

Ties That Bind Together: A Review of Motherhood and Daughterhood in English Literature and Criticism

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Abstract:

Women's alliance with the history has always been anything other than reciprocal. Although women have emerged as every culture's primary fixation and comprise at least one-half or majority of the human species on earth, they are hardly visible in any documented or oral history. Despite this numbness on the historical and literary terrain, generations of women, naive and natural in nuzzling their maternal instincts, have set themselves on an adventure of womanhood unfurling episodes of scrutiny and acceptance as matriarchs in their own rights. This paper explores the themes of motherhood and daughterhood which have become lost traditions in the labyrinth of patriarchal ideology and culture and this factor, perhaps, is an insignificant reminder of patriarchy's over-obsession with male hegemony and its resultant demolition of female psyche.

Keywords: Motherhood, Daughterhood, Literature, Criticism

Introduction:

Now I am ready to go back and understand the one whose body actually carried me. Now I can begin to learn about her, forgive her for the rejection I felt, yearn for her, ache for her. I could never want her until I myself had been wanted. By a woman.

— Sue Silvermarie, *The Motherbond*

Since the paradoxical nature of women's lives in the realm of patriarchy has surfaced on the social and literary terrain, women's neglected status has been scrutinised under the feminist lens on a vast scale. The adventitious exploration of women's subordinate status in relation to men has been the subject of critical attention for the feminist scholars for quite a few decades. But what has gone simply unnoticed, even in the heydays of feminist literary theory and activism, is the exploration of women's relation to the other women in the home and the society. Therefore, the scripting of the tumultuous journey that the women as mothers and daughters have undertaken has suffered complete collapse and extreme devaluation in the traditional literary and theoretical initiatives.

The unfolding of a new millennium in our lives has postulated various new challenges in our perpetual struggle against inequality and oppression in a male dominated society. And what threatens our existence as women even more is the gradual extinction of the testified mutual bond between women themselves from the oral and written history. In awaiting an unforeseen and crucial juncture in our evolution as women, an unfathomable hindsight at women's achievement in the past and apprehending the future challenges in our way become crucial. Therefore, the necessity of the emergence of our identities as feminists,

mothers and daughters is pivotal to our perception of the universe we live in and the habitable world we fancy for.

The contemporary feminist writings on mothers, daughters and feminism pave the way for deconstructing the traditional configuration of mother-son dyad in literature and society, which has always been represented under the pseudonym “mother-child” dyad. The extreme idealization of the mother-son dyad and the incongruous absence of the ideology of mothers-daughters bond from the mainstream literary and social scenario, thereby, deters the growth of mother-daughter relationship by typifying it as something trivialized and unnecessary and hence unworthy of applause and autonomy.

Adrienne Rich, in her most successful work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which is arguably the best feminist study of motherhood till date points out rhetorically, “Like intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men” (226). Irrespective of the cultural diversities that exist across the nations, patriarchy never allows the prominence of mother-son relationship to be faded into oblivion. But the radical outlook of the psychoanalytic theory and feminists’ endeavour to discover a pre-oedipal stage in the mother-daughter bond, which was intentionally relegated into background, gained momentum among the feminist thoughts and activism. The underrepresentation and oversimplification of mother-daughter dyad motivated the western feminists to embark upon the journey of dismantling the crux of this highly ambivalent and conflicting relationship in their works.

The clinical investigation of mother-infant relationship based on Freud’s psychoanalytic ‘Oedipus’ findings and the rejection of the same by his followers like Jeanne Lampl-de Groot compelled Freud to review his own clinical investigation. He agreed upon the existence of a pre-oedipal phase in the early feminine development, where the infant, be it a daughter or a son, becomes solely attached to the mother. This proposition disrupted Freud’s original claim of ‘Oedipus Symmetry’ and postulated a different view other than the ‘female Oedipus object-relations’ while championing the uniqueness of pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship (Chodorow 95).

The act of turning the mother-daughter bond into oblivion and the relatable prominence of mother-son relationship in every culture and societal genre woven into an intricate detail of interesting stories and experiences have led the western feminists to term this absence of mother-daughter significance as a lost tradition. The feminist psychoanalysts have diverted their research experiences towards the discovery of a splitting feminine self which patriarchy has successfully installed in women.

Western feminist scholarship in general and normative psychoanalytic theory in particular offer a convincing mandate regarding the emergence and evolution of an autonomous and empowered female self which validates itself through an early integral and vital bond between mothers and daughters. The importance of nurturing this mother-daughter bond since infantile period and its relevance in the lives of adolescent daughters is established by the ground-breaking books like Virginia Banne Rutter's *Celebrating Girls: Nurturing and Empowering Our Daughters*, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher and by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s *Meeting at the Crossroad* etc. Virginia Banne Rutter emphasizes the importance of female self-worth and its affirmation not only through everyday practice of the feminine rituals but also through the acts of inheriting the same prowess from their mothers’ sense of self-acknowledgement and pioneering self-belief. Rutter writes in this regard:

We are all aware of the severe pressures and dangers that diminish girls' self-esteem as they approach adolescence. As concerned mothers, we read all this depressing news and wonder if there is anything, we can do about it. I believe the answer is a decided yes: Mothers and other adult women in girls' lives can raise girls with vital, intact feminine spirit. . . . [The mother daughter relationship is the ground for teaching, taking, and sharing the feminine experience and the more we empower that experience, the healthier our girls will be. We need to secure our daughters' sense of self-worth, in their mind and their bodies, so that they will not turn away from us and from themselves. (9)

Reclaiming the narrative space, in written as well as oral culture, and providing language to maternal subjectivity are the chief concerns of feminist maternal theory. Speaking about something which has remained unspeakable for centuries, voicing the concern about something what has been silenced and disguised as our emotional nonpriority, the exposure of mother-daughter bond gives the maternal narratives a new and pathbreaking dimension. Patriarchy as well as psychoanalysis has been obsessed with reflecting and contemplating the mother-son dyad while showcasing the mother primarily engrossed in tasks of weaving a script for the son's initiation into maturity and manhood. What, therefore, largely remains neglected is the mother's awareness about the female narrative—which can enable the strengthening of relationship between herself and her other self (her daughter) and carve a new roadmap of her journey into womanhood.

Whereas the mother's role in her son's maturation enables him to become an avid storyteller—either in autobiographical or fictional format while narrating sacrificial stories of his mother—the daughter's pen juggles through the dictionary to narrate strategies of defiance and resistance and an “alternative script of coming into womanhood” (O'Reilly, “Mothers” 19). She rightly mentions that the stories between mothers and daughters need to be told and retold, because it allows us to define female experience outside the phallogocentric narrative of patriarchy. As in *Stories from the Motherline: Reclaiming the Mother-Daughter bond, Finding Our Souls*, Naomi Lowinsky goes on to say:

Whenever women gather in circles or in pairs, in olden times around the village well, or at the quilting bee, in modern times in support groups, over lunch, or at the children's party, they tell one another stories from the Motherline. These are stories of female experience: physical, psychological, and historical. They are stories about the dramatic changes of woman's body: developing breasts and pubic hair, bleeding, being sexual, giving birth, suckling, menopause, and of growing old. They are stories of the life cycles that link generations of women: mothers who are also daughters, daughters who have become mothers; grandmothers who...remain granddaughter(2).

The development of a maternal narrative, therefore, becomes important for the empowerment of daughters and mothers alike. Daughters today lead a radically different life than that of their mothers. Centuries of detachment from the maternal narratives have led them search for authenticity and authority of their womanhood. For reclaiming the authenticity and authority, they must connect to the maternal narratives of grief, anger, love, lust and peace. The maternal narratives need to be made available to the adolescent women so that they can derive strength from their identity as women. The maternal narrative, which is always disguised as gossip and old wives' tale by the patriarchal culture, should be the bridging gap between mothers and daughters. Reconnecting the female selves of the daughters with the mothers' narratives, therefore, paves the way for the gynocentric mother-daughter bond to effectuate a better societal environment of growth out the realms of patriarchy.

It is, however, worthwhile to mention that Indian social terrain is also fraught with this dichotomy as perceived by the western feminist minds in its apparent display of uncanny neglect of the relationships between women themselves. The literary scenario in India which has played a significant part in reshaping the cultural and societal outlook of its national belief system since independence, has been preoccupied with the complexities of gender and nation. The critical juncture of the female experience and its associated dilemmas encompassed within the domestic, familial, and societal boundaries was still the untrodden path, especially by the women writers in India.

Patriarchal concepts dominated the subcontinental mindset since ancient times. Sukumari Bhattacharji writes about the obligatory ritualistic mandates that the society has levied on girls to be obedient daughters and loyal wives who may join their husbands who would then utter: "Come, let us join together that we may generate a *male child*, a son for the sake of the increase of wealth" (50). She further elaborates on the extravagancy of social desires that wanted females to be blessed only with "motherhood of sons" (50) as recounted in Act IV of Kalidasa's *Abhijanasakuntala*, where the wives of the sages used to bless the pregnant women to become mothers to heroic sons.

Surprisingly, such kind of misappropriation of women's reproductive capacity persists and patriarchy still wants the women to deliver and nurture a male child instead of a female one. This intense desire to propagate a male progeny has resulted in what Geeta Aravamudan has described as "Disappearing Daughters" (88) syndrome. Therefore, the already pre-conceived notions of ideal motherhood (of sons) have disempowered and subjugated women since ages. The apotheosis of motherhood in India, which never seems to reveal at greater length the actual status of women's lives as mothers, is compensatory in nature, and thus the magnification of the crucial experiences of women's everyday lived reality becomes significant not only in the literal but also on the social terrain.

The dismantling of the prevalent orthodox system of mother-son glorification and the emergence of mother-daughter dyad in literature and society are crucial as well as difficult as these are submerged under different hierarchical and complex issues involving patriarchy, colonialism, social stratification, categorization, and the variables in these categories are often prone to alter our perspectives on the complex issue. As Sudhir Kakar writes about the severity of the prevalent condition, "Virtually every popular depiction of mothers and sons-in-art, popular fiction in various Indian languages, the autobiographies of famous Indian men, mainstream cinema, folk tales, legends and proverbs- corroborates the mother's sentimental prevalence" (Kakar and Kakar 96).

Kakar also points out that the emotional ambience which embraces the mother-son relationship does not always reflect the same intensity in the mother-daughter relationship. Although the mother is a constant in a daughter's life but she is neither an adored and adoring figure nor a benign presence. Radhika Manoharam, for instance, dwells on the scarcity of the available resources for building up a strong theoretical premise for decoding layers of misappropriation that a mother-daughter relation has endured in the face of patriarchy. While myth, history and reality abound in enough theoretical and textual evidences for supporting mother-son glorification, there is a "curious silence on the thematic of mother-daughter relationship" (Manoharam 20). She attributes the reason of such marginalization of mother-daughter relationship to the age-old and persistent over-indulgence with heterosexuality and the denial of anything other than the prescribed codes and conduct of heterosexuality. Manoharam also recognises the fact that it is the absence of a standard precedence or lack of insight into the female experiences that has caused the literal and social apathy regarding this thematic concern. As she states, "Not a skeletal blueprint exists for the narrative of mother-

daughter relationships within the master discourse of Indian fiction. This is not to say that there are no significant female characters in Indian mythology- rather, this particular relationship is not valorised” (20).

This interlude in Indian feminist concern regarding the mother-daughter relationship is, however, apprehended and approached with a cautious and careful detail in the 90s decade, resulting in the publication of a considerable number of novels written by Indian women writers. This emergence of notoriety and variety regarding the varied nuances of womanhood and its associated defiance and impeachment of long established traditional patriarchal culture in carving a niche for themselves in the socio-political culture of the country became a trademark of the feminist concern of the emerging Indian women writers.

It is, however, very fascinating to note that apart from being engrossed in deciphering the multi-layered modes of violence unleashed by patriarchy and bringing them into forefront, the Indian women writers starting from the 90s decade to the present day are also actively engaged in exploring the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship in their texts. Their conviction regarding the mis-appropriation of the long-established social and cultural norms, mythology, and folklores— in unleashing violence on women and unnerving their vulnerable selves in justifying the atrocities directed against them— engaged them in scripting an alternative reality of womanhood and expatiate on modes of protest based on mother-daughter relationship in their texts.

The patriarchal disruption of mother-daughter bond and its consequence in the form of disharmonious and distraught relationship between the mother and the daughter become the chief dwelling point for these women writers. Women’s emergence from periphery to forefront and their gaining of a unique sense of individuality become the navigational point from which their texts start manoeuvring the complexities and baffling paradoxes of this relationship. The exploration of the women’s lives, the probing of the vacillation and contradiction, the effort to harmonize the resultant estrangement between two biologically alike bodies in the texts symbolically characterized the writers’ feminist efforts to script protest the cannons of patriarchy.

It is, however, worthwhile to mention that when the mother figures internalise the patriarchal values and culture and become the upholders of patriarchal impositions and limitations, they become the overpowered fatalities of the entire set-up. Therefore, the patriarchal incumbent of the mother figure as the symbol of authority and structure within the filial set-up often culminates in the foregrounding of limited and paralyzed female selves in the daughters. The daughters’ rage and fury against such overwhelming acts of restriction by the maternal propel their search for an altered social identity and finally an act of reconciliation unveils and envelops the mother-daughter bond with a better understanding of each other’s restrictions, dilemmas, and obligations.

The daughters’ search for an alternative identity other than the usual, stigmatised social roles, in both personal and political sphere, enlarges their perception of the maternal world, where despite being engaged in disharmony and discord, they often resolve through mutual understanding and empathy. As Lucy Irigaray has rightly pointed out in her work *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, “Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love. Both of them. In a female whole that, furthermore, is not closed off Achieving, through their relations with each other, a path into infinity that is always open, in-finite” (105).

Lucy Irigaray’s proposition regarding the re-establishment of mother-daughter bond has been visualised and concretized into words by the noted Indian women novelists from the 90s decade to the present day and their fictional works became a marker of female assertion

and protest interwoven with dynamics and problematics of mother-daughter relationship. Gita Hariharan, Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor, Sashi Deshpande, Arundhuti Roy etc. were the chief precursors for bringing the long-suppressed female sensibility into the forefront of Indian literary scenario. What proved beneficial for this feminist uprising is economic liberalisation of 1990s, opening gateways to the outside world and vice versa.

Women writers in India started pervading the literary scenario with strong and individualistic women characters and their victory/downfall, or aggression/submissiveness, or revolt/penance in the critical junctures of life scripted a lore of mutual acclamation and reliance among generations of women. This tendency of literature towards the creation of a powerful alliance between women themselves was integral for the avant-garde statement of womanhood and women's liberation in the gradually advancing Indian ambience.

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