

The Killjoy Mother: Navigating the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*

Sushree Routray
Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee
(India)

Abstract:

Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (2020) narrates the story of a mother who disrupts the hegemonic discourse of motherhood by refusing to abnegate her desires for the sake of her child completely. This decision has significant ramifications for the daughter, who grapples with an ontological crisis and feelings of estrangement as she internalises patriarchal ideologies and grapples with her mother's humanity. The novel conceives of motherhood as a liminal space in which women must confront and negotiate the boundaries between their own subjectivities and their obligations to their children. Through an analysis of Sara Ahmed's understanding of happiness as a product of conformity to societal norms of family and marriage, the novel calls into question the fates of women who resist these norms. The novel dances on the edges of abstract notions of motherhood inconsistent with embodied experiences of motherhood. Ultimately, Doshi's narrative framework reclaims the agency and individuality of mothers, depicting them not simply as nurturers and caretakers but as multifaceted individuals with their desires and choices.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Motherhood, Feminist Phenomenology, Killjoy, Identity

Introduction

A plethora of research around motherhood negotiates the intricate relationship between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as a lived experience. Maternal ambivalence is a complicated and contradictory mental state that all women experience in varying degrees and in which sentiments of love and hate for their children coexist. However, a lot of the 'ubiquitous guilt' mothers have come from finding it difficult to deal with the unpleasant emotions brought on by having maternal ambivalence in a society that rejects the very existence of something it has contributed to (Parker, 1997, p. 17). Simone de Beauvoir, in her influential work *The Second Sex* (1956), grapples with the complexities of motherhood and the ways in which it is socially constructed. She asserts that while motherhood can bring fulfilment and meaning to a woman's life, it can also entrap her into a role that is not in line with her own needs and desires. De Beauvoir's analysis highlights how motherhood, rather than being an essential aspect of femininity, is a socially imposed role that can constrain and limit women's agency. This perspective highlights the importance of situating maternal ambivalence within the broader context of gendered power dynamics and the ways in which social norms shape and inform the maternal experience.

Examining maternal ambivalence serves as a crucial lens through which to deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of motherhood within a patriarchal society. By situating the experiences of mothers within a broader socio-political context, we can foreground the agency of mothers and challenge the universalizing discourses that seek to homogenize maternal subjectivity. The metaphor of the mirror in the novel serves as a conduit for exploring the complexities of identity formation and the negotiation of gendered roles within a traditional social milieu. The nonchalant response of Dilip to Antara's questioning of the need for a child reveals the extent to which gendered expectations are naturalized and internalized within a heteronormative framework. Antara's desire to maintain a "desirable facade" reflects the extent to which she internalizes and performs the prescribed roles of femininity within a patriarchal society (p. 19). The physiological demands of the developing fetus may also challenge the maternal body's agency, as illustrated by Antara's narrative of pregnancy. After giving birth, Antara found it disturbing that congratulations were primarily directed towards her husband while she and the infant were left bruised and battered

from the childbirth experience. The maternal body is subjected to a gendered power dynamic, where the husband is congratulated for his perceived role in the childbirth process while the mother and infant are overlooked. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between 'motherhood' and 'mothering'. She argues

between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution – which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control (Rich, 1986, p. 7).

According to Rich, the concept of motherhood as it is currently understood and valued within modern society is heavily influenced by patriarchal institutions, which have replaced the more egalitarian societies of the past in which women were often held in high regard. These patriarchal institutions shape the experiences of mothers and dictate cultural practices related to motherhood, which are subject to change based on various societal and economic factors. Patriarchal institutions control the experiences of mothers (Reilly, 2020, p. 20). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) describes the experience of pregnancy as fraught with ambivalence due to the deeply ingrained cultural associations of femininity with contamination and chaos, as well as the inherent uncertainty regarding the boundaries of the female body (p. 203). Antara's moral ambiguity regarding the evaluation of her mother as a good or bad mother highlights the multifaceted and equivocal nature of motherhood explored in the author's analysis. The arrival of Anikka prompts Antara to confront and reconcile her preconceived ideas of motherhood with the realities of the physical and emotional difficulties inherent in the role.

The powerful presence of Tara resists being pigeonholed into the stereotypical role of a maternal figure. However, her daughter remains unable to absolve herself from the turmoil caused by her actions. Seeking to escape the ennui of her conjugal life, Tara and her daughter Antara relocate to a Pune ashram in India, led by a magnetic figure known simply as Baba, who espouses a blend of free love and idiosyncratic interpretations of traditional spiritual practices. However, when Baba takes on another paramour, Tara abruptly departs the ashram, leaving Antara feeling adrift and perplexed by her mother's decisions. Tara imparts to her daughter the importance of standing up for one's desires, even if it means defying societal norms. She asserts,

"The world exists only as far as you can see, What's above, what's below, that's no concern of ours. What they've told us before, none of those matters" (pp. 107-108). In an attempt to shield herself from instability and the fear of being abandoned by her spouse, Antara becomes pregnant, leading her to reevaluate her relationship with her mother and her own identity as a mother.

**"There's nothing wrong with thinking about oneself":
Feminist Killjoy and Happiness Wish**

The mother is a feminist killjoy who questions the standards of what constitutes a good mother. She is a troublemaker who "violates the fragile conditions of peace" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 61). She disrupts and challenges the dominant societal expectations of motherhood, refusing to conform to the strict social norms that constrain women's freedom of choice. This is evident in her decision to leave the traditional domestic sphere and seek spiritual fulfilment at an Ashram, where she becomes a lover of the guru, only to later depart when she becomes dissatisfied. Sara Ahmed (2010) interrogates the stereotypes of the feminist killjoy, a person who is blamed for killing the joy of others by exposing injustice and sexist behaviour. In the home of her parents and husband, Tara lacked freedom of choice. The rest of the novel is an amalgamation of her choices and their consequences. Killjoy figures are sceptical of the happiness derived at the expense of personal freedom. They are comfortable bringing out uncomfortable feelings of not belonging to patriarchal institutions.

Sinha (2010) contends that Indian mothers are often celebrated without being truly empowered, with motherhood "assigned a sacrosanct space as a crucial determinant of the ultimate identity and worth of Indian women" (p. 321). There are numerous instances of this particular bias being depicted in Indian literature. The character of Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* faces social ostracization due to her refusal to prioritize marriage and motherhood as the primary goals of her life (Lahiri, 2007, p. 139). Women face social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and prioritize reproductive labour over other forms of self-actualization. Tara's rebellion against this reduction of her identity to that of a wife and mother reflects the complexities and limitations of gendered societal expectations. The strict social norms could not accommodate her wishes. *Burnt Sugar* serves as a critical exploration of the ways in which patriarchal societal norms intersect

with the lived experiences of mothers, particularly within the Indian cultural context. The protagonist's journey towards self-actualisation and autonomy is a powerful example of how feminist resistance can take shape within the personal sphere.

Upon leaving the Ashram, Tara and Antara are forced to beg for survival due to their lack of social and financial stability, leading Antara to become sceptical of her mother's choices. Antara remembered her mother being shouted at and leered at by people around them. Furthermore, the novel explores the societal rejection and disdain that Tara and Antara face upon leaving the Ashram, as they are viewed by the club members as outcasts, "proof of how easy it was to fall" (p. 107). The author also emphasizes the physical degradation and poverty that Tara and Antara face, as Antara describes herself as resembling the dog she befriended near the club. Doshi (2020), highlights the idea that one's perception of being an insider or outsider depends on the tension one experiences while navigating a specific space. Killjoy figures are constantly treated as outsiders by society. They are often "attributed as willful" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 2). According to her, the capacity for survival is compromised by willfulness. As an outsider and a divorcee, Tara is systematically excluded from the institutions of family and power. Through her observations, Antara witnesses the emotional, physical and economic losses that her mother incurs due to this exclusion.

The novel traces the lineage of this ambivalent figure across three generations of women, highlighting the societal pressures and limitations imposed upon them. Tara, in particular, is depicted as stubborn and disobedient by the society in which she lives. Following her departure to the ashram, her father expresses his disdain for her choices. He urges her to return to her husband's home immediately, highlighting the societal expectation for women to conform to traditional roles. Ahmed (2014) asserts that willfulness and sadness are often inextricably linked in patriarchal societies, where individuals who refuse to conform to societal norms are seen as both wilful and miserable. Tara's decision to pursue a better sexual and emotional life, despite the potential repercussions, serves as a poignant example of this phenomenon. Her status as a mother who does not prioritize her child further exacerbates the societal judgement of her suffering as legitimate. Moreover, the novel also highlights the difficulty that women have in supporting and believing in other women who challenge societal norms. The grandmother's reaction to Tara's Alzheimer's illustrates this, where her practical concerns regarding the jewellery are unsettling despite their sensibility.

**“We are interchangeable, after all. I will never be free of her”:
Negotiating Identity in Mother-Daughter Relationships**

Mother-Daughter plots are essential in bringing out the dynamics of the pull for intimacy and the need for distance (Felski, 2003, p. 117). The power dynamics within this relationship are particularly noteworthy and can be seen to change dramatically when the traditional roles of mother and daughter are reversed. Antara, who had spent her entire childhood at the mercy of her mother's mood swings and decisions and was forced to repeatedly leave behind places and people that she loved due to her mother's frequent relocations, felt the weight of her mother's dominance in her life. However, with the diagnosis of her mother's Alzheimer's disease, the power dynamic between them shifts dramatically. As Antara takes on the role of caregiver and provider, it becomes clear that she is the one who holds the power in the relationship. She is the one who makes decisions such as when she purchases a bed for her mother and is assumed by the shopkeeper to be buying it for her own child. The name Antara itself implies that she will be the undoing of her mother, as "Un-Tara" (p. 210). Throughout her journey as her mother's caretaker, Antara transforms herself into the "other," the antithesis of her mother. She conforms to patriarchal societal norms and represses her dilemmas. In the later part of the book, there is a noticeable change in Antara's attitude towards her mother when she becomes pregnant.

Rich (1995) posits that the mother-daughter relationship is an essential human relationship and suggests that it can be viewed as a threat to patriarchal power structures. The novel explores the transformative experiences of two women, Tara and Antara, after becoming mothers. Doshi (2020) expands upon this idea by stating that "being mothered and mothering is a continuum," highlighting the cyclical nature of this relationship. The novel concludes with Antara reflecting on her own identity and recognizing the undeniable presence of her mother within it. She acknowledges, "Ma is there in my face. I nod and she nods back," (p. 227) as she comes to understand that she shares many traits with her mother and experiences the same uncertainty as her mother. Doshi (2020) states that "One is forever in the reflection of the other", emphasizing the inextricable nature of the mother-daughter relationship. The novel provides an insightful examination of the intricacies of this relationship and how it shapes the identities of the individuals involved. It highlights the cultural and societal pressures placed on mother-

daughter relationships while also capturing the transformative power of the bond between mothers and daughters.

Initially, Antara, the narrator, believes her mother to be a 'bad mother'. She thinks that her mother is a "teenager" who is at the "mercy of hormones" (p. 214). When Tara suffers from Alzheimer, Antara says:

I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure. I suffered at her hands as a child, and any pain she subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption— a rebalancing of the universe, where the rational order of cause and effect aligned" (Doshi, 2020, p. 1).

Despite the pervasiveness of patriarchal and patriarchal-adjacent structures in Antara's familial dynamics, with her father's absence and neglect serving as salient examples of patriarchal hegemony, Antara's internalization of gendered expectations and subsequent failure to hold him accountable is indicative of her adherence to patriarchal norms and the patriarchal imaginary. Mitra (2020) emphasises how motherly qualities include caring, tending, and compassion, which by extension include cooking, washing, or other necessary activities are entailed by the patriarchy from which fathers are released. In contrast, Tara's character serves as a counterpoint, resisting oppressive gender roles through her engagement in acts of resistance against various forms of domination, including matrimony and restrictive dietary practices, thereby challenging patriarchal ideologies and hegemonic gender norms. Tara's encouragement of Antara to prioritize her own desires and needs, stating that "You don't have to care what others say all the time. Not everything is a show for the world. Sometimes we do things because we want to" (p. 51) serves as an act of subversion against the patriarchal notion that women's desires and needs are secondary to those of men and reinforces the importance of agency and self-determination in decision-making. While Antara's full adoption of this perspective is not fully realized until later in the narrative, Tara's character serves as a catalyst for Antara's reevaluation of societal expectations and patriarchal ideologies, and her identity as a mother is not solely defined by her maternal roles and responsibilities. This serves as a critique of traditional gender roles imposed by patriarchal societies and highlights the importance of challenging such societal constructs.

The performative nature of gender and identity, as theorized by Judith Butler, heavily informs the protagonist Antara's understanding of herself and her world. Antara's initial impressionable years were shaped by the traditional patterns presented to her, leading her to make several attempts to conform to societal expectations. A shared social structure that is prevalent heavily influences individual performances (Butler, 1988). Through the stylization of the body, gender is established. In the beginning chapters, Antara concurs with other people's views. Antara wonders "if performing for the world circulates something vital, if the pressure of an audience is what forces the blood to pump" (p. 9). She was always on the lookout for stability, security, and symmetry. She wished for a "desirable cover-up" to protect her poverty and powerlessness (p. 19). Antara is constantly aware of how other people perceive her. However, through her experiences and observations, Antara begins to question the authenticity of these performative gender roles and their impact on individuals and society. As Antara navigates her sense of self, she becomes increasingly aware of the role of societal expectations. The narrator's traumatic background, stemming from her mother's rejection by her family and society for her independent choices, further highlights the potentially detrimental effects of societal performative expectations on individuals. Thus, throughout the narrative, Antara grapples with the conflicting desires of conformity and authenticity and how societal pressures shape one's sense of self and reality.

The experience of motherhood entails a unique embodiment of emotions and feelings that transcend traditional forms of communication. Antara does not idealize this experience, as she feels it has resulted in a loss of personal freedom and agency. Setting boundaries in motherhood can be a formidable task, as a mother may feel trapped in a monotonous routine. However, when boundaries are successfully established, a mother may be perceived as a 'feminist killjoy' by others. Asserting one's agency is crucial for a mother, as exemplified by the characters Tara and Antara in their subversive relationships. In particular, Tara maintains relationships that the dominant culture deemed "taboo" (Doshi, 2020). As Sara Shabot (2018) asserts, drawing on the philosophy of Iris Marion Young, motherhood and sexuality are often seen as mutually exclusive in society. However, Antara ultimately learns to accept her mother's sexuality. Tara asserts her autonomy within the institution of marriage and motherhood by refusing to conform to societal expectations of ennui and misery.

Conclusion

The novel refuses to provide any redemption or resolution for the deep ambivalence it portrays in the characterisation of Antara and Tara. Instead, it highlights the impossibility of categorising a woman in the binary of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood. By reframing the conventional perception of everyday mothering, *Burnt Sugar* brings out the uncomfortable truth of a mother having sexual and emotional needs against the idea of a self-sacrificing mother living for her child alone. The text's ambivalent treatment of the concept of a 'good mother' serves to disrupt the reductive dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' maternal figures, instead foregrounds the intricate subjectivity of maternal identity. The protagonist's inability to forgive her own mother can be read as a manifestation of the ongoing power dynamics between the two women and how these dynamics are shaped by societal constructs of motherhood. The novel also critically explores the figure of the feminist "killjoy" and how it undermines the performance of motherhood, leading to challenging social presumptions about motherhood in general. Motherhood can be seen as a liminal space where women must be able to negotiate the boundaries between themselves and their children. The narrative confers ambiguity on the reader and forbids them from giving in to romantic wistfulness.

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