

Exploring Motherhood and Oppression in Geetanjali Shree's Novel

Mai: Silent Mother

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Abstract

Reproduction and motherhood are two major aspects which have been discussed throughout the history of feminism. There are a number of literary works which provide enough space to mother characters that can be categorised as maternal fiction. After analysing the portrayal of mothers and their narrative it seems that the sole purpose of women is reproduction. This is how they can have a fulfilling life. In this paper we analyse the portrayal of women in the Indian context and how Geetanjali Shree silently questions this institutionalised and idealised picture of mother in her novel "Mai: Silent Mother." She depicts how societal apparatus works to imprison women.

Keywords: Motherhood, Maternal Fiction, Reproduction, Feminism

Introduction

After traversing the vast amount of literary works devoted to mothers and their characteristics, it seems that child rearing and childbearing are the sole purpose of women's lives. This is the most significant task a woman can perform. They are warned not to put off having children due to dwindling fertility, but also forewarned of the negative effects of adolescent pregnancy. Motherhood outside marriage is viewed negatively shows the height of hypocrisy of our so-called developed society. We are all familiar with the idea of conventional family structure- A stay at home mother and a male breadwinner. Traditional

parenting is something in which a wife and her children are expected to submit to their stern patriarchal father. Men have jobs outside the home and mothers are seen as a sacred teacher, moral guide and an angel in the house who dedicates her whole life to household and cuisine. This is how gendered division of labor comes on the scene which is designated as gender performativity by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, A seminal work in the landscape of feminism. If we particularly analyse Indian myths and folk tales, Indian society has always praised a women's ability to be a mother. She is praised as a life giver, an epitome of love, affection and sustenance. These intricately woven norms are so strong and enduring that have masked the reality of motherhood from antiquity to the present. Ancient scriptures have had a strong impact on how society in India constructs motherhood. A heavy load of nebulous ideals that women are expected to adhere to is dictated by myths and religious stories. With its Sitas and Draupadis, The Ramayana and Mahabharata contribute to internalizing and preserving the very idea of womanhood. The mythical figures Kunti, Gandhari, Kausalya and Kaikeyi are constantly ingrained in our consciousness. They are exalted, yet they are never truly free. However, freedom was never truly achieved. Motherhood is a woman's primary function and ultimate goal. The most intriguing concern to address is how can these Indian female writers reconcile the tension between their personal goals and a culture that actively works to oppress women. How these female writers extend and co-opt nationalist conception of womanhood. In this particular paper we will analyse Geetanjali Shree's *Mai: Silently Mother* and how she depicts women as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother.

Originally written in Hindi, and translated by Nita Kumar, *Mai: Silent Mother* is a novel about a mother, as the title would imply which cautiously sketches out a new realm of enunciation. It maps out the growth and journey of a woman through the complicated bonds she has in a middle class North Indian joint family, their attendants and their visitors. Indian readers find *Mai* particularly relevant since they can connect with it on a personal level. *Mai*

has two children Subodh and Sunaina, the two siblings who are quite attached to her mother. This novel is set in an inherently patriarchal household in a small town near Lucknow. Here Mai is portrayed as a stereotypical daughter-in-law, wife and a mother. But Mai's children belong to a progressive thought process, defying all traditional shackles. They continually try to rescue her from the clutches of oppressive and stifling ambience. Mai is presented as the archetype of Motherhood and its poignant effects. This novel brings forth the issue of psychological impact of convention and orthodox family structure. Narrated by her daughter Sunaina, who worries that her life may end up being like her mother's as she says "I cannot become another Mai. Mai herself is a vanishing species". She begins Mai's description by saying, "*We always knew mother has a weak spine. The doctor told us that later*". Sunaina and Subodh both siblings try their best to make her free from traditional shackles and live a meaningful life. She ponders whether she might convince her mother to leave the oppressive home and therefore gain her own freedom. Sunaina's account of Mai is limited to households where everyone has authority over her. The only weapon she has, to face everyone, is her silence. This book portrays Mai as a passive wife, submissive daughter-in-law, selfless mother and a helpless woman: "*Mai was always bent over. We should know. We've been watching her from the beginning. Our beginning is her beginning after all. She was bent over right from the start, a silent spectre moving around, taking care of everyone's needs*". Shree nudges the readers indirectly to put a question mark on the image of Mai manifested by Sunaina and the real one which has indulged completely in motherhood and womanhood: "*Both weakness and power, innocence and manipulation, self-denial and self-interest. It is the paradoxical reciprocity of the two that creates a version of the master-slave dialectic, that leads to confusion on the part of observers, and miscalculation by both 'oppressors' and 'reformers. Mai goes to the heart of this paradox*". Mai is a puppet which is voiceless, with its head down, eyes on the ground, listening to others, doing as others wanted. She is veiled,

which is considered her virtue, a symbol of her endurance and self-restraint. Our tradition which demands women sacrifice in the form of fasts like Karva Chauth and Ahoyi, some for husband's long life and the other for son's life and prosperity. A woman's agony and societal hypocrisy are at its zenith when a woman is considered unholy during her menstruation. She is not allowed to enter kitchen or temple. Although this is painful it can be a respite from her chores. As menstrual cycle begins, a girl is considered no longer auspicious. How can it be so impure to be able to conceive. However, in spite of her suffering, she is determined to save her own daughter from these chains and let the strong urge of becoming independent grow in her. Although Mai is the stereotype of Motherhood, yet she tries her best to bestow wings so that she can fly in the infinity where the whole sky is her own. She is the one who untangles her chains. It is Mai who decides to nurture their children in such a way so that they can have their own viewpoints and never submit themselves to patriarchal identities and societal systems. This is her own way, the way of silence with which she challenges chauvinistic and predominantly male-controlled society by empowering her children, two individuals who become her own voice and discontinue the cycle of patriarchy.

Conclusion:

Mai: Silent Mother is a simple description of all mothers in rural India dedicating their whole life to family and their children without posing a single question. It is the story of every Indian home. Mai is the representative of all docile wives, obedient daughters-in-law and sacrificing mothers who mold their personality in order to fit in a pre-decided framework. This is the novel where orthodoxy is jolted by modern liberal thoughts of the next generation, which shows progressive thoughts of a silent Mother and her rebellious nature. Through this process, Mai probes many existential issues which lead to a deep contemplation.

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