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Psychic Conflict and Cultural Selfhood in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*

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Abstract: *This paper deals with Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* in a comparative framework, juxtaposing psychoanalysis and indigenous psychology. It argues that neither of the critical approaches can fully explain the novel's disturbing depiction of maternal ambivalence. The mother-daughter dynamics are equally influenced by repressed psychological conflicts and the culturally constructed patterns of selfhood, kinship, and duty. The psychoanalysis framework is used to examine the repression, repetition, memory, resentment, and the return of buried childhood trauma in adulthood, while indigenous psychology helps explain cultural conflicts around relational identity, family obligation, and the nature of suffering embedded in that specific culture. The paper argues that Antara's fragmented memories and her volatile relations with her mother reveal not only private trauma but also a larger emotional world in which care, guilt, and resentment are socially produced and culturally mediated. By reading the novel through these two theoretical lenses, the study shows that *Burnt Sugar* resists reduction to either a purely psychological case or a purely social narrative. Instead, it presents a layered account of human experience in which inner conflict and cultural formation are mutually constitutive. In conclusion, the paper contends that a hybrid interpretive model is the most suitable approach to the understanding of the complex representation of motherhood, memory, and relational suffering in the novel.*

Keywords: *Psychoanalysis, Indigenous Psychology, Comparative Frameworks, Relational Self, Repression*

Introduction

"I suffered at her hands as a child, and any pain she subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption—a rebalancing of the universe, where the rational order of cause and effect aligned. But now, I can't even tally between us. The reason is simple—my mother is forgetting, and there is nothing I can do about it. There is no way to make her remember the things she has done in the past, no way to baste her in guilt." (Doshi 1)

These are the opening lines of Avni Doshi's Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *Burnt Sugar* (2020). The novel was earlier published in India as *Girl in White Cotton*. At the center of the novel is



a mother-daughter relationship. The mother, Tara, is diagnosed with dementia, which causes her daughter Antara to relive her own childhood trauma. Antara is resentful of her mother for her unconventional life choices that were unexpected for a mother. Her reckless lifestyle left Antara to fend for herself and exposed her to trauma and a sense of abandonment. (Inam) Tara was wild in her youth. She abandoned her marriage, and for a while, they both lived in an ashram in Pune, where she had an affair with the guru, and she ignored Antara. Tara lived as a beggar for a while and spent years chasing an artist, and while she was pursuing her reckless lifestyle, Antara was with her. (Brown)

The disturbing depiction of motherhood and daughterly resentment has been the subject of much critical attention. Maternal ambivalence has been noted in recent scholarship due to psychological, social, and cultural pressures (Banerjee 493; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74). Much of this criticism still approaches the novel from a single theoretical perspective, trauma and maternal conflict or feminist readings of non-normative motherhood (Ahmad and Idris 269). What remains to be explored is how the text might be read in tandem, through psychoanalysis and through Indigenous psychology, two frameworks that foreground different but related aspects of subjectivity, relationality, and suffering (Allwood and Berry 245; Mallick and Mallick 25).

This article attempts to fill this gap by participating in the dialogue between psychoanalytic theory and Indigenous psychology to examine how the novel portrays the mother-daughter relationship as an unconscious psychic struggle and a culturally situated way of being (Mallick and Mallick 25; Allwood and Berry 245). Psychoanalysis opens a reading of suppression, repetition, ambivalence and reappearance of buried affect (Mallick and Mallick 26). Indigenous psychology is interested in relational selfhood, family obligation, and the cultural embeddedness of emotional life (Allwood and Berry 245). This interdisciplinary approach investigates how the representation of motherhood and daughterhood in *Burnt Sugar* is influenced by the interaction of psychic experience and cultural frameworks (Mallick and Mallick 25; Allwood and Berry 245).

This article attempts to address this lacuna by contributing to the conversation between psychoanalytic theory and Indigenous psychology in order to examine the ways in which the novel constructs the mother-daughter relationship as an unconscious psychic conflict and a culturally situated mode of being (Mallick and Mallick 25; Allwood and Berry 245). Psychoanalysis enables a reading of suppression, repetition, ambivalence and the return of buried affect (Mallick and Mallick 26). Indigenous psychology considers relational selfhood, family obligations, and the cultural embeddedness of emotional life (Allwood and Berry 245). This interdisciplinary method investigates the confluence of psychological experience and cultural contexts in the representation of motherhood and daughterhood in *Burnt Sugar* (Mallick and Mallick 25; Allwood and Berry 245).



Viewed through these interpretive lenses, the conflict in *Burnt Sugar* is influenced not only by personal or pathological factors, but also by inherited social expectations, kinship structures, and culturally inflected notions of duty and care (Doshi; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74; Allwood and Berry 245).

Instead, of viewing psychoanalysis and Indigenous psychology as conflicting systems, this research uses both in tandem as interpretive tools (Mallick and Mallick 25; Allwood and Berry 245). This comparison approach helps us to see the novel's mother-daughter tension as a multi-layered experience where there is a constant interaction of psychic harm and cultural formation (Mallick and Mallick 25–27; Allwood and Berry 245). In doing so, the paper argues that *Burnt Sugar* offers a powerful literary space for examining how inner conflict is produced, intensified, and expressed within a specifically Indian emotional world (Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74).

Theoretical frame: psychoanalysis and indigenous psychology side by side

The present study reads *Burnt Sugar* in dialogue with psychoanalysis and Indigenous psychology. Psychoanalysis offers tools for the exploration of repression, ambivalence, desire, and the repetition of unresolved psychic conflict, especially with respect to the mother-daughter relationship (Mallick and Mallick 26–27). In contrast, indigenous psychology emphasizes relational selfhood, family obligation, and culturally shaped emotional life (Allwood and Berry 245; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 73-74). It helps us to understand how the conflicts of the novel are situated in Indian social and kinship structures (Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74). Together, these frameworks indicate that the novel is not simply about private psychological suffering but about a complex interaction between unconscious life and culturally constructed identity (Doshi, Mallick and Mallick 25, Allwood and Berry 245).

Narrating maternal ambivalence in *Burnt Sugar*.

The story is strong because it refuses the traditional self-sacrificing mother (Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 73). In *Burnt Sugar*, parental ambivalence is shown as an enduring and complicated emotional experience, interwoven with love and resentment, dependency and guilt, and harm (Ahmad and Idris 269; Banerjee 493). This tension is made obvious from the daughter's point of view by the portrayal of the mother as both caretaker and site of grief, so that motherhood appears as an unstable and contested relationship rather than an ideal of unconditional devotion (Dious; Banerjee 493). The most striking thing about the story is that it does not conform to the stereotype of maternal self-sacrifice but depicts motherhood as emotionally complicated and affected by history (Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74).

Instead, it depicts motherhood influenced by psychic depletion, societal pressure and accumulated memories, making maternal feeling neither pure nor singular (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269; Banerjee 493). It is in this sense that the novel can be viewed as “saying the



unspeakable”: it offers a literary shape to feelings that are often ignored or negated in accepted cultural narratives of motherhood (Dious; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74).

The mixed feelings may be seen psychoanalytically as the return of suppressed hurt, unresolved reliance and recurring conflicts of emotion (Mallick & Mallick 26). The relationship between mother and daughter can also be seen from the perspective of Indigenous psychology as based on kinship, duty, and culturally patterned notions of care and obligation (Allwood and Berry 245; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74). Together, these readings suggest that maternal ambivalence in *Burnt Sugar* is both an inner psychic condition and a relational-cultural reality (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269).

Memory, repression, and repetition

Psychoanalytic theory explains repression as a mechanism to keep painful experiences out of consciousness but nevertheless affect emotions and behavior (Mallick & Mallick 26). Antara's daily repeat of painting the identical face of the day before can be viewed as a psychoanalytic manifestation of repetition compulsion, an attempt to manage a painful and unstable past through compulsive repetition (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269).

“My project to copy perfectly had been a failure... my art is about looking at where patterns cease to exist.” (Doshi 29-30).

The “double” has been the object of psychoanalysis for a long time including the anxiety of becoming or repeating the parent through unconscious identification and psychic inheritance (Mallick and Mallick 27). Antara's moment of looking at her own and her mother's naked bodies in the mirror and struggling to distinguish between them can be seen as a manifestation of this psychic doubling and fear of maternal repetition (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269).

“She is naked, and steps back to look at her reflection in the glass. She looks at mine, as it appears next to hers, then back and forth, as though she cannot tell the difference. Opposites often resemble each other.” (Doshi 15).

Antara's memories of her mother in *Burnt Sugar* are not linear or do they reappear in their entirety but are embodied, fragmented and charged with emotion, such that memory itself begins to resemble not a stable record of the past, but an ongoing struggle with it (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269). So amnesia in the novel is never simply absence but tends to be another type of haunting and unresolved affect (Banerjee 493; Dious). The dementia of Antara's mother, for instance, is not simply understood as a condition to be mourned but also a loss of moral reckoning, where Tara can no longer be forced to remember, own blame, or explain previous injury (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269).

“There is no way to make her remember the things she has done in the past, no way to baste her in guilt... The sympathy she elicits in others gives rise to something acrid in me.” (Doshi 7).



Burnt Sugar reveals how repressed memory continues to operate in the present not as a fixed recollection but as a recurring emotional pattern. From a psychoanalytic perspective, repression may return indirectly through bodily habits and affective responses rather than through conscious recall (Mallick and Mallick 26). Antara's compulsive cuticle-biting—"It isn't really the nail that I'm biting, it's the cuticle" (Doshi 13)—along with her intense discomfort toward her mother's physical decline, may be read as manifestations of unresolved childhood anxiety surfacing through the adult body (Doshi; Ahmad and Idris 269). To sustain the appearance of composure and functionality, Antara appears to suppress earlier fears of instability and abandonment rather than fully confront them (Doshi 13).

In the words of Indigenous psychology, memory is not just individual and internal but relational and contextual (Allwood and Berry 245). Antara's somatic neuroses (the cuticle biting) are not only responses to a non-specified abusive parent. They can be seen as psychological defense mechanisms specifically activated by the cultural shock of the maternal ambivalence in a society that offers no script for a mother rejecting her child (Mallick and Mallick 26; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74).

Indigenous psychology examines how suffering is experienced within culturally specific structures of meaning, relationships, and social obligation (Allwood and Berry 245; Mallick and Mallick 25). Tara's early actions—leaving her marriage, joining an ashram, and distancing herself from maternal responsibility, described through Antara's recollection of her mother as "disappearing every day, dripping with milk, leaving me unfed" (Doshi 14)—disrupt dominant cultural expectations of the self-sacrificing and nurturing mother (Doshi; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74). Antara's childhood repression may therefore be understood as a survival response within an environment in which her mother's rejection of patriarchal and domestic norms produced emotional instability and fractured relational security (Ahmad and Idris 269; Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74).

"Every sign of her physical degradation feels repulsive... I stay quiet as she speaks for the rest of the journey, listening less to what she says than how she says it... to cover for her own uncertainty." (Page 13)

"I put my right hand back on the steering wheel and try not to clench it, but my left hand moves automatically to my mouth." (Page 13)

Relational self, family obligation, and culturally shaped suffering.

Another way to look at the novel is through the concept of a relational self, where identity is built through connections with family instead of radical individual autonomy (Allwood and Berry 245). Here, Antara and her mother are not distinct psychological entities but are constituted by kinship, memory, dependency, resentment, and the emotional labour of being attached to each other (Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74).



Family obligation becomes expectations, remorse, sacrifice and social pressure so that daughterhood and motherhood are lived as tasks that can sustain and wound (Bhandarkar and Kulkarni 74). This makes suffering culturally molded: anguish is not just the result of private trauma but of the load of inherited duties, moral rules and expectations of how a “good” daughter or mother should behave (Mallick and Mallick 25). *Burnt Sugar* read this way reveals suffering as not only interior but relational and social (Allwood and Berry 245). The characters’ misery is compounded by cultural expectations that family ties be maintained, even when they are destructive. It is the tension that gives the novel its power: it shows how love, duty, and hurt can become blurred in a culture-shaped emotional landscape (Doshi).

Conclusion

Ultimately, Avni Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* demands a hybrid model of interpretation, as its depiction of maternal ambivalence stretches beyond the parameters of any one critical framework. Psychoanalysis can account for the novel’s repressed resentments, its fractured memory, and its repetitive emotional injuries, but it alone does not account for the culturally specific meanings of care, daughterhood, and familial duty that inform the mother-daughter relationship. Indigenous psychology addresses this limitation by foregrounding the contextual, relational, and culture-bound dimensions of human experience, showing that emotional life must be understood within the social worlds that produce it. Specifically, a hybrid model is needed because *Burnt Sugar* foregrounds motherhood and daughterhood as experiences that are psychologically intense but also culturally mediated.

Taken as a whole, these frameworks suggest that the suffering in *Burnt Sugar* is not simply intrapsychic or social. It arises from the interaction of unconscious conflict and culturally created relational identity, between private pain and inherited systems of obligation. The novel thus resists reduction to a universal psychoanalytic case study or to a purely sociological account of Indian family life. Such a reading expands the remit of literary criticism beyond the reading of the novel through one lens. Specifically, a hybrid model is needed because *Burnt Sugar* foregrounds motherhood and daughterhood as experiences that are psychologically intense but also culturally mediated.

The text demonstrates that memory, guilt, resentment, and dependence are produced not only in the inner life of the subject but also in a social order that idealizes maternal sacrifice and limits women to moral expectations of care. The emotional complexity of the novel is precisely in this overlap between the unconscious and the cultural, by putting psychoanalyst Such a reading expands the remit of literary criticism beyond the reading of the novel through one lens.

It suggests that *Burnt Sugar* is best approached as a narrative in which psychic disturbance and cultural formation are inseparable and that an interpretive hybrid is the only way to do justice to the text’s layered representation of maternal ambivalence, relational suffering, and fractured selfhood.



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