Special Connections between Strangers: Viewing Chitra Divakaruni's Fiction Through a Maternal Lens

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Abstract

Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has an enviable body of work. She has covered a range of themes, including the search for identity and heritage, immigration, mother-daughter dynamics, domestic abuse, palace intrigues, the impact of 9/11, mother-love, and the bonds between sisters. Through a nuanced exploration of the dynamics between strangers,she brings to the fore possibilities of love, cooperation, and emotionally sustaining interactions. The special connections have a soothing effect and, at times, a subversive edge. They can challenge hetero-normative conventions: two Indian immigrants discover the happiness promised by lesbian love. They can disregard the law: a young Indian woman develops an instant and irrepressible attachment for a lost child, whom she takes in without the knowledge of the authorities. They can counteract the forces of hate: a yoga practitioner stabilises an artist disturbed by 9/11 and its aftermath. The connections chosen for this analysis have a distinct maternal component, i.e., they involve holding, protection, nurturance, and what Sara Ruddick calls "attentive love". Through an application of Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking", I will examine and explicate the rationality of care that informs the interactions between strangers in Divakaruni's fiction. After a broad

engagement with Divakaruni's oeuvre, this paper will take a deep dive into the short story "A Perfect Life" (1995) and the novel *Queen of Dreams*(2004). By forging unique connections between her characters, Divakaruni broadens the scope of what is possible. She also reveals the different ways in which the maternal can manifest itself.

Keywords: Maternal Thinking, Mother-Love, Strangers, Rationality of Care, Holding, Attentive Love, 9/11

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has an enviable body of work. She has published ten novels, including a work of historical fiction and two feminist retellings of ancient Indian epics. She has written five books for children, including a fantasy series and a retelling of a Bengali folktale. She has published two collections of poems and as many collections of short stories. She has covered a range of themes, including the search for identity and heritage, mother-daughter dynamics, domestic abuse, colonial expansion, mother-love, and the bonds between sisters. Two of her novels—*The Mistress of Spices*(1997) and *Queen of Dreams*(2004)—deploy oriental and occult imagery even as they grapple with relevant, real-world issues. *The Mistress of Spices* reveals an active involvement and investment in the lives and fates of strangers. Tilo, the titular character, runs a grocery store in inner-city Oakland in the US. Through the magical power of her spices, she seeks to remedy the problems faced by Indian immigrants in a foreign land. In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni tackles the phenomenon of 9/11 with the audacity of hope. In the midst of dramatic events, such as 9/11 and its scarring aftereffects, Divakaruni provides glimmerings of fellowship amid strangers. She avoids neat resolutions as well as cynical resignation. Through simple and vivid strokes, she creates fleeting visions of togetherness and harmony. These visions offer solace but steer clear of easy answers. Some of the images evoked by Divakaruni soothe and stabilise. They offera calming contrast to the burning hatred symbolised by the terrorist attacks.

The Last Queen (2021)depicts the rise, fall, incarceration and rebellion of Rani Jindan Kaur, wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who is considered the greatest Sikh ruler. The novel offers an intense and intricate 'her story' of Punjab's and Jindan Kaur's fortunes after the death of Ranjit Singh, who protected his kingdom from the British. Hailed as the "Mother of the Khalsa", Jindan Kaur combines a maternal sensibility with political astuteness. From palace conspiracies to the British's divide-and-rule tactics, the resilient queen handles many political challenges. With the guidance of Ranjit Singh, Fakir Azizuddin, Rani Guddan and other supportive figures, she learns to play the royal game. Despite her humbles origins, Jindan Kaur finds her foothold in both the zenana and the Lahore court. The British, who are threatened by her influence and rebellious spirit, banish her from Lahore and take charge of her son's upbringing. To justify her separation from Dalip Singh, Jindan Kaur is painted as an unfit mother. Once she is no longer in the picture, Dalip is made to sign away his kingdom. Despite her hardships and loss of power, Jindan Kaur retains her passionate concern for her country and Dalip's rights. The "Mother of the Khalsa" is both combative and subversive.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*(2019), Divakaruni foregrounds the mythological figure of Sita, the ideal woman in the cultural imagination of Indians. Sita's moral vision is anchored in her maternal outlook. Sita is conscious of "the specific nature of individual suffering and tries to soothe at least some of the pain" (Vagmita, 2019).She can "empathise with her supposed enemies, remember their pain, even tell their story along with hers, blur[ring] the distinction between friend and foe, good and evil"(Vagmita, 2019).

One Amazing Thing (2009) provides a compelling example of a transformative interaction between strangers. In the novel, nine strikingly different individuals receive a collective jolt when an earthquake hits an American city. Stranded inside the basement of an Indian consulate, they work in close coordination to keep each other alive. The sharing of stories and essential items creates a caring and empathic climate. The slowly strengthening

connections ease the frayed nerves of the group members. As they tell stories from their lives, their hearts and minds get interlocked. Death is longer a *looming* spectre; it becomes a pale shadow.

In the short story "The Lives of Strangers", which is part of the collection titled *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), the maternal is embedded and expressed in the acts of care performed by a sisterly figure. A sisterly feeling—with some romantic overtones—springs up between an elderly lady and a young Indian woman brought up in America. The American-born woman defies her social group to nurse the old lady, who is labelled "unlucky", only to fall prey to their cynical ideas at a vulnerable moment. This encounter holds out, but does not fulfil, the promise of mutual sustenance. Natural forces combine with social prejudice to tear apart the tenderly knit connection between two women from vastly different milieus.

In "The Blooming Season for Cacti", another story from the aforementioned collection, two women, both broken in their own way, glimpse the joys of lesbian love. The realisation comes like a "summer rainstorm" (Divakaruni, 2001/2002, p. 196), altering the arid landscape of their lives. The protagonist, Mira, is trying to find her feet in the US. She develops an instant connection with Radhika, the second wife of her employer. As the connection between these women—thrown together by chance—deepens, Mira sees flashes of her mother in Radhika. Radhika's crooked smile, the tuberose she wears in her hair, the *samosas* she prepares—all carry traces of Mira's mother, who died in the Bombay riots. Mira is trying to recover from the loss of her mother, who sacrificed her life to ensure her daughter's safety. Radhika ministers to Mira; she rubs oil in her hair and painstakingly prepares snacks for her. She seems to fill the void in her life by performing the maternal role. Together, they read books and widen each other's horizons. By nourishing each other's souls, they find peace and companionship. Mira, her dead mother, and Radhika are intertwined by

the "motherbond", which the poet Sue Silvermarie (1974) describes as "primitive, all-encompassing, and paramount" (p. 27). Mira, however, cannot bring herself to embrace her true feelings. Her blooming passion for Radhika seems "unnatural"; she resists the onslaught of these powerful emotions. When a distraught Radhika attempts suicide, Mira seeks to open the closed chambers of her mind. She casts aside the doubts and self-hatred sown into her mind by the judgement of others. She takes hold of her experience and views it in a new, hopeful light. Like Silvermarie (1974), she begins to "treasure and trust the drama between two loving women, in which each can become mother and each become child" (p. 27). Mira's connection with Radhika challenges heteronormative conventions.

The special connections foregrounded in Divakaruni's narratives have a soothing effect and, at times, a subversive edge. They can disregard the law: a young Indian woman develops an instant and irrepressible attachment for a lost child, whom she takes in without the knowledge of the authorities. They gently counteract the forces of hate: a yoga practitioner stabilises an artist disturbed by 9/11 and its aftermath. This paper will take a deep dive into the short story "A Perfect Life", from the collection titled *Arranged Marriage*(1995). It will look closely at the novel *Queen of Dreams*, which offers glimpses of the maternal in the interactions between strangers. The connections chosen for this analysis have a distinct maternal component, i.e., they involve holding, protection, nurturance, and what Sara Ruddick calls "attentive love". Through an application of Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking", I will examine and explicate the rationality of care that informs the interactions between strangers in Divakaruni's fiction.By forging unique connections between her characters, Divakaruni broadens the scope of what is possible. She also reveals the different ways in which the maternal can manifest itself.

The Disarming and Disruptive Nature of Mother-Love

In her fiction, Divakaruni explores the bittersweet and compelling nature of mother-love. By capturing the anguish of mothers, she gives voice to the silent strain of mothering—an activity that is often sentimentalised and simplified. In the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*(2016), which looks at the lives of three generations of women, Divakaruni describes a mother's piercing desire to protect her grown-up daughter. Sabitri, who has taken retirement and returned to her ancestral village, is rattled by her daughter's distress. Though she wants to be left alone, she cannot help responding to her daughter's call:

> The phone rang. She wasn't going to pick it up. That's what she had bought that fancy expensive answering machine for. But then there was Bela's voice, ragged. She'd been crying. What is it about children? An old need twisted in Sabitri's chest. *Protect, protect*. She lunged unwisely across the dark and banged her knee; pain shot down her leg like a fire. (Divakaruni, 2016/2017, p. 2)

What comes through here is the visceral discomfort caused by the unpredictable demands of children. Though Divakaruni points towards the darker side of motherhood, which leads to a loss of self and personal space, she does not denounce the difficult experience. She simply lays bare the aching complexity and inescapable toll of maternal work. The engulfment can, in fact, be profound and transformative:

> Women who become mothers find that it is often in the crucible of that experience, in what is in so many ways a sacrifice of self, that she touches her deepest experiences of the female self and wrestles with an angel that at once wounds and blesses her. (Lowinsky, 1992/2009, p. 66)

The pangs and demands of mothering can get in the way of focused work. Mother-love, with its overpowering force, can sideline other plans and priorities. Women often need the help of other women to cope with this strenuous challenge. In *The Last Queen*, Rani Jindan Kaur leaves her son, Dalip, in the care of her maid, Mangla, even when her breasts are

heavy with milk. She needs to pray for the recovery of her husband, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, by standing at her window all night and facing the tomb of Jhingar Shah. At this crucial hour, mother-love can become an impediment to resolute action: “If Dalip cries, [Rani Jindan] can’t think. His distress cuts into her like a saw.” (Divakaruni, 2021, p. 5). The unsparing pull of mother-love can give it a disruptivequality.

In the short story “A Perfect Life”, mother-love takes over Meera, an Indian-American woman with a flourishing career and a wonderful boyfriend, in a somewhat dramatic fashion.

She spots a boy crouched under the stairwell. His distant, huddled shape and the glint in his terrified eyes make him look like a wild animal. Though the boy barely comprehends her and even scratches her in fear, she feels compelled to take him in. Meera is ambushed by something primal and instinctive. The child’s enormous, fearful eyes and his thin, tremulous shoulders seem to elicit a caring, though not exactly tender, response. Meera’s inexplicably intense concern for an uncommunicative, somewhat aggressive, seven- or eight-year-old boy of unclear ethnicity and unknown history suggests a complex dynamic with maternal underpinnings. For the scared little child, Meera is probably a strange and forbidding figure:

> Later I would wonder how *I* must have appeared to him, a large, loud, bent-over figure in pink sweats with hair swinging wildly about her face, ordering him to *come out of there right now*, demanding *where did you come from* and *how did you get past the security door*.(Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 77)

What adds to the strangeness of the encounter is Meera’s fastidiousness—she is not the one to take in strays—and her ambivalence about motherhood. She describes the households of friendswith babies as “homes ruled by tiny red-faced tyrants with enormous lung power” (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 77). Meera, who is entirely satisfied with her seemingly perfect life, is determined to not let mother-love overpower her: “. . . I knew mother-love was real.

Real and primitive and dangerous, lurking somewhere in the female genes—especially our Indian ones—waiting to attack. I was determined to watch out for it."(Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 75). Meera's resolve is broken by the surge of mother-loveat the sight of the helpless child, who is both a perfect stranger and a vulnerable creature in need of care.Her response to this vulnerability reflects a maternal commitment to preserve a fragile being: "To be committed to meeting children's demand for preservation does not require enthusiasm or even love; it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care rather than abuse, indifference, or flight."(Ruddick, 1989/1995, p. 19). Though Meera thinks of calling the superintendent, something prevents her from handing the boy over to him. Instead of informing the authorities, she takes the responsibility of caring for the child. Though her choice is perplexing and problematic, her dedication seems to give it emotional legitimacy.

Meera suddenly loses the control that had distinguished her life from that of her friends, who are caught up in the messy process of child-rearing. She is propelled into a new territory, which brings with it a distinctive way of looking at control. This conception of control entails "respect for the independent, uncontrollable will of the other" (Ruddick, 1989/1995, p. 73). As Meera is plunged into the world of mothering, she learns to care for a boy who, though polite and obedient, has a silent will of his own. Though Meera pays assiduous attention to the boy's needs—whether it is his clothes, toys, or food—she is unable to draw him out. Her orderly life is (re)organised around the requirements of the child, whose arrival impacts Meera's relationship with her boyfriend and her performance at work. At first the child does not understand how to use the bathroom. Chaos intrudes into Meera's neat and "civilized" life (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 77). Despite her unpreparedness to take on the responsibility of a challenging young creature, she stretches herself to accommodate the boy. In a burst of inspiration, she names the boy after the demon-slaying godKrishna. Since the god was raised by a foster mother, the name seems apt. There is another important connection

between Meera and Krishna. Meera is a Bhakti saint who is said to have disregarded social conventions and devoted herself to Lord Krishna. Her *bhajans* (devotional songs) are popular across India. The rebelliousness with which Meera, the protagonist of the story, embraces Krishna seems to mirror the glorious dedication of the 16th-century mystic. Meera tries to push away the objections of her boyfriend, Richard, who feels she is too emotional to think clearly.

Feeling alone does not propel or guide Meera. What forms in her is a commitment to look after the child. This enables her to transition into a 'mother'. Mother-love turns her desire or instinct to protect into a conscious commitment to preserve, nurture and train the child—the three main activities constituting maternal practice, as defined by Ruddick. This conscious commitment is followed by attempts to become a registered foster parent. Though Richard is sceptical of Meera's growing attachment to Krishna, the boy becomes the centre of her existence. This unusual mothering experience becomes life-changing and all-consuming: "Mother-love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away. Friendship. Romantic fulfillment. Even the need for sex." (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, pp. 98–99).

When Meera bathes the child, she discovers burn marks on his back. The boy'sabused and emaciated body deepens Meera's commitment to protect him. The thought of cigarette butts being pressed into the child's back reduces Meera to tears. An awareness of the child's utter helplessness seems to tighten her bond with this fragile creature. Meera honours the requirements of preservative love. Ruddick (2007) dwells upon this concept:

> The child's physical, psychological, and moral well-being are all fragile, are all the object of preservative love. By "preservative love" I do not mean a feeling. Mothers' feelings toward their children vary from hour to hour, year to year. . . .Preservative love is an *activity* of caring or treasuring creatures whose well-being is at risk. (p. 146)

Meera cares for Krishna's physical and emotional well-being. She attends to his mind, heart and body. Krishna develops a wordless bond with Meera, who provides him with genuine and thoughtful care. The child's attachment to Meera springs from a sense of safety. The continuity of Meera's love, along with the formation of a settled routine, strengthen the mother-child dynamic. Meera takes the child to the park and reads him stories; they watch videos about animals and fly a kite. They fix the dinner together and go over the mouse story, Krishna's favourite. Despite his curious silence, Meera showers him with "attentive love".Ruddick borrows from Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch to develop the concept of attentive love. She describes it thus: "The concept 'attentive love,' which knits together maternal thinking, designates a cognitive capacity—attention—and a virtue—love. It implies and rewards a faith that . . . to the loving eye the lovable will be revealed." (Ruddick, 1989/1995, pp. 119–120). She adds: "Attention is at once an act of knowing and an act of love."(Ruddick, 1989/1995, p. 120). Through patient and loving attention, Meera is able to gain an intimate understanding of Krishna. She has an intuitive grasp of Krishna's emotional state—his slow revival and the fragility of his faith. When Ms. Mayhew, who works at the Foster Homes office, asks her to hand over Krishna, Meera has serious misgivings. Though the separation is temporary, Meera knows, deep down, that Krishna will not be able to withstand it. She can feelthe child's unspoken need for steady love. She pleads with Ms. Mayhew to let him stay with her:

> "It's just a week." I leaned forward, gripping the edge of her desk. "Can't you make an exception, please, just for one week? He's doing so well with me. He'll be terrified if he's moved to a strange place. . . ." (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 94)

Ms. Mayhew, however, turns down her request since she needs to follow certain rules. At this point, maternal thinking contrasts or clashes with the bureaucratic mode of caring: "Because bureaucracies function through routines, . . . all of the problems that present themselves to the

bureaucracy must become routine; that is, they must be standardised." (Fisher &Tronto, 1990, p. 49).Since Meera is not a registered foster parent, the rules do not permit her to keep the child with her. The rule book seems to have no guidelines to interpret, or respond to, the child's fierce protestations. Krishna is put under the care of Mrs. Amelia Ortiz, who, despite being a kindly woman, does not seem to win the child's confidence. The child's desperate attempts to hold on to Meera are overlooked. As Ms. Mayhew, along with Mrs. Ortiz, tries to loosen Krishna's tenacious grip, she offers Meera easy consolation: "'You probably won't believe it, but they often calm down right after you leave.'" (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 101). Though Ms. Mayhew's assessment is based on experience, it is a kind of generalisation. Meera's discomfiture is rooted in her understanding of Krishna, who, for her, is not just another child.

When Krishna breaks his long silence and cries "[m]ama-mama-mama" (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 102), his howl of anguish can only be heard by Meera, who feels the depths of his fear and despair. She tries frantically to return to him, wanting to offer some solace:

> "I've got to go to Krishna one last time," I said, trying to pull away from Richard. I don't know what I had in mind—a last hug, a final kiss, some word of reassurance that would keep him safe till I saw him again. But Richard wouldn't let go. (Divakaruni, 1995/1996, p. 102)

Richard does not feel the poignant urgency of Krishna's call. Ms. Mayhew does not appreciate Meera's delay in leaving since that seems to be making things difficult. Mrs. Ortiz is of the same view. They are all focused on extricating the child from Meera. That Krishna has suddenly found his voice is lost on everyone except Meera. Others are thinking of following the procedures. Meera seems to understand the pitfalls of such slavish adherence to rules. Her muted resistance to the impersonal rulesshows a tendency to think concretely, which is a cognitive style mothers develop:

> A mother attends to a *particular*[emphasis added] child and understands [him] as best she can on a given day, . . . She will eschew generalization, not only because children are very particular beings to whom she attends, but also because they confound prediction.(Ruddick, 2007, p. 157)

As it turns out, Krishna does confound everyone's prediction by fleeing from Mrs. Ortiz's home. When Krishna goes missing, Meera lashes out at Ms. Mayhew. Meera had placed the child's psychological well-being above legal procedures, which did not seem to take into account the specificity of Krishna's needs. To be given up after being taken in would have been experienced as a betrayal. Though Ms. Mayhew asserts the need to follow the law, Meera leaves to look for Krishna. She vows to not hand him over to Ms. Mayhewin case she finds him. In case of Meera, mother-love becomes both disruptive and subversive. The way in which Meera experiences and expresses the maternal in herself challenges the law as well as the primacy attached to biological motherhood.

Flickers of the Maternal in a Hostile World

Queen of Dreams examines an artistic woman's struggle to survive in a darkly competitive and rapidly changing America. Rakhi, a woman of Indian origin, runs a café, named Chai House, that pretends to have a desi feel but is devoid of authenticity. The manager of the café next door watches Chai House like a shark. As Rakhi and her team resuscitate the dying store, they create a hub of cultural activity. Rakhi's father regales Indian immigrants with old melodies from Hindi films. The café, which is revamped to resemble a genuine chai shop, helps the old men reconnect with their roots. As Rakhi's father sings, the men take out their instruments and dance to the beat. Their absorption and gusto draw others to the shop. The daily musical "ceremony" (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 194) gives the shop a unique character and flavour. A diverse bunch of people flock to the lively place:

> Word of our soirees must have traveled, for one day an African American comes in with a tall, carved drum, and a flute player who looks like he's from South America. A week later there's a hippie with a braid and a tambourine. The men eye the African American's shaved, gleaming head with curiosity. . . . But they shift around and make room for them, and nod approvingly when they hear how the new instruments add timbre to the songs. (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 195)

The shop, which is renamed Kurma House International, becomes a microcosm of a multicultural America. A sense of fellow-feeling springs up between customers, who forge a bond with the place as well as with one another. With their active cooperation, the store survives two major setbacks. While the first, a fire in the kitchen, seems to be an accident, the second is a violent attack in the wake of 9/11. Since the café attracts a truly diverse crowd, the latter is an attack on the multicultural ethos of America. The violence deals a brutal blow to Rakhi's confidence. The country she called home seems to turn its back on her. South Asian Americans are viewed with suspicion. Rakhi and her friends are labelled 'terrorists'. Sikhs, whose turbans make them look like the 'enemy', become easy targets. Rakhi's Indianness signifies 'otherness'; she is stripped of her sense of belonging.

After the attack, the musicians, who are regular customers at Kurma House, express their solidarity by forming a "protective knot" (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 275) around Jespal,the Sikh man targeted by goons masquerading as self-professed patriots. These so-called patriots assume the right to decide who is American and who is not. With these violent elements on the loose, innocent citizens are caught in the cross hairs. When the time comes to close the shop, the musicians hang around Rakhi and her team. Every day, they protect the café owners in this alert and discreet way.The way they keep an eye out for any form of trouble resembles the cognitive style, termed "scrutinising", developed by mothers in the service of protection:

> In city streets or at the beach, traveling or at home, mothers are on the lookout for dangers before they appear. Their alert, action-ready glances are often furtive, so that children [or the ones being protected] don't feel observed, and apparently intermittent, so that the mother has enough energy for a chat or a chore. (Ruddick, 1989/1995, p. 72)

The way the men protect the café owners is furtive and unobtrusive. They pack and repack their instruments, pretending to be busy. They make sure Rakhi and her friend reach the parking lot safely. They perform this daily ritual without posturing as guards or protectors. They chat casually while remaining mindful of potential threats. They watch the women get in the cars and start their engines. This "scrutinising" ensures safety without any display of machismo; it allows the daily business of life to be carried out without unnecessary fuss or alarm. Ruddick (1980) points to this extended scope of the maternal:

> For me, "maternal" is a social category: Although maternal thinking arises out of actual child-caring practices, biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient. Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring with others. (p. 346)

In one of her paintings, made as a response to the fallout ofSeptember 11 attacks, Rakhi critiques the muscular patriotism unleashed by the tragedy. This hyper-masculine assertion of "American" identity, symbolised by the waving of a giant flag, threatens to rip apart the multiracial and multicultural fabric of the country. The creative resistance to violent paranoia and reactive nationalism is followed by a meeting with "the man in white", a stranger she encounters several times.A visit to the eucalyptus grove, where she sees the man, signifies an immersion in Mother Nature. The man gives Rakhi the strength to keep swimming in rough waters. His eyes "hold [her] as a wave holds a swimmer" (Divakaruni,

2004/2005, p. 287).He is the messenger that connects her with her mother, who was chasing him in her final moments.

Before spotting him in the grove, Rakhi had struggled with the thoughts and feelings bottled up inside her: “Inside me the thoughts I’ve been battling wait like submerged rocks in a river. Even one of them can make me sink if I crash into it.” (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 285). The stranger helps her keep her balance as she practises yoga with him. When Rakhi wobbles, she reaches for him for support. It keeps her from sinking and crashing. The warm glow of the fellowship insulates her from the turmoil in her life and the larger world. She is enclosed in “a bubble that no one else can break into” (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 288). There is tenderness in this protective space. The “man in white” joins his palm over Rakhi’s as if “they were petals on the same flower” (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 290). He is calm and poised; his presence soothes and stabilises Rakhi. Through his maternal touch and gentle instructions, he teaches Rakhi the Warrior yoga posture and quietens the storm of questions brewing up in her. He shores up her inner resources and helps her channel her inner warrior.Rakhi uses the image of the web to make sense of this strange encounter:

> I stand alone, balanced, and for a split second I have the strangest sensation, as though I were a dewdrop on a web that I can’t see, a web huge beyond imagining. The man in white is another dewdrop. Right now some force—wind, gravity, planetary influence—has brought us near each other. In another moment it might push one of us away, . . . This is how it is all the time—people go skittering out of our lives, never to be found. But they’re all still somewhere on the web. (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 289).

This feeling of connectedness is both transient and enduring. The momentary companionship may be a small part of a vast and intricate web of relations. It, however, provides a spiritual anchor to Rakhi, who is floundering in a post-9/11, hate-filled world.

The vitiated atmosphere leaves its dark imprint on Rakhi's mind. Rakhi's gnawing worries about the state of the world indicate an expansion of the scope of maternal protectiveness: "[I]f the world itself seems under siege, and if that siege holds any community and all children hostage, the effort of world protection may come to seem a 'natural' extension of maternal work." (Ruddick, 1989/1995, p. 81).

Though Divakaruni does not offer a political remedy for the security crisis signalled by 9/11, she does not endorse the dropping of bombs in a far-away country. In one swift stroke, she calls attention to the dehumanising effects of war, which wastes mothers' painstaking efforts to protect minds and bodies. When Rakhi watches young American soldiers on television, she feels a visceral discomfort with the much-publicised War on Terror:

> Reporters interview American soldiers, many in their teens. Some look nervous, but everyone who's on camera declares that he or she is ready to die for America. Rakhi feels her guts twist. Their faces are so naked, so unknowing. She wonders what they'll look like by the time they come back home." (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 277)

The "naked" faces of the young soldiers testify to their raw innocence. Many of them are teenagers, too young to grasp the gravity and insanity of warfare. Rakhi shows a sturdy suspicion of the militarist enterprise they have been enlisted for. While turning maternal thinking into a resource for peace, Ruddick (1989/1995) emphasizes the need for "a sturdy suspicion of violence even in the best of causes" (p. 138). Through her gut-wrenching painting on the impact of 9/11, Rakhi registers her protest against bombing and blood-spilling.

As Rakhi contends with the ramifications of 9/11, she discovers another place of fellowship and community. The infectious energy of the club loosens Rakhi's taut nerves.The camaraderie displayed by the crowd provides an antidote to the lingering suspicion in the

air.The club becomes a space for spontaneous connection. Rakhi dances with her eyes closed.The crowd, both caring and carefree, catches her when she stumbles. She is struck by the fellowship among the clubgoers: “To go out blind among strangers, trust them to bear your weight, to not hurt you, to keep you, in fact, from getting hurt” (Divakaruni, 2004/2005, p. 305).After a period of intense alienation, Rakhi is suddenly in her element. As she moves to the beat and sheds her gnawing worries, she learns to trust again.

The fellowship that Rakhi glimpses in the club and the eucalyptus grove steadies her.In a brief meeting, “the man in white” manages to teach, soothe, stabilise, support, strengthen and heal Rakhi. This is a spiritual manifestation of the maternal. Rakhi’s mother was critical of her daughter’s distrustful nature. As Rakhi practises the Warrior posture, she feels some coil of distrust loosen inside her. The “man in white” temporarily fills the void left by her mother. Rakhi, who is constantly unravelling the mysteries surrounding her mother, learns to be satisfied with not-knowing. Rakhi speculates whether “the man in white” is a specific person or whether he is a title she imposes on people when her subconscious feels a particular need. If the man who teaches Rakhi the warrior posture is merely fulfilling an unconscious need, then it is the need for holding that he is fulfilling. Rakhi is tormented by the thoughts swirling inside her; she needs a mother figure to keep her steady and show her the way. By making her practise yoga postures, “the man in white” reorients and empowers Rakhi.

Conclusion

In her narratives, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni lays bare the complexity and overwhelming force of mother-love. Meera’s life-shaking encounter with a lost child underscores the disruptive potential of mother-love. Her truncated mothering experience reveals the significance of what Ruddick terms the “rationality of care”. Meera attacks the apathy of legal procedures, which do not address the specificity of a child’s emotional needs.

Divakaruni poignantly captures the conflict between bureaucratic and maternal thinking. Meera's concrete thinking and awareness of the child's emotional life help her to judge well. In case of Meera, the maternal is disruptive and subversive. The maternal can also be soothing, steadying and life-affirming. *Queen of Dreams* offers moments of maternal bonding. The gentle touch of "the man in white", a yoga practitioner and a spiritual figure, settles the veritable storm inside Rakhi. He becomes a mother figure in an increasingly hostile world, counteracting the toxicity with his calming influence. By bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, Divakaruni reveals newer possibilities of fellowship and varying manifestations of the maternal.

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