

# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Maternal Ambivalence in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*

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## Abstract

Scholars and philosophers of motherhood studies have continuously highlighted the contradictions in the dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood and the lived experiences of mothers. While the ideologies define the mother as selfless, unconditional, and unequivocal in her love for her children, the actual experience, psychological and sociocultural studies reveal, is often permeated with negative, violent, and conflicting emotions towards children, known as maternal ambivalence. In India, where the idealisation blatantly spills over to deification, voicing such feelings becomes sacrilegious. This paper attempts to study how the novel *Burnt Sugar* (2020) by Avni Doshi dares to speak the “unspeakable” and demonstrates maternal ambivalence as resulting from a combination of psychological, social, and cultural factors. The analysis looks at how the text negotiates the interspace between daughter-centricity and matrifocality in women’s writing by giving voice to ambivalences on both sides of the mother’s experience—of mothering and being mothered. Ultimately, this study investigates the manner in which these feelings, which are not acknowledged within cultural conceptions of the mother, result in ambivalence and trauma across generations.

**Keywords:** daughter-centricity; maternal ambivalence; matrifocality; mothering; transgenerational trauma



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## Introduction

The introduction to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* begins with her statement that she felt compelled to write on the theme when she realised that "there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we are trying to conform" (Friedan 1963, 39). Adrienne Rich wrote about a similar cleavage between two meanings of motherhood, one formed by experience and the other imposed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood (1976, 13). Dominant ideologies about motherhood do not always align with the lived experience of women; they idealise mothers as selfless, their love as unconditional, and the experience of motherhood as being invariably gratifying to all women. This apotheosis of motherhood is perhaps most prominent in India, where the concept is deeply embedded in its history of nationalism, freedom struggle, and independence centred on the image of *Bharat Mata*.<sup>1</sup> Though the conception of the nation as the mother invoked by her patriotic sons is not new, the image of *Bharata Mata* is still reappropriated to maintain social organisations of gender in the country today and insists on motherhood as an "essentializing signifier of womanhood and femininity" (Bagchi 2017, 12). Writer and activist Amrita Nandy coined the term "mater-normativity" (2017, 60) to refer to this cultural paradigm that mandates motherhood and leads to an "overwhelming maternalisation of female identity" (2017, 60). Deifying motherhood in cultural ideologies, mater-normativity not only identifies all women as mothers but also forces them to mother in ways that it prescribes; it does not accommodate maternal subjectivities that challenge its tenets. Maternal ambivalence, characterised by emotions such as anger, resentment, and regret, is an experience common to all mothers (Parker 2005, 18). However, cultural ideologies of motherhood stigmatise these feelings, causing mothers to suppress them under what Susan Maushart calls the "mask of motherhood," which conceals the realities of motherhood "carefully shrouded in silence" (2000, 5). It propagates an idealised notion of motherhood that is humanly unachievable, forcing mothers to grapple with feelings of shame and guilt (Parker 2012, 95). The story of the mother remains the "unspeakable plot" in women's writing, where the silent mother is the object of the child's subject formation but never the subject herself (Hirsch 1989, 3). This tendency is referred to as "daughter-centricity" (Daly and Reddy 1991, 2) as opposed to "matrifocality" (O'Reilly and Caporale-Bizzini 2009, 10–11; Podnieks 2019, 176) that foregrounds the subjectivity of mothers. This paper examines how Avni Doshi's debut novel *Burnt Sugar* (2020) unmask motherhood in its unflinching exploration of maternal ambivalence. First, it analyses how the text, by rendering voice to ambivalences in both sides of the mother's story, of mothering and being mothered, negotiates the interspace between daughter-centricity and matrifocality in women's writing. Second, it argues

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1 The symbol of *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India, represents the personification of India as a nurturing and protective mother figure. The image modelled on upper-caste Hindu goddess iconographies is both patriarchal and casteist. Erasing the distinctions between mother and nation, it elevates the concepts to the realm of spirituality, to be protected and worshipped by the soldier son and the women, seeing themselves as bound by tradition, are urged to aim towards an ideal future as mothers of the nation's progeny.

that ambivalence in mothering largely arises from the sociocultural location of the individual. Finally, it looks at how these feelings, which go unvalidated in the cultural imageries of the mother, lead to transgenerational ambivalence and trauma.

## From Daughter-Centricity to Matrifocality

Postcolonial feminist scholarship in India has produced significant work criticising the patriarchal underpinnings of nationalism and the mother goddess iconographies that continue to equate women's merit to the extent of their self-abnegation. Sangeeta Ray's *En-gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (2000), Sumathy Ramaswami's *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (2010), and Jasodhora Bagchi's *Interrogating Motherhood: Theorizing Feminism* (2017) are important in this regard. However, works that delve into the experiential and material aspects of motherhood have been sparse, especially ones that accommodate realities as complex as maternal ambivalence. In fiction, postcolonial women writers like Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, and Jhumpa Lahiri, have explored the inner lives of women, including mother-daughter relationships—a theme alien to mainstream Indian literature till then. However, these writings talked about mothers either in terms of their absence (owing to death or pursuit of desires separate from their domestic role) or ambivalence of the daughter towards the distant and son-preferring mothers. In these texts, the mother is the feared and hated object of the daughter's story but never the subject. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy use the term “daughter-centricity” to emphasise this tendency of feminist writing and criticism to favour the daughter's experience of being mothered to the mother's experience of mothering (1991, 2). Such texts alienate the mother, whose role and responsibilities are already fraught with contradictions and challenges in a patriarchal social setup. Theorists like Andrea O'Reilly (2009), Silvia Caporale-Bizzini (2009), and Elizabeth Podnieks (2019) emphasise the need to write and read more “matrifocal literature” instead. Podnieks defines matrifocal literature as “written and narrated by mothers ... rendering maternal identity and experience from subjective perspectives ... they (re)value the significance and meaning of maternal figures in cultural, social, and national arenas, and often contest or negotiate traditional ideologies of the ‘good’ mother ... with her antithesis, the ‘bad’ mother” (2019, 176). *Burnt Sugar* closes the chasm between daughter-centricity and matrifocality through its unrelenting investigation of the mothering experience that offers a nuanced portrayal of both the “bad” mother and the child she mothers.

Doshi, in an interview, states how talking about mother-child relationships and their conflicts is still uncomfortable as maternal love and certitude are taken for granted. She says, “Ambivalence in a mother is too dangerous for the culture to integrate – a relationship understood as original and natural should be automatic, a reflex, and there is very little room for complexity. It comes down to how much agency a woman is supposed to have and what feelings she is allowed” (The Booker Prizes, n.d.). She dares to speak the “unspeakable” when she lays bare these complexities in her novel at a level

and scope unprecedented in women's writing from India. It explores the many uncertainties, ambivalences, and betrayals of the love relationship between a mother, Tara, and her daughter, Antara, who cannot conform to the cultural assumptions of motherhood.

*Burnt Sugar* reads like a daughter-centric text in the first half; it is narrated by the daughter. It is in terms of the protagonist Antara's ambivalence towards what she presents as a negligent, abusive, and emotionally unavailable mother, Tara, that we interpret the latter's "deficient" mothering. This is until Antara herself becomes pregnant, which unravels to her the realities of mothering that subsume her in feelings of violence, guilt, and shame, and she starts narrating not just as a daughter but also as a mother. Tara and Antara share a complicated relationship fraught with mistrust and insecurities. Antara becomes the caretaker of her abusive, ever-so-critical, and incorrigible mother, who is losing her memory to what is suspected to be an early onset of Alzheimer's disease; abandoned by her father and largely neglected and abused by her mother, Antara is confounded by her new role. She is affected by conflicting feelings to protect her mother and to hasten her deterioration as revenge for all the times Tara had left her feeling neglected and wanting. In this reversion of roles, Antara fares no better than Tara, who, despite her disease, is still imperious and critical. Tara's resentment towards her mother pervades the entire novel, and the tone is set in the first line, "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 2020, loc. 13 of 4080, Kindle). As we read on, we find that the antagonism is mutual. Tara's response to the helpful notes Antara leaves around the house is, "I cannot believe any child of mine could have such bad handwriting" (Doshi 2020, loc. 38 of 4080, Kindle). Antara's recollections of her past are primarily about her mother's neglect and abuse: "There were pinches, slaps, kicks, beatings, though I now cannot remember what they were in retaliation for. ... they were accompanied by surprise, fear, and a feeling that lasted beyond the pain of impact, cauterizing me from inside out" (Doshi 2020, loc. 1501 of 4080, Kindle); she was left in the care of others for long periods of time and shamed for her looks by Tara. Antara believes her mother feels a distinct pleasure in telling her hurtful things and wonders, "Did she ever see me as a child she wanted to protect? And when did I become a competitor or, rather, an enemy?" (Doshi 2020, loc. 3316 of 4080, Kindle). Antara grows up wanting a life different from her mother in every way possible; she yearns to escape Tara and build a family that would offer her security and social acceptance, things she believes Tara has denied her. Her decision to marry and choose motherhood is made in this hope. But as she begins to feel the constraints of an unequal marriage and a crippling ambivalence towards her infant daughter that extends to murderous thoughts, Antara begins to understand the complexities of her relationship with Tara and the similarities in their mothering experiences: "Maybe we would have been better off if I had never been designated as her undoing. How do I stop myself from making the same mistake? How do I protect this little girl from the same mistake?" (Doshi 2020, loc. 3556 of 4080, Kindle). In the novel, both Tara and Antara become mothers for validation without waiting to think if it is what they want for themselves. Regret and, consequently, shame embitter their

mothering experiences, permanently damaging the relationship between them and foreshadowing similar conflicts between Antara and her daughter Annika. The novel, through its juxtaposition of the ambivalent daughter Antara's expectations from her mother and the ambivalence in her own mothering experience, transitions from a daughter-centric text to a matrifocal one, marking an important and overdue shift in mainstream Indian literature.

### What Makes “Bad” Mothers?

An image that is irreconcilable with the glorified mother is that of the mother who intentionally harms her children; she is the antithesis of the image of the selfless mother—the angel of the house and a fierce protector of her children. Mothers in *Burnt Sugar* subvert such images; they resent their children, scheme and plot against them, have violent thoughts, and are capable of verbal and physical aggression towards them. Angry and violent mothers have always existed, and accounts of children being emotionally and physically abused by mothers come to light from time to time. The myths of murderous mothers like Medea<sup>2</sup> and negligent mothers like Kunti<sup>3</sup> have fascinated the minds of artists and laypersons alike. However, in real life, the notion of a mother being abusive is considered unacceptable, and their actions are the pinnacle of human evil and cruelty. Thanks to scholars of motherhood studies, the burgeoning field has established, at least within academia, that not all women desire to mother, and “maternal” nature is not inherent in women. Psychoanalysts Rozsika Parker (2005) and Barbara Almond (2010) highlight how a mother's relationship with her child, just like any other relationship, can be conflicted and be affected by both positive and negative feelings, described as maternal ambivalence. Unmanaged ambivalence, they assert, can result in thoughts and acts of violence both towards oneself and the child (Parker 2012, 106). Theorists like Martha McMahon (1995), Sharon Hays (1996), and Andrea O'Reilly (2010) posit that ambivalence arises not only from psychological factors but also from the mother's particular historical, cultural, and social conditions. Qualitative research in the field has shown how culturally idealised norms and expectations regarding the mother's role intensify their ambivalence towards it. Though scholars like Parker have argued that maternal ambivalence can be beneficial to the psychological development of the mother and her sense of autonomy (2012, 88), in mater-normative societies like India, where the concept is still taboo, it can prompt feelings of shame and guilt in mothers. The issue, according to Almond, is not the feelings but the hesitation to talk about them in a society that demands too much from women (2010, 226).

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2 A powerful enchantress in Greek mythology who kills her children to exact revenge on her husband Jason, who leaves her for another woman.

3 Kunti is a prominent figure in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, often criticised for conceiving her first child, Karna, on a whim and setting him afloat on a river to avoid scandal.

## **Tara, the Ambivalent Mother**

Motherhood is a social expectation imposed on women in mater-normative societies which hold those who abstain from motherhood in contempt. It serves as a prerequisite for social and familial validation (Nandy 2017, 16). Tara and Antara do not become mothers of their own volition; Tara wants to fit into the image of a dutiful wife, and Antara is constantly haunted by the fear of abandonment; she believes that a baby would prevent her husband from abandoning her like the other men in her life. Coerced into motherhood, they develop problematic relationships with the new role. We see Tara reiterating at different points in the story that she did not want to have Antara. She is explicit in her anger and resentment; “I always knew having you would ruin my life” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3305 of 4080, Kindle). Parental regret is a sentiment considered too taboo to be discussed, an object of disbelief, that is often not discussed at all. But Tara is a rare literary mother who admits to maternal ambivalence and appears unrepentant. She leads a life of rebellion from childhood, constantly flouting the oppressive rules set by society. However, her brief attempt at conformity in the form of an arranged marriage, which her mother believes is her chance to right the “wrongs of the past” (Doshi 2020, loc. 642 of 4080, Kindle), results in an estranged husband and a daughter she does not know what to do with. The loveless marriage is made worse by a tyrannical mother-in-law, another victim of institutionalised motherhood, who is forced to seek validation and self-actualisation in the triumphs of her son in the social order. Having internalised cultural attitudes towards women and gender roles, she sees pregnancy as a natural progression for a dutiful wife whose duties, according to her, include waiting at the door every day for her husband’s arrival after work, sitting beside the mother-in-law for endless hours, etc. Even the marriage is decided upon and executed by the mother, who leaves no stone unturned in ensuring the social status of her son. Psychoanalyst and novelist Sudhir Kakar observes how, in the social organisation of gender in India, a woman can gain a sense of purpose and identity only in her role as the mother of a son, which he says becomes both a “certification and redemption” (Kakar 2008, 56). Her validation comes from the acknowledgement of this status by society, family, and, more importantly, the son. A daughter-in-law, then, is regarded as a threat capable of replacing the mother as the object of the son’s love and devotion. In the novel, Tara talks about how she yearns to grow close to her husband but finds it impossible in the presence of her mother-in-law, who is resolute in ensuring that his loyalty stays with her. Tara finds the suffocations of such a marriage so unbearable that she would “bang her body against the wall and scream silently to herself” (Doshi 2020, loc. 746 of 4080, Kindle). She learns of her pregnancy at a particularly distressing time when her dreams of a freer life with her husband outside the country are shattered by her mother-in-law. Her alienation and desperation grow worse when her own mother refuses to help or support her; this, again, is an idea deeply entrenched in the dominant ideologies of womanhood in India. Daughters are brought up as belonging to the future husband’s family, and any discord in the daughter’s married life is perceived as her inability to please her husband and parents-in-law and the inadequacy of her mother’s training (Kakar 2008, 62). Disappointed with her marriage, she turns to her older ways of

rebellion; she discards the role of the model wife and spends her days in an *ashram*.<sup>4</sup> She becomes ambivalent towards the pregnancy and dreads the changes it will bring. She smokes despite knowing that it is dangerous for the foetus (Doshi 2020, loc. 773 of 4080, Kindle), and after the baby is born, does not care to feed it: “she would disappear every day, dripping with milk, leaving me unfed” (Doshi 2020, loc.773 of 4080, Kindle). She is coerced into mothering anyway because the child, being a girl, is not accepted or loved in the family: “my father’s mother had no great love for me, another girl, another nuisance” (Doshi 2020, loc. 785 of 4080, Kindle). Tara thinks she has walked out of the marriage and societal expectations when she moves to the *ashram* with Antara. However, she repeatedly encounters betrayal and rejection from a society that is foundationally antagonistic to a woman who makes her own choices. While she learns to renounce the people and systems that reject her, she is confounded by her role as a mother, which she is neither able to accept nor renounce, pushing both the mother and daughter into a vicious cycle of love, hate, and abuse that they are unable to escape from till the end. Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, points out how “instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological” (Rich 1976, 263). It is seldom that the reasons behind their behaviour are analysed; motive becomes irrelevant in the face of such “monstrosity.” Abusive parents are often the result of deep-rooted personal crises and socioeconomic issues undermined by the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” mothers. Many women mother in less-than-ideal conditions and are trapped in life situations out of their control. Their individual acts of violence are often consequences of larger issues in society, and it is often their despair that manifests as rage. Tara’s attempts to find herself inevitably fail in a society whose rules are skewed to favour men; her anger and frustrations are poured out on Antara, leaving both of them permanently scarred and traumatised.

Though Antara’s recollections of her past are primarily about her mother’s neglect and abuse, there are also moments of tenderness and love. Tara does not want to carry or give birth to a child, yet when Antara is born, she wants to give her a life that is different and better than hers and names her Antara or “un-Tara” (unlike Tara) (Doshi 2020, loc. 3554 of 4080, Kindle). Nevertheless, she did not consciously choose motherhood and cannot accept its duties graciously, as expected by cultural ideologies. Parker, who wrote extensively on the theme of maternal ambivalence, defines it as “not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side” (2005, 18). When Antara accuses Tara of being selfish, she responds by saying, “There’s nothing wrong with thinking about oneself” (Doshi 2020, loc. 897 of 4080, Kindle). Though many of Tara’s actions can be seen as deviant from a conventional standpoint, *Burnt Sugar* is a matrifocal narrative that shows not only the “bad” mother but allows

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4 A secluded dwelling of a Hindu sage and his group of disciples.

the readers to see the powerful suffocations and frustrations of institutionalised motherhood that prompts them to act in ways they do.

### **Antara, the Ambivalent Daughter and Mother**

The assaults by her mother are described factually by Antara, who resorts to self-harm and compulsive eating as coping mechanisms, scarring both her mind and body in the process. Tara's pursuit of love leaves Antara on the fringes, forgotten and angry. She chooses marriage and motherhood in the hope that they will offer her security and validation; instead, marriage puts her in a precarious position where she depends entirely on her husband for her emotional and financial needs. Her insecurity is worsened by threats from her mother to break her marriage by revealing a past affair. She is gripped by a sudden fear of abandonment and, like many other female characters in the novel, decides motherhood is the only way to secure her position in the family: "A baby. A baby will take up time and space, a baby will fill the day. A baby will tie me irrevocably to Dilip, turn me from a wife to a mother. Maybe I'll be sacred then. He can never leave me once I have his child. He will never want to" (Doshi 2020, loc. 3006 of 4080, Kindle). Antara's rationale for choosing motherhood serves as a critique of the societal emphasis on motherhood to validate women.

Antara's experience of the pregnancy, parturition, and postpartum periods in the novel is an accurate representation of maternal ambivalence and postpartum depression. It highlights the violence pregnancy wreaks on the body and mind of the mother in the form of physiological and psychological changes in the perinatal and postpartum periods and the onerous nature of the care work for the child. Additionally, childbirth can cause excruciating pain and leave the mother with permanent scars on her body and psyche; multiple studies have revealed how issues of postpartum morbidities, depression, and long-term health adversities, including, but not limited to, chronic pain, higher risk of diabetes and incontinence, can follow pregnancy (Neiger 2017, 1). These realities are usually hidden behind cultural imagery that portrays pregnant women and new mothers as holy, angelic, and exuding bliss and peace (Ruddick 1995, 29). Antara, like Tara, is ambivalent towards the pregnancy and dreads the changes it will bring to her body and life. The ambivalence stays through childbirth and afterwards as she undertakes the care work for the baby. The matrifocality of the novel subverts many of the conventional images of motherhood, including the experience of childbirth. What is normally expected of a new mother is that she expresses exquisite joy upon seeing the newborn, forgetting the terrible pain and labour of parturition, even though this is not always the case. But the author acknowledges giving birth for the harrowing experience it is: "I don't feel anything much as I hold her ... I know I should express joy... Maybe I am too tired" (Doshi 2020, loc. 3369 of 4080, Kindle). Antara is also overwhelmed by the physical and mental demands of the care work involved: "I am tired of this baby. She demands too much, always hungering for more" (Doshi 2020, loc. 3422 of 4080, Kindle). The factual description of postpartum experiences prompts us to look at a new mother's challenges not as sacred acts of sacrifice but as individual suffering: "I have become an assembly line. Each part is incidental, only important if it can do its job"



(Doshi 2020, loc. 3423 of 4080, Kindle). Antara oscillates between murderous and protective thoughts towards her child; she craves intensely to return to her child-free life and is tempted to kill off the child more than once; “The window is open, and a small body can fall quickly, soundlessly” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3519 of 4080, Kindle). Antara’s increasing frustration and helplessness often translate into violent and hateful feelings towards the child; her response to the baby’s relentless crying at one instance is, “She is a rude little bitch if I ever met one” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3429 of 4080, Kindle). She dreams earnestly of the days when she will finally be rid of the child but also has feelings of extreme tenderness and love towards her. She is fiercely protective and is upset when she has to share the baby with others, and her thoughts about getting rid of the child are almost immediately conflicted with thoughts of never wanting to. Such a portrayal of the unpredictable and exacting nature of mothering and the toll it takes on the mental and physical health of women force readers to interrogate the cultural ideologies that posit motherhood as the most joyful and rewarding experience of women’s lives.

Antara’s frustration and distress are exacerbated by the fact that her husband has to contribute very little towards the actual birthing and caring for the child, yet society gives equal and sometimes more regard to him: “I’d forgotten about my husband until now. He is the only one who has remained unscathed through all of this. The baby and I are bruised and battered. He looks smug, proud of himself or his family. I have the urge to ask him what he’s done for any of us” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3394 of 4080, Kindle). This spatial dichotomy of gender organisation propounded in the nationalist ideologies that situate the woman/mother inside the home, proudly and resolutely doing her “nurturing” duties, and the man/son outside, engaged in the noble pursuit of nation-building and “protecting” the nation vis-à-vis the women, continues to inform definitions of motherhood in India today. Throughout the narrative, we see how fathers are never held responsible for bringing up their children or held accountable for their failings. None of the father figures in Antara’s life, including her birth father, step up to their roles. Antara blames her mother for the shortcomings of her childhood and the unhappiness in her adult life. Though the abandonment by the males leaves scars and a perennial sense of insecurity in Antara, it is Tara who becomes her nemesis and the object of her rage and hatred: “‘I don’t blame my mother,’ I told the therapist, though I know I do and always have” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3053 of 4080, Kindle). However, Antara’s conflicted feelings upon becoming a mother force her to reevaluate her mother’s actions.

The conflict and violence in the mothering experiences of Tara and Antara, elaborately portrayed in Antara’s case, arise from guilt, the guilt of being unable to live up to society’s expectations of a “good” mother. Being aware of these expectations, which are perceived as reality, they cannot come to terms with the ambivalent feelings towards their children, leading to a cycle of guilt and abuse in Tara and a perennial and debilitating sense of ambivalence in Antara. Violence in mothering, Rich says, is a product of the institution of motherhood: “the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood, the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgements and

condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt. So much of this heart of darkness is an undramatic, undramatized suffering” (1976, 277). Antara, unsettled by her violent thoughts towards the child and an incident where the baby falls from the bed, is convinced that she is unfit to take care of the baby; she lets her mother-in-law take over after this. Tara’s disease accentuates her guilt, and she has frequent psychotic episodes where she is convinced that Antara is still a baby and that she needs to find plastic sheets for her to sleep on or that she needs to be picked up from school. When her granddaughter Annika is born, she believes that it is Antara and tries to take care of her; she acts as if she has been given a second chance with Antara. This guilt that dictates the lives of mothers is a product of the cultural idealisation of motherhood, which Antara realises is a feeling that has been entrenched in generations of women: “These tales have passed down from mothers to daughters since women had mouths and stories could be told. They contain some moral message, some rites of passage. But they also transfer that feeling all mothers know before their time is done. Guilt” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3472 of 4080, Kindle). Antara’s mothering is constantly scrutinised, especially by her mother-in-law, who disparages her efforts by comparing them with her own and those of others who have more children. To Antara, she becomes emblematic of all the expectations and demands from her role as a mother, and she envisions a life where she has killed them all and hence is much happier with her daughter (Doshi 2020, loc. 3658 of 4080, Kindle). Even though she realises it is these expectations that intensify her ambivalence towards her daughter, she is unable to escape it. Her unresolved trauma from being mothered by an ambivalent mother incentivises her self-abnegation as a mother and, consequently, her ambivalence to the role.

## Unresolved Ambivalence and Transgenerational Trauma

Parker identifies mothering as a transgenerational experience: “Mothering is multigenerational. For most women, images of their own mothers dominate the experience of mothering as a reproofing presence or cautionary tale” (2012, 91). Antara’s experience as the daughter of an ambivalent mother affects all her life choices. She grows up with the intense need to separate herself from her mother. Tara also envisions providing her daughter with a life that is “as different from hers as it could be” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3553 of 4080, Kindle), but in the process of trying to separate themselves, they become “pitted against each other” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3555 of 4080, Kindle). Parker identifies guilt as the primary factor that intensifies ambivalence (2012, 88), and guilt leads to shame when the mother cannot live up to the cultural maternal ideal (2012, 95). In the novel, though Tara tries to resist these assumptions, they are internalised by Antara, who persecutes her for her apparent failings as a mother; she associates shame with her mother’s unconventional choices that make them outcasts in social groups. The constant shaming from Antara makes it impossible for Tara to manage her ambivalence; she asks why she always chases after her like a “rabid dog with its fangs out” (Doshi 2020, loc. 895 of 4080, Kindle). Her ambivalence towards a child she begot to satisfy cultural expectations in the first place is inflated by Antara’s accusations. Guilt and, consequently, shame affect her mothering experience and is turned inward as self-

hatred: “She named me Antara, intimacy, not because she loved the name but because she hated herself” (Doshi 2020, loc. 3553 of 4080, Kindle). The shame also translates to resentment towards Antara through what Parker opines is a “defensive projection” (2012, 96) of the pain of the mother, who is unable to reconcile with the cultural notion of being “bad” or not good enough.

Antara struggles with her new identity as a mother. The incongruity of her expectations and the realities of her experience as a mother push her into a state of debilitating self-doubt and hatred, which she, like Tara, projects onto her daughter. She wants to offer Annika the all-consuming, self-abnegating mother love, which she thinks Tara has withheld from her. But the conflation of these expectations with the incessant physical and emotional demands of motherhood steeps her in guilt and shame as her feelings of hatred and aggression towards the child do not align with her ideals of a “good” mother. Her need for motherhood is founded on her ambivalence towards her mother and the need to compensate for the lack of her childhood, so she perceives her ambivalence as a mother as a failure. Ambivalence takes root in her long before she actually becomes a mother; despite desiring to mother a daughter, she dreads the possibility because she is anxious about the influence of her experience as a daughter: “my feelings for her would pierce a little too sharply. I’m not sure that particular pain would suit me” (Doshi 2020, loc. 2929 of 4080, Kindle). Tara’s mothering is treated as a cautionary tale by Antara, and she is terrified by the possibility of “reproducing” her mother.

Antara’s experience of being mothered affects not only her mothering but also the other choices and relationships she makes in life; she suffers a constant sense of insecurity and fear of abandonment. She is dissatisfied with her marriage and is unprepared to become a mother, but she chooses to mask her feelings and continues to work to appear perfect in these roles. Adamantly striving towards unachievable ideals results in self-abnegation that makes her feel trapped and invisible. Antara is unable to escape her trauma of being mothered even after her own ambivalence as a mother offers her a chance to understand and reconcile with Tara’s ambivalence; she continues to grapple with cultural maternal ideals and blames and doubts both herself and her mother. Tara ultimately succumbs to her psychological anguish caused by unmanaged ambivalence and resultant trauma. Doshi’s novel does not offer solutions or methods to cope with the dark side of mothering but lays bare the abnegations and challenges motherhood poses to women in a society that does not allow them to identify or validate the intensely complex and demanding experience of mothering.

## Conclusion

Motherhood, O’Reilly says, is “the unfinished business of feminism” (2021, 13). She calls for a mother-centred or matricentric feminism to address the oppression of mothers as women and as mothers. Most women who enter motherhood do so from spaces already problematised by diverse social, cultural, economic, and political stresses and more personal factors like physical and mental health, quality of interpersonal

relationships, etc. They are further challenged by the actual physical and mental labour of mothering. So, not all women approach motherhood with endless joy and willingness to sacrifice, which cultural ideologies posit as natural for mothers. However, the stigma attached to maternal ambivalence prevents it from being included in the prevalent discourses on motherhood, which fail to accommodate the inherently complicated and unpredictable nature of mothering. It is fallacious for feminism to exist as a movement or academic discipline oblivious to the experiences and issues of motherhood. Frameworks like matrifocal reading and writing will allow maternal subjectivities to be written and explored, thus divorcing them from the institution of motherhood. Literary traditions that foreground the mother and mothering experiences are rare, but when they do, they reveal how mothering is both political and personal. It is not easy to write about mothering as no mother can live up to the idealised image of motherhood; writing honestly about it is to admit one's apparent failings as a mother. So, either maternal subjectivities are not articulated at all, or they are narrated in ways that align with traditional notions. However, matrifocal narratives like *Burnt Sugar* address this gap and throw light on the lived experience of mothers. It includes the ambivalent nature of mothering and the consequences of coercing women into motherhood, which are not limited to the mother and the child but the whole family and larger society. The trauma it creates influences the parenting choices and practices of successive generations. Doshi's work exemplifies how literary spaces can be used to negotiate and challenge traditional notions of mothering. By presenting both sides of the mother's story, the text demystifies motherhood and interrogates the cultural ideologies that try to regulate it. The unabashed honesty of the narrative is a jolt to the complacency with which we regard motherhood and urges us to look at motherhood as an individual experience characterised by both positive and negative feelings between the mother and the child.

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