

Unmasking the Patriarchal Motherhood: Feminist Pedagogy of Empowered Mothering in Geetanjali Shree's *Mai: Silently Mother*

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Abstract

*Indian patriarchy shrouds a canopy of ideologies by mythicizing and naturalizing motherhood. In this context, motherhood is the embellished cult of domesticity without the actual scope of empowerment for mother. To relinquish the deified halo of patriarchal motherhood, the empowered mothering is the only feminist pedagogy for resistance. Geetanjali Shree's debut novel, *Mai: Silently Mother*, focuses on the darkness under the halo of celebrated motherhood by emphasizing on the need of resisting practice of feminist mothering even in a patriarchal system. *Mai*, the mother in the novel, nurtures her daughter against the very grain of patriarchal gendered norms. She brings a radical change in the understanding of Indian mothers. The present paper examines how the ideological construct of motherhood is contested emphatically by *Mai* in the novel.*

Keywords: Motherhood, Empowered Mothering, Feminist Pedagogy, Ideology, Feminist Consciousness

Introduction

The seemingly ahistorical patriarchy, as a system, is actually a historical institution and for the continuation of it, the patriarchal ideologues have been working on a lot of ideologies and myths to make it infallible. According to Gerda Lerner, the institution of patriarchy means “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family, and the male dominance over women in society in general” (239). The domination of women in an organized way occurs through different mythical and ideological institutions like family, marriage and motherhood. As a result, motherhood is constructed as one of the pillars of patriarchy to justify its sabotage on the marginalized gendered race. Therefore, Jasodhara Bagchi has aptly pointed out, “motherhood is one such compelling ‘myth’ of a woman with which the system validates itself” (33). In this aftermath, the mother is only “the human counterpart of land in a patriarchally organized agricultural society – a passive factor

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of reproduction” (Bhattacharji WS50). Indian patriarchy shrouds a canopy of ideologies by mythicizing and naturalizing motherhood, as if it is the culmination of femininity.

The polarization of mothers in a patriarchal society is primarily caused through the construction of male-defined motherhood and linking it to the womanhood in a system, where motherhood has been conceived as a culmination of the ideal womanhood” (Bagchi 2). This woman-mother succession is essential to the gendered power-polarity of patriarchal discourse and, to break this power-pattern, “mothers must dismantle the patriarchal institution of motherhood” (O’Reilly 170). In this regard, the famous distinction between motherhood and empowered mothering is elemental to the feminist analysis. Motherhood is a patriarchal institution to suppress women and empowered mothering is powerfully a maternal pedagogy to subvert the ideological construction. The empowered mothers become critics of the tendency of the patriarchal ideologues “to measure motherhood, not in extended narratives, but by a set of signal moments” that is interpreted as “emblematic tests and summations of women’s mothering abilities” (Kukla 69). Thereby, empowered mothering breaks the historical pattern, in which mothers are non-actors or permissible actors in the infancy of the children. Andrea O’Reilly suitably points to the fact that empowered mothering “calls into question the dictates of patriarchal motherhood”. She also adds that it is, in contrast to the apolitical motherhood, “understood to have cultural significance and political purpose” (142). Patriarchy restricts mothers to have claims on the formation of ideological world of children through powerless motherhood. The first step to unmask this motherhood is to follow the pedagogy of empowered mothering with feminist consciousness.

Purpose of the Study

Feminist consciousness evokes the transformation of powerless motherhood into powerful mothering, as Sara Ruddick critically puts that “the work of mothering can become a rewarding, disciplined expression of conscience” at the moment when “maternal thought will have to be transformed by feminist consciousness” (104). Feminist consciousness can disrupt the powerless motherhood and evokes a sense of empowerment in the experiences of mothering. This can lead to a redefinition of mothering experience, which holds the key to re-narrate the maternal agency even in a patriarchal society. The emergence of maternal literature in India shows this kind of new possibility.

Research Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative approach to Geetanjali Shree’s *Mai: Silently Mother* through the theories of motherhood, empowered mother and feminism. The paper analyses the novel as a criticism of patriarchal culture of India while examining how the ideological construct of motherhood is contested in a patriarchal culture by the protagonist of the novel.

Empowered Mothering in Shree’s *Mai: Silently Mother*

Geetanjali Shree’s debut novel *Mai* (1993) is translated from Hindi to English by Nita Kumar as *Mai: Silently Mother* in 2001. The translation is the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize in 2002. The title of the novel is evocative of its core theme. Nita Kumar, the translator, pens down the novel’s primary focus in the very first line of the “Afterword”, “*Mai*, as the title suggests, has at its heart a mother” (Kumar 171). The novel is subtitled “Silently Mother”,

which connotes the societal expectations from a mother to silently perform the patriarchal mothering as a powerless responsibility. If “ideology articulates complex and contradictory practices” (Dutta 93), the ideological construction of good motherhood in India hides the darkness under the halo of celebrated motherhood. Geetanjali Shree unearths the reality behind the ideological deification of mother, as the fissure between the ideal and real only “cautions that the images, ideals, archetypes, and theories of the archetypal mother are sanctioned and promoted by patriarchal culture to reinforce the conservatism of motherhood as an ‘institution’” (Mitra 14). In this novel, the mother has lost her maiden name ‘Rajjo’ after marriage. In return, patriarchy gifts to her a common epithet ‘Mai’, which means mother in Hindi. Although “patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values” (Rich 70), she denies to be the cultural barrier and carrier of prevalent ethos by disintegrating the primacy of patriarchy. Rajjo, as the mother, invites power through her maternal thinking and empowered mothering, which directly confront and counteract “patriarchal motherhood by presenting an alternative approach to mothering that is designed to empower women, mothers, children and others” (O’Reilly 347).

The Mother-Daughter Duo

Patriarchy codifies the prioritization of patriarchal son. This kind of treachery towards the daughter in India happens due to the preference for son who will carry forward the family line. In tune with this argument, Jasodhara Bagchi argues, “the motherhood that patriarchy holds captive is the mother of sons, the keeper of *vamsa* or the male lineage” (35). Therefore, Rajjo, the mother, commits herself to weaving power for her daughter. She does not discriminate between her daughter and son on anything. She realizes that through establishing a strong bond with her daughter, she can ensure a better understanding, which can lead towards the empowerment of both of them in future. Rajjo’s mothering as the “counter narrative has gone a long way to destabilize the patriarchal view that positions mother and daughter disconnection as inevitable and necessary” (O’Reilly 164). Rajjo, as the empowered mother, does not nurture Sunaina to be the emotional cure to men; rather incite the cravings for self-independence and self-confidence to live life in dignified ways. In patriarchy “daughters have been nullified by silence”, and to negate this silence, a mother should advice the daughter “not self-sacrifice or selflessness, as preached in patriarchal motherhood, but selfhood” (Rich 218; O’Reilly 201).

Daughter-Mother Continuum

Indian patriarchal society dictates the inevitability of the daughter-mother recurrence to naturalize the life of the daughter to be the repetitive pattern of her mother’s life. Rajjo distorts this continuation by creating empowered future for Sunaina, who admits, “I was the bird poised in one place in the wide open sky that mai had shown...” (Shree 109). Lindal Buchanan coins the term “the Woman/Mother continuum” to elaborate the patriarchal fate of woman and argues that “positioning a woman toward the mother end of the continuum typically elevates her ethical standing; situating a mother toward the woman end of the continuum usually erodes it” (121). The mother’s role in maintaining and encouraging this continuation is optimal. When Rajjo walks against this, she is criticized in refusing “to become the echo of someone else’s voice” (Shree 93). In patriarchal culture, the woman/mother continuation mediates through marriage and the empowerment through education disrupts this mediation. Rajjo supports

Sunaina's desire to study abroad, when she affirms, "I want that you should achieve something, make a name" and she retreats "into a decisive silence" in reaction to the multiple queries of the patriarchal dictators (93). Here, Sunaina's empowerment is only the aftermath of her mother's empowered decisions, as the mother "gives rise to the daughter's empowerment" (O'Reilly 164). Sarah Trimble calls mother like Rajjo as "outlaw mother", as "at the margins of patriarchal culture, outlawed mothers are busily engaging in mothering practices that challenge the dogmas of institutional motherhood" (182).

The Marriage Question

The patriarchal ideologues place utmost importance to the practice of marriage, which works almost like a bondage throughout women's lives. Through marriage, men or the society at large, can control women's mobility, as Kamla Bhasin critically puts the idea, "in order to control women's sexuality, production and reproduction, men need to control women's mobility" (9). When Sunaina decides to earn as an artist, she faces the same question of marriage like a refrain. Rajjo answers peacefully to this societal pressure, "the most important thing is to stand on your feet" and stresses, "if in this day and age you accomplish that, then whatever will be, will surely be good" (Shree 129). Patriarchy expects that every woman should aspire for the status of "*pativrata*", which is the specific *dharma* of the Hindu wife, because "women are the repositories of family honour – of their own family as daughter and of their husband's family as wife and mother" (Chakravarti 70; 143). Sunaina is not interested in marriage and Rajjo does not act as the catalyst to her daughter's marriage through encouragement. Both of them are seen with suspicion and categorized as bad women, who are not normal women living in society. As an Indian mother, Rajjo should be focused on prosperous arranged marriage proposals for her daughter and should dissuade her from any kind of courtship before marriage. Indian mother is the saviour of moral code of conduct in children's lives and thereby, should be interested in the "disapproval of the romantic complex prior to marriage through arranged alliances in which the family plays a pivotal role" (D'Cruz and Bharat 168).

Fearful Kitchen Fire and Resistance through Blooming Flowers in Creative Garden

Some of the feminist critic would urge women to reject motherhood, as it is the most oppressive heterosexual politics played on women by patriarchy. Neyer and Bernardi observe the same, "the mainstream feminist discourse up to the mid-1980s took a critical approach to motherhood and regarded the rejection of motherhood as a pre-requisite for overcoming women's subordination and for gaining equality" (164). But this would only add more oppression to those women, who nurture a desire to become mothers. In the novel, Rajjo holds her mothering desire at the core of her heart and succeeds in showing that empowered mothering is the only solution to reject powerless oppression. A mother holds more power to bring gender equality by nurturing empowerment in her and in her children. Maithreyi Krishnaraj argues, "a mother in essence transcends the binaries of gender as every child, boy or girl, is born of a woman" (1). Rajjo loves gardening and creativity becomes the locus of her infinite variety. Sunaina says, "when mai put her touch on the garden" and "there was a new womanly blossoming" (Shree 88). Gardening becomes parallel to mothering and blooming flowers on plants become parallel to her nurtured children. For her, neither the acquisition of plot for gardening nor the invention of empowered discourse for mothering is easy in the orthodox North Indian society, but she achieves it. In connection to this, the maternal memoir of Alice Walker is relevant, as she

praises her mother's creativity in gardening and regards it as a legacy, "she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me" (234). The same is noteworthy in Rajjo's gardening creativity. This creativity inspires Sunaina to continue her career in painting as an artist.

Patriarchy works sinuously to minimize women's dignity through organized ritualistic fashion by maintaining customary rites such as "*kanyadann*" and "*matri rin*" (Mukherjee 80). '*Kanyadaan*' signifies the objectification of daughter by limiting her to the status of material objects which can be donated. '*Matri rin*' signifies the belittlement of maternal nurturing which can be repaid by offering a handful of rice to the mother. Mothers with conscious politics of society, such as Rajjo, can show that the best way to repay maternal debt is possible only through carrying mother's legacy in creative ways. Sunaina cannot possibly find another more appropriate way, rather than becoming an artist to portray her mother in different colours. This is perhaps the best way to remember mother's colourful hues. In a similar vein, Tutun Mukherjee remembers her mother while writing a creative piece on maternal lineage and thinks that it is the best way for "acknowledging my *matri rin*" (80). Mothering opens up new path of identification for daughters and mothers, as Neyer and Bernardi argue, "it rather opens up the possibility for agency, for a great diversity of (self-defined) 'motherhoods' and for a positive identification with maternity" (167). The analysis of the entire mothering narrative depicts Rajjo not only as a successful mother, but also as a feminist epitome of good mother, as the "good mothering can be constituted only through an entire parenting narrative" (Kukla 68).

Matrophobia and Misunderstanding

When women start to see the real story of oppression and suppression behind the veil of mystic idealization, they start to revolt against the women who have started internalizing their subordinated position in society. In such context, the daughters often revolt against their mothers, who have naturalized the motherhood. In the novel, Sunainai initially has failed to see the strong potentiality of her mother. She thought her to be like other patriarchal women, who cannot practice mothering with feminist conscience. That's why as a daughter, she resists any kind of identification with her mother at the early stage of her life "because she does not want a life like her mother, nor does she wish to be aligned with someone who is oppressed and whose work is so devalued" (O'Reilly 21). As a result of her misunderstanding, she suffers from "matrophobia" which is "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother" (Rich 236).

Her assertion is not against all mothers, but against the patriarchal mother whose sole motif is to be revered as good mother. Relevantly, Kapoor has opined, "in the context of India, which is a patriarchal society, only the 'good mother' who fits into the institution of womanhood, motherhood, family and marriage is revered" (2590). Sunaina, for the lack of deep understanding, has wrongly categorized her mother as a patriarchal mother, who always maintains silence and cannot resist. Rich argues appropriately, "a young girl may have lived in horror of her mother's child-worn existence and told herself, once and for all, no, not me" (238). Later, in realizing her own misunderstanding, she admits, "Mai had not been nothing", rather "it was we who had made her like that" (Shree 166). She gets the idea that her mother's way of resisting the patriarchal culture is way more profound than their capacity to comprehend it. Rajjo is silently nurturing her maternal agency by strategizing long-term politics to cause upheaval

in patriarchal inequality. Andrea O'Reilly identifies the maternal agency "as the notion that mothering can be a site of empowerment and a location for social change for women" (697). Sometimes, misunderstandings at the initial stage can only lead to rejection of prejudiced notions and then to profound understanding. Sunaina through series of events realizes her mother's dignified individuality and understands the difference between her mother and other patriarchal mothers in her vicinity. She asserts, "we did not sense the dignity behind the parda" (Shree 164). Misunderstanding dissolves in the admiration of Rajjo as "a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist" (Rich 235). Therefore, Sunaina's strong sense of individualism and freedom only comes out as her mother's laudable efforts to free her daughter from the grasp of patriarchy. Sunaina admits by admiring her mother's crusade against society, as she says, "in my childhood mai had put down a ladder to get me out of the pit" and "I would keep climbing that ladder until I reached..." (Shree 167). Rajjo's mothering is so subtle that any presumption and shallow judgment would profusely fail. Thereby, Sunaina praises her mother's individual spirit, as she points out that her mother is "a mai on her own, not a mai moulded by babu or dada, or a mai moulded by us" (164). The mothering of Rajjo is the courageous mothering, which "calls for the empowerment of daughters and mothers, and recognizes that the former is only possible with the later" (O'Reilly 24).

The Loop of Daughter-centricity

Mostly feminists point out that there exists the loop of "daughter-centricity" in the literature on motherhood and mothers (Reddy and Daly 2). In order to highlight the individualization of daughters who succeed to overcome the trap of 'daughter-mother-continuance' in patriarchy, some writings lack sensibility towards maternal experience. As Andrea O'Reilly elaborates the same problem, "while the subject of the narrative may be the experience of motherhood, daughter-centric accounts are conveyed through the singular perspective of the daughter, thus skewing the position toward that of the daughter/child while marginalizing or ignoring the position of the mother" (268). Geetanjali Shree gracefully avoids this problematic narrative approach in her novel. She posits the daughter, Sunaina, as the narrator; but maintains the focal point of the narrative to depict the freedom and subjective individualization of the daughter as the result of the empowered mothering of Rajjo. Metaphors remain Shree's the most effective tool by portraying maternal influential fire working under the subjective rubric of daughter's existence. Sunaina declares, "mai was my guide – for what I must not be" (Shree 147). The metaphor lies in the fact that Sunaina does not want to lead a mother's life and her mother herself is instrumental in that realization. Rajjo becomes the root cause of her daughter's individualized epistemic development and makes her capable enough to negate the patriarchal expectation by internalizing feminist consciousness in her life. This is possible only because she resists the process of biological mothering that only dictates the nurturing of children's bodies. She negates the only possibility of becoming "a factotum, a life-support system" to her children and moves on towards the path of building individualized mothering, which opts for the overall growth of her children (Hooks 335). She shows the courage to develop a new definition of motherhood and a new mothering pedagogy in her life by discarding the patriarchal tag of 'good mother'. As Sarah Trimble argues, "patriarchal motherhood (re)colonizes their energies and efforts under the renewed rubric of the 'good mother'" (180).

It is the genius of Shree that she writes univocal anecdote of empowered mothering of Rajjo through the lens of daughter-centric narrative. Here, in the novel, although Sunaina initially has failed to see the feminist fire in her mother, she later admits the influence of her mother in forming her future path by declaring “the ash was inside me, becoming warm, and smouldering gradually again with the fire of mai’s un-lived and unseen life...” (Shree 167). Even after the demise of Rajjo, her daughter gracefully forwards her legacy as an artist. Geetanjali Shree plays a pioneering role in feminist literature on mothers through her venture of literary writing on ‘new mothers’ or empowered mothers who are not willing to accept any subservient positions allotted to by society. As Shari Thurer points out, “we are beginning to see a new kind of mother in novels – the mentor, the one who guides her children to independent adulthood” (299). If “giving voice to the experiences of motherhood and recognizing the subjectivity and agency of mothers were clearly crucial feminist aims”, Shree has done tremendous job in writing this narrative centered on empowered mothering as well as real mothering experiences (Kawash 971). The powerful line, that “helplessness was a victory in itself”, evokes the resisting power of Rajjo (Shree 18). She overpowers the myth and false institutions of motherhood, as she gets helpless herself and does not want the same future to be repeated by her daughter. Thus, she ekes the path of resistance out of her helplessness in society through the pedagogy of empowered mothering.

Conclusion

The glorification of motherhood has been done magnificently to restrict the real mothers by defining them through various categorical terms like ‘good mother’ and ‘good wife’. Giving birth and nurturing children to adulthood are naturalized as the mother’s inherent duty in patriarchal society. As Naomi Wolf points out, “culture prefers to give women doggerel: it often suggests that motherhood is something effortless” and “calls motherhood ‘natural’” (3). That’s how the power politics of patriarchy work through the ideology of motherhood to make women powerless and passive. Rajjo as the mother, is neither under the influence of ideologies, nor is afraid of the patriarchal tags such as ‘bad mother’ and ‘mother outlaw’. She does not practice the pedagogy of mothering, rearing and nurturing under the menace of patriarchal surveillance, rather she internalizes the politics, praxis and pedagogy of empowered mothering. She, as a mother, with the help of feminist conscience avoids women’s destined oppression in patriarchy. Therefore, the eponymous protagonist in Shree’s *Mai: Silently Mother* transforms the cultural understanding and brings a radical change in the identity construction of Indian mothers. This indicates a new beginning in the corpus of maternal literature in India.

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