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Mapping Motherhood ***The Fiction of Anita Desai***

At first glance one is tempted to assert that there are no mothers in Indo-English novels by women. Vernacular or *bhasha* literature has numerous examples of complex mother figures. An unforgettable figure like Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short story, "Stanadayini" (Breast Giver), for example, has no parallel in Indo-English writing. Even the kind of mother-daughter relationships that are central in the novels of Amy Tan (1991, 1989), Isabelle Allende (1999, 1985, 1995), Alice Walker (1983), and Toni Morrison (1997, 1970) remain largely peripheral in Indo-English novels by women. The main role of the few mothers in this literature seems to be that of transmitters of cultural values.¹

Yet, the mother figure has been central to Indian arts and ritual practices from as far back as 20,000 BC.² The mother goddess was and is worshipped for her awesome powers of creation and protection as well as for her fearsome powers of destruction. The nationalists' deliberately evoked the nation as mother as a rallying symbol for anti-colonial resistance.³ Bollywood (Indian popular cinema) too, effectively used the symbol of the mother to embody the idea of the nation in classics such as "Mother India" and in more contemporary films. Indian cinema has contributed enormously to the projection of the image of the mother as a highly romanticised, nurturing and self-sacrificing figure. The mother-son bond particularly is highly valued. These over-drawn celluloid stereotypes dominate the popular imagination and mediate our perceptions of real mothers and of the ideology of motherhood. Additionally these invocations bear testimony to the continuing symbolic power of the mother figure.

The dichotomy inherent in the Mother figure of Indian mythology and culture is replayed with a certain difference in contemporary Indian society. It can be seen in the chasm between the adulation of the iconic mother (in both

her creative and destructive aspects) and, the neglect and disrespect accorded to actual women—mothers, non-mothers and widows in particular. The sacralisation of motherhood prevalent in the Indian imagination is inherently problematic because on the one hand it is indicative of female creative power, which as Kamala Ganesh notes, “conveys not so much the ideas of physical motherhood but a world-view in which the creative power of femininity is central” (1990: 58). On the other hand, though, it is possible to read the deification of motherhood as Sukumari Bhattacharji does as “compensatory, seeking to recompense society’s indifference to the mother” (1990: 50). The good-mother/bad-mother binary in Indo-English fiction can be traced back to Parvati, the nurturing mother goddess, and, her other side Kali—the goddess of destruction.

In popular imagination these twin facets of the same goddess complement and contrast each other as archetypal images. Kali’s independence (of any male god), her physical position above him, her dark and dishevelled appearance and association with cremation grounds are deliberate markers of her otherness that locate her on the margins of society. She is dangerous because she “threatens stability and order” (Kinsley, 1986: 120). These traits are, however, recognised as being tameable and trainable to preserve patriarchal domesticity. Kali’s flip side Parvati is the upholder of societal norms. She embodies very specific cultural values of female strength as moral superiority, often achieved through self-sacrifice. Parvati as the “insider” goddess is part of the patriarchal structure of society while Kali the “outsider” goddess threatens that structure—and with that the whole moral code. The dichotomy between structure and anti-structure revolves around Woman’s sexuality seen as the central balance of kinship relations in a society.

Motherhood has been a key feminist issue since the early days of women’s movements; moreover, since the 1970s a substantial body of work on feminist theories of motherhood has emerged (Chodorow, 1978; Walker, 1984; Smart, 1992; Glenn *et al.*, 1994). Adrienne Rich’s (1979) analysis of motherhood as “experience” and as “institution” led to a re-examination of the idea of motherhood, as did the investigation of the gap between the idea of the mother and the chore work of mothering. The change in western feminist focus on motherhood from the issue of choice, prominent in the ’70s, to the creative experience of mothering in the ’90s, highlights the crucial significance of the experience. Along with noting women’s right to mother or not, Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto noted that mothering could be oppressive or gratifying or even both (1982: 55). But normative motherhood imposes strict controls on women where no choice is possible. Furthermore, often it is women themselves, especially older women, who have internalised a patriarchal ideology and who perpetuate the system victimising those who do not conform.

The sacralised attitudes towards mothers and the unwritten taboo on exploring sexuality have almost silenced Indo-English women’s writing on sexuality and therefore on exploring motherhood. Anita Desai is one of few

Indo-English authors who explores the issue in some depth especially in her little acclaimed novel *Voices in the City* and later in *Fire on the Mountain*. The author of about a dozen novels and collections of short stories, Desai is acclaimed in India and internationally. Her novel, *Clear Light of Day*, was nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize. *Voices in the City* was published in 1965, before the current popularity of Indian writing in English, but even so it is considered to be one of her less successful novels. It is important though because it may be among the earliest and one of very few Indo-English women's novels to self-consciously explore motherhood. Motherhood in this novel is seen as the *sine qua non* of attachment. Birth and nurture seem to open the doors for women to interact and empathise with other individuals as well as to tap into an emotional reservoir that is common to all humanity. In *Voices in the City* Desai weaves the traditional duality of the mother as creator and destroyer (Parvati/Kali) and embeds the text in an Indian reality where actual mothers are often ignored or ill treated; whereas in folk-lore, myth and nation building the idea of motherhood is venerated and iconic mothers are worshipped.

The philosophic dilemma of the novel is a quest for salvation. The question posed is whether salvation can be achieved through a path of intense involvement with life or through detachment. Desai explored this theme in her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and returns to it in *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). The culmination of the search in a vision, and, a fusion of the apparent dichotomies—destruction and creation—in *Voices in the City* is also repeated in *Journey to Ithaca*.

It is significant that *Voices in the City* is set in Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal. Linguistically the mother-role is underlined in the affectionate addressing of all women as “ma” or mother in Bengali culture. The worship of mother-goddesses—Kali, Durga and Saraswati—is also far more prevalent in Bengal than anywhere else in India. Visually too, the colour red of the scarlet-breasted “Bleeding Heart Doves” (1965: 120-121) that so traumatise Monisha at the zoo evokes the typical red-bordered white saris of Bengali women. This red—of the doves’ breasts and of the red sari borders—signals the linked fates of the doves and the women—quietly bleeding away their lives in the nurture of others. Monisha’s own unarticulated but visible suffering is suggested by “the dove’s stigmata” (121).

The destruction associated with the bloodthirsty goddess Kali is also firmly concretised in Monisha’s experience of the city. Her repugnance and sense of oppression are palpable:

From all sides their moist palms press down on me, their putrid breaths and harsh voices. There is no diving under-ground in so overpopulated a burrow, even the sewers and gutters are choked, they are so full. (Desai, 1965: 116)

But Monisha does not resent the “grime, darkness, poverty and disease”

(116) of the city as much as she resents the “meretriciousness, the rapacity, the uneasy lassitude of conscience” (116). Yet this is also a space where the centrality of the mother, in both her forms as Parvati and Kali—the nurturer and the destroyer—is reinforced by daily, ritual worship in dedicated temples. Monisha is trapped in the contradictory movements, in the blatant gap between worship and a wilful disregard of the nurturing women/mothers.

Voices in the City is divided into four parts. Three sections bear the names of each of the three siblings, Nirode, Monisha and Amala, and the final section is entitled Mother. These are the “voices” of the title that narrate their experiences of the city of Calcutta. The fourth and concluding chapter of a dozen or so pages entitled “Mother” resembles the voice of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. The text renders ambiguous which mother specifically is being referred to: Monisha, her mother, the street singer, the goddess Kali, or even the city of Calcutta. They all seem to bleed into each other to form this final voice. Monisha’s death and the confusion and clarity it brings conclude the narrative.

Monisha’s unremarkable story is quite simple. She accepts an arranged marriage and after some years of out-of-state postings comes to live in Calcutta with her husband’s large extended family. Her non-mother status already marks her as different, but living in a joint-family exacerbates her sense of loneliness and alienation. In the end, she commits suicide by dousing herself in kerosene and immolating herself.

For Nirode, his sister’s suicide is a revelation of the “whole fantastic design of life and death” (Desai, 1965: 249). Monisha’s death resolves Nirode’s philosophic quest (shared by Monisha) between detachment as preached in religious texts like the *Bhagavad-Gita* or the path of intense involvement and empathy. *Voices in the City* has the makings of a novel in the psychological genre, but it does not quite fulfil that promise. The relationship between Nirode and his mother specifically lends itself to a Freudian reading. Nirode’s ambivalence towards his mother is repeated in his negotiations with the city. As a son he finds his mother’s sexuality and independence threatening. This relationship shapes and haunts his search for an identity as a writer and as a human being. His world seems to collapse around him when a local amateur theatre group rejects his play—a baring of the soul and his magnum opus.

Monisha’s death provokes an entirely different reaction in her younger sister, Amala. Newly arrived in Calcutta to join an advertising firm, she sees both her siblings tread the thin line between passion that inevitably promises chaos, and, dull normalcy. Amala’s adamant insistence in remembering her mother as “just mother”—a role—rather than the reality of who her mother is as an individual also marks her negotiations with Calcutta. Initially she does not allow the city to oppress her because she refuses to recognize its dark side, just as she refuses to acknowledge the destructive, dark side of her unarticulated feelings for her mother. Her amorous involvement with a once-famous artist had led her into a subterranean world of unclear boundaries. Now she opts for

emotional detachment and the safety of the socially circumscribed, bhadra-lok or respectable middle-class world that would constrain anomie.

Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark uncompromising margin. (Desai, 1965: 248)

Although the text is also about the destinies of the other siblings, it explores the issue of motherhood through Monisha's unique viewpoint as a non-mother. The subtext or hidden story is that of her mother whose voice is silenced although she dominates the text even by her absence. Monisha's narrative questions the centrality of motherhood as a biological and a social imperative that can imprison and destroy women, especially those who are not mothers, or empower those who are mothers, as creators. The novel posits motherhood as a symbol of attachment—the creation of and involvement with life. Monisha, precisely because she is not a mother, opens the space for a reading of motherhood as a psychological, social and a cultural phenomenon. The text is ambivalent and leaves the issue unresolved. On one level, it makes a deeply troubling and problematic suggestion that Monisha is emotionally unresponsive because she cannot be a mother. This lack is seen as the cause of her sense of alienation. On the other hand, the novel also suggests that the detachment Monisha so assiduously cultivates could be the cause of her inability to become a mother.

Peter Berger notes in *The Sacred Canopy* (1969) that an individual needs the reflection of an outside world and a conversation with others to confirm her or his identity. One's sense of their place in society is a result of this response. The imbalance between individual and society, seen in Monisha's alienation and ultimate suicide, could be attributed to what Berger calls "a break-down of conversation" (1969: 34). Motherhood, in Monisha's case, is a normative gender role that she, as an Indian woman in a patriarchal society, has internalised to the extent that she herself cannot conceive of an existence outside it. The lack of what Berger terms "dialectic identity formation" between a society that privileges women's uni-dimensional gender roles and their multiple identities is responsible for the kind of rupture that Monisha feels between her sense of self and the world. Her acknowledgement, "I have not given birth, I have not attended death" (240), establishes her separateness. As a Bengali married woman living in a joint-family, how can she, who does not conform in this one crucial aspect, make sense of her life?

Monisha's sense of absolute alienation is crystallized as she watches an itinerant street performer couple. The singer looks like a "professional hermaphrodite" because "her poverty had destroyed her sex, cancelling out the

characteristics of lover and mother” (Desai, 1965: 236). Despite her ambiguous gender status, while the singer can still sing of passion and sorrow, Monisha, trapped in her unfulfilled normative gender role as a mother, remains unmoved. She concedes that this involvement with life is symptomatic of a primeval wisdom that has eluded her. Attributing the lack of feeling to an inadequacy in herself, she notes that the others are visibly moved while she alone is immune. In this moment Monisha realises that it is the vulnerability of involvement that she both yearns for and that terrifies her. The detachment that sets her apart promises only emptiness.

[W]hat she feared was the great empty white distance set between her and this moist, crimson flowering of emotion in the street below. (Desai, 1965: 238)

Even in the singer whose sexuality has otherwise been erased, Monisha recognises the characteristics of an atavistic Mother Goddess:

But the face, the face was that of the Eternal Mother, the Earth Mother, a face ravaged by the most unbearable emotions of woman, darkened and flayed and scarred by them. (Desai, 1965: 237)

This is a face that Monisha recognises but cannot relate to. The song resonates in the dull women of the house, evoking in them an exquisite awareness of life, a capacity to feel. In contrast, Monisha feels the acute futility of her life, “What a waste, what a waste it has been, this life enclosed in a locked container” (Desai, 1965: 240).

Motherhood, in this novel, is often configured spatially. The continuum of containers, cubicles, house and room link up ultimately with the womb—in Monisha’s case an empty womb that mocks her empty life. The locked container, for instance, is an ill-disguised metaphor for the womb and the home at the same time. Her imprisonment is two-fold; the inability to give birth locks her in, as does the perception of being trapped by regulative norms. The text is ambiguous about whether Monisha’s alienation is caused by her inability to be a mother, or whether her alienation is the cause of her failure of motherhood. Her references to being put away “in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle” (Desai, 1965: 239) suggest that she holds someone else responsible for her suffering. Monisha registers the contradiction of being both imprisoned in the house and kept out by a patriarchal familial ethos of gendered roles and spaces.

In Desai’s Calcutta and its women, there is not even the possibility of a discursive coalition or communication among women that other Indo-English novels like Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine* (1993) or Markandaya’s *Two Virgins* (1973) seem to offer. The house and the city contrive to imprison women by the sanction of antiquity and the “tradition” of regulative norms that allow no escape. The city, house, room, and body are interconnected in the text and one

often implies the others. At moments, there is a particularly interesting conflation of room and body. Monisha's description of the invasion of her room can be read as an invasion of her body and her privacy:

even my own room, which they regarded at first, as still bridal, now no longer is so (the tubes are blocked, it is no good). (Desai, 1965: 116)

Motherhood, even as a biological fact, is a public issue within these narrow walls, a situation which automatically permits "sisters-in-law [to] lie across the four-poster, discussing my ovaries and theirs" (116). Ironically, it is specifically this physical and symbolic construct of the women's sphere to which Monisha is denied entry, in part because she does not fit the category of Bengali women/mothers who accept traditional gender roles. Monisha's bleak view is of a society polarised between selfish, insensitive men and interminably patient women who resignedly spend their lives

In waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city. (Desai, 1965: 120)

The repetition of "old" in the last line reveals that Monisha blames imprisoning traditions in the form of "old houses" and "old cities" and men for women's futile lives. As there is no conversation between women and men; nor is there any possibility of conversation among women if they step out of the patriarchal code of social norms, women like Monisha are left with few options.

The link between the home/prison and women is repeated in the images of caged birds and animals in the zoo. The "Bleeding Heart Doves" (Desai, 1965: 120-121) for instance, are reminiscent of the many images of Monisha peering out longingly through the barred balcony of the home. As an insider, Monisha is imprisoned by and in the house, guarded by "my large, secure, round keepers" (110). Their solidity—gauged by both size ("large") and smugness ("secure")—is in stark contrast to her thinness and silence that render her invisible even if they do not quite erase her. Monisha's "eerie unreality" (142)—to others as well as to herself—cries out in her silence. She is rendered speechless in a noisy, chattering household: "I am locked apart from all of them. They cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret" (239). She does not have anything to say to anyone in the house nor do they have the capacity to hear her. More damning, though, is her self-castigation: "I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary" (140). The text is unclear about the kind of woman Monisha imagines writes a diary, but it is clear that she sees this negatively. The diary is the only thing with whom "conversation" is possible, and, it is, in the end, inadequate.

In a terrible revelatory moment Monisha finds "the answer": The resigna-

tion of women/mothers—"How can they live, eat, work, sing bleeding through life?" (Desai, 1965: 121). Their acceptance of their lot and their roles as givers and nurturers who remain unrecognised distinguishes them from her because she is not willing passively to accept her lot. Their death, like their lives, will go un-remarked: "there is no dignity in their death... but only a little melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth" (121). Seen in this light, Monisha's death can be read as a grand gesture of defiance. This ability to reject, to say the "great No," is also central to Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1982). The decision to end what has been for her a living death is undeniably Monisha's. But in giving her this agency it is unclear whether the text intends to absolve the marital family and society of the moral responsibility of Monisha's death.

Although denied motherhood and a certain identity because she cannot give birth, Monisha claims complete agency for her death. The kerosene and matches—the method of dying—chillingly recalls the "bride burnings" and "dowry deaths" of the factual world of newspaper reportage. The unspoken affinities between fact and fiction raise the uncomfortable question of whether these deaths—the nameless ones in the newspapers and Monisha's—should be seen as murder because the women are driven to this ultimate erasure by social and family pressures. Or is Desai on some level privileging women's agency over the stereotypical image of Woman as victim? Is the text attempting to legitimise this kind of death (Monisha's and the various dowry deaths) as a sign of defiance and resistance? However, if the people she is surrounded by can only "lip-read and mis-interpret" (Desai, 1965: 239), then would her end have any greater effect than "the settling of a puff of dust" that is the dove's end?

The ideology of motherhood revealed in and through this novel is, despite the particular setting, pan-Indian. Nirode claims, "Kali is the mother of Bengal, she is the mother of us all" (Desai, 1965: 256). He, in particular, blurs the lines between an abstract cultural ethos and his experiential relationship with his own mother. By equating his mother with Kali, Nirode is able to find a culturally appropriate symbol for his sexual fears. It is almost wholly from Nirode's viewpoint that we see the mother, and for him, "She is Kali, the goddess and the demon are one" (255). For all three siblings their mother is a distant figure who does not conform to the stereotype of the nurturer, and yet she does not until the end, at least in Nirode's eyes, reveal herself as the destroyer either. The mother's own missing narrative leads us to think that this deliberate silence may be her individual resistance to being thrust into a preset mould. She too may have yearned for a reflective "conversation" that would confirm her identity as a whole individual and not just as a mother.⁴ The siblings' ambivalence towards her and her refusal to fit into the gender stereotype of the nurturing mother creates instability in their lives. Monisha resolves the void in her life by her death. But Nirode and Amala learn very different lessons about life from Monisha's death. Their mother (who is never named but always

referred to as ‘mother’), too, seems to reveal her true self only after Monisha’s death.

In the final vision Nirode senses a new grandeur in his mother: “She was a woman fulfilled—by the great tragedy of her daughter’s suicide” (Desai, 1965: 252). The bloodthirsty Kali now sated by the sacrifice looks benignly upon the festive streets with divas (earthenware lamps) lit for her homecoming. On the way from the airport to the city Nirode

imagined he heard drums throbbing beneath the cacophony of traffic, and the wailing and chanting of hymns dedicated to her exalted presence. Lights swam through the smoke and night like proffered garlands, loftily, she paid no attention at all. (Desai, 1965: 253)

The last sinister vision we have is of this mother watching Amala and Nirode from the balcony uncharacteristically dressed in mourning white.

As Nirode translates and makes concrete the iconic symbol into the specific reality of his mother, he experiences a moment of epiphany that reveals his *raison d’être*. He explains to his sister, Amala:

how once she has given birth to us, she must also deal us our deaths
. . . . I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you
and Monisha and I, and she is also everything we have fought for.
(Desai, 1965: 256)

In a single move, the mother, both real and abstract, becomes representative of cultural norms against which these siblings define and measure themselves. She also symbolises the bourgeois, *bhadra-lok* or middle-class values against which they contend. This ambivalence is repeated in their relationship with the city—the site of their various struggles.

As a narrative that seeks to map the attitudes towards and the treatment of real mothers on the ancient tradition of mother worship in India and thereby reveal the chasm between the two, *Voices in the City* succeeds, but only at this one level. The novel reveals women’s imprisonment to gender roles. It also acknowledges that the problem is systemic, but it neither explores the nature of this prescriptive code nor does it provide alternatives. In the end both the mother and the non-mother are either transformed or erased. Nirode’s mother transcends gender and her status as a real woman, and is transformed from a powerful absence into an iconic representation of the destructive mother goddess Kali. As a non-mother, Monisha is not offered any alternatives but death. The philosophic quest for salvation and resolution of the dichotomies of life are revealed in Nirode’s vision of fusion and his understanding that life and death are one. In the denouement of the novel however, this spiritual answer may, in fact, serve to elide the real issue. It absolves society of the responsibility for the destruction of the many Monisha’s who do not or cannot conform.

Mothers in some of Desai's novels especially *Fire on the Mountain* and *Voices in the City* stand as silent sentinels, mute reminders of unfulfilled lives. These novels could be read as a searing indictment of a society that requires women to sacrifice their individuality and personal fulfilment at the altar of duty and conformity to patriarchal gender roles. Ironically though, the unwilling conformity tears the woman apart from within as much as does the willing conformity which forces her to bleed away quietly. Berger's identity confirming 'conversation' remains an elusive chimera for these mothers.

¹The view of women as cultural transmitters is fairly universal. Ruth Bloch notes, "it was above all as mothers that women were attributed social influence as the chief transmitters of religious and moral values..." (1978: 101)

²Pupul Jaykar's *The Earth Mother* provides a comprehensive mapping and explanation of artifacts and rituals relating to goddess worship throughout India.

³Radha Kumar's excellent study of the Indian Women's movement notes how the mother-ideology was deployed for the nationalist cause.

⁴I am grateful to Seema Sharma for her insightful comments about the mother's silence in the narrative as being a possible sign of resistance.

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