



Marriage, Motherhood and Cult Culture as Constructs of Patriarchy: Juxtaposing Trauma and Feminism through the Study of Avni Doshi's Female Characters in *Burnt Sugar*

¹Mahak Balchandani, ² Dr. H.K. Jha

¹Research Scholar, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Haryana, India

²Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Haryana, India

Email – mahak.balchandani@gmail.com, hkjha@ggn.amity.edu

Abstract: *One of the most harrowing, yet ubiquitous phenomena during the span of human life, is trauma. Having turned the riveting point to mental health since the last century, trauma theorists have commendably brought forth the role of trauma in literature. This paper endeavours to juxtapose feminism and trauma theory, and explore the interlaced relation between the two with the help of a Booker Prize nominated novel – Burnt Sugar, by Avni Doshi (2019). This study foregrounds the traumatic episodes braved by the dysfunctional mother-daughter duo – Tara and Antara; owing to patriarchal standards set for a wife, a mother, and a woman in general. This research strives to validate the argument that motherhood in addition to the societal constructs of marriage and cult culture have led to fixed gender roles. The paper deems that against different waves of feminism, the non-conformance to gender stereotypes still lead to catastrophic outcomes for women, as is the case with the female characters of Doshi, striving for sanity in the face of trauma.*

Keywords: *Trauma, Feminism, Patriarchy, Marriage, Motherhood, Cult Culture, Gender Stereotypes.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

“Literature is often inextricably bound up with trauma in ways we have yet to grasp.”

-Cathy Caruth, a renowned trauma theorist

Literature has been reflecting upon the lives of humans and human interactions since the beginning of the literary writings, and trauma has been an inseparable part of literary depictions. Trauma, inevitably, is a human experience, and it is more pertinent in the case of females. A good woman, quite conveniently, has always been envisioned as the one who's passive and meek. The more docile a woman, the more feminine is its spirit - perpetuates to be the ultimate paradigm. Any kind of anomaly has been treated with wrath, contempt and disdain. The paper attempts to detangle the closely knit theories of feminism and trauma along with comprehending their interwoven structure with the help of the two main female characters - Tara and Antara, of Doshi's debut novel - *The Burnt Sugar*. The study of trauma and the advent as well as effects of the rise of feminism, in relation to the text, will not only throw light upon the ways women have been oppressed by different cultural and societal elements, but also how a biological phenomenon of becoming a mother is jarred by patriarchy in many ways. In this paper, the role of marriage and cult culture, along with the compulsion and expectation of mothering, will be claimed as the constructs of patriarchy, obtruding trauma upon womankind.

2. FEMINISM AND TRAUMA THEORY :

From the advent of the first wave of feminism in the mid-nineteenth century, which for the first time demanded suffragette, to the beginning of the fourth wave focussing upon intersection and empowerment of women from all backgrounds through technology and internet; females across the world have been battling patriarchy. According to Ania Malinowska, under the fourth wave “the private and organized use of social media became a real catalyst for the fight against women's harassment, professional discrimination, media sexism, and gender shaming.” (Malinowska, 2020, 5) With advancements in the field, the centuries long trauma, which has proved itself to be detrimental to a



female's mental health, has taken the centre stage. The subjugation has taken different forms pertaining to the socio-cultural milieu of the time. As professed in the third wave postmodern feminism - pivoting oppression against women around misogyny without considering the race, post-colonial aftermath, class, caste and ethnicity would not only be undemocratic but also a case of gross generalization.

As stated by Simone de Beauvoir, the great French feminist, philosopher and novelist, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." The fixation of gender roles has more to do with the biological sex of the person, relating to the binary gender benchmarks which are highly patriarchal. "Gender is different from sex. For many people, however, these terms are used incorrectly and astonishingly interchangeably." (Jamili, Roshanzamir; 2017, 114) The rigid gender stereotypes, more often than not, have resulted in infliction of mental, emotional or physical trauma. Webster and Dunn corroborate the aforementioned, "Feminist therapists, researchers, activists and scholars have long recognized that power differentials can have serious, sometimes fatal, consequences for women and children." (Webster, Dunn, 2005, 111)

Cathy Caruth in her ground breaking work on trauma - *Recapturing the Past* defined Trauma as- "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time." (Caruth, 1995, 153) Feminism can't be completely comprehended sans feminist trauma as elaborated, "The feminist underpinnings of trauma therapy invite practitioners to understand women's mental health "symptoms" within the context of such experiences as child abuse and sexual violence that disproportionately affect women." (Tseris, E.J., 2013, 153) The intersection between feminism and trauma brought forth the discussion of women's mental health. The American Psychological Association revealed that women are twice as susceptible to mental disorders against men.

One of the pioneers of trauma theory- Sigmund Freud, initially based feminist trauma loosely around sexual exploitation, incest, child abuse and rape. The article *Sigmund Freud and The Trauma Theory* by Nasrullah Mambrol states, "Early in his career, he (Freud) assumed that a history of sexual seduction in childhood was responsible for the neurotic symptoms he observed in his patients. Gradually, however, he moved away from a one-to-one formulation of the relationship of the external to the internal world." (Mambrol, 2017) He later evolved his theory towards the concept of long repressed internal conflict. Cixious debunked Freud's stance on the 'feminine' by commenting on his theory of sexualization, "the feminine is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex." (Cixious, 1985, 69)

Feminists, world over, have recognised the role of normalized misogynistic practices in creating havoc in females' lives, and the mental disorder caused due to the trauma thus inflicted. Gender based trauma studies put feminist issues in the focal point to determine the "source of power prior to a traumatic event", that is, the "dominant culture" of patriarchy. (Jennifer Griffiths, 2018, 181). Consequently, the paper will deem gender-based trauma and feminism as two intertwined theories.

3. BURNT SUGAR - TARA & ANTARA :

Avni Dosh's novel, *Burnt Sugar*, also known as *Girl in White Cotton*, is far from a traditional take on a mother-daughter relationship. The narrative is set in Pune, India, pivoting around a non-conformist mother, Tara, who exemplifies "a paradigm change in people's perceptions of self, gender, and identity." (Chabane, 2021, 7) Her plight can be attributed, firstly, to the misogynistic gender roles expected of a woman in a matrimonial bond; secondly, to the rising cult culture preying on vulnerable women to enchant them into sexual submission; and lastly to the patriarchal confines of motherhood which utterly suffocated her. "Ma always ran from anything that felt like oppression. Marriage, diets, medical diagnosis." (Doshi, 2019, 63) The aforementioned trauma induced grievous damage to Tara's mental health, making her prone to mental disorders and, finally, dementia.

Tara named her daughter 'Antara' with a prefix 'an' added to her own name. This had more to do with the void and gloom she lived in, and didn't wish for her daughter. "She named me Antara, intimacy, not because she loved the name but because she hated herself. She wanted her child's life to be as different from hers as it could be. Antara was Un-Tara, and hence, Antara would be unlike her mother. But in the process of separating us, we were pitted against each other." (Doshi, 2019, 244)



Antara, who's also the narrator of the novel, shares a twisted relationship with her mother. This becomes evident from the word go - "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure." (Doshi, 2019, 8) In the former half of the narrative, she finds herself victimized due to her mother's unconventional choices, challenging the stereotypes and often humbling herself in the process. However, as the plot unfolds, Antara herself is shown navigating through her marriage as well as postpartum depression, starting to resonate with her mother's refusal of "self-abnegation". (Routray, 2022, 54) "Sometimes I hate being married. Sometimes I think I am becoming my mother." (Doshi, 2019, 207) Sushree Routray further corroborates, "The novel oscillates between the daughter internalising the ideologies of patriarchy and acknowledging her mother's humanity." (Routray, 2022, 54)

4. MOTHERHOOD :

The patriarchal standards highlighting the panoramic view of an ideal mother, claims that the ultimate purpose of womankind is to rear children. However, the modern authors and feminists contradict it strongly, "the assumption, which emphasizes the necessity of motherhood for all women, regardless of their private motives or ambitions, should be carefully questioned, if not altered. They disqualify the notion that all women have an inherent maternal instinct, and hence, should be considered as the *raison d'être* of their existence." (Chabane, 2021, 35) Any woman's digression towards self-actualization is far from any comprehension and invites reprobation that eventually leads to trauma. "Modern authors regard motherhood as a form of slavery or subjugation or a patriarchal constraint that confines a woman to domesticity." (Chabane, 2021, 34)

The novel has a unique take on motherhood that is far from a traditional one. Tara is not an ideal mother to Antara in a conventional sense, as she puts her wants and life choices over her role as a mother. "Through the representation of Tara, Doshi shatters the idea of the perfect universal motherhood. She humanises mothers and shows the flip side of any imposed social and gender role." (Roy, 2023, 112) Tara's endeavours against the traditional structure of the Indian society, that is, from the role of a typical wife and mother, invites scorn from her own daughter - "I suffered at her hands as a child and any pain she subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption." (Doshi, 2019, 1). Having been left unattended and starving at the ashram, the narrator of the novel, Antara, condemns her straying mother. She, later, savours her mother's miseries while taking care of her, as a reparation for the wrongs done to her. This gives shape to a distraught relation between the two.

She keeps her past affair a secret, and encashes upon her mother's dementia as an excuse for not remembering him. She inconspicuously feeds sugar to Tara, to make her unmindful with an aim to avoid confrontation, after she recognised Reza in Antara's drawings. "I set the table with biscuits, bread and jam... Her descent into the abyss is fast. I spoon sugar into her afternoon tea and stir..." (Doshi, 2019, 228-229) This heightened the dysfunctionality brought amidst the mother-daughter duo by the men around them. Her father's initial indifference and then chosen absence from her life, played an indispensable role in adding to the cumulative trauma inflicted upon her since early childhood. "... he divests himself of responsibility or choice in all past, current or future situations..." (Doshi, 2019, 36) Taking care of her sick old mother, with whom she had always shared a twisted relationship, made her lose a sense of self, her identity. "...I haven't started to fathom the danger I'm in, how my own grasp on reality is being shredded." (Doshi, 2019, 207)

5. CULT CULTURE :

The role of primarily male-dominant cult culture inflicting trauma on a person's psyche is clearly stated by Gillie Jenkinson in *An Investigation into Cult Pseudo-Personality: What Is It and How Does It Form?*, "A cult ... systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, exploits members to advance the leadership's goals, and causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community." (Jenkinson, 2008, 201) Finding herself a guru - 'baba', who seemed to be a ray of hope and a way out of a loveless marriage, Tara was utterly bewitched by the doctrinal cult culture. Antara, calling guru a 'giant', was at a loss with her mother's fascination with the man which made Tara utterly indifferent to her daughter. "'Ma! Ma! Ma!' I am flapping my wings, but she doesn't notice... I slap ma's leg with my hand, and she looks down at me and pushes me away." (Doshi, 2019, 75)

The time Antara spent at the ashram, aloof, sick, bewildered, starving and lying on the damp mattress, left a mark on the child's psyche. "Ma doesn't know. I never told her that for a portion of my childhood I was always hungry and have been searching for some fullness ever since." (Doshi, 2019, 114) Witnessing sexual submission and victimization of women by philandering cult of men at the ashram, marred her psyche for good. "Most people at the ashram were dabblers... They were promiscuous in their beliefs like fickle lovers." (Doshi, 2019, 104) Cult Culture is yet again an example and a byproduct of patriarchy; vandalizing women, their identity and their psychological equilibrium. As stated



by Lalich in 1996, “sexual exploitation of women in cults of all types is widespread, and, to date, is possibly the least talked about, and certainly the least researched, aspect of cult life”. (Lalich, 1996, 7-8)

Being a spectator to her mother’s debauched involvement with the cult chief and the other horrifying instances borne by a mere child, bears witness to trauma getting interlaced with feminist issues. ““I realised that it’s no small thing, ‘she said. ‘To be the lover of a great man.’(guru) I told her that to me it looked small, cheap even, and was definitely nothing to brag about. She grabbed me by my arms and shook me before slapping my face. ‘You’re a fat, little bitch. Have some sympathy! I became a widow today!’” (Doshi, 2019, 175)

6. MARRIAGE :

The narrative unveils Tara exiting her unhappy marriage to head to the ashram, exposing her to sexual exploitation, homelessness and eventual dementia. Tara’s rebellion against the norms are evident from the conversation Antara had with her maternal grandmother - “...at fourteen and fifteen, disappearing from school every afternoon to a roadside restaurant... she would order a large beer and drink straight from the bottle... she would dig out a packet of Gold Flake cigarettes and smoke one after the other...”. (Doshi, 2019, 43-44)

Many efforts were made by everyone around Tara to make her an object of fancy for her husband, but all went in vain. She felt encaged in her “backwards new family” (Doshi, 2019, 51) Bhushan Sharma comments on a traditional Indian arranged marriage, “In an arranged marriage, a woman is considered an object who is not allowed to have any aspirations, desires, or interests but acts as an unpaid servant who shoulders the domestic chores.” (Sharma, 2023, 9) Trying to earn her husband’s affection, while dreaming to relocate to America alone with him, turned out to be a frustrating time for her. The transitory fairy-tale made her feel aloof and dejected. “The depth of ma’s gloom and her alienation from her family made her lonely and desperate.” (Doshi, 2019, p.54) Tara’s non adherence to her mother-in-law’s whims and her husband’s indifference led to their divorce after four years of their wedding, with him finding a new wife shortly after. Sharma further adds, “Indian women belonging to a male dominated society based on traditional matrimony have no choice other than to endure subjugation, marginalization, and disregard from their husbands.” (Sharma, 2023, 11)

Antara, while going through the wedding pictures of her parents, distastefully calls it “sanctioned kidnapping”. Doshi, here through Antara, comments satirically on traditional Indian weddings calling out the misogynist elements involved- “real work, the import of dowry and daughter”, “women congregating in fear, ... men dawdling with downturned mouths”, “by morning the girl will be transformed... She finds herself alone... mourning an end that did not culminate in death.” (Doshi, 2019, 49) When Antara divulges details of her mother’s diagnosis of dementia to her father, Tara’s ex-husband, he shows indifference and washes his hands off any potential responsibility that may lay on him. “He divests himself of responsibility or choice in all past, current or future situations...” (Doshi, 2019, 36)

Marriage being attributed to domestication of women, didn’t fail to leave a sour taste in Antara’s mouth as well, as stated in an article in *NY Times*, “Antara’s husband, betraying how little he understands her, says she can make art in their guest room because he likes the idea of her “being at home all day,” she isn’t afraid to push back.” (Thammavongsa, 2021) Antara seemed to be entirely possessed with the idea of love, not with her husband but with her mother’s former lover, Reza, as she continually tries to redraw his limb. She is involuntarily riveting her art around him and avoids all kinds of inquiries by her husband upon the same. The “superstitious nonsense” (Doshi, 2019, 18) that played up right before her wedding involving Antara marrying and then divorcing an idol, following the lie by her husband about her mother’s divorce to make it sound “less controversial” (Doshi, 2019, 24) lays a wobbly foundation of their marriage as well. Sharma later states, “ The age-old, traditional institution of marriage subjugates women under the guise of matrimony, providing women only a house to live in and a family at the price of her identity.” (Sharma, 2023, 11)

The end of the novel unexpectedly puts Antara into her mother’s shoes, contemplating reluctantly about her own marriage and motherhood. This suggests that both of Joshi’s characters naturally rebelled against the societal conditioning of localizing women as nurturers of a family unit. Any digression towards self-actualization is far from



any comprehension and invites reprobation that eventually leads to trauma. “Modern authors regard motherhood as a form of slavery or subjugation or a patriarchal constraint that confines a woman to domesticity.” (Chabane, 2021, 34)

7. CONCLUSION :

Doshi's female characters are not conventionally feminine, for they are not naturally attuned to marriage and maternity. Their identity is not defined by the gender stereotypical roles, generally been attributed to women since the time immemorial. They unremittingly endure traumatic episodes for their non-submission to the conventional prototypes of a wife and a mother. The sexual submission of Tara at the ashram, witnessed by Antara as a child, led the former to a life on the streets as a beggar, eventually developing dementia; and impaired Antara's view of self, the world, of a mother and that of a romantic relationship. The feminist issues brought forth, exemplify the trauma endured by the fair sex due to the issues which are unanimously considered innate or biological by the patriarchal society. Through all the four waves of feminism, the bruising of a female's psyche due to misogynist upheavals have been put through a critical lens. Thus, the trauma theory is highly interlaced with feminism.

REFERENCES:

Books:

1. Doshi, Anvi (2019). *'Burnt Sugar'*. United Kingdom, Hamish Hamilton.

Secondary Sources:

1. Malinowska, Ania. (2020). Waves of Feminism. 1-7. 10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc096. University of Silesia, Poland
2. Baradaran Jamili, Leila & Roshanzamir, Ziba. (2017). Postmodern Feminism: Cultural Trauma in Construction of Female Identities in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. 8. 114. 10.7575/aiac.all.v.8n.4p.114.
3. Webster, Denise & Dunn, Erin. (2005). Feminist Perspectives on Trauma. *Women & Therapy - WOMEN THER*. 28. 111-142. 10.1300/J015v28n03_06.
4. Caruth, Cathy (1995). *'Recapturing The Past- Introduction'*. United States, Johns Hopkins University Press.
5. Tseris, Emma. (2013). Trauma Theory Without Feminism? Evaluating Contemporary Understandings of Traumatized Women. *Affilia*. 28. 153-164. 10.1177/0886109913485707.
6. Mambrol, Nasrullah . (2017). Sigmund Freud and the Trauma Theory <https://literariness.org/2017/06/21/sigmund-freud-and-the-trauma-theory/>
7. Cixous, Helene; Cohen, Keith & Cohen, Paula. (1976). *The Laugh of the Medusa*. The University of Chicago Press
8. Griffiths, Jennifer. (2018). Trauma and Literature. Chapter-12, *Feminist Interventions in Trauma Studies*. Cambridge University Press
9. Chabane, Houria. (2021). Dysfunctional Mother – Daughter Relationship in Avni Doshi' *Burnt Sugar*. University of Biskra. <http://archives.univ-biskra.dz/handle/123456789/18499>
10. Routray, Sushree. (2022). Lived Experience and Ambiguity: Reconstructing Motherhood through the lens of Feminist Killjoy in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*. Vol. 23 (2022): *Re-Imagining Literatures of the World: Global and Local, Mainstream and Margins*. ICLA
11. Roy, Sneha (2023). Exploring Memory and Motherhood in Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton: A Detailed Book Review*. Page No: 108-112. *Interlocutor Journal*, Vol-2, (December, 2023)
12. Jenkinson, Gillie (2008). An Investigation into Cult Pseudo Personality: What Is It and How Does It Form?. *Cultic Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3.
13. Lalich, Janja (1996). Dominance and submission: The psychosexual exploitation of women in cults. *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1.
14. Sharma, Bhushan (2023). Changing Ideologies of Marriage in Contemporary Indian Women's Novels. *Journal of International Women's Studies*. Vol. 25 Iss. 3 [2023], Art. 9
15. Thammavongsa, Souvankham. (2021). Her Mother Is Losing Her Mind but Not Her Talent for Humiliation. *NY Times*