

Voicing the Unspeakable: Indian Daughters Writing Mothers

Sucharita Sarkar¹

D.T.S.S College of Commerce, Mumbai, India

Abstract

Indian society has traditionally glorified the mother as the silent and submissive producer of sons. In the context of hegemonic patriarchal discourse, the mother-daughter relationship has been an “unspeakable plot” (Hirsch 1). Yet mothers have always shaped their daughters’ identities through their own sacrifices and resistances. In this paper, I have examined the contours of the mother-daughter plot through two texts by Indian daughters/writers: *Mai: A Novel* by Geetanjali Shree (1997; translated from Hindi by Nita Kumar, 2000), and the “biography-novel” *Diddi: My Mother’s Voice* by Ira Pande (2005). Although both texts are located in middle class, upper caste families in North India, the mothers respond to patriarchal subjugation in contrasting ways. These texts challenge and subvert patriarchy at various levels: by reasserting the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship; by narrating stories of maternal resistances within and outside the family; by articulating the ambivalences felt by daughters and their consciousness of progressive empowerment; by examining the problematic relationship between procreativity and creativity; by unpacking the social construct of motherhood through the prism of the daughters’ representations; and by tracing the formation of the “motherline” (Lowinsky 1) which creates, values and transmits enabling maternal legacies. Using the methodologies of comparative textual analysis and feminist psychoanalysis, I have attempted to rediscover the “matronymic” that is “blanked out by the patronymic” in the family plot (Gilbert and Gubar 378) as narrated by daughters writing their mothers in India.

Keywords

India, daughterhood, motherhood, patriarchy, relationality, resistance

The Mother-Daughter Relationship: Indian Texts and Contexts

The moon has gone
behind the attic;
sweet is the talk
between mother and daughter. (Tharu and Lalitha 137)

¹ Sucharita Sarkar is an Associate Professor of English at the D.T.S.S. College of Commerce in Mumbai, India. Her research focuses on issues and intersections of gender, family, media, diaspora, identity and culture studies.

A daughter's born and the house falls to pieces
 A son's birth sets rejoicing even the latch
 On the door... (Tharu and Lalitha 141)

My heart kept asking, Beloved, or unloved? I drew her to my bosom and
 asked her, 'Little daughter of mine, are you my beloved, or are you my
 unloved one?' (Chaudhurani 274)

I deliberately begin this paper with two quotations from folk songs – the first from Maharashtra and the second from Karnataka – sung by anonymous, rural, non-literate women, juxtaposed with another quotation from the writings of the urban, educated Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani, who was part of the first wave of women writers of the nineteenth century writing consciousness-raising articles in women's journals – this is from the journal *Sadbhava* (1891). My intention is to indicate the suppressed covertness of the mother-daughter bond – that is here articulated privately, at night – and the forces of patriarchy (specifically Hindu Brahminical patriarchy) that cause this suppression. The different contexts of these texts, locational as well as generational, emphasise the continuity and pervasiveness of the suppression of the mother-daughter relationship in Indian societies.

Historical evidence directly links the suppression of the mother-daughter relationship to the prevalence of son-preference. A.S. Altekar's seminal work on the position of women in Hindu civilisation categorically states that "the available evidence shows that in India too in early times the daughter was not as welcome as the son" (3). The notion of daughters being unwanted is embedded deep in Hindu society, with scriptures such as the *Atharvaveda*, the *Manusmriti*, and epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, reiterating how daughters bring "misery" to their families, especially their fathers (the mother is noticeably absent) (Bose 76-78). This was partly because of the "greater anxiety" that parents felt at the birth of a daughter, because she would have to leave her natal family after marriage, a condition enforced by the system of patriliney (Altekar 9). Such paradoxical reasoning that both causes and justifies the marginalisation of daughters is typical of patriarchal ideologies. In a similar way, the rule of the father ensures that the "birth of a son immediately heightens [the mother's] status" (Altekar 100). The glorification of the mother who produces sons is a strategy to ensure the hegemony of the patriarchal discourse, as such mothers often become complicit in their own and their daughters' subordination. Overall, through scripture, ritual and social practice, Hindu patriarchal discourse idealises women, including mothers, "through a rhetoric that glorifies compliance," and attempts to enforce an "overbearing control" over all aspects of women's lives, including their relationships with each other (Bose 156).

Thus, in spite of the apparent apotheosis of the mother in Indian culture, the mother-daughter dyad hovers "on the textual margins," "overshadowed" by

the mother-son bond, as Ira Raja and Kay Souter survey in their anthology of mother-daughter stories from India (Introduction xii). Radhika Mohanram also notes the absence of any narrative “blueprint” for mother-daughter relationships “within the master discourse of Indian fiction” (21-22). Analysing the shift from “apni” (belonging to us) to “parayi” (belonging to others) that marks the process of othering of daughters, Rachana Johri summarises, “Empowering cultural representations of mother daughter relationships are rare”; in fact, “the strongest image involves the parting scene at the daughter’s marriage,” a visual metaphor of the inevitable distancing of daughters in Indian patrilineal, virilocal societies (29).

It is not that the invisibilisation of the mother-daughter dyad is restricted to Indian contexts. The “cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story” of all patriarchal cultures and literatures that privilege the word and authority of the father (Rich 225). Marianne Hirsch identified the Oedipal father-son plot as the paradigmatic narrative in Euro-American patriarchal systems of discourse and representation, while Jocasta’s missing story – the “unspeakable plot” – reveals how mothers and daughters have been “neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures” (3).

Yet, to refer once again to the quotation with which I began my paper, despite the submersion and marginalisation, the mother-daughter plot continues to be articulated in many cultures, especially in the works of women writers. Alice Walker acknowledges the debt to the mother when she comments, “Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories” (240). Raja and Souter also document through their anthology how, in India, “mother-daughter intimacy proves more resilient than familial and social structures would seem to allow” (Introduction xiv). In another essay, Raja notes that since the 1990s, “mother and daughter relationships in changing India have been increasingly addressed in contemporary fiction” (853). This increase in visibility can be directly attributed to deliberate strategies of resistance and reclamation adopted by women writers, many of whom articulate a feminist consciousness in their writings.

This paper investigates the contours of the mother-daughter relationship through the lens of the daughter writing the mother, focusing specifically on two texts, *Mai: A Novel* by Geetanjali Shree (1997; translated from Hindi by Nita Kumar, 2000) and the “biography-novel” *Diddi: My Mother’s Voice* by Ira Pande (2005). Although the texts belong to disparate genres – *Mai* is fiction, while *Diddi* incorporates fiction into layers of memoir – they are linked by their location. Both texts are located in middle class, upper caste families in North India, a society where rigid hierarchies of caste, class and gender intersect to subjugate women along various axes of oppression. *Diddi* is born in and marries into “high-born Brahmin families”; and there are repeated references to

the sacred thread worn by mai's husband and father-in-law and to the "zamindari style" of her married home (Pande 17; Shree 142). The mothers in these texts respond to patriarchal subjugation in contrasting ways, and, expectedly, their daughters relate to them in different ways. I have explored the range of maternal responses to oppression, as well as the diversities of daughters' responses to their mothers, by studying these contrasts and differences.

The comparative textual analysis of the selected texts is grounded in feminist psychoanalysis and deploys specific concepts formulated in theories of feminist mothering. In writing this paper, I am deeply indebted to the works of motherhood theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow and Naomi Ruth Lowinsky, and to the works of various Indian scholars on the mother-daughter relationship. This rich field of earlier scholarship that I have referenced here has enabled me – to use a maternal metaphor – to engender and nurture this paper to its completion.

Theorising Mother-Daughter Relationships

In the above section, I have attempted to contextualise the marginalisation of mother-daughter relationships in the literature and culture of India. In this section, I shall give a brief overview of Freudian psychoanalytical theorising, and the subsequent feminist revisions thereof, about the ambivalences and complexities of this crucial relationship.

Sigmund Freud chose the Oedipus story – where Jocasta's figure is silenced and killed off as a necessary step to restore order – as the foundation of his theory of identity formation, where the mother-figure is the primary and most intense love-object for the child, both male and female. The Oedipal theory has been critiqued by feminists as a negation of maternal needs, desires and selfhood. Freud later analysed female psychosexual development through the lens of the Electra myth, where the desiring mother, Clytemnestra, is condemned by her daughter, Electra, whose attachment turns to rejection and hostility. According to Freud, this turning away from the mother is *necessary* in daughters to ensure the transference of their erotic object from the mother to the father, which is needed for *normal* female development. Freud used the term ambivalence to reconcile the contradictions of his theories about how the daughter's intense attachment shifts to hostility, yet he was unclear about the specific causes for the daughter's hostility.

Feminist psychoanalytical theorists have questioned the Freudian model of mother-daughter conflict. Instead of regarding it as inherent, inevitable, normal and necessary, they investigate how social and cultural conditioning also influence the daughter's supposed hostility. Steph Lawler argues for the need to resist existing cultural prescriptions by understanding that "mother" and "daughter" are not distinct, pre-existing subject positions; instead, they are

imbricated and ongoing products of gendered politics and discourse. Nancy Chodorow realigned psychoanalysis with feminism by providing an alternative post-Freudian model of mother-daughter relationships. Chodorow opines that girls are culturally expected to identify with their mother in order to “attain her adult feminine identification and learn her adult gender role,” even as they have to overcome this primary identification and differentiate sufficiently from the mother to form a secondary identification (177). Thus, daughters experience the constant and contradictory pulls of identification and differentiation, often leading to a perception of “overwhelming enmeshment” (Boyd 292). It is not necessary that this feeling of enmeshment will *only* or *always* result in hostility, as Freud claimed. Instead, feminist psychologists theorised the mother-daughter relationship as a connection that is simultaneously “powerful and painful” (Raja 857). In this context, it is significant to note that in both *Mai* and *Diddi*, the daughters take up the task of writing their mothers after the mother’s death: perhaps the enmeshed intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship requires the distancing provided by death in order to be grappled with in text. This distancing is never an easy task. Pande writes that Diddi, “had burrowed herself so deeply into my life that losing her was like losing a limb” (Pande 1). After *mai*’s death, Sunaina continues to feel her existence within herself: “Rather, this was *mai* in agony within me” (Shree 153). Just as the daughter is born of the mother, so also the mother exists within the daughter, and to distance the mother from the self is as painful as a dismemberment.

The mother-daughter dyad is not just a relationship between two enmeshed individuals, it is also a relationship within one individual. Hirsch comments, “the multiplicity of ‘women’ is nowhere more obvious than in the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter” (12). This ensures continuity between mother and daughter, as well as conflict between mother and daughters. The potential duality of the self as both mother-daughter produces matrophobia. Matrophobia is not, as Adrienne Rich has clarified, the fear of one’s mother, it is the fear of “becoming one’s mother,” a fear linked to the process of “womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother’s bondage, to become individuated and free” (Rich 235-36). We recurrently observe the explicit matrophobia of Sunaina – the daughter and narrator – in *Mai*. She says on many occasions, “I cannot become another *mai*. *Mai* herself is a vanishing species.... I will fight to the death not to be another *mai*” (Shree 57). Pande’s matrophobia, though, is not overt, it emerges only obliquely and rarely. It is expressed covertly in her comment on her parents’ marriage, which she felt was mismatched, unequal and oppressive: “The story of Diddi and Babu, as we call our father, is a labyrinth that is dark and full of shadows” (69). Pande chooses not to enter this labyrinth, and prefers instead to reconstruct the affirmative aspects of her relationship with her mother.

The difference in expressions of and approaches to matrophobia in *Mai* and *Didi* can be explicated through this analysis by Chodorow:

Mother-daughter relationships in which the mother is supported by a network of women kin and friends, and has meaningful work and self-esteem, produce daughters with capacities for nurturance and a strong sense of self. Mother-daughter relationships in which the mother has no other adult support or meaningful work and remains ambivalently attached to her own mother produce ambivalent attachment and inability to separate in daughters. Those aspects of feminine personality which reproduce mothering become distorted. (Chodorow 213)

The positional and circumstantial differences between *mai* and *Didi* also create differences in their relationship with their daughters. *Didi* is a determined and acclaimed writer, surrounded by an enabling and supportive female network of her own mother (Ama), sister (Jayanti Jerja), maid (Ramrati) and others. Her strong sense of self fosters a similar individuating capacity in her daughters, as well as an abiding attachment to their mother. *Mai*, on the other hand, does only the devalued domestic work of care and labour within the home, where she is oppressed, instead of supported, by her mother-in-law. Hence, her daughter Sunaina openly expresses her derision for *mai*, but is simultaneously unable to individuate herself effectively. In her repeated derision for her mother, Sunaina replicates the oppressive structures of patriarchy.

To counter the persistence and damaging potential of matrophobia, feminist motherhood scholars aim to “accept and integrate and strengthen both the mother and the daughter” in themselves, and to reintegrate the mother-daughter bond (Rich 253). Western feminist theories of mother-daughter relationships uphold the Demeter-Persephone myth as a counter-narrative to the Electra complex: Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, share a close and primordial bond which is disrupted by Hades, who abducts Persephone to the underworld. Yet Demeter’s maternal agency ensures that Persephone is reconciled to her every year in spring; in winter, she returns to Hades. Unlike Freud’s linear theory of hostile mother-daughter conflict, the Demeter myth is circular – the mother-daughter estrangement is always followed by a reconciliation – and reaffirms the values of maternal legacies and maternal agency. Ira Pande’s *Didi* can be read as a daughter’s celebration and circulation of her maternal legacy. As a translator, Pande attempts to “recreate her [mother’s] voice” from Hindi into English; and as a thinking, reading and writing daughter, she acknowledges and documents the rich legacy of her-stories that she has inherited from her storyteller, novelist and columnist mother.

Motherhood scholars also deploy the concept of the motherline as a practice and strategy to provide an affirmative model of mother-daughter

relationship. Jungian psychoanalyst Naomi Lowinsky defines motherline as “that pattern, for the oneness of body and psyche, for the experience of continuity among women” (4). Fiona Joy Green imagines Lowinsky’s concept of the motherline as “a line, a cord, or a thread that connects every woman – each born of a woman – back to her foremothers through her roots of family and culture” (“Matroreform” 231). It is created through shared stories that bond mothers and daughters and is passed down generations of women, often orally. In the Indian context, women are uniquely placed to give and receive stories and create and share motherlines because of the very structure of the Hindu joint family, where many generations of mothers, daughters and mother-surrogates (aunts, female cousins, grand-aunts) live under the same roof. But these oral stories are trivialised and invisibilised in the dominant literary canons, and the persistence of matrophobia interrupts the creation and continuity of the motherline.

One way of reintegrating the mother-daughter bond and tracing the motherline is by reclaiming the unspeakable plot, by writing the mother. This is not an easy task, not least because of the experience of matrophobia and mother-daughter ambivalence. Pande admits, “Perhaps because we called our mother Diddi, elder sister, our relationship with her was always somewhat ambivalent” (1). Sunaina also confesses, “I want to narrate ‘mai’ but the distance between ‘mai’ and the ‘narration’ is so troubled, so full of opposition, that one doesn’t know how to cross that distance or what might happen on the way” (Shree 3). In a way, both *Diddi* and *Mai* can be read as works of “motherquest,” the term coined by Adalgisa Giorgio to define the daughter’s search for identity by reclaiming her maternal legacy (5).

***Mai*: Resistance and Relationality through Silence**

Mai was always bent over... right from the start, a silent spectre moving around, taking care of everyone’s needs. (Shree 1)

Mai retreated into a decisive silence. (Shree 85)

Mai, in the eponymous novel, is introduced to the reader by her daughter-narrator Sunaina as the epitome of the silent, sacrificing and submissive Indian wife/mother. The exteriorisation of mai’s state of subjugation is emphasised by her spinal ailments: “We always knew mother had a weak spine. The doctor told us that later” (Shree 2). The weak spine becomes a recurrent physical metaphor embodying mai’s powerlessness. For mai, the agents of oppression within the family are her husband and her in-laws. Like her constant bent down figure, mai is also visually defined through her “parda” or “head covered with her sari”: “So powerful was dadi’s will that mai was in ‘parda’ all day long” (Shree 11). It

is dadi (grandmother) who relentlessly dictates to and dominates mai. This is symptomatic of patriarchal systems of subjugation, which are strengthened and perpetuated by the consent and complicity of the victims themselves. In such situations, motherlines cannot form between women of different generations as the relationship they share is one of oppression rather than support. This is in stark contrast to *Diddi*, where Pande dedicates her book to her mother-in-law, Jiya, who was her “best friend” and “someone who was more of a mother to me than my own” (n.p.). The grandmother is an important link “in the life stream of generations,” “often she is the first to tell her granddaughter the stories from her Motherline” (Lowinsky 115). Sunaina’s maternal grandmother died when mai was very young, and dadi, her paternal grandmother, suppressed rather than enabled female companionship. In the absence of such generational links with her female ancestors, Sunaina struggles to create motherlines. Sunaina’s narrative, which begins at a time when she and her brother Subodh were young children living with their parents and grandparents, does not probe into the interior world of mai’s feelings about her own life, depicting her only from the outside, from the self-centred perspective of a child: “For a long time we had no idea when mai arose in the morning, what she ever ate, how she existed” (Shree 9).

The initial impression of mai’s weakness and shadowiness is both reinforced and subverted later in the narrative. There are spaces within the domestic confines where mai can “slowly remove her ‘real parda’” and express herself (Shree 11). In her children’s room, she would uninhibitedly laugh and play with them, check their homework and tell them stories where “the poor people who were considered fools turned out to be victorious” (Shree 12). This is the space where mai’s maternal intimacy with her children emerges and flourishes. Mai also speaks outside this room of her own when she feels the need to support her children. When their grandfather, Dada, orders the barber to cut short Subodh’s hair against his wishes, mai intervenes, and “clearly” orders the barber to stop (Shree 31). She explains the processes of menstruation and conception to Sunaina when she gets her periods and “rescues” her from the “shame” associated with menstruation by reassuring her that she has not become less “auspicious”: to Sunaina, bewildered and hurt when her dadi and aunt try to impose menstrual taboos on her, it is mai who “quickly put[s] down a ladder” to enable her to come out of the “pit” (Shree 49). Lowinsky’s concept of motherline includes the sharing of such embodied knowledge, “blood mysteries” between mother and daughter (Lowinsky 13).

Mai seconds Subodh’s wishes to allow Sunaina’s admission to a college hostel, contesting Babu’s ranting, vociferous opposition with her “decisive silence” (Shree 85). She accepts Subodh’s British fiancée Judith, and Sunaina’s live-in partner Vikram into her home without any judgement, despite being criticised by Babu, her husband, for being made a fool of by her children (Shree

39). Sunaina grows to appreciate this strength in mai, her insistence on non-judgment that silently contests the dictates and prejudices of patriarchal families. Sunaina realises, “Maybe the credit also went to her who refused to become the echo of someone else’s voice, who simply heard impassively what everyone said” (Shree 85). Writing about what daughters need, Rich states that “old, institutionalized, sacrificial ‘mother-love’” is not enough, daughters need “courageous mothering” (Rich 246). Mai, located at the cusp of tradition and modernity, demonstrates a juxtaposition of both self-sacrifice and courage to resist; it is a juxtaposition that bewilders her children.

Despite mai’s latent strength, Sunaina and Subodh persistently project her as a victim and a burden and cast themselves in the roles of her emancipators: “We used to think of mai as our burden.... We grew up in our longing to save her” (Shree 39). While Subodh continues to believe in this victim-rescuer narrative, Sunaina’s responses become more complex and even contradictory. One reason for this is matrophobia. In Sunaina’s narrative, matrophobia, which is very pronounced and even naive initially, gradually becomes more complicated as it is nuanced by a feeling of indebtedness and respect for the hidden strength of mai. Sunaina says,

I will not be like her, giving and giving and pretend this giving is my taking.... I have to fight her history, reject her being, and do that by taking and taking, and only then give. (Shree 156)

Yet it is mai, “who is precisely that which I must not become – it is this mai before whom I repeatedly bow my head,” she says again (Shree 57). Initially dismissive of mai’s disempowered status and her lack of the usual indices of authority, like education and employment, Sunaina gradually realises the value of the work that mai does at home. After the death of her in-laws, when mai experiences more freedom and autonomy within the boundaries of her home, her “world expand[s],” the “prison walls of the kitchen also open[s] up” and her talents find space to grow and excel: “[W]hen mai put her touch on the garden, there was a new womanly blossoming” (Shree 80).

Despite her reiterative determination to dissociate from mai, Sunaina also demonstrates a recurring and often unconscious internalisation of her mother’s values and behaviour. Psycho-analytic theorists emphasise the “unconscious” aspect of daughters’ imitation of their mothers (Boyd 291). When Sunaina feels “this obsession with reviving mai” and decides to write about her, she feels a deep sense of “shock” that “mai, so weak from the very beginning, can fill someone up like this” (Shree 3). This paradoxical weak-strength or absence-presence is a key metaphor in understanding how apparently subjugated women in the Hindu patriarchal families also exert a certain kind of power and agency. Sunaina recounts, “Fasts were frequent, almost all kept by mai” (Shree 22). The

vratas (ritual fasts) that mai diligently performs for the benefit of her family are a Hindu custom that offer a significant space for women's self-expression within the limits and dictates of patriarchy. Mandakranta Bose interprets the performance of vratas as "the paradox of authority gained through servitude" (Bose 140). Sunaina grapples with these inherent paradoxes in mai.

Although the plot of *Mai* follows a linear structure, beginning with Sunaina's and her brother, Subodh's childhood and ending sometime after mai's death, this linear flow of narrative is interrupted by recurrent flashbacks, flash-forwards, incoherence and ambiguities. Sunaina confesses that tracing mai is like entering a fort "complete with trapdoors, mazes, cellars, secret tunnels and puzzles" (Shree 3). Sunaina often has feelings of suffocation, of being "trapped in this smoke, choking, breathing... of mai's fire... and also embers that were still alight and shedding ashes" (Shree 157). The disruptions in the linearity of the plot are a structural metaphor for Sunaina's constant struggle to grasp and pin down her mother – both in her own feelings and in the words of the text. There are repeated references to the elusiveness of mai, and Sunaina subverts her own attempts at deciphering mai by saying, "I was not able to explain" (Shree 156). The repetitions and disruptions create an impression of circular stagnation: Sunaina seems unable to achieve closure. Whereas Subodh's childhood desire to free mai shifts to become his desire to free himself from mai, Sunaina struggles to achieve this differentiation. Analysing the difference between a son's and a daughter's response to the mother as they grow older, Chodorow explains that the daughter's identity is more "continuously embedded in and mediated by their ongoing relationship with their mother," while the son is able to "deny [that] relationship" in adulthood (Chodorow 176).

Boyd notes how "intimacy and irritation often go hand-in-hand" within the mother-daughter dyad (298). This attraction-repulsion complex is also present in Sunaina's relationship with mai. Mostly set within the confines of the home, an outsider's perspective on the mother-child bond in *Mai* is provided when Judith, the British girlfriend of Subodh, comes for a visit: "Get out of this suffocating intimacy or you will never be free" (Shree 103). It is significant that the advice to break free from the mother comes from a British/Western character. Western psychoanalytical theory emphasises the necessity of individuation: "The bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, must be broken so that the daughter can become woman" (Irigaray qtd. in Hirsch 43). Sunaina, however, is unable to break free from her mother so easily. Nancy Chodorow opines that daughters in American society have "problems with differentiation from and identification with their mothers" (177). Although set in a different location, Sunaina's circular, tortured narrative that alternates between empathy and disaffect, reveals similar generational problems.

The novel ends with Sunaina finally being persuaded and coerced by Subodh into leaving the house, but with the "fire of mai's un-lived and unseen

life” smouldering within her (Shree 157). Her final action both distances her from the physical space marked by her mother – and potentially allows for the development of her selfhood – and also emphasises the psychic connections between her mother and her self which she reclaims and reasserts. Hence, despite her struggles, I would read Sunaina’s circuitous journey from avowedly despising *mai*’s one-dimensionality to acknowledging her complexity, and the maternal legacy bequeathed to her, as a journey that traces and embraces her personal motherline. As Lowinsky suggests, ““Finding the Motherline is not a linear process. It is entirely individualistic, and you may begin at any point in the process. It is the work of most of a lifetime” (209).

***Diddi*: Resistance and Relationality through Writing**

She had embarked on a writing career as a defiant gesture against the suffocating laws of his family. (Pande 76).

A different kind of motherline – more consciously feminist – is traced in *Diddi*. Diddi’s non-normativity is foregrounded at the very outset: known as Gaura at home, she chose the synonymous acronym “Shivani” to embark on a career as a writer. Shivani’s existence is an act of subversion in traditional Hindu society where women rarely had non-familial social roles. By choosing words as her medium of self-fashioning, by choosing to have a public career as a writer, columnist and radio-show host, Diddi is directly contesting the patriarchal norms that exalted silence and domesticity as the crowning virtues of women. In order to break the transfer of self-depreciation from mother to daughter that is so often seen in patriarchy, Adrienne Rich suggested that “the nurture of daughters in patriarchy calls for a strong sense of *self*-nurture in the mother” (245). Diddi’s quest for a selfhood beyond motherhood demonstrates Rich’s feminist mothering dictum. Unlike *mai*, who is defined by silence, Diddi is defined by her own words. The full title of the book, *Diddi: My Mother’s Voice*, indicates the autonomy that Diddi had over her own discourse, as opposed to *mai*’s condition of disenfranchisement. Through her self-making as a writer, through her undiminished spirit and independence, Diddi provides her daughters with an empowering model for social learning. Rich claims that “as daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours.... The quality of a mother’s life – however embattled and unprotected – is her primary bequest to her daughter” (247). Strong mothers create strong motherlines, and Diddi’s legacy of articulation and strength is carried forward by her daughter/s through their recuperative and creative writings.

Marianne Hirsch makes a cautionary point in her investigation of daughters’ attempts to reclaim maternal plots: “To speak for the mother, as many... daughters... do, is at once to give voice to her discourse *and* to silence

and marginalize her” (16). After her mother’s death in March 2003, Ira Pande set herself the task of reconstructing her mother from the writing her mother had left behind, both the “large body of autobiographical prose” – “her portraits, essays, memoirs, chronicles, travelogues and newspaper columns” – as well as her fiction, where “Diddi bled into her plots often without knowing that she was doing so” (Pande 2). Instead of writing a memoir or a biography which would overwrite the maternal voice with the daughter’s discourse, Pande makes her own narrative a frame – sometimes detailed, sometimes rudimentary – for the translated versions of her mother’s writings. She writes the prologue as well as the last chapter on her mother’s death, but closes the book with an epilogue that is one of the final stories written by her mother, one that appears to her as “an epitaph she wrote on her generation of parents” (Pande 185). Not just a memoirist, Pande engages with the maternal discourse in her professional capacities as a translator and an editor. In this sense, the narrative of *Diddi* – despite moving back and forth between the daughter’s and the mother’s voices, and between memoir and fiction – is more linear and less tortuously circular than Sunaina’s journey to find her mother and individuate herself.

Although their histories in writing give Diddi and Pande a common professional meeting ground, it also adds another layer to the inherent complexities of the mother-daughter dyad. The ambivalence that characterises mother-daughter relationships is further complicated here because of the mother’s agency as a writer: an agency that her daughter/s both trivialised and were inspired by. Pande writes how Shivani’s status as “the most popular Hindi writer of her times” made them both “proud” and “embarrassed”: in hindsight, she realises how Diddi was deeply pained when her children outgrew “her kind of writing” and “chose to deliberately downplay her literary reputation with us, treating it as a joke” (1). Despite Diddi’s determined self-making, such trivialisation of her achievements by her own children reveals the obstacles that mothers must negotiate, even within the circle of their most intimate supporters, to forge their agential trajectories outside the confines of motherhood.

In *Diddi*, we encounter maternal ambiguity rather than maternal silence. The usual pattern of mother-daughter texts – the journey from maternal silence to daughterly speech – is altered here. Pande’s mother’s silence is broken by herself, not her daughter. Diddi’s account of her own mother, Ama, reveals Ama to be a strong-willed matriarch capable of taking “radical and subversive” decisions in the face of patriarchal opposition and outrage (Pande 49). Ama openly challenges Hindu norms of widowhood when she adopts the young widow Munna, decides to fund her higher education and encourages her to shed her mandatory white widow’s saree and wear coloured garments and glass bangles (Pande 48). It is true that Ama’s challenging of the “rigid boundaries of Brahminism” is done more through “guile” than open contestation: “Men’s

presence you need next to you always.... No one likes to see a woman managing things” (Pande 52-54). Ama’s feminist legacy needs to be evaluated in the context of her generation and location. She was “unashamedly partial to the boys of the family” and insisted on nurturing the girls in accordance with “tradition and patriarchal laws.” Pande admits that “to the women of Ama’s generation, men were the only weapon – even if they cut both ways – women had”: despite this, Ama was “determined that men... must be controlled” (Pande 54).

A similar deference to the titular authority of men is also present in *Diddi*, which seems contradictory to her instinctive desire for female autonomy. *Diddi*’s son preference is also quite blatant, and extends beyond life to instructions after her death: “She could not bear anyone else but her son to light her pyre” (Pande 181). *Diddi* inherits Ama’s paradoxical attitude to patriarchal regulations. Whereas Shivani herself declares that “I agreed to abide by all the rules of a good Hindu wife,” yet her novels had “strong women characters who rebelled against all such values and social inequalities” (Pande 77, 42). The motherline that connects Ama to *Diddi* and her daughters is, although complicated by paradoxes, still carried forward as a legacy of feminist mothering. In this context, I am borrowing Green’s definition of feminist mothering as “a conscious political strategy they use to bring about social change in their lives and in the lives of their children” (“Developing” 8). When Pande declares, “I strongly believe that all daughters ultimately grow up to be like their mothers,” she is describing how Ama had “passed on” her “refusal to accept injustice or hypocrisy quietly” to *Diddi* and to her grand-daughters (Pande 40).

It is also significant that in the “Last Chapter” of *Diddi*, Pande narrates her own adult memories of her mother’s old age and failing health, a period when she and her siblings took turns in caring for her when required (175). Although *Diddi*’s fierce independence and eccentric individuality prevents total dependence on her daughter/s, she does spend her last few days with Pande, arriving at her house with the greeting, “I have come to your house to die” and reluctantly allowing her daughters to mother her in her last illness (Pande 180). Boyd concludes from several studies that mother-daughter dyads transition into a phase of “mutual mothering” as both age, and the adult daughter, often a mother herself, feels an “enhanced empathy” for her mother that leads to a more “positive connection” (296). In *Diddi*, written by a daughter who has aged, this kind of heightened empathy is more evident than in *Mai*. It is Pande’s own mature vision as an adult and as a mother, as much as *Diddi*’s death, that provides the necessary distance between subject and object, giving Pande’s text a positivity, humour and serenity that is absent from the much younger and unmarried Sunaina’s account. Although Pande confesses that while writing this book “I deliberately put aside all that I ever learnt as editor,” it is perhaps her

professional training that enables her to find a more equable balance in the attraction-repulsion complex that often makes the process of writing one's mother a fraught and intense experience. Whereas in *Mai*, the narration is from the perspective of the daughter, and *mai* herself – despite her nominal titular centrality – plays a supportive role to Sunaina's painful process of individuation, Pande's experimental form of biography-fiction shares space equally with the articulation of Shivani's maternal subjectivity.

Pande structures her work into chronological order, from Diddi's childhood in Kasoon and her relationship with her own mother to her education in Santiniketan, her married life with Babu, the intimate network of sisterhood (both her own and Diddi's sisters) that connected them and emplaced them in a familial and female support system, Diddi's life post-widowhood and, finally, her old age and death. The unhindered chronological narrative flow and the fluid transitions between the mother's narrative and the daughter's commentary are symptomatic of a maturity and serenity that indicate a daughter who has "found" her mother and has been enriched by that maternal legacy. Pande describes the process of finding her mother: "As I translated one article after another, fascinated by the life that was unfolding in another language... beneath the surface of the written word, I could see a history that was hers as much as ours" (137). The act of translation becomes a feminist act, an act of discovering the motherline through the different steps enumerated by Lowinsky: "reclaiming our stories" (210), "reclaiming the mother tongue" (212), "reclaiming the mother-daughter loop" (213), "reclaiming the power of the grandmother" (214) and "reclaiming our mother's childhood landscapes (215). Writing about feminist family romances, Hirsch states that these texts offer us a "powerful mythic space" that "points to an alternative to patriarchy and the logos – a world of shared female knowledge and experience in which subject/object dualism and power relationships might be challenged and redefined" (133). The shared spaces and histories produced by *Diddi's* mother-daughter collaboration have such myth-making capacity. Hence, while *Mai* replicates the problematic processes of daughters' writing/finding their mothers/selves, *Diddi* points towards the enriching potential of the daughters' project.

Re-inscribing the Unspeakable Plot: Crossing Thresholds

You nurtured me to be a carefree bird, O Mother
 You counted the days to make me fly, O Mother (Tharu and Lalitha 135)

[I]n search of my mother's garden, I found my own. (Walker 243)

Interestingly, Ira Pande's *Diddi* is part of a larger project undertaken by her and by Mrinal Pande, her sister, to rediscover and celebrate their feminist motherline in their own creative, interpretive and translation works. Ira Pande has also translated another anthology of Shivani's short stories, *Aparadhini: Women without Men* (2010), recovering and sharing the inclusive stories that humanise women who have been criminalised by the patriarchal state as deviant and monstrous. Mrinal Pande's work, *Devi: Tales of the Goddess in Our Time* (1996), also creates a motherline, albeit through another process: that of tracing a goddess genealogy in women around her, including her mother. In a way, Ira Pande and Mrinal Pande's revisiting of their mother in their works is a recurrence of the Demeter myth, where the daughter is enriched by her circular returning to her mother. In the Preface, Mrinal Pande acknowledges her debt to her mother, who introduced her "to the Goddess-tales from the *Markandeya Purana*, and to the *Devi Kavach*," and celebrates the empowering potential of "language, or *Vac*, [which] is a form of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning" that has "sprung the lock for millions of women, like my mother and myself, and helped minds leap away from the fearful prisons of silence" (Preface xviii). Shivani's connection with her daughters expands beyond biological mothering into creative mothering, and the mother also becomes the creative precursor of the daughter. The rich intertextualities between the texts of this mother-daughter triad opens up new possibilities for a resolution of the problematic relationship between procreativity and creativity.

Taken together, the works of Shivani, Ira Pande and Mrinal Pande chart a journey from subservient silence to defiant speech, for the mother, for the daughter and for the entire sisterhood of women. The theme of this issue of *Asiatic* is "From Compressed Worlds to Open Spaces" in South Asian women's writing. It is significant that this theme encompasses a journey: "from... to..." Ira Raja comments that the social context of the north Indian, urban, Hindu middle-class family provides little precedence for "sustained mother-daughter relationality," even as she analyses counter-cultural Hindi fiction like Krishna Sobti's *Ai Ladki* (2002) and Maitreyee Pushpa's *Kasturi Kundal Basai* (2000) which challenge these very conventions and absences (Raja 861). As South Asian societies transition from conservative pasts to neoliberal presents, the changing mother-daughter relationality that is represented in texts like *Mai* signifies this journey from silence to speech.

As examined earlier, both *Diddi* and *Mai* acknowledge the role of the mothers in the empowerment of the daughters. *Diddi* provided an enabling role model to her daughters through her own life and writing. By her unconventional choices, and by initiating her daughters into the liberating pleasures of music, dance and art, *Diddi* gave her children "a taste of life beyond school and the family" (Pande 89). Even Sunaina, whose mother was much more restricted by location and convention, asserts:

I am forced to pay respect to this tireless, weak person who gave protection to the strong me. She was the one who undid my chains, let the fire inside me grow, and gave me strength. It was her tireless weakness that enabled me to fight. (Shree 57)

Both these texts represent an unconventional, feminist mothering. According to Green, feminist mothering helps the daughters to “develop into women with a strong sense of themselves” and not to “replicate the patriarchal model of motherhood” (Green, “Matroreform” 16). We may read Diddi’s writing and mai’s silence as conscious strategies deployed to empower their daughters (in Diddi’s case, also her own self).

In conclusion, I would like to situate the texts studied here within an emerging field of conscious feminist literary activity that is reclaiming and centralising the mother-daughter plot, both in women’s family fiction – vernacular as well as English, as seen in the works of Ira Raja – and women’s memoirs. In memoirs especially, there have been several exciting projects, both individual and collaborative, where the mother-daughter relationship has been affirmed and celebrated. *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood* (Bhattacharya) is a conscious engagement with the role of mothers in the empowerment of daughters. In this anthology, the writers make the exercise of “thinking through their mothers” a deliberate, political and feminist act that is both honouring and passing on the legacy of the mothers’ struggle to the next generation of daughters and readers (Virginia Woolf qtd. in Bhattacharya 17). Another strategic, collaborative and “subversive assignment” by a group of feminist writers to contest the “culture of silence” is the anthology *A Space of Her Own* (Gulati and Bagchi 257-58). The narratives of twelve feminist academics about their mothers, grandmothers and aunts – women who exhibited strength in powerless situations, and who functioned as the writers’ foremothers – reflect on the “emotional lines of matriline within the social structure of patriline” as a strategy to fashion not just a motherline but also their own “personhood” (Gulati and Bagchi 10). The feminist project of daughters writing mothers in India can thus be aligned with the globally alive practice of “matroreform,” which reforms “static patriarchal motherhood practices” and reaffirms “creative feminist motherwork” by generating “space for feminist mothers and daughters to voice up and rise out of invisibility and silence” (Green, “Matroreform” 20).

As Adrienne Rich deduced, “It was not enough to *understand* our mothers; more than ever, in the effort to touch our own strength as women, we *needed* them” (225). Hence, by voicing the hitherto unspeakable mother-daughter plot, daughters – who are often mothers themselves – are not only reclaiming their mothers, they are shaping and empowering themselves and their future generations of daughters.

Works Cited

- Altekar, A.S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1956.
- Bhattacharya, Rinki, ed. *Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Bose, Mandakranta. *Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions*. London, New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Boyd, Carol J. "Mothers and Daughter: A Discussion of Theory and Research." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 51.2 (May 1989): 291-301.
- Chaudhurani, Sarat Kumari. "Adorer, Na Anadorer? (Beloved, or Unloved?)." Trans. Tista Bagchi. *Women Writing in India: Volume I, 600 BC to Early Twentieth Century*. Eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1993. 263-74.
- Chodorow, Nancy J. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Freud on Women*. Ed. Elizabeth Young-Buehl. New York: Norton & Co., 1990.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land, Volume 3, Letters from the Front*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1994.
- Giorgio, Adalgisa, ed. *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002.
- Green, Fiona Joy. "Developing a Feminist Motherline: Reflections on a Decade of Feminist Mothering." *Journal for the Association of Research on Mothering* 8. 1/2 (2006): 7-20.
- Green, Fiona Joy. "Matroreform: Feminist Mothers and their Daughters Creating Feminist Motherlines." *Journal for the Association of Research on Mothering* 10. 2 (2008): 11-21.
- Gulati, Leela and Jashodhara Bagchi, eds. *A Space of Her Own: Personal Narratives of Twelve Women*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Johri, Rachana. "From Parayi to Apni: Mothers' Love as Resistance." *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood*. Eds. Jasjit K. Sangha and Tahira Gonsalves. Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013. 17-32.
- Lawler, Steph. *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Lowinsky, Naomi Ruth. *The Motherline: Every Woman's Journey to Find Her Female Roots*. Cheyenne: Fisher King Press, 2009.
- Mohanram, Radhika. "The Problems of Reading: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Indian Postcoloniality." *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter*

- Relationships in 20th-Century Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. 20-37.
- Pande, Ira. *Didi: My Mother's Voice*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Pande, Mrinal. *Devi: Tales of the Goddess in Our Time*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Pushpa, Maitreyee. *Kasturi Kundal Basai*. New Delhi: Rajkamal, 2000.
- Raja, Ira. "Desiring Daughters: Intergenerational Connectedness in Recent Indian Fiction," *Women's Studies* 32 (2003). 853-74.
- Raja, Ira and Kay Souter, eds. *An Endless Winter's Night: An Anthology of Mother-Daughter Stories*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2010.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986.
- Shivani. *Shivani's Aparadhini: Women without Men*. Trans. Ira Pande. Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010.
- Shree, Geetanjali. *Mai: A Novel*. Trans. Nita Kumar. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2000.
- Sobti, Krishna. *Ai Ladki (Listen Girl!)*. Trans. Shivanath. New Delhi: Katha Asia Library, 2002.
- Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha, eds. *Women Writing in India: Volume I (600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century)*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1983.