. She mentions, "Never, I will never stop suffering for Anu" (27).

Once Urmi is asked how many children she has. Though she answers, "Only one. A son" (60), but what she thinks at the same instant is significant to note here: "Must they ask this question? Oh God, must they?" (60). Thus even an indirect reference to her daughter renders Urmi bewildered and she again becomes conscious of the betrayal: "Only one, a son . . . the words keep hammering in my mind. How could I, oh God, how could I? That was betrayal, treachery, how could I deny my Anu?" (106). Even the simple routine activities like cooking meal absorb Urmi into her daughter's memories. It seems as if Urmi lives not a life of her own but a life of her dead daughter. Through memories of the daughter, Urmi the mother recreates her reality of everyday life:

> I make the chapattis and we start on our meal. And suddenly I remember Anu, her little sparrow mouth open to receive the spoon, banging her own spoon on the table, turning her head to follow Kartik as he dances about the room to amuse her, the spoon scrapping her cheek . . . . (63)

The memories of the daughter have so strongly been ingrained onto Urmi's psyche that each passing moment seems to echo the lost presence of Anu in the mother's life. Any simple thought about Anu fills Urmi's heart with loss and an element of anguish. Once Urmi's mother wished to have a photograph of Anu put on the wall. Urmi reacts to this idea of Anu watching her from the wall every time she crosses it. With disdain she bursts out, "I don't need a picture to remember her, I can remember every bit of her, every moment of her life. How can you imagine I need a picture . . . ?" (68). Urmi is not able to escape from the vibrant memories of her daughter. Her loss has made Urmi too much conscious of her motherhood that now she feels reluctant to be the mother of only a son. She states: "I have a vivid picture of Anu, a soft warm mound in Inni's bed, opening her eyes and looking at me, the sudden sharp awareness of my presence in her eyes, the small body scrabbling at the covers, sitting up, holding out her arms, the happy cries . . ." (69). The loss of the daughter is so heavy on Urmi's conscience that she becomes insecure almost on the verge of losing her personal self. The loneliness born out of the absence of the daughter haunts Urmi the most. It appears as if the daughter governs the life of the mother. Urmi misses her daughter so intensely that she has to look at strangers to fill her loneliness with human voices. She retorts to her mother, "I've told you many times let's call Shanta back, even if there's no work for her at least I'll have someone to talk to. I know I'm a burden to you, but I'm helpless, I have no one . . ." (69).

Urmi longs to discover what has remained undone in her relationship with her daughter that Anu left her mother before reaching the age of acknowledgement. For Anu, Urmi has been one among other women who gives birth and nourish their children. She could never make Urmi feel as a special mother. But now the pain of her loss has made Urmi a special class of woman who seeks answers of such questions which lie unanswered since centuries: "And the whole day I have been left with an uneasy sense of something undone, something I should have done for Anu, but hadn't. What was it?" (123). Here, the daughter becomes the source of fulfillment for the mother in the sense that what the mother has lacked in her life as a daughter herself, she attempts to live up to all that through her daughter: "I wanted so much for Anu; now, it's all gone, there's nothing left of all my hopes for her. We dream so much more for our daughters than we do for our sons, we want to give them the world we dreamt of for ourselves" (124). But in this process of bestowing so many self-assessed and self-fulfilling dreams, mothers like Urmi and Shakutai forget to acknowledge their daughters' peculiar individual distinct selves implying that it is not necessary what one desires for oneself has to be true in case of all others. Shakutai tells, "I wanted Kalpana to have all that I didn't. But Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams. She had her own" (124). And in this way the binary mother/daughter is substituted and replaced by daughter/mother.

Urmi believes that if she starts living a normal life living afresh it would be a treachery to her bond with her daughter. The reason seems that it is only Anu who gives a sense of belongingness to her mother. "Now, yes. But at first I thought, if I stop grieving, if I take up my normal life, I'll be betraying Anu" (155). Here Anu does not merely represent her dead daughter but in a sense turns out to be a reference point which links Urmi to her own 'Anu' – essence of daughterhood that she has been carrying all through these years. According to Basudhara Roy, "She is grieved with the memories of her mothering of Anu which are also, psychoanalytically, the memories of her pre-oedipal relationship with her mother" (2). Thus for her to betray Anu is similar to betraying her own sense of daughterhood; to betray her daughter is like betraying her own daughterly self. And it is this loss of self that haunts Urmi day and night.

Along with the story of Urmi and her daughter Anu, the novel also deals with the story of Mira, Urmi's dead mother-in-law and also recounts her daughterly and motherly experiences. Ranu Uniyal remarks, "Mira has been denied the space to be herself in her husband's house. She does not share her isolation with her mother. She knows she cannot be like her mother. She would not want to become her mother" (64-65). Mira dies giving birth to her son at the age of twenty-two. Urmi was given the charge of the old trunk carrying Mira's writings.

Through Mira's poems and scattered write-ups, Urmi tries to understand her own relationship both as a daughter and a mother. Before it, she considered that losing a daughter was only her personal loss. But while going through Mira's life history that she constructs through her poems, Urmi realizes her position in the arena of profound feminine sufferings. "Her mother was lucky, she died first, she never had to clear away her dead daughter's belongings" (51). Mira's mother had died before Mira's death. Mira had to go through marital rape as her poems suggest to Urmi. Perhaps without her mother's wisdom, Mira was not ready to begin her married life. Urmi feels, "I have a feeling Mira was closer to her father. I imagine that she, his only daughter, was his favourite child" (64).

Mira, it seems, had grown up in reaction to her mother's idea of herself. "In her refusal to be her mother, the daughter somehow seeks a different place and a space of her own. The mother's role is what she dreads, despises and refuses to accept" (Uniyal 65). She remained secretive as it could be seen in her relation with her husband. The novelist writes about Mira that "But I have my defences; I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings" (67). This element of resistance governed her relationship especially with her mother. And she finally decided to what not to do: "To make myself in your image/ was never the goal I sought" (*BV*, 124). And as a defiant and resistant daughter, Mira questions her mother's self, her wisdom and her vision. She writes:

> They all think I am grieving because I could not meet her before she died. Am I? Yes, I am. But there is more. I wish I could have asked her a question. 'Mother,' I always wanted to ask, 'Why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?' But she died and I will never know her answer now. (126)

Thus, instead of becoming like her mother, Mira becomes an aspiring poet. She leaves behind a set of poems and notes in a diary, but none give her recognition. "It seems that by wanting to become a poet Mira has transgressed the patriarchal domain which is satisfied only by excluding and suppressing the poet in her" (Uniyal 66).

The novel also deals with Vanaa and her daughter, Mandira. When "Vanaa and Mandira both moved to Akka, and of the two it was Mandira who looked more adult" (46). Out of the two, it is the daughter, Mandira, who dictates the nature of their relationship. Vanaa's perception of her own self and the validation of her actions and decisions depend on Mandira's responses and reactions. Mandira's extrovert and dominating behaviour renders Vanaa questioning her own sense of motherhood. Vanaa asks Urmi:

> 'Did you see how carefully she avoided saying anything to me when she left? That little chit, she does it deliberately, she knows she can hurt me. You heard her, didn't you? The kind of things she says to me. Do you think there's something wrong with me, Urmi? Am I such a terrible mother?' (74)

Thus, the narrative revolves around the desired claims of the daughter against her mother's superior position. To attain the privileged position in their socio-cultural roles, the daughter segregates herself from the mother and does not even hesitate to challenge the mother's worldview by her independent choices. In this way, the narrative highlights a new possibility of a binary – daughter/mother – emerging out from the tussle for power between women's different social roles. Therefore, while talking about a fix identity either about mother or daughter, there remains an inherent enigma voiced by Judith Kegan Gardiner who clearly states that "the word 'identity' is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women" (347). Thus, it is not easy to become a mother by giving up daughterhood altogether. There always remains something significant about daughterhood in the personality of the mother perhaps because she can be a daughter and a mother at the same time.

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