

Representation of Motherhood in Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton***Ruchika**

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Abstract

The term 'Maternal Echoes' describes how becoming a mother has a profound impact on both mothers and their children. In order to investigate the many facets of motherhood, researchers investigate maternal echoes by using methodologies from a variety of fields, including sociology, literature, psychology, and cultural studies. When it comes to many aspects of life, women have accomplished a great deal. Throughout history, literature has played a significant role in demonstrating these facts. Motherhood and the responsibility of caring for children have traditionally been considered to be of utmost significance for women. This paper aims to analyse the portrayal of motherhood in Avni Doshi's novel *Girl in White Cotton*, published in 2019. The narrative, set in Pune, reveals the author's thoughts through a discussion of the characters' desires. The main characters of the novel are Tara and Antara, a mother and daughter who have a difficult connection with one another. Antara has a difficult time comprehending the peculiar behaviours that her mother exhibits. Tara has a rebellious nature and decides to terminate her marriage to explore novel experience, such as becoming a disciple of a spiritual leader. Over time, when Antara witnesses her mother grappling with Alzheimer's illness, she intervenes to assist and discovers unexpected shared interests. The book, *Girl in White Cotton*, explores the nuanced nature of identity and the many perspectives individuals have on reality. The paper aims to explore the impact of motherhood on personal growth, transformation, and societal influence. The role of motherhood is the cohesive force that binds *Girl in white cotton* Cotton—it is challenging, enduring, and evokes a wide range of emotions. This paper will also examine the impact of maternal memories and effects on various aspects of the novel, as well as the resulting consequences on the female characters.

Keywords: Identity, Memories, Motherhood, Psychology, Women

In contemporary era, motherhood is often seen as a demonstration of affection, tenderness, nurturing, and loyalty. Social norms and cultural values largely influence maternity, reflecting the spirit of the time as it evolves throughout history. However, misinterpretations of this experience are common. Scientifically, different approaches explain this phenomenon. Norms

and cultural values, personal experiences of people can affect motherhood. Some feminist scholars approach the phenomenon of maternity from a social constructionist perspective, emphasizing gender ideology's crucial role in understanding this issue. The whole phenomenon of being a mother reflects being pregnant, giving birth, and being with a child.

Motherhood is a complicated and natural event in one's life that involves numerous of changes. Psychological shifts depend on several factors, such as personal circumstances, socioeconomic status, beliefs, views, experience, knowledge, and commitment. Furthermore, social relations contextualize the experience.

Discussions and social norms are important in shaping motherhood as valuable, influencing, and significant, extending beyond the biological limit. Social norms emphasize the instincts of a mother which involves clearly defined gender roles. Mothers face significant changes in their experiences and a particularly high level of anxiety due to social expectations and one's own relationship to their capabilities. Motherhood, therefore, is a boon, a responsibility with the expectation of self-denial and great love. A woman's life throws up questions about her priorities and values. Social, economic, and cultural contexts change the perception of motherhood.

In *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*, published in 2018, Gill Rye et al. explores the diverse experiences of motherhood among women from different backgrounds. Several aspects, including class, religion, nationality, disability, race, and sexual orientation, can influence the maternal experience. The field of maternity research is inherently multidisciplinary and transnational, that includes several disciplines like literary studies, politics, the historical and social sciences, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and socio-biology. Additionally, it leads to the creation of work that integrates methodologies from many disciplines. Gill Rye et al. observes: "The terms 'motherhood', 'mothering', and '(the) maternal', which are fundamental to our project and which are variously used to describe what mothers do and the relations they have with their children, are themselves ambiguous, heterogeneous, and ideologically loaded" (7). Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born* (1976) skill-fully combines personal observations with knowledge from several disciplines such as history, literature, sociology, and religion. Adrienne Rich corroborates that the "patriarchal institution" is not an essential component of being human:

Motherhood . . . has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual private pains as a mother, the individual and seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or colour, the regulation of women's reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics and extrauterine experiments - are all essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers. (*Of Woman Born* 15)

Adrienne Rich identifies key topics that are the focus of feminist research here, including societal expectations for motherhood, the treatment of childbirth as a medical issue, and the lived experiences of women in their roles as mothers.

In *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, Patrice DiQuinzio defines motherhood as a universally relevant subject matter since "everyone has a stake in the social organisation of mothering" (Introduction viii). However, it is also inherently diverse and influenced by intersecting factors. The inclusion of country, colour, class, religion, sexuality, (dis)ability, and other factors in the discussion of motherhood adds complexity and promise to this subject matter.

Elizabeth Badinter's work, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*, suggests that maternal love is not guaranteed but rather influenced by factors such as the motherly care and nurturance, the characteristics of her children, and the cultural environment. Motherly love "cannot be taken for granted. When it exists, it is an additional advantage, an extra, something thrown into the bargain struck by the lucky ones among us" (Badinter 327). She does not attribute legendary qualities to motherhood or motherly love. Instead, she challenges the notion that a maternal instinct is an inherent and influential force in human affairs.

Indrani Karmakar, in her book *Maternal Fictions: Writing the Mother in India Women's Fiction* shows how motherhood is a metaphorical state of being where one is able to take care of oneself without relying on others, and this requires prioritising the needs of children above one's own bodily and emotional needs. The system that proclaims motherhood often disregards fundamental aspects such as financial stability, great physical well-being, and emotional contentment, which mothers should consider essential. Singe Hammer states: "Not all women become mothers, but all obviously are daughters, and daughters become mothers. Even

daughters who never become mothers must confront the issues of motherhood, because the possibility and even the probability of motherhood remain” (7).

Hindu mythology is rich in the presence of several mother goddesses. Therefore, the veneration of mother goddesses, including both their compassionate and destructive forms, has significant sway within the religious framework. Therefore, within the Hindu-Indian family, the wife’s status is confirmed when she assumes the role of a mother. In his article ‘Woman Versus Womanliness in India,’ Ashis Nandy highlights the distinct social rationale for a woman’s isolation and self-denial, especially in light of her symbolic position as a mother. This paradoxical occurrence exemplifies a more extensive inconsistency in the actual encounters of Indian mothers, where the idealised celebration of motherhood, combined with challenging expectations and limited independence, significantly influences tangible maternal experiences across various social divisions such as class, caste, and religion. The concept of motherhood plays a crucial role in creating gender identity, namely defining the boundaries of femininity by focusing primarily on biological reproduction (Krishnaraj 13; Bagchi 17).

Jasodhara Bagchi has made significant contributions to the comprehension of motherhood within the context of Indian culture. In *Interrogating Motherhood*, published in 2017, Bagchi delves into the inherent contradictions surrounding the concept of motherhood within Indian society. Bagchi examines the conflict between the idealisation of motherhood and its inherent vulnerability, illustrating how the latter, despite its intention to celebrate maternity, may instead validate oppressive actions and diminish the profound importance of motherhood. Bagchi argues that in colonial Bengal, motherhood served as a mechanism for oppressing women within the societal frameworks of the household, culture, government, and technical pursuits. In Bagchi’s perspective, during the colonial period, the Indian narrative strategically employed the concept of motherhood to shape the nation and maintain it, as well as elevating this and enhancing its importance in the postcolonial imagination during this time.

In 2010, Maitreyi Krishnaraj authored a book titled *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* Krishnaraj examines the many perspectives in this book that people in India have had towards motherhood throughout a significant period of time, ranging from the ancient to the contemporary times. Society establishes the notion that becoming a parent is the most essential thing for a woman. In order to demonstrate this, the book examines several

aspects of society, including the media, technology, language, the legal system, and religion. It also discusses how the concept of motherhood has evolved in India, shifting from a connection with worshipping gods to a connection with loving one's nation and handing down things solely to males. The government assists these developments by regulating the options available to women when it comes to having children.

Avni Doshi's first novel, *Girl in White Cotton*, has been published in 2019 and is shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize in 2020. The narrative is about a family that is very well-written and packed with powerful emotions that truly capture the attention of readers. On the other hand, the narrative is structured from the perspective of women, and it is all about memories and becoming a mother. The novel *Girl in White Cotton* is a unique and contemporary work that takes place in Pune in India. Antara is the primary character, and she is an artist. She relates the narrative as she sees her mother go through the stages of having dementia. The novel has a tremendously profound and enduring quality, and it has terrifying elements that keep stacking up. In her thoughts Antara considers the ways in which her parents and grandparents have influenced her. In addition to that, she contemplates her own marriage. Every single character does not experience a sense of contentment or security in her home, marriage, or in her family.

In a courageous manner, Doshi discusses sensitive topics such as child abuse, being abandoned, and issues that arise inside families. The tale is passed down through a number of generations. There is a sense of tension throughout the whole novel since the characters are coping with difficult relationships in which they are neglected or who feel furious. Even though it is depressing, the narrative is powerful and conveys significant messages concerning what makes individuals proud, weddings, and the expectations that society places on individuals.

In her novel, *Girl in White Cotton*, Avni Doshi discusses a variety of topics that are interconnected, such as the relationship between trauma and the mind, being a mother, individuality, and the ways in which we experience both hatred and understanding. The author, Avni Doshi, examines the role of motherhood in great detail throughout the novel, demonstrating how challenging and confusing it can be, particularly between Antara, the main character, and her mother, Tara. The author demonstrates how being a parent is a significant obligation that comes with a lot of responsibilities for the family, as well as how the mother influences the life

of the main character, who she is, and how she develops. The book makes a difficult discussion on what it means to be a mother. It examines topics such as being generous, open-minded, and feminine, and it questions whether the conventional notions of a mother's love are accurate. Being a mother is the glue that prevents *Girl in White Cotton* from falling apart.

The narrative revolves around Antara's growth—her moral, intellectual, and psychological development—and eventually delves into her expanded understanding of the universe. The novel begins with an assertion that “I would be lying if I say my mother's misery has never given me pleasure” (*Girl in White Cotton* 1). The novel skill-fully establishes its atmosphere through its portrayal of the delicate, complex, and fraught relationship between a mother and daughter.

The novel employs a narrative structure that switches between the past and present, gradually revealing the distressing history of their haunting past. Antara becomes a victim of a very traumatic past. In an effort to free herself from the life that her mother has forced upon her, Antara embarks on a journey to find the meaning of her existence. However, she is compelled to assume the role of a care giver for her mother as her mother's memory begins to deteriorate. Antara works as an artist in Bombay. However, the abrupt decline in Tara's health compels Antara to assume the responsibility of caring for her mother, who had previously neglected her daughter's presence throughout her childhood. Antara recalls: “I suffered at her hands as a child and any pain she subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption” (*Girl in White Cotton* 1).

In one part of the book, Antara describes her childhood. When she tries to talk to her mother, she gets up and yells over the noise. But her cries aren't heard because the place is full of laughs, screams, and tears. She becomes more and more desperate, demanding that they send her mother an important message right away. “‘Ma!’ I am screaming, but the sound I make is lost. ‘Ma! Ma! Ma!’ I am flapping my wings, but she doesn't notice.” (*Girl in White Cotton* 75). A feeling of being alone and abandoned is emphasised by the narrator's desperate efforts to get the mother's attention. “Flapping my wings” (*Girl in White Cotton* 75) is a symbol of a child's longing for connection, which adds an affecting touch.

Antara experiences a profound sense of isolation, devoid of any companion with whom to confide her distressing recollections of her previous life. She is uncertain as to how to provide

care for her mother, who has not returned her affection. Antara experiences difficulty discovering a purpose for her life and a sense of detachment from her environment. Distant recollections inflict severe mental and existential anguish on her. Antara struggles with conflicting emotions towards her mother, whom she once deceived, including loathing, love, and sympathy, as well as haunting memories of the past. Antara, devoid of any hope, finds herself immersed in a world that has abandoned her.

In order to understand the condition of Antara, it is foremost important to understand the psyche of Antara's mother, Tara. What is the cause of her condition? Why has she been that indifferent to her daughter? The reality of Tara was not a simple one. There have been numerous obstacles in her path. Tara dedicated her entire existence to the anticipation of her husband's arrival. There was a lack of communication for many days, as her husband's attention was on achieving academic success in order to go to America. Tara's existence concluded in a state of darkness, and she started to experience a sense of detachment from her own life as her own mother disregarded her worries and objections, intensifying her anguish and isolation. Consequently, she familiarised herself with white cotton while transforming herself and setting out on a quest to discover her own identity. Antara's existence was like that of a prison, since the presence of the same white cotton fabric kept her emotionally far from her family. Antara observes, "The white clothes were the ones that separated us from our family, our friends and everyone else, that made my life in them a kind of prison" (*Girl in White Cotton* 57). The metaphorical representation of white clothing as a prison serves to emphasise the narrator's and her mother's experience of social alienation and solitude. This highlights the societal pressures and limitations that may restrict the freedoms and personal decisions of women, thereby exacerbating the difficulties associated with motherhood. The novel uses the word "white" several times due to the way in which an image functions across multiple registers of significance. All of its associations with renunciation, maternity, memory, purity, and sorrow are resonant.

Tara has tremendous melancholy and a feeling of estrangement from her family, particularly when her mother Nani fails to see any issues. Consequently, individuals experience emotions of seclusion and hopelessness. Tara has a regression to her former identity, either as a result of the influence of pregnant hormones or her anxiety about motherhood. She undertook a

metamorphosis that included allowing her hair to grow, relinquishing shoulder pads and cosmetics, and forsaking the saris that her mother-in-law had handed down to her, claiming that an old servant was responsible for their disappearance. Ma engages in secret smoking, dismissing the probable detriment it presents to her ability to conceive, and reverts back to her prior taste for cotton clothing, forsaking the bras she once embraced fervently. Her abrupt zeal for participating in a guru's satsang is surprising, given her previous indifference towards religion. The narrator states, "She smoked in secret, though she knew it could be dangerous for her foetus. Ma went back to her old cotton comforts, forgoing the bras she had enthusiastically purchased, and announced that she wanted to start attending a guru's satsang, to hear him speak" (*Girl in White Cotton* 54-55). The mother's rebellious actions, such as smoking and seeking solace in spirituality, demonstrate her struggle for autonomy and uniqueness while navigating societal expectations and familial obligations. This illustrates the many challenges faced by women in asserting their own identities.

Tara disregarded her family's wishes and stayed at the ashram, making Baba Antara's father and the ashram her place of residence. Tara's actions as Antara's care giver led to Antara's psychological suffocation. Following a prolonged period of no communication, Tara suddenly re-emerges, prompting Antara to wonder if her mother had neglected her or died. Antara ponders "I thought she had forgotten about me, I wonder if she was died" (*Girl in White Cotton* 100). Due to Baba's ownership, Antara has no way to visit her mother and feels distressed. She endures harsh living circumstances, a lack of access to basic necessities, and abuse at the hands of the ashram's sannyasins. Her unwavering devotion to her mother and Baba has led to constant persecution throughout her life.

The years Antara spent at the ashram had a deep impact on her mentality, shaping both her behaviour and her way of life. Antara suffered greatly during this period without her mother's warmth. Antara endured tremendous suffering during this time because her mother was absent. Antara found solace in Kali Mata, who fulfilled her maternal longing and fulfilled her need for maternal affection. Antara shared a room with Kali Mata, with whom she developed a profound emotional connection. Kali Mata instructed her on proper pencil grip and how to manage her hyper-extended thumb. Antara quickly discovers her maternal instincts in Kali Mata.

It is portrayed that Antara's upbringing was devoid of maternal affection and concern. Even so, she shows affection for her mother. Antara engages in a conversation with Nani over her mother's cognitive disorders. Nani disregards it, assigning forgetfulness to unwed females, citing the ancestral record of forgetfulness. The narrator recounts a disconcerting episode in which their mother had a loss of memory about their identification. As doubts and misunderstandings surface, Antara wonders whether they overstated their mother's illness. Antara states: "This is different," I say. "The other day she forgot who I was." She nods and I nod in return, and together we seem to imply that something has been understood..." (*Girl in White Cotton* 40). The interaction between the narrator and Nani exemplifies the difficulty of familial communication when unconscious agreements and mutual gestures transmit profound significance. The narrator's apprehension over her mother's cognitive decline adds an additional level of unease to the story, emphasizing the profound effect of disease on family relationships.

Antara holds the belief that forgetfulness serves as a practical mechanism for her mother, given that Tara is opposed to recalling her previous actions. By forgetting, Tara is capable of avoiding the brutal realities of her life, despite the fact that the distressing memories of her past continue to weigh heavily on her mind. Antara experiences a sense of detachment and separation from her mother. Antara states: "It seems to me now that this forgetting is convenient, that she doesn't want to remember the things she has said and done. It feels unfair that she can put away the past from her mind while I'm brimming with it all the time. I fill papers, drawers, entire rooms with records, notes, thoughts, while she grows foggier with each passing day" (*Girl in White Cotton* 61). Antara is faced with the difficulty of tending to her mother, who had previously disregarded and neglected her. Avni Doshi portrays Antara's profound powerlessness in caring for her mother, emphasising her mother's lack of affection and consideration since she has been unable to provide the emotional stability and assistance that a daughter desires. The mother-daughter connection serves as a metaphorical arena for Antara, representing an internal struggle between affection and bitterness, compassion and being dishonest. Antara remembers:

I wonder how I will love Ma when she is at the end. How will I be able to look after her when the woman I know as my mother is no longer residing in her body? When she is no longer has a complete consciousness of who she is and who I am, will it be who are not our own, or voiceless animals, or the mute, blind and deaf, believing we will get away

with it, because decency is something we enact in public, with someone to witness and rate our actions, and if there is no fear of blame, what would the point of it be? (*Girl in White Cotton* 117).

Tara, Antara's mother, treated her poorly when she was a baby, and this pattern has persisted into adulthood. Antara becomes so provoked by Tara's remarks regarding her occupation—a source of refuge from the brutal realities of life—that she resorts to physical aggression. In spite of opposition from various individuals, including Dilip, who advises her to cease her professional pursuits in order to prioritise Tara, Antara discovers a safe and protected environment within her matrimonial residence. Tara's deeds, including a violent outburst and burning down Antara's studio, incite Antara's anger and increase worries regarding the possibility of self-harm by her mother. Tara causes psychological anguish and misery in the life of Antara, who views her as a burden. Reflecting the confinement and difficulties of motherhood, these occurrences highlight the tensions in their relationship.

The doctor tells Antara to stay away from her mother, Tara, because they both share some of Tara's objective world. He frequently discusses Tara's constant reconstruction of memories and how she alternates between forgetting and remembering her history. Antara feels very alone because she has troubling fantasies about her past, where bits and pieces of memories slip through like dirt through a sponge. Antara compares herself to a fly that explores the edges of a room without trying to get out. This is a metaphor for how she feels trapped in her own life. Even though she could run away, she learns to live within her means, tied to her life's comforts and things.

Antara sees life as a summons of problems, like a gunshot that could go off at any time. She still doesn't understand the world around her, especially since her mother looks down upon her journey to womanhood, which confuses her both mentally and physically. She feels unpleasant in her body and can feel another woman coming out of her. According to Antara, childhood is a time of waiting, eagerly anticipating the chance to truly live. Antara is greatly affected by seeing Tara's sudden decline after Reza Pine left because she loves him more than anyone else. Antara deals with her problems by cutting faces and items out of old photos. She uses her art to carefully encode and decode her past, keeping the best parts and getting rid of the rest.

Antara is afraid of becoming a mother because she thinks it would make her more dependent on Dilip, which is something she doesn't want. Every now and again, she feels like she's becoming like her mother, which makes her detest marriage. After talking to a psychotherapist about her mother's background, Antara makes a conscious decision not to bring up the story of her parents' withdrawal. She feels confused and helpless after the therapist's intense inquiries, which torment her in her dreams. "It would be easier if I could just kill her off, in story at least - tell everyone that Ma is dead" (*Girl in White Cotton* 221). In order to avoid answering questions, Antara expresses her deep hatred by thinking about her mother's fictitious death.

Antara suffers from postpartum depression after childbirth, characterised by an increased sensitivity to hormonal fluctuations and physical changes in her body. She grapples with concealing her dissatisfaction with mothering from others, becoming tired, and losing enthusiasm for her kid. The difficulties escalate, pushing her into a state of madness, as shown by an instance in which her carelessness results in the baby's fall. The intense emotions of fear, intimidation, unease, and annoyance torment Antara. Her grasp on reality weakens, leading to the manifestation of delusions and hallucinations. The statement "The difference between murder and manslaughter is intention" (*Girl in White Cotton* 255), made by Antara, demonstrates her deliberate manipulation of her mother Tara's memory by the daily administration of sugar in order to avoid the disclosure of a concealed secret. Antara is torn between her aspiration for personal growth and her temptation to do pain to her mother. She struggles with feelings of both belonging and alienation.

During times of frustration, Antara acknowledges having horrible thoughts about her mother's temporary death, which she hopes will be followed by a desired change. In spite of these thought processes, she openly confesses her affection for her mother, recognising her own uncertainties over her identity and the prospect of life without her. Antara reveals that her deliberate use of sugar is aimed at calming Ma, causing her to become restless and unpredictable when deprived of it. The complexities of Antara's feelings and the nuanced dynamics of their connection are seen in her contradictory sentiments over her mother's welfare. According to Antara, "Even as these thoughts enter my head, I can't believe I am thinking them. I love her, my mother. I love her to death. I don't know where I would be without her. I don't know who I

would be. If she would only stop being such a terrible cunt, I would get her back on track” (*Girl in White Cotton* 256).

Tara finds comfort in her Alzheimer’s disease, which provides her with a way to escape from the harsh or unforgiving realities of her life. However, her troubling memories from the past consistently cause her daughter Antara distress. As the story progresses, Antara starts to recognise the similarity between her own identity and Tara’s. Antara feels an estranged connection with Dilip, reminiscent of her mother’s early marriage and a period marked by minimal interactions. Antara finds no comfort in being with Dilip, who is always surrounded by people incapable of comprehending her mental suffering, only serving to deprive her of the mild numbness to her own experiences. In her novel, Avni Doshi delves deep into the inner workings of both mother and daughter, narrating their history as two deeply unhappy women suffering deep and intense pain. Looking back at Tara’s early years, one can see that they are characterized by depression and other emotions that contributed to an unstable relationship with her daughter, Antara. Despite their similar-sounding names, their interpretations are the reverse of each other, “Antara was really Un-Tara” (*Girl in White Cotton* 244) as the devastated mother wanted to forget her misery. Therefore, the name Antara is merely a mockery of the fact that both mother and daughter are unhappy with one relationship or another. They actively criticize their husbands and the role of wife and mother.

It can be concluded that Avni Doshi has effectively shown the deep distress and challenges that Antara and Tara face as they are compelled to deal with their dark pasts. The mother-daughter relationship has been transformed into something awful and lingering in life, something that people cannot rid themselves of because the memories of agony and pain are passed on from generation to generation. One of the things that burden Antara’s multiple female personae is the emotional scars that she retains from her past and all the things that have happened to her before. This shapes her on a transformative journey toward a better understanding of herself as she contends with her grief and misery. The notion which Doshi investigates the most entirely throughout the novel is, as a result, the narrator’s or her characters’ innermost reflections and emotions, as well as their own dissatisfaction with their lives and their world.

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