

Subaltern Silence and Gendered Subjectivity: Reconfiguring Traditional Motherhood in *Mai: Silently Mother*

Akanksha Singh

Research Scholar

Department of English

Banaras Hindu University

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

akanksha8853yadav@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the complex intersections of silence, identity, and maternal subjectivity within the framework of Indian patriarchy. While motherhood is often culturally celebrated as the highest form of fulfillment for women, this study argues that such idealization frequently conceals structures of coercion, sacrifice, and identity erasure. In many traditional contexts, motherhood is not a matter of individual choice but a socially imposed role, where women are expected to prioritize familial duties over personal aspirations.

Drawing on insights from Simone de Beauvoir and feminist theory, this paper situates the mother figure in *Mai* within the discourse of the “Second Sex,” highlighting how women are systematically positioned as subordinates in both public and private spheres. The novel presents the protagonist, Mai, as a figure marked by silence, yet this silence is not merely passive submission. Instead, it operates as a layered and ambiguous space where oppression, endurance, and subtle forms of resistance coexist. By reading Mai as a subaltern subject, the paper explores how her muted presence reflects broader patterns of gendered marginalization in Indian households. The study further interrogates the paradox of maternal reverence in Indian society, where mothers are symbolically elevated to divine status while simultaneously subjected to everyday control and invisibility within domestic spaces. It also examines how

motherhood contributes to the fragmentation of female identity, as women are often redefined through relational roles first as wives and later as mothers, losing autonomous selfhood in the process.

Ultimately, this paper argues that *Mai* reconfigures traditional notions of motherhood by foregrounding the tensions between silence and agency, oppression and resilience. It contends that the struggle for identity persists within the maternal role, revealing motherhood not simply as a site of fulfillment, but as a contested terrain where women continuously negotiate their existence and subjectivity.

Keywords: Motherhood, Subjectivity, Subaltern, Marginalisation, Oppression.

Introduction

Motherhood has always been regarded as one of the most important aspects of a woman's life, especially in traditional societies such as India. It is often described as something "natural" and essential to being a woman. However, this idea needs to be questioned. While childbirth is biological, the expectations attached to motherhood are largely created by society. The belief that every woman must become a mother and find complete happiness in it puts pressure on women to follow a fixed role. In many cases, motherhood is not a free choice but something that is expected from women, whether they want it or not. This creates a conflict between a woman's personal desires and societal expectations.

This research paper studies how motherhood is shown and understood in Indian society, especially through literature. It focuses on how motherhood, while often celebrated, can also lead to the loss of a woman's identity. Women are expected to sacrifice their personal dreams, careers, and even their sense of self for their families. They are often known not by their own

names but through their relationships as someone's wife or someone's mother. In this way, their individual identity slowly disappears.

In Indian culture, mothers are given a very high status. They are often compared to goddesses and seen as symbols of love, care, and sacrifice. But this respect is mostly symbolic. In reality, many women face control, pressure, and a lack of freedom within their own homes. This shows a clear contradiction: while mothers are praised in theory, they are often ignored or suppressed in everyday life. The idea of the "ideal mother" expects women to be patient, selfless, and silent, which makes it difficult for them to express their own needs and desires.

Even the way we define motherhood shows this imbalance. A mother is usually defined as a woman who gives birth and takes care of a child, while a father is simply someone who fathers the child. This shows that most of the responsibility of raising children is placed on women. As a result, women have to make more compromises in their lives. Many women who want to focus on their careers or choose not to have children face criticism and pressure from family and society. Women who cannot have children or who do not give birth to a male child are often disrespected or blamed, even though these things are beyond their control.

These issues are deeply connected to patriarchy, a system where men hold more power and authority in society. As explained by Jasbir Jain, patriarchy affects all areas of life, including family, culture, and religion. It creates rules that favor men and limit women's freedom. Women are taught to accept their roles as caregivers and to find pride in sacrifice. The idea of motherhood is often used to support these beliefs, making it seem like women should naturally accept these roles.

Feminist thinkers have challenged these ideas. Simone de Beauvoir, in her famous book *The Second Sex*, explains that women are often treated as the "Other," while men are seen as the main or "normal" subject. This means that women's identities are shaped in relation to men,

rather than being independent. She argues that society, not biology, is responsible for keeping women in a lower position. In terms of motherhood, this means that the ability to give birth is used as a reason to control women and limit their choices.

These ideas can be clearly seen in the novel *Mai*, originally written in Hindi by Geetanjali Shree in 1993 and translated into English by Nita Kumar in 2000. The novel tells the story of a middle-class Indian family and focuses on the life of the mother, known simply as “Mai.” The story is told from the daughter’s point of view, which helps us understand Mai’s life from both inside and outside. Mai is shown as a traditional mother who spends her entire life taking care of her family. She rarely speaks about her own feelings or desires and accepts everything quietly.

At first, Mai’s silence may seem like weakness. Even her children describe her as someone with a “weak spine.” But this silence is more complex than it appears. It reflects the pressure and control she has faced for years. Her silence can also be seen as a way of surviving in a system where speaking up might lead to conflict or rejection. The idea of a “weak spine” is both physical and symbolic. It shows how constant bending, both literally and emotionally, can cause lasting pain. Women like Mai, who spend their lives adjusting and compromising, often carry this pain silently.

The novel also shows how difficult it is for women to break out of these roles. When women try to speak up or change their situation, they often face resistance from their families and society. This can lead to emotional pain and isolation. At the same time, the daughter in the novel represents a new way of thinking. She questions the traditional ideas of motherhood and tries to understand her mother’s life in a different way. Through her, the novel shows that change is possible, even if it is slow.

This paper will examine how *Mai* presents motherhood not just as a role, but as a complex experience shaped by silence, sacrifice, and struggle. It will argue that Mai's silence is not just a sign of weakness but also a reflection of the limitations placed on her. By studying her character, the paper aims to show how traditional motherhood can take away a woman's identity and how women continue to struggle for their sense of self within these roles.

Motherhood in *Mai* is shown as both meaningful and challenging. It is not simply a source of happiness, but also a space where women face pressure, loss, and conflict. By looking at these issues closely, this paper tries to present a more realistic understanding of motherhood, one that includes both its emotional value and its social limitations.

Representation of Mai: Silence, Submission, and Survival

Mai is a complex character whose silence cannot be understood simply as weakness or submission. At the surface level, Mai appears to be the ideal traditional Indian mother, quiet, patient, and fully devoted to her family. She rarely speaks about her own needs, avoids arguments, and accepts everything without protest. Because of this, even her own children describe her as someone with a "weak spine." However, if we look more closely, her silence is not just a sign of helplessness. It is shaped by deeper psychological and cultural conditions, and it also becomes a way for her to survive within a patriarchal household.

Mai's silence is largely a result of long-term conditioning. She has grown up in a system where women are expected to be obedient, selfless, and calm at all times. These expectations are not always forced directly but are slowly learned through daily life. Over the years, Mai has understood that speaking up or questioning authority can disturb the peace of the family or even bring negative consequences for her. Because of this, she begins to choose silence. It becomes a habit and, eventually, a part of her personality. This shows that her silence is not natural but learned over time.

This also shows the psychological side of her silence. Mai is not someone who lacks feelings or thoughts; instead, she has learned to suppress them. After years of adjusting and compromising, she reaches a point where expressing herself feels difficult or even unnecessary. In this way, her silence becomes internalized. It is not just imposed on her from outside but also comes from within. This reflects how deeply patriarchy can affect a person's mind, shaping not only their actions but also their sense of self.

At the same time, Mai's silence is strongly influenced by cultural expectations. In Indian society, a "good" woman is often expected to be quiet, patient, and understanding. Speaking less and tolerating more are seen as qualities of an ideal wife and mother. Mai fits into this image perfectly. By remaining silent, she gains acceptance within the family and fulfills her role as a "good mother." This shows that silence is not only a personal or psychological condition but also something that is encouraged and rewarded by society.

However, it would be incorrect to see Mai's silence only as submission. Her silence also works as a form of survival. In a household where power is not in her hands, open resistance could lead to conflict, rejection, or further suffering. By staying silent, Mai avoids confrontation and manages to keep a balance within the family. Her silence helps her continue her life without creating situations that might harm her position. In this sense, silence becomes a practical choice, even if it is not a free one.

The idea of the "weak spine" in the novel is very important here. It is not just about physical weakness but also about emotional and mental bending. Mai has spent her life adjusting to others, her husband, her family, and social expectations. Just like a person who keeps bending physically may develop pain, Mai carries emotional pain from constant compromise. Yet, this bending also helps her continue. If she resisted completely, she might "break" under pressure. So, her silence and submission are closely connected to her survival.

Mai's character shows that silence is much more complex than it appears. It is not just a sign of weakness but a result of psychological conditioning and cultural expectations. At the same time, it becomes a way for her to survive in a system that does not allow her much freedom. Through Mai, the novel shows how traditional motherhood often demands not only sacrifice but also the loss of voice and identity. Silence, therefore, becomes both a limitation and a way of coping, making Mai's character deeply meaningful and realistic.

Domestic Space as a Site of Patriarchal Control

The household is not simply a place of comfort and belonging; it also functions as a space where control and power are constantly exercised. The domestic space, which is often seen as safe and nurturing, becomes a structured environment where patriarchal values are maintained and reinforced. Within this space, roles are clearly divided, and women are expected to follow certain rules without questioning them.

Mai's life is largely confined to the home, and this confinement reflects how the household itself becomes a controlling structure. She is responsible for managing daily chores, taking care of family members, and maintaining order, but she has very little say in how the household is run. Important decisions are usually made by male members of the family, while Mai's role remains limited to following instructions and fulfilling duties. This shows that even though she is central to the functioning of the home, she does not hold real authority within it.

Gender roles within the family further strengthen this control. Men are seen as decision-makers and providers, while women are expected to be caregivers and supporters. These roles are so deeply normalized that they are rarely questioned. Mai has been conditioned to accept her position, and over time, this acceptance becomes part of her identity. She does not openly challenge the system because it is presented to her as natural and necessary. In this way, the household becomes a space where inequality is not only practiced but also normalized.

This control is clearly visible in the lack of freedom Mai experiences in different aspects of her life. When it comes to decision-making, she is rarely involved in matters that shape her own life or the future of the family. Whether it is financial decisions, social matters, or family arrangements, her voice is either ignored or not sought at all. This exclusion limits her sense of agency and reinforces her dependent position within the household. Mobility is another area where Mai's freedom is restricted. Her movements are largely confined to the domestic space, and stepping outside it is neither encouraged nor seen as necessary. The home becomes both her responsibility and her boundary. This physical restriction also reflects a broader social expectation that women belong within the private sphere, while men have the freedom to move in the public world.

Similarly, Mai's freedom of expression is limited. She rarely shares her opinions, emotions, or frustrations openly. Even when she feels something deeply, she chooses silence over expression, partly because she has learned that her voice may not be valued. This lack of expression is not just a personal choice but a result of living in an environment where speaking up can disturb established norms.

Through Mai's character, the novel shows how the domestic space can quietly function as a site of control. It is not always through direct force, but through everyday practices and expectations that women's freedom is limited. The home, in this sense, becomes a place where patriarchal power operates subtly but effectively, shaping women's lives in ways that often go unnoticed.

Daughter's Perspective: Re-reading Motherhood

The narrative is largely shaped through the perspective of the daughter, Sunaina, who acts as both an observer and a participant in the family. Her viewpoint is important because it allows the reader to see Mai not just as a traditional mother but as a complex individual whose life needs to be questioned and understood. Unlike Mai, who quietly accepts her role, Sunaina

looks at her mother's life with curiosity, confusion, and often frustration. Through Sunaina's eyes, motherhood is no longer seen as something naturally fulfilling, but as something that needs to be critically examined.

As an observer, Sunaina closely watches Mai's everyday life, how she constantly adjusts, sacrifices, and remains silent even in situations where she could speak. This repeated silence begins to disturb her. Sunaina struggles to understand why her mother does not stand up for herself, especially when she is clearly being overlooked within the household. At times, this frustration becomes direct. In one imagined moment that reflects their dynamic, Sunaina questions her, "*Mai, why don't you ever say anything? Don't you feel angry?*" To this, Mai responds softly, "*What will happen if I say something? Things will only become worse.*" This brief exchange reflects the gap between the two generations, one that questions and one that has learned to endure.

Sunaina's frustration, however, is not without empathy. As the narrative progresses, she begins to look beyond the surface and tries to understand the reasons behind Mai's silence. She starts to realize that Mai's behavior is not simply a matter of choice but the result of years of conditioning within a patriarchal system. This shift from anger to understanding marks Sunaina's growth. She recognizes that Mai belongs to a different generation, one where questioning authority or expressing dissatisfaction was not easily possible. In another reflective moment, Sunaina asks, "*Did you never want something for yourself, Mai?*" Mai replies quietly, "*What I wanted.... I forgot long ago.*" This line captures the deep loss of identity that Mai has experienced over time.

Through Sunaina's perspective, the novel brings in the voice of a new generation. She represents a more aware and questioning mindset, one that is influenced by new-age feminist thinking. Unlike Mai, Sunaina is not willing to accept traditional roles without questioning them. She is more expressive and conscious of the inequalities that exist within the family. This

reflects a shift in how women begin to see themselves not just as daughters, wives, or mothers, but as individuals with their own identities and choices.

New-age feminism, as seen through Sunaina, emphasizes personal freedom, individuality, and the right to make choices. It challenges the idea that being a “good woman” means being silent and self-sacrificing. Instead, it opens up the possibility of redefining motherhood where a woman can care for her family without losing herself. Sunaina’s questioning does not reject motherhood entirely, but it pushes for a more balanced understanding of it.

At the same time, the novel does not present this shift as simple or complete. Sunaina’s frustration also highlights the gap between her expectations and Mai’s reality. While she wants Mai to speak and change, she slowly understands that such change is not easy for someone who has lived within strict boundaries for so long. This tension between wanting change and understanding limitations makes Sunaina’s perspective more realistic.

In this way, Sunaina becomes a bridge between two worlds, the traditional and the modern. She questions, reflects, and tries to reinterpret her mother’s silence. Through her, *Mai* re-reads motherhood not as a fixed role, but as something shaped by time, culture, and experience. Her voice brings in feminist awareness and suggests that change begins with questioning, even if it does not immediately transform reality.

Motherhood and Loss of Identity

Motherhood is often celebrated as a beautiful and meaningful experience in a woman’s life. It is associated with love, care, and fulfillment. However, along with this positive image, there is another side that is often ignored, the gradual loss of a woman’s identity after marriage and motherhood. In many traditional societies, a woman’s individuality slowly fades as she becomes defined by her relationships rather than by her own self.

After marriage, a woman is often identified as someone's wife. Her name and identity begin to be linked with her husband. This change becomes even stronger after she becomes a mother. She is then referred to as the mother of her children, rather than as an individual with her own identity. This shift may seem normal, but it reflects a deeper issue where a woman's personal identity is replaced by roles given to her by society. Over time, her own desires, interests, and ambitions take a back seat, and she becomes known only through her connections with others.

This loss of identity is not always forced directly; it happens slowly through everyday expectations and responsibilities. Women are expected to prioritize their families above everything else. Their time, energy, and emotions are focused on taking care of their children and maintaining the household. While this work is important, it often leaves little space for women to focus on themselves. As a result, they begin to lose touch with who they were before these roles were assigned to them.

This loss of identity is clearly visible in the character of Mai. She is known simply as "Mai," which itself shows how her personal identity has been replaced by her role as a mother. No one remembers her name, Rajjo, which highlights her lack of identity outside of her role as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. Her life revolves entirely around her family, and she rarely expresses her own desires or opinions. Over time, she becomes someone who exists for others, rather than for herself. Her silence and constant adjustment reflect how deeply she has internalized these expectations.

Mai's character shows that this loss of identity is not always questioned or resisted. For many women, it becomes a normal part of life. They accept their roles as wives and mothers without realizing how much of themselves they have given up. This makes the issue even more complex, as the loss of identity is not only imposed by society but also accepted by individuals

over time. While motherhood can bring meaning and happiness, it can also lead to the erasure of a woman's individuality.

Is Motherhood a Choice or an Obligation?

From a young age, women are taught that becoming a mother is an essential part of being a "complete" woman. Marriage is quickly followed by expectations of childbirth, and any delay often leads to questions or pressure from family members. In such situations, motherhood does not remain a free or personal choice. Instead, it becomes a duty that women are expected to perform. Society plays a major role in shaping this idea by constantly reinforcing the belief that a woman's primary role is to nurture and care for others.

Family pressure plays a crucial role in shaping women's reproductive choices, often limiting their autonomy over decisions related to motherhood. In many patriarchal settings, decisions about childbirth are not entirely personal but are influenced or even controlled by husbands and elder family members. While men are generally granted the freedom to choose when or whether to become fathers, women are rarely afforded the same authority over their own bodies. This imbalance highlights the issue of bodily autonomy, where a woman's reproductive capacity is treated as a family concern rather than an individual right.

Feminist theorists have critically examined this dynamic. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, argues that women are often reduced to their biological functions, which restricts their ability to exist as independent subjects. Similarly, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood, emphasizing how social structures control women's reproductive roles. These perspectives reveal that motherhood, in such contexts, is not always a matter of free choice but is shaped by external pressures. Consequently, women's lack of control over their reproductive lives reflects a broader pattern of gender inequality embedded within family and society.

The glorification of motherhood in India exists alongside the everyday subjugation of mothers, creating a deep contradiction within the social structure. On one hand, mothers are symbolically elevated and often compared to goddesses, seen as sources of love, sacrifice, and moral strength. On the other hand, this symbolic respect does not translate into real power or autonomy in their daily lives. Instead, many women continue to face control, limited decision-making power, and emotional invisibility within their own families. This condition can be understood as “glorification without empowerment,” where praise becomes a way to mask inequality rather than challenge it.

Indian feminist thinkers have explored this paradox in detail. Uma Chakravarti explains how patriarchy in India operates through both control and consent, where women are idealized as self-sacrificing figures but are simultaneously restricted in their roles. Similarly, Kumkum Sangari highlights how cultural traditions often romanticize women’s suffering, presenting sacrifice as a virtue rather than a condition imposed by unequal power relations. This glorification makes it difficult to question these roles, as they are seen as honorable and desirable.

Further, Nivedita Menon argues that such symbolic elevation actually works to maintain gender hierarchies. By placing women on a pedestal, society limits their movement and choices, expecting them to live up to an ideal that leaves little room for individuality or resistance. This situation becomes even more complex when we consider caste, class, and location. Women from marginalized backgrounds often experience harsher forms of control and exploitation, showing that the idea of motherhood is not experienced equally by all.

The idea of motherhood as duty rather than choice is clearly reflected in the life of Mai, whose existence is shaped almost entirely by social expectations. Mai does not actively choose motherhood as a personal desire; instead, it becomes a role she performs because it is expected of her as a wife and a woman in a traditional household. Her daily life revolves around

caregiving, household work, and emotional labor, leaving little space for her own identity. She is rarely seen making independent decisions, especially about her own body or life, which highlights how deeply normalized these expectations are.

Mai's acceptance of her role is not sudden but the result of long-term conditioning. She has internalized the idea that being a "good woman" means being a selfless mother. This reflects what Simone de Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex*, where women are reduced to their biological roles and denied full subjectivity. Mai embodies this condition, as her identity is almost entirely defined through her family. She is known simply as "Mai," which itself shows how her personal self has been replaced by her maternal role. Through Mai's character, the novel shows that motherhood, in many cases, exists less as a choice and more as an obligation, deeply rooted in cultural and familial expectations that shape a woman's identity over time.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how Mai redefines traditional motherhood through the lens of subaltern silence and gendered subjectivity. The character of Mai represents not just an individual mother, but a larger section of women whose lives are shaped by patriarchal expectations and whose voices remain unheard. Motherhood in the novel is not presented as a free or joyful choice, but as a role that is socially imposed and deeply internalized. Mai accepts this role without open resistance, which shows how normalized such expectations have become within the cultural and familial structure.

From a subaltern perspective, Mai can be seen as someone who exists within the system but does not have the power to express herself in a way that is recognized or valued. Her silence reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes when she questions whether the subaltern can truly speak. Mai's presence is constant, yet her voice remains absent in decision-making and self-expression. Her silence is imposed by patriarchal norms, but it is also internalized over time, becoming a part of her identity. This shows that subalternity is not only about external

oppression but also about how deeply it affects a person's inner world. At the same time, Mai's silence can also be understood as a form of survival. In a system where open resistance may not be possible, silence becomes a way to continue living within restrictive conditions. This makes her silence complex it is both a sign of oppression and a quiet strategy to endure it. The domestic space further strengthens this condition, as it limits her freedom in decision-making, mobility, and expression, reinforcing her marginal position within the family. Sunaina, brings a contrasting perspective that reflects new-age feminist awareness. Through her questioning, the novel re-reads motherhood and exposes the gaps between generations. While Sunaina seeks answers and change, she also begins to understand the limitations that shaped Mai's life.

In conclusion, *Mai* presents motherhood as a space where identity, silence, and power intersect. Through a subaltern lens, the novel reveals how women like Mai live within structures that deny them full subjectivity. It challenges the glorified image of motherhood and instead presents it as a complex experience marked by struggle, adjustment, and silent endurance, ultimately calling for a more critical and empathetic understanding of women's lives.

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