

MATROPHOBIC DAUGHTERS IN ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN* AND SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*: A COMPARISON

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'Phobia' is one of the most basic human emotions. Everyone sense phobia in the progress of their life. In clinical psychology, 'phobia' is a kind of mental disorder which characterizes by anxiety and fear. For the present paper, the term 'Matrophobia' is adopted from Adrienne Rich seminal book *Of Woman Born*, where she calls it, "not the fear of one's mother or of motherhood, but of becoming one's mother" (1976, 235).

Feminists down the years have endeavored to explain the term 'matrophobia'. Fran Scoble's essay, *Mothers and Daughters Give the Lie* outlines the mainspring of feminist 'matrophobia' in the mother's acquiescence with the crooked power dissemination of patriarchy, seen, in the words of Adrienne Rich, says

[m]atrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all our mothers bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victims in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery (1976, 236)

Marianne Hirsch comments that "mother... who succumb to convention in as much as they are mothers – become the targets of [the] process of disidentification and the primary negative models for the daughters" (1989, 11). Even, Betty Friedan shares this view

In my generation, many of us knew we did not want to be like our mothers, even when we loved them. We could not help but see their disappointment... they could not give us an image of what we could be. They could only tell us that their lives were too empty, tied to home, that children, cooking, clothes, bridge and charities were not enough (1971, 72).

Feminists, however over- rule Freudian psychoanalytical view that the rage of daughters towards their mothers in an expression of their resentment for not having been given a penis. Daughter's resentment at their mothers who are seen as victim in patriarchal cultural oppression was the factual reason.

Opposed to 'matrophobia', but in more than one way integral to it, is 'Matrophilia'. Matrophilia is characterized by a strong attachment to the mother grounded in the search for the maternal bond, which involves feeling such as affection, admiration, and a need for protection. It can be experienced in a biological mother or anyone who might act as a surrogate. In both cases, it is marked by a positive impulse that reinforces a female continuum giving form to matrilineality, within the patriarchal order, as Shoshana Felman has noted, 'a woman [. . .] is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife'(110). Antagonistic to Matrophobic daughters, the

Matrophillic daughters tend to do what their mothers did before them. But the defiant matrophobic daughters are working against the traditional cultural standards and try to be autonomous by breaking up the proverb ‘like mother, like daughter’.

The novels under study, the revolt against the matrophillic daughters (mothers) are one of the first indications of the matrophobicdaughters with the existing ideals. In *Meridian* and *TheDark Holds No Terrors*, the young matrophobic daughters see their mothers (matrophillic daughters) as having taught them compromise and self-hatred that they are struggling to be free. They hate their mothers to the extent of suffering and developing a dread that if they relax their guard, they may identify with the mother completely. The mother stands for the victim in themselves, the unfree woman, the martyr; and so the matrophobic daughters do not want to be vessels of their mother’s (matrophillic daughter) frustration and self-denial.

In Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, Meridian is torn between her actual feelings and behavior expected from her towards childrearing. As her beliefs do not coincide with those of her mother’s, she incurs her mother’s disapproval. “Her mother’s love was gone, withdrawn and there were conditions to be met before it would be written conditions Meridian was never able to meet” (M. 17). Although she fights hard against her mother’s influence, Meridian feels constantly haunted by her. Also she feels guilty of stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her mother’s emerging self, though she is unable to decipher how this could possibly be her fault.

Meridian internally wishes to remove herself from the role of a mother;and she also removes herself from her love of nature. It is also possible that Meridian’s loathing of motherhood is a direct result of her own mother’s derision toward her life as a mother. Gertrude Hill is a stellar example of the destructive result of motherhood on a woman’s life. Meridian is sensitive to her mother’s sense of failure with her own life and is filled with a sense of guilt “for stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her mother’s emerging self” (M. 43). In the novel, we are told that Mrs. Hill, before she was married, was a well-to-do teacher, and when she got married and had children, it spelled “the beginning of her abstraction”:

She discovered she had no interest in children, until they were adults [...] She learned to make paper flowers and prayer pillows from tiny scraps of cloth, because she needed to feel something in her hands. She never learned to cook well, she never learned to braid hair prettily or to be in any other way creative in her home. She could have done so, if she had wanted to. Creativity was in her, but it was refused expression. It was all deliberate. A war against to those who she could not express her anger or shout, “It’s not fair!” (42)

Mrs. Hill has lived a life of suppression because she was “not a woman who should have had children” (40), and because the patriarchal society dictates that since most women’s bodies are naturally capable of bearing children, that is the only reason for which they should live. Nagueyalti Warren explains this collective expectation by claiming that “in our society, there is a fundamental expectation that women make others instead of making themselves, and that women naturally want to sacrifice their own freedom in order to nurture children and husbands” (187-188). This leads women to believe that they do not have a choice but to be mothers and wives. What most of them repress is the fact that it is men who are “the primary perpetrator of this myth,” who cannot explain the logic behind it, but who know that they must “attribute the behavior to instinct and glorify the maternal role by calling it sacred” (Warren 188). This further compartmentalizes the role of women in society; it does so by muffling their voices and their natural tendencies and affixing them all with the same characteristics. So repressed is Meridian’s mother that she even does not bother to complain about anything around her. But because she had an idea about who had caused her to stay in a fixed gender role, “she complained only about

her husband, whose faults, she felt, more than made up for her ignorance of whatever faults might exist elsewhere” (76). Mrs. Hill does not understand why she is frustrated, and her feeling of inferiority stems from being aware of the myth of the perfect mother and not being able to live up to that standard. On the other hand, the mother archetype also marginalizes a woman by reminding her that she is inferior to a patriarchal standard, making the situation one that is next to impossible for women to conquer. Having witnessed her mother’s feelings of frustration and emptiness, Meridian begins to experience the same when her identity is narrowed down to that of a mother.

What Meridian is unable to achieve with her mother, she comes near to achieving in her relationship with Miss Winter, a childless teacher at Saxon, yet a mother figure, who saves her by granting her the forgiveness which her mother never could give. Miss Winter's words have a therapeutic effect on the ailing Meridian, and she regains her physical and mental health. Through Miss Winter, Meridian learns the value of life and its relation to death. As will be seen subsequently, symbolic mothers do have an edge over biological mothers even in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Andrienne Rich refers to such syndrome where daughters split themselves between two mothers- one, the biological mother who represents the culture of domesticity, of all centeredness, conventional expectations and another perhaps a woman artists or teacher who exemplifies strength and pride in her body, a freer way of being in the world, alive with ideas, representing the choice of a vigorous work life. Such a splitting, Rich says, may allow the young woman to fantasize alternatively, to test out two different identifications, but may also lead to a life in which she is not able to resolve the choices (1976, 247-48)

The revolt against the matrophillic daughters (mothers) by matrophobic daughters reaches scathing proportions in ShashiDeshpande’s *The Dark Holds No terrors*. While Meridian, to an extent, understands that her mother’s attitude is only a consequence of psychological victimization by patriarchy, Saru in Deshpande's novel directs a more personal attack against her mother for whom she has only sensed bitterness and scam: "she never really cared Not after Dhruva's death I just didn't exist for her I died long before I left home" (DH. 27). Saru was born in a traditional Brahmin family of south Indian city. Saru's parents have brought up her in an orthodoxical way. Her mother, Kamalatai is very rigid about the Bhraminical rites and rituals. She often hates her daughter just for her position as a daughter. She discourages Saru everywhere she get chance. Saru gets no sympathy from her mother even during the sensitive phase of adolescence. Her mother, on the other hand, makes her feel ashamed of growing up, and so Saru sees her body as a burden Also, she is repulsed by the physical appearance of her mother "If you're a woman. I don't want to be one, I thought resentfully, watching her body" (DH. 55)

Just as in *Meridian*, the psychological separation between mother and daughter in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* imposes a physical separation as well. Her hatred and repulsion for her mother enables Saru to rebel against her mother, She breaks away from the claustrophobia and stifling atmosphere of her mother's house: "I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her Suffer" (DH 128). This separation, described by Deshpande in terms of the reverence of the umbilical cord, is for Saru, far from painful, as no bonds of love and affection connect her to her mother. For Saru, her parents had become "the past" and "meant nothing" (DH . 34). Saru's first act of defiance is seen in her intention to join medical college against her mother's wishes. There is a silent antagonism between the two as Saru refuses even to talk to her mother, "I'm not talking to you I'm not asking you for anything I know what your answer will be No. forever a 'no' to anything I want You don't want me to have anything, you don't want me to do anything You

don't even want me to live" (DH. 51). Her act of defiance in marrying Manu, who belongs to a lower caste, is actually directed against her orthodox Brahmin mother.

Although Saru's mother is a character evoked from the dead, she is more effective than the living characters. In the novel her haunting presence looms large on the psyche of Saru, the recurring memory of her mother is "as violent as an assault" (DH. 12), and Saru angrily tries to select it. Her obsessive remembrance of her mother is indicative of her own sense of guilt and defeat. Her assertion, "why should she matter dead when she had never mattered alive?" (DH. 23) is ineffectual. The realization that her mother is dead brings Saru not grief but anger because she could not now have her revenge. Even after her death, her mother seems to draw away Saru's happiness like a vengeful ghost "I hate her, sapping me of happiness, of everything. She's always done it to me taken happiness away from me. She does it even now when she's dead" (DH. 100). Although she never admired or tried to emulate her mother, the influence of the dead woman is so profound in Saru's unconscious that she often merges with her mother's personality. "She went on jumbling herself with the dead woman, sometimes feeling she was acting out a role, sometimes feeling she was her mother and somewhere was that unloved, resentful, neglected child Saru" (DH97).

What Rich says of her own experience as a daughter looking at her mother, "I too shall marry, have children -- but not like her I shall find a way of doing it all differently" (1976, 219) – this exactly fits Saru, who tries hard not to be what her mother was, but ultimately realizes that she is no more than an educated version of her mother. Devoid of a sympathetic mother, Saru, like Meridian, unconsciously searches for a mother - substitute and finds her in a neighbor, Mavshi ---- 'In the motherly type with an overflow of motherliness from her own five children for Saru" (DH .66) Later, even with her, Saru tastes disillusionment, for when she returns to her house after a long interval, she finds a different Mavshi, embittered by life's experiences. Earlier, the woman's plumpness and placidity had been a part of the motherliness which had attracted Saru, now, with all her 'motherly' qualities gone, Saru is disappointed once again.

The concept of the mother as goddess also undergoes a sharp revision Saru does not regard the 'Devi' in the temple as a mother-goddess -- "Mother Imagine the thought of having a mother like that" (DH: 91) The 'Mother', like her own mother, is to Saru, a terrible cursing mother. It is her mother's curse before her death that stings Saru to the core: "Daughter? I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died. Now I am childless.... I will pray to god for her unhappiness. Let her know more sorrow than she has given me" (DH. 178).

Thus, the young angry daughter's initial feelings of matrophobia towards their real mother, to the point of even, symbolically killing them, metamorphosis into an incipient matrophilia towards their surrogate mother. The destructive approach towards matrophilic daughters (mother) leading – this time to sustain their identity. Approaching to motherhood, both as a daughter and as a potential parent, matrophobic daughters are in a clear need to escape from the mother bond. It signifies the continuation of a woman's journey to reach a place where she is free from the bonds of gender stereotypes. Both Meridian and Saru ensure their neutrality of gender by giving up their role as mother and rebel for a better place for them within society. Whereas in Meridian, the oppressive effect of motherhood is more psycho-social than biological, when it comes to Saru, the aversion to motherhood can be traced back to both biological and social factors. Unlike Meridian, however, Saru is unable to relinquish her role as mother although she temporarily abandons it. It is the thought of her children that prevents her from separating from her husband, Manu. Although Meridian at some point yields to maternal pressure, she later rejects the role outright when it becomes an imposition of ideology. The predominant idea of

‘dis-identification’ has also been raised to explore the real identity of matrophobic daughters. They neither reject the mistakes nor accept the success of their foremothers. Therefore the matrophobic young daughters in their own non-conformist way lent themselves free enough to analyze from the light of women, whose identity goes beyond being mothers and also at some stage they relinquish the role of mother. Subsequently those theoretical conceptions acquire strength and vicar when they have been made use to explicates sociological issues which are found in terms of massive technological advancement and multiple cultural negotiations.

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