

Unmothering the Nation: Female Subjectivity and the Maternal Body in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (2020)

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Abstract

Avni Doshi's Booker Prize–shortlisted novel *Burnt Sugar* (2020) unsettles the sanctified figure of the Indian mother, replacing devotion with doubt and tenderness with resentment. This paper examines how the novel's narrator, Antara, and her mother, Tara, dramatize what feminist theorists call maternal ambivalence, the coexistence of love and hostility within the maternal bond, against the backdrop of a culture that elevates motherhood to a near-sacred civic duty. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and recent Indian feminist scholarship on maternal fiction, the paper argues that Doshi performs a deliberate “unmothering”: a narrative strategy that strips motherhood of its nationalist and mythic associations, echoed in tropes such as Bharat Mata, and relocates it within the fallible, desiring, forgetful female body. Reading Tara's encroaching dementia, Antara's compulsive self-portraiture, and the novel's unreliable, embodied narration, the paper shows how Doshi reframes memory and the body as unstable archives of female subjectivity rather than vessels of inherited virtue. Ultimately, *Burnt Sugar* emerges as a text that refuses redemptive closure, insisting instead that daughters, like nations, inherit not purity but a complicated, embodied history.

Keywords: *maternal ambivalence; female subjectivity; memory and dementia; Indian English fiction; body politics; nation and motherhood*

Introduction

Motherhood in the Indian cultural imagination has rarely been permitted to be an ordinary human experience. From the maternal iconography of Bharat Mata to the domestic ideal of the self-sacrificing mother enshrined in myth, cinema, and everyday speech, the mother figure in India tends to be received less as a woman than as an institution, a repository of national virtue that must remain untouched by doubt, anger, or desire. Avni Doshi's debut novel *Burnt Sugar*, published in 2020 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize, disturbs this inheritance with unusual candour. Narrated by Antara, a visual artist caring for her mother Tara as Tara's memory dissolves under dementia, the novel refuses to sentimentalise either the daughter's devotion or the mother's decline. Instead, it stages a relationship built on resentment, rivalry, and unresolved harm, and it does so through a narrator whose own reliability is repeatedly called into question.

This paper argues that *Burnt Sugar* performs what can be called an “unmothering” of the maternal figure: a deliberate narrative undoing of the cultural scaffolding, religious, nationalist, and domestic, that has historically sanctified Indian motherhood. Doshi accomplishes this unmothering

through two interlinked strategies. First, she grounds motherhood insistently in the body, in appetite, illness, forgetting, and physical intimacy, rather than in abstract virtue. Second, she structures the novel around unreliable, embodied memory, so that the reader, like Antara, can never be certain which version of the past is true. Together these strategies produce a portrait of female subjectivity that is fragmented, ambivalent, and resistant to the redemptive arcs that dominant cultural narratives typically impose on mothers and daughters alike.

Theoretical Framework: Ambivalence, Abjection, and the Maternal Body

Adrienne Rich's foundational distinction between motherhood as “institution” and motherhood as “experience” offers a useful entry point into Doshi's project. For Rich, the institution of motherhood is a patriarchal construction designed to keep women's reproductive and nurturing labour under male control, while the experience of mothering is a lived, embodied, and often contradictory reality that the institution works hard to obscure (Rich). Indian cultural nationalism has historically fused these two registers with particular force, casting the mother as both a literal parent and a symbol of the nation itself. Feminist scholars of Indian fiction have noted how this fusion leaves little room for mothers, or daughters who might criticise them, to express anger, boredom, or ambivalence without appearing to betray the nation along with the family.

The concept of maternal ambivalence, developed across psychoanalytic and feminist scholarship, names the simultaneous presence of love and hostility within the maternal bond, a coexistence that mainstream culture typically forces into silence. Recent scholarship on *Burnt Sugar* has drawn directly on this framework, arguing that the novel dares to voice what is otherwise treated as unspeakable in the Indian context: a mother's resentment of her child, and a daughter's resentment of the mother who failed to protect her (Routray et al. 406-08). This paper builds on that reading but extends it toward a more explicitly political register, asking how the unmothering of Tara and Antara also unsettles the nationalist and mythic scaffolding that historically supports the sanctified Indian mother.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is equally instructive here. Kristeva describes the abject as that which the self must expel to maintain its boundaries, and she locates the maternal body as a primary site of this expulsion, since it is both the origin of the self and a reminder of the self's own dissolution and mortality (Kristeva). Doshi's novel repeatedly stages this abjection literally: through descriptions of illness, incontinence, spoiled food, and the decaying body of a mother who no longer recognises her daughter. The maternal body in *Burnt Sugar* is thus never simply nurturing; it is also frightening, repulsive, and finally unknowable, which is precisely what allows the novel to resist idealisation.

The “Good Mother” Unmade: Antara, Tara, and the Refusal of Sentiment

From its opening pages, *Burnt Sugar* refuses the conventions of the redemptive caregiving narrative. Antara does not describe caring for her ailing mother with tenderness; she describes it with something closer to clinical detachment, occasionally shading into satisfaction at Tara's helplessness. This is a significant departure from the dominant literary and cinematic script of Indian filial duty, in which a daughter's care for an ageing parent is framed as an uncomplicated

moral good, an enactment of dharma that redeems whatever conflict came before. Doshi instead allows Antara to admit that she sometimes withholds affection deliberately, that she catalogues her mother's failures rather than her virtues, and that she is not entirely sure whether she wants Tara to recover her memory or lose it completely.

This refusal of sentiment operates in both directions. Tara herself, as remembered by Antara, was not a conventionally devoted mother. She left her husband and daughter to join an ashram and pursue a relationship with a guru, prioritising her own spiritual and erotic desires over the domestic role assigned to her. In the retrospective narrative, Tara's rebellion left Antara neglected, sometimes literally hungry, and exposed to instability that shaped her adult anxieties around food, attachment, and trust. By allowing both women to fail the maternal ideal, Doshi denies the reader a single villain and a single victim; instead, ambivalence circulates between generations, becoming less an individual failing than a structural inheritance. Scholarship on the novel has described this pattern as an interrogation of "the interspace between daughter-centricity and matrifocality," a narrative space in which neither the mother's nor the daughter's perspective is granted uncontested authority (Routray et al. 406).

What makes this refusal politically significant is its context. In a culture where public discourse rarely tolerates open criticism of mothers, and where maternal self-sacrifice is treated as a natural rather than constructed virtue, Antara's admissions function as a quiet act of transgression. Doshi does not moralise about this transgression; she simply lets it stand, unresolved and unapologised for, which is itself a formal argument against the expectation that maternal narratives must end in reconciliation.

The Body as Archive: Dementia, Memory, and the Unreliable Self

Tara's dementia is the novel's most powerful device for relocating motherhood within the body rather than within myth. As Tara's memory deteriorates, the narrative repeatedly stages moments in which she forgets Antara's name, mistakes her for someone else, or reverts to fragments of her earlier, pre-maternal self. This erosion of memory literalises what the novel implies throughout: that the self, maternal or otherwise, is not a stable moral essence but an accumulation of remembered acts, vulnerable to erasure, revision, and dispute. Recent criticism has read this dementia narrative as a way of dramatising how memory itself becomes a contested inheritance between mother and daughter, since Antara's own recollections of childhood neglect can no longer be verified or challenged by the person who lived through them alongside her.

Antara's response to her mother's forgetting is not simply grief; it is also anxiety about her own reliability as a narrator and as a self. Trained as a visual artist, Antara compulsively draws self-portraits, producing an obsessive visual archive of her own face across time. This practice mirrors and inverts her mother's condition: where Tara is losing the ability to hold a continuous image of herself, Antara is trying, almost pathologically, to fix one. Yet the novel undercuts this attempt at fixity by repeatedly revealing gaps and contradictions in Antara's own account of the past, so that the reader cannot be certain whether Tara neglected Antara as severely as Antara claims, or whether Antara's narrative has been shaped by resentment and selective memory. The body, in other words, becomes an archive that is at once intimate and untrustworthy, storing experience in

ways that resist clean, verifiable narration.

This narrative unreliability is not a flaw in the novel's construction but its central argument. By refusing to stabilise either woman's memory, Doshi suggests that female subjectivity, particularly maternal subjectivity, cannot be adequately represented through the linear, redemptive plots typically available to it in dominant culture. Instead, subjectivity in *Burnt Sugar* is episodic, sensory, and frequently self-contradicting, closer to the actual experience of embodied memory than to any coherent myth of motherhood.

Unmothering the Nation: Domesticity, Rebellion, and Political Allegory

Doshi situates the mother-daughter relationship within a Pune household whose fortunes and anxieties are shaped by India's broader political transformations, including the rise of Hindu nationalist politics in the background of the narrative's present. Although the novel is not primarily a political allegory, its domestic drama gains resonance when read alongside the symbolic role that the mother figure has long played in Indian nationalist discourse. The trope of *Bharat Mata*, the nation imagined as a devoted, suffering mother, has historically demanded that individual women absorb and perform an idealised maternal virtue on behalf of the collective. Tara's early rebellion, her abandonment of domestic duty for an ashram and a lover, can be read as a refusal of precisely this demand: a woman declining to serve as a vessel for either familial or national virtue.

Antara's adult ambivalence toward her own approaching motherhood extends this refusal into the next generation. Pregnant for much of the novel's second half, Antara experiences her pregnancy not as fulfilment but as a source of dread, uncertain whether she is capable of, or even interested in, the selfless devotion her culture expects of her. This anxiety allows Doshi to unmother the nation in a second sense: by depicting a young Indian woman who approaches motherhood as a site of ambivalence rather than destiny, the novel quietly resists the idea that womanhood and nationhood are best expressed through willing maternal self-erasure. As one review of the novel observes, *Burnt Sugar* interlaces intergenerational maternal trauma with the wider political climate to suggest that individuals are conditioned to repeat the unresolved patterns of the past, whether familial or national, unless those patterns are named and examined.

It is worth noting that this political resonance remains understated in the text; Doshi does not stage explicit nationalist rhetoric or direct political commentary. Rather, the allegorical charge emerges from juxtaposition, from placing a story of maternal failure and ambivalence within a setting where maternal iconography carries unusually heavy ideological weight. This restraint is itself significant: by declining to moralise or explain, Doshi lets the domestic and the national resonate with each other without collapsing one into the other, preserving the novel's primary commitment to psychological rather than polemical realism.

Cyclical Inheritance: Antara as Mother, Repetition and Rupture

The novel's final movement, in which Antara becomes a mother herself, refuses to offer the reassurance that generational cycles of harm can be simply broken by awareness or good intention. Antara's fear that she will repeat her own mother's failures, that she will neglect, resent, or abandon

her daughter as Tara once abandoned her, is never fully resolved. Doshi leaves open the possibility that maternal ambivalence is not an aberration to be cured but a structural condition of mothering itself, one that recurs across generations regardless of a daughter's determination to mother differently. This refusal of narrative closure is consistent with the novel's larger project: *Burnt Sugar* is less interested in offering solutions to maternal ambivalence than in insisting on its reality and its right to be represented.

At the same time, the novel does gesture toward a modest form of rupture. Antara's willingness to name her mother's failures, to draw and redraw her own face, and to narrate her ambivalence openly rather than suppress it, constitutes a kind of agency that Tara, constrained by an earlier and more rigid cultural moment, did not have full access to. The unmothering that Doshi performs, stripping motherhood of its sanctified, silent virtue, does not resolve the pain of the mother-daughter relationship, but it does make that pain speakable, which the novel implies is itself a meaningful, if incomplete, form of change.

Conclusion

Burnt Sugar dismantles the sanctified Indian mother not through polemic but through the patient accumulation of bodily, sensory, and psychologically ambivalent detail. By grounding motherhood in illness, appetite, forgetting, and artistic obsession rather than in inherited virtue, Avni Doshi relocates maternal subjectivity within the fallible, desiring body, and by structuring her narrative around unreliable, embodied memory, she denies both her characters and her readers the comfort of a single, verifiable truth about who failed whom. Read alongside feminist theories of maternal ambivalence and abjection, and against the backdrop of a culture that has long conflated motherhood with national virtue, the novel emerges as a quiet but insistent act of unmothering: a refusal to let the maternal figure remain a symbol rather than a woman. In doing so, *Burnt Sugar* contributes to a broader shift in contemporary Indian English fiction, in which women writers increasingly claim the right to represent motherhood not as destiny or duty but as a contested, embodied, and unresolved experience.

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