

**Glimpses of Disappointed Mothers: Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* and
Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*****Udita Mitra**Assistant Professor
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Cultures across the world venerate motherhood as the fulfillment of woman. Motherhood is celebrated as a universal sacred bond between the mother and the child. However the bond between the mother and the child, particularly between the mother and the daughter, is a dynamic field of discourse. The mother- daughter bond is generally underexplored in popular discourse. This bond is a field of play for patriarchy and its construct of gender roles. An undercurrent of ambivalence, on part of both the mother and the daughter, resonates in the workings of the relationship. This relationship is a key to understand family dynamics and the dynamics of gender roles and identity. The present paper takes up Alice Walker's story *Everyday Use* and Mahasweta Devi's novella *Mother of 1084* and analyses the portrayal of the tensions between the mother and the 'contrary' daughter. Within this frame of reference, this paper attempts to explore the interplay of patriarchy and the female body in framing out the concept of motherhood. Motherhood is often a tool for the male- dominated society to regulate the expanse of female sensibility and experience. This in turn effects the trajectory of the life of the women involved in the fruition of motherhood.

Keywords: motherhood, daughter, construct, patriarchy, gender.

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Motherhood is often universalized and idealized across diverse zones of time and space. Nevertheless, the dynamics of the relationship between mothers and children defy convenient straitjackets fashioned by the patriarchal society. In particular, the equation shared by a mother with her daughter has been underplayed in popular discourse. It would be very superficial on one's part to assume that mother- daughter bond is a linear, mono- dimensional static of nurturing and understanding. Like every other aspect of human existence, being a mother or a daughter is wrought with infinite emotions, expectations, interpretations and ensuing complications. The present paper is a humble attempt to sift through the various layers of challenges shared by mothers with respect to their daughters, taking as reference points Alice Walker's story *Everyday Use* and Mahasweta Devi's novella *Mother of 1084*.

Before proceeding with the textual analysis, it would be pertinent to consider motherhood as a site of critical discourse. Patriarchy projects motherhood as the universal function of the female body. Patriarchy renders the function of bearing and rearing children as something natural, desirable and expected for every woman. Conventional systems of thoughts do not acknowledge the scope for contradictions and questions on part of the mother as well as the children. However there has always been more than what meets the eye. For the conventional worldview, a woman finds her fulfillment as a mother. Yet a mother is no longer viewed as a woman whose psycho- somatic experiences may be contrary to her role as a mother. In this way, motherhood marginalizes the issues pertaining to the expectations, requirements and interpretations of a woman as an entity complete by herself. Daughters too find themselves in quite a problematic situation. The experience of being a daughter often tussles with the experiences of playing out other roles defined by the male- dominated society. The interaction is not just between the mother and the daughter; it is the interplay of different women, dealing with forging individual identities and simultaneously stepping in and out of the generic roles of 'mother' and 'daughter'- these roles being as much the constructs of patriarchy as the Man-made concept of gender.

Adrienne Rich views mother- daughter relationship as a volatile bond, oscillating from sheer mutuality to the possibility of painful repulsion and isolation. This volatility is rooted in the way patriarchy spells out the roles for women in different relationships. Rich believes;

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females... it means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life.

Being a mother is an idealized plane, glorified by patriarchy as the ultimate duty and fulfillment for women. But a mother is seen only as a mother; no one, including the mother herself, gets to consider her separately as a woman. A mother is always in crisis regarding her identity away from her role as a procreator and caretaker of the progeny.

The girl child embarks on developing gender identity once she crosses the pre- Oedipal stage. The mother is understood as one subservient to and underprivileged than the father. The daughter recognizes that father symbolizes autonomy and independence. Mother does not have the power to help the daughter gain her own individuality. This generates what Adrienne Rich and Jane Flax have discussed as “mother- blame”. The daughter has to distance herself from the mother in search of a) individuality b) relative security in the patriarchal society. Thereby sprouts “matrophobia”. The mother on the other hand sees in the daughter both her own unconscious desires and the germination of another individual. For the mother, the daughter is both the ‘self’ and the ‘Other.’ To quote Simone de Beauvoir;

...in her she seeks a double. She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguities of her relations with herself; and when the otherness of this alter ego manifests itself, the mother feels herself betrayed.

Accordingly, such ambivalent feelings problematize the mother’s approach towards nurturing the girl child. Jane Flax writes;

It is not that women totally lack the experience of being nurtured, but it is rather that their experience takes place within a context in which the mother’s conflicts render the experience less than optimal and in some cases profoundly inadequate.

Everyday Use:

At this juncture one must recall that motherhood has quite a different ramification in the Black Afro- American context than it has in the white European’s understanding. Writers have often pointed out at a higher scope of closeness and identification among Black mothers and daughters. Black woman’s motherhood is considerably molded by the political and racial history of oppression. Her motherhood is not just about the individuation of her daughter and herself, it is also about ensuring that the Black woman does not remain an Object for the world outside. In her work *Homeplace: A Site of Resistance*, Bell Hooks writes;

Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid of domination... Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects...

Alice Walker's story *Everyday Use* evidently allows for the study of the Mrs. Johnson's reaction to her prodigal daughter Dee from a cultural point of view. It would be interesting to note the other facets of the mother's perception of the daughter who is not exactly a seamless fit into the mother's expectations.

The story opens with Mrs. Johnson waiting for Dee's arrival at the village home; the other daughter, Maggie, does not seem to be as eager as her mother to wait for Dee. Maggie is homely and not as vocal as her sister. Mrs. Johnson believes that Maggie views her sister "with a mixture of envy and awe";

She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that 'no' is a word the world never learned to say to her.

However Mrs. Johnson's ruminations, her "dream" of landing in a TV show courtesy Dee's worldly success, strongly suggest that she too shares Maggie's envy and awe of Dee. She is in reality "a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands", not "the way my daughter would want me to be." She knows that Dee does what she herself would not dare to;

Whoever knew a Johnson with a thick tongue? Who can imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye?... Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye..

Mother does not find the daughter trying to identify with her; this insinuates a sense of Otherness, for someone who mirrors the unconscious desire of the Self but whom the conscious cannot acknowledge.

In contrast, Maggie is always "my Maggie" for Mrs. Johnson. Is it just a protective mother's love for a shy homely vulnerable daughter? Or is there a sense of oneness too?

Dee has what her mother and sister do not have: education, a sense of style and an unyielding desire to soar free. Dee is the Other for her mother. Mrs. Johnson describes Dee in terms of her words, her books, her dresses, even her golden earrings and white heels. But she is never "my Dee". There is a sense of awe bordering on resentment;

Often I fought off the temptation to shake her... the well-turned phrase, the cute shape, the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye.

Dee arrives and makes it clear that her liberated mind looks to reclaim a sense of her native identity. For instance, she does not want a White name. She calls herself Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. The new name signifies charting a different path on her own, away from the mother as well. Dee treats the objects at home as antique pieces. She demands to have one of the old quilts

that Maggie has been promised. Dee does not want to keep them for ‘everyday use’; those would rather be sterilized as ‘heritage’. Mrs. Johnson does not give her those quilts. One wonders if, for Dee, the old things are like showpieces, for Mrs. Johnson, Dee too has been something like that.

Mother of 1084:

Mahasweta Devi’s moving tale, of a mother grappling with the loss of her son in the wake of Naxalism, is also an insightful take on the power dynamics of the upper- middle class families. Here too one finds snippets of tensions twerking the mother- daughter bond. Sujata, mother of four children and a working woman herself, lives mentally estranged from all her family barring her youngest son Brati and her domestic help Hem. Sujata finds the three older children perfectly ‘social’ but pitifully out of her wavelength. Her younger daughter Tuli, in particular, seems resentful of Sujata.

One notes that Sujata did many things for Brati that she did not or could not do for the other three children. Jyoti, Neepa and Tuli grew up under the supervision of their grandmother. They, for example, were made to sleep alone. For Brati, however, Sujata asked Hem to sleep along. It is quite clear that she stood up more in case of Brati.

Tuli comes across as a classic case of “mother- blame” and “matrophobia”. From a very young age, Tuli has emulated the voice of the patriarchy. As Sujata observes time and again, Tuli has taken up the role of the matriarch, stepping into the shoes of her late grandmother. To her, Sujata has been inefficient as a homemaker. Tuli aligns herself more with her father. She even goes on to support the adultery of her father. This is a kind of negotiation with the patriarchy to gain from the power struggle.

Looking at Sujata’s approach to the matter, one finds that her family has been a disappointment to her. Yet she had never deigned to question others. It had been ingrained into her through socialization that a woman is not supposed to voice her desires or resentment. This also suggests that she possibly did not take charge of the stern disciplining of her older children at the hands of her mother- in- law. This powerlessness of the mother made the youngest daughter resentful to the mother. Accordingly, Tuli tries to be as different from Sujata as possible, so as not to end up in a powerless isolated position like her. Sujata is so isolated from the family that without consulting her beforehand, Tuli’s engagement has been fixed on 17 January, the death anniversary of Brati.

It is not that Sujata has never had stood up against her husband. She did not have any other child after Brati, she did not resign her job at the bank, she kept back a few of her ornaments to give to Nandidni, Brati’s love interest. Hers is more of a silent resistance. In her article *Feminism and the Politics of Resistance*, Rajeswari Sundar Rajan argues that women’s silence is no longer the silence of the weak, it has become “an instrument to counter patriarchal ideology”. However silence does fall short of a voiced protest at times. One wonders how far Tuli would have accepted Sujata had Sujata been more assertive of her opinions and decisions regarding all her children.

Motherhood bears different connotations for the patriarchy and for the two women who are part of the mother- daughter bond. Gender politics plays an indelible part in shaping the interaction between the mother and the daughter. Both mother and daughter became each other's mirrors, reflecting the curious mix of the Self and the Other, the Othering being a political maneuver of the patriarchy to skew the power balance in favor of the male. Motherhood is a patriarchal construct that glorifies bearing and rearing children only to use the woman's reproductive ability to define her in a subservient role, internalized enough to make it a voluntarily accepted role for many. It would be a great impetus to the understanding of the dynamics of motherhood if critical analysis diversifies itself into incorporating multiple approaches of study.

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