

**Maternal Fictions: The Representation of Motherhood  
in Indian Women's Writing**

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## **Abstract**

This project seeks to examine and analyse motherhood as presented by selected Indian women writers, paying particular attention to selected works by Ashapura Debi, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Nandita Bagchi. My research engages with their literary representation of motherhood for a number of reasons. First, their works are illustrative of the discursive norms of the particular society and culture – or intersection of cultures – in which they were produced. Second, and perhaps more importantly, their creative portrayals provide a “space of contention” that contributes to re-conceiving prevalent ideas of motherhood and thus offers alternative visions. Drawing upon feminist scholarship on motherhood and postcolonial feminism, this thesis, in the course of its four chapters, focuses on four thematic areas, namely maternal subjectivity and agency, the mother-daughter relationship, motherhood and diaspora and non-biological motherhood. It attempts to understand the literary ramifications of these concerns in order to identify the ways in which the representations reconceptualise the notion of motherhood from and against multiple perspectives. Another concern is whether these Indian women writers’ visions furnish readers with any different understandings of motherhood (a term which is in turn intimately linked to our understanding of womanhood) as compared to dominant Western feminist discourses. Exploring connections between the fictions’ content and form, the thesis interrogates which literary modes the writers mobilise and how they variously articulate their visions. In conclusion, I argue that this project furthers feminist literary criticism in the specific area of Indian women’s writing and the overarching area of motherhood and literature by suggesting a complex constellation of ideas concerning motherhood – one which is ambivalent, diverse, contingent, grounded in a specific location, and yet well placed to converse with discourses emanating from other times and places.

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Indrani Karmakar, York, September 2017

## **Author's Declaration**

I, Indrani Karmakar, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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## Introduction

“I am a single mother.

I am the mother of humankind, whose name has been erased by the propagation that Manu came from Brahma’s navel, and *manab* from Manu”. (Sengupta n.pag.; trans. mine)

The late Bengali poet Mallika Sengupta, in the first two lines of her poem “Ekla Ma-er Monologue” (Monologue of a Single Mother), captures two modes of repression: the denial and silencing of mothers. She alludes to the Hindu mythological account of the origin of man, one version of which relates that Manu, the first man, came into existence from the navel of the deity Brahma, who is one of the three Gods in the Hindu trinity. The Sanskrit word *manab* translates as human, although it is a masculine noun (like the patriarchal use of “man” to denote humanity that still sometimes creeps in to the English language). According to legend, Manu is the “First Man” or “the father of the human race” (Wilman-Grabowska 116). What the poet highlights here is that in this religious narrative that traces the origin of humankind, the figure of the mother has been left out. The word “single” in the title and the first line of the poem carry particular nuances, especially if we consider the original Bengali word *ekla*. On the one hand, *ekla* connotes a sense of loneliness as it commonly translates as “alone”, but on the other hand there are undercurrents of being self-reliant.<sup>1</sup> My epigraph is thus emblematic of the curious position the mother finds herself in, which is located somewhere between repression and resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> The word *ekla* when used in poetry or song strikes a special chord in middle-class Bengali, literary and cultural consciousness because of the enduring legacy of Rabindranath Tagore’s song “Ekla cholo re”, the first line of which is “if they answer not to thy call, walk alone” (Tagore *English Writing* 341).

This thesis aims to bring mothers and the maternal to the forefront of cultural analysis through an exploration of fictions produced by women writers. To do this, this project seeks to examine and analyse motherhood as presented by selected Indian women writers, paying particular attention to selected works by Ashapura Debi, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Nandita Bagchi. My research engages with their literary representation of motherhood for a number of reasons. Firstly, these writers' novels and short stories are illustrative of certain aspects of Indian society: their works reflect the discursive norms of the particular society and culture – or intersection of cultures – in which they were produced. Secondly and more importantly, their creative portrayals provide a “space of contention” (Chaudhuri and Mukherjee 2) and thus contribute to re-conceiving prevalent ideas of motherhood, offering alternative visions that are inclusive yet contingent.

### **Writers, Texts and Contexts**

In this project to map the maternal in fiction, I limit my focus to Hindu women writers and texts produced in last fifty years. This constraint owes primarily to the varied and multifarious socio-cultural and religious practices permeating India. The inclusion of writers belonging to diverse backgrounds – for example, India's biggest minority, Muslims – might run the risk of generalisation, obliterating various determining factors relating to religion and ethnicity, as well as the specificity of each individual author in terms of her literary engagement with society at large. This is not to say that the fictions chosen, as well as the examination attempted, convey a monolithic picture of the Hindu Indian cultural context and the writers' literary engagement with that. The selected texts are diverse, having been produced in different decades and places, while



the authors are from various social and regional contexts; some are based in India, while others are diasporic. Jhumpa Lahiri is an American writer but is of Indian descent, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a first-generation Indian immigrant in America. Anita Desai, who is of mixed parentage, could also be seen as diasporic writer as she now lives in New York. Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Ashapura Debi and Nandita Bagchi (the latter having spent substantial time in West Africa) are India-based writers, but have chosen different languages for their literary production (English for Deshpande, while Devi, Debi and Bagchi write in Bengali).

There are evidently intersecting cultural factors that influence both the writers and their creative portrayals, while the time scale of fifty years inevitably witnesses many changes to society and its cultural production. The time period is in part chosen to enable a broad understanding of such growth and development in women writers' attempt to delineate the maternal. For example, *The First Promise* by Ashapura Debi was published in 1964, with its plot being situated in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. I include this text in Chapter 2: Mothering Daughters, along with Shashi Deshpande who is writing in and about India of the 1990s. These two literary narratives, tied together by somewhat similar concerns but separated by time and space, help me identify overlapping issues, such as mother-daughter estrangement, ambivalence and so on, as I sketch the contours of the literary representation of the mother-daughter relationship that assumes new shapes and retains old struggles.

This thesis addresses the wide variety within the Hindu cultural context, in which caste and class play a determining role. Mahasweta Devi's texts, which delineate some maternal stories of women belonging to marginalised classes and castes, enable me to enquire into the intersectional web of oppression that mothers are subjected to. By placing Devi's textual mothers next to Anita Desai's upper-class, urban protagonist Sita from *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* (1975), I

attempt to unravel the significant differences of maternal experiences even within the Hindu context, wherein Hindu religious and social veneration of mothers is always at work but is entangled with class and caste in intricate ways. It is this exigency of diversity that prompts me to reach for the representation of the maternal in the Hindu Indian diaspora in the US as portrayed in Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakruti, who are second and first generation immigrants, respectively. To summarise the justification of my chosen parameters, the texts and writers selected do not epitomise the entire country, and nor are they intended to be read as representative of the Hindu cultural milieu. My intention is to keep the Hindu context as a common backdrop – however diverse and vast this is within itself – in order to mobilise a comparative examination, making use of “provocative divergences” (Silva 11), so that an in-depth analysis can be achieved while the research remains manageable.

Another aspect of this thesis that might be considered a limitation, though I have tried to tackle this in a productive way, is its tilt towards Bengali writers. This is partly because of my familiarity with that region and language, which gives me a special entry point. My particular, though not exclusive, focus on Bengali women writers can also be explained by Bengal’s crucial position in the nationalist movement (I discuss this in some detail in Chapter 1, *Contextualizing Motherhood: Locating Maternal Subjectivity and Agency in Resistance*) and the ideology of motherhood that issued from the movement, which provides ample material for further investigation. Discussing motherhood and this Bengal connection, Jasodhara Bagchi writes: “the feminist signification of motherhood resonates deeply with the colonizing process in Bengal” (*Interrogating* xxvi). The primacy of motherhood ideology in Bengal and its historical significance to the nationalist struggle lend support to the prominent place that Bengali texts are accorded in this thesis.

Since I am using translated versions of Ashapura Debi's novel and Mahasweta Devi's short stories, and deploying my own translation for the Bengali short story of Nandita Bagchi, a few perceptive words regarding the problematics of translation are worth recalling. Translating postcolonial texts can prove to be a risky enterprise, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly warns in her widely-read piece "The Politics of Translation". Spivak argues that owing to the intended accessibility of the text to readers of English, there is a risk of potential over-assimilation of the text into the global lingua franca – English – resulting in the effacement of the source language's specificity ("Translation" 206). In other words, translating the texts of non-Western writers into English might entail reducing the text to the level of a "social message" (Simon 135). Spivak's is a robust stance, through which she asserts the importance of knowing the other language intimately and having familiarity with the situation described. She also prioritises attention to the "rhetorical nature" of the language (201). I have given careful thought to these insights from translation studies in my own translation of the short story. Following Spivak, I have tried not to simplify the language for the sake of accessibility, but to capture the writer's "pre-disposition" and transport it to the host language, while remaining conscious of the rhetoricity of the original language.

### **Feminism and Motherhood in India**

In the introduction to her book *Feminism in India* (2004), Maitreyi Chaudhury addresses the issue of apparent ambivalence towards the term "feminism" in India (xi). She detects a gap between the rich corpus of writing on the women's movement or feminist activism in India and a relative scarcity of theoretical writing on feminism. Chaudhury explains this phenomenon in two

ways; one reason, she suspects, may be the “existing international academic division of labour which presumes that theorization is the preserve of Western concern and expertise” (xi).

Alternatively, the paucity of Indian feminist research could be the consequence of “an active lack of interest, an impatience with ‘theory’ in societies such as ours where the sheer urgency of people’s problems demands immediate alleviation” (xi). Through these observations, Chaudhury also accounts for the belated beginning of theoretical writing on motherhood in India.

Simultaneously, her comment serves as an important reminder of the “urgency” of the Indian context that reverberates throughout the corpus of women writers’ fictional representations of motherhood.<sup>2</sup>

In India, “feminist theorizing”, as Jasodhara Bagchi puts it, “coincided with the collective efforts that marked the emergence of Women’s Studies within the institutions of higher learning in India from the 1980s” (*Interrogating 2*). One primary concern related to the maternal that regularly resurfaces is the idea of India as *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) and its sacralisation via multiple images of mother goddesses.<sup>3</sup> Despite the symbolic effacement of real-world mothers in the major

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<sup>2</sup> One example of such “urgent” feminist intervention can be found in social scientist, poet and feminist activist Kamla Bhasin’s initiative to counter patriarchal ideas around motherhood by writing nursery rhymes. Back in the 1980s, Bhasin was “sad to see that sexism was rampant in books for little children” (Bhasin n.pag.), most of which inculcate patriarchal values by advancing a gendered notion of girls’ and women’s labour within the domestic space. To combat this gender stereotype, Bhasin wrote a number of nursery rhymes that promoted equality within the family, by depicting a working mother, a father engaging in daily chores, and ultimately advocating for shared responsibilities. The collection, first written in Hindi, was later published by UNICEF in 1982 and subsequently translated into five other languages.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of *Bharat Mata* has recently resurfaced in the Indian political scenario, precipitating a squabble among political leaders. While the present BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government is deploying hyper-nationalist strategies, the figure of *Bharat Mata* is being appropriated in right-wing ideology to formulate a certain brand of Hindu nationalism. Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have said that those unwilling to chant “*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*” (Victory to Mother India) have no right to stay in the country. In response,

Hindu religious narratives – as suggested in the poem I used as my epigraph – Hinduism abounds in mother goddesses. As such, worship of mother goddesses – both the benevolent and destructive incarnations – is an influential part of the religion. In the Hindu-Indian family, the wife is supposed to be in a subordinate role to her husband and to other male members, but her position is validated once she becomes a mother (Kakar 65-66). Ashis Nandy, in his essay “Woman Versus Womanliness in India”, writes “only in a few cultures have the loneliness and self-abnegation of woman as a social being found such elaborate justification in her symbolic status as a mother” (Nandy 37). What he claims is that being a mother entails sacrifice and suffering, and a “compensatory glorification” of motherhood justifies this self-effacement (Dutta 85). This paradoxical phenomenon is indicative of a contradiction that permeates the lived realities of mothers in India. In other words, the ideological glorification of motherhood with its attendant expectational burdens and the constriction of agency affect mothers in real lives: these constitute the maternal experiences of most mothers in India across class, caste and religious divides. More importantly, ideals surrounding motherhood function as the key to gender identity in that they set the parameters for womanhood that prioritise biological reproduction (Krishnaraj 13; Bagchi 17).

As mentioned, motherhood in the Indian context is almost invariably linked with nationalist ideas about the motherland – a sacred figure, capable of nurturing and nourishing her brave sons who can fight for her liberation from the foreign enemy (Sizemore 60). Consequently, this has

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member of parliament and president of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, Asaduddin Owaisi, refused to chant “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” because of its supposed association with Hindu Goddesses (*The Indian Express* n.pag.). These incidents establish that the mother figure and its incorporation into nationalism are far being spent forces in the Indian socio-political context, and will continue to affect the discourse around motherhood and womanhood for years to come.

been the focus of much feminist scholarship in India and South Asia. The gendering of the nation was discussed in Sangeeta Ray's *En-gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (2000). Ray's book enquires into the representation of the native woman in colonial and postcolonial writing by both male and female writers, identifying and examining "manipulation of gender politics in the exercise of national rule" (5). Ray offers an astute analysis of the process in which the figure of the Hindu woman came to be a "crucial semiotic site" (8) that is intricately connected with the discourses of nationalism, postcolonialism and feminism. While Ray's focus is on India, a significant work that concentrates on a similar process of gendering in the context of other South Asian nations Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka – in addition to India is Neluka Silva's *The Gendered Nation: Contemporary Writings from South Asia* (2004). Situating these gendered concerns within a broad socio-cultural context, Silva ventures to unpack the "naturalised and sacralised gender tropes" in literary representations of the nation state (12). Mindful of South Asia's wide diversity, Silva maintains that she is focusing on the "common denominator" (12), namely the legacy of colonialism that cuts across the region, and the ensuing nationalism wherein gender tropes remain a potent element.

Sumathy Ramaswami's *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (2010) explores various and evolving images of *Bharat Mata*, the nationalist appropriation of religious discourses and these discourses' sustained influence on the collective imagination (Ramaswami 10). One of her important findings worth recalling at this point is that the image of *Bharat Mata* had its roots in colonial Bengal: Abanindranath Tagore's painting of *Banga Mata* (Mother Bengal), in the wake of the *Swadeshi* (this word loosely translates as nativist) movement resisting the proposed partition of Bengal in 1905. This painting by Rabindranath Tagore's nephew kindled the nationalists' imagination, eventually resulting in the creation of the mother figure of *Bharat*

*Mata* to inspire a nation-wide movement against the colonisers. Because of this substantial body of work on the nationalist construction of the mother(land) – which is indeed a constitutive element of prevalent maternal ideologies in India – I choose not to contribute detailed discussion to an already well-researched field. In this thesis, my critical gaze is instead trained on the chosen literary texts so as to understand the gendering of the nation’s formation through the use of specific icons, such as Sita and *Bharat Mata*.

In the field of feminist literary studies in India, an important text that partially deals with motherhood is Elizabeth Jackson’s *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing* (2010). This book examines the “treatment of feminist issues” in contemporary Indian women writers’ novels and devotes a chapter to motherhood as one of the key issues. Jackson identifies feminist concerns relating to marriage and motherhood as they unfold in her chosen writers’ works, while also enabling a critical comparison between them and selected Western feminist concepts in order to trace commonalities and divergences. I follow Jackson’s comparative approach, and stage a comparison on the grounds of the maternal to generate a dialogue between maternal approaches in India and elsewhere. In relation to motherhood, Jackson’s primary concern, as she states clearly, is to examine “the ways in which contemporary Indian women novelists are challenging traditional ideas about motherhood in India” (13). While I am also concerned with this issue, my project examines motherhood from many other perspectives, encompassing subjects such as pregnancy, non-biological motherhood, the maternal and the diaspora that have hitherto been insufficiently unearthed. Jackson’s later articles that followed her monograph (“Gender and Communal Politics in Shama Futehally’s *Reaching Bombay Central*” and “Celebration and Disillusionment in Contemporary India: Narrating the Muslim Wedding and its Aftermath in Shama Futehally’s *Tara Lane* and Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy*

*Days*”) discuss such feminist concerns (gender and communal politics, marriage) from “Muslim perspectives” (475). Since this thesis is limited to Hindu women writers in the interests of feasibility in scope, one avenue for future research is depictions of the maternal amongst Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs or women writers belonging to other religions.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially, motherhood as a distinct academic concern has started gaining attention in Indian feminists’ works this decade with three major publications coming out, two of them in the last two years alone. However, the maternal as a personal and political matter started gaining research momentum from 2005 with the anthologies entitled *A Space of her Own* (edited by Leela Gulati and Jasodhara Bagchi) and *Janani* (edited by Rinki Bhattacharya, published in 2006) that bring together life writing and autobiographical accounts in which present-day authors, thinkers, film makers and activists consider their personal experiences of motherhood or non-motherhood. These two texts initiate a vibrant conversation within Indian feminist scholarship, aiming to retrieve a sense of agency, while expressing solidarity with fellow women – mothers as well as childfree women – and embracing a liberating view of motherhood and womanhood. In a way, these volumes emerging from personal experiences function as a microcosm of the bigger socio-cultural realities from which later feminist theorisations of motherhood proceeded.

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson’s forthcoming monograph *Muslim Indian Women Writing in English* is a detailed study in the field of Anglophone writing by Indian Muslim women, in which she interrogates the issue of gender, social class, religious identity in this body of literature, as well as the writers’ narrative strategy and format. This work is a timely contribution to the relatively neglected area of Muslim women’s writing and anticipates future engagement in this field. I am thankful to Jackson for allowing me (via Claire Chambers) to share her forthcoming book here.



My thesis, therefore, positions itself within ongoing feminist and literary scholarship, and I believe that this project adds to this feminist literary collage in the making. A brief overview of the three recent works helps to demonstrate my singular position. The first book dealing specifically with motherhood is *Motherhood in India: Glorification Without Empowerment?* (2010) edited by Maithreyi Krishnaraj. This book is a useful resource for my project as it discusses prevalent conceptions of motherhood in India. The collection of essays starts with motherhood in ancient India and brings the topic up to the present day with a chapter on the contemporary Indian television soap opera. This book takes a socio-anthropological approach to the issue, as it discusses, for example, the mother community in South India, the Hindu Code Bill and so on.

The next book, *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* (2016) by Shubhangi Vaidya and Anu Aneja, approaches the topic of motherhood from an interdisciplinary perspective as it deals with cultural production as well as current sociological issues such as artificial reproductive facilities, motherhood and disability. The book starts with an interpretation of prevalent iconography around the mother goddess that emerged in ancient India, and goes on to consider its implications and absorption in present-day society. Significantly, Aneja and Vaidya emphasise some alternative images of non-maternal mother goddesses like Kali and Saraswati, who are vastly different in their fierce, violent (Kali) and asexual (Saraswati) personalities from the benevolent mother goddesses Lakshmi and Annapurna. In doing so, the authors suggest that Indian culture is replete with the trope of a “search for pleasures beyond the constricting spheres of the social and the familial” (xix). The book also considers the depictions of motherhood in Hindi cinema, most of which feed into the dominant image of the self-sacrificing mother, while the authors rightly flag up some “new spaces” that make divergence

and discord visible by representing issues such as “homosexuality, disability, marital strife” (90). The concern of global capitalism and its impingement on the modern-day lived reality of motherhood in class-ridden Indian society is scrutinised in one of the volume’s chapters, to which I refer briefly in my final chapter. Perhaps the book’s most significant contribution is to draw attention to a relatively neglected issue in India; that is, the mothering of disabled children. This intense chapter of the book, stemming from one of the authors’ personal experience as a mother caring for an autistic child, discusses the social isolation and stigmatisation of those mothers who are compelled to feel guilty for supposedly having failed to mother their children properly. The case studies demonstrate that mothers’ identities are shaped by the experience wherein their care works and the children’s needs are prioritised over everything, as they struggle to grapple with social disgrace and negotiate their position within society. This illuminating and conscientious chapter anticipates the production of further research in this area, both sociological and literary. Fictions occupy a small part in the book’s ambitious interdisciplinary approach, leaving room for future works in this area.

Finally, *Interrogating Motherhood: Theorizing Feminism* (2017), published after the 2015 death of the Indian feminist scholar Jasodhara Bagchi, for the most part assumes a theoretical approach. This book belongs to the series “Theorizing Feminism”, and takes on the issue of motherhood as its present concern of theorisation. Bagchi’s slim but useful book adds to the burgeoning sub-branch of maternal writing in India; however, one might deduce that the book would have been in a fuller condition had we not lost Bagchi to an untimely death. The book’s uniqueness lies in creating an inter-linkage among Indian, Western and black feminisms, which Bagchi elaborates in the first chapter in her analysis of feminism and motherhood. Other

concerns discussed in the books are her much-read and lauded examination of Bengal's nationalism, modern-day reproductive technology in India, and motherhood and patriarchy.

All these three books are significant to an understanding of historical and present-day ideologies of motherhood in India and women's negotiation with the same. While they do include literary texts in their analysis (along with other representational discourse, such as film), they use them sparingly because of their theoretical, socio-historical and anthropological approaches. When compared with this corpus, mine is a literary critical approach; I work on literary texts and fictional representations of motherhood and how they contribute to understanding and rethinking motherhood in the particular social context of Hindu India and its diaspora in the United States.

### **Feminist Theories of Motherhood**

Since this thesis uses a feminist lens and draws heavily on feminist maternal theories, this section examines feminism's uneasy relationship with motherhood in order to establish a conceptual framework. Although a considerable body of feminist scholarship has been produced on motherhood, it is still a controversial issue which prompts various academic approaches.

Feminists' preoccupation with motherhood can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir's influential work *The Second Sex* (1949), which contains her rather problematic view of motherhood. Writing in 1949, de Beauvoir's radical aim is to investigate why and how woman has been relegated to the category of the "other" against which man can define himself.

However, in her interrogation de Beauvoir seems to be ambivalent about the issues of reproduction and motherhood, as is demonstrated by the following remark in which she relates some biological aspects of reproduction:

It is obvious once more that many of these traits originate in women's subordination to the species, and here we find the most striking conclusion of the survey: namely, that woman is of all mammalian females at once the one who is most profoundly alienated (her individuality the prey of outside forces), and the one who most violently resists this alienation; in no other is enslavement of the organism to reproduction more imperious or more unwillingly accepted. (64)

What de Beauvoir's comment seems to reinforce here is a clash between the demands of the human species and the demands of the woman as autonomous individual. This leads to an almost inevitable destiny that woman is entrapped by immanence, failing to overcome what has already been fixed for her. Such comments verge on biological determinism and have been excoriated by later critics such as Genevieve Lloyd and Judith Okely who detect the dormant male gaze in de Beauvoir's negative views of the female body and reproduction (Okely 25; Lloyd 99). I concur with these critics in part, but want to retain de Beauvoir's apt analysis of the body as a "situation" as opposed to a "thing" that challenges any accusation of biological determinism. However, in her account de Beauvoir contradicts herself by looking at the "situation" in a rigidly specific way which almost renders the body as a pre-given thing. Nonetheless, Beauvoir's view has its particular importance and relevance insofar as it helps identifying a hostile situation for women while demythologising motherhood.

Early second wave feminists like Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) were also critical of the institution of motherhood as they considered it to be a mode of women's oppression. They highlighted the compulsory domesticity attached to motherhood which represents a barrier in the way of women's emancipation. Being critical of her fellow women's over-reliance and sole dependence on maternal identity, Friedan contends:

“When motherhood, a fulfillment held sacred down the ages, is defined as a total way of life, must women themselves deny the world and the future open to them? Or does the denial of the world force them to make motherhood a total way of life?” (51). Friedan’s comment gestures towards the tension that motherhood often generates for (middle-class) women, in which they are compelled to consider motherhood as their only identity because they are denied other viable identities. Articulated in 1963, Friedan’s remark undeniably still rings true to many women’s lives across countries and cultures, even in contemporary middle-class India.

Unlike their predecessors, the late second wave feminists embark on a critical enquiry to bring out the primacy of motherhood and the mothering role, notable amongst whom is Nancy Chodorow. In the field of psychoanalysis, Chodorow’s feminist intervention contests the dominant absence and othering of the mother by prioritising the mother-child dyad.<sup>5</sup> She argues in her seminal work *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) that motherhood “is of profound importance for family structure, for relations between the sexes, for ideology about women, and for the sexual division of labour and sexual inequality both inside the family and in the nonfamilial world” (3). Chodorow’s psychoanalysis provides an understanding of “the dynamics of the female psyche”; in particular, she investigates the mother-daughter relationship to understand how women “experience a self in relation” (13). Chodorow’s views are indeed useful for an understanding of the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship and its impact on the sense of self in both. I draw on Chodorow’s insights

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<sup>5</sup> Chodorow’s work is known as object-relation theory, and is distinguished by its emphasis on social relationship, as compared with other schools of psychoanalysis that primarily focus on “biological drives” (Anderson and Taylor 93). Her work in several ways modifies Freud’s theories, and pivots on the relationship between the child and the early care giver to gain an understanding of the development of gender identity (O’Brien 357).

to understand this dynamic, while also foregrounding the narratives' regular divergence from Chodorow's theorisation, that reveals itself in the text's preoccupation with mother-daughter connections, rather than autonomy and individuation.

The 1970s witnessed the emergence of French feminists such as H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva,<sup>6</sup> who also worked in the field of psychoanalysis, however differently from Chodorow. Their research is premised on the idea of sexual difference and repression of the female in the symbolic. Significantly, their works contributed to developing a particular kind of writing famously known as * criture f eminine*. What they argue for is a distinct mode of feminine writing soaked in maternal *jouissance* and disruptive in its nature, since its aim is to subvert the Western phallogocentric discourse that has long repressed the feminine in silence. The first few lines of Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" illustrate this vividly:

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (875)

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<sup>6</sup> Although these theorists are generally grouped together under the umbrella term of * criture f eminine* or French feminism, one needs to be aware of their differences, not only in their background (not a single one of them was born in France: Kristeva was born in Bulgaria, Cixous in Algeria and Irigaray in Belgium) but also their theoretical positions. For example, Irigaray prefers the notion of speaking as a woman, while Kristeva talks in a "gender neutral way about the desire in the language" (Lykke 102). Nonetheless, they can loosely be connected with each other because of their shared preoccupation with the links between language, writing, and the body.

What is evident here is an impassioned plea to inscribe the feminine into the body of writing, reclaiming the self. Cixous elsewhere uses the term “white ink” to describe her writing that recalls its association with breast milk (“White Ink” 58). Building on Jacques Lacan’s proposition that the symbolic is conceived through language, the French feminists primarily make use of the pre-oedipal space or the pre-linguistic phase – in which the child cannot distinguish him/herself from the mother – to argue for a semiotic that is characteristically feminine and repressed by male language. However, French feminism has been criticised for being essentialist and ahistorical (Rye 26) as Toril Moi, for instance, criticises French feminism for failing to address socio-cultural or historical specificity, and for prioritising sexual difference while overlooking other difference, such as race and class (147-148). In Chapter 1: Maternal Subjectivity and Agency, I draw on Kristevan ideas to explore the disruptive semiotic in relation to the text (*Where Shall We Go This Summer*), while grounding the theory on the narrative’s context of postcolonial India, that encompasses other crucial issues such as nationalism and its concomitant woman question.

If Chodorow’s account is seminal in the field of psychoanalysis, Adrienne Rich’s groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born* (1976) is a synthesis of personal and scholarly narrative on motherhood. Rich theorises motherhood in terms of institution and experience. She was arguably the first thinker to differentiate motherhood from mothering to unravel the oppressive and emancipatory aspects of maternity (Rich 13). The following quotation exemplifies Rich’s liberating and powerful view of maternal embodiment:

I have come to believe [...] that female biology – the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation

and fruition of life which can take place in the female body – has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. (39-40)

One can discern a striking contrast between Rich's celebration of the female body and de Beauvoir's problematically ambivalent notion of embodiment that I mentioned earlier. Rich's radical idea helps uproot the regressive self-hatred that many women internalise due to social conditioning. In a similar manner, Rich is eloquent in articulating the potential of motherhood outside the institution of motherhood that, according to her, "has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (13). However, in her agenda around disentangling the empowering aspects of motherhood, she rightly and robustly champions choice and autonomy, but occasionally slips into essentialism in her argument about the patriarchal distortion of motherhood, which suggests the possible existence of eternal motherhood, untinged and pure (Jeremiah 60). Nonetheless, Rich's theorisation provides key insights for my examination of the maternal so as to understand and identify patriarchal distortion of the mother-daughter relationship, the potential of mother-daughter connections and so on.

Another distinct kind of positive account of motherhood is perceived in the "ethics of care" approach, as articulated by Carol Gilligan in *A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982), and extended by Sara Ruddick in her book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989). These ethics of care proponents purport to offer a "female" perspective on morality. According to Gilligan, traditional notions of morality or ethics in the modern Western tradition emphasise justice and equality, valorising the ideas of autonomy and individuation. However, generally human relationships are not always between two equally empowered people. Throughout our lives, Gilligan argues, we encounter differently empowered people and get involved in relationships that are based on mutual dependence rather than



autonomy and equality. Gilligan's analysis suggests that ethics ought to be rebuilt so that they acknowledge this interdependence, and as such the ethics of care focuses on this interdependence (Gilligan 174). According to this approach, women develop an ethics of care and responsibility over the course of their experience. Ruddick advances the theory by making use of this idea of interdependence, since she holds that mothering is the best example of such interdependent relationships. Her idea of mothering is akin to a distinct discipline, as opposed to something innate in woman. This is particularly relevant to argue for mothering beyond procreation as I do in my final chapter, *Motherhood Beyond the Body*. She further develops the field by claiming that maternal thinking can potentially give rise to a political stance of nonviolence or what she calls a "politics of peace" (Ruddick 148). Strategically, Ruddick uses the traditional dichotomy erected between mothers and war and then rebuilds it on an explicitly feminist conception. She argues:

All of women's work – sheltering, nursing, feeding, kin work, teaching of the very young, tending the frail elderly – is threatened by violence. [...] Mothering begins in birth and promises life; military thinking justifies organized, deliberate deaths. [...] Mothers protect children who are at risk; the military risks the children mothers protect.

(148)

Ruddick's argument captures and intensifies the fundamental contradiction between mothering and war, and capitalises on this opposition to envision her politics of peace that would be characteristically maternal. Ruddick's idea, despite being much lauded, has invited criticism for being ethnocentric, reinforcing patriarchal expectations of maternal care and verging on essentialism (Bailey 162; DiQuinzio 20). While the dangers of essentialism and obliteration of difference are perhaps latent in her account of maternal peacefulness, Ruddick constantly

acknowledges this trap and attempts to deploy strategies to avoid such pitfalls, advocating to rebuild maternal care on a feminist standpoint that would be decisive and diligent. In my use of Ruddick's idea of care and nurturance in relation to literary analysis of non-biological motherhood, I finesse the discussion according to the specific contexts of the texts to emphasise the localised mothering, as opposed to a universal one.

This concern relating to universal and local brings home the critique of much of the Western feminist theories of motherhood. As such, Western theories have received criticism, especially from Black feminists (and also from postcolonial theorists whom I discuss shortly), as well as from maternal theorists for routinely undermining the issues of race and class in their almost sole preoccupation with the category of gender and the discursive spaces of public and private. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins asserts that "gender inequality has long worked in tandem with racial domination and economic exploitation", adding that in most of the cases, the motherwork of women of colour "recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity" (45). This interplay of multiple categories has been theorised effectively by critical race feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw whose 1989 coinage of the term "intersectionality" addresses the intricate forms of oppression resulting from one's multiple identities, conjoining in such a way that it becomes difficult to separate one from the other (139). As mentioned, in the context of India, the nexus of class-caste-gender forms an intersection that is crucial in understanding the maternal and its representation.

The sustained interest in motherhood has resulted in the emergence of motherhood studies as a distinct discipline over last few decades. Two recent important works that have contributed to this burgeoning field are Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounter: The Ethics of Interruption* and

Lisa Guenther's *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. Baraitser extends feminist scholarship on mothering by focusing on maternal subjectivity emerging from bewildering moments that constitute the experience of mothering. Drawing on Levinas's conceptualisation of subjectivity that suggests that the self or subjectivity only comes into existence by behaving responsibly towards the other, she argues that the peculiar, varied and often extreme emotions involved in mothering can give rise to a way of experiencing oneself anew as these extremities bring forth profound change in one's own identity and sense of self. Therefore, Baraitser's claim is that mothering as an experience has the potential for transformation (22). Guenther too appropriates Levinas's account of responsibility from a feminist standpoint. In her explication of motherhood as a gift of the other she espouses a feminist politics of reproduction "served by a vision of the self as embodied and engendered, but neither biologically determined as a mother nor socially committed to the pursuit of individual autonomy" (10).

The key aim of motherhood studies, in the words of Jenni Ramone, is "to create an empowering practice and theory of mothering for women, countering the patriarchal master-narrative of motherhood that maintains notions of the ideal mother and the dangerous binary of good/bad mothering" (297). This thesis, therefore, pays attention to the feminist reflections that seek to construct motherhood in anti-patriarchal ways by forging a connection between literary studies and motherhood studies. Nonetheless, I do not prioritise theories over literary texts, but rather start with the insights offered by the texts, reaching for theoretical explorations to illuminate these further as and when this seems appropriate. The complex relationship between women and motherhood is reflected in the creative writing of women authors who have portrayed motherhood in various ways. As Susan Koppelman suggests, there is proximity between

women's personal lives and their literary creations; the experience of motherhood and daughterhood has been a significant issue in women's writing (2). Women authors often "use textual spaces to accept, embrace, negotiate, reconcile, resist, and challenge traditional conceptions of mothering and maternal roles [...] and [...] offer alternative practices and visions for mothers in the present and future" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 1). In other words, imaginative explorations encourage a re-conceptualisation of dominant ideas, since the fictions under discussion not only critique conventions around relationships and gendered labour but offer alternative visions in an imaginative and innovative way.

### **Postcolonial Feminist Theories**

The feminist theories I have discussed mostly emanate from the so-called Western milieu, but my research focuses on ideas of the maternal which emerge from different locations in India and its diaspora. The varied and wide-ranging socio-cultural backgrounds of the writers necessitate a renegotiation of difference. As such, the concept of postcolonialism and specifically postcolonial feminism has great impact on this thesis. Postcolonial feminism questions the efficacy of first world feminism in effectively addressing the problems of non-Western women (McLeod 173). In "French Feminism in an International Frame" Spivak raises the crucial question of the representation of third world women via first world feminist concepts that often seem to circumvent the vast heterogeneity of the third world. Warning against a naïve benevolence that comes out of a privileged position, she avers, "The academic feminist must learn to learn from them [the under-privileged or subalterns], to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened

compassion” (“French Feminism” 186). Spivak’s words serve to be a crucial reminder throughout the thesis in relation to the application of theories to the maternal narratives.

In her pioneering essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak further considers the role of the academic in representing the subaltern, and chooses the figure of subaltern female to pose the rhetorical question “can the subaltern speak?” which finds its answer in the negative at the article’s end.<sup>7</sup> She rightly raises the issue of gender even within the subaltern context wherein the female is doubly oppressed. She exemplifies this argument by referring to colonial discourses on *sati*, which, in an attempt to abolish the brutal law, make it appear as though “white men [are] saving brown women from brown men” (“Subaltern” 297). Emphasising the unbridgeable gap between the one willing to represent and the subaltern, she writes: “even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act” (292). Spivak’s theory provide insights into many such silences that pervade women’s lives, as they often find themselves in marginalised and disempowered positions.

Postcolonial feminist criticism thus emerges in order to address gender issues effectively as it maintains that the experience of postcoloniality is not the same for both genders. Additionally, postcolonial feminist criticism helps to identify the blindspots of Western feminist theory which, according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, sometimes

discursively colonise[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular “Third World

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<sup>7</sup> I briefly discuss the term subaltern – its emergence and usage – in Chapter 1: Contextualising Motherhood, in relation to Mahasweta Devi’s stories.

woman” – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorising signature of Western humanist discourse. (“Western Eye” 53)

Mohanty argues that scholars tend to identify the “third world woman” in terms of “underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism and overpopulation” (“Cartographies” 6). While this information about the third world is necessary, it does not suffice in creating the understanding of “the everyday, fluid, fundamentally historical and dynamic nature of the lives” of third world women (6). Mohanty contends that Western feminists “homogenise and systematise third world women” and create a monolithic picture. It is problematic to use the term “third world” and yet not pay attention to the variegation and plurality of women of various classes, castes, religions and ages. According to Mohanty, collapsing differences and making the third world a homogenous category on the basis of the underdeveloped lives of the women, as compared to the privileged women of the first world, amounts to “discursive colonization” (“Western Eye” 51). As I have already mentioned, my research takes into account the cultural and religious diversity of India and does not intend to project a homogeneous image of India. Rather, I emphasise the issue of “difference”, contingency and diversity throughout the project, drawing on works by postcolonial theorists (such as Spivak, Mohanty, and others) to help me to do so.

### **Research Aims and Methodology**

Derek Attridge in his *The Work of Literature* elaborates on the ineffability that any attempt to define literature entails. Nonetheless, he starts by explaining literature in terms of its potential effects on readers inasmuch as to read a literary text is to experience an event that can cause

some changes in the reader's mind. These changes might involve "modification of the reader's outlook, or sense of the world, or emotional make-up, or some other aspect of the relation of self and other" (2). However, he states that this transformative potential of literature is not always visible, predictable or easily realised. In a similar way, the creative writer Tabish Khair succinctly insists on the curious possibilities of literature: "literature [...] is where we are confronted with the possibilities, problems and limits of language, which are finally also the problems of reality (and representation)" (Khair 10). Both Khair and Attridge warn against any reductive understanding of literature based on its supposed capability to teach moral lessons or offer solutions. This thesis therefore concentrates on fictional texts (rather than other modes of writing, such as journals, memoirs and narrative nonfiction) not because they teach feminist messages of motherhood, but because they invite exploration of some possibilities and limitations, leading to an empathetic understanding of the other.

Radha Chakravarty argues that theoretical and creative texts should exist in what she calls a "transactional" relationship whereby each sheds light upon the other. "The value of literature (especially fiction) for feminism", she states, "lies in its accommodation of the factual as well as the imagined or visionary, for a visionary dimension is essential to a politics of change" (*Subjectivity*11). Here Chakravarty creates a link between the aesthetic and the political; what she illuminates is the idea of transcending the mere act of documenting the social facts by means of imaginary vision. In other words, literature that builds on facts, but in perfect synchronicity with the imagination, is a potent method through which to envision more than reality, and it is this visionary aspect that feeds into feminist politics. Since I engage with a range of feminist philosophical and postcolonial feminist theories and my primary focus is on literary texts, I will attempt to follow this method of a "transactional" relationship between theory and literary texts

where one might challenge, facilitate and extend the other. Close reading and application of the theories discussed here form an important analytical method for this thesis. Following Spivak, I try to “reconstellate” the text to “draw out its use” and to “wrench it out of its proper context and put it within alien arguments” (“Literary Representation” 333). Put differently, the insights provided by the texts are posited in the wider context of feminism and also in relation to Western and postcolonial feminist discourses in order to identify the areas of similarities and divergence between them which might lead to the suggestions of alternative visions.

To summarise, the thesis draws upon feminist scholarship on motherhood and postcolonial feminism to drill down over the course of its chapters into four thematic areas: maternal subjectivity and agency, the mother-daughter relationship, motherhood and diaspora, and non-biological motherhood. The research attempts to understand the literary ramifications of these concerns in order to identify the ways in which the primary texts reconceptualise the notion of motherhood from and against multiple perspectives. Another concern is whether these Indian women writers’ renditions furnish readers with any different understandings of motherhood (a term which is in turn intimately linked to our understanding of womanhood) as compared to dominant Western feminist discourses. Exploring connections between the fictional works’ content and form, the thesis interrogates which literary modes the writers mobilise and how they variously articulate their ideas and political perspectives.

## **Chapter Synopses**

In Chapter 1: Maternal Subjectivity and Agency: Confronting Society, I explore maternal subjectivity and agency at the crossroads of socio-cultural discourses. The texts which I examine



are Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), alongside Mahasweta Devi's short stories "Bayen" (2012/1998), "Breast-Giver" (1997/1997), and "Ma, from Dusk to Dawn" (2011/1970).<sup>8</sup> Desai and Devi's texts are markedly different from each other in terms of their style, treatment and language (Devi's texts are originally written in Bengali and I use translated versions of the text as well as referring to the original). However, I put them together as these texts offer compelling insights into the issue of maternal subjectivity and agency in distinct ways, specifically because of the difference of their subject matter (Desai focuses on the middle class while Devi's concern is the marginalised subaltern). I start this chapter with an account of the nationalist construction of womanhood and motherhood. This leads on to my analysis of the literary texts, in which I argue that although both the writers are from India, their texts deal with a broad socio-cultural spectrum, and therefore provide room for varied visions of the maternal. Having scrutinised each writer individually, in the concluding part I include a comparative analysis of the two authors.

In a society where the mother-son bond is greatly esteemed and somewhat overrated (Kakar 72; Nandy 112), an examination of the mother-daughter relationship is long overdue. Chapter 2: *Mothering Daughters: Trajectories of Mother-Daughter Relationship* aims at capturing the supposedly ambivalent relationship between mother and daughter which is often characterised by tensions between and the coexistence of conflict and compassion. The novels explored in this chapter cast light on the subtleties of this relationship through their consideration of several factors: how social dictates tend to determine the trajectory of the mother-daughter relationship, what the consequences are and how this relationship traverses through this often complicated route. For a better understanding of this theme I draw on second-wave feminists, especially Adrienne Rich, who

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<sup>8</sup> "Bayen" was later transformed into a play like few other short stories and novel such as *Mother of 1084*. The primary reason for this change of form was to reach a larger audience (many of whom are illiterate and under-privileged) by means of performance.

in the “core chapter” (entitled “Motherhood and Daughterhood”) of her famous book *Of Woman Born* writes, “the cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story” (225). Rich investigates the reasons behind the peculiar silence of this distorted relationship and raises issues such as the mother’s role in implementing patriarchal rules while not being the maker of the rules, as well as coining the term matrophobia or the fear of becoming one’s own mother. She even theorises the potential mode of women’s empowerment through a connection between mother and daughter. However, I ask whether and to what extent the texts deviate from or resonate with the theories. This chapter engages in critical discussion of this theme in Ashapura Devi’s *The First Promise* (1995/1964), and Shashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine* (1993). My chosen matrilineal narratives project a mother-daughter relationship fraught with ambivalence and anxiety, while simultaneously exploring this struggle in order to usher in a re-connection of mothers and daughters.

Chapter 3: Motherhood and Diaspora: Remembering and Remaking Home concentrates on motherhood as portrayed by two diasporic writers of Indian origin. The reason for including diasporic authors is that in these texts, a different set of concerns relating to migration as well as gender is shadowed forth. The migrant woman’s confrontation with a different culture has a profound impact on her as she shifts from the cultural values of her homeland and garners new experiences in the hostland. Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* (2003) and selected short stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni provide thoughtful insights into the immigrant mother’s experiences: her isolation, dilemma and a distinct diasporic consciousness. The novel and short stories portray Indian women in the United States, depicting their sense of freedom as well as the cultural restrictions (such as the experiences of racism and lack of community support), which are imposed upon them by the society within which they are living and the one they have left,

ultimately leading to personal transformation. Additionally, this chapter aims to understand how the maternal is enmeshed in a gendered understanding of diaspora.

The version of motherhood which is endorsed by Indian patriarchy is that of biological motherhood. Over-idealised as it is, the biological aspects of motherhood set the parameters for women inasmuch as they are judged according to their reproductive capability. As such, in Chapter 4: Motherhood Beyond the Body, I argue that motherhood as a concept encompasses non-biological aspects of motherhood and even voluntary non-motherhood, though the latter is not my concern in this project. Feminists like Sara Ruddick discard the traditional espousal of biological motherhood and perceive mothering in terms of a practice that can be conducted by both the sexes. Ruddick interprets mothering in the light of a certain discipline that has its own needs and demands. In this case the demand of maternal work, according to Ruddick, serves to cultivate “preservation, growth and social acceptability of the child”, and anyone can develop maternal thinking by practising this discipline (17). In this chapter I engage in a discussion of motherhood beyond biology, evaluating how this particular concern has been handled by my chosen authors, whether the imaginative visions provided by the literary texts contribute to reshaping motherhood which moves beyond the body, and the implications of the “ethics of care” approach propagated by Ruddick in the Indian context. This chapter will examine Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and Nandita Bagchi’s short story “Bilkisu Becomes a Mother” (1999) which portray maternal practice and thinking that do not emerge from the maternal body.

Commenting on the efficacy and viability of feminist theories to address and represent the maternal, Patricia Hill Collins argues that maternal theories can always and only provide partial perspective because of the diversity of maternal contexts, writing: “shifting the center to accommodate this diversity promises to recontextualise motherhood and point us toward feminist

theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality” (652). This thesis aims to capture the differences inherent in the narratives of the maternal, encompassing as they do multiple experiences – oppression and resistance, abjection and agency, and finally, motherhood’s primacy in women’s lives. In conclusion, I argue that this project furthers feminist literary criticism in the specific area of Indian women’s writing and the overarching area of motherhood and literature by suggesting a complex constellation of ideas concerning motherhood – one which is ambivalent, diverse, contingent, grounded in a specific location and yet well placed to converse with discourses emanating from other times and places.

## Chapter 1

### **Contextualising Motherhood: Locating Maternal Subjectivity and Agency in Resistance**

We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. (Rich 5)

[M]otherhood cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context. Motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class and gender. (Collins 45)

My introduction took as its point of departure discussion of the continual silencing of mothers. In this first chapter, I consider some of the modes through which silence is achieved, as well as resistance to that silencing. I do this by exploring maternal narratives that unfold in multiple material realities; namely, different social classes and castes. As such, I explore maternal subjectivity and agency at the intersection of socio-cultural discourses and institutions. The above epigraphs by Adrienne Rich and Patricia Hill Collins not only act as a prelude to my chapter, but also help me establish my position from the outset, illuminating as they do two crucially different areas. Rich's quotation rightly and vehemently accuses the "institution" of motherhood for rendering mothers powerless, while Collins astutely notes other identity components – class and race – which conjoin to form a systematic structure of oppression to which black mothers are subjected. If translated into the Indian context, Collins' concern about colour could well be replaced by caste (which also bears the stigma of colourism). To understand maternal agency or its lack in the face of repressive institutions, one needs to be attentive to a complex web of oppression.

In exploring maternal resistance emerging from diverse situations in response to patriarchal and class/caste exploitation, I examine Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Mahasweta Devi's short stories "Bayen", "Breast-Giver" and "Ma, from Dusk to Dawn". The two writers' texts are markedly different from each other in terms of their content, style, treatment and language, and their characters who come from a wide socio-cultural spectrum. Putting them alongside each other might seem at first to be a jarring juxtaposition. However, this chapter itself is premised upon the idea of difference – the different contexts of motherhood that these two writers represent. Bringing them together in a chapter will, I hope, facilitate alertness to the diversity of stories around motherhood, as well as the writers' diverse ways of negotiating these maternal narratives. In the concluding part of the chapter I undertake a comparative analysis of the authors to consider how the differences in their texts help to develop an understanding of maternal subjectivity and agency as contingent and grounded on the various situations in which the textual mothers experience their mothering.

### **Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?***

Three times Booker nominee, Anita Desai is a well-known name in Indian Anglophone literature. Coming from a mixed background of Indian-German parentage, Desai in her fiction has sought to excavate a space for those often on society's peripheries. This is demonstrated in much of her writing by an interest in gender marginality. Known for her predominantly stream-of-consciousness narratives, many of her women protagonists experience a sense of alienation and emptiness resulting from an existence defined and designed by stiflingly rigid familial norms. For this chapter, I choose her relatively neglected novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) as it delineates an

intriguing account of maternal subjectivity. In this novel, the textual mother, Sita appears to be suffering from perinatal depression and acts out a rebellion against the normative world. Her insurrection against conventions is marked by its subversive potential and grounded in experiences shaped by postcoloniality and social class. The narrative is set in the monsoon season of 1967 (with a retrospective section going back to the winter of 1947) amidst postcolonial complexities – India’s longstanding Hindu tradition of worshipping the mother goddess, dominant nationalist discourse surrounding womanhood and motherhood, and women’s subordinate position in society and family. To analyse the rebellious interior life of the mother depicted in the novel, I draw on Julia Kristeva’s concepts of the semiotic and symbolic. As such, a Kristevan reading intertwined with research into the complexities of the postcolonial context helps me to understand the protagonist’s divided maternal consciousness.

### **Nationalist Ideas about Women and Mothers**

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is instructive for revealing the connections between women, Hinduism, the nationalist construction of womanhood and this construct’s supposed prerequisite, motherhood. The idealisation of motherhood and the concept of womanhood based on it can be traced to the writings of (late nineteenth-century) nationalist writers such as Swami Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who “linked [the] traditional image of sacred motherhood to the modern concept of motherland, hoping thereby to give a new sanctity to the concept of nation in an essentially apolitical society” (Nandy 311). The Indian nationalist movement has had a complicated and problematic relationship with the “woman question”. Nationalist discourse, which was formed to oppose the colonialist power, constructed an image of woman which moved to the centre of anti-

colonial political strategy, but ultimately remained restrictive for women's emancipation (Chatterjee 622-632). At the heart of anti-colonial rhetoric, there existed a dichotomy of the "spiritual" and "material" represented by India's own identity and that of the colonial power respectively. In other words, in the anti-colonial narrative, the Indian nation's identity was conceived in terms of its long tradition of spirituality, which, the narrative claimed, was superior to the materialistic colonial power; this identity based on religious and spiritual traditions was to be preserved by all means. Within this ideological framework woman was positioned as the symbol of the country's true self – the inner domain which should be preserved and saved from outer influences (624). Partha Chatterjee analyses the nationalist construct of woman and how it creates a gendered division of space:

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests [...]. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. (624)

Thus, the polarised ideas of the spiritual and material corresponded with the notions surrounding home and the world, the spaces which were assigned to female and male respectively.<sup>9</sup> In the preservation of the spiritual self of India, where "woman" became the symbol of the nation, anti-colonial discourse imbued the traditional or mythological images of woman and the mother goddess

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<sup>9</sup> Critics such as Priyamvada Gopal have pointed out limitations in Chatterjee's analysis, claiming that his thesis is more of a reflection on "male nationalist anxieties around cultural identity and colonial subjection", than an analysis of "woman question" since it does not sufficiently delve into "why" the nationalist resolution involved such spatial gendering (62).



with qualities of self-sacrifice and benevolence (Bagchi *Interrogating* 51-73). Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 novel *Ghare Baire* (translated as *The Home and the World*) was groundbreaking for explicitly addressing the issue of these spheres as the domains of two contending forces. In this novel Tagore uses the character Bimala and her journey from the private to the public sphere as "pulse points of an increasingly violent Hindu nationalism that engenders itself in the image of the Mother Goddess as Shakti (strength)" (Ray 91).

Interestingly, nationalist discourse's centrifugal and centripetal forces simultaneously pulled women in different directions that proved to be both constraining and enabling for them. The nationalist movement sought not to physically confine women in the domestic area, but encouraged their political mobilisation in the anti-colonial struggle; however, this apparent agency was to be operated within a normative patriarchal framework (Katrak 397). In such a patriarchal setting, women's sexuality was not supposed to transgress the traditional institutional boundaries of marriage and motherhood, for this would threaten the division of the private and public locations assigned to men and women. The construct of the "Indian woman" – a figure endowed with "cultural refinement" but construed as nonthreatening and compliant – "has generalised itself among the new middle class, admittedly a widening class and large enough in absolute numbers to be self-producing, but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate class" (Chatterjee 632). The glorification of tradition to the extent that it became the main identity component of the nation proved to be detrimental for the middle-class woman who was the symbol of this nation, as there was no immediate impetus to celebrate the spiritual self against foreign powers after India gained independence. Consequently, the residues of the nationalist fervour ended up imposing ideological burdens on middle-class women who were supposed to adhere to their sacred duties of domesticity with none of the political agency that the nationalist movement might have previously accorded

them (Katrak 398). Desai's novel finds its plot in this particular time and place: her protagonist belongs to the post-independence educated middle class – that particular class which remains deeply affected by this construct of “womanhood”. Desai's protagonist, Sita, was a child during the independence movement and came of age as part of the generation that followed independence. Her father was an influential Gandhian, revered on his enchanted island Manori as a spiritual healer, but whose suspicious “underlit night-time aspect” (Desai 76) caused Sita's childhood trauma, leading to her eventual breakdown. Prospero-like Sita's father presided unchallenged over his enamoured “chelas”. Suggestions that he committed incest with his elder daughter Rekha and impregnated vulnerable female disciples demonstrate that far from providing the spiritual sanctuary revered by nationalists, domestic spaces are often dangerous for women.

The novel shows compelling parallels between Sita's father, who is known as a “second Gandhi”, and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Like the Mahatma he fasts; has a Parsi millionaire, Dalwala, as a donor to fund his ascetic lifestyle as Gandhi had Ghanshyam Das Birla (Mehta 59); calls his venture in Manori island an “experiment”<sup>10</sup>; and behaves in sexually inappropriate ways with teenage girls. While discussing nationalist discourse surrounding womanhood, the Gandhian view must be explored, as Gandhi powerfully invoked the supposedly female strength of nonviolent resistance and evolved political strategies to mobilise women for the nationalist agenda (Katrak 397). The idea of womanhood, “[N]aritva (womanhood), so repeatedly stressed by Gandhi [...] included some traditional meanings of womanhood in India, such as the belief in a closer [...]

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<sup>10</sup> Gandhi's controversial sexual life caused quite a stir both during his lifetime and afterwards. Shortly after his death, much of the controversial material such as letters was destroyed to keep his deity-like stature intact. However, later re-examination of his sexual life reveals that he believed in the ultimate power of abstinence and made his ashram his first abode of experiment. A devotee of the Hindu idea of Brahmacharya (celibacy), he used to test his chastity by sleeping next to women, often much younger than he (Adams 7).

conjunction between power, activism and femininity” (Nandy *Intimate* 53; emphasis in original). In Gandhi’s view, passive resistance is a gendered concept as passivity is apparently connected to women, owing to their alleged passive and patient endurance of oppression (Jayawardena 97). Gandhi’s political strategy of passive resistance and non-violence came from women who were taken to symbolise nurturance and endurance. This was especially true of the image of the benevolent mother, which provided him with a model, as Ketu H. Katrak argues: “Gandhi’s uses of female sexuality were channelled through his evocation of women’s obedience and nurturance as mother” (Katrak 397). He harnessed the myths of Sita and Savitri creatively for their chastity, purity, patience and suffering.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi urged women to take part actively in the nationalist movement. However, as Katrak argues, Gandhi’s over-reliance on the Hindu mythological female figures to articulate specific modes of femininity was confined to traditional or legitimate marriage and motherhood (396). Although Gandhi advocated women coming out of the domestic front in order to serve the nation, he did not address the issue of unequal power relations between males and females inside the domestic space.

Here, I am influenced by one of Desai’s essays, “A Secret Connivance”, in which she refers to the powerful and pervasive existence of the mother goddess myth in Indian society and how it generates a submissive and subservient image of womanhood:

In India, [...] there are 100,000 [...] cults built around the Mother Goddess in one form or another – that fecund figure from whom all good things flow – milk, food, warmth, comfort. [...] She is called by several names – Sita, Draupadi, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi, and so on. In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is

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<sup>11</sup> Savitri is the mythical female character who led an ascetic life for the sake of her husband’s life and succeeded to convince Yama, the God of death not to take her husband’s life.

mEEK, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. Even when spirited and brave, she adheres to the archetype: willing to go through fire and water, dishonour and disgrace for his sake. (972)

This myth of the mother goddess sets the parameters for ideal womanhood and/or motherhood in dominant patriarchal discourse and thus serves as a “subtle, deep rooted form of suppression, a secret connivance at the taking away of freedom” (967). These models of ideal womanhood and motherhood convey an image of the dutiful and sacrificial mother and wife.

Discussing Desai’s use of myth necessitates a brief note on the mythical story of Sita. Sita in the Hindu mythological epic *Ramayana* is the character who is revered and worshipped as the ideal woman because of her sacrifice for her husband Rama. She accompanies Rama in his exile for fourteen years, is always loyal and faithful towards him despite all her ordeals and makes a perfect mother to his sons. Notwithstanding her loyalty and devotion to her husband she has to go through the “fire ritual” (*Agnipariksha*) in order to prove her chastity. She has been abducted by the devil Ravana and held captive in his kingdom from where Rama with the help of the monkey army rescues her. Even though she performs the ritual and is able to prove her faithfulness and purity, she is banished by her husband, whose sole concern is to appease the widespread rumours about Sita’s chastity. The pregnant Sita goes to live out her banishment, during which time she gives birth to her sons and rears them on her own. Only when Sita bears his child does Rama find justification to withdraw the banishment. As questions again start emerging as regards her chastity and purity Sita, humiliated and insulted, requests Mother Earth to take her back into her. While the earth divides itself, Sita leaves her sons and husband and goes back to her mother (Mackenzie 374-428).

Sita’s return to her mother can be interpreted as an act of defiance and resistance against all the humiliation and injustice she has received. However, the loyalty and faithfulness of Sita as a wife

and mother have been endorsed by traditional belief structures, whereas her final protest is downplayed. The incorporation and articulation of this myth in nationalist discourse emphasising only Sita's chastity and loyalty serves patriarchy's agenda. The *Ramayana* myth which has been used by Desai in the novel can well be called a "nation building narrative" of India (Zacharias 31) because of its prime importance in underpinning the nationalist discourse against colonial power. As Usha Zacharias argues, "In nationalist discourse since 1920 as represented by Gandhian rhetoric and the *swadeshi* movement, Sita signifies the feminine, 'uncolonizable domain of the nation'" (32; emphasis in original). In Gandhian discourse around nationalism, Sita's resistance to Ravana is reinforced and is read metaphorically as resistance to materialistic seductions. Gandhi emphasised Sita's ascetic qualities and her strong personality, both of which functioned as blows to Ravana's pride and reputation. Gandhi's advocacy of strong nonviolent and passive resistance like that of the mythical Sita was in line with the anti-colonial struggle wherein he wanted women to participate actively and thus oppose the colonial power (33). However, in his evocation of myth and mobilising of a political strategy based on it, Sita's protest to her husband was left unaddressed.

### **Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* – Demythologising Motherhood**

Desai uses the *Ramayana*, so significant in shaping the nationalist narrative, for the demystification of mythology and simultaneous exploitation of its transgressive potential. The name of the protagonist Sita and her husband's name Raman have been chosen deliberately from the mythical Sita and Rama. Sita's act of defiance and maternal rejection resoundingly challenge

the myth's espousal of sacred womanhood and motherhood.<sup>12</sup> Mother of four children and pregnant with her fifth, Sita desires that her new baby remains unborn. She becomes increasingly aware of her lack of control over her own body at this advanced stage of her pregnancy. Even if she does not want the baby she has no alternative but to give birth to it. In addition, her sense of powerlessness in relation to her body and the imminent birth make her lose mental stability. Alienated from everyone, and in a desperate attempt not to give birth, Sita seeks refuge in Manori island, where she spent her childhood, with the hope that the island's magical charms will work for her.<sup>13</sup> Despite her unwillingness to give birth to the baby, Sita does not want to abort the child; instead she wants to keep it within her body. Both the mythical Sita and the novel's protagonist go to live out their banishment with children in their wombs. The mythical Sita was banished by her husband quite unjustly; in the novel, the modern, educated protagonist Sita *chooses* to go to Manori. Despite this act of rebellion, one of the most suggestive moments in the novel arises when Sita walks back to the house placing her feet in Raman's footprints – a delicate and ironical touch on Desai's part, showing that in most areas of her life she follows the path her husband has laid out for her. Behind Sita's choice lies her sense of disappointment and frustration that an Indian middle-class wife and mother often feels while carrying the ideological

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<sup>12</sup> While discussing motherhood and women writers' subversion of dominant myths, one must mention the Bengali writer, Mallika Sengupta's 1996 novel *Sitayan*, a literary text that powerfully shifts the focus from Ram to Sita, depicting the story from Sita's perspective. The novel is a retelling of the epic, with Sita acting as its protagonist. It starts in medias res when Sita, pregnant with twins, is banished by Ram, and ends in Sita's decisive departure. Sengupta's sophisticated language preserves the grandeur of the epic, while her iconoclastic Sita becomes an embodiment of dignity and protest.

<sup>13</sup> A related, later example of fictional mother who suffers problems with new birth after having four healthy baby is the mother of Dorris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988), Harriet Lovatt. In Lessing's novel, it is the child, Ben who poses the problem, whereas for Desai writing thirteen years earlier, it is the mother who poses a threat to social stability.

burden of motherhood, breeding children against her will, and acting as a self-sacrificing, loving mother. Desai uses religious imagery to reveal Sita's desperation: "she had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping the baby unborn" (31). Sita's act of defiance has twofold implications in relation to the myth: first, as mentioned previously, her rejection of maternity stands in striking contrast to the mythical grandeur of motherhood; and, second, her act of defiance and resistance can be compared with the protest of mythical Sita who could not bear the humiliation anymore and left her husband and sons to take shelter in Mother Earth.

In re-writing the myth, Desai grounds her protagonist in modern-day India, within middle-class boundaries, and lets her acts of rebellion play out within her psyche almost as a confrontation between the private and the public, the inner and outer realms. As such, Desai's charting of the mother's interiority invites analysis through the lens of Kristeva's explication of "semiotic", "symbolic" and "semiotic chora". According to Kristeva, the semiotic is the phase when the infant is still in a state of union with the mother insofar as s/he is yet to enter the realm of language (which is dominated by the male). The infant, as s/he grows up, gradually starts using language and enters the symbolic realm which is the arena of signs. In other words, the child, while growing up as a speaking subject, severs him or herself from the mother in order to acquire masculine symbolic language. However, the semiotic does remain latent at the periphery of human consciousness with the potential to irrupt in the forefront and disrupt the symbolic order.

Kristeva's idea of the semiotic is connected to her concept of the "chora", a term she borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*, wherein it is used in maternal terms, meaning mother or wet nurse. According to Kristeva, this chora is a "preverbal functional state that governs the connections between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper), objects, and the protagonists of family structure" (Kristeva 27). For Kristeva, this is the space which contains primary semiotic forces and

drives. The maternal body, according to Kristeva is the “ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*” and represents the “site of continuation between apparent oppositions (a thoroughfare, a threshold), not their absolute separation. Symbolic and Semiotic coexist in her” (Kristeva 37; Robbins 132). A pregnant woman feels what is happening inside her but she cannot explain it as she is “the site of a particularly acute realisation of the inadequacy of Symbolic knowledge” (132). Both scientific and religious discourses fail to articulate her position. A pregnant woman carries an “other” within herself which is “self” and “other” at the same time, and thus blurs the border of her selfhood. Her body is the space where nature confronts culture, and is situated close to the tension between the oppositional forces of semiotic and symbolic (Robbins 132).

Keeping in mind Kristevan ideas of the semiotic and symbolic while retaining awareness of the socio-political context the text is located in, we can understand the nature and implication of a peculiar subjectivity acting in revolt and resistance. Sita’s life, as we see in the novel, has been problematic as she, along with her other siblings, was deserted by their mother at an early age. Although the text does not clearly mention her age when she was abandoned by her mother, it is apparent from her conversation with the family’s long-term servant Moses that she can barely remember her mother. The absence of her mother has had a powerful impact on her life and her perception of her selfhood:

Sita had imagined she came into the world motherless – and the world was crowded enough so [...] she belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history – like a lamb does to the flock – and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone. (84)



Unlike the mythical Sita, the novel's protagonist does not have a mother with whom she can seek shelter. The absence of a mother has a significant effect in her life, as her own desertion of her husband and two children when she decides to go to Manori almost looks like the re-enactment of what her mother did. She admits this in conversation with her husband: "[P]erhaps, this is the urge my mother felt" (67). The impact of the desertion by her mother on Sita's psychological development invites exploration through Kristevan theories. According to Kristeva, if a child loses her mother before she perceives her as the "other", it can lead to a narcissistic depression which can express itself in a "kind of disintegration, a threat of the loss of subjectivity where the subject loses cohesion, the ability to integrate its experience" (McAfee 64). This kind of melancholia, according to Kristeva, "is a noncommunicable grief; the melancholic is wrapped up in her sadness; it is hers alone, something she cannot share in the social/symbolic realm" (McAfee 61). Abandoned by her mother at an early age, Sita appears to have developed a similar kind of depression which makes itself visible during this pregnancy.

Desai willfully makes her novel's central character reunite with her estranged mother through their acts of defiance towards motherhood. Whereas the mythical Sita ultimately goes back to her mother, the protagonist finally follows her mother's footsteps in order to escape from the symbolic world. The mythical Sita's return to Mother Earth and the protagonist's attempt to keep the baby unborn inside the womb (and thus resist the forward thrust of time): both could be connected with the desire to go back to the maternal chora. Desai delves deep into the maternal consciousness of the protagonist while layering it over with mythical allusions.

Manori is the island in which Sita spent her childhood. After India's independence in 1947, Sita moved with her father and siblings to the island Manori. There her father, a Gandhian figure, was believed to have magical powers and was deeply admired by the islanders, but Sita felt distant

and neglected by her legendary father. After her marriage Sita moves to Bombay, which stands in contrast to the apparent idyllic life of Manori. Desai shows Sita's mental distance from her husband Raman who prefers to be content and busy with a routine-bound city life. Against this backdrop, Sita's unstable mental condition is contextualised. Her journey to Manori seems to be a metaphorical journey in search of her identity. The use of the village as a pre-industrial idyllic life in contrast with the chaotic humdrum of modern city life is a common trope in Gandhian literature (see Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) for two examples). Desai problematises such idealisation through the problematic Gandhian figure, Sita's father and his overwhelming presence on the island. The motif of a cow drowning in the well is used provocatively in the early stage of the novel to foreshadow a sense of maternal sacrifice. The cow that drowned in the well dug by Sita's father is considered a fortunate animal to have ended her life in a sacred place. As the villager Jamila exclaims: "how fortunate the cow that drowned in it the other day. How sweet must have been her death" (12). Jamila's words impart a sense of gratification in surrendering one's life to something sacred or divine. This idea of unquestioning fidelity and unwavering devotion evokes an image of ideal motherhood.<sup>14</sup>

In a Kristevan interpretation, Sita's urge to return to her native place can be seen as a longing for the semiotic, which can be discerned in the following passage, which at times turns almost poetic. While Sita is contemplating the life she has been leading as a wife and mother of four children, who

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the image of drowning cow functions as a leitmotif in Desai's novels as we will see (in the last chapter), she uses this motif extensively in the novel *Clear Light of Day* as a trope of motherhood.

is expected to be happy with the so-called ideal, private family life, she feels a strong urge to go back to Manori:

If the sea was so dark, so cruel, then it was better to swim back into the net. If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic. Then there would be the sea – it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tides would lull the children, too, into smoother, softer beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect them. (101)

This poetic passage is saturated with tidal images, of swimming through the oceanic waters. The recurring trope of the tide evokes a sense of ever-flowing time and Sita's desire to go back. While Sita's journey to Manori turns out to be the culmination of her search for selfhood or instead expresses her sense of alienation from everyone or everything, her family and Bombay stand out as symbols of the compulsory domesticity and motherhood to which she is confined.

Reflecting on Desai's stream-of-consciousness style, Ramesh K Srivastava argues that Desai uses the "'language of the interior' and [is] [...] interested in dealing with personal emotion" (3). While it is evident that Desai probes the psyche of her protagonist, as was apparent in the above-quoted passage (and many other reflections from the novel), Srivastava's argument can, I would suggest, overlook Desai's social consciousness that lurks underneath the subjective feelings she describes. This passage is soaked with personal feelings of despair, but it conceals the tough situation confronted by a mother who reads her maternal consciousness on her own terms albeit through fantasy. What is important at this point is to locate this maternal experience and the resultant conflicted subjectivity within the specifics of Sita's class position. There exists broad consensus among literary critics about Desai's preoccupation with middle-class women's lives. Writing on

“identity and femininity” in Desai’s fiction, Renu Juneja comments: “Anita Desai’s fictions seek to unravel the complex responses of middle-class women to their domestic world, a web-like associations with parents, husband, siblings and children” (77). Ruth K. Rosenwasser makes a similar point when she writes that Desai’s novels “reveal the dissent of middle-class women” (84). Elizabeth Jackson’s analysis is also worth mentioning here as she points to many of Desai’s textual protagonists’ lack of employment, confined as they are to the home and financially dependent on their husbands (151). Concurring with these critics, I would add that it is important to enquire how and to what extent the novel makes use of social class in narrativising maternal experience. I argue that Desai, despite being more bent on charting interiority, does provide both subtle and explicit readings of class realities that need to be taken into account in our understanding of maternal resistance.

The novel’s narrative arc traces the protagonist’s gradual engulfment in feelings of confinement. This is illustrated on many occasions such as her dissatisfaction with the duty-bound joint family and her eventual departure from its sphere, and the moment when Sita reminisces about her wedding day by looking at her wedding album and comparing the bride in the photo with her present ageing face hidden under “layers of experience of melancholy and boredom” (56). One such occasion that merits special mention to understand Desai’s intricate use of class position comes when Sita refuses to meet Raman’s colleagues and guests and expresses her repulsion at their hollow existence:

One had brought a wife – a soft-fleshed, thick, jewel-embedded woman with nothing to say although her eyes roved over and scanned every detail of their room and seemed to absorb and put away details that she might later vociferously reveal [...] [T]hey are the

Indian merchant class,' he said drily, 'to which I think we ourselves belong. Better get used to them'.

She never got used to anyone. (48)

Desai thus situates her protagonist within specific class boundaries – those of the 'Indian merchant[s]' – only to make her break away from the fold. Sita's absolute dissatisfaction and disgust is palpable here, as is her eventual detachment, simply put in the concluding remark. We witness that during her stay with her family she "had vibrated and throbbled in revolt" as she feels tied with a chain "which can only throttle, chock and enslave" (49). This speaks volumes of Sita's sense of suffocation within a middle-class space. Desai textualises this revolt in a mother's tumultuous thoughts that long to transgress the norms of a naturalised, banal existence.

Significantly, Desai provides careful framing of her middle-class Hindu heroine's breakdown from within the working-class, non-Hindu focalisations of the family's long-term Christian servant Moses and his wife Miriam, as well as their Muslim friend Jamila. Their raucously dissenting working-class voices bookend the narrative almost akin to a Shakespearean subplot, intimating that Sita's unhappiness can only be indulged by the leisured classes.

Sita is often frustrated by language's inadequacy to express her predicament. For instance, she is challenged by Raman when she describes an earlier epiphany she had on seeing a Muslim woman in a park. Raman is aghast that she terms this random encounter her happiest memory, and Sita backs down, concurring: "Perhaps that's not the word for it after all [...] It is the wrong word" (148). She struggles to make herself intelligible but her speech is frequently interrupted by her chaotic thoughts. Sita's behaviour is akin to that of a "borderline patient", as it is termed in psychoanalysis. According to Noëlle McAfee "these are people whose borders of self are

seriously threatened, who have only a tenuous hold on the symbolic, who can barely control their semiotic affects” (51). If Sita’s thoughts seem disjointed, then so is the expression of those thoughts. She says, “But I don’t want to *have* the baby’ and then immediately after that she says she ‘want[s] to *keep* it” (34-35; emphasis in original).

Sita’s perinatal depression and bleak visions are powerfully expressed in the following passage, in which she is terrified by the violence of the world outside:

They all hammered at her with cruel fists [...], the headlines about the war in Viet Nam, the photograph of a women weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan, the virtuousness of our own India [...] [T]hey were hand-grenades all, hurled at her frail goldfish-bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it, feeling the child there play like some soft-fleshed fish in a bowl of warm sea-water.  
(55)

This is a nightmarish fantasy in which Sita apprehends that the violence of the outside world is directed at her unborn baby. The war in Vietnam suggests American imperialist power and aggression, while contrary to this destructive force is the poignant image of an anonymous mother weeping over the grave of her child. The “crowd outside a Rhodesian jail” gestures towards the anti-colonial struggle, thereby furnishing an image of violent racism and the struggle against it. Newspaper headlines about the supposed perfidy and virtuousness of two newly-born postcolonial nations (Pakistan and India) conjure up the complicated histories of their birth and the consequent tension between the two countries which still persists. Moreover, Sita is fearful that all these forces of the outside world are violently directed at her unborn baby, as is evoked by the image of a hand grenade. Instinctively, she lays a protective hand on her belly, and she compares the foetus with a

goldfish, an image of smallness and innocence in sharp opposition to the various forms of violence depicted in the passage. The word “frail” similarly evokes a sense of the vulnerability of both Sita and her unborn child. This dystopian vision has two implications. On the one hand, it reveals that Sita is unable to integrate her experience of the symbolic world with that of the semiotic within herself. On the other hand, the turbulent world outside provides an image of the symbolic which is itself chaotic and utterly unsettled, wherein her semiotic finds an acute sense of lack. In other words, all the newspaper headlines and pictures mentioned in the passage represent an unusually and unexpectedly chaotic symbolic world with which her semiotic urges are struggling – the urge that is powerfully manifested in her desire to keeping the baby in her womb, safely unborn.

According to Usha Bande, “in protecting her child from the callous world, Sita is in fact, guarding her self-image” (114). Bande’s argument indicates a conflict in maternal consciousness in which the mother tries to grapple with her parental responsibilities and motherly identity, oscillating between her resistance and conformity to internalised dictates of institutionalised motherhood. Jackson, in a slightly different vein, argues that Desai does not let her protagonist plunge into dangerous “solipsistic despair”; the son and daughter who accompany Sita to Manori “embody and represent her grounding in reality” (115). What Jackson points out here is that the fact Sita takes two of her children with her implies a sense of maternal responsibility even in the midst of her inner turmoil. Radha Chakravarty similarly argues that Sita’s revolt “does not imply simplistic rejection of the maternal role” (“Maternal” 75). Chakravarty’s assertion, I infer, is primarily based on the understanding of care and responsibility that Desai underlines in Sita’s attempt to keep the baby safe and secure. Keeping in mind these critics’ responses, I wish to argue that there exists fundamental ambivalence in Desai’s projection of the maternal subjectivity in this text, which manifests itself in the protagonist’s simultaneous negation and affirmation of maternity.

Desai makes use of symbols and metaphors which effectively call to mind Sita's sense of surrender and vulnerability in the novel. One evocative metaphor is of a jellyfish which she compares with the foetus she is carrying. While standing at the sea shore in Manori with her two children, she sees a jellyfish which reminds her of the foetus:

Tossed up and thrown onto the sandbar by the discarding waves, it now lay quite still again as it had inside the skull of that mostly passive and unadventurous sea creature, for Sita's eyes to regard till a sudden pulsing movement inside her reminded her of the foetus stranded between her hips and she was startled by the similarity of what floated inside her, mindless and helpless, to this poor washed thing thrown onto the beach, opaque and wet and sad (124).

The way the foetus has been described as being "stranded between her hips" and the animal image of jellyfish for the foetus invokes the biological compulsions being exerted on the maternal body. Additionally, the helplessness of the jellyfish being tossed by the waves emphasises Sita's defencelessness. On the other hand, the tide could be interpreted as an image of maternal time. Tides are cyclical and, given that, their image suggests an urge to go back to the maternal chora. Sita's attempt to keep the baby could also be interpreted as this urge to return to the maternal chora and a resistance to the teleological thrust of the symbolic world – a world which not only fails to validate her motherhood properly, but also imposes oppressive Law on it. The image of the jellyfish fits aptly with the image of the "goldfish belly" mentioned in the quotation, as if Sita wants the baby to live forever in her womb as a floating creature. Also, the parallel between the fictional Sita's regressive desire to contain the baby in her womb and the mythical Sita's return to Mother Earth could be read in Kristevan terms as a desire for the pre-oedipal bond which is always there at the periphery of one's consciousness, both threatening and maintaining one's subjectivity.



Through the protagonist's confusion of creation and destruction, Desai adds another dimension to her dilemma. She is confused whether childbirth represents creation or destruction; indeed, she cannot differentiate between the two impulses, because to her "the line between the creative and destructive grew so thin, so hazy and undefinable that, gazing at it, she seemed to see it vanish altogether" (56). In her confused and disturbed mental state she reflects upon this vanishing borderline between creation and destruction:

Then she grew muddled. By giving birth to the child now so safely contained, would she be performing an act of creation or, by releasing it in a violent, pain-wracked blood-bath, would she only be destroying what was, at the moment, safely contained and perfect? More and more she lost all feminine, maternal belief in childbirth [...], and began to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in a world that had more of them in it than she could take. (56)

Sita's thoughts powerfully express her ambivalence both literally and metaphorically; the rhetorical questions she poses have both positive and negative connotations. The image of childbirth as a "violent blood-bath" portrays the biological side of motherhood with utmost negativity. However, the desire to protect what is "safely contained" inside her comes in contrast to her loss of faith in maternity. Ideas of "Creation" and "Destruction" are deeply embedded in Hinduism where, along with the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva representing Creation, Sustenance and Destruction respectively, there exists the maternal images of Creation and Destruction represented by Lakshmi (Sita of the *Ramayana* is believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi) and Kali. The traditional religious trifurcation of Creator, Preserver and Destroyer: all three seem to puzzle and bewilder Sita, so that she cannot discern which act she will be performing in giving birth to her child. Put

differently, the traditional and religious discourses fail to account for her maternal position in this tumultuous time of social upheaval.

In her essay, “Stabat Mater”, Kristeva argues that the Virgin Mary fails to function as an appropriate model of motherhood for modern women, and suggests that Christian discourse renders mothers merely as masochists (Kristeva 160-186). Kristeva’s essay was directed from and towards a Western context. However, it could be adapted to the very different postcolonial context of India to argue that for a Western-educated, middle-class women like Sita, traditional images of motherhood are inadequate as a model. In the Indian context, this can also be explained in terms of Brahminical patriarchy. Uma Chakravarty in her incisive and unsparing analysis of the oppressive caste system, writes that the hierarchies of caste and gender are closely interconnected (528). The subordination of upper-caste women has its roots in Brahminical patriarchy and its design bent on controlling women’s sexuality. According to Hindu scriptural injunctions, women’s supposedly innate nature (the Sanskrit word for this is *strisabhava*) stands in conflict with their *stridharma* – which is their loyalty towards their husbands. What this conflict actually signifies, Chakravarty explains, is that women’s allegedly “demoniac” *strisabhava* is the maternal heritage that is women’s reproductive ability, while women’s *stridharma* is the paternal heritage. Therefore, women’s maternal power within patriarchy needs to be appropriated, controlled and channeled only in “legitimate motherhood” (523). Seen in this light the rebellion of Desai’s upper-class/-caste, pregnant protagonist is suggestive of such “demoniac” maternal power trying to break the shackles of subservient *stridharma* for which her mythical namesake Sita of the *Ramayana* is celebrated.

Towards the end of the novel, readers see Sita trying to negotiate her maternal identity, accepting childbirth. However, she is not elated by it; rather, she has an indifferent attitude: “Once the infant was born [...] Sita would lie as still as though paralysed in a fearful accident, with blue lips and a

grey sensation of death” (154). Sita is uninterested in the child, whom she had neither wanted to be born, nor desired to kill. This ambiguity in Desai’s representation of motherhood pervades the novel, since Sita tries to reconcile her own divided self as one who does not want to carry the burden of institutionalised motherhood and one who believes in the powers of love and preservation.

Sita’s search for healing in Manori, her apparent madness, visible depression, incoherent thoughts, and disintegration of self can all be connected to the semiotic which is struggling with the symbolic realm in which Sita finds herself. As I have discussed, Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic chora and its metaphor, the maternal body, contain both semiotic and symbolic within them; both contain the nature-culture duality, the tension between “self” and “other”. Throughout the novel, we see Sita struggling with these conflicting ideas, expressing them in a rhetoric that captures that contradiction, be it creation versus destruction, reality versus illusion or the desire to keep the baby safely enwombed and not wanting to give birth to it. Sita, in her experience of pregnancy, almost entirely embodies the Kristevan notion of the metaphor of pregnant woman as the site of maternal chora. However, this text in a way goes further than the notion of a coherent symbolic by showing a symbolic which is utterly unsettled and chaotic and thus fails to provide a stable and coherent social order.

Sita’s revolt and subsequent reconciliation shows motherhood as a site of profound ambivalence as in her decision to return to the domestic life of Bombay, she seems to have struck a compromise with herself. Although her return can be seen as a defeat, as some critics (Sharma 69; V Rao 49) have observed, it seems to me that her return might also be interpreted as an inescapable eventuality. Keeping the novel’s context in mind, this kind of re-entry into the domestic space can be linked to the vexed issue of women’s choice between “ghar” (home) and “bahir” (world), which

has been a concern since the nationalist struggle and has its ramification in postcolonial lives. Nonetheless, a strategic reading in the light of Kristeva's theories could open up space for interpretation by suggesting the potential (and even the inevitability) of the semiotic to subvert the oppressive and patriarchal symbolic Law. Desai's charting of the protagonist's interiority and split subjectivity could well be seen as an irruption of the semiotic and its confrontation with an uncharacteristically chaotic and unstable symbolic world.

### **Mahasweta Devi: Champion of the Marginalised**

Mahasweta Devi, a renowned literary figure of Bengal, is also widely known for her commitment to and activism on behalf of the indigenous people and tribal communities in India. Her fictions mostly represent the subalterns and the wretched condition of their lives, resulting from a discriminatory system which has systematically marginalised them before and after the independence of India (Bandyopadhyay xiii). Devi's texts are particularly important for investigating the dynamics of unequal power relations between the classes while also addressing the issue of gender politics. My concern is to probe the representation of motherhood in her selected stories in order to explore how she uses fiction in order to counter, from a distinct location, the normative idea of motherhood, thus providing a vision of maternal agency or lack of it operating within a certain location. I will also interrogate how Devi represents the motherhood of the "gendered subaltern" and how specific contextual issues (such as class and caste hierarchy) impact on representations of the maternal in the texts.

In order to proceed with my exploration of Devi's literary representations of subaltern motherhood, I need briefly to explicate the concept of the subaltern and its relevance to my

discussion of Devi's texts. The word subaltern was first used by the Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1973). In his *Prison Notebooks*, written during Mussolini's fascist regime in the Italy of the 1930s, he used the word "subaltern" to mean "non-hegemonic groups of classes" (Gramsci xiv). Gramsci's concept of the subaltern was further developed and deployed by the Subaltern Studies Collective historians, led by Ranajit Guha, in their analysis of the historiography of the nationalist struggle in India. The collective strongly criticised the elitism inherent in bourgeois nationalist historiography which did not acknowledge the contribution of the non-elites towards India's independence (Chaturvedi 9; Guha 36). However, "subaltern" later encompassed other categories, as Guha defines the term as "a name for the general attribute for subordination [...] whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (viii). Since then, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised crucial questions as to the efficacy of the project of recovering the subaltern's voice in her famous 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak adds another dimension to the argument by highlighting the issue of the gendered subaltern who is doubly marginalised as "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" ("Subaltern" 287). She argues that the subaltern woman's voice is under-represented while her male counterpart has gained dominance in representations of subaltern resistance. In such a context, Devi, through her activism and her literary writing, has relentlessly endeavoured to create a space where the subaltern's voice can be heard. What is particularly important for this chapter's concern is that in these stories Devi chooses to represent the doubly marginalised, gendered subaltern who is often neglected in literature (Basu 130). Furthermore, through her maternal narratives, Devi retrieves the voices of subaltern mothers whose "acts" speak of their resistance when their powerless position – deriving from lower class and caste status – overpowers their mothering.

According to Spivak, the project of representing subalterns entails the danger of silencing them in an attempt to “speak for” them. Being attentive to Spivak’s cautious position, it is imperative to address Devi’s own subject position. Despite belonging to the elite class and caste, Devi chooses to write extensively (and almost exclusively) on the indigenous and subaltern people. I cite Devi herself talking about the driving force of her writing, which cannot be separated from her activism as both stem from a sense of responsibility. She writes:

An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people [...] is the only source of inspiration for my writing. [...] I have to go on writing to the best of my ability in defence of the dispossessed and disinherited, so that I may never have reason to feel ashamed to face myself. For all writers are accountable to their own generation and have to answer for themselves. (Devi “Preface” xx-xxi)

The metaphor of the burning sun aptly expresses Devi’s grievances against and anger at the governmental system of post-independence India, which has failed to improve the condition of subalterns. Her tone is one of antagonism mingled with fury and rage, which, she claims, propels her to write on the subaltern people. The quote indicates the “inextricability” of her creative writings from her social activism (Ratti 204). Maitreya Ghatak writes that from Devi’s “third creative-writing phase (1976-85)” the subjects of her writing have always been the tribals and socially marginalised people (x)<sup>15</sup>.

Devi’s familial and educational backgrounds are completely different from that of the characters (Chandi, Jashoda, Jati) she creates. Devi was born into a Brahmin family, and both her parents

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<sup>15</sup> The tribals constitute 8 per cent, and the scheduled castes comprise 17 per cent of the total population of India. From 1976s onwards Devi’s creative writings have focused on these communities who belong to the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

Manish Ghatak and Dharitri Devi were well-known writers. The personal background of the authors seems pertinent here in identifying Devi's own social position in the caste- and class-divided social system of post-independence India, and in understanding her conscious and continuous critique of this hierarchical social setting. The ethical dimension which we witness in Devi's assertion of her literary agenda gestures towards the interrelatedness of her activism and her writing.

For a better understanding of this ethical issue, Spivak's theorisation of "ethical singularity" proves helpful. Amidst her translations and commentaries on Devi's short stories in *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, Spivak writes about Devi's "painstaking labour to establish 'ethical singularity' with the subaltern" (xxiv). To explain "ethical singularity", Spivak writes:

when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability [...] [I]n such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides here is always a sense that something has not got across [...] the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides. (*Imaginary* xxv)

Here Spivak is referring to an engagement between the self and the other which entails a sense of empathetic involvement; however, she argues that such empathy and attempts to reach out for the other are inevitably incomplete and partial. Sara Ahmed terms the other's ineffability the "particularity of the Other" that "cannot simply be figured" (64). What is important in such encounters between self and other is to maintain self-awareness of one's own inabilities alongside a simultaneous effort to overcome it. Devi's involvement with the tribal communities, her relentless activism and her literary texts attempt to carry out this responsibility from an ethical position.

Since Devi's fiction is originally in Bengali, crucial questions arise as to whether translation retains the original language's nuances. Devi's use of language which is a mixture of sophisticated, tribal and colloquial words presents especially difficult obstacles for the translator to negotiate. As a translator, Spivak writes: "Mahasweta's prose is an extraordinary melange of street slang, the dialect of east Bengal, the everyday household language of family and servant, and the occasional gravity of elegant Bengali" (*Imaginary* 123). Radha Chakravarty, the translator of the story "Bayen", similarly argues: "[i]nstead of a seamless texture, her writing acquires a dynamic disruptiveness that reinforces the thematic emphasis on separation and struggle, where dissonance represents the irreducibility of difference" (*Subjectivity* 97). In other words, the amalgam of elite and erudite phrases along with the tribal dialects, English and Hindi words: all of these contrasting argots create commotion and interruption which lie at the texts' core. In her translation of "Breast-Giver", Spivak italicised the English words used in the original Bengali version. According to her, "this is a reminder of the intimacy of the colonial encounter" (xxxix). Radha Chakravarty keeps Bengali words like *dom* (a low-caste Hindu subgroup comprising those people who cremate dead bodies) in "Sanjh-Sokaler Ma" (Ma, from Dusk to Dawn) in order to retain the nuances which are present in the original story. Mahua Bhattacharya, the translator of "Bayen", consistently uses italicised words in the sections describing the superstitious beliefs around the bayen: a bayen is a kind of witch who nurses and suckles dead children and casts evil spell on living children. One can assume that the translator does this in order to emphasise the pervasiveness of such superstitious beliefs and to distinguish this as a certain kind of superstitious norm. Devi's use of tribal dialect alongside English words and elegant Bengali creates a sense of diversity and also gives a sense of Bengal's palimpsestic history through the English words relating to official institutions such as the "BDO" (Block Development Officer), the "government", and the medical term "diagnosis", all of



which impact on these characters' lives, while highlighting class differences. As such, I suggest that language itself forms a central part of Devi's literary strategy.

### **The Evil Mother in "Bayen"**

The protagonist of the story "Bayen" is a Hindu low-caste woman named Chandidasi, whose ancestral job is to bury dead children.<sup>16</sup> Once Chandi becomes a mother with the birth of her son Bhagirath, she finds it difficult to bury dead children. Her motherhood thus stands in the way of her profession. Chandi lactates at the time of burial and finds herself accused of being a "bayen"; this accusation leads to her forced removal from her husband and son. By convention, a bayen is not killed but is isolated from the community. Separated from her husband and son and branded as a witch, Chandi spends her life in utter poverty and humiliation. Chandi's life of ostracism comes to an end when she jumps in front of a running train to save the train and its passengers from an armed robbery. Her courageous act gets government recognition and she is given a posthumous reward. Receiving the reward on behalf of his mother, Bhagirath, the son, declares that she was his mother, and not a bayen.

In portraying the distorted mother-child bond in "Bayen", Devi shows motherhood or, more precisely, the maternal body, as a site of oppression through repeated reference to Chandi's breast milk in the text. When people see Chandi next to the dead children's grave at odd hours of the night, she says, "No, no, I'm not a Bayen! I have a son of my own. My breasts are heavy with milk for him" (Devi 11). Chandi here seems to be claiming ownership of her breast milk, which she

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<sup>16</sup> The marginalised "dom" community consists of Hindu low-castes whose caste-assigned job is to cremate dead bodies.

argues is for her son and does not make her a bayen. People suspect her as a bayen when a drop of her breast milk spills on the ground at the time of burying her niece. The repeated allusions to breast milk have important implications in the text inasmuch as they encapsulate a struggle between two opposing forces. On the one hand, the breast milk reaffirms to Chandi her maternal identity, as she claims its possession in the above-cited statement. The narrator first mentions Chandi's breast milk when Chandi is called away from her son for work, well before she is branded a bayen: "her breast ached with milk if she stayed too long in the graveyard" (8). This bodily reaction and Chandi's response to the separation from her child serve to underscore the intimate connection between the mother and child. On the other hand, Chandi is eventually forced to separate from her son and thus deny him her milk. This absolute negation of her right over her own breast milk and the evil connotations attributed to it by society suggest Chandi's vulnerability as a mother, while evincing the ways social oppression impinges on the very survival of the mother-child relationship. The maternal body thus becomes a personification of the maternal agency curbed by the community's orthodox and superstitious beliefs.

In order to provide a nuanced analysis of the maternal in this text, I situate Devi's work in the context of perceptions of motherhood in Bengal, to locate her work within the specific socio-cultural context, and also to delineate how Devi deliberately breaks away from the conventional patriarchal, nationalist and religious ideas of motherhood, while foregrounding the mother's journey from victimhood to agency. Discussing the anti-colonial uprising of the 1940s, Jasodhora Bagchi suggests that the mother image projected by it was "a combination of the affective warmth of a quintessentially Bengali mother and the mother goddess Shakti, known under various names as Durga, Chandi or Kali, who occupies a very important position in mainstream religious practice" ("Nationalism" 66). Bagchi here indicates the invocation of motherhood in nationalist struggle in

Bengal where, alongside the image of the mother goddess (of the Shakti cult, with its fearsome and destructive aspects), an affectionate and caring figure of the traditional Bengali mother was also incorporated.

The widespread Indian glorification of motherhood stems from the religious traditions of worshipping the mother goddess among all classes in Bengal. Anthropologists have traced “mother cults in local village level practices [...] some of these have been related to realities such as fever epidemics” (Bagchi “Nationalism” 66). Thus a powerful idea of motherhood prevails in Bengal which has varied manifestation in different social classes and castes. In Bengal, the mother goddess has both creative and destructive aspects: while Lakshmi represents wealth and prosperity, the goddesses of the “Shakti” cult – Durga, Chandi and Kali – are the ones with fearsome aspects and act as the destroyers of evil and miscreants. According to Sudhir Kakar, Bengali culture is exceptionally prone to the destructive or threatening aspects of the mother goddess. However, Bagchi argues, “[t]he Shakti cult among Bengalis, paradoxically enough, is upheld by the affective qualities of a son’s yearning for the mother” (67). Bagchi here indicates the way worship and invocation of these fearsome mother goddesses is followed through a tender and familiar image of a son’s affectionate yearning for his mother (68).<sup>17</sup> Even in using the Bengali *Ma* (mother) as an image of motherland – caring, loving and victimised by colonial power – the nationalists simultaneously deployed the strong and destructive force of the mother goddess. In relation to the nationalist vision of motherhood and the motherland, Tanika Sarkar argues:

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<sup>17</sup> A popular genre of music called “*Shyama Sangeet*” is religious and devotional songs addressed to Shyama, other name of Goddess Kali is typically composed in a way of a son’s yearning for a mother. Ramprasad Sen, a devotee of Kali in the eighteenth century, Bengal, composed the songs, which are still popular both in urban and rural Bengal (Bagchi 67).

The mother, however, is not just a figure signifying enslavement. Feminine cults also represent power, an image of resurgent and fearful strength [...] there is a curious blending [...] of the principles of abject victimhood and triumphant strength in the polysemic iconography deployed around the mother. (*Hindu* 253)

In other words, the ideals of motherhood invoked by the nationalists carried ambivalent connotations. While the image was ostensibly of a mother figure colonised by the foreign enemy, in a deeper way it evoked female power embedded in the concept of Shakti, which is fierce and destructive. This mother image in nationalism was drawn not only from mainstream religious practices but also from rural areas and folklore. About the popularity of the mother goddess cult amongst society's outliers, Sudhir Kakar states: "the presence of the mother goddesses at the lower reaches of society is usually associated with such poverty and deprivation that many of the mother goddesses were forces of the dark to be propitiated" (67). This complex ideology of motherhood in all sections (including urban and rural) of society in Bengal should be held in mind while examining Devi's texts, as her story is firmly grounded in this socio-cultural setting. Her characters experience the constructions of motherhood even as they deviate from these. What is more, the subaltern mothers' experiences of multiple oppression and eventual separation from their children as well as their resistance demystify and unsettle that version of motherhood eulogised in nationalist, religious discourse. In this way, they create parallel narratives which indirectly reverberate with the idea of a powerful and affectionate mother.

Devi's protagonist, Chandi, shares her name with the goddess Chandi who presides over the *Shakti* cult. Keeping in mind the veneration of motherhood in Indian society and culture, it could well be said that Devi's story uncovers the hypocrisy that lurks behind this normative glorification. The powerful hold that the mother goddess exerts over the upper and lower classes and the different

castes of Bengal, as well as the mother goddess's deployment in the nationalist struggle do not empower actual mothers. The rousing rhetoric of religion and nationalism around the mother's exalted position<sup>18</sup> prove empty and shallow in an oppressive subaltern context. However, a close reading of the text suggests that Devi's portrayal subtly retains the ambivalent overtones of the mythical and cultural concepts, inscribing them within a maternal perspective. Chandi is a bold and fearless woman from an unwomanly profession. The narrator observes that "the word 'fear' was foreign to Chandi" (6). But Devi also divulges her tender side when Chandi feels the weight of her traditional profession on her maternal body:

God ... God ... God ... Chandi would weep softly and rush back home. She would light a lamp and sit praying for Bhagirath. At those times she also prayed for each and every child in the village that each should live forever. This was a weakness that she had developed of late. Because of her own child, she now felt a deep pain for every dead child. Her breast ached with milk if she stayed too long in the graveyard. (8)

Here the author reveals Chandi's vulnerable side, quite unlike her usual fearless nature. Through Chandi's yearning for her son, her lullaby which hovers over the story calls forth her unfulfilled motherhood, and through her motherly feelings for every child the author shows Chandi's qualities traditionally attributed to women. To reflect theoretically, Chandi's motherhood transforms her from within, and she, in her newly acquired maternal identity, goes beyond merely biological motherhood. However, in this localised account of subaltern maternity, there is hardly any scope for

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, there is a Sanskrit proverb – *Janani janmabhūmischa swargadapi gariyasi* – which means mother and motherland are superior to heaven.

the subaltern mother to reflect upon her maternal consciousness. She has to act to reclaim her motherhood, as Chandi does through her courageous sacrifice.

Chandi's sacrificial death to save the people from an armed train robbery is emblematic of the strong and compassionate qualities of a mother. This depiction comes closer to the mythical, cultural and religious perception of the goddess: a blending of the archetypal Bengali 'Ma' full of love and affection and a fearless woman of indomitable strength. I concur with Radha Chakravarty's contention that through her defiance of the social labelling of bayen by saving those who victimise her, Chandi claims a place in the annals of history (*Subjectivity* 101). In relation to Chandi's death Chakravarty writes: "she dies, as she lives, alone and larger-than-life, in an act of heroism that once again elevates her above the common mass of humanity" (101). While it is true that Chandi's sacrificial death accords her an elevated position previously denied because of her class, caste and gender, the death reflects her victimisation as well, as she becomes a figure deified on the grounds of her sacrifice. More than this heroic elevation, the decisiveness of her final act, in my estimation, is an attempt to reclaim the lost agency that has been negated through the severance of the bond between mother and son. Chandi's final sacrifice, as Chakravarty rightly observes, endows posthumous recognition on their mother-son relationship, with the son publicly re-establishing the mother and the child's long-lost connection. However, what is striking here is an acute sense of loss that permeates this entire mothering experience. This double trajectory of loss and gain resides at the core of the maternal narrative, insofar as the motif of the mother without child disturbs a simplistic formulation of mother as either victim or agent. Therefore, it would be problematic to simply glorify Chandi's sacrifice without being conscious of the peculiar and complex nature of her maternal agency.

Devi positions her protagonist within history: we see Chandi taking pride in being the descendant of Kalu Dom, who sheltered legendary King Harischandra and received all the world's burning cremation grounds to follow generation after generation in return for his favour. Through invoking this mythical story of Kalu Dom and Harishchandra's gift of the cremation grounds, Devi foregrounds the systematic exploitation of the lower castes – how they have been deprived and oppressed for generations. To highlight the ongoing marginalisation, Devi also addresses the present situation. We see that Malindar, Chandi's husband, is the only person in the dom community who can sign his name. Their son, Bhagirath goes to a school where the boys from the dom community are looked down upon and expected to keep a distance from the higher-caste boys. Bhagirath comes to know from school that the Indian constitution, in its 1955 Untouchability Act, abolished untouchability and gave equal rights to everyone, but the evident disparity between this legislation and the reality surprises his innocent mind. Being a woman of this continually exploited caste, Chandi is doubly marginalised. In the story Chandi's maternal identity has been discarded by the superstitious practices despite the conventional sacralisation of motherhood in the same context (thinking of worship of the mother goddess in many village cults). Chandi's maternal exploitation highlights gendered power relations within the context of a rural setting. Samik Bandyopadhyay observes that the story does not only protest the inhuman superstition around bayens, but also “touches the larger space of the social forces that separate mother and son in a male dominated system” (xiii). I would add that this separation instigates a peculiar instance of maternal agency that is grounded in the subaltern situation where a subaltern mother is either not allowed to act (if we consider the protagonist's life of impoverishment and isolation) or she carries out the final act of resistance through death.

## **Jashoda, The Benevolent “Breast-Giver”**

Unlike the Hindu lower-caste woman Chandi, Jashoda the protagonist of Devi’s “Breast-Giver” is a Brahmin, belonging to the top of the caste hierarchy, but economically she is near to the bottom. It is significant that the concept of the subaltern as “heterogeneous” is reaffirmed by Devi’s depiction of subaltern women belonging to various castes and classes and experiencing exploitation meted out to them differently by the intersecting factors of class, caste, religion and so on. In “Breast-Giver” the upper-caste Jashoda becomes a professional mother in order to sustain her family after her husband Kangalicharan loses his legs in an accident. Due to breastfeeding about fifty children – her own and those of the Halder household in exchange for money – Jashoda eventually develops breast cancer. Alienated from her body and also her much-loved husband and children, she dies a lonely death. In this story, then, Devi’s narrative revolves around the commodification of motherhood.

Devi names her protagonist after Jashoda, believed to be the foster-mother of Lord Krishna, the Hindu deity. The name has ironic implications as it underlines the figure of mythical Jashoda and thus an elevated maternal image of the universal foster-mother. But Devi exposes the hollowness of the myth through the depiction of the protagonist’s exploited motherhood. Jashoda only realises her exploitation in the final days of her life: “‘if you suckle you’re a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don’t look at me, and the Master’s boys don’t spare a peek to ask how I’m doing’. The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes” (Devi 67). This quotation expresses Jashoda’s anger at the indifference of both her own sons and the ones she suckled. She detects the lie that is concealed behind the traditional elevation of mother and motherhood. The narrator highlights her destroyed breast to underline both her bodily exploitation and her mental agony, resulting from a sense of being double-crossed, as the word “lie” suggests betrayal.



Spivak's famous translation and analysis of Devi's text is important as she uses a number of theories (Marxist-feminist, liberal feminist, French theorisation of the body) to analyse the text and to illuminate the theories in turn. I will not accord detailed analysis to her commentary; rather I will use those parts of it which are relevant to my discussion on the maternal in this text. One of Spivak's critical arguments is that Devi's text shows how the maternal body and mothering could be used to produce economic value, and thus complicate Marxist divisions of labour. Spivak's argument effectively unfolds the unique nature of agency in the subaltern context. Jashoda makes her body a site of "value production" which enables her to assert her agency in terms of being the breadwinner of the family, resisting class oppression. There is a reversal of gender roles in Jashoda's family which is discernible in the following passage:

[f]rom now on Kangalicharan took charge of the cooking at home. Made the children his assistants. Gradually he became an expert in cooking plantain curry, lentil soup, and pickled fish [...] [E]veryone's devotion to Jashoda became so strong that at weddings, showers, namings and sacred-threadings they invited her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman. (52-53)

This passage indicates Jashoda's position being upheld both in her family and outside. This supposedly superior position certainly empowers her by making her body a site of "value production". However, this self-same body turns out to be the source of her utmost exploitation and agonising death.

However, agency and consciousness are influenced and regulated by cultural discourse. Jashoda remains trapped in the mythic grandeur of motherhood. The last two paragraphs of the story are startlingly contradictory and demand analysis. The author begins in a rather prosaic way: "Jashoda

Devi, Hindu female, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an untouchable". In the last paragraph, the author abruptly changes her tone: "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone" (74-75). These paragraphs contrast, with the former painting a realistic picture, reported in a matter-of-fact way, and the other one utilising an elevated tone which equates Jashoda with the mythical foster-mother. The last paragraph resonates with Jashoda's own thoughts of herself as a generic mother of the world, but it could also be seen as an ironic remark on the author's part. Jashoda's cancerous body and her death are sharply compared with an image of the divine mother figure. This reinforces the discrepancy between practical exploitation and the mythical elevation of motherhood.

In Devi's own interpretation, the text is a "parable of India after decolonisation" (Spivak "Literary Representation" 337):

[L]ike the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. (337)

Devi presents her own writing as a parable of post-independence India, whereby Jashoda is the symbol of Mother India exploited by her own citizens who promised to protect her after independence. Devi reads her own text in relation to the metaphor of Mother India generated during the nationalist movement, arguing that the mother figure is ultimately abused by those who once glorified it. Spivak, however, argues that Devi's reading of the text as a "parable of decolonization"

undermines Jashoda's position as a subaltern woman, while adhering to the conventional ideas of Mother India.

Radha Chakravarty agrees with Spivak's argument that Jashoda's story is not a bildungsroman, but the reason Chakravarty provides is that Jashoda does not experience any "growth of consciousness" (62). In contrast, I think towards the end of the narrative Jashoda's disillusionment in the grandeur of motherhood is an instance of her growing consciousness, although it comes with a heavy price, that of her tormented death. Questioning the ideals around motherhood, experiencing disillusionment in the glory of a milk-full breast, and understanding the nature of the exploitation of the body: these active reflections can certainly be interpreted as an attainment of a certain kind of subjectivity.

### **The Divine Mother in "Ma, from Dusk to Dawn"**

Contrary to the forced mother-child separation in "Bayen", the absence of the child in the story "Ma, from Dusk to Dawn" is somewhat partial, which makes it even more complex. The protagonist, Jati is a woman belonging to a nomadic tribe and she assumes the role of a spiritual mother after the death of her husband. This masquerade of spiritual mother dictates that she should be called "Jati Thakurani" ("thakurani" is a Bengali word, used to address a woman with divine power) during daylight hours when she is only a divine mother offering blessings to her devotees, and accepting their material offerings (food, money) in return. But, during that time she cannot be a human mother of this mortal and mundane world. She can function as a human mother and can be called "ma" by her son only from the beginning of the dusk until the day's dawning. Jati, during the

last days of her life cannot continue the disguise anymore and longs to hear her son address her as “ma” regardless of the time.

In this story Devi’s protagonist uses spiritual motherhood as a tool, an instrument for her survival. Being a young widow of a lower class and caste, and in order to protect herself from sexual exploitation and sustain the life of her son, she takes up the disguise of a spiritual mother. In her chosen role, she offers spiritual bliss and gets honour and respect from those who would otherwise oppress her. One example of this is the upper-caste Brahmin Anadi-*daktar* (a Bengali word for doctor), a quack who regularly pays “obeisance to Jati Thakurani’s feet with offerings of oil-coconut-rice-salt” (Devi 5). This illustrates how Jati has not only resisted potential class, caste and gender exploitation, but has also manipulated and reversed the dominant hierarchy. Moreover, as mentioned, this camouflage is actually her means of mothering, because she feeds her son with the income and often remains unfed herself. Ironically, to perform her mothering (in the sense of nourishing and preserving the life of child) she has to separate herself from her child. This is not a physical separation, but one that demands that the mother denies her maternal love for her child. In other words, though they are not forced to live without each other, their love is curtailed and rendered inadequate in order to feed into the idea of the spiritual mother that becomes essential for their mere survival. An intense sense of unrequited love characterises this relationship as we see Jati, even during the day-time, cannot help pleading her son: “call me Ma, Sadhon”, while Sadhon out of similar angst says to the doctor: “how my heart bursts out, how I long to call her Ma, sir! Then! When it’s dark, I’ll put my head in her lap, call her Ma! Ma! Ma! To my heart’s content” (8). This yearning of the mother and the child for each other almost enacts a tragedy born out of a hostile situation, divulging as it does the impossible space that the mother without child occupies in

her subaltern position. Nonetheless, despite the tragedy one can discern the struggle and resistance that this repressive context gives rise to, forming an alternative version of mothering.

Like “Bayen”, Devi situates her protagonist in her historical and social context, embedded in mythological tales, which the protagonist herself recalls. In her delirium Jati says, “our tale is the most incredible! My ancestor is Jara the hunter, himself. Heard of him? ... We say Jaara the hunter. Our tongues sound different” (Devi 12). The Jara (traditional hunters) are believed to be of the community who killed the highest Hindu deity, Lord Krishna and were thus doomed to a nomadic life devoid of a stable habitat. Devi’s own argument about using history in literature is worth noting here, she writes:

Literature should be studied in its historical setting [...] [T]o capture the continuities between past and present held together in the folk imagination, I bring legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into a contemporary setting, and make an ironic use of these, as I do with the Dasharath story in my *Pindadan*, and legend of Kalu Dome in my *Bayen*. (Devi qtd. in Bandopadhyay xii)

Devi stresses the importance of history to literary texts, as she makes ironic uses of prevalent myths and legends to historicise her characters. The legend of Kalu Dom and Jara’s alleged killing of Lord Krishna and, more broadly, the mythical stories as a form of oral history incorporated into the story also suggest a continued form of exploitation of the lower class and caste. Devi’s textual mothers are representative figures of those marginalised sections whose mothering experiences and separation from their children emanate from such an exploited condition. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, in her discussion of the mother without her child, writes: “stories of mother without child individually and collectively refuse to let us forget that experiences of motherhood depart from theories that

would inform them, and they also insist on embedding mothers in specific historical communities and groups” (17). Paying heed to Hansen’s argument, I have attempted to highlight the historical and contextual issues that affect the experiences of motherhood.

What is significant about Jati is the way in which she, as a mother, deploys strategies to combat gender, class and caste oppression to bring up her son. The narrator movingly narrates Jati’s mothering sustained by her spiritual disguise and the meagre earning that this disguise brings her: “Not money, not a single cowrie shell, only a *pali* of rice was what Jati Thakurani asked in exchange. Come dusk, Thakurani would become Sadhan’s Ma again. The rice she earned as Thakurani, she would then cook as Ma and feed to her idiot son” (Devi 6). Through these lines Devi reveals a mother’s sheer struggle for her child, wherein her mothering is ironically premised upon the very absence of the child. Crucially, this simultaneous presence and absence of nurturing, both literally and figuratively, does not conform to any convenient category of the maternal – good/bad, successful/unsuccessful – instead lending itself to creating a form of motherhood laden with contradiction and ambivalence.

Apparently, Jati’s decision and her survival strategy might seem to have empowered her. While it certainly indicates her strength and stamina – the way she manipulates the system to bow down to the feet of a tribal woman – examining it closely we can discern Jati’s choice is the result of a constraint, a compulsion. She is compelled to take up this role which denies her the maternal affection she wants to express for her son, but ironically enough she does this out of profound maternal love for her child, to sustain his life. Jati’s maternal agency denotes a complex nexus of maternal agency which emerges as a resistance to an oppressive system (patriarchal, unequal, class and caste divided), but remains circumscribed.

The author attacks class and caste segregation and the pervasive influence of religion in the following passage, where Jati after putting on the red clothing of a spiritual mother travels in a train without experiencing any trouble from fellow passengers. This reminds her of her husband's futile effort to change their last name in order to be considered upper-caste:

Jati had been gazing out through the window, her eyes flooded with tears. How the people respected her, honoured her. Was this what it was like, then? To move up in life? Alas, if only Utsav were present, he could see how no court, no official paper had been needed. Only a cloth and trident had promoted Jati's caste, elevated her class. (28)

In this passage, the author with biting irony points towards the wide gap between upper and lower classes and castes, but at the same time poignantly shows her protagonist developing an understanding of the ways of the world. The red attire and accompanying trident as religious symbols act as her weapons to protect herself and gain respect.

At the end of the narrative, we see Jati's son Sadhan performing the funeral works of his mother, but he snatches the offering of rice from the priest he gave in the name of her mother. Hungry as he is, the smell of rice proves irresistible to him. In the penultimate paragraph when a bereaved Sadhan cooks rice and remembers his mother, the author says, "the smell of rice, such a lovely smell. The smell brings his mother close, once again. As long as Sadhan cooks rice, eats hot rice, his *shanjh-shokaler Ma* will stay close, safe and secure" (36).<sup>19</sup> For Sadhan, mother and food are inseparable; the very smell of rice conjures up the idea of his mother staying close to him. The image of the

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<sup>19</sup> "Sanjh-sokaler Ma" is the Bengali phrase for "mother from dusk to dawn". The translator, Radha Chakravarty, has kept the Bengali phrase amidst her English translations throughout the story. The reason for this, I presume, is to make the phrase stand out so that it almost becomes the name of such fraught mothering.

quintessential Bengali “ma”, a caring, affectionate, sacrificing figure is prominent here – and it also metaphorically denotes the image of the benevolent mother goddess offering food and sustenance and preserving life. Devi endows her character with the values of love and care traditionally attributed to women, but her portrayal seems to destabilise the patriarchal interpretation of these values (they are exclusively for women, and should be followed to the letter by them), as well as prioritising mothering in terms of as a strategy for resistance.

## **Conclusion**

If these texts are positioned in relation to the larger issue of feminism which prioritises gender equality, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s research proves highly relevant. Mohanty claims that “to define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being ‘woman’ has nothing to do with race, class, nation or sexuality, just with gender” (12). These texts validate Mohanty’s argument: to focus solely on the issue of gender would yield partial or incomplete analysis of these texts. What is significant in contextualising motherhood in the light of these two authors’ texts is an understanding of the intricate nexus of class-caste-gender. Desai’s and Devi’s protagonists come from different castes and classes; this difference is crucial as it determines mothers’ varied experiences of mothering rooted in their particular situations. On a broad spectrum, these fictions’ suggestion of maternal diversity also reinforces the significant issue of “differences” within the subcontinent rather than homogenising women’s experiences in the third world (Mohanty 13). However, there is a common thread which justifies my putting them together; namely, their shared ground of motherhood, which, for them, is the site of both subjugation and agency. I by no means want to generalise their representations, but rather have tried to indicate the socio-cultural



differences and the impact of these issues on their representations. This facilitates the notion of a contingent nature of maternal subjectivity and agency.

By contingent motherhood, I mean a concept of motherhood which is context-specific, flexible, and depends upon intersectional and interdependent factors of class, caste, religion and so forth. Desai represents motherhood from the specific location of a post-independence, middle-class scenario. Her protagonist is presumably an upper-caste Hindu, Western-educated, modern woman. We see her protagonist smoking cigarettes on her balcony, and reciting English poems to herself to console her troubled mind. In contradistinction, Devi's protagonists discussed here all inhabit the space of the lower caste or even tribe, without any educational privilege and experiencing great poverty. In the case of Desai's Sita, the middle-class values of motherhood, mixed with Hindu religious notions, exclusively set the parameters and created a domestic space for motherhood to be performed. Partha Chatterjee's argument about the class-bound (ir)relevance of nationalist ideas of the "new woman" is worth recalling here. In the concept of the "new woman" propagated by the nationalists, a woman is supposed to have traditional cultural refinement without troubling her domestic space. Desai's character Sita has to confront what is widely expected of a middle-class woman from the generation following independence. It is this confrontation which gives rise to her divided maternal subjectivity, in which she oscillates between her choices. Devi's protagonists do not experience this predicament of living up to the ideals of this "new woman". They belong to the subaltern population who have been effectively effaced from nationalist historiography. Significantly, Jati and Chandi do not face domestic confinement as an issue negating their identity; they have their inherited profession and in that sense, are not confined to compulsory domesticity. Chandi is a proud ancestor of the dom community, whereas Jati belongs to a nomadic tribe. However, this issue is complicated and

compounded in “Breast-Giver” where Jashoda is an upper-caste Hindu, and therefore traditionally and conventionally secures a high place in the caste hierarchy. Jashoda demands honour in the strict casteist sense, but it is her economic class that can be chalked up to her exploitation. The religious elevation of the mother goddess plays a crucial role in relation to Jashoda’s gestation capability and reproductive power. As a Brahmin woman, she could be honoured by lower-caste people both on the grounds of her caste “superiority” and also for her abundant milk (which is believed to be a blessing by the goddess to a Brahmin woman, Jashoda). These complex intersectional identity components and their convergence to form an oppressive structure come close to Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality which she uses to explain Black women’s subjection to race, class and gender oppression (139). These maternal fictions through their portrayals of an intricate web of oppression, demonstrate that it is often difficult to separate one identity component from the other when it comes to their contribution to the oppression.

These two authors’ different concerns and their textual mothers’ diverse locations affect the literary aesthetics and strategies deployed in their respective texts. Desai engages more in the exploration of the psyche of her protagonist in which the mother actively reflects on her subjectivity. Readers witness long passages describing Sita’s inner turmoil, which often provide intriguing glimpses of a divided maternal consciousness. Devi’s protagonists’ experiences of mothering bring about a transformation to their characters if we consider Jati’s strategic guise of a spiritual mother to save her son, and Chandi’s hesitant reluctance towards her inherited profession. Unlike Desai’s protagonist they do not actively reflect over this transformation but “act” to respond to the situations life drives them to. As such, my close reading showed Devi’s texts conveying a greater sense of maternal agency and its lack through consideration of Chandi and Jati’s resistance and Jashoda’s acute suffering. Devi’s texts are more confrontational, engaging in conversation with

different people. There are long authorial interventions, where she situates her character in relation to their history or comments extensively on certain situation. Notably, in my selected texts both the authors make ironic use of myth. Desai names her protagonist after Sita, the epitome of ideal motherhood and womanhood, and unfolds her narrative skilfully providing a subversion of the epic story of the *Ramayana*. Devi also uses myth but mainly to historicise her characters as she herself admitted, and largely in the form of oral history which her characters recall. Both the writers make strategic use of myth in order to demystify that self-same myth (the myth of Sita's ideal motherhood, the universal foster-mother Jashoda, and the mother goddess Chandi) by problematising and emphasising the confining nature of the mythical and religious glorification which restrict maternal agency. What emerges from their literary portrayals is an interrelatedness of maternal agency and oppression. Motherhood, as presented through these maternal figures, occupies a tension-ridden space where both agency and victimhood uncomfortably co-exist.

## Chapter 2

### **Mothering Daughters: Trajectories of the Mother-Daughter Relationships**

Ten months and ten days

The mother dreams on ever,

I'll have a son I'll see him grow,

Now she's a daughter's mother.

The cruel Fates have sent her

At last a little daughter;

To an alien home she soon must go,

So weeps the daughter's mother. (Anon., qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 134)

This folksong, collected from Comilla (in present-day Bangladesh), speaks of a female bond: one that is between a mother and a daughter. In the song, the mother longs for a son, but being “deprived” by her fate, she gets a daughter. However, she is attached to her daughter, whom she eventually has to give up for marriage. Apart from the obvious son preference expressed, the two issues emphasised here are the birth and marriage of the daughter. There is an apparent contradiction between son preference and love for the daughter. These seemingly ambivalent feelings as well as concerns about the daughter's birth and marriage are suggestive of the mother-daughter relationship in a society marked with pervasive son preference. It is this complex terrain that I explore in this chapter.

To do this, I examine the issue of mother-daughter relationship in Ashapura Debi's *The First Promise* (1964) and Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993). These two authors belong to different generations and cultures, and they write in different languages: Deshpande writes in English and Debi in her mother tongue, Bengali. I have chosen them as their literary texts offer portrayals of mother-daughter relationships embedded in specific historical times and places (colonial and postcolonial India), and are influenced by several socio-political issues that need to be examined for the light they shed on the multi-layered aspects of these mother-daughter relationships. Vivien Nice's argument about the importance of social context is worth quoting here: "the relationship between a mother and a daughter does not exist in a social vacuum. The context will to some extent determine the relationship, and only by attempting to explore all possible facets of social context can we hope to increase our understanding" (11). Paying heed to Nice's argument, in this exploration I highlight the cultural and contextual issues that affect the writers' delineation of the trajectory of this relationship.

### **The Mother-Daughter Dyad in Feminism**

The mother-daughter bond has figured prominently in feminist scholarship since the 1970s, with the dominant methodologies coming from psychoanalysis and the concept of matrilineage (Schultermandle 46). The theoretical aspects of this relationship started gaining attention from feminists after Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born* in 1976. In the chapter "Motherhood and Daughterhood", which Rich considers the "core chapter" of her book, she analyses and explores this relationship from the perspectives of fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology and literature (218). Rich examines the patriarchal distortion of this relationship and also

provides possible strategies for the female empowerment that the mother-daughter bond can enable.

Feminist psychoanalysis, an important strand of feminism, has been preoccupied with the mother-daughter issue. French feminists like Luce Irigaray (in “And The One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” published in 1979) and Julia Kristeva (in “Stabat Mater” published in 1977) appropriate Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to celebrate woman’s pre-oedipal connection with her mother. In “And The One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other”, Irigaray emphasises the impossibility of separation between mother and daughter. Hers is an idea of enmeshment of the self and the (m)other (39). While Irigaray assumes the position of a daughter, Kristeva in “Stabat Mater” speaks from a mother’s perspective. She celebrates the figure of the mother containing self and other, nature and culture, and semiotic and symbolic in her body (Kristeva 27; 31).

In *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989) Nancy Chodorow demonstrates the psychological development of the female in relation to her mother. Chodorow’s psychoanalytic feminism has contributed to the understanding of the relationship especially in the pre-oedipal phase which, she claims, is “likely to differ for boys and girls” (48).<sup>20</sup> According to her, a mother tends to identify intensely with her daughter rather than her son, since she re-experiences herself through her daughter (Chodorow 48-50). Mothering, Chodorow claims, involves a “double identification” for the mother. Through her parenting, the mother can identify both with her own mother and her child by imagining herself as a child. Through her identification with her mother,

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<sup>20</sup> Pre-oedipal refers to the earliest years when the child is still in a state of union with the mother inasmuch as s/he cannot separate him/herself from the mother (Chodorow 48; Wyatt 221)

the daughter experiences difficulties in separating herself from her mother, and this obstructs her process of individuation (Chodorow 43).

The mother's unconscious identification with the daughter is relevant in the Indian context, as Sudhir Kakar, Adrienne Rich and Chodorow variously refer to anthropological evidence pertaining to Indian high-caste and patriarchal Rajput families, where sons are accorded higher status and greater importance than daughters (Kakar 70; Rich 256; Chodorow 44). In such families, the mother forms a special bond with her daughter and treats her with greater "leniency and affection" out of sympathy for the girl child who like her mother will leave her home and go to a possibly oppressive household after marriage (Kakar 70). This is an example of the peculiar mother-daughter bonding borne out of a situation hostile to all women whatever generation they are from. As I proceed to discuss the texts, it will become clear that this affection is not the only aspect of the relationship, and that in the Indian context other socio-cultural issues (such as concern over daughter's sexual safety, class differences and so on) impact on it. There are significant diversions from the Western theories owing to India's different social patterns – such as the notion of family honour or "izzat", class and caste differences and so on – to which I will return later in my discussion of the texts.

### **Mothers and Daughters in India**

In order to probe the mother-daughter relationship in my chosen texts it is necessary to situate the topic in the larger socio-cultural matrix of India. The present instable sex ratio in India – because of numerous cases of female foeticide – bears testimony to the relative devaluation of

the girl child.<sup>21</sup> However, I must mention that female foeticide has never been committed uniformly in India, and son preference does not automatically mean the daughter's neglect (Dube Bhatnagar et al. 4; Johri 161). In the previous chapter, I addressed the nationalist idea of motherhood and how it drew on religious texts to construct an idea of motherland, "Bharat Mata", who needs to be saved by her brave sons. This nationalist ideal demonstrates the primacy of the mother-son relationship over that of the mother-daughter. The girl child in India is usually regarded as *parayi dhan* or "a wealth belonging to strangers", who has to be taken care of for the prospect of a good marriage (Kaur 47; Kakar 66-67; Katrak 176). In the Hindu cultural context, the girl child is usually placed within an "apni/parayi classificatory scheme" (Johri and Prakash 161).<sup>22</sup>The dominant "psychosocial realities" of her life, as Sudhir Kakar notes, are that "she is a daughter to her parent [...] wife to her husband (daughter-in-law to his parents) [...] she is a mother to her sons (and daughters)" (66). Kakar observes that a woman can only assert a certain degree of power through her identity as a mother, preferably to a son. However, despite and to some extent because of this devaluation, mothers and daughters can form a curious bond owing to the mother's often silent but palpable affection for the daughter. The debasement of the girl

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<sup>21</sup> The website of the Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India provides details about a recent scheme entitled "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) that has been initiated to combat the unstable sex ratio, as well as securing girl children's education. The site's introductory lines refer to the latest statistical figures of the Child Sex Ratio: "The Census (2011) data showed a significant declining trend in the Child Sex Ratio (CSR), calculated as number of girls for every 1000 boys between age group of 0-6 years, with an all time low of 918 in 2011 from 976 in 1961. The decline in CSR has been unabated since 1961. This is an alarming indicator for women disempowerment [*sic*]. It reflects both pre birth [*sic*] discrimination manifested through gender biased sex selection, and post birth discrimination against girls. The decline is widespread across the country and has expanded to rural as well as tribal areas" ("Beti Bachao" 3). The scheme, like many other, has reportedly been inadequate to effect change because of the "lack of policy implementation, diversion of funds, and the failure of monitoring mechanism", among other causes (Kapur n. pag.).

<sup>22</sup>Apni means one's own possession, and Parayi means something that belongs to the other.



child and a peculiar kind of identification and affection growing out of this repressive situation is crucial to understanding the mother-daughter relationship in Indian society and in the novels.

The relative cultural devaluation of the girl child is reflected in the scant attention paid towards the issue of mothering daughters except in newspaper and blogs in India (Phadke 93). My chosen novels are especially significant because they articulate a relationship which, until recently, has been little explored in Indian literature. Sudhir Kakar indicates the bias of anthropological research in India, which focuses on the development of boys and “skip[s] female childhood altogether” (66). Myths, he argues, are equally “sparing of their bounty towards the daughters” (66). Writing on the bias of myth in prioritising the boy child, he incisively comments, “in a patriarchal culture myths are inevitably man-made and man-oriented. Addressing as they do the unconscious fears and wishes of men, it is the parent–son rather than the parent–daughter relationship which becomes charged with symbolic significance” (67). Rajender Kaur makes an interesting point that even Sita and Draupadi (the major female characters from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics) do not have mortal mothers. This cultural absence of the mother-daughter dyad, according to Kaur, is paradigmatic as it is “symptomatic of the neglect to this relationship” (56).

Writing in 1992, Radhika Mohanram argues that “stories of mother-son and father-daughter relationships abound in Indian mythic as well as modern literature, but there is a curious silence on the thematic of mother-daughter relationships” (20). I concur with Mohanram’s point that this silence is a serious lacuna in Indian culture. In literature written in English, the theme has been increasingly addressed since the 1990s (Raja 856). Published in 1993, Deshpande’s novel can therefore well be considered one of the initial attempts to break the silence on this theme in Anglophone Indian writing. Although there are some earlier texts written in India’s regional

languages which thematise the mother-daughter bond, these non-Anglophone texts' depictions of mothers and daughters have received little critical attention. For example, my chosen text for the first half of this chapter, *The First Promise* is an early Bengali novel that engages with the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>23</sup>

### **Ashapura Debi's *The First Promise***

A prolific and widely-read but relatively under-researched Bengali writer, Ashapura Debi (1909-1995), in her more than six decade-long writing career, published 181 novels and 38 collections of short stories.<sup>24</sup> Her novels and short stories primarily represent Bengali women's evolving domestic world. Debi's highly acclaimed intergenerational trilogy *The First Promise* (1964), *Subarnalata* (1966) and *The Story of Bakul* (1973) portray the emergence and subsequent journey, struggle and predicament of "modern", middle-class Bengali women. Like the protagonist of her novel *The First Promise*, Debi herself was a self-taught person. Born into a conservative Brahmin family, she did not receive any formal education, as the family did not approve of girl children going to school. However, Debi and her sister's self-teaching attempts were sustained by their mother's affectionate encouragement (Datta 59).

Debi's trilogy, written after India's independence, depicts the lives of both colonial and postcolonial women, and documents the social and political changes unfolding in those eras. As such, the trilogy encompasses three generations of women – a grandmother, mother and daughter

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<sup>23</sup>There are even earlier Bengali texts dealing with this issue, most notably Rassundari Devi's autobiography *Amar Jibon* (My Life) which was published in 1868. The first autobiography of a Bengali woman, and also the first autobiography written in the Bengali language, records how the author has followed her mother's teaching throughout her life, especially in relation to her devotional life.

<sup>24</sup> Dipannita Datta's 2015 book *Ashapura Devi and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal: A Bio-Critical Reading* is a recent study on her life and works.

– and through them, represents the evolution of middle-class Bengali women. In what follows, I will examine Debi’s representation of the mother-daughter relationship in the first part of the trilogy *The First Promise*. The reason for choosing the first part of the trilogy is the particular historic moment that the novel addresses. The context of the novel is nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, an era and location marked by the emergence of the “new woman” asserting her position vis-à-vis her male counterpart. Hence Debi examines the early period of women’s negotiation with modernity and tradition, and their understanding of social agency (and its lack) experienced via the roles of mother and daughter. Given the significance of this historic setting, I will read Debi’s text alongside the reformist discourse of that era in order to identify how Debi questions, deviates from and draws on reform discourse in configuring her representation of mothering daughters.

*The First Promise* was published in 1964, and it took almost four decades for it to be translated, by Indira Chowdhury in 2003. Earlier I mentioned the fact that a number of vernacular texts did not come to the surface for a long time because of language barriers; the translation of a text like this one was certainly overdue in the history of women’s writing in India. Given that the writer is a first-generation, post-independence woman author and that the primary topic she deals with is the much-contested “woman question” amidst the transition to modernity, Chowdhury’s translation is of great significance. Chowdhury successfully conveys Debi’s idiomatic language with simultaneous simplicity and depth. Since Debi focuses on the domestic world there are many words in the text that Chowdhury leaves untranslated; instead, she adds a glossary. She thus avoids problematic translation and also remains closer to the original. However, using a glossary has its own set of concerns; as Bill Ashcroft suggests, “glossing gives the translated word, and thus the ‘receptor’ culture, the highest status” (66). Chowdhury’s rationale is that the

words for which she provides the glossary do not have any “conceptual and material equivalent” in English (xxxiv). She writes, “the act of translation (of *The First Promise*) offered a means of revisiting the past and rediscovering it” (xxxv). She emphasises the novel’s embeddedness in the history of nineteenth-century Bengal, especially the way it voices women’s history undermined in the hegemonic male discourse.

Debi herself re-visits the past in this novel. From the outset, the narrator declares that the story belongs to Bakul who wrote her grandmother, Satyabati’s, story. Bakul has to be aware and appreciative of her mother and grandmother’s struggle in order to understand her present privileged position:

Having travelled such a vast expanse of her life, Bakul has learnt that one must repay the debts to one’s grandmother and great-grandmother before one begins to talk about oneself. [...] Behind the innumerable Bakuls and Paruls of today’s Bengal there is a history of years of struggle. That history is the struggle of their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. (1)

These introductory lines speak of Debi’s literary agenda, which is to document the struggle of Bengali women when they first started becoming “agent[s] of their own discourse” (Chowdhury 45). That said, I must mention that “woman” refers to middle-class, mostly higher-caste women who were the “subject of much nineteenth century social reform” (Sarkar “Strisiksha” 154). The above-mentioned passage illustrates that Debi’s textual character traces her selfhood through her foremother. Significantly, this makes Debi’s concept of identity different from the dominant Western narrative of the unitary self. Opposed to the individualised self, hers is a communitarian identity linked back to mother and grandmother.

At this point, it is crucial to remember that Debi's own position as a postcolonial writer contributes significantly to her exploration of the past. Debi wrote this novel in the 1960s, a decade after India's independence. She is looking into the past century of the emergence of the "intellectual" woman and probing the "woman question" from her present situation. Feminism in India owes much to the anti-colonial movement, for many women came into the public domain due to their involvement in nationalism. Amartya Sen writes, "there has been a higher involvement of women in leadership positions in the Indian struggle for independence than in the Russian or Chinese revolutionary movements" (Sen 234). Critic and translator of this novel Indira Chowdhury argues that after "the disintegration of the women's movement by the mid-1950s" caused by "middle-class women's co-option into 'new' hierarchical power structures of expanding class norm [*sic*]", patriarchy was reconfigured (47). It is from this position that Debi looks back to the past era with both awe and scrutiny. On the one hand, she considers the nineteenth century to represent the dawn of women's agency; on the other hand, she exposes its limitations and misplaced hopes.

As I mentioned, the context of the novel is the momentous mid-nineteenth century which witnessed the beginning of the Bengal Renaissance, a movement that matured in the late nineteenth century, and was centred on debates around social reform, the emergence of women writers and eventually nationalist uprising (Bardhan 6; Banerjee 185; Bagchi "Girl Child" 2214). Debi historicises her protagonist and situates her in the specific social setting of a propertied, Kulin Brahmin family.<sup>25</sup> The extraordinary personality of the protagonist Satyabati (hereafter referred to as Satya), her questioning of oppressive, orthodox religious customs and unshakeable

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<sup>25</sup> The Kulin Brahmin is the highest caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy. A Kulin Brahmin girl is supposed to get married before her puberty through the ritual of "Gouridana" (Banerjee 199).

urge for education – all these features are characteristic of the nineteenth-century reform movement. Debi integrates into the plot issues of women’s education, early marriage and widowhood. Accordingly, an overview of the reformist discourse needs to be taken into account in my examination of Debi’s representation of mothering.

### **Nineteenth-Century Bengali Social Reform**

I now briefly recapitulate the nationalist idea of motherhood in colonial Bengal which incorporated an idea of the motherland based on the Hindu religious tradition of worshipping the Mother Goddess (Bagchi “Nationalism” 65-71). The role of the mother was eulogised in nationalist discourse, and this contributed to the segregation of a private, domestic space for women to inhabit (Bagchi 65; Chatterjee 121). However, Himani Banerjee argues that the “home and the world” is not merely and purely a nineteenth-century “nationalist invention”, but is rather a manipulation of the age-old socio-religious dictate of Bengal’s feudal propertied class (192). In other words, the women in Bengal’s upper caste and middle class inhabited the inner space of the house – “antahpur” (interior) – within the patriarchal and gendered structure of the family. There the deprivation of Kulin widows, girl children’s lack of access to education, early marriage and consequent widowhood made girls the “chief victim” of that time (Bagchi 2214-18). It is worth asking whether and how the mother-daughter bond survives in such a repressive context, and how an educated “warrior” like Satya perceives and performs her parenting especially when she has a daughter.

In nineteenth-century Bengal, a concern to improve the conditions of women developed amongst members of the male intelligentsia with the aim of restructuring the “foundation of social

relations” to produce “new Bengali women” (Bandyopadhyay 100-17). Later on (around the mid-nineteenth century), women came forward and actively took part in shaping their “social subjectivity and agency” (Bandyopadhyay 103). Discussing the social condition of girls in the nineteenth century, Bagchi argues that in Bengali culture, which is “permeated” by “vatsalyasneha” (affection for one’s offspring), the “mother–child bond takes precedence over all other familial mores” (“Girl Child” 2215). To illustrate the significance and quality of the mother-child bond, she refers to two conflicting modes of Hindu religion, Vaishnavism and Shakta, which, despite their diametrically opposing “psycho-social imaginations”, had one common area: their preoccupation with mother–son imagery.<sup>26</sup> While Vaishnavism drew on the image of the Mother Jashoda and her son Lord Krishna, the Shakta tradition invoked the Mother Goddess Kali in a manner akin to a son’s yearning for his mother. Bagchi insightfully concludes that “in this ambience the girl child is captured in an idiom of loss” (2215). Such an “idiom of loss” is taken up by Debi for her literary project of charting the navigation of the girl child through oppressive gendered customs with the aid of knowledge ushered in by a new socio-political epoch.

Among all the reformists’ concerns, the one which is the most pertinent and central to the novel in terms of its depiction of mothering is the issue of women’s education. From an early stage of her life, Satya expresses her strong desire for education; she later uses her knowledge to determine her own future and as a tool in her mothering. Here Debi’s own experience of being an autodidact and an education enthusiast come close to that of her protagonist. In a Bengali book containing her autobiographical essays, Debi writes about her early years of self-teaching:

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<sup>26</sup>Vaishnavism worships Lord Krishna, Shakta tradition worships the Goddess Kali. The former emphasizes the divine love and the latter is dedicated to a destructive form of female power (McDaniel 20; Fuller 87).

“slowly and steadily a completely new world was getting created within my mind. It was a world of comprehension, of feeling” (qtd. in Datta 7). Debi endows her protagonist with the same urge for education that plays a crucial role in Satya’s identity as a mother. The significance of Debi’s direct engagement with girls’ education and her attempt to connect it with motherhood cannot be adequately explained without situating this concern in the context of nineteenth-century debates on women’s education, especially the reformist agenda of Vidyasagar.<sup>27</sup>

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) is held to be the champion of women’s education and widow remarriage in Bengal (Hatcher 15; Forbes 526). His reformist works were in many ways a continuation of the uplift initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy. Roy led the campaign against *sati* or widow self-immolation which ultimately succeeded in banning the practice in 1829 (Sen 88). He drew on the Hindu scriptures in support of his advocacy of a ban against the ritual of widow burning. According to Bagchi, Roy’s recourse to *shastra* (scriptures) injunctions to some extent sanctioned other oppressive religious rituals associated with widows, even as it succeeded in banning the practice of *sati*. It was the area left vacant by Roy that Vidyasagar started working in. He began his reformist agenda by addressing the plight of Hindu child widows subjected to Kulin Brahmin polygamy. Married and widowed at an early age, girl children had to undergo a painful life full of rigorous rituals (Hatcher “Introduction” 477; Sarkar “Strisiksha” 175).

Vidyasagar mourns these girls’ dolorous lot in his essay “Balya Bibaher Dosh” (translated as “The Evils of Child Marriage”). He writes:

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<sup>27</sup>The historical records show that from 1856 to 1910, 190 Bengali women authors produced about 400 works including poems, novels, plays and essays. 21 periodicals came out with which women were associated, and they were primarily devoted to women’s issues, especially women’s education (Karlekar 11).



We have followed the custom of child marriage for so long that it has become our sad fate to suffer immeasurably, trapped in the coils of popular custom and Shashtric precept [...] O lord, how long must we wait before you rescue us from peril? And when will that blessed day arrive? [...] [S]urely if we are tireless in our investigation of the various dangerous customs that beset our country, we will one day find the proper means for their abolition. (Vidyasagar 479)

Although Vidyasagar opposes the “Shastric precept”, religious overtones are evident in the passage. He addresses two concerns: one is child marriage and the other is the impending widowhood that this early marriage often results in.

Widowhood in the nineteenth century was synonymous with virtual death, in that the bereaved wives (most of whom were very young) were required to shave their heads, renounce all their jewellery and material attachments, and lead a life full of rituals consisting of penances, many of which were physically unbearable. They had to be celibate as they were considered half the body of their late husbands. This widowhood is one of Debi’s preoccupations in this novel, and it shapes the parallel mother-daughter narrative (of Shankari and Suhash, the second mother-daughter pair in the novel) to that of the protagonist. The sexual exploitation of the child widows was one of the primary concerns of the reformists, as is evident in Vidyasagar’s agitation for widow remarriage. Seeking legal intervention into restricting the practice of child marriage, Vidyasagar insisted that the custom was ‘outmoded’ (Forbs 408). During the 1870s and 1880s Vidyasagar fought alongside Hindu reformers for this cause and the campaign was finally rewarded with the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. After this political victory, Vidyasagar began targeting women’s education, establishing a non-religious school for girls with the help of John Drinkwater Bethune, the renowned philanthropist. Needless to say, all these acts infuriated

Brahmin orthodoxy, but proved encouraging to likeminded progressives. Vidyasagar's three aims of widow remarriage, restricting child marriage and promoting women's education are entrenched in Debi's mother-daughter plot. Moreover, the protagonist herself endorses two issues of the reform agenda, namely women's education and opposition to child marriage. Given the nascent phase of women's education in Bengal, she is still in doubt about widow remarriage, but acknowledges its importance in reform works.

Contemporaneous Bengali journals also consistently contributed to the formation of the idea of "new female subjectivity" (as part of the nationalist agenda) while exploring women's issues and advocating girls' education. Perhaps the most important journal of the period is *Bamabodhini* (1863-1922) which repeatedly used terms such as "Strisiksha" (women's education) and "Strisadhinota" (women's freedom). Journals like *Bamabodhini* and *Antahpur* not only advocated female education, but also prescribed maternal responsibilities as leading to the creation of a better nation nurtured by educated and enlightened mothers. The enlightened woman, in the form of the new category of "bhadramahila" (gentle woman) became the "new discursive social icon" (Sen 176).

However, this reform discourse has not been approached uncritically by scholars. In many instances, under the influence of the hegemony of "bhadralok" ("gentle man", namely the modern, educated, upper-caste male), the "bhadramohila" or "new women" advocated women's rights within a framework that did not go far enough in challenging traditional Hindu patriarchal ideas (Sil 3). Krishna Sen argues that the "the goal of the newly liberated 'Bhadramahila' is not self-fashioning but to fashion a (relatively modern) self to please her husband" (Sen 184). Despite being a pioneering journal in its championing of women's education, *Bamabodhini* remains problematic because of these "inherent epistemological contradictions" (Sen 188).

Another obvious critique to make of the nineteenth-century reform movement is its limited focus on a small section of women, which is of the reformists' own class – elite and upper-caste (Bandyopadhyay 102). Nonetheless, as historian Tanika Sarkar argues, reformist advocacy for “Strishikhha”, however “tame” and “moderate”, did contribute to the awakening of the ‘antahpur’” (Sarkar 179). It is undeniable that women’s education was a significant step forward, inspiring succeeding generations of women to dispute the oppressive customs of orthodox Hinduism. Women’s illiteracy before the nineteenth century was a normative Hindu requirement and to change the situation the reformers faced violent opposition and ostracism (Sarkar 560).

### **Debi’s “Deviant Mothers”**

Debi’s textual mothers are subject to these conflicting discourses and have to bear the problematic as well as the empowering aspects of the reform movement. Because the novel is a voluminous one with several characters and sub-plots, a brief summary is useful at this point. To focus especially on the mother-figures, the novel primarily projects the enlightened mother, Satya, who as a child bride exhibits a tremendous passion for education. She later becomes a responsible, though rebellious individual by moving away from her joint family in a Bengali village to the city of Calcutta to acquire a better education for her children. As she gets older, Satya becomes involved in many supposedly unconventional activities, such as teaching in a girls’ school, seeking legal intervention for the murder of a child bride and so on. However, all her achievements are rendered meaningless when her daughter Subarna is married off as a child bride by her mother-in-law and husband. Another important textual mother is Shankari, (Satya’s distant relative) who is also a child bride and widow, but unlike the heroic protagonist, she is

presented as one of the numerous ill-fated victims of nineteenth-century oppressive Hindu customs. Yet Shankari is also a “deviant” woman in the nineteenth-century sense of the term as she elopes with a lover, despite being a widow. Abandoned by her lover on getting pregnant, she gives birth to a daughter, Suhashini (hereafter referred to as Suhash). Because of the child’s problematic birth history, Shankari tells everyone that Suhash is a child widow. The novel’s protagonist Satya comes across them years after Shankari’s elopement and brings up Suhash on her own after Shankari commits suicide.

Debi scrutinises the efficacy of the law, especially widow remarriage law, only to reveal its inefficacy in the face of a pervasive reluctance to allow widows to remarry. Through Shankari’s elopement and subsequent misery and her daughter Suhash’s false widowhood, Debi highlights the inadequacy of the law when it is not accompanied by a radical change in thinking. She makes her protagonist, Satya, work towards this shift in mindset by taking up the weapon of “education” through which she envisions a change in women’s position in society. An example of writing published in the journal *Bamabodhini* illustrates Debi’s historicising of her character and validates my insistence on the issue of education in the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship. The following passage is an imaginary mother’s advice to her daughter published in *Bamabodhini*:

Thanks to the mercy of the Lord, you have been born in very beautiful times [...] You see the spread of knowledge everywhere [...] So far, ignorant and cruel men had deprived them (women) of the rare and wonderful gem that is knowledge [...] and still women serve them like servants. (qtd. in Sarkar 175)

From her standpoint in the 1960s Debi treats the mid-nineteenth century as the moment when Bengali women's agency was formed. She makes her protagonist align with the category of the emerging woman and gives her the mission of mothering empowered daughters. With her unflinching criticism of feudal patriarchy and unequivocal advocacy for education (with, however, a limited understanding of caste politics), Debi chisels out her political position. Satya starts teaching her daughter Subarnalata despite the conventional superstition threatening widowhood for literate and educated women. Astonished to see Satya teaching her daughter, her sister-in-law warns her that it is dangerous to teach the girl child before the age of five (458). Satya calmly replies, "that's a rule for the boys. Rules for girls! – as if she would be allowed to take her haathe-khari" (458). "Hatekhor" is a ritual which is observed to initiate the first learning in front of the idol of the goddess of learning, Saraswati. Satya here not only mocks the custom which did not allow girl children to observe this ritual, but also subverts the rule on her own terms. Considering the social context, this is a rebellious act and Debi uses such a transgressive character to articulate an alternative model of motherhood to the one endorsed in orthodox discourse.

What is more, Debi's portrayal of a nineteenth-century Bengali mother's conscious attempt to be a progressive mother and her endeavour to inculcate a quest for education in her daughter is relevant to the present-day "ongoing feminist conversation about connection and empowerment" (O'Reilly *Mothers and Daughters* 3). Second-wave feminists emphasise the strong connection between mother and daughter which resists any distortion of their relationship (O'Reilly 4). However, this connection–empowerment nexus is determined by social conditions, and this becomes apparent in the novel from the sudden rupture in the bond caused by the early marriage of Satya's daughter without Satya's permission and knowledge. Significantly, Debi does not

simply provide a dramatised and fictionalised version of the reform movement by her courageous protagonist's reformist spirit and activities. She underpins the limitation inherent in the struggle through her portrayal of such obstacles that the protagonist confronts.

The mother's loss of her daughter brings me back to Bagchi's analysis of the socialisation of the girl child in nineteenth-century Bengal. Being a Kulin Brahman girl, Satya gets married early and therefore her own relationship with her mother remains incomplete. In the patriarchal feudal family such as the one in which her mother Bhubaneshwari is just another member, performing her share of daily chores and familial duties, the mother and daughter have hardly any time for themselves. As a daughter, Satya realises her mother's importance only after growing up and being separated from her. This sense of loss is discernible throughout the novel and Indira Chowdhury convincingly argues that "motherlessness" is the metaphoric core of the novel (218). Although I agree with Chowdhury's contention, I would add that there is a crosscurrent in the form of the protagonist's conscious struggle against this loss. This working against loss is evinced in Satya's attempt to educate her daughter, to prevent the early marriage of her daughter and bring up Suhash on her own terms. Satya's attempt to transgress the normative model of motherhood thus occupies a tension-ridden space between loss and a continual working against loss that runs through the narrative.

In her discussion of "motherless daughters" in women's writings and biographies, Vivien Nice argues that "motherlessness" can yield different meanings. She cites the examples of Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson, whose motherlessness was the consequence of their mothers' duty-bound familial lives where daughters were secondary (77). Nice argues that "daughters' feelings of being motherless can be seen in relation to the way family was constructed and maintained" (78). Satya and her mother's relationship could not develop because of the early marriage of the

daughter. Here the loss is acute and physical rather than the psychological sense of being “unmothered”. Debi intensifies this motherlessness through the scene in which the new mother Satya is given the news of her own mother’s death, suggesting that a relationship was severed before it had the opportunity to flourish.

The custom of child marriage is condemned by Satya, as she compares the ritual of giving away the daughter (known as “gauri-dana”, “kanya-dana” or “prithvi-dana”) to a kind of “bait”. She asserts “it was the same as readying the girl for a sacrifice much before she developed any understanding!” (513).<sup>28</sup> Through Satya’s condemnation of the custom Debi touches on the biggest issue of that time, the institution of child marriage against which such reformers as Vidyasagar campaigned. Satya’s refusal of the supposed sanctity of the custom shows her determination not to sacrifice her daughter to repressive customs. Debi suggests that the fundamental basis of such empowerment is Satya’s education.

In contradistinction to a cerebral and enlightened mother like Satya, Devi presents the strikingly different mother figure of Shankari, whose helplessness and wretchedness not only complicates the notion of dynamic mothering epitomised by Satya, but also underscores the inefficacy of the reform agenda in changing most women’s positions. On discovering Shankari’s deliberate lie about her daughter’s widowhood, an angry and astonished Satya bursts out thus:

How could you? What kind of a mother are you to say that your unmarried daughter is a widow! [...] [B]ecause of you the poor thing must suffer, and eat rice and boiled plantain

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<sup>28</sup>The word “dana” means to give away, and “Gouri”, “Kanya”, “Prithvi” refer to the girl child.

all her life [...] won't she accuse you one day – “How could you do this to me being my mother”. (357-58)

The indignant tone of the rhetorical questions hurled at Shankari captures both Satya's anger and helplessness at the unfortunate fate of the girl and her mother. The enormity of Shankari's lie can be understood if we consider the extreme plight of nineteenth-century widows of that time which I already explored in relation to Vidyasagar's campaign for widow remarriage. Needless to say, Shankari's terrible lie is induced by a number of fears she holds as a defenceless mother of an adolescent daughter. These fears revolve around anxieties about her daughter's sexual safety and about being unable to marry her daughter off at the proper time leading to probable isolation from her society. In this context, what Shankari's relationship with Suhash underscores is not a complex psychological insight into the mother-daughter relationship, but the very question of the survival of this bond. Shankari's suicide reinforces this crisis of the mother-daughter bond. It is important to note that beneath the crisis and abjection, what is still perceptible is a mother's attempt at sustaining the bond. Shankari dies only after being assured of her daughter's security; until that point she continues her struggle as a mother to save her daughter. Through Shankari's death, Debi again highlights the reform movement's limitations and its inability to touch many women's lives.

However, Debi invests her protagonist with the transgressive potential to chart an alternative model of motherhood. Satya's active mothering of Suhash is apparent as she becomes a non-biological mother to her and wholeheartedly tries to initiate her into a new version of identity. Mothering almost becomes a type of activism here:



After all, Suhash was the goddess she has shaped and moulded with her own hands. She was not a glass doll and no infant either. Satyabati had taken her in as a fifteen-year-old, badly brought up with numerous offensive habits and flaws. In a few years, she has managed to refashion the girl completely. Of course a stupendous remoulding has been naturally happening already. Her mother's sudden death and her becoming aware of her mother's history had brought about that change. (402)

Debi's use of words like "moulding", "remoulding" and "refashioning" all convey the idea of deliberate and conscious working towards a transformation. The affirmative tone of the passage captures the determination and resolve of an independent mother for whom mothering is a way of effecting change. The quoted passage also demonstrates the closeness of Satya's mothering to the present-day ideas of feminist mothering (O'Reilly *Feminist Mothering* 5). This kind of mothering suggests non-conformity to the conventional modes of parenthood; instead, it espouses an active form of mothering on the mother's own terms in order to re-fashion the child and make her immune to social oppressions meted out to her (O'Reilly 5). Although Debi was ambivalent about the term "feminism" (Datta 80), her textual mother displays characteristics which can be connected to the idea of feminist mothering.

Earlier I mentioned the issue of separation and individuation of the daughter as discussed by Chodorow. This theorist opines that the daughter has to remove herself from the mother in order to discover a sense of selfhood. While autonomy is emphasised in Chodorow's account, the novel projects an alternative picture. Here the individuation of the daughter seems less important and "remaining connected" is a primary concern (Johri and Prakash 161). In an era when the girl child is usually given away to another family at an early age, both mother and daughter struggle to stay connected, rather than aspiring for autonomy and individuation. The concept of

matrilineage illuminates this narrative's diversion from mainstream psychoanalytic theory. Unlike many white feminists' preoccupation with the psychological conflict between mother and daughter, "the literature of matrilineage supersedes mere analysis of motherhood along psychological parameters, [...] engag[ing] in a more culturally and socially directed criticism of the aspects of what it means to be a mother and daughter" (Schultermandle 40). Silvia Schultermandle argues that in this literature, "the theme of connection and separation is still apparent, but the focus has shifted from the mother-child to the relationship of mother to the society as a whole" (41). Debi's text (and her broader trilogy) seems to align with the matrilineage paradigm as it pays homage to "foremothers' strength and struggle" (Schultermandle 38).

The novel ends tragically when Satya's daughter is secretly married off through the ritual of *gouridan* by Satya's mother-in-law and husband. In protest, Satya leaves the family and decides to go to her father to ask why she was also married early. What is important is that Debi, in depicting the inadequacy of Bengal's "modernity" and "reform", accentuates its ambivalent character throughout the narrative. Satyabati's final act of rebellion in deserting her family on her daughter's untimely wedding day is the most daring and defiant act a mother could commit. According to Chowdhury it is a "metaphorical infanticide" (20). Chowdhury refers to the infanticide committed by numerous widows of that period because their pregnancies were considered illegitimate. In the character of Shankari we witness this problem, although she did not abort her child but rather had to give her daughter a life worse than death through false widowhood. Chowdhury links Satya's desertion with infanticide to reinforce her argument about motherlessness. I agree with Chowdhury's contention that it would be naïve to celebrate Satya's final act as a feminist achievement rather than being aware of its constraints. However, Satya's

“act” indicates a certain amount of agency, and the fact that she leaves with questions in her mind for which she seeks answers underscores her predicament as a mother, a predicament which will take more than a generation to resolve.

In her article “Caged Tigers: First Wave Feminists in India”, Geraldine Forbes quotes Miriam Schneir’s assertion that “no feminist works emerged from behind the Hindu purdah or out of the Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development or expression” (Schneir qtd. in Forbes 525). Forbes in her examination of the nineteenth-century reform movements demonstrates that Schneir’s assumption is influenced by an aggressive imperialist notion of Indian women as victims and sole consideration of Western women as a model. Forbes terms nineteenth-century women activists and dissenting writers “caged tigers” since they were still bound by several patriarchal and caste dictates. But, given the context out of which they emerged and made their challenge to dominant patriarchal Brahmin mores, their limitations are unsurprising. This metaphor of a “caged tiger” is apt for Debi’s textual mother, the representative figure of that era. The protagonist, as a mother, chose her conviction over conformity, but her protest remains partially successful because of several patriarchal shackles. Debi’s representation of mothering daughters is fraught with this tension, which seems to project that bringing up empowered daughter is a generational task.

### **Shashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine***

Deshpande refuses to identify “one core theme” for this novel, since it deals with many issues including the “recovery of women’s writing” and “sexual domination of women’s bodies” (Bhalla 49-50). However, she does acknowledge that “to a large extent, this novel is about

mothers and daughters” (Deshpande, qtd. in Bhalla 50). The mother-daughter relationship, in this novel, can be analysed from both psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. Deshpande’s characters inhabit various classes of modern India (precisely Karnataka, bordering on Maharashtra) in the 1990s. Her narrativisation of the mother-daughter dyad primarily brings forth three issues: the ambivalence in the relationship between mother and daughter, a sense of conflict and tension which gradually turns into recognition of these conflicts, and the final development of a closer connection between the two. This text, I will argue, also suggests a connection between mothers which is strengthening for their relationship with their daughters.

Urmi, the central consciousness of *The Binding Vine*, is an educated, modern, working woman, who has recently lost her daughter and has an uneasy relation with her own mother. Shakutai is a cleaner in a hospital whose daughter, Kalpana, is brutally raped. Another important character is Urmi’s mother-in-law, Mira who is present in the novel only through the writing in her diary as she died before the beginning of the novel. Mira’s diary records her suffocating marriage and strained relationship with her mother. Through these mother and daughter figures, Deshpande does not simply portray a picture of victimised Indian womanhood. Rather, I argue that despite their mutual suffering, it is the resolve of the women that is emphasised in Deshpande’s text. Even more importantly, what emerges is solidarity between women, especially through the bonds between various mothers. Significantly, Deshpande’s characters are carefully chosen to project class and generational differences.

The novel begins with the protagonist Urmi grieving over the death of her baby daughter, Anu. This loss is important in the narrative inasmuch as Deshpande proceeds to portray how this sense of loss is shared by other mothers and daughters, and how they negotiate and combat this loss. As she mourns her daughter, Urmi reflects, “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 ourselves" (124). This speaks of more than a mother's grief for her dead daughter. Chodorow's argument about the mother's double identification with the daughter is worth recalling here; Chodorow avers, "through identification with her child, she (re)experiences herself" (42). What Deshpande underlines here is that the "world" a mother dreams for herself often remains inaccessible due to constraints imposed on the young females. The longing for that world is offloaded by the mother onto the daughter. Importantly, Deshpande projects how a sense of identification is shared by mothers across social classes. Urmi discerns a connection with another mother, Shakutai, in their dreams for their respective daughters. She remembers that Shakutai told her "I wanted Kalpana to have all that I didn't" (124). Deshpande deftly makes these two mothers who inhabit different places in society, identify with each other through their individual, unfulfilled ambitions for their daughters

Siddharth Sharma, discussing Deshpande's portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel, comments that "in *The Binding Vine* we find Urmila's relation with her mother as direct and frontal. Her hostility towards mother is evident from her angry tone and language [...] Shakutai also has a love hate relationship with Kalpana" (56). This criticism is rather insufficiently developed as it does not probe the love-hate relationship, and nor does it explore the apparent hostile relationship of Urmi with her mother or Shakutai with Kalpana. Neeru Sharma's analysis is more nuanced as she examines the intricacies of the relationship by discerning a connection between Urmi's loss of her daughter and her the emotional (and physical) distance from her own mother in childhood (n. pag.). Sharma's evaluation also implies

that losing a daughter doubles the pain of estrangement for the mother who has a deep feeling of being “unmothered” by her mother.

Importantly, Deshpande depicts the protagonist’s gradual understanding and growing empathy for the mother-daughter bonds which she experiences in Mira’s writing and her encounter with Shakutai, a mother who is almost on the verge of losing her daughter. Mira’s own conflict with her mother makes Urmi reflect on the relationship with empathy, and enriches her understanding. A line from Mira’s diary reveals a daughter’s refusal of her mother: “to make myself in your image was never the goal I sought” (124). Mira’s words have significant effect on the narrative in terms of Deshpande’s charting of the nuances of the mother-daughter relationship. In the novel, we see conflicts between the mother and the daughter: their expectations clash and their views differ. We come to know that Urmi’s marriage was not approved by her mother Inni as the latter had higher expectation for her educated daughter than seeing her get married to the boy next door. Shakutai, a woman belonging to the lower rank of society, has her own dreams for her daughter: she wants to see Kalpana married, but the girl is too independent to succumb to her mother’s wishes. A continuation of this conflict between mother and daughter is apprehended by Urmi when she wonders whether her daughter would have felt the similar desire not to see herself in the mother’s image (124).

Mira’s words – in which she rejects constructing an identity for herself in her mother’s image – can partially be explained in relation with Rich’s account of matrophobia, which, Rich argues, is the “fear of becoming one’s own mother” (236). Discussing daughters’ refusal to be like their mothers, Rich states:

[T]housands of daughters see their mother as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. [...] Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman. [...] our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers. (235-236)

In this passage, Rich draws attention to the misogynist and patriarchal values which affect women's sense of self. A sense of limitation and restriction is passed on from mother to daughter due to their sense of identification with each other, while the daughter tries to free herself from a self-hatred which she inherits from the mother. The instances in the novel do not perfectly embody matrophobia, but to some extent the daughters' refusal of their mothers can be seen from this perspective. Acts of daughterly rebellion indicate the young women's growing desire for independence from their mother's identity and control. This refusal to see the self in the mother's image demonstrates the distorted mother-daughter relationship, caused by a system where the daughter inherits the mother's bondage and continually tries to free herself from it.

Rich's contention can be applied productively to the text when we see Mira secretly questioning her mother in her writing for making her repeat the same tragedy that her mother went through. Writing about her mother's apparent inability and lack of will to save her from a loveless marriage, Mira laments:

[Y]et I am glad I told her nothing. What if I had? What could she have done? Nothing.

That was all she could do in her entire life – nothing [...] I wish I could have asked her a

question [...] mother...why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own? (126)

The despondent tone of these lines not only imply the daughter's rejection of her mother but also acknowledge the constraints on the mother; there is a sense of helplessness for the mother's powerlessness to defy those limitations for the sake of her daughter. Ironically, in their attempt to repudiate their mothers, the daughters end up becoming a shadow of their mothers, as these lines from Mira's diary record: "whose face is this I see in the mirror, | unsmiling, grave, bedewed with fear? | The daughter? No, Mother, I am now your shadow" (126). Here the daughter's feeling cannot be defined adequately in relation to the idea of "matrophobia", for the rejection and refusal of the mother's identity is shot through with an underlying compassion. I have mentioned Chodorow and Kakar's point about the mother's double identification with the daughter. Here the daughter also identifies herself with the mother even if she does not want to. The desire to be separated from the mother is simultaneously undone by identifying even more closely with her. This sense of identification, often unintended on the part of the daughter, adds to the texture of the relationship.

A crucial point in the narrative is Inni's confession about sending baby Urmi to her grandmother and Urmi's realisation that her mother's helplessness and lack of caretaking have significantly affected their relationship. Deshpande movingly represents the moment at which a daughter comes to realise her mother's subjection and her resentment gives way to an understanding of vulnerability. Rich's contention that the mother is victimised in the patriarchal family and that this has a negative impact on the mother-daughter relationship is relevant here. Rich maintains, "easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (235). Rich argues that daughters' view of their mothers is often blocked by their



mothers' apparent opposition to them; it is difficult for the daughters to recognise the factors which influence the mothers. This situation in this novel validates Rich's contention. Urmi's rejection of her mother is actually determined by her situation within a male-dominated society. But finally she is able to see her mother beyond the constraints imposed on her. What is more interesting in Deshpande's depiction is that this revelation leaves Urmi feeling exposed, as if her "armour" has fallen off. After the breakdown in front of her daughter, Inni feels unburdened, but Urmi says, "I don't feel weighed down, either. It's something else. A sense of being vulnerable and naked, as if some armour I've been wearing all these years – against what? – has fallen off" (200). The word "armour" denotes the heavy burden Urmi has been carrying so far. Yet the word "against what" suggests that she does not quite comprehend what she has been wearing the armour to ward off. The implication of this encounter, I believe, is that once the reason for emotional estrangement is removed, the daughter identifies even more intensely with her mother – it is their shared sense of loss that at once makes them vulnerable, and makes them connect with each other in positive recognition of their renewed relationship.

The tensions between mother and daughter indicate the issue of ambivalence which is a "central concept" in the academic literature on the mother-daughter relationship (Nice 11). Seen from a psychological perspective, ambivalence is a "sign of stress" which in extreme cases can cause mental disturbance and affect the relationship. Nevertheless, Vivien Nice argues that "being aware of the complexity of one's own feeling towards another must be a sign of mental health" (11). Deshpande's portrayal of daughterly ambivalence in her protagonist gradually becomes mature at the end of the narrative as Urmi begins to grasp the depth of her feelings for her mother. Through this emotional reconciliation between the mother and the daughter Deshpande

accords a positive weight to the ambivalence which often exists between “two people bound together by birth and by gender identity” (Nice 12).

A significant aspect of the mother-daughter relationship Deshpande addresses in the novel is the mothers’ protectiveness of their daughters from sexual assault. All the mothers in the novel constantly worry about their daughters’ sexual safety. For instance, Shakutai warns her daughter to be careful, Vanaa repeatedly asks her daughter not to be late, and Urmi’s mother reacts furiously to her late arrival (150). These mothers’ anxiety may seem commonplace, but what is important is that through the reiteration of fears about sexual safety, Deshpande highlights the social condition wherein the daughters seem to cause grave anxiety to their mothers. This inadvertently affects the relationship between them, if not resulting in a complete devaluation of the daughter.

Sociological accounts corroborate that daughters cause an added concern for their parents when it comes to maintaining the “izzat” or honour of the family (Johri n.pag.; Zare 110). In almost all sections of society daughters are considered “signboards of family’s character” (Zare 114). The issue of “izzat” does not apply to the son to the same degree, since a son’s misdeeds do not necessarily defame the family’s honour. In an ethnographic survey examining the rearing of girl children in Andhra Pradesh, the issue of daughters’ sexual safety is prominent in the mothers’ accounts as they voice their worries about “safeguarding the daughters’ sexual status” (115). What figures prominently in that survey is that in comparatively lower-class families, providing security to girls often becomes burdensome. This encourages the parents to opt for a marriage that supposedly provides the young girls sexual security, or at least causes the duty to shift from the parents (specifically the mother, given that she is more responsible for the daughter’s socialisation) to the husband and in-laws. *The Binding Vine* exhibits this pervasive insecurity

experienced by a mother and its consequences on the mother's experience of bringing up a daughter.

Related to this concern is the issue of rape which Deshpande explores in the novel depicting not only Indian society's general silence around sexual violence but also its devastating effects on the relationship between mother and daughter (Raj and McDougal 165). Shattered by the daughter's rape, Shakutai cries out to Urmi, "why does God give us daughters" (Deshpande 150). This is evidently the cry of a mother who is traumatised by her daughter's rape, but it also indicates a social condition in which a mother is forced not to want a daughter because of the apprehension of suffering and sorrow likely to accompany her upbringing.

Analysing a mother's reaction to her daughter's rape, Rich comments,

It is not simply that such mothers feel both responsible and powerless. It is that they carry their own guilt and self-hatred over into their daughter's experiences. The mother knows that if raped she would feel guilty; hence she tells her daughter that she is guilty. She identifies intensely with her daughter, but through weakness and not through strength. (244)

In the novel Shakutai blames her daughter's immodest dress and fearless attitude for her rape – "cover yourself decently, I kept telling her, men are like animals. But she went her way [...] It's all her fault" (147). However, this blame does not undermine Shakutai's disquietude and pain for her daughter which are evident. Leaving aside the Indian societal factors whereby rape is a matter of shame and disgrace, Rich's contention sheds light on the mother's own self-hatred being transferred to her daughter in rape cases. More importantly, Rich's argument suggests that the identification is made on the basis of weakness rather than strength. The reverberation of

Rich's argument is felt in the protagonist's sceptical view of the blame Shakutai places on her daughter: "does she really believe this? Or is she saying it to shake off the burden of guilt" (149).

Importantly, Deshpande does not create a stereotypical picture of powerless Indian mothers and daughters. Women constantly challenge ideas and question conventions in this novel, whether this is through Kalpana's fearless and upright nature or Urmi's progressive thinking. Urmi is concerned for Kalpana, taking the initiative to report her rape to the police, but she can now fathom the silence that surrounds women like Kalpana and Shakutai. Furthermore, in the novel, we witness some tessellation between all mothers and daughters. Through their shared sense of loss (for example, the death of Urmi's daughter Anu, and Kalpana's brutal rape), these women eventually form a strong communal bond as Shakutai finally consents to report her daughter's rape after her continued interaction with Urmi, and Urmi decides to publish Mira's poems. Some sense of solidarity among mothers and daughters is created, which despite their suffering, unites them and endows them with power.

If situated in the broader context of mother-daughter theorisation, this novel marks some interesting similarities and divergences. Following Tess Cosslett's definition of matrilineal narratives Yi-Lin Yun details some features of such narratives. She writes, "First, there is a sense of a strong identification between mothers and daughters [...] second, women writers' preoccupation with female family relations often leads to the relative obscurity of father figures in most matrilineal narratives" (5). Returning to *The Binding Vine* we can discern the relative obscurity of the father figures in the novel: Anu's father, Kishor never appears except in Urmi's thoughts, there are only few references to Urmi's father, Kalpana's father is absent and we get to know that he has deserted the family. However, this narrative goes beyond the conventional definition of matrilineal narrative as it interestingly raises another important identification, which

is between mothers across different classes and times and the delineation of the mother-daughter trajectories in their lives. The mothers here think through other mothers to understand the relationship with their daughters. In other words, the mother takes other mothers as compatriots or comrades in their negotiation of the relationship with the daughter.

Ira Raja draws our attention to the inherent bias in Indian writing towards the young female who is a daughter rather than focusing on the mother, and adds that a neglect of adult women is widespread in feminist discourse in India (859). This preoccupation with young female rather than the adult, she argues, denotes an omission of the mother and the cultural primacy of the daughter. Marianne Hirsch in *Mother-Daughter Plot* comments on the dominant voice of daughters: “to speak for the mothers as many of the daughters do [...] is at once give voice to her discourse and to silence and marginalise her” (16). This novel contains both mothers’ and daughters’ voices but strikes a balance between the subjectivities of each member of the dyad. Urmi, having lost her daughter, assumes a mother’s perspective, but she has a daughterly view in her own relationship with her mother. Shakutai speaks from a mother’s position while Mira writes from a daughter’s perspective. The text does not necessarily prioritise any particular vantage point, but manages to accommodate both mothers’ and daughters’ voices.

Reflecting on the mother-daughter relationship, Rich writes,

probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement (225-226)

Rich's words succinctly capture the complexity of the relationship in terms of its uniqueness, conflict and potential power. These factors have resonated in my analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*. Through her narrativisation Deshpande skilfully allows the conflict and estrangement in this relationship to play out. She does not make her protagonist reject her mother outright but rather makes a conflict fester between them which Deshpande resolves at the end of the novel. She also highlights the complexity resulting from patriarchal structures, causing a rift in the relationship while there is a subterranean flow of compassion. Deshpande's thematisation of the mother-daughter relationship accords positive recognition to the coexistence of conflict and compassion that characterises the relationship. Also, it envisions a connectedness between women – mothers and daughters – whereby they refuse to be silent and make their stories heard.

## **Conclusion**

The two novels *The Binding Vine* and *The First Promise* belong to different generations and cultures. The common entry point into these two texts is their distinctive portrayals of the mother-daughter relationships. As I mentioned in the introduction, these two texts reflect the evolving society and family structures, and the ramifications in the relationship between mothers and daughters that they evoke. My analysis of these two novels figures forth some interesting comparable aspects which further an understanding of the representation of the mother-daughter relationships in them. The protagonists of both the novels are “new women”: in the case of *The First Promise* the protagonist embodies the first generation of the new “enlightened” woman of nineteenth-century Bengal, while Deshpande's text projects the central character who is a new

woman in twentieth-century sense of the term, who is modern, liberated and professional (Lau “New Indian”162). Both conceptualisations of the new woman are much contested and debated. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan argues that the contemporary “new” refers to urban, educated, career women as opposed to the marginalised classes (Rajan *Real* 130). The “new woman” in the nineteenth century was also confined to a particular class and caste, namely the propertied upper caste (Brahmin and other upper castes such as Kayastha). The negotiation of tradition and modernity is more deeply felt in Debi’s novel as it details the formative period of modernity. Hers is a modern mother’s struggle to rear her daughter on her own terms. There is negotiation by the mothers and daughters in Deshpande’s text as well, but not in the explicit form of a “tradition/modernity” dialectic but rather in a subdued way. Deshpande depicts the generational conflicts between the mother and daughter wherein the former represents tradition and the latter modernity. This conflict is particularly exemplified in the relationship between Kalpana and Shakutai.

Deshpande juxtaposes her protagonist, the so-called new Indian woman, Urmi, with the “other” woman, Shakutai who belongs to a lower class than Urmi. Through them Deshpande accentuates the diverse experiences of mothers and daughters belonging to different sections of society. A different, but parallel picture of juxtaposition can be perceived in Debi’s novel in the figures of Satyabati, the enlightened mother and Shankari, the deviant, abject mother. Debi makes her protagonist a rebel mother to configure her idea of alternative mothering. However, she has to depict the helpless, victim mother not only to reinforce the impossibility of mother-daughter relationship in patriarchal culture, but also to underscore the limit of the modern, reformist discourse. What I have been arguing is that both the authors explore this bond through various prisms, and are not blinded by a single view of the relationship.

Debi's novel is set in an era when child marriage, women's education and widowhood were much-debated issues. Her rebel mother strives to sustain the mother-daughter bond amid oppressive Brahminical and patriarchal norms. Hence, Debi's portrayal is more concerned about the mother's "act" towards the survival of her girl (both in a physical and an intellectual sense). Deshpande is writing in the "new India" with increased number of opportunities open to women. Consequently, hers is a more psychologically-oriented approach: she depicts ambivalence and conflict between Urmi and her mother, Mira, and Mira's own mother. However, another mother-daughter pair (Shakutai and Kalpana) living in the same time and place makes visible a parallel contour marked with confrontation with "social pressures" and the struggle for survival. The two writers' different literary treatment of this issue bears witness to the importance of the context in which mother and daughter come to experience their relationship. Most importantly, both the novels grapple with the issue of loss. All the mother-daughter pairings in the two novels across social classes and generations experience an emotional or physical loss or threat of such a loss. The mothers in the novels negotiate, question, and combat this loss. This overlapping concern of different mothers and daughters signifies a continuation, which renders the mother-daughter relationship as the site of a continual struggle.



## Chapter 3

### Motherhood and Diaspora: Remembering and Remaking Home

[D]o you, alone in Bed,

Lie awake at night,

In tears and sickness of heart?

Take flowers to the temple at dawn

To offer your prayers for your exiled daughter's well-being? (Tagore., Trans.  
Radice 48)

This poem, “Bride” by Rabindranath Tagore, is written in the form of a monologue from a newly married woman who remembers her mother(land). Having left her natal family after marriage, the “bride” longs for her mother, assuming that her mother is remembering her amidst similar pain of separation, and is anxious about her well-being. These lines evoke the daughter’s yearning for her mother as she imagines what her mother might be doing without her. Although the context of the poem is migration from the rural to the urban, these particular lines capture how longing for home(land) is intimately connected to one’s own mother. This connection between home and mother is my concern in this chapter, as I further explore it in a diasporic context.

The first part of this chapter examines the representation of the relationship between the maternal and the diasporic in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* (2003). The novel deals with the first and second generations of Indian immigrants in the United States. In what follows, I explore how

Lahiri's depiction of female diasporic experience is intrinsically connected with motherhood, whether this is longing for the homeland, creating a second home in the host land, or the literal experience of being a mother in a foreign land. Additionally, I will examine how this novel represents a gendered idea of home, in that it is perceived through the prism of the maternal.

Since the text deals with diasporic subjects, it is necessary to explain the idea of diaspora as theorised in literary and cultural studies. The term diaspora, according to Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur,

literally (and on a historical level, negatively) denotes communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion, but etymologically suggests the (more positive) fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds. (4)

They refer to the historical event of Jewish migration and the word "diaspora"'s Greek origin. Susheila Nasta also alludes to the etymological meaning of the word – "to scatter" and "to sow" – to contend that this word itself implies both "dispersal and settlement" (Nasta 7). According to Robin Cohen, the diaspora consists of communities of people living together in one country who "acknowledge that the 'old country' – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions" (ix). John McLeod, in his analysis of diaspora, stresses the idea of a "community" of people who reside in a particularly country but are "looking across time and space to another" (*Postcolonialism* 207). It is important not to conflate diaspora solely with migrants; while many diasporic people are also migrants, many others come from later generations than the pioneer cohort to have emigrated. Born in diaspora, an individual might well qualify for the nationality of that particular country, but

his/her identity often remains influenced by the past “migration history” (McLeod 207). Apart from the generational differences which account for considerable divergences within a particular diasporic community, other socio-cultural issues such as class, religion and ethnicity also come into play. Therefore, the heterogeneity of the diaspora is a significant issue, as Avtar Brah argues: “all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous and contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of the common ‘we’” (184). What she significantly points out is that diaspora can appear deceptively homogeneous owing to the common issue – its members’ migration history – but one should be mindful about the diverse sectors the members inhabit that account for their divergent experiences of the diaspora.

Postcolonial literature is abundantly influenced by these experiences of diaspora, which inspire authors to produce texts representing the issues of nation, belonging, identity and so on. The idea of diaspora is productively used in relation to people’s movement across national borders – chosen or forced – which often seem to challenge the notion of a fixed national identity.

Diasporic writings by women have grown significantly over the last three decades, of which South Asian (encompassing India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) diasporic women’s writing is a “literary subculture” that is burgeoning (Lau 127) but is often “overshadowed by the attention paid to their male precursors, who first came to the fore in the 1980s and 1990s” (Ranasinha 7).

In the context of South Asian women’s writing, it is not an easy task to categorise writers as either diasporic or indigenous. Bharati Mukherjee, a first-generation immigrant, regards herself as an “American writer of Indian origin” (Vogt-William xiv), while Jhumpa Lahiri, a second-generation immigrant, is hesitant about her identity as American (Glassie n. pag.). What makes one diasporic is a contested question. Many authors divide their time between South Asia and the

West or visit another country for a long period of time. This flexibility itself challenges the attempt to categorise writers as diasporic or indigenous. In the context of Pakistani writing, Claire Chambers detects a similar problem of distinguishing home and diasporic authors: “Many Pakistani writers in English (including Nadeem Aslam, Aamer Hussein, Kamila Shamsie, and Uzma Aslam Khan) neither have hyphenated identities, nor can be considered Pakistani exiles, but write in liminal positions between West and East” (“Pakistani Fiction” 122). In her anthology of Pakistani women’s writing in English, Muneeza Shamsie states that Anglophone Pakistani women writers “live between East and West literally and figuratively” as their writing reaches readers of the English language all over the world. However, according to Shamsie this work is not widely read within Pakistan, where vernacular-language writers are more popular than the Anglophone ones (1). In the case of India, renowned writer Amitav Ghosh expresses his unease at consideration of him as a diasporic writer: “I’m not really a diasporic in the sense that I grew up in India. I’m returning to India. So I’ve been away for a while. But the trajectory of my life is really one of travel rather than being in the diaspora” (qtd. in Zanganeh n. pag.). Since I am looking into only Indian women writers for the sake of rigorous and focused research, I am treating diasporic writers as authors who do not reside in India but migrated from the country or have immigration history in the previous generation.

Concomitant with women writers is the issue of women’s experience of the diaspora, which has remained under-researched until recently (Kim 3). Writing about women’s different diasporic experience Aparna Rayapol argues, “immigrant women’s experience cannot be treated as if they are identical to men’s as their very reasons for entering the alien society and culture may be different from those of men” (15-16). Rayapol rightly argues that the very starting point of the

diasporic experience can be different for men and women, as women tend not to be the agents of migration.

Since the 1990s, “ethnic minority” women writers have emerged and gained pre-eminence in academic and non-academic fields. Their writing in part represents the cultural negotiation performed by diasporic women subjects who challenge “cultural boundaries” and gradually acquire a “female agency” while grappling with two cultures (Vogt-William 11). The writers themselves “inhabit hybrid spaces which allow them to envision and create diasporic narratives which bring out the ambiguities of transcultural lives” (Vogt-William 10). In their writing, concerns as diverse as sexuality, domestic violence and cooking are transplanted to the new host societies. However, South Asian diasporic women’s writings have also been criticised for some supposedly problematic aspects. Critics such as Jaspal Singh, Rajendra Chetty and Lisa Lau argue that some of the texts written by diasporic women writers seem to endorse the idea of “assimilation” to the extent that they often portray the home culture as “monolithically oppressive”. Moreover, the potential concerns of “exoticisation” and “totalisation” are raised uncomfortably by some of their texts (Singh and Chetty 1; Lau “Making the Difference” 243).<sup>29</sup>

Women writers, as I indicated, are predominantly concerned with the female experience of diaspora. Emphasising the issue of gender in the diaspora, James Clifford holds, “at the level of everyday social practice, cultural differences are persistently racialized, classed and gendered.

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<sup>29</sup> Ruvani Ranasinha in her recent searching monograph on South Asian women’s writing, observes that sometimes the contemporary diasporic women writers such as Lahiri are being judged by the parameters and expectations set by the earlier cohort such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her cautious reminder is that being preoccupied with re-orientalising tendency apparent in Mukherjee or Divakaruni (I discuss Divakaruni’s alleged re-orientalising bent later in the chapter) can potentially cloud an informed and impartial reading of newer generation of writers whose representations are attentive to the complexities of divergent diasporas and mindful to exoticisation (28).

Diaspora theories need to account for these concrete cross-cutting structures. Diasporic experiences are always gendered” (258). The issue of gender gets compounded in the context of diaspora “since women negotiate the conflicting politics of home and abroad, of tradition and emancipation and of ethnic belonging and metropolitan fusion” (Ponzanesi xv). Sandra Ponzanesi gestures towards the dichotomy of “home” and the “world” that women are expected to reconcile by conforming to tradition and yet displaying sufficient mobility to meet the demands of a rapidly expanding world. Ponzanesi’s argument may be regarded as an extension of Partha Chatterjee’s views on nationalism and the woman question in the context of the Indian nationalist movement, in which he argued that woman, nation and home were rendered synonymous, and pitted against the “world” which was the colonial power. However, the idea of the “new woman” came out of nationalist ideals that required women to come out of domestic areas without jeopardising the home, thus somehow maintaining a balance. Discussing the issue of gender in Indian diasporic literature Sandhya Rao Mehta argues that this nationalist division of home and the world and the expectation that women should preserve the equilibrium is relevant to the present-day diasporic scenario in which a similar kind of negotiation is carried out by diasporic woman (6). Since my aim is to explore the literary representation of motherhood and the diaspora, these theoretical reflections on the gendered aspects of the diaspora not only serve to contextualise the discussion, but also provide crucial understandings to evaluate the diasporic narratives.

**Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake***

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* shot to fame by winning Pulitzer Prize as she was the first one from a South Asian background to win this award.

(Ranasinha 20). A second-generation diasporic Indian-American, Lahiri is hesitant about whether she has a fixed identity, be it Indian or American.<sup>30</sup> In an interview she talks about her reluctance to categorise herself as an American writer:

[M]ainly because my parents didn't think of themselves as American. You inherit the idea of where you're from. So calling myself an American would have been a betrayal [...] but going to India as a child made it apparent that I simply did not have a claim to either country. (qtd. in Glassie n. pag.)

Elsewhere, discussing the problem of living up to two conflicting sets of cultural values, she states, "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society" (Lahiri n. pag.) I have quoted Lahiri extensively here to understand how her own experience of being a diasporic subject enables her to describe diasporic lives in all their nuance and ambiguity. Some facets of her autobiographical accounts, as I will demonstrate, resonate with her fictional characters' predicaments.

*The Namesake* primarily follows the life of Gogol Ganguly, a second-generation Bengali immigrant like Lahiri herself. However, despite the novel being centred on Gogol, it is no less about Gogol's mother, Ashima Ganguly, whose experience of the diaspora is my central focus. The novel opens with the pregnant Ashima trying to satisfy her craving for *jhalmuri*, a Bengali

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<sup>30</sup> Born in London, Lahiri moved to the USA with her parents at the age of two. Both her parents are from Calcutta, and she is presently based in Rome.

street food that she misses in her new home in America. This event is narrated in minute detail, which reveals the author's sensitivity towards and sympathetic understanding of the seemingly trivial aspects of diasporic life:

Ashima Ganguly stands in the kitchen of a Central Square Apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks. [...] Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. (1)

The mention of the character's present location, the detailed description of the recipe including each and every ingredient, and the references to taste and tactile senses: all this conjures up an image of the yearning for home (through food) and Ashima's attempt to re-create her home in the United States. The beginning of the novel sets the tone for the entire journey about to be made by the diasporic subject. Interestingly, the unavailability of the "home" ingredient induces Ashima to make it in an American way with some compromise and the innovation of introducing typical US brands such as Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts into the mix. This "concoction" metaphorically denotes the sense of recreating something with both old and new elements. Additionally, the issue of pregnancy and imminent motherhood add complexity to this episode, making it a gendered and typically female experience.

Food continues to appear in the novel on numerous occasions. Keeping in mind the connection of food and the kitchen with conventional gender roles and motherhood, I want to emphasise their centrality for diasporic subjects. Food and eating have received much attention in recent



years from critics and scholars with various disciplinary affiliations. As such, food is considered not only part of “basic human somatic activities” but also a “crucial determinant of subjectivity” (Thieme and Raja xix). More importantly, Ira Raja and John Thieme argue that food always comes with “social inscription” (xix). According to them, in the case of South Asia, food becomes particularly significant in generating a discourse. Naturally, such a powerful “social signifier” as food occupies an importance position in diasporic narratives. Christine Vogt-William perceives the culinary field as a space of “cultural negotiation” and “a connecting bridge to homeland” (118). Anita Mannur, in a similar vein, states “among the most common and complex emotion food engenders for a diasporic subject is a sense of nostalgia” (20). For Ketu H. Katrak, food often functions as an imaginary return to the homeland (270). Katrak, along with other critics mentioned here, stresses the particular action of remembering “home” through food. However, this act of remembering is not the only aspect of food in the context of diaspora. Discussing food in the context of Asian diaspora in the United States, Mannur comments, “food provides a language through which to imagine Asian alterity in the American imagination” and adds that “it feeds into literary rendering of Asian American subjectivity” (13). What Mannur argues is that food functions as a medium through which a diasporic writerly subjectivity comes into being. Along with subjectivity, she further uses the term “culinary citizenship” to stand for the “ability to articulate national identity via food” (13). She therefore does not only perceive it as a nostalgic act, but also as an assertion of one’s national identity in a diasporic location.

There is an elaborate description of food at the event of Gogol’s rice ceremony, typically observed by the Hindu Bengali to celebrate the “consumption of solid food” by the six-month-old infant. The event is narrated thus:

the fragrance of cumin seeds, sent in the package [from the grandmother] lingers in the weave [...] The food is arranged in ten separate bowls. Ashima regrets that the plate on which the rice is heaped is melamine, not silver or brass or at the very least stainless-steel. The final bowl contains payesh, a warm rice pudding Ashima will prepare for him to eat on each of his birthdays as a child, as an adult even, alongside a slice of bakery cake. (39)

The detailed description of the food and its preparation, the mention of spice and its smell – these have both aesthetic and sensuous qualities. Lahiri’s narration of these customs has twofold implications. First, as I already mentioned, these food rituals are an attempt to re-create home in the host land. Secondly and more importantly, this idea of re-creating home is narrated from the perspective of the textual mother, Ashima. If, at the beginning of the novel, the attempt to make *jhalhuri* metaphorically denotes the act of remembering home, then the food description here illustrates the act of re-creating a new home away from home.

Roger Ballard, in his analysis of the ways South Asian immigrants “made themselves at home” in Britain, uses the Hindi phrase *Desh Pardesh* which means “home from home” or “at home abroad” (5). Ballard’s point is that both first and successive generations of immigrants continue to “find substantial inspiration in the resources of their own particular cultural, religious, linguistic inheritance” in order to “rebuild” lives “on their own terms” (5). At one level, this episode of the rice ceremony, along with many other gastronomic incidents in the novel, illustrates the idea of *Desh Pardesh* in terms of an immigrant mother’s attempt to create a home for herself and her family. Simultaneously, observing these food rituals in a social gathering alongside other members of the diasporic community gives rise to a distinct sense of subjectivity that is both personal and communal. This subjectivity is embedded in Bengaliness, but is also

marked by the diasporic experience. In other words, the attempt to assert identity by observing their customs and rituals is propelled by their (dis)location wherein the community collectively engage in re-building their lives in foreign land.

A maternal perspective on the diaspora is exemplified in the following lines, from the perspective of Ashima who has been admitted in the hospital to give birth: “she wonders if she is the only Indian person in the hospital, but a gentle twitch from the baby reminds her that she is, technically speaking, not alone” (4). This deceptively simple line yields multiple meanings in the context of diaspora. The new immigrant mother, overwhelmed by the newness of the foreign land, feels alienated and alone, but it is her imminent motherhood that saves her from solitude in this strange culture. It would be simplistic not to consider the dissonant part of the quotation: the protagonist assumes her child’s nationality to be Indian. This idea is soon going to be challenged when the mother emerges as a cultural mediator for her children. Child-rearing for Ashima proves to be challenging, just as she had anticipated. We witness a series of conflicts and disagreements between the mother and her children when it comes to adhering to Bengali culture that the mother endorses but the children reject.

*The Namesake* explores the difficulty a woman faces while undergoing childbirth away from home and her loved ones, without much in the way of support. Left lonely at home when her husband is at work, Ashima thinks, “in India [...] women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husband and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives” (4). Lahiri shows the difficulties faced by the migrant in coping with socio-cultural differences, and she addresses some practical problems encountered by the immigrant mother, who lacks community support and the help of her natal family at a time when she needs them the

most. The peculiar nature of this gendered aspect of diasporic experience is revealed in the following passage:

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she has arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. [...] In spite of her growing discomfort, she'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother [...] had done. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (6)

What is important in these lines is their simultaneously pensive and speculative tone. Worth noting is the conviction that she will "survive" the pain which has two dimensions: physical pain owing to pregnancy and the pain of separation from home/land. However, there is a sense of uncertainty in terms of the challenges she is about to face rearing children in a foreign land. At one level Lahiri, like many other writers, shows the physical problems faced by pregnant woman. Yet, there is more to it: namely, the experience of mothering in an alien culture. As the primary caregiver and the parent most often responsible for rearing and socialising the child, the woman is significantly affected by her experience of diaspora and her lack of affinity with the host culture and social atmosphere.

We witness Ashima gradually becoming aware of her diasporic identity. As she moves to the suburb where only hers is the only Bengali family, she feels acute loneliness throughout the day when her husband is away at the university. She continues to make the Indian snack which she

used to have craving for in her pregnancy. The event and Ashima's growing realisation is narrated as follows:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.

The analogy of pregnancy with being a foreigner captures the diasporic dilemma through a gendered picture, a typically female experience. The wait that pregnancy entails is translated in diasporic life wherein one has to wait to come to terms with the newness of the life, to accept its challenges. This passage also allows us to catch a glimpse of competing temporalities, namely the linear movement of time and the “cessation of time” experienced by the pregnant mother (Young 53). Iris Morin Young, in her intriguing account of the temporality of pregnancy, writes that in labour “there is no intention, no activity only a will to endure”. She further adds: “I only know that I have been lying in this pain, concentrating to stay above it for a long time, because the hands of the clock say so, or the sun on the wall has moved to the other side of the room” (54). Young thus renders the “pregnant embodiment” as a punctuation in the linear progression of time. In the novel, the diasporic consciousness of “living a radically different temporality” (Clifford 265) converges on a maternal temporality.

Alongside Lahiri's concern with mothering comes the idea of home, a space which the novel depicts in maternal terms. In the context of diaspora and migration the meaning of home is often

problematic, as McLeod argues: “it exists primarily in the mind, no act of actual, physical return [can] facilitat[e] it” (209). In a similar manner, Avtar Brah contends:

home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of locality (92).

If diaspora entails this longing for the lost home, it also engenders a desire to create a home. In the words of Susheila Nasta, “diaspora [...] does not only create an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a ‘homing desire’, a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it” (Nasta 7). Diaspora, as much as it “invoke[s] imageries of dislocation and trauma” also creates “sites of hope and new beginning” (Brah 193). Sissy Helff suggests that “home is constructed on the assumption that what it defines is constantly in flux [...] and thus can never claim to depict an objective condition or constitute an ultimate truth” (ix). Hers is an idea of home that is defined by its fluidity. The novel, as I will demonstrate, dramatises these ideas of home.

We witness Ashima’s homesickness from the novel’s outset. Her frequent tearfulness, daydreams about her parents’ house back in Calcutta, and her compulsion to re-read her parents’ letters all evoke her nostalgia for home. Interestingly, most of the time Lahiri shows this homing instinct through Ashima’s yearning for her mother. Ashima, while preparing to console her mother for the impending death of her ailing mother (Ashima’s grandmother), dreads her own mother’s death: “she can’t help but wonder who will console her the day her own mother dies” (44). It is the connection of three generations of women – grandmother, mother, daughter – through which Lahiri repeatedly conjures up home in the imagination of her immigrant character.

As Lahiri weaves the idea of home through her novel in maternal terms – be it remembering home through the mother, re-creating home through cooking, or observing Bengali food rituals for children by a mother – she also deftly connects home with the mother tongue. While putting her son to sleep, Ashima sings Bengali songs her mother used to sing for her. Lahiri’s skilful portrayal makes mother, motherland and mother tongue resonate together. As Sneja Gunew argues, “language shapes us” and it is “implicated in the formation of subjectivity” (100), language acquires yet another significance for the diasporic subject. Elsewhere in the novel, Lahiri portrays a get-together between Bengali families, in which it is language and culture that unites them. “[T]hey sit in circles,” she writes, “singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium” (38). Apart from this collective remembering of home through language and culture, personal and intimate events are described in the novel as reinforcing the connections between mother tongue and home. Often the mother tongue is the language in which Ashima tries to find home. After her son is admitted to school, Ashima “to avoid being alone at home [...] sits in the reading room of the public library [...] writing letters to her mother, or reading magazines or one of her Bengali books from home” (50). Letters written in one’s mother tongue sent to one’s mother back home intensify the connection between home and mother (tongue). Furthermore, Ashima avoiding being alone at home in the absence of her son indicates that her second home is largely built on her identity as a mother.

The relation between language and home is illustrated effectively in the following lines:

Ashima looks up from a tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she’d brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The printed pages of

Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her. She's read each of the short stories and poems and articles a dozen times. (6)

*Desh* is a Bengali magazine, popular amongst middle-class, educated Bengalis, and to date remains arguably the most-read one. The name of the magazine – whether used deliberately or incidentally – adds to the interest of this situation, for “Desh” in Bengali means country or home nation. Gayatri Charavarty Spivak in her discussion of the relationship between language and nationalism asks “when and how does the love of mother tongue, the love of my little corner of ground, become the nation thing? [...] [T]his love or attachment is more like comfort. It is not really the declared love of country of full blown nationalism” (79). Spivak’s words can help us interpret this event in a meaningful way; she asserts that the love for the mother tongue is primarily a “comfort” that entails a sense of familiarity. Ashima seems to get a similar kind of solace while reading her mother tongue while she is transplanted to a foreign land amidst a foreign language. In the text, there is a noticeable contrast between roughness and comfort, expressed in the passage through the grainy texture of the pages and the comfort Ashima derives from touching them. This oxymoronic experience encapsulates the pain Ashima feels for the lost home and the succour that that very same lost home continues to provide.

When it comes to re-creating home in the host land, it is through her children that Ashima is exposed to America both literally and figuratively. The first day Ashima takes Gogol out in his pram, it is because she has no more rice left to cook. On the way to the shop, she sees American people “suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she has done. They look curiously, appreciatively, into the pram” (34). What is interesting here is that the process of assimilation is propelled by the child and Ashima’s newly-acquired position as a mother.

However, the process of child-rearing, as the novel depicts, is not a smooth one. Lahiri shows the



mother as a cultural negotiator who, despite her children's embarrassment and reluctance, tries to inculcate the traditions of the homeland in her children. What the novel underscores is an attempt painstakingly made by the mother to sustain both the homes – one in the imagination and the other in reality.

Interestingly, the hardships suffered by Ashima gradually give way to her efforts to overcome them, as Lahiri shows her textual mother taking pride in doing all by herself things that would once have caused her concern. At the end of the novel, the author presents Ashima in a new light: she is a working woman, she can drive and, more importantly, she decides to devote time to both her homes. The gradual evolution that takes place in the years of diasporic experience is clearly visible. “[S]he has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta” (276).

According to Rao Mehta, the diasporic experience can be challenging for the gendered diasporic subject in terms of the gender expectation she has to live up to; however, the experience can be potentially transformative as well (117). After a long diasporic journey traversed by Lahiri's protagonist, she outwardly looks the same but is changed inwardly. The fact that she still wears traditional attire is significant as it denotes a sense of cultural negotiation by preserving the home culture.

This topic of transformation is picked up by another critic, Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero, who, discussing the agency of the diasporic female subject in Lahiri's novel, argues,

Reading Lahiri's novel in the context of diaspora and borders allows us to account for how Ashima negotiates her identity through her cultural practices throughout the 30-plus years covered by the text; she embraces particular aspects of American culture while

preserving Bengali traditions so that this negotiation becomes a site of agency for the postcolonial immigrant. (856)

In this passage, Alfonso-Forero views Ashima's negotiation in a positive light as she accords it a sense of agency on the part of the female immigrant. Alfonso-Forero draws on Partha Chatterjee's analysis about the nationalist's "woman question" to argue that the immigrant Bengali woman's identity is still embedded in the concept of the "new woman" as formed during the nationalist struggle, despite the generational and geographical distance (853). However, translated into the language of the diaspora, the "new woman" ideology needs to be re-worked, or re-visited as Lahiri's textual mother does. I discussed the idea of the "new woman" in both my previous chapters, mapping a changing pattern of the construction of the "new woman" from one that is rigidly formulated in nationalist ideology to a "modern", more upwardly mobile category, shaped by class and caste. In the case of this novel, during the character's diasporic stay spanning three decades, we perceive a similar re-fashioning of this idea of the "new woman" further propelled by experiences in the diaspora.

Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero rightly argues that the role of mother "facilitates" Ashima's "successful negotiation" of this role (852). In accordance with Alfonso-Forero, I would add that this "successful negotiation" does entail a difficult and painful process as Lahiri's depiction unfurls during the course of the novel. Writing about home, feminists Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Bidy Martin note that "there is an irreconcilable tension between the search for a secure place, from which to speak, within which to act, and the awareness of the price at which secure places are brought" (101). Lahiri's representation of motherhood in the diaspora enacts the tension and struggle that go into creating a second home.

According to Rashmi Lahiri-Roy, Ashima “personifies [...] homing desire” (1). My reading of the novel suggests that this homing desire is simultaneously materialized and accompanied by a desire for the lost home that serves as the foundation of the new home. Emphasising the enabling aspects of home, bell hooks states, “home is a place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers or difference” (56). The idea of home is a crucial component in the protagonist’s diasporic experience, since home for her is multidimensional. It is at once geographical space, memories and longing. In Lahiri’s representation, as I discussed, it is also something inherently and intrinsically connected to the mother. Lahiri’s protagonist remakes her home in America through her cultural negotiation, assimilation and preservation. All her efforts ultimately come from her position as a mother. *The Namesake* shows motherhood as a site of cultural negotiation and a constant reminder of in-betweenness, while also providing resources to affirm maternal subjectivity.

### **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” and “The Intelligence of Wild Things”**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is at once a prolific writer, teacher and coordinator of the South Asian women’s telephone helpline MAITRI in San Francisco (Huang 121). Unlike Jhumpa Lahiri, Divakaruni is a first-generation immigrant. Born and raised in a middle-class Bengali family she emigrated to the United States to pursue higher studies and ended up settling there. As I explore the relationship between the diaspora and the maternal in this chapter, I have chosen these two writers of similar origin (both Divakaruni and Lahiri are middle-class, Bengali Hindu

Brahmins based in the US). This will facilitate a comparative approach to their representations that are influenced by their similar origins while addressing different aspects attached to such diasporic experience. In what follows, I discuss two of Divakaruni's short stories "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" and "The Intelligence of Wild Things" from her collection of short stories *Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) in order further to explore the relationship between the maternal and diaspora, this time from two different perspectives.

### **The Ageing Mother in a New Home**

The story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" portrays inter-generational conflict, which is amplified in the context of the diaspora. This is embodied in the figure of an ageing mother, who finds herself embarrassingly caught between her age-old Bengali values and customs and the newness of America. The protagonist, old Mrs. Dutta, moves to San Francisco after the death of her husband to live with her son (Sagar), daughter-in-law (Shyamoli), and grandchildren, after being persuaded to do so by her son who is worried about his widowed mother's wellbeing. This transition is not an easy one for Mrs. Dutta, as she finds it increasingly difficult to adjust to American ways, eventually deciding to go back to India. The story is partly epistolary, as the protagonist regularly composes letters – most of which are only written in her mind – to her friend Mrs. Roma Basu in Calcutta, confessing, confiding, and even sometimes attempting to hide the myriad feelings she experiences in the diaspora. Letter-writing in this text serves as a medium of "self-discovery" for the protagonist who is still struggling to make sense of her experience in diaspora (Stoican 60).

The opening scene of the story gestures towards the protagonist's uneasiness in her new home as Mrs Dutta is yet to become accustomed to her soft American mattress, so different from the "reassuringly solid copra tiking she is used to at home" (Divakaruni 1). However, she reminds herself, somewhat wistfully, that "*this is home now*" (Divakaruni 1; emphasis in original). The beginning establishes the mood of the story by denoting a conflict between the superficial softness of the American mattress and the solidity of the more familiar bed back home. These incompatible tactile senses evoke the difficulty if not impossibility of coming to terms with something new while one is firmly grounded somewhere else. This episode echoes the one in Lahiri's novel wherein the narrator describes the oxymoronic roughness of the pages of her Bengali journal and the comfort Ashima derives from them.

The protagonist's emphatic reminder that "this is home now" shows her effort to accept the US as home. As discussed previously in relation to Lahiri's novel, the issues of "home" – being torn between two homes, and recreating a new home – are often examined in diasporic narratives. This story, however, casts light on another aspect of the diasporic dilemma: borrowing the words of Arthur W. Frank, "the story is about the disjunction of what sociologists call habitus: the collection of tastes, preferences, priorities, obligations and duties that become second nature to any person, guiding his or her judgments and actions" (194). Frank here draws on Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus, and this concept needs elaboration in order to understand how Divakaruni's story dramatises the "disjunction" in the life of an elderly mother living in a foreign land. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is "constituted in practice" (52). It is a set of behaviours and beliefs that are deeply and firmly rooted in society owing to repeated practice. Bourdieu writes, "the habitus – embodied history, internalized as a second nature so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" (56). What this definition

emphasizes is the integral connection between past and present, wherein the latter not only carries the former within it, but is also a consequence of the former. Importantly, this active presence of the past is “internalized” and assumes the status of norms. In other words, habitus is a set of practices performed over time that assume the status of “nature” inasmuch as these practices become “natural”, “reasonable” and “common-sense behavior” (Levin 34; Albright and Luke 185).

Bourdieu’s argument about the supposed naturalness of the habitus can be associated with the idea of home. As such, the habitus concept holds within it connotations of home in terms of the home being a place where one’s natural and/or normal self can function smoothly (Hage 418).

To elucidate the connection between home and habitus, Ghasan Hage asserts,

[t]he feeling of security is of course one of the most basic feelings we aim to foster in our homely space. This feeling derives from the availability of what we consider necessary to the satisfaction of basic needs and from the absence of harmful threatening otherness.

[...] The feeling of familiarity is generated by a space where the deployment of our bodily dispositions can be maximized, where we feel in possession of what Bourdieu would call a well-fitted habitus. (418)

What Hage argues here is that it is the space of home which works as the site of habitus. As such, the home can well contain the habitus and thus becomes a space wherein one can be one’s “normal” self.

I want to extrapolate from the passage the words “security”, “satisfaction” and “familiarity” that are inherent to habitus and home. Seen through the lens of Bourdieu’s theory, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” dramatises feelings of thwarted security and familiarity and the lack of a “well-fitted

habitus". It does this through a number of themes, namely food, clothes, customs, beliefs and values. We witness a series of events that intensify the "disjunction", brewing tensions between two sets of beliefs, values and ways of life as the old-worldly ways of Mrs. Dutta cause annoyance in her American household and also in the neighbourhood. Examples of such disturbances include her early rising which disturbs others' sleep, her Indian food initially loved by other family members but shunned later for being unhealthy, her failed attempt to teach her grandchildren the 108 names of Lord Krishna and finally some actions of hers that irritate the family's American neighbours.

Importantly, this conflict, which manifests itself on various occasions, is perceived through the consciousness of a mother, which automatically genders the experience. The kitchen, that conventionally feminine and maternal domain, appears again in Divakaruni's story. In Lahiri's novel, food functions as a means of re-creating home in the new host land. In a similar vein, for Divakaruni's protagonist the preparation of food becomes a medium through which she attempts to keep herself stable amidst the overwhelming experiences of being in a radically different environment from the one which she is accustomed to. We see Mrs. Dutta, disheartened by the indifference of her grandchildren, retreating to the kitchen that gives her solace:

Busy in the kitchen, Mrs. Dutta has recovered her spirit. It is too exhausting to hold on to grudges, and, besides, the kitchen – sunlight sliding across its countertops while the refrigerator hums reassuringly – is her favorite place. Mrs. Dutta hums too as she fries potato for alu dum [...] At least the family's eating well since I arrived, she writes in her mind, proper Indian food, ruti that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee. (7-9)

Apart from the detailed description of “proper Indian food” that reinforces the protagonist’s familiarity with these dishes, what is important in this passage is that food and the kitchen environment work as healing factors for her. By using the word “humming” Divakaruni makes the kitchen and Mrs. Dutta ring together both literally and figuratively. A conventional motherly picture is depicted through the satisfaction this mother derives from cooking and feeding her children and grandchildren. However, the family starts refusing her food, which hurts the old woman, for whom cooking has occupied such a major space in her roles as wife and mother. These apparently trivial issues, which are at once embedded in everyday experience and carry cultural significance, cause rupture and stress.

As I am reading one aspect of the text through the concept of habitus, what becomes more important at this point is “an understanding of habitus in terms of gender” (Reay 60). The idea of gendered habitus “shows up a common view of the world in which division of labour between men and women is seen as ‘natural’, and much domestic labour is rendered invisible” (Reay 60). Mrs Dutta’s compliance to old-world views and social conventions exhibits a gendered picture of her habitus as indicated in her idea of domestic space as exclusively a feminine domain and her ideals of so-called womanly values which she finds her daughter-in-law lacking in. These values of the elderly woman are shaken while confronted with different ideas of the new land.

The clash of two generations aligning to corresponding and competing values is evident when the daughter-in-law Shayamali is insulted by her American neighbour as Mrs. Dutta put their clothes on their fence for drying. Humiliated and angered, instead of blaming the neighbour, Shyamoli complains to her husband about her mother-in-law. Although she disapproves of her daughter-in-law’s complaint especially in the light of some cisgender values she has upheld



throughout her life, Mrs. Dutta writes an imaginary letter in which she is nevertheless also critical of her own position:

Women need to be strong, not react to every little thing like this. [...] You and I, Roma, had far worse to cry about, but we shed our tears invisibly. We were good wives and daughters-in-law, good mothers. Dutiful, uncomplaining. Never putting ourselves first [...] And what good did it do? The more we bent, the more people pushed us, until one day we'd forgotten that we could stand up straight. Maybe Shyamoli's doing the right thing, after all. . . (27-28; ellipsis in the original)

Mrs. Dutta's tirade starts with a certain degree of conviction: it appears as a proud declaration of her compliance to established stoical feminine values. However, before long this fervour turns inward. Her assertiveness turns to interrogation, a reflective tone and a questioning of the worth of those idealised values.

Divakaruni shows the wide gap that exists between the older and younger generations of the South Asian diaspora (represented by Mrs. Dutta and her daughter-in-law respectively), to the extent that it seems impossible for the two to cohabit without damaging their relationship. In her narrative Divakaruni is not necessarily judgemental about any particular generation and culture, but rather traces the different desires of people separated by time and space. However, by making the elderly woman her protagonist Divakaruni to some extent directs readers' empathy towards the older generation. A turning point comes when Shyamali, visibly miserable, tells Sagar that she cannot possibly continue living with her mother-in-law. As Shyamali starts weeping, Sagar consoles her affectionately. Mrs. Dutta who is in the other room can only see

their shadows on the wall. She guesses that the children are puzzled to see their mother weeping and have joined their parents.

All the shadows on the wall shiver and merge into a single dark silhouette. Mrs. Dutta stares at that silhouette, the solidarity of it. [...] A silhouette – man, wife, children – joined on a wall, showing her how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary. (23-24)

The words “shadow” and “silhouette” convey a sense of lack of clarity; the diction reveals that Mrs. Dutta is unable to make sense of the American lives of her loved ones. As the shadows cannot be caught hold of, so too their lives remain inaccessible to Mrs. Dutta.

In an interview Divakaruni discusses the conflicting traditions and values existing in so-called Eastern and Western societies:

It seems to me that's one of the big differences between Eastern society and Western society. Eastern society is so family- and group-oriented that you completely subjugate your individual desire for the good of the family. And in the West it's the opposite. You're so individualistic: You want what you want, and if it doesn't jive with the family, then forget the family. This is at the crux of *Unknown Errors*, but these Indian characters are living in the West and so they're exposed to both kinds of thinking and they're trying to figure it out in their minds. (qtd. in Aldama 8)

In the passage, Divakaruni is referring to the importance and predominance of community life in India which, according to her, is not common in American society. Apart from these two conflicting modes of life, when it comes to retaining the customs and traditions of the homeland,

as also depicted in Lahiri's novel, there is an apparent lack of effort from second-generation immigrants. Outside this literary text, sociological research demonstrates that in the Hindu Indian diaspora, first-generation immigrants generally adhere to the cultural values of their homeland, while "the second and successive generations" generally do not prioritise it, which gives rise to "intergenerational conflict" (Sharma 50). The story touches this issue, but Divakaruni, being a skilled storyteller, narrates the story in a largely impartial manner.

Critics such as Husne Jahan have lambasted Divakaruni's early fictional works, especially her debut collection *Arranged Marriage* for reinforcing stereotypes of traditional India and liberal America (76-100). The collection has also been accused of portraying victimised Indian woman and dominating Indian men (Ross 250). On the other hand, Pallavi Rastogi warns against the tendency to attribute to Divakaruni the unmanageable task of giving voice to immigrant Indian women. Rastogi here echoes Kobena Mercer's idea of the "burden of representation", a term he coins for black artists who are expected to represent and be "spokespersons" for their culture (61-78). According to Mercer, such an expectation around artists stems from an assumption of culture as a "fixed and final property of different racial groups" (63). Therefore, as Rastogi argues, it would be erroneous to assign Divakaruni the task of representing South Asia and its diaspora as this would potentially lead to homogenising the culture. Asha Sen writes that Divakaruni "adopts a conventionally formulaic tradition/modernity binary; however, when read against each other, some stories contradict the representations found in others thereby undermining homogeneous national representations of either India or the US" (57). Although Sen is referring to Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* and I have chosen to work on stories from her other collection, I partly concur with her argument. While it is true that a seeming binary of traditional India/liberal America is often found in her writing, "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter"

captures the complexities of different generations' perspectives without any such binary framework in the background.

### **The Mother Back Home**

Divakaruni's short story "The Intelligence of Wild Things", unlike "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter", does not focus on a mother who lives in diasporic space, but rather presents one who is left in her home(land) by her children. Additionally, the daughter voices the story's first-person narrative. The other texts by Lahiri and Divakaruni that I have discussed so far in this chapter portray mother figures whose voices are prominent in the narrative. This story, in contradistinction, offers a different angle whereby the mother is enmeshed in memory. The diasporic daughter's act of remembering her mother poses some tacit questions that I will explore, which include how the female subject deals with the distance, both geographical and emotional, that lies between her and her mother. Alongside this, I examine the role of memory and/or nostalgia in overcoming this distance. The story revolves round a pair of siblings (the sister is the first-person narrator who is unnamed, and the brother's name is Tarun) who are living in the United States while their mother remains in Calcutta. While the daughter "eagerly" moved to the US as a consequence of an arranged marriage, the brother is initially reluctant to move. His mother eventually persuades him to go to the US for higher education (Divakaruni 37). She is keen for him to go because of the rising political turmoil in 1970s Calcutta after the Naxalbari movement grew violent, as did the resultant police brutality.<sup>31</sup> When the son is sent to the US against his wishes after much

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<sup>31</sup> The Naxalbari movement is a radical left movement that started in 1969 with an armed uprising by peasants from the area called Naxalbari, and was then continued and developed by urban radicals who were inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideals (Sinha Roy 30).

maternal manoeuvring, he terminates all communication with his mother. This is partly because of the mother's emotional manipulation of her son, but he is also now too preoccupied with his new life in America to disturb its pace with any memories. As the dying mother longs to hear from Tarun and repeatedly asks her daughter about him, the sister reminisces about her memories of their childhood and tries to convince her brother to reconcile with their mother.

As is evident from this brief plot summary, nostalgia and memory are at the heart of the story. As such, this narrative, for the most part, is constructed through the act of remembering: the narrator is often submerged in memories, especially those of her childhood. Since memory and nostalgia constitute the story, some theoretical reflection on these ideas can help advance the exploration. Memory has been a significant issue in literary and cultural studies for last few decades, but in contrast, the study of nostalgia is relatively new (Walder 23). According to Vijay Agnew, "memories play a role in the individual struggle to construct a social and personal identity which is fractured and fragmented" (*Diaspora* 7). Memory is not merely a "depository of fact" but rather is an "active process by which meaning is created" (8). Gayle Green differentiates nostalgia from memory, arguing that the former is a "desire to return home" whereas memory is more radical as it means "to think again" or "to recollect" (292). However, according to Walder, this sentimental aspect is only a part of the story as "nostalgia can begin with desire, and may well end in truth" (Walder 8). It is generally difficult to separate nostalgia from memory, though one could remember something without being nostalgic (Walder 4). The word 'nostalgia' comes from two Greek roots: "nostos" means "returning home", and "algia" denotes "pain or longing" (Walder 7; Wilson 21). According to Dennis Walder, "[n]ostalgia is usually thought of in terms of longing and desire – for a lost home, place, and/or time. But it is also more than that: it is a longing for an experience – subjective in the first place, and yet, far from limited to the

individual” (4). Walder’s definition emphasises the yearning that is inherent in nostalgia. Roberta Rubenstein in a similar vein states that nostalgia, unlike homesickness, refers to separation which is temporal (4). As I proceed to analyse Divakurani’s story, the reverberation of these theoretical ideas will be heard in the narrative and, more importantly, the text extends these ideas of nostalgia and memory by locating the maternal as an integral component of both. I will argue that in this text the maternal evokes the past, memory and nostalgia, and vice versa.

As the narrator struggles to approach her brother about their ailing mother, childhood memories come thronging into her mind. She reminisces about her brother’s preferences as a child: “what he liked best was listening to my mother’s stories – tales her mother had told her – of princesses, wondrous talking beasts, and jewels which, touched to walls of caverns, made secret entry-ways appear” (39). The use of the word “jewel” is important as it recurs in the story on a number of occasions. While the jewel in the fairytale has the power to open the door of a secret cavern, translated into actual lives, a jewel from the nostalgic memory of childhood can potentially open doors in the characters’ minds which have been blocked by temporal and spatial distances. Readers witness that the brother, after many years, calls his sister “didi”, the Bengali word for elder sister. He uses this affectionate name out of the excitement of seeing a crane that reminds him of their childhood memories at a village in West Bengal when as playmates the siblings first saw that bird. The narrator reflects: “the childhood endearment which he hasn’t used in years. Didi. A small flash of a word, potent as any enchanted jewel from my mother’s stories” (27). Uttered after years in an alien land, the term carries valuable memories that the narrator compares with some “enchanted jewel” in a fairytale told by their mother. Significantly, in both instances there is the presence of the mother in the memories – be it the real mother telling

stories to her children, or the sister, delighted to re-connect with her brother through their childhood memories, and invariably linking their shared memories to the mother.

In the story, Divakaruni shows how a thoroughly assimilated diasporic subject perceives the distant Indian home as something unreal. Early on, when the mother writes a letter to the daughter expressing her concerns for her son's safety amidst the violence in the city and his reluctance to go to the US, the daughter admits that despite knowing the grave nature of the problem back home, she somehow does not connect to it:

My mother's letter distressed me, but it was distress of peculiar, blurred kind. I know how serious the situation in Calcutta was, but somehow the tragedies Ma spoke of weren't real, not like my own problems. The pain of my daughter's swollen gums as her first teeth came through; the smell of our apartment which, no matter how much I scrubbed, stank of stale curry; [...] Inescapably mundane, these things loomed so large in my world that they forced everything else to recede. [...] I kept my mother's letter for a long time at the bottom of my jewelry case, under the thick gold wedding bangles that I no longer wore because they were too elegant for my pedestrian Sacramento life. (43-44)

This passage can be analysed from two perspectives. First, the passage curiously juxtaposes the unreal distant home with the present real home. This juxtaposition of contradictory ideas – the unreal and real, distant and near, old and new – captures the duality of the diasporic subject. The passage starts with mention of the “blurred” home which is contrasted with the sharp focus of the present in such details as the daughter's swollen gums, stale curry smells, and so on. Again, these everyday, “mundane” details are set against rarer treasures, specifically the mother's letter and her gifts of jewellery. The fact that the letter is stored in a long-unused jewellery case evokes

India's irrelevance, and the daughter's view of it as precious but devoid of practical use. Mother and the home that is left behind are valued but lose their everyday utility in a diasporic life which has new and pressing demands.

Secondly, it is important to note that Divakaruni here presents a gendered picture of the diaspora. Sandhya Rao Mehta argues that the diasporic female subject bears greater responsibility for creating and running her new home than her male counterpart (7). While the decision to migrate is usually taken by the male, "the onus of retaining memories of home", creating a new habitus and mediating between these two realms are often feminine tasks (7). Divakaruni's character remembers her mother back home but she has more material, "real" duties to fulfil. As such, for the young mother in the new home of diaspora, its many demands on her qualify for "reality", whereas memories of the old home, necessarily accompanied by memories of her mother, have their own place in a corner. This corner, as the text depicts, is precisely the one constructed in one's memory.

It should not escape our notice that, this passage also reveals a sense of ambiguity in the narrator's treatment of the memories of her mother. Unlike the previous metaphorical allusion to jewels potent enough to open the blocked door, here the jewel is devoid of practical use. This ambiguity is further intensified as the daughter continues to excavate memories and at some point feels an urge to keep them safe. "If I had been an artist, this is what I would have painted, to keep it safe from loss – and from change, which is perhaps crueler than loss" (40). Discussing the impact of the past in the context of cultural identity, Stuart Hall writes,



The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. (226)

Interestingly, Hall compares the relationship with the past with that of a mother and a child hence locating the maternal in memory. Hall's comment, though directed towards a different context, can well be applied to a text that delineates the complicated relationship between an individual and her memories and past, wherein this past and memory are merged with the maternal figure.

Divakaruni depicts how memory and the act of remembering give rise to a hope that can connect the severed relationship. Relying on the power of memories, the sister finally convinces Tarun to reconnect with their mother:

Tonight, I will tell my brother a story. Once there was a widow-woman who had two children. I'll tell it the way the old tales were told, without guilt or blame, out of sorrow and hope, in honor of memory. Maybe he won't listen, and maybe he will. (32)

These final sentences intensely speak of the memory that can overcome the distance of time and space. As woven throughout the text, the final paragraph too brings in the mother figure – this time, explicitly – who literally embodies the memory. The attempt to reconnect with the past is made synonymous with reuniting with the mother, as the daughter proceeds to convince her brother to contact their dying mother. Walder's assertion about the power of nostalgia can aptly be applied here: "nostalgia in a curious way connects people across historical as well as national and personal boundaries" (Walder 1). The concluding paragraph exemplifies this idea as the

sister finally rests her hopes on a nostalgia that can potentially overcome physical and mental boundaries, and lead to a reconciliation with the past – and with the mother.

## **Conclusion**

The diasporic characters portrayed in these texts by two diasporic authors – one second-generation and the other first-generation – belong to similar social classes. This is largely, I believe, because the authors themselves belong to the educated, Bengali-Hindu upper class and caste. Both the authors in their delineation of diasporic lives touch overlapping concerns of home, memory and nostalgia. However, my chosen texts present these issues from diverse perspectives – the young mother, the ageing mother and eventually memorialising the maternal in the context of diaspora. In Lahiri's novel the young female character, Ashima, becomes a mother at the beginning of her stay in a foreign land, and despite initial difficulties she recreates home in her own way. For Ashima, her idea of home is grounded in her motherhood: the place where she gives birth to and rears two children finally acquires the meaning of home. In contrast, Divakaruni's story focuses on an elderly mother's struggle to reconcile her old and new homes. What is important is how the different subject positions of these women (Ashima and Mrs. Dutta) shape their diasporic maternal experience. For the young mother, the challenge of rearing children in an alien land gradually transforms her to the extent that the foreign land, over time, becomes a home or at least the idea of home goes through a transformation. In case of the over sixty, ageing mother with an adult son and his family thoroughly assimilated in a different culture, it is difficult to re-create a second home. The question of habitus that I drew on in relation to Divakaruni's text becomes crucial at this point. The question of the disjunction of

habitus is relevant to Ashima as well, for she experiences a completely different place and culture. However, this disjunction is overcome by the “homing desire”. By contrast, in Divakaruni’s text the conflict is the crux of the narrative. While these two texts – one novel and the first short story – depict how two mothers experience diaspora and its related concerns home, memory, nostalgia in different ways, the third and final text reverses the gaze from the mother to the daughter. This reversal yields an understanding of the idea of the maternal at the heart of the diaspora – be it the nostalgia for home(land) which inevitably connects itself to the mother, or yearning for a past wherein the memory of the mother is embedded, or reconciling with the past after years of diasporic life being synonymous with reconciliation with one’s mother.

## Chapter 4

### Motherhood Beyond the Body

The “childless woman” and the “mother” are a false polarity, which has served the institutions both of motherhood and heterosexuality. [...] What of the woman, who as the eldest girl in a large family, has practically raised her younger sisters and brothers, and then has entered a convent? [...] Many of the great mothers have not been biological.

(Rich 250-251)

Our lives are as they are because some of us  
have children and some of us do not. (Dowrick and Grundberg 9)

These two epigraphs evince contrasting tones: one is passionate about rejecting stereotypes surrounding motherhood, while the other is quietly confessional. In the former quotation, Adrienne Rich dismantles the dominant discourse of motherhood which endorses only biological motherhood within heterosexual marriage. Defying the essentialist definition of motherhood on the basis of gestation and giving birth, Rich emphasises care and nurturance. In the latter, Stephanie Dowrick and Sibyl Grundberg admit a simple truth. The determining roles of biology and childbirth permeate various societies and cultures all over the world. As such, birth is at once personal and political, for it is often dictated by the socio-political and religious context (Nandy 129). In the context of India, the obsession with biological motherhood in accordance with the

social norms around “sacrosanct” marriage has been evident throughout the thesis so far. As an alternative to this essentialist definition, therefore, the present chapter aims to explore motherhood beyond the body by focusing on the portrayals of non-biological motherhood by two ostensibly “childless” women in Anita Desai’s novel *Clear Light of Day* and one in Nandita Bagchi’s short story “Bilkisu Becomes a Mother”. Amidst many forms of non-biological mothering, I choose to concentrate on the literary ramifications of a comparatively unrecognised and unnoticed mothering and argue that these works of fiction creatively intimate an inclusive definition of motherhood.

### **Non-Biological Mothering: Difference and Diversity**

Although non-biological motherhood is relatively less recognised within the pronatalist scenario, it has, however, existed in diverse forms and shapes that have unique characteristics and material issues other than the concerns of caregiver. Therefore, it is imperative that distinctions are made clear to acknowledge the differences and similarities between various forms of non-biological mothering to define and discuss my key terms. Perhaps the most common form of non-biological motherhood is adoption, which, nonetheless, is a “controversial practice” (Katz and Hunt 41). Adoption is a strictly legal process that entails several stages of “surveillance and regulation” during which the birth mother must surrender her rights over the children and a new family takes over childcare responsibilities following a rigorous official procedure (Stanworth 294). John McLeod writes, “this particular modus operandi readies new identities for all concerned – the infamous adoption triad – that redesignates mother and child as ‘birth-mother’ and ‘adoptee’ and creates ‘adoptive parents’ as acceptable substitute for consanguineous kins” (*Life Lines* 2).

McLeod concisely encapsulates the bureaucratic consequences of adoption on all involved in this triad. Also, what is crucial in the adoption contract is that it is usually people from the privileged middle and upper classes who adopt children from poverty-stricken families wherein the birth parents are compelled to give up their children, as McLeod aptly asserts: “adoption is fundamentally imbricated in the land of economic impoverishment and wealth” (2). Moreover, separating from the birth parents can be a traumatic experience for the adopted children, no matter how well-meaning the adoptive parents are. The 2017 Academy Award nominated film (in the category of best film), *Lion* narrativises adoption, presenting a moving account of the extremities – both emotional and material – that adoption often involves. The film which is inspired by real-life events, follows Saroo Brierley’s journey from childhood in an impoverished family in India to adulthood in an affluent family in Australia. The five-year-old Saroo gets separated from his family and ends up being in an orphanage in Calcutta from where he is adopted by an Australian couple. Despite having a convenient upbringing under the protective love of his adoptive parents, Saroo is haunted by his shadowy past that reappears in his conscious and sub-conscious mind, making his present identity fragile and fragmented. Driven by the call from his distant childhood, he seeks to find out his home and his biological mother, and finally succeeds using technological tool – google earth. The film captures the wrenching pain of not only Saroo, the protagonist, but also both his birth and adoptive mothers who experience estrangement from the child physically and psychologically, respectively. The harrowing experience and emotional turmoil that the film depicts, present adoption and its attendant dilemmas as irreconcilable. Because of all these complexities such as surveillance, poverty and so on, the relationship between feminism and adoption is an uneasy and ambivalent one (Stanworth 294). Although feminists like Shelley M. Park strategically celebrate the

“queerness” of adoption (which I will discuss a little later in relation to the non-biocentric mothering model), these issues of compulsion, lack of choice, and surveillance problematise the whole idea of adoption, discouraging unequivocal advocacy in its favour.

Starkly different from this, a liberating and empowering version of non-biological mothering is found in “other-mothering” in African-American communities where the responsibilities of child care are by shared between the birth mother and other women from the community. This practice of “other-mothering” serves as a site of power for the mothers as they take charge of their maternal acts without any external constraints and raise children in a collective way (O’Reilly *From Motherhood* 11). Evolving from this practice, there is another kind of mothering known as “community mothering” whereby women who are past the age of child-bearing “take care of the community”. These mothers who assist biological mothers in bringing up the children have traditionally been “central to the institution of Black Motherhood” (Collins 47).

In India, a very informal caregiving is provided by female kinsfolk, namely aunts, elder siblings and grandmothers, who sometimes undertake intensive mother work (Aneja and Vaidya 141). This kind of informal and impromptu mothering could well count as surrogate or foster mothering as the female kinswomen, through their care, act as substitutes for the birth mother. However, the word “surrogate” has gained currency in recent years in connection with Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), where surrogacy refers to lending one’s womb in a financial contract which I discuss in the next section.

### **Childlessness and Non-biological Mothering in Indian Society**

Concomitant with the reverence for biological motherhood and its being the “axis of gender identity”, childlessness is considered taboo in many societies (Riessman 165). Rich writes, “childless women have been considered failures across ages and countries” (Rich 251). In India, the pervasive preference for biological children relegates childlessness into “barrenness” inasmuch as different religious rituals are generally observed in the hope of biological offspring (Krishnaraj 30). Biological children are considered God’s blessing, and birth is associated with religious rites. By contrast, childlessness is still a social stigma in many parts of India, although the severity of social punishment depends upon the caste and class (Dube 7).<sup>32</sup> One extreme example of such social stigma can be seen in some rural, southern parts of India where childless women are marginalised to the extent that they are believed to have evil powers. Women with children try to avoid any kind of contact with childless women out of the fear of being cursed by them which, they apprehend, would be fatal. Childless women, in turn, often harbour intense anger and bitterness because of this marginalisation and internalise the regressive notion of childlessness as evil (Saavala 79).

Interestingly, Hindu mythology offers several versions of parenthood other than the biological one. There is no dearth of examples of adopted children or infants who have non-biological parents in both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The highest Hindu deity Lord Krishna is the biological child of Devaki but is brought up by his foster mother Jashoda. “Bhajans”, a specific genre of Indian devotional or religious song, are recited to celebrate the mother-child relationship

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<sup>32</sup> A Gujrati folksong, anthologised in *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C to the Early Twentieth Century*, speaks of the pain and humiliation experienced by a woman because of her childlessness. The song is composed as a prayer to the sun queen, Rannade, urging her to grant the worshipper her earnest wish, a child. The song after each stanza repeats the phrase “Mother, the taunts of childlessness are hard to bear”. Such folk song, presumably composed by women and transmitted in oral culture, bears testimony to the extent of stigma and taboo that exist around childlessness (Tharu and Lalita 139).



of Krishna and Jashoda. According to legend, Jashoda rebukes little Krishna in mock-seriousness for his naughty misdeeds but her heart melts at her loving son's antics. Another significant mythical figure is Karna, the kind-hearted, generous man who is also a brave warrior. Karna is brought up by his adoptive parents, Adhirath and Radha. They took in Karna after he was abandoned as a baby by his biological and shamefully unmarried mother Kunti. Similarly, Sita, the epitome of ideal womanhood, was given another name, Janaki, by her adoptive father Janak. Paradoxically, despite many such instances from revered epics and religious texts, the version of motherhood that is validated in Indian society is biological. This leads to birth being considered the "normative quintessence of 'real' motherhood" (Nandy 129). Consequently, in India, unlike in many so-called Western countries, there have been scant studies on adoption, owing to a relative social rejection of and unease with the issue of adoption (Nandy 130).

Scholar and social scientist Maithreyi Krishnaraj criticises the biology fetish of new reproductive technologies which could otherwise be subversive and empowering. She acknowledges the potential of ART or In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) to challenge dominant ideas about motherhood by "re-imagining human kinship" and to herald "freedom of choice" (Krishnaraj 39). In a similar vein, Amrita Pande writes: "gestational surrogacy [...] creates three possible mothers – the biological mother, surrogate mother, adoptive mother" (135). Evidently, the surrogacy process disrupts ideas surrounding "kinship based on procreation" (120). However, the science of surrogacy has been used to reinforce the "obsession with biological motherhood" and "close tie[s] of gender identity and motherhood" (Krishnaraj 30; Nandy 130). Like adoption, in gestational surrogacy the concern of financial compulsion has remained a crucial issue. The entire concept of using "poor/ third-world women's bodies for feeding wealthy/western women's demands for tailor-made children" has been controversial and has received criticism, while some

critics have also found ART augmenting the social taboo of childlessness (Aneja and Vaidya 139; Tripathi 125). A recent fictional representation of this phenomenon is Meera Syal's novel *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2014), in which the over-forty, British-Indian protagonist goes to India – the site of a booming industry of cheap surrogates – in search of a surrogate mother as she is unable to bear a child owing to her own ageing “inhospitable womb” (Syal 10). The novel goes on to navigate through multiple sub-plots of ageing, home and diaspora, rape and so on but what is relevant here and worth a mention is Syal's exploration of the baffling issue of childlessness and the industry capitalising on this. I am not looking into fictional depiction of surrogacy in this chapter, hence this brief mention of Syal's novel only to underscore the appropriation of the maternal body – its transient power based on its procreative function within a capitalist market, and actual exploitation. On the one hand, this commodification makes visible an economic power structure that determines mothering experiences. On the other hand, suffering the agony of childlessness and yearning to have a child of own's own by means made possible by technology, deserves sympathetic consideration rather than an outright rejection.<sup>33</sup>

There are other forms of non-biological surrogacy which are based on monetary transaction, and which can be critiqued on similar grounds. This is particularly visible in the Indian context in

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<sup>33</sup> In India, the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016, has proposed to ban commercial surrogacy, allowing only “altruistic” surrogacy within the family. The proposed bill problematically does not allow altruistic surrogacy for unmarried couples, gay or lesbian couples, foreigners and single parents. The bill has been criticised by many for being “a regressive legislation that seeks to control women's bodies and reinforces heteronormative notions of what a family is” (Kumar 13). The parliamentary panel that was set up to evaluate the bill, has provided a report, criticising its narrowness and impracticality, and has recommended a redraft with a broadened framework.

relation to “ayahs”, or domestic nannies. In urban India women from lower classes and castes are appointed as maids and nannies to look after the children of affluent families. Since this relationship is premised on a financial contract, any emotional attachment between the child and the ayah is not encouraged, as Krishnaraj states: “when care-givers do mothering, the care-taker gets emotionally attached to the child. Yet, she is not entitled to full ownership because there is a money transaction involved” (23). At the other end of the spectrum, the children of married ayahs are often left behind in villages without their birth mother, and in most cases are brought up by their female kinsfolk (who act as their non-biological mothers). Discussing the exploitative and hierarchical nature of such kinds of maternal pacts as those that exist in commercial gestational surrogacy and paid domestic caring, Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya define “surrogacy (both as reproductive transaction and caregiver)” as a “culturally promoted trope under capitalism” (149).

### **Reimagining Motherhood in Non-Essentialist Ways**

Since the domain of motherhood and especially the maternal body have mostly been rendered as “transient carrier vessel[s] of patriarchy” (Aneja and Vaidya 150), a radical re-imagining is called for. For this, I turn to feminist philosophers who conceive of motherhood in non-essentialist ways. Mielle Chandler, for instance, defines motherhood as follows:

It is my position that “mother” is best understood as a verb, as something one does, a practice which creates one’s identity as intertwined, interconnected and in-relation.

Mothering is not a singular practice, and mother is not best understood as a monolithic identity. (Chandler 273)

Chandler's argument that mother is best understood as a verb emphasises the work and agency that motherhood entails in relation to the child. Through this accentuation, she challenges the passive definitions of motherhood which are prevalent in most cultures, while also contending the essentialist definition premised on birth and gestation. Additionally, her perceptive attention to the diversity and inclusivity of mothering experiences resists a unified concept of motherhood. Chandler rightly shows awareness of her specific location in "urban, western, nonaffluent, predominantly white, feminist sphere", and maintains that hers is not a universal idea of mothering as a practice. While conceiving motherhood in terms of action, Chandler is influenced by Judith Butler's idea of gender as "repeated action" as opposed to a static pre-given. As such, although Chandler's argument aims at creating new possibilities for multiple motherworks, while Butler's is about subverting socially restricted boundaries of gender by undoing performance, Chandler "imports" (277) Butler's idea of "enacting" and "becoming" a gender in her thesis. Citing Butler, she adds "to be a woman is to consistently re-enact femininity [...] to be a mother is to enact mothering" (273). Chandler thus theorises motherhood as an identity emerging from repeated performance in relation to a child.

In a similar way, feminist ethicists have also contributed to reimagining a type of mothering that does not prioritise biology, birth and gestation; notable among them is Sara Ruddick and her idea of maternal thinking. Ruddick follows the praxis-oriented historical materialist view that claims, "all thinking arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage" (9). What Ruddick argues is that it is our practices that give rise to distinct ways of knowing. Therefore, it is the practice of mothering (not the event of birth), which has the aim of preserving and nourishing the child, and which gradually develops an essentially anti-militant understanding that

speaks a “politics of peace”. Ruddick, in her configuration of maternal thinking, carefully includes men, since she claims men too can mother (40).

Although the texts that I discuss here are not about adoption but informal non-biological mothering, it is useful to consider some theoretical considerations of adoptive motherhood in terms of what their arguments mean for non-procreative maternity. A significant theoretical reflection on adoption comes from Shelley M. Park who outlines her manifesto in the following sentence: “I wish to consider the experience of adoptive mothering as a unique form of mothering that allows for the development of a critical maternal praxis” (201). Park designates the adoptive maternal body “as a queer paradigm for thinking motherhood” (201). She criticises the pronatalist and essentialised view of the maternal body which defines itself in relation to reproductive capability. From the standpoint of the pronatalists, an adoptive maternal body is “queer” as it is not the real one but claims to be so. Park draws on an important idea from postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon that “bodies that inhabit the periphery of the larger social body develop a double consciousness” (Park 202). This double perspective stems from the insights of both centre and periphery that are required for survival. Park’s ultimate aim is to capitalise on this double consciousness effectively and strategically to understand motherhood from a new perspective. Adoptive mothers, according to her, inhabit the borderland between authentic and unauthentic motherhood. This singular position at the boundary of “real” motherhood, I submit, is also relevant to other forms of non-biological mothering (informal mothering by female kinswomen, mothering by paid domestic carers or ayahs and so on), since they are not often socially recognised and are sometimes disapproved and opposed. For example, there is a proverb in some parts of Bengal that can loosely be translated as “the one who loves more than the mother is actually a witch”. This proverb bears witness to the repressive idea of

gender identity on the basis of procreation and the perceived absolute value of biological motherhood.

### **Maternal Non-mothers: Mira masi and Bim in *Clear Light of Day***

Anita Desai's acclaimed novel *Clear Light of Day* is a landmark text in Anglophone Indian literature. Since its publication in 1980 it has received widespread and sustained critical attention in the subcontinent and abroad. Much has been written about feminist issues, the female voice, partition and so forth in relation to the novel (Kanitkar 175-200; Ray 126-146; Roy 80-87). My concern, as mentioned, is to focus on representation of non-biological mothers in the novel, a topic that has been only briefly touched upon (by critics such as Ranu Uniyal and Radha Chakravarty) and left relatively unexplored. Desai presents readers with two women characters who embody care for a dependant but do not fit into the normative maternal model.

*Clear Light of Day* is about the Das family which, like the recently independent, partitioned India, is somewhat lost amidst dramatic current events. The narrative begins in the post-independent India with all the siblings grown up, but goes back to earlier days as they reminisce about their childhood in which they were neglected by their irresponsible parents who preferred to go to clubs and parties rather than looking after their children. The lack of parental affection and warmth induced the children (the youngest of whom, Baba, is mentally disabled), to form their own worlds within themselves. The children, however, found a mother figure in Mira masi, a distant, widowed relative who was brought into their household to look after the children. Eventually the children grow up and find their own places in life, except for the eldest sister Bim, a history teacher at a women's college, who stays in the old house taking care of Baba and

old, alcoholic, eccentric Mira masi. It is around the return home of the younger, married sister Tara for a holiday that the novel is constructed. The narrative is largely structured by memories through which the two sisters reminisce about their younger days, trying to reconcile the grudges and sorrows of their pasts with the present. After a sequence of introspection and retrospection, the novel ends on a positive note with Bim developing a calm acceptance of her siblings' individual choices, and in a larger way finding solace in love and understanding.

Through the very different characters of Bim and Mira masi the idea of mothering is problematised, questioned and reformulated. Aunt Mira is a poor destitute widow who experiences humiliation and fear of sexual assault at her in-laws' house and consequently comes to the Das household to look after the children. She is primarily projected as a victim, given her unfortunate lot and series of humiliations. The narrator compares her to "a discarded household appliance" who has a "scarecrow-like appearance" (111). The metaphor of Mira masi as a lifeless and used domestic object serves to convey what little value she is accorded in her familial surroundings. However, when she starts looking after the children both she and they find a fulfillment that they have been in desperate need of. The author makes a sharp contrast between the indifferent biological mother and a concerned Mira masi in the following passages. Discovering that the milkman does not give pure cow's milk but rather dilutes it by adding tap water, an angry Mira masi finally gathers courage to report it to Mrs. Das:

"It is more blue than white", Aunt Mira's voice cracked into splinters and indignation, "and there's no cream at all. [...] They [the children] get no nourishment. It can't go on." [...] "Then what do you suggest?" She [Mrs. Das] asked sourly as if to put a stop to the distasteful conversation and get on with the inserting of ear-rings into the waiting earlobes. (169 –170)

This genuine concern of Mira masi and the mother's uninterest have a dramatic effect in the novel, inviting the reader to question the motherhood of the biological mother. The milk alludes to nourishment, both physical and psychological. Being a childless woman, Mira masi cannot produce her own milk. However, her care and affection is a substitute which the biological mother (the one who once had the ability to produce breast milk) cannot provide. The word "sourly" used to describe Mrs Das's tone of voice carries an underlying suggestion of milk going sour, denoting a dwindling of care and a lack of empathy on the part of the biological mother.

Briefly addressing the issue of motherhood in the novel, Radha Chakraborty writes: "As surrogate mothers Mira Masi [*sic*] and Bim extend the idea of nurturing beyond the conventional association of maternity with marriage; this role however is not willingly chosen, but thrust upon them by circumstances" (*Subjectivity* 79). However, it is evident in the text that Mira masi's role, though not initially chosen by her, gives her immense satisfaction. The following passage eloquently demonstrates this sense of fulfilment:

They grew around her knees, stubby and strong, some as high as her waist, some rising to her shoulders. She felt their limbs, brown and knobby with muscle, hot with the life force. They crowded about her so that they formed a ring, a protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace [...] [T]ouching them, dressing them, lifting them, drawing them to her, she felt how their life streams met and flowed into each other. She fed them with her own nutrients, she reared them in her own shade, she was the support on which they leaned as they grew. (176)

In this passage, the connection between Mira masi and the children is rendered through images of nature that connote a primal proximity between and oneness of mother and child. In other



words, the metaphor of the tree giving shade and feeding with nutrients intensifies the intergenerational connection and evokes the pre-oedipal bond. Perhaps the most crucial aspect that this pastoral imagery illuminates by suggesting a kind of organic oneness with mother nature, is the naturalness of the supposedly unnatural (non-biological) mother-child relationships. On another level, this relationship is very much enmeshed in physicality – the contentment and pleasure of bodily contact with the children. The use of the words “touching”, “dressing” and “lifting” conveys the bodily bond that exists between the mother and her child. As Mira masi “feels” the “life force” of the children, the diction indicates the physical aspect of child rearing which is often a major reason for choosing biological motherhood and downgrading other forms of motherhood to an inferior category. Arguing in favour of adoptive motherhood, Park asserts: “all forms of parenthood include bodily experience” (206). Margaret Homans similarly makes a strong case for the importance of physical contact between the adoptive mother and the child:

there are same pleasure of plump baby flesh [...] we experience the same joys and responsibilities for bathing, feeding, singing lullabies, reciting stories to one’s child. As the mothers of infants, toddlers, or teens, we too are familiar with the tears, screams, laughter, and smiles that “enter one’s bones”. (266)

Homans’ point about this bodily contact is encapsulated in Mira masi’s child-rearing activities described in the above quotation. The phrase “life stream” to express identities flowing into each other validates and echoes Homans’ observation that the child enters “one’s bones”. Mira masi’s mothering in a way liberates her from the wretchedness of her life, devoid as it is of respect and dignity.

Mira masi's descent into mental illness and her nightmare about the drowned cow that she insisted on buying to give the children pure milk exude the "problematic of motherhood" explored in the text (Lee 97). On the one hand, given the extent of intensive mothering Mira masi does for the four children, the motif of the mother cow seems pertinent to underscore the continual flow of nurturance and nourishment on her part. On the other hand, the drowning of the cow in the well and Mira masi's nightmare about it is suggestive of the draining nature of such dedication and devotion. Mira masi's lonely life as a destitute widow certainly ascertains some purpose and meaning in her mother work, but at another level her exploitation cannot simply be overlooked, for she is the one who has always devoted herself to the needs of others without having any autonomous existence. My point is that Desai's portrayal of mothering resists a naïve idealisation of all-consuming mother work by means of deploying such a provocative motif that disturbs and disrupts any easy interpretation.

Another maternal character that Desai presents is her indomitable protagonist Bim, whose tenderness of character is subtly apparent despite her outward abrasiveness. The other sister Tara – the soft and shy one – pragmatically chooses an upwardly mobile life by marrying Bakul, a foreign diplomat and, through moving to the United States escapes the confines of the old house. Raja, who once was very close to his sister Bim, proves to be no less a realist. He gets married into a Nawab family and, as their son-in-law, moves to the princely state of Hyderabad, leaving Bim and Baba behind. Once a promising student, Bim decides to stay behind to take care of Baba and Mira masi.

Arguing that Bim is the most stable and strong of all Desai's women protagonists, Ranu Uniyal writes: "Bim escapes the heterosexual plot, that is, she turns down marriage and maternity but looks after the everlasting baby in Baba. She is not a biological mother but is a strong maternal

figure in terms of responsibility, caring and commitment” (280). Uniyal’s focus and concern is to read the novel as a search for a “landscape of affirmation” as she analyses the relationship between selfhood, temporality and space. Motherhood not being within the purview of her enquiry, she only mentions Bim’s maternal qualities in passing. What I take as the tenor of Uniyal’s argument is that Bim is situated outside heteronormativity. Bim’s position as one not complying with conventional ideas of femininity is important as it makes her into what Park calls the “queer maternal body” (201).

Bim’s being unmarried and therefore childless is underlined by the narrator in another passage. Speaking of her fondness for her dog, Badsha, Bim says to Tara: “I know what you’re thinking [...] You’re thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven’t children. Children are the real thing, you think” (16). This juxtaposition of two sisters aligning with different ways of life is necessary for the plot as it provocatively brings out issues of social norms and expectations, and women’s decisions as to whether to conform to them. Tara is a mother of two girls now, a life she has chosen freely. Bim has also elected to be a “spinster” and is putting all her efforts into looking after her brother who needs care and assistance. While one is a mother, the other is a spinster, and both these terms carry social inscription within them. Bim’s conscious decision not to comply with what is deemed socially desirable is, in a way, resistance to the compulsory heteronormativity of Indian society.

The old house, which contains all these members and their divergent aspirations, is an animating force in the novel. Bim looks after the house in such a way that time seems to stand still. Helen Kanitkar writes, “gradually Bim becomes more and more identified with the house” (195). The importance of the house in the narrative can be explained in more than one way. Houses in many South Asian creative works act as a microcosm of the nation; for example, Amitav Ghosh’s *The*

*Shadow Lines*, R. K. Narayan's *The Financial Expert*, A. K. Ramanujan's "Ruins of a Great House" and so on (Chambers "Borders" 43). In this novel, the house stands in testimony to the siblings' relationship turning indifferent and bitter, resulting in separation. In this, it is much like the nation itself, which witnessed political upheaval leading to the bloodshed and enmity engendered in partition and its aftermath (Pandey 3). Bim's effort to keep the house unchanged and undistorted is an attempt to write an alternative history. Moreover, if we consider the woman question of the nationalist movement which necessitated a radical reformulation of the idea of womanhood combining elements from the private and public domains, Bim's position is unique and does not fit into that easy formulation. Bim is an educated, so-called Westernised, working woman. But her decision to cling to the old house and keep it unchanged gives the impression that she chooses the inner domain over the outer. This self-chosen domesticity and rootedness in the house has a maternal side to it as she not only preserves and nurtures the life of her sibling Baba but also the lives they have all lived in the house.

The relationship between Bim and Baba is one delineated with care and sensitivity by the author, in that we witness an array of emotions being played out within this relationship. Critics such as Adriana Elena Stoican and Elizabeth Jackson observe that Bim's decision to singlehandedly take care of Baba is one out of genuine concern rather than authority. I suggest that Desai nuances this "compassion and care" (Stoican 111) with a certain degree of contradiction and ambiguity. Bim's mothering is evident from the beginning of the novel – be it casual every-day, care work of making breakfast for Baba or her motherly perseverance of encouraging him to go to the office, an effort likely to be futile. It is Baba's presence in her life that saves Bim from an acute loneliness, as she emphatically says to Tara recollecting the earlier days when her siblings had departed – "I still had Baba" (70).

The intimate relation between Baba and Bim, and Baba's ultimate dependence on his elder sister is evoked in the following passage when Tara unintentionally hurts Baba by asking whether he wants to go to the office. As Baba does not know what to answer he is puzzled and disturbed. The moment that Tara says that he does not need to answer because she can ask Bim, Baba seems to come back to himself: "she had said the right thing at last. [...] It made Baba raise his head and smile, sweetly and gently, [...] in agreement. Yes, Bim, he seemed to say, Bim will decide. Bim can, Bim will. Go to Bim. Tara could not help smiling back to his look of relief, his happy dependence" (27). The affirmative tone and repetitive sentence structure through which the narrator expresses Baba's emotions vividly conveys a sense of Baba's absolute reliance on Bim. To complete the picture of mutual love and dependence, I reach for another passage which exemplifies Bim's maternal affection towards Baba:

[S]he felt an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside him on the bed, stretch out limb to limb, silent and immobile together. She felt that they must be the same length that his slightness would fit in beside her size, that his concavities would mould together with her convexities. Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure. (259)

Again, Desai uses bodily contact and tactile senses to demonstrate the essence of the relationship. Bim's desire for the siblings to merge into one reverberates with the image of an expectant mother carrying a baby in her womb. Though they are genetically connected as brother and sister, this yearning, as the passage suggests, carries overtones of a mother's longing to be united with her child.

Significantly, Desai maintains a notable ambivalence in portraying her two mother figures: like Mira masi, Bim's mothering role is not free from ambiguities. As previously discussed, for Mira masi, the role involves work not initially chosen by herself, though wholeheartedly done; this labour is also rigorous as she undertakes intensive mothering for four children. In the case of Bim's mothering, Desai has avoided the issue of self-effacement which is often expected of Indian women, by making Bim a self-sufficient and independent woman. Bim turns down any possibility of romantic relationship with her admirer, Mr Biswas; her annoyance with an ordinary, domesticated existence is evident in the scene in which she meets his mother, Mrs. Biswas. Later, when Mr. Biswas tells Bim "now I understand why you do not wish to marry [...] [Y]ou have sacrificed your own life" (211), Bim gets irritated for being "misunderstood" and "misread" (211). Robert Boyers considers this frustration reflective of a "determination not to feel victimized by anything" (51), while Ketu Katrak insists on Bim's supposed "martyrdom" beneath her seeming agency (135). Both critics' views are useful to uncover a duality residing at the heart of the novel's maternal (and feminist) question. Despite being in full control of her life as an autonomous individual Bim cannot help harbouring a deep sense of loneliness as she struggles to come to terms with the way her siblings (Tara and Raja) have deserted her. Desai depicts this inner struggle movingly when Bim attempts to blackmail Baba emotionally, asking him whether he prefers to go to Hyderabad to live with Raja. Seeing Baba's innocent face contorted in sudden shock, she immediately feels guilt-stricken, realising that she has only been venting out her pent-up frustration on Baba. This kind of self-absorption in duties and consequent suffocation and guilt are familiar maternal concerns that Desai evokes through this motherly sister.

Bim's predicament, more broadly, carries resonances of the dilemma of individuation and connectedness if we consider feminism's uneasy relationship with motherhood, especially the apparent conflicting views on motherhood by earlier second wave feminists (such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan) and later feminists (particularly, feminist ethicists such as Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick) who advocate for autonomy and interdependence, respectively. Desai's representation teases out this dialectic and more importantly chooses the figure of non-biological mother to enact this tension and negotiation. The non-biological mothering performed by two childless women in the novel in many ways reinforces Chandler and Ruddick's conception of mothering as practice and a distinct way of practice-led thinking, respectively. Importantly, both these feminists have emphasised maternal identity as intertwined and relational. Desai's novel, however, does not project any simple formulation; rather, it maintains contingencies of mothering by representing two sharply contrasted figures who curiously overlap with each other.

### **Mother-work and Care in “Bilkisu Becomes a Mother”**

Contemporary Bengali author Nandita Bagchi started her writing career as the author of travel articles for *The Statesman*, an English daily in Kolkata, but she eventually chose her mother tongue, Bengali, as the medium of her creative writing. Shortly after her marriage, Bagchi moved to Northeastern Nigeria with her doctor husband and pursued a teaching career there. She got involved with the International Women Club in Nigeria in many of their social work enterprises across Nigeria and neighbouring areas of West Africa. For this chapter, I have selected one of her short stories “Bilkisu Becomes a Mother” (originally given the Bengali title “Bilkisur Ma

Howa” and here I am using my own translation), which is set in Nigeria. My analysis of this story further develops my enquiry into non-biological mothering, this time by probing the tension between the biological mother and the paid childcare provider. Having argued for an alternative, non-procreative model of mothering in Desai’s text, what I seek now is an understanding of the complexities and possibilities of delegated (paid) “caring labour” (Ruddick 47), as represented in the text.

The short story follows the life of a Bengali couple (Dalia and Bratin) living and working in Nigeria. Dalia has previously had two stillborn babies and is pregnant again, so the couple wants to ensure the safe arrival of their much-desired child by any means possible. After their son is born they employ a local Kanuri woman, Bilkisu, as a nanny to look after the baby since Dalia is mostly busy with her job as a college lecturer. The childless Bilkisu immerses herself in the care of the little boy. Consequently, the boy gets attached to Bilkisu, which creates a sense of insecurity in his parents’ minds. His mother in particular is visibly anxious about their son being drawn towards the nanny. As Dalia grows restlessly possessive about her son and envious of Bilkisu, the story takes a climactic turn when Bilkisu saves the boy from a dangerous snake in Dalia’s presence as the latter rushes to the spot after hearing Bilkisu screaming. Bilkisu, in a desperate attempt to save her beloved “Bomboi”, fiercely twists the snake’s head in her own fist and gets bitten by it. The story ends with Bilkisu being admitted into hospital and Dalia crying hysterically as she confronts the question she cannot help asking herself as to why she could not kill the snake.

The story ends with a question springing from a maternal consciousness that doubts its own validity. This question itself gives rise to other questions – what demarcates the border between the mother and the caregiver in their shared mothering labour? What does it mean to perform



mother-work as a profession and then transgress the profession's boundaries to enter the territory of love? In the course of the story the mother-work relentlessly performed by Bilkisu and intermittently shared by Dalia, figures prominently. This sharing of mothering labour between the biological mother and employed caregiver occupies a curious place in the modern-day middle-class, nuclear family which, sometimes, complicates the division between the mother and non-mother engaged in the same labour. This juxtaposition is the crux of the story, further accentuated by a diasporic setting.

### **“Working mother” and “Mother-worker”**

The shared responsibility of caregiving between the mother and paid caregiver is not new, but has gained particular importance in contemporary global society owing to the increased participation of women in the public world and their concomitant reliance on care-workers to look after children (Tronto 36). The relationship between the mother and the caregiver, however, has long tended to be an uneasy one. In colonial India, ayahs were appointed as surrogate mothers or sometimes as wet nurses to look after the Empire's future. Sharon Jacob writes, “that same maternal body hired to perform the duty of a surrogate becomes the site for constant suspicion, anxiety, and control – given the *ayah*'s high degree of access to the infant – its body and its growing psychological sensibilities” (2). The over-dependence on ayahs often made the British memsahib bring them to England during their seasonal visits or permanent returns back home. The ayahs were brought for convenience but they were not accorded any security, often not even granted the return passage to India (Visram 24). With the decline of empire and colonisation, the hierarchy of coloniser/colonised has to some extent been replaced by the new

hierarchy of employer and employed in a capitalist world. This is certainly the case for ayahs in contemporary urban India, where working-class ayahs are often exploited by upper-class employers (Aneja and Vaidya 137). In order to analyse my key text, I therefore need to elucidate briefly the potential and problematics of delegated mother-work, since these factors are constitutive of this narrative.

Sociologist Cameron Macdonald's observations on this issue are particularly illuminating.

Writing on the subversive potential of paid caregiving work, she argues:

Although separate from motherhood as a social role or identity, mother-work represents a large component of what it *means* to be a mother and to experience mothering. Therefore, the practice of delegating mother-work in the relationship with a paid caregiver might fundamentally challenge our understanding of what it means to mother. (26; emphasis in original)

What Macdonald points out here is that mother-work when performed as a profession and by virtue of its nature, contests the prevalent meaning of motherhood. In other words, traditional mothering tasks such as feeding, tending, caring or the “whole bundle of psychological and social tasks” supposed to be carried out by mothers, are transferred to someone else (Rothman 24). However, Macdonald's analysis reveals that there is a relative devaluation of the works performed by paid caregivers, since motherhood as an institution “offers no legitimate place” for caregivers, who are often considered a “necessary evil” (27). The caregiver generally functions as a medium through which the mother's child-rearing practices are transmitted. Therefore, she is, on paper at least, an extension of the mother without having a well-defined relationship with the child (Souralová 5).

Reverberations of this anxiety can be heard in Bagchi's short story, which even dramatises the issue by creating what Macdonald terms a "shadow mother" who is racially and culturally different. Macdonald uses this term to denote the sense of lack that the woman in the position of a "mother-worker" often experiences, for she is present only as a "shadow" of the "real" mother. In the story, we witness the baby gradually becoming dependent on Bilkisu: "the baby acts strangely. He is Dalia's much longed-for child, but he seems to ignore his own mother. All his *communication* is with Bilkisu, [...] his eyes brighten up whenever he sees Bilkisu" (292).<sup>34</sup> While Dalia, as a mother, is puzzled to witness a bond growing between her son and Bilkisu, what is easily apparent in her reaction is racial prejudice, as we see her wondering what beauty her son finds in Bilkisu's "dark skin, flat nose, and thick lips" (292). This racist attitude tacitly and ironically re-enacts the superiority of the colonial memsahibs over the native ayahs of the British Raj, albeit in a changed time and place. This mindset is also symptomatic of the colour consciousness that is still dominant in India society in which "light-skinned people are generally assumed to be superior to dark-skinned people, regardless of the fact that there are dark-skinned people of high caste, for example, and fair-skinned people living in poverty" (Agnew *Where* 112). This attitude, as critic Vijay Agnew discusses in her memoir, owes much to the colonial legacy and to the alleged history of Aryans coming from Persia and defeating native dark-skinned Dravidians (112). One present-day manifestation of this inherited prejudice and regressive collective belief is the popular advertisements for skin whitening creams (Johri n. pag.).

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<sup>34</sup> The emphasis is mine as the author has also used this English word.

What is important in the text is that Dalia's frustrations emerge out of her perceived identity as a mother who struggles to negotiate her position in the face of an imagined competitor. The following passage expresses the struggle vividly:

How will Dalia save her son, her much-desired possession? As if Bilkisu has trapped him in an illusion. When he grew up a little, Dalia would send him to some boarding school back home, but what to do now? Should she resign from her job? But it is difficult to ignore such an amount of money, five times more than what is offered back at home.  
(292)

To describe Dalia's sense of possessiveness Bagchi uses the Bengali word "dhon", which literally translates as wealth. Although this word is sometimes used as an affectionate mode of address, its literal meaning concerns ownership of some precious possession. The word "illusion" is also significant as it conveys connotations of falseness. Bagchi uses the Bengali compound word "mayajal" that contains two words in it – "maya" and "jal" which mean illusion and trap, respectively.<sup>35</sup> Dalia, being the "original" or "real" mother, wants to save her child from a trap which she perceives to have been set by Bilkisu, whose care-work does not accord her any authority. Bagchi's portrayal, however, is sensitive enough to suggest the emotional complexities: she does not present the biological mother as a flat, unidimensional character who is unkind, authoritative. Rather, mentioning Dalia's previous maternal loss and grief, the author makes this possessiveness somewhat understandable, encouraging readers to see her in a sympathetic light. Nonetheless, deep within the seeming normalcy, what may exist is an internalised notion of superiority for physically bearing one's own child. Writing on the social

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<sup>35</sup> The word "maya" in Bengali has other nuances in it, for it is also used to denote a sense of emotional attachment.

discourse of biological motherhood, Marilyn Strathern insists: “in popular parlance the ‘real’ motherhood has its foundation both in biology and in the social recognition of biology, so the real mother always has either nature or society on her side” (290). It is my contention that maternal subjectivity is not independent of social discourses: its inherent authority and supposed realness are socially conditioned. The text thus essentially stages a conflict between undervalued care-work and idealised biological authority. In so doing, it charts the contours of a maternal consciousness that is grappling with the contingencies of mothering ensuing from the care of the non-mother.

The quoted passage also shows the characters’ mobility between home and diaspora. The upper middle-class couple’s voluntary migration “carries the possibility of immediate re-engagement with the homelands [...] through return visits and transnational links” (Burrell 185). This peripatetic lifestyle is important in the text inasmuch as it raises interesting issues relating to race and language that complicate the text’s maternal question. The couple, as readers quickly learn, are from wealthy and educated Bengali backgrounds and are demonstrably ambitious in their careers. Their desire to migrate to Western countries has much to do with their career prospects and an improved lifestyle in general. At the beginning of the story, readers are informed that the couple planned to go to London for a better equipped hospital for Dalia to give birth in, but due to medical advice they had to cancel this arrangement at the last moment. We see that the husband Bratin secretly harbours a desire to migrate to England through his strategy of having their son delivered in London and thus potentially gaining British citizenship. He even day-dreams about the baby being born aboard their flight in the sky-space over France or Switzerland which would also endow him with citizenship in the respective countries and a consequently easier passage to those countries for the infant’s parents. This willful desire gestures towards a

flexibility of self in Bratin that is “shaped not in relation to a specific place but to transnational concerns” (Cichon 49). The incidental nature of acquiring citizenship on the grounds of having born in a particular space adumbrates a “fluid sense of self” (Schultermandle and Toplu 5). It is worth noting that such fluidity challenges any essentialist definition of self or identity. The text’s main concern is to complicate maternal identity and in dealing with this the author counters biological essentialism through the figure of the mother-worker. In this textual context, the character’s preferred fluid and flexible sense of self expressed through the desire of accidental citizenship only sounds ironic when juxtaposed with the biologically essentialist idea of the maternal self that is simultaneously harboured by them.

Language plays a significant role in the text’s representation of the maternal. As such, the baby boy, much to his mother’s annoyance and astonishment, starts speaking Housa. This leads Dalia to lambast Bilkisu for not obeying her repeated instructions to speak English with the boy. When they consult their Pakistani paediatrician friend, Dr. Khalil, with their concerns that they are not proving able to teach their son Bengali, English or Hindi, Dr. Khalil tries to explain the issue as follows:

He cannot be a multilingual person at this stage. And an exposure to two or three languages is not good for him at his tender age. It will confuse him. He can learn his mother tongue later. Do we not learn foreign languages after we grow up? look at us – how we have become expert in Housa in a short span of time, but your mother tongue is Bengali and mine is Urdu. For now, you can say, Housa is your son’s mother tongue.

(293)

Recent research on children's language acquisition, however, refutes Dr. Khalil's opinion. Instead, research shows that "learning a second language in childhood, either by simultaneous acquisition or in the context of bilingual education, is associated with positive cognitive gains" (Diaz and Klinger 167). However, what is notable in Dr. Khalil's explanation is a sense of reversal: the mother tongue is becoming a foreign language and a foreign language turns into the mother tongue. This reversal itself serves as a trope through which to complicate the authority of the "real motherhood". Regarding the process of language acquisition Andrea O'Reilly writes, "mothers play a key role in language acquisition as the mother-child dyad is universally recognised as the primary locus of language acquisition. This relationship is recognised through the term *motherese*, which refers to infant-directed communication, although the term *caregiverese* is now gaining prominence" (*Encyclopedia* 65). This singular mother-child dyad that is the primary site for language acquisition is ruptured in Bagchi's text by the intrusion of the other-mother and her language.

While the story portrays the emotional turmoil of the mother as she tries to negotiate her maternal identity and her shared mothering labour, it simultaneously creates occasions on which this issue is addressed and explained from a distance. During a visit to Kolkata on vacation, the couple notice that the boy is missing his nanny as he keeps crying calling her name. They even apprehend that he may have been subjected to some black magic of the Kanuri tribes. When Bratin discusses this with their doctor friend, Pratik, he condemns Bratin for being unnecessarily unkind:

Why are you talking of such regressive, superstitious beliefs? How would that innocent woman cast a magic spell on the baby? Had you left the boy to *Masima*,<sup>36</sup> he would have had a similar kind of attachment with her. You two are mostly busy with your jobs, it is just normal that the baby would be mentally dependent on the nanny. Bilkisu is his sole companion. I would suggest you go back as soon as possible or the baby might suffer from trauma. (294)

This passage not only illustrates how desperate the biological parents are, but also echoes the findings of relational psychoanalysis that long separation between child and the caregiver “could lead to adverse effects on both parties” (Merwe and Gericke 320). As the friend mentions Bratin’s mother who could have been the baby’s carer had they not migrated to another country, this conjures up the issue of shared mother-work in middle-class Indian and in particular Bengali households. Middle-class women in India often share the responsibilities of childcare with other family members who informally engage themselves in the work alongside the mother.

Grandmothers and aunts are usually the substitute caregivers in the Indian tradition (Kapoor 143). Generally, in the middle-class milieu, a family only seeks outside help with childcare when there is no family support available. According to Shraddha Kapoor, “non-familial caregivers are seen as alternative caregivers but not substitute” (145). In a joint family, the mother is seldom the “sole caregiver”, although her position is securely central. What is significant here is that despite the practice of shared mothering in a traditional Bengali/Indian family, the intrusion of the racial “other” is not easily accepted.

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<sup>36</sup> *Masima* is the Bengali word for aunt. This word is commonly used to address elderly women – known or unknown – as elderly people, in Bengali culture, are not generally called by their name. Here, Bratin’s friend is referring to Bratin’s mother addressing her as *Masima* or aunt.



The familial connections that are prioritised in Bengali society are also an extension of the biological, genetic link with the child. Through the figure of the infertile, tribal Bilkisu the biological equation is problematised while care and its attendant emotions are valorised. In other words, this text, by creating a diasporic scenario, situates the supposedly racially inferior mother-worker against the birth-mother. In so doing, this text underscores the way the racially “other” mother slips through racial and cultural boundaries by means of her care-work, to such an extent that she poses a threat to the absoluteness of the biological motherhood. Crucially, this seeming rupture of the singular mother-child dyad can be read as resisting what Shelley M. Park terms “monomaternalism” (40). Defining this term, Park writes “I refer to the ideological assumption that a child can have only one real mother as the assumption of monomaternalism. The ideology of monomaternalism stems from a combination of beliefs about the socially normative and biologically imperative” (Park 3). Dalia’s inherent superiority and authority both emanate from these normative beliefs that are threatened by the mutual dependence of Bilkisu and the child, and by Bilkisu’s influence becoming most central to the child’s psychological and linguistic development.

That said, a feminist reading of this text would discern two areas of potential tension. First, in terms of gender politics, this text is indicative of normalised and internalised gender expectations. The story focuses on maternal identity – its assumed inherent superiority and its subsequent collapse. The father, who is also anxious about his son’s over-dependence on the nanny, does not however perceive this growing bond as a threat to his parental position the way the mother does. The text does not evince a problematic bias against the working mother; instead, it depicts the practicalities of the working mother’s life in an understated and non-judgemental way. These practical details include Dalia’s increasing work pressure owing to her

students' A-level exams, references to the syllabus that is yet to be covered, and so on. At the same time, the story highlights Dalia's desperate longing for a child after experiencing a miscarriage. In other words, as readers, we encounter Dalia as a modern, educated working woman yearning for motherhood and trying to make her life convenient in a foreign land. However, it is she, not Bratin, who fleetingly considers leaving her job and moving back to India. As such, the text realistically reflects traditional gender expectations rather than providing any idealistic alternative. More importantly, Bilkisu's "becoming" a mother through sacrifice alludes to conventional, patriarchal expectations around motherhood. The biological mother, at the end of the story, weighs up her own maternal identity according to the parameters of sacrifice versus selfishness. Bagchi's representation emphasises care and nurturance over procreation; however, in formulating this alternative mothering model, the uneasy question of altruistic, sacrificial motherhood remains unresolved.

## **Conclusion**

Writing on the construction of sex and the gender hierarchy, Butler declares, "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside" (3). Butler's insight could well be used to illuminate the social construction of the maternal subject, which entails a similar process of "exclusion and abjection" of the supposedly aberrant female body that does not comply with "biological destiny" (Simons 85). Commenting on social (un)acceptance of voluntary and involuntary childlessness, Gayle Letherby writes, "while woman has been defined as the 'other' in relation to the male norm, the non-mother is 'other' to the feminine ideal (530). The textual non-mothers –

Mira masi, Bim and Bilkisu – if seen from a pronatalist position, belong to the category of the “other”. However, one must be mindful of their distinct positions in terms of class, ethnicity and race that intersect with their experiences of femininity. In other words, the non-biological mothers in my chosen texts, come from diverse geographical and cultural locations, and engage with their respective mothering in different, distinct ways. These differences serve as a significant reminder of the multiplicity and diversity of non-biological caregiver and resist any homogenisation. If Mira masi and Bilkisu are “childless” in conventional terms, a seemingly emancipatory, modern-day term “child-free” can be applied to Bim. Nonetheless, both these categories are outside the norm as the former invites pity and the latter is often regarded as selfishness, escaping responsibilities and so on (Letherby 531). What is crucial is that these characters’ position outside hegemonic femininity and their mother-work provide a glimpse of a “space of contention” that can destabilise the hierarchical distinction between biological and non-biological mothering. To conclude, these non-biological mothers, with all their ambivalence and ambiguities, do transgress the dominant model based on biology, and offer an alternative imagination through their own maternal aesthetics. What could be surmised is that these forms of informal non-biological mothering which happen frequently everywhere need to be recognised in order to unleash their potential, to broaden the definition of motherhood and to challenge patriarchal and capitalist exploitation of women’s bodies and minds.

## Conclusion

Recently, a Twitter campaign was launched by some Indian women that attracted mainstream media attention in India and elsewhere. Women of different ages posted their photos to Twitter while out late at night, using the hashtag #AintNoCinderella to proclaim that staying out at night is their choice. This campaign was sparked by a “high-profile” stalking case in Chandigarh, and the consequent reprehensible victim blaming done by the Vice-President of the Haryana BJP,<sup>37</sup> Ramveer Bhatti, who took to social media to accuse the victim of staying out at night and thus inviting trouble on herself. He reiterated that “girls should not be seen roaming on roads after certain hour in the evening” (*The Indian Express* n. pag.).<sup>38</sup> As expected, this regressive remark exasperated many people who registered their protests in different ways. In response to such surveillance and dictates on women’s mobility, a Chandigarh-based activist Amy Sing organised a march known as “Bekhauf Azadi” (Fearless Freedom) that took place at night to “reclaim the night, reclaim the street”. The event description in Facebook has two poetic lines that can loosely be translated thus: “The roads are ours; the alleys are ours too. The night is ours and its moon and stars are ours too” (n. pag). Previously, in December 2015, a campaign named “Pinjra Tod” (Break the Cage) was initiated by university students residing in Delhi to protest those sexist rules that many colleges and hostels impose on female students regarding their sartorial choices,

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<sup>37</sup> The Bharatiya Janata Party, which is the present governing political party in India as well as in the state of Haryana.

<sup>38</sup> The stalking case involved Subhas Barala, the son of the Haryana BJP chief, who along with two other friends have reportedly chased and tried to kidnap 29-year-old Varnika Kundu, a DJ by profession and the daughter of an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer. In her Facebook post, Kundu wrote “I am lucky because I’m not lying raped and murdered in a ditch somewhere”. Kundu’s remark reminds us of the horrific gang rape in Delhi of Jyoti Singh in December 2012, while ironically the BJP vice president sounds almost like one of the convicted rapists, Mukesh Singh, who blamed the victim for staying out late.

curfews around arriving at accommodation and so on. These acts of resistance against a hermetically sealed existence that is expected of women, testify that the gendered division of inner/outer space still persists in India, including women from the educated upper and middle classes.

Importantly, such a powerful hold of normalised spatial gendering that constitutes the experience of most women is inadvertently connected to the idea of motherhood. As such, this conditioning is meant to pave the way for the attainment of womanhood's pinnacle, which is supposed to be motherhood. Women, indoctrinated to dwell in the "home", are expected ultimately to take over this domain as mothers. A recent political event illustrates this connection and its implication vividly: on 14 January 2017, in a rally held in Jammu, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) chief Mohan Bhagwat made a clarion call to the mothers of India to take an active part in nation building. He claimed that they should start with their homes and families, creating "mini-India without getting distracted by anybody" (*Firstpost* n. pag.).<sup>39</sup> He declares that it is important to educate womenfolk because a "mother is the basic teacher to her children" and "women have taught and inculcated a sense of sacrifice among the children and the society in the country" (*Firstpost* n. pag.). What we can infer from these multiple instances of ideological imposition is that, to use Rachel Jones's words, "the position of women cannot be rethought without rethinking the position of mothers" ("Motherhood" n.pag.).

Troublingly, with Narendra Modi's jingoistic Hindu Right tightening its hold on power, patriarchal and repressive ideas of motherhood and womanhood are resurgent. The current

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<sup>39</sup> The RSS is a highly disciplined right-wing, Hindu nationalist organisation and can be considered the origin of the present governing party in India, BJP. India's current prime minister, Narendra Modi, and several other ministers from his cabinet and other states originally belonged to this organisation.

political context demonstrates that the politics around motherhood constitute one of the most pressing issues in India today.<sup>40</sup> Together with right-wing nationalism, the new patriarchy is creating false binaries, obstructing and conniving against any female solidarity to reclaim a liberating space. In such a context, it is imperative that dialogues must be initiated and maintained from all sides, in textual as well as material spaces. In the present context, writing maternal narratives is automatically a political act. This thesis has therefore aimed to further a feminist dialogue on motherhood through its exploration of some well-known and other relatively neglected literary texts from a diverse range of perspectives.

Initiating and maintaining such dialogue, however, is not an easy enterprise: differences of race, class, caste and ethnicity create distinct experiences of womanhood and motherhood that collide with each other.<sup>41</sup> This dilemma is aptly expressed by Maithreyi Krishnaraj in her foreword to Uma Chakravarty's book *Gendering Caste*: "we began by a strong notion of universal sisterhood and now we realize there are divergent interests among us. How do we reconcile them? From saying we are tied by a common bond of oppression to saying we do not have the same kind of oppression, are we stranded in theory?" (Krishnaraj xi). Krishnaraj not only addresses the issue of difference but also reminds us of the pitfalls of getting preoccupied with theory, risking

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<sup>40</sup> To give another example, a Government-funded research organisation that operates under the ministry of Ayush (formed in 2014 to uphold India's traditional healing process, Ayurveda) has released a booklet that prescribes expectant mothers to not eat meat, maintain abstinence, and "avoid bad company" in order to have healthy babies. This yet another instance of the misogynistic controlling tendencies increasingly prominent in current political context (Pandey n. pag.)

<sup>41</sup> The contrasting lives of Indian mothers are sharply reflected in the new maternity bill that was passed by the Indian parliament in March, 2017. The amended bill raises maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, placing India third in number after Canada and Norway in terms of the number of weeks allocated to this leave. While this amendment will benefit approximately 1.8 million women in the organised workforce, a huge number of women working in the informal sector – such as domestic servants – will always be excluded from this essential benefit, since such informal work does not involve any contract that ensures women workers' rights (Doshi n.pag.)

connection with ground reality. By emphasising Krishnaraj’s argument, I do not intend to dismiss or undermine theory as I concur with Mary Eagleton’s assertion that “the struggle for social justice is in part a struggle *about* concepts” (3; emphasis in original). What I have attempted throughout the thesis is to maintain a balance between theories and text by bringing them to a conversation so that they can illuminate each other. The texts discussed in the thesis represent multiple maternal experiences – both oppressive and liberatory – that stem from various contexts. The challenge has been to make sense of the differences within this diverse body of fiction, and to gain an understanding of what this means for motherhood.

The thesis started with a chapter predicated on the different contexts of motherhood, which contexts are nonetheless tied together by the thread of resistance. This chapter sought not to obliterate the differences between the representations of motherhood found in Anita Desai (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) and Mahasweta Devi (“Bayen”, “Breast-Giver” and “Ma, from Dusk to Dawn”), but to identify and appreciate them, in order to develop an eclectic definition of maternal agency and subjectivity. The second chapter mapped mother-daughter trajectories in two different eras (described in Ashapura Debi’s *The First Promise* and Shashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine*), recognising the hurdles and trials that this relationship witnesses and the possibilities it promises, and thereby bringing out the distinctiveness of this relationship in a patriarchal setting. The issue of differences is constant in this chapter too – be it Debi’s portrayal of the enlightened and the victim mother embodied in Satyabati and Shankari, respectively, or Deshpande’s upper and lower class mothers enacted in Urmi and Shakutai. Significantly, both the novels help to conceive ideas of connection and solidarity not only between mothers and daughters, but also between mothers themselves across class divisions.

The third chapter with its spatial focus on Indian mothers living in the United States, adds new layers to the idea of motherhood. In the words of Elizabeth Jackson, “consideration of diaspora fiction suggests that the relationship between gender, cultural identity and space may be even more complex for South Asian women living in the West” (63). The home and the world dichotomy that has functioned as connective tissue for most of the key texts (to which I will return a little later) assumes a new meaning when one is not home, or when the meaning of home changes. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* foregrounds a gendered experience of the diaspora in which the meaning of home is saturated in the maternal – be it the home one leaves or the one remakes in the new land. Readers observe that Lahiri’s protagonist resists isolation in the diaspora by integrating her maternal role into her diasporic life, that in turn facilitates an alternative mode of belonging. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story “Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter”, we see a different perspective through the focalisation of an ageing mother for whom the diaspora never quite assumes the meaning of home and, and thus remains a foreign land. This incomplete incorporation of the mothering role into diasporic life projects motherhood as a shifting and once again context-specific phenomenon. The final story “The Intelligence of Wild Things” in a way sums up the chapter by entangling the maternal and the diaspora, thereby imagining motherhood at the centre of diasporic consciousness.

The fourth and final chapter develops and embraces an inclusive idea of mothering, destabilising patriarchal, pro-procreative definition. In Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* the differences between the hapless widow, Mira masi, and the independent, modern woman, Bim, are brought into sharp focus, even though their discrete identities sometimes blur into each other and overspill their caregiver boundaries in a curious way. The final story, Nandita Bagchi’s “Bilkisu Becomes a Mother”, stages an encounter of two very different mothers – Dalia, the biological mother, and



Bilkisu, other non-biological caregiver. As Dalia questions her own authority and struggles to come to terms with the unexpected experiences that motherhood entails, we as readers get a glimpse of mothering that is transformative and even subversive.

In their 2016 book *Embodying Motherhood*,<sup>42</sup> Anu Aneja and Shivangi Vaidya acknowledge that “until recently” Indian feminist scholarship has primarily rested on empirical discourse (xxvi). Their project therefore navigates the space between representational discourses and those social sciences that tilt towards case studies, while also encouraging the “interpretive slant of the humanities” (xxiv). My thesis extends this enterprise by pivoting on fictions, situating them in the contexts of maternal theories emanating from both Euro-America and the Indian subcontinent. In this enquiry into literary representations, I have tried to establish the centrality and diversity of motherhood depictions among Indian women writers residing in India and abroad.

As mentioned, one limitation of this thesis is its focus on Hindu writers. Additionally, all of my chosen authors come from the educated upper and middle-classes. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita’s note of caution is worth mentioning here; they argue: “even when the writing is specifically feminist [...] opposition to the dominant ideologies of gender can be discomfitingly class or caste bound” (38). While it is apparent that the authors write from their own class position which manifests mostly in their creation of middle-class protagonists, their textual narratives complicate any facile, sweeping judgement that might relegate their vision as narrow. As mentioned in the first chapter, Desai has consistently used working-class perspective to cast her upper-class protagonist’s dilemma into relief, while Devi has departed from her class position by

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<sup>42</sup> I discussed this book in my introduction as part of the ongoing feminist engagement with motherhood in the Indian context.

exclusively focusing on mothers from the lower class (Jashoda) and caste (Jati and Chandi). The class issue is salient in Deshpande's narrative as she creates parallel narratives of middle and lower-class mother-daughter relationships that converge at particular points. In Bagchi's short story the upper class, educated mother considers the lower class and supposedly "racially inferior" mother as her rival. The writers are demonstrably conscious of their privileged position and incorporate class issues in their maternal narrative in order to finesse their portrayals. In her monograph, *Intimate Class Acts*, Maryam Mirza incisively explores South Asian writers' interest in the portrayal of domestic servants in their literary texts. However, what is needed in future is extensive enquiry into representation of mothering in writers who themselves come from marginalised communities, namely Dalit writers such as Urmia Pawar, Gogu Shayamala, whose works are under-represented in Indian literary criticism.

When seen through a feminist lens, the supposed private, sacred identity of motherhood serves to re-articulate the well-worn but still relevant feminist slogan "the personal is political". This slogan denotes that the seemingly personal issues of rape, infanticide and childcare are in fact outcomes of a bigger political reality that involves "fundamental questions of power" (Felski 73).<sup>43</sup> The aim of feminist critique, according to Rita Felski, is "to express the personal dimension of the political" (73). Insisting on the importance of literary texts and feminist critics, she declares: "the literary text needs to be seen as one important site for the struggle over

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<sup>43</sup> The recent phenomenon of Hindu Right-sponsored cow vigilantism which is begetting a dangerous trend of mob-lynching in India must be mentioned here. Muslim and Dalit men have been beaten to death by mobs on the suspicion of carrying beef which is prohibited in Hinduism (since "Gomata" or the Mother Cow is a Hindu religious symbol). A nationwide campaign titled "Not in My Name" was mobilised in major cities such as Delhi and Kolkata to protest this atrocity. A Kolkata-based photographer Sujatro Ghosh compiled a photo series of women wearing cow masks, with the searing and shameful question: "is it safer to be a cow in India than a woman?" (*The Guardian* n.pag.)

meaning through the formulation of narrative. [...] Writing should be grasped in this context as a social practice which creates meaning rather than merely communicating it” (73). Paying heed to Felski, I have tried to fashion my discussion in a way that highlights the multiple meanings the chosen texts generate.

Despite the significant works of feminists in academia, as well as women’s rights activists at the grassroots level, the most widespread notion of feminism in India is that the movement alienates Indian women from their own cultures and traditions. Feminist activist Kamla Bhasin’s impassioned plea “Do not be afraid of feminism, join it” and Deshpande’s forceful piece “Thank God, I am a Feminist!” are conscientious attempts to counter such rejection of feminism. Ania Loomba observes that Indian feminists are often reprimanded for aping Western ideas, thus diverting from and corrupting so called Indianness. The general “political ethos” evoked by the terms “Indian” and “Western” is often marked by a set of binaries that has its roots in colonialism and the ensuing nationalist struggle, and is still being renewed and appropriated to espouse a certain brand of nationalism based on exclusionary politics. This kind of simplified, sweeping criticism and disavowal of feminism can be attributed to the patriarchal frameworks that understandably repudiate women’s resistance of any kind. Writing in 1993, Loomba claims: “it is easy to imagine why entrenched patriarchal institutions would seek to marginalize women’s movements by calling them un-Indian” (271-272). Loomba’s inference is sadly still pertinent to the present-day nationalistic frenzy around declaring any dissent anti-national.<sup>44</sup> However,

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<sup>44</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), an institution that cultivates liberal scholarship, has been suffering attacks from the BJP government since February 2016. This started with sedition charges against some students who had allegedly broadcast “anti-national” slogans. In response, JNU started teach-in sessions in which scholars like Romila Thapar, Partha Chatterjee and others took open classes on “Nationalism”. Professor Nivedita Menon, author of the highly acclaimed book *Seeing Like a Feminist*, was consequently termed “anti-national” and a complaint was lodged against her by the BJP for her lecture on the Kashmir issue at one of the teach-in sessions.

commenting on the popular Western picture of the victimised third world women, Loomba writes: “It is in fact very difficult to stop being a kind of nativist when one faces hostility or ignorance or patronizing gestures from one’s sisters” (275). What this careful reminder implies, especially in the context of my feminist discussion of the maternal, is that to create a meaningful conversation, we need to listen to the other’s stories with empathy and without condescension.

In her examination of the gender and space in postcolonial writing, Jackson refers to Desai and Deshpande in relation to Western influences and feminism. She indicates that many of Desai’s protagonists (perhaps because of her own background of mixed parentage) are identifiable with their Western counterparts or have connections to the Western world. In contrast, Deshpande’s fiction operates exclusively within India, with only the most tangential allusions to the West in her novels. Interestingly, Desai is hesitant about the idea of feminism, while Deshpande is confident to call herself a feminist (63). Jackson therefore lambasts any automatic “labelling of feminist ideas as Western and un-Indian”, adding that such a rushed judgement overlooks India’s heterogeneity (63). What also emerged from the maternal narratives discussed in this thesis is that feminist conversation, in order to be generated, first needs to be built on this idea of heterogeneity that does not make one surrender one’s distinctiveness.

As mentioned, the new Hindu patriarchy and its corollary – spatial gendering – reveal the tenacity of the home and world dichotomy that runs through most of the narratives, and also relates to the use of realism in the texts. This narrative mode of realism and the focus on the home or other internal spaces are longstanding concerns in women’s writing. Historically, there has been a tendency to marginalise women’s experiences and perspectives and to equate domestic life and family relationship with triviality. My chosen texts include Anglophone writing as well as texts written in a regional language, Bengali. The language each text is written

in has relevance to the content or problematics that the text engages with. In her survey of Indian English novels, Priyamvada Gopal concurs with Aijaz Ahmad that narratives of the nation figure prominently in Anglophone writing, but she disagrees with Ahmad's point that indigenous writing ignores this issue. Underlining the interconnectedness of the home and the world, she writes, "transformations of the public sphere made their presence felt in private lives and fiction inevitably engaged with these. As Tagore suggested almost a century ago, the world and the home can impact each other in strong, often unexpected ways, and out of this emerge unique stories" (139). She uses the term domestic fiction to describe the texts that are set in the home and concerned themselves with emotional lives, relationships and so on. Seen in this light, some of the texts discussed here can be termed domestic fictions, while most of them reflect a tussle between home and the world and their mutual influences. For a writer like Ashapura Debi, who herself was self-taught and belonged to a conservative Brahmin family, her textual world was mostly the *antahpur* or inner domain. This resonates with Desai's observation: "[Women] live mostly in such confined spaces and therefore their field of vision is at the same time more restricted and more intense" (57). However, both Debi and her protagonist transgress spatial boundaries and in doing so reach out to the world. Moreover, and as I have examined, Desai and Deshpande's fiction demonstrates an awareness of bigger social realities that have associations with the narrative of the nation. The portrayals of motherhood in the texts, as has been discussed, often envision a more extended social role for women, so that they can exercise their maternal work outside the family.

This discussion brings home the issue of the dominant narrative mode used in the texts. My chosen writers seem to deploy a realistic mode in their textual representations of motherhood; however, this "seeming" nature suggests nuances which often goes unnoticed by those critics

who rather sweepingly dismiss realism. For instance, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notices that there exists inhibition amongst Indian women writers when it comes to using modes other than realism, since most of their novels are “unlikely to attempt to transgress the structure of separate spheres even where home, marriage, family – the private sphere – is perceived as most repressive” (140). While this observation contains some truth, it might undermine the subversive potential of some texts because of its assumptions about the realistic mode. As such, there is a general tendency to view realism as “necessarily conservative” and therefore not subversive enough; this tendency within criticism often ignores the distinction between different shades of realism (Ross 158; Felski 80). In her book *Realism and Reality*, Meenakshi Mukherjee traces the development of the literary genre of the Anglophone novel in Indian writing, connecting this genre with contemporary social realities. Commenting on the efficacy of social realism, she writes: “social realism, at its best, conveys in concrete and specific terms, the complex relationships between individuals and their society” (99). Most of the texts examined here bear an awareness of reality and can loosely be termed realist. However, there are both subtle and explicit differences. For example, Desai’s prose by its extended enquiry into interiority aligns itself to a “subjective realism”, while Devi’s is robust social realism which is not lacking in transgressive potential. For Debi as a member of the generation that witnessed both colonialism and postcolonialism, it was important to document the evolving realities in novelistic form while also exploring future possibilities and re-imagining the present reality by creating empowered characters. Both Lahiri and Divakaruni sporadically use a reflective and lyrical tone to underscore diasporic quotidian details (99). The realist mode in many texts even contributes towards demythologising motherhood, stripping it of its sacred glory and leaving bare its

material powerlessness and potential power. Perhaps this narrative mode functions as a reminder of the “urgency” that characterises Indian women’s daily lives across class and caste divides.

With a span of fifty years in the contextual background, these texts represent a range of maternal experiences amidst various and evolving socio-political conditions, foregrounding some overlapping concerns as well as evincing divergences among mothers who both fall victim and pose challenging questions to the recurring and changing face of capitalist, nationalist patriarchy and other modes of repression. We witness a sense of loss, and of struggle against that loss, which is threaded throughout many of the narratives. This struggle, as the texts suggest, is as much against societal dictates as with one’s self. By this term, I do not mean a self devoid of and isolated from society; my point is that, in addition to an explicit confrontation with the set of rules laid out for mothers by society, motherhood in a deeper way in many of the narratives entails a profound personal ambivalence. As such, both the literary texts and the feminist theories demonstrate motherhood as a site of contention and paradox. Elaine Tuttle Hansen incisively analyses such dividedness of motherhood and feminism: “the feminist critique of motherhood necessarily set out to do something that also appeared to be – and often was, practically speaking – contradictory. Its bipartite goal was to attack pronatalism and to revalue the function and status of mothers” (235). Nonetheless, as a feminist literary critic one has to negotiate with and navigate through the paradoxes, making visible mothers’ stories from their shadowy position in the dominant patriarchal narrative. In such a project, attention to diverse perspectives is indisputably essential.

The work of a literary critic, according to Derek Attridge, is to provide a “testimony to the particularity of the work’s power, intellectual and effective” while also indicating “very precisely to the features that have produced this response” (10). The appropriate critical response, Attridge

avers, is not to “prove” anything about a certain literary work but to “convey and affirm the singularity of a work to a particular reader” (10). In this thesis, I have attempted to read stories so as to understand their “singularity” and “inventiveness”. Emily Jeremiah in her searching work on motherhood in German fictions stresses the enormous potential of literature arguing that it “involves a rethinking of the world, an adjustment of vision: as such it is both a political and ethical enterprise” (Jeremiah 173). She goes on to suggest a subtle parallel between reading and the maternal in terms of the ethical repositioning of the self that both the acts – reading and mothering – involve which in turn gives rise to a relational form of subjectivity (173). It is this openness to the “other” or experiencing oneself in a close proximity with the other that can potentially give birth to a bond which survives differences. The maternal stories that the thesis has examined collectively resist a unified definition of motherhood or a homogenised category, embracing the ideas of inclusion and contingency, with all their underlying paradoxes and contradictions. Viewed together, these writers do not utter any last words; rather they adumbrate a maternal work in progress.



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