
Book Review

Title:	<i>Maternal Fictions, Writing the Mother in Indian Women's Fiction</i>
Author:	Indrani Karmakar
Publisher:	Routledge (an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group)
Year:	2022
Pages:	152
Price (in GBP.):	130

Maternal Fictions by the author Indrani Karmakar is a timely intervention into the broad domain of South Asian Feminism. As the name suggests, the book talks about motherhood from not one, but various windows of feminism, that include both fictional and non-fictional instances. Mostly based in Indian context, Karmakar drives her book through a bit vaster geography of South Asia in her discussion, briefly touching the West (mostly to refer to feminists and texts) at times. Written in a very layman-friendly and elegant language, the book does stand as a valuable piece of research on the subject of maternity.

In the introduction, the author mostly talks about the arguments she intends to establish throughout the book. The very section begins with addressing one of the most recent pan-India scenarios that put maternity in a brighter and newer light – the migrant mothers, during the COVID-19 mass-migration in India. Further, the author takes us to the myriad cultural and sociological interpretations of the infamous Durga idol in Kolkata that represented a migrant mother and her children; and later on, to the concept of ‘motherland’ i.e., ‘Bharat Mata’ in gendering our nation. She broadly elaborates how ‘The gendering of the nation through maternal imaginaries invariably affected the constructions of Indian femininity.’ (Karmakar, p. 3).

Karmakar begins her first chapter titled ‘Reluctant Mothers? Maternal Subjectivity and Ambivalence’ addressing the immense societal pressure put on the woman’s body to give birth to offspring and how that age-old pressure becomes a hindrance for a mother in doing anything out of that fixed

frame of maternal duties, and in extension, how that gives birth to 'reluctant mothers'. The author draws the example of how Gandhi, in gendering the non-violence ideology as 'feminine' (his logic being, women being typically mute to oppression!), was heavily criticized by eminent figures such as Ketu H. Katrak, Jayawardena and Amrita Nandy. In this chapter, the author also mentions the notion of maternal ambivalence, which refers to conflicting feelings and pulls experienced by mothers. Acknowledging maternal ambivalence is a way to resist the dominant and conventional idea of motherhood, and shed light on the structural inequalities and concerns that contribute to intense ambivalence. There is also the example of Anuradha Roy's fictional mother in *All the Lives We Have Never Lived* feeling confined in her life now revolving only around her son Myshkin and his baby food, soap, milk etc. She later escapes from all of these duties and monotony in choosing her art over her mono-dimensional identity as a mother. Karmakar nicely puts an innuendo-question in our minds as to how and why a mother has to arrive in such a horrible crossroads where she has to choose between her life as a free individual on one hand; and as a person who feels like a trapped caretaker of her own child on the other. Karmakar lets the question linger. Next, in another example of Anita Desai's book *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), Karmakar portrays a reluctant protagonist Sita who rejects motherhood, throwing a question at the tradition of a woman's fulfilment lying only in becoming a mother. Desai's choice of naming the protagonist as 'Sita' has also been rightly admired by Karmakar.

Karmakar titles her second chapter as 'Cast(e)ing Motherhood', where she talks mainly about mothers belonging to the marginal sections of Indian society. She starts the chapter by referring to Urmila Pawar's autobiography, where Pawar remembers her mother comparing the job of mothering to the suicidal act of *Sati* (jumping into the pyre willingly), and how that comparison left a deep imprint on her mind. The image Pawar uses, as referred to by Karmakar, is fierce and it evokes fear. The chapter talks about the social activism of Radhika Vemula, the Dalit mother of the PhD scholar Rohit Vemula who chose to take his own life in January, 2016. Despite being a single mother raising three children, she has shown dauntless resilience and determination, even in the face of losing one of her children to caste prejudice. She has fought against the very oppressors who denied her and her late son Rohit justice. We see elaboration on how different waves of the Feminist movement in India excluded the Dalit women's experience, the way it did the same to the lower-class and Black women in the West. The author repeatedly quotes feminist Sharmila Rege in establishing her argument on how the downtrodden were segregated as

the 'other' while Indian feminism became a vent only for the voices of the Brahmanical women. Karmakar also takes writer-activist Mahasweta Devi's texts featuring lower-caste mothers and their struggles (here she confesses taking more Bengali texts due to her familiarity with the region). The two texts she takes are *Bayen* and *Ma from Dusk to Dawn*. In the former, we see how a lower-caste woman whose job is to bury dead children, is forcibly separated from her biological child, solely due to her occupation, until her death. Karmakar quotes Devi in her most tear-provoking lines uttered by the protagonist Chandi, "'No, no, I'm not a Bayen! I have a son of my own. My breasts are heavy with milk for him' (Devi 11)". Later the author talks about how the Bengali 'Shakti' cult portrays mother goddesses as fearsome and powerful, while the very mother is yearned for by the son, i.e., the male devotee. This chapter gives more textual instances of fictional Dalit mothers and their individual struggles, linked with subject of class-caste-gender, in maternity under societal oppression.

The third chapter is about a very sensitive and rather under-researched topic, of mother-daughter relationship, titled 'Mothering Daughters'. It starts with a folksong that expresses a mother's lament over giving birth to a daughter, after fantasizing and wishing throughout her pregnancy of a son. This chapter highlights that very ambivalence and talks about how the mothers love their daughters, but pity them for their similar future of an oppressed in-law's household. The traditional concept of motherland waiting for her brave sons to protect her, glorifies the mother-son relationship, thus further negating the mother-daughter bond. The author refers to Nancy Chodorow's text *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1989), among other texts, where she brings in Chodorow's discussion on how a mother identifies herself more through her daughter than her son, and how she relives her life through her daughter's. The chapter discusses the bias in anthropological research and mythical narratives towards the development of sons in Indian society. It highlights the stark absence of the daughter as a theme in Indian literature, but mentions some notable works that do address it. The emergence of women's writing since the 1990s reflects changing roles and opportunities for women in modern India. However, scholarly writing on this topic remains limited. Another saddening part that the chapter deals with is the Indian mythical absence of mother-daughter relationship—according to Rajender Kaur, neither of Sita and Draupadi had mortal mother to show the bond concerned. Karmakar also draws our attention to Rich's argument of how a daughter develops phobia of motherhood, and hence tries her best to not become her own mother. To further elaborate the bond, the author takes two texts—*The Binding Vines* by Sashi Deshpande that talks of a middle-class mother in the 1990s; and *Women*

Dreaming by Salma that adds the subject of mothering in Muslim culture in a rural setting. The chapter is mostly concerned about the socio-cultural and psychological aspects that regulate the mother-daughter tie.

The title of the fourth chapter 'Motherhood and Diaspora' is somewhat explanatory of the subject, as the author here takes examples of two texts to elaborate a mother's experience in a foreign land – *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The experiences of the double-diasporic people have been researched under many lights, but the way Karmakar deals with it here, by bringing the common elements of food, culture, language, cooking etc between the two fictional mothers Ashima and Mrs. Dutta, from two different scenarios and age groups, is noteworthy. Through Ashima the author shows the difficulties a young mother faces, without her family and culture's support, in a foreign land, and how she tries her very best to make the foreign land a homelike place. On the other hand, Mrs. Dutta is an aged, widowed mother who finds herself to be an unnecessary burden on her son's happy family in a foreign land. Both the mothers have the common ground of being diasporic, and both of them hold onto their homeland's culture and nostalgia to find some comfort, alongside their children's happy faces.

In the fifth chapter – 'Maternal Non-mothers', Karmakar talks about how non-biological motherhood has become a false polar opposite to biological maternity. She presents Rich's idea of maternity, which is beyond biology – it's about the maternal care that defines the quality of a mother. The author, in this chapter, also discusses informal mothering done by older female kin of the child's family, and nanny being unmistakably important in childcare, alongside the biological mother's nurture. Another topic she illustrates is the trend of rich families from first world countries in adopting downtrodden kids from third world countries, for which she takes the example of the movie 'Lion'. In this movie, we see how both the biological and the non-biological mothers pine for the protagonist Sheroo, thereby blurring the lines between biological and non-biological mothers. Karmakar also illustrates the fact of the intensity of motherhood to be independent of biological bond, and how that independence is shaken disturbingly by our very own society that considers child as a gift of God and childlessness as an ill omen. The ideas of surrogate mothers and adoptive mothers are discussed with the later referring to mythical characters of Karna and Krishna. Karmakar takes the text *The Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai and shows how Bim performs sacrifices and mother's duties to her autistic brother Baba, thereby becoming his mother in a way, despite bio-

logically and actually (?) being his sister – again somewhat harking back to female kin taking care of a child (here Baba is a forever-child due to his condition). There are other examples, of unwilling motherhood in *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* (2011), and nanny becoming emotionally closer to the child than the biological mother in *Bilkisu Becomes a Mother*. Altogether, the chapter puts before us stunning examples of maternity beyond biology coming at par to the biological counterpart.

Conclusion:

Maternal Fictions: Writing the Mother in Indian Women's Fiction is a book that portrays the multi-fold aspects of motherhood in Indian setting, with numerous instances of representing maternity in Indian women's writing. She talks about class, caste, diaspora, willingness, biological bond and other relevant factors of motherhood quite well. However, the author somewhat loses the opportunity to talk in her own words – the book turns out as a documentation, a compilation of words of other writers. One important contemporary discussion that Karmakar should have brought here, is that of transgender maternity. This does not just belong to this subject of discussion but also demands focus from contemporary academicians. Another such relevant study on working mothers vs non-working mothers in the making of a child would also have been quite beneficial, which, again, she does not take up here. Yet overall, the book is indeed a very informative and detailed study on the subject, making it a notable academic work on Indian feminist writing dealing with maternity. I would recommend this as a brilliant study on the subject, despite its shortcomings.

Oishi Pattanayak