

REVISIONING MOTHERHOOD - GEETANJALI SHREE'S *MAI* AS A COUNTERNARRATIVE OF MOTHERING

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Abstract

The concept of motherhood has been a subject of much debate and criticism in the field of feminism. Beginning with the Women's Liberation movement in the West, 'motherhood' has been interpreted but famous feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone as an effective patriarchal tool employed that ensures the absolute subjugation of feminine subjectivity. The western feminist arguments against motherhood have met with both acceptance as well as criticism in the Indian context. Adrienne Rich's conception of the distinction between the patriarchal institution of "motherhood" and the process of "mothering" which opens up the possibility of emancipation for women, put forth in her major work "*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*", provides an interesting alternative to the conflicting notions of motherhood held by various factions of feminism. The liberating nature of the process of 'mothering' as opposed to the institution of motherhood is convincingly brought out in Gitanjali Shree's novel *Mai* translated from Hindi by Nita Kumar. The mother, who is at the heart of the novel, employs her motherhood as an instrument for achieving her own as well as her children's liberation from the stranglehold of the oppressing patriarchal value system. The novel supports Adrienne Rich's claim that motherhood could prove to be a source of power and selfhood for women if utilized efficiently and could therefore be used as a "counternarrative of motherhood", to use Rich's term, that works against the patriarchal notion of motherhood as the ultimate, limiting and subsuming feminine identity.

Keywords:- motherhood, ultimate, limiting, feminine, patriarchal.

The concept of motherhood has been central to various feminist debates on womanhood across the centuries and it has been approached from various view points, loading the term with entirely conflicting associations. Beginning with the women's liberation movement in the West, the conception of motherhood has been "reconsidered", exploring the patriarchal employment of motherhood as a tool of oppression and subjugation of women and "challenging the view of

motherhood as an inevitable destiny for a woman”, making it the only source of fulfillment for them (Krishnaraj 21). Western feminist theoreticians, like Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone perceived motherhood as restricting women’s subjectivity, critiquing it for encouraging women to consider mothering as their sole responsibility and as “the fundamental and primary identity” (Krishnaraj 2). It is also criticized on the grounds of “obliterating female subjectivity” (Zerilli 3). Western feminist interpretations of motherhood have been borrowed by Indian feminists who assimilated them as befitting the Indian context while also vehemently contesting them on the ground that they clashed with the Indian attitude towards family and society.

Those who adopted the western perception looked down upon motherhood as a patriarchal tool of exploitation which confined women to reproductive functions alone, denying them access to any productive roles in the society, which in turn reinforced the perception of women as weak and intellectually inferior to men. Patriarchy achieved this mostly by glorifying ‘ideal motherhood’ and the sense of fulfillment it supposedly offers women. However, feminists –both Indian and Western –have observed that this was mere “glorification without empowerment” (Krishnaraj 6). While various institutions like religion, nationalism and the like exalted motherhood as divine and as the ultimate realization of womanhood, the reality of the situation remained entirely contradictory. The various articles in Maitreyi Krishnaraj’s edited work titled ‘*Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?*’ hold witness to this phenomenon. Written by a number of eminent feminist scholars of India, the essays explore motherhood in the Indian context, raising theoretical questions on the social construction of motherhood in India, as different from the lived realities of Indian women. This discrepancy between fact and fiction becomes clear from Maithreyi Krishnaraj’s observation: “. . . motherhood invites glorification but no empowerment. The real life conditions of mothering in terms of pre-natal and post-natal care, give the lie to the exalted position a mother is supposed to have. Still reeling under high maternal mortality, we are far from nurturing the nurturer” (6).

On considering motherhood and its implications, the identity construction that goes along with the glorification of motherhood also becomes relevant from a feminist theoretical perspective. As patriarchy perceives mothering as ‘natural’ to women, all the associations that mothering is tied up with, such as self-denying, caring, suffering and nurturing, also turns out to be something ‘inherent’ in women. Feminists criticize motherhood on the basis of this essentialism that accompanies it.

While a faction of Indian feminists emphasize the delimiting nature of motherhood, yet another group criticizes this perception, calling for the acceptance of motherhood as a source of emancipation. Adrienne Rich differentiates the institution of “motherhood” from the “experience of mothering”. According to Rich, while the patriarchal institution termed motherhood proves oppressive for women, the actual experience of mothering could be a source of power and selfhood, if utilized efficiently. This alternative interpretation to motherhood put forth by Adrienne Rich, in her central work *Of Woman Born*, would provide the ideal theoretical framework for the analysis of the novel *Mai*, which would involve looking at how the text demands the adoption of a fresh perspective of motherhood and the definitions of feminine identity that accompanies it as different from the western feminist understanding of motherhood as restricting and oppressive, and as detrimental to feminine subjectivity. The novel could also be interpreted as, to use Rich’s term, a “counter-narrative” of motherhood, very much in contrast with the patriarchal notions of the same.

At the centre of the novel *Mai* is a mother, as the title undoubtedly suggests. It is important to note that the mother is referred to by the term ‘mai’ for most part of the novel. The narrator is the daughter of this mother who however, has a name –Sunaina. It is around Sunaina’s life *inside* as well as *outside* their home in Delhi that the narrative revolves, all along accompanied by her constantly unraveling perception and understanding of mai. It is through her mai that the novel explores the ambivalence associated with motherhood, especially in the Indian scenario: a country of all powerful divine mother goddesses and equally powerless human mothers. However, it is exactly this word, *powerless*, that *Mai* wants us to reconsider. It calls for a complete revision of the concepts of freedom, selfhood, power, etc., probing its readers to re-think the widely-held notions underlying these terms. The opposing feminist perceptions of motherhood expounded in the introductory paragraphs prove to be extremely relevant in the case of Indian women and also of *Mai*. Because it is not only a novel “about women or speaking to women”, but is undoubtedly a “feminist novel”, as Nita Kumar observes in her afterword to her English translation of the novel (198).

As previously observed, most feminist theoreticians critique motherhood as a patriarchal strategy for ‘essentialising’ the role of women, resulting in a complete loss of subjectivity and self actualization in terms of the numerous individualistic goals women could pursue. This denies her “the potential as a human being with multiple abilities, and her need to be a citizen as much as anyone else” (Krishnaraj, 2). Feminist scholars like Beauvoir regards the “rejection of motherhood” as the radical measure to, in Beauvoir’s words, “gain freedom from being the ‘other’” (qtd. Krishnaraj 21). It is necessary to understand the various reasons for this extremely pessimistic view of motherhood. First and foremost, feminist scholars argue that motherhood has been employed by the male dominated society as a means of excluding women from any participatory role in the public life. Despite the glorification associated with motherhood,

. . . the social reality had relegated the woman to the socially significant role of the procreatrix; she had lost her identity as a woman, as a social being, and as an individual with free scope for intellect, volition and emotion. She was primarily, (if not solely) a mother, preferably of male children (Bhattacharji 58).

Also, the exaltation of this ‘divinely allocated’ role of women did not prove to be of any substantial use for the mothers themselves, as they are given control neither over the mothering process nor over the products of the hardship they endure. Mothers are perceived as passive receptacles of the ‘seed’, the ‘harvest’ of which belongs primarily to the owner of the seed –the father. This male chauvinistic point of view, observes Sukumari Bhattacharji, came about as a result of the transformation of the Aryan society from nomadic to agricultural and had powerful implications for mothers. Thus, women were only regarded as instruments for child bearing and child rearing. The patriarchal exaltation of motherhood has been largely internalized by women, along with the suppressive notions of femininity associated with it. According to Bhattacharji, such internalization resulted in women’s failure to recognize of the potential of motherhood to function as a source of power and superiority for them. Furthermore, it led to a confinement of female subjectivity within the boundaries of the experience of motherhood:

Most women . . . see motherhood as their destiny, but this is due both to the lack of alternatives and to a glorification of motherhood. Women are admired for their ability and desire to sacrifice, to suffer and live for others. This has been a psychological trap for women. Such glorification is like the sugar coating on bitter pills, and for generations, women have

fallen for this bit of sugar and accepted a role that has confined, suffocated and immobilized them (Bhasin, ----)

The institution of patriarchy gained immensely from this strategy of oppression as it assured an uncontested perpetration of its own interests. In conforming to the patriarchal conception of motherhood, women accepted mothering as their prime vocation and fulfillment. In doing so, they furthered the institution of patriarchy by providing a continuation of its line and also by performing the function of socialization whereby children are trained to conform to the strict patterns of behaviour prescribed by it. Motherhood is observed as extremely harmful to women, especially from the perspective of western feminism, for all the reasons mentioned so far.

The mother in *Mai* is presented to the readers in the light of this extreme pessimism of everything associated with motherhood. Mai is all that the male dominated society demands of a woman and a mother. She is the perfect victim of patriarchal oppression, dutifully playing all the roles a woman is supposed to play. It is this powerlessness of mai that is hinted at in the very first lines of the novel, when the narrator explains how they always knew that mai had a “weak spine” because she “constantly bends”:

Mai was always bent over. We should know. We’ve been watching her from the beginning. Our beginning is her beginning after all. She was bent over right from the start, a silent spectre moving around, taking care of everyone’s needs (1).

Mai’s “weak spine” is a symbol of her powerless existence. The narrative provides a picture of mai that is the personification of all the ‘feminine’ characteristics that feminists despise. Nita Kumar draws a “hair-curlingly accurate picture” of mai in her afterword:

The friendliness, submissiveness, being-always-at-others’-disposal, healing-all-wounds, being- sexually-usable; the putting-everything-again-in-order, the sense of responsibility and self sacrifice, frugality and unpretentiousness, the renunciation in favour of others, the putting-up-with and helping-out-in-all-matters, withdrawing-oneself and being-invisible and always-there, the passive being-available and the active ‘pulling-the-cart-out-of-the-mud’ – the endurance and discipline of a soldier (qtd. Kumar 163).

The mother that the novel presents to us is limited to the “inside” of the home, like all the women characters in the novel. There is a constant invocation of food and cooking which suggests mai’s eternal confinement to the space of kitchen. The men in the family, dada and babu, both impose their authority over mai. The former exercises his power in an explicit manner while the latter does it subtly; both, nevertheless, prove to be oppressive for her. Mai possesses the quality of silence, the only thing that her mother-in-law appreciates about her. She embodies the great “motherly virtue” of self denial as well, revealed by the fact that anything unwanted in the house goes to mai, including the stale food from the fridge. And mai’s refusal to question *babu* about the ‘other woman’ firmly establishes our conviction of her being the epitome of suffering, endurance and weakness. In short, the novel projects mai as the dutiful daughter-in-law, the submissive wife and the caring, selfless mother and in close connection with these roles, as the weak, oppressed, helpless woman.

However, the success of the novel lies in subtly probing the reader into questioning this image of mai that the narrator envisages. This ‘other’ mai is built into the narrative and is hinted at in one of the first lines of the novel quoted previously: “Mai was always bent over . . . We’ve

been watching her from the beginning. “Our beginning is her beginning after all” (1). There is the suggestion of a possible alternative interpretation of mai and her actions in that mai’s beginning as understood by the children is actually only *their* beginning and this opens up the likelihood of another beginning for mai, as different from the one perceived by the children. It is here that the paradox that is at the heart of the novel lies. In Nita Kumar’s words,

. . . a mother is, at the most elementary level, both weakness and power, innocence and manipulation, self-denial and self interest. It is the paradoxical reciprocity of the two that creates a version of the master-slave dialectic, that leads to confusion on the part of observers, and miscalculation by both ‘oppressors’ and ‘reformers’. Mai goes to the heart of this paradox (162).

The novel unravels this paradox by means of a certain narrative style, which on close reading, could be seen as working on two levels. On one level, the reader is given an interpretation of mai from Sunaina’s and Subodh’s perspective, which portrays her as a woman lacking in courage and devoid of selfhood. On the other level, the narrative reveals another perspective of mai very subtly, allowing only a dedicated and sharp reader to realize this ploy. The alternate perspective presented so gently, unaccompanied by claims and assurances that, it does not possess the character of truth, leading the reader into confusion as to the reality of this truth. Even as the narrative constructs the picture of the ‘powerless’ mai, it simultaneously destroys the picture. It becomes necessary to examine the ways in which the novel accomplishes this.

To begin with, as previously observed in the discussion about the feminist criticism of motherhood, patriarchy appropriates motherhood as an institution for perpetrating its ideologies, thereby destroying the possible emancipatory potential motherhood holds for women. The patriarchal society achieves this by gaining total control over the child once the process of mothering is complete and furthermore, by engaging mothers in the process of socialization of children into rigid patterns of behaviour based on patriarchal norms and values. On taking into consideration these two aspects of motherhood, mai stands out as unique in that she challenges the male/patriarchal control over her children and the socialization process. It is obvious in the course of the narrative that mai has more influence over the two children than any other character in the novel, including babu. Sunaina describes how each and every member of the family tried hard to restrict her, to put her behind the ‘parda’, except mai:

When I came home from school, I would wander around the big compound of our house . . . If dada saw me, he would stop me – ‘Go to mai’. Babu would also tell mai, ‘Keep her near you. There is no trusting servants or anyone.’ Dadi would say, ‘The girl has come of age.’ I would feel that a-girl-of-age was the name of a problem. With an odd sensation I looked inside myself for this problem . . . Mai never stopped me from doing anything. I thought she paid no attention (25).

Despite Sunaina’s feeling that mai paid no attention, it becomes very clear to the reader that mai *chose* not to pay attention. She has a perfect understanding of when and how to regulate her children, as it becomes clear from the manner in which mai deals with the situation where Sunaina finds a ‘dirty book from babu’s room and reads it hiding away:

Mai entered, and said with perfect calm, ‘You are reading babu’s book, is it interesting?’ ‘It is dirty, mai, look,’ I passed the book to her, inspired by her calm, ordinary voice. ‘Hmmm...hm, yes, it’s strange...such things are

sold so quickly whether you learn anything from them or not'. Mai neither stayed around, nor did she remove the book from there. I looked through it without hurrying, digested what mai had said without hurry. Mai left us alone like this again and again. It was as if she did not know how to feel suspicious . . . Her faith in us made us believe in ourselves (38).

Unlike the kinds of influence exerted by dada, dadi, babu or bua, mai's influence works on its own without overt force or compellation. As Sunaina admits, her mother's faith in her "injected some solemnity into the middle of all my innocent fidgeting around" (39), something which dada's supreme patriarchal authority, dadi's scolding or babu's constant worrying could not achieve. However, it is not in the least surprising that no one in the family understands this subtle influence that mai exerted, not even the children who took upon themselves the heavy responsibility of 'saving' their mother. Everyone misunderstood mai's knowledge as ignorance, and her faith and confidence as a foolish and thoughtless attitude to everything that happened around her. Nobody understood, in the narrator's words, "her profound faith in us to be the well of strength it was" (39). A strength that the father obviously lacks, despite his conviction that his wife was a "formless pot, a lota that would roll wherever it was pushed" (39), and always fooled by her children, because she could not assert herself to them, not enforcing hers (or for that matter, others') will over them: "she would begin to tell us what he wanted, then start listening to our story instead, and keep quiet in such a way that we could go ahead and do whatever was on our minds even more brazenly" (39).

Mai's conscious choice not to enforce others' will on her children could be looked at as her outright refusal to be a tool for the perpetration of patriarchal values and identities. She nurtured her children with ideas and convictions of their own, encouraging them to question the set standards in every manner possible. Her so-called 'ignorance' made it possible for them to grow up as self-willed individuals, not influenced by any of the existing conventions of rights and wrongs. Though this attitude of mai has a profound influence on both children, it has much far-reaching implications for the daughter. It enabled Sunaina not to become a puppet in the hands of patriarchy. Her mother saved her from being toyed with and distorted by the accepted notions of femininity – from the real parda that she was being forced into by the society: "Everyone was worried. Only mai did not seem to care, where I was, what I did. Everyone was anxious to put me behind the 'real parda', and she, as it were, accidentally pushed the curtain open before it could be stretched shut and closed tightly" (40).

This was mai's way of challenging the patriarchal hegemony that forced her to remain inside the parda. For her, the identity of motherhood was a powerful one in that it enabled her to bring into being two individuals who questioned the assumptions of the male-dominated society overtly in a way that her situation made it impossible for her to do. Unlike the mothers who lost their children to the patriarchal social system soon after they cease to be under their care and nurture, mai succeeds in maintaining her intimacy with her children as well as the influence she has on them even after they leave the house. Elizabeth Jackson's remarks on the importance of women as the "cultural carriers" of their respective communities become relevant here:

. . . the female body's capacity for birth makes women crucial to the preservation of a particular community's integrity and purity. In addition, women's responsibilities for the organization of the home and the socialization of the children makes them crucial for cultural as well as biological reproduction. For this reason, cultural control over women is fundamental to the continuity of tradition and community identity (15).

The role of women as those who ensure the continuity of tradition gives a special power to mothers. According to Jackson, “if mothers are expected to pass on cultural values to their children, [they] can sometimes exercise a subversive influence by attempting to bring up their children with alternative values”. This is precisely what mai does throughout her life. She denies patriarchy any authority over her children by refusing to carry out the task of ‘socialisation’ that she supposed to.

What mai is doing here is something similar to that which Adrienne Rich terms as “the reconstruction of motherhood as a site of power and resistance for women” (O’Reilly 6). She goes on to make a distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and mothering, the latter referring to “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction” (O’Reilly 6). While motherhood is oppressive, ‘mothering’ could be, argues Rich, a source of emancipation. Adrienne Rich observes how the patriarchal narrative of motherhood could be interrupted and deconstructed by reconstituting motherhood as a site of power and resistance for women, thereby destabilizing the patriarchal hold over the meaning and practice of mothering. In opening up this possibility, Rich has “cleared the space for the articulation of counternarratives of mothering which are women-centered and feminist meanings and experiences of mothering” (O’Reilly 8). To quote further on this:

A feminist counternarrative of motherhood is concerned with imagining and implementing a view of motherhood that is concerned with a view of motherhood as empowering to women . . . alternatively called authentic, radical feminist, or gynocentric mothering, this mode of mothering positions mothers, in Rich’s words, as “outlaws from the institution of motherhood”. this new perspective, in emphasizing maternal power and ascribing agency to mothers. . . gave rise to the view of mothering as a socially engaged enterprise that seeks to effect cultural change in the home through child rearing” (O’Reilly 10).

This is precisely what mai does. She introduces a change into the patriarchal set up of the household by nurturing her children in such a way that they become aware of the oppressive strategies at work in these hegemonic structures. As a mother, she has a great influence over her children, to the extent that the final say in their matters is hers and she is the only person who has the capacity to alter their lives.

There is a further implication for this. As observed before, another major purpose of motherhood is providing male heirs so as to ensure the continuity of the patriarchal lineage. In the novel we see that mai does not insist on Subodh’s, and even more crucially Sunaina’s, marrying within the community. She wholeheartedly accepts Subodh’s girlfriend from London, despite babu’s constant worrying regarding the nature of their relationship; with the same ease she accepts Sunaina’s lack of eagerness for marriage. Mai responds to bua’s doubts regarding Sunaina’s marriage with a boldness that Sunaina herself fails to summon up. Sunaina’s worry that bua’s questioning would give others also the courage to bring up the topic does not bother mai. She reassures her daughter calmly with the words, “The most important thing is to stand on your feet. In this day and age you accomplish that, then whatever will be, will surely be good’ (119-20). These words are uttered by the same mai, whom her husband considers ignorant and uneducated, as “one who has no knowledge or experience of the world” and, according to him, whose views had neither orthodoxy, nor maturity.

There are various such instances that bring out the strength and dignity that underlies mai’s apparent weakness. The mai who stops humming tunes inside the household after dada

admonishes her, who pushes aside the entire meal she cooked when dada half consciously utters a desire to have something else, is the same mai who stands up to dada when situation demands it: “Once dada lifted his hands to strike Subodh who was insisting that I should go to the hostel. Mai entered the sitting room, and met dada’s gaze for perhaps the only time in her life. Dada’s hand dropped, mai pulled Subodh inside, and he eventually dropped me off to the hostel” (44). It was this inner power that mai possessed that the children failed to see in their consistent desire to ‘save’ mai.

Mai’s self sacrifice and silence are interpreted by the children as signs of weakness. That mai enabled them build a life on their own terms by means of her sacrifice and silence is a fact that Subodh and Sunaina frequently overlook. Remaining her silent and selfless self, mai succeeds in achieving what she wanted to achieve, using the very tools of oppression that patriarchy employs –femininity and motherhood –to subvert and destabilize the hold that patriarchal ideologies exercised on her household.

The novel also reveals the strength of mai’s personality by contrasting her with those characters that seems to enjoy a comparatively greater degree of freedom. Dada’s self pride and authority is exposed to be mere arrogance. Babu’s character is portrayed to be having power only over mai, while he is subservient to dada and completely at a loss when it comes to the children. Mostly, one gets a feeling that it is because mai chooses to obey him that he receives some measure of power in the household. Similarly, dadi’s desperate clinging-on to her son makes her look pathetic, despite her apparent authority over the inner space of the household. Also, the fact that she lacks any say in the matter of the ‘other woman’ in her husband’s life in contrast with mai’s fierce response to her husband’s illicit affair, shows the hollowness of the power that dadi enjoys. In dadi’s case as well, it is possible to argue that her dominance over her mai, is something that mai willfully grants her:

We had scolded mai that she let dadi say all that she did. Mai told me that dadi’s bald spot was not from old age. Dadi used to hide in the store room when dada was drunk and he would pull her out by hair. Mai said that dadi’s and her *jati* was the same and she could not turn away from her own kind (29).

This profound awareness of mai undoubtedly puts her on a much higher level when compared to dadi. A similar comparison could be made between mai and bua as well, whose seeming power over her husband is proved wrong by the fact that she has to beg money from him even for house expenses. Also, it becomes impossible for her to visit her own home as her husband refuses to stay without her.

Yet another stark difference between mai and the other two women characters in the novel (dadi and bua) is that while the latter pays homage to patriarchy in promoting and transferring its ideologies to the younger generations, mai, as already observed, bluntly refuses to do so. The novel *Mai* suggests a comparison, though not explicitly, between different kinds of mothers. While dadi and bua are mothers “who speak for patriarchy and the non-freedom of women”, mai questions and subverts it, posing the “conundrum that the problem of mother is created, most volubly and aggressively, by mothers themselves: for Rajjo and Sunaina by dadi and bua” (Kumar 169).

Despite all these aspects that make mai unique, the children fall back upon the rational, western perceptions of silence as weakness and self denial as absurdity. Even the daughter fails to understand the immense strength that mai had to summon up in order to light up the fire inside her and to keep it glowing, without letting it be put out by the fluttering of the *parda*. Sunaina

realizes that mai had a fire inside her too, but she did not perceive it for what it really was, just because mai hid it from others. And when it threatened her parda, “she might have drawn the flame inside her rather than let it grow outwards” (41).

However, mai’s character and the narrator’s perception of it keep evolving throughout the novel and become complete with the appearance of Rajjo, a part of mai’s identity, and a very crucial one at that, which got submerged in the only identity that her children allowed her – that of their mother. Sunaina’s and Subodh’s discovery of Rajjo does not happen by mere accident; mai is the reason why this transpires. When talking of mai’s reclaiming of Rajjo, one striking aspect of mai’s strength as a mother and individual comes to the forefront. While dadi never succeeds in detaching herself from her obsessive love for her son and therefore fails to shed the one and only identity that patriarchy grants her, that of a mother, mai successfully lets go of her children and regains that part of her which she dearly cherished, like the crumbling letter inside the mirror frame. This “letting go” of the child, observes Rich, is very important to the child and also, for the mother:

Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child or children, is one part of the female process; it is not an identity for all time . . . but in the eyes of the society, once having been mothers, what are we, if not always mothers? The process of “letting go” – though we are charged with blame if we do not – is an act of revolt against the grain of the patriarchal culture. (38).

Unlike dadi, mai gradually lets go of her children, moulding them into independent, self-willed and sensitive human beings, not attuned to the standards of the patriarchal society, In doing so, she simultaneously regains the phase of her life that had been denied her by the same society, by confining her to the roles of daughter-in-law, wife and mother. Towards the end we realize, however, that she has never let Rajjo disappear down the dark corridors of time; she kept her alive, awaiting the time when she could reclaim her. As Sunaina notes, “Mai was returning to the centre of her life, she was putting herself back from pieces to whole” – a wholeness that the male dominated society denied her (112).

Last but not the least, it is important to note that the two children entirely differ in their perception of the sudden appearance of Rajjo. While Subodh is outraged by mai’s courage to let go of the Rajjo within her, Sunaina’s perception is transformed. She gains an insight into mai –an insight that she has never been capable of all these years she knew her mother. Significantly, it is Sunaina who finally grasps some truths about mai, while Subodh remains confused and disillusioned till the end, as his words reveal: “there is no one so tyrannical, he continued, ‘and no one so helpless that he would let anything be done to him –no matter what – without protest . . . no one can be such a weakling” (112). The final realization is Sunaina’s; because for her, understanding mai holds the key to understanding herself. It is to her that mai’s life speaks. Sunaina speaks to herself, “We had seen her parda. We saw the parda as lifeless thing in other’s hands, pulled here, pushed there. We thought that this was mai, this was mai herself. We did not sense the dignity behind the parda (154).

When Sunaina refuses to leave the house, Subodh accuses her of wanting to be nothing, *just like mai*. Her response to him is the following thoughts, which she prefers not to say aloud:

Wrong. Wrong. I was not able to explain. Mai had not been nothing. It was we who made her like that. I did not want to be mai. I would not ever become mai in any case. Mai never did want to make me like her. Even if I wanted to, I could not be mai . . . I have to fight her history, reject her

being . . . I have to fight till then, fight her herself, the mai who is alive, who is in me, who is in the fire, in the ashes, who is there forever. Before whom I bow. I will fight her.

...
Mai suffered. She pulled her fire inside. But do you understand, mai had a fire too; she was not hollow, she had a fire? We had seen her suffering only for others but did not see her suffering from her own fire.

Yes, I will suffer. I will pull and pull mai's fire outside and keep it alight.

And do so here. Right here.

Because freedom is not the air blowing around in a cramped corner. And a prison is not only the clearly outlined bars in the window (156-7).

The last words are extremely significant in expressing Sunaina's awareness of the need for looking at mai from a different perspective, one that would reveal the complexities underlying the definitions of freedom and confinement, power and weakness, self denial and self actualization, as well as silence and speech. To quote Nita Kumar, "We could start evaluating silence differently than how our dichotomous, rationalist world . . . We could question agency, strength, and weakness anew. We could take the plurality of each of these things seriously" (168-9).

This is exactly what mai desired her daughter to realize: that freedom could come in the guise of confinement and power in that of weakness. She achieves her desire by carving out a motherhood for herself as different from that which the patriarchal society granted her, thereby transcending the popular conceptions of the constricting nature of femininity. In narrating this *unconventional* mother, *Mai* portrays motherhood as a "site of power and resistance for women" and in doing so becomes, to use Adrienne Rich's term, a "counternarrative of mothering" (O'Reilly 8).

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