

## **PEN PORTRAYAL OF MOTHER'S ROLE IN SHORT STORIES OF DIASPORIC WOMEN WRITERS**

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### **Abstract**

Life manifests itself in various forms. But the common origin is mother. The term 'Mother' is as old as life itself and the signature of survival. Over ages, the nobility, piety and the grace of mother's role is treated indelibly. Mother's significance is unique and the status of that role is second to none. Through different forms of art, mother's role is elevated high sky. Values, traditions of families from end to end in any part of the world are disseminated from mothers. World witnessed bad children but not bad mothers. The legacy of family especially in culturally ancient countries as India is transferred from generation to generation through women in general and mother in particular. Men of letters throughout the world have been giving venerable position in their works to the role of mother.

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## 1. Introduction

“A mother is the truest friend we have, when trials heavy and sudden fall upon us; when adversity takes the place of prosperity; when friends desert us; when trouble thickens around us, still will she cling to us, and endeavour by her kind precepts and counsels to dissipate the clouds of darkness, and cause peace to return to our hearts.” Washington Irving.

Many writers across the world were very successful in honouring mother’s role and its status in their works. With a special reference to woman writers of Diaspora, the theme is celebrated richly. They presented a visual rendering of what a mother is through their characters.

The statement ‘Mother is fact but father is only a belief,’ may seem unpalatable to the male dominated world. Yet, it is true. Phrases as Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Mother Land, Mother tongue etc. are coined ever since. Mother is a solace, an assurance, and an inspiration, by word for patience, a multi- tasking master and what not. At times to mould her children the best, mother pretends to be a strict disciplinarian and turns as a hard task master too. Great and eminent personalities throughout the world are tailored in the hands of mothers, as mother’s lap contributes first schooling for any child. An episode is worth quoting in this connection. In the context of India, renunciation is the most sanctified phase of human life. According to the norms of renunciation for saints, they are beyond all mundane relationship. But in the annals of Saint Sankaracharya, it is said that he promised his mother, that he would return to her at the hour of her last breath. This instance is more than enough to explain the rank and value of motherhood. While one sect of Christianity, Protestants worship Jesus, Roman Catholics revere Virgin Mary who is a Holy Soul selected by God Jehovah to be the mother of his son, Messiah. Thus, the Mother who gave birth to Him is greater in the philosophy of Roman Catholicism.

The field of literature paid its tributes to ‘Mother’ in a magnificent and noteworthy style. Though Diaspora is a later trend, writers especially women contributed their best pen pictures of mother characters. Diasporic writers projected mother characters in a most befittingly graceful manner. There are various shades in the treatment of subject and topics with the principal theme of acculturation. But the writers were very successful in painting mother characters extremely well interwoven with the plots of their stories. Unerringly it is their subjective nostalgia. This paper

focuses on a handful short stories written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Shauna Singh Baldwin and AnjanaAppachana concentrated on mother characters.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's '*Bats*' in '**ArrangedMarriage and Other Stories**' is a sad story of a helpless wife but a loving mother. She does not want her daughter to know about the suffering that she undergoes.

“A couple of days later Mother had another mark on her face, even bigger and reddish blue. It was on the side of her forehead and made her face look lopsided. This time when I asked her about it she didn't say anything, just turned the other way and stared at a spot on the wall where the plaster had cracked and started peeling in the shape of a drooping mouth”. (p. 7)

She fails to protest the ill- treatment by her husband with an apprehension of her child's future. She is annoyed but dumb as her child may lose support and care if she revolts against her husband. The dependent wife cries all night but sees that her daughter never gets a hint of her sorrow. Mother tolerates pain and torture to keep her daughter happy and peaceful. For daughter's sake, mother withstands agony though it is awful. Across all her efforts by mother to seem normal in the presence of her daughter, the reader finds maternal love for her daughter.

In another story '*Meeting Mrinal*' the narration is an epitome of staying power in mothers. The fortitude and endurance of woman is flamboyantly compared with that of Mother Earth. If once the topic is the mother's patience, it is peerless. Devoid of comforts in life and torn away from the love of her son.

“But Dinesh has lived in this house all his life. I feel that if I can hold on to it until he graduates, a year longer (eleven more payments, to be exact), I will have made up to him partly for my failure to hold on to his father” (p. 144)

Mother tries to commit suicide. It is the disgust of a mother in the earlier phase of the story. But her tolerance to get change in her son is paid well towards the end of the story when her son realizes his faults and cares for her.

The story '*A perfect life*' is an account of a woman with peculiar attitude. The very noble purpose of female race, reproduction is detested by Meera, the protagonist. She never wanted to become a mother. Yet, an innate urge to give birth to a baby alters her stance. Irresistible love for a child in woman's heart is depicted.

"Many of my women friends considered me strange. The Americans were more circumspect, but the Indian women came right out and asked. Don't you mind not being married? Don't you miss having a little one to scramble onto your lap when you come home at the end of the day?"(p.43)

"Meera, the unmarried heroine, swept by motherly-love, the tidal wave, finds herself in a crisis when she gives shelter to a dirty little kid in her. Like a typical Indian Woman, she is overwhelmed with motherly love for the boy and cares a fig to the law of the land" (Malati Agarwal 5)

On an occasion to see her friend, she goes to a maternity ward. The reader can easily sense the real and primitive maternal love lurking in a woman especially Indian. On other instances she is shocked to realize that she is drawn towards children. She takes an abandoned boy may be an orphan, much against the wish of her husband. The story takes strange twists as Meera is ready even to marry a widower with a little baby. It is a genuine maternal urge in her. Meera who almost turns maniac to have a little baby for her, feels that her life can be defined perfect only if she rears a child and enjoys the bliss of motherhood.

"Six years I've been a foster mother, this never happened to me," said Mrs. Ortiz. "And he was so good too, so quiet and neat and obedient, who would have thought ..." (p.57)

"Mother-daughter relationships provide the psychological underpinning for several Divakaruni's stories. But she doesn't seem to try too much beyond the contrapuntal arrangement of independent, strident Americanized daughter against the self-effacing Indian mother, of the modern clashing with the traditional" (Sumuna 76)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's second collections of short stories '**The Unknown errors of our lives**' presents handful stories which describe motherhood. The unpleasant turns in the life of a woman especially a mother are deftly dealt by the writer in '*Mrs. Dutta writes a letter*'. Mother in this story is an epitome of love and forgiveness. Mrs. Dutta leaves India to live with her son abroad. She tolerates every kind of insult and disgrace when her own son is unhappy with her. Sagar, her son gets angry with his mother as she cannot adapt herself to a new style of life. She recollects his childhood and notices the difference in his physical features. With receding hairline etc., he is as pretty as he was young. To mother, child looks pretty evermore. When Mrs. Basu enquires if she is happy with her son, Dutta is not convinced to say that she was unhappy. She could not arrive to any reply unless happiness is defined. It is just because she is with her son. Happiness or unhappiness is a trivial issue when compared to her privilege of living with her son.\_

"The grandchildren refer to elders in a disrespectful way. But the parents leave them unrebuked. Children are not taught Indian family values. She suffers nostalgia. As a mother and a grandmother, Dutta knows the consequences of weak relationship and its future impact. She is also shocked to see the strange relationship between children and parents. In spite of many disgusting things, Dutta does not want to hold on to her grudge, who is an icon of patience and love".(p11)

"She enjoys her chance of cooking for her son and others and is elated to see them relishing her cooking. "No stale bottled curry powder for her! At least the family's eating well since I arrived, she writes in her mind, proper Indian food, ruti that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee". (p15)

A typical mother's ecstasy of simple pleasures. She expects her motherhood to be honored always. But she was taken aback on Mothers' Day. Leaving everything unfair in her itinerary, Dutta gets reconciled to make considerable living with her son in spite of sea of difference in culture. In her letter to Mrs. Das, she mentions that she got used to alien culture and glad to be with her son. Sacrifice is mother's other name. In her words "Blood is blood after all" (p.16). Her association with her son is her bliss.

In the story '*The intelligence of wild things*' Tarun's mother is the central character. She brings her children up well in a disciplined way through many hardships as a widow. Their upbringing is appreciated by friends and relatives. "Our women relatives would complement Ma on bringing him up so well" (p.27).

When Calcutta is intimidated with the Naxalite movement, Mother is annoyed that Tarun might be victimized and ruined in the movement. She is also worried that Tarun might involve himself in political storm. With foresightedness, she chases Tarun abroad lest he should be spoiled and that she can save him from the ill effects of political unrest in Calcutta.

"But I'm terrified to keep him here. You know How bad the Naxal movement is right now in Calcutta. Every morning they find more bodies of young men in ditches".(p27)

But her maternal love is reciprocated seldom. Though not altogether, he almost stops correspondence with his mother once he leaves for Vermont.

"So when I rang up India and Ma would say that it had been a long time since she had heard from Tarun (p29)

Besides Tarun, his mother has a daughter who is the narrator of the story. Mother's only desire is to meet her children before she dies. It is an everlasting craving of mother to be with her children.

"What can I do for you, Mother? What will make you happy?

Seeing my children before I die.

But I am here, Mother.

Seeing my children before I die. Seeing my children . . . (p32)"

At the end of sister's narration, the mother feels that her children are still kids listening to her recount of a story with rapt attention. Mother's world is simply her children for once and always. In this story '*The lives of Strangers*', a woman who attains the status of motherhood, she lives for her children's sake and gets prepared to struggle till her last breath in spite of all oddities. This is a lucid narration where mother's boundless forbearance in protecting and caring her children is

sketched. It is a probe into the difficulties, insult faced by a widowed mother in bringing her children up.

‘*The love of a good man*’, in this anecdote, the reader can see that a daughter is so deeply loved that the daughter develops hatred towards her father who was quite indifferent to the suffering of her mother. Besides this even her husband’s affection cannot please her. The narrator’s mother used to say, “The love of a good man saves your life”. Through the narration, Mother’s role is so delicately painted that she is constantly anxious about the welfare of her children. “Mother gives her child something vital to manifest by”. Preaching such as ‘Ocean is nothing but drop upon drop’ reflects her mellowed experience and motivation to her children. In the course of the story, Monisha’s mother dies of cancer. But throughout the first person narration at each juncture, mother occupies every inch of narrator’s life.

“Divakaruni’s short stories show that the ambiguities in women’s relationships grow out of their patriarchal conditioning. The mother daughter bond should be, she observes in “My Mother’s Daughter and Me” as about sympathy, understanding and support as it is about love”. (Qtd. in Kumar 35)

Motherhood and maternal love work as an elixir in the case of Aparna, the protagonist in “*What the body knows*”. Aparna turns delirious but recovers from her serious illness because of her instinct of motherhood. In the move of the story, once she even states that her son’s love saved her.

She has settled back, people will ask her, but what finally made you better? She will give them different answers. “It was the new antibiotic,” she might say, “the Cipro.” Or, with a shrug, “I was lucky.” Only once will she say, to a friend—not the one who had taken care of her baby; somehow they drifted apart After Aparna got better—she will say, looking out the window and blushing a little, “Love saved me.”(p.64)

The bond between mother and child is so pious and strong that Aparna who is almost on death bed recovers.

The character of mother is insignificant in “*The forgotten children*” is insignificant in this tale. She is used to loneliness but never complained “If it was lonely for her mother all day when we were gone, she did not complain. Perhaps she was glad to have the time to herself.”(p74)

She is after all a dependent wife who quietly follows her husband’s footsteps. So she gets reconciled with the circumstances. She feels happy of having liberty to think about her children at least with her heart of hearts. Her husband could not foil her maternal love.

In the chronicle “*The blooming seasons for cacti*” Mira’s mother gives her rebirth by asking Mira to hide in a water tank. When Mira was a little girl, people had threat for their lives due to insurrection in Bombay. Mira’s mother hides Mira to save from Bombay riots. Mira, when grew old, understands why her mother left her alone in the water tank. “My mother pushed me down into the tank, handed me a banana and two oranges, she let her hand linger for a moment on my hair. “God bless you”, she said.”(79)

But unfortunately mother is not traced after Bombay riots. She sacrificed her life to save Mira, her child. In this story another character with bountiful maternal love is Radhika, Malik’s second wife. After their acquaintance, Radhika and Mira become close to each other. Radhika is more anxious about the safety of Mira as how a mother would pine for her children.

I hate myself for what I’m going to say next. But it isn’t merely selfishness that drives me, it is also a fear I cannot articulate. “Not like me, Mira.

I’d never want you to be like me. To make my mistakes. To end up tied to the man who tricked you in the worst way, because what else is possible in your life—”

“I don’t want to be

“Your mother. I only want to save you from the suffering I see you rushing toward.”(89)

She does not want Mira to be cheated by Ajit just as how Malik did to her. Radhika warns Mira to be careful with Ajit. But when Mira gives a deaf ear, the helpless but earnestly loving Radhika attempts suicide. Her motherly love melts Mira. Radhika’s motherly kindness for Mira is somewhat bizarre. Radhika’s only intention is to protect Mira from the wiles and guile of man.



“For my mother, who also believed that to save the one you love, you have to give up your own life. (93) This is what exactly a matured mother thinks about her own children especially girls.

In the story “*The names of stars in Bengali*” The American boys who are escorted by their mother come to India and are surprised to watch the parental and maternal love of their grandmother. Even though her daughter is too a mother, grand ma addresses her beloved daughter ‘Khu-khu’. To mother her children are always kids and gets glad in fondling. When it is the case of Mira in the role of mother to her two kids, the readers obviously experience an avidly caring mother\_\_

“And her mother—more than anything else, she was amazed at her own mother. The hours she spent listening to knock-knock jokes which must have made no sense to her, the hours she spent making them elaborate snacks which they quite often refused to eat. They showed her their comic books and told her in dramatic detail about their favourite superheroes. They tied a handkerchief over her eyes and made her play blind man’s bluff with them. She had never been this patient with her own daughter, the mother thinks, stung by a small resentment. Then she is ashamed.”(p. 109)

Mira always avoided water since an unpleasant experience in her youth. But when her sons were about to be drowned, she risked her life and jumped into water to save them. Similarly, when her younger son falls sick, the mother at once becomes an American for facilitating effective medical treatment. Nonetheless she respected mother land and the practices in India; yet she never wanted to take chances as she is a loving mother. A grand paradigm to say how much a mother loves her children irrespective of her likes, dislikes or risk to her life.

Shauna Singh Baldwin is another diasporic writer with unique themes. ‘Naina’, a story in ‘We Are Not in Pakistan’, deals with the concept of deliberately prolonged pregnancy is an awe inspiring subject matter. A weird fear that world is not safe for the offspring does not allow a mother to deliver her baby. She feels that the girl child is more comfortable in mother’s womb than the world outside. ‘Only a girl would be so comfortable in her mother’s womb that coming out and needing to grow would spoil her world (p.54)’

Naina is too timid to deliver her baby not because she is scared of fatal labour pains but her love for her baby makes her think in an outlandish manner. The reader may feel that it is Naina's height of foolishness and timidity in keeping her pregnancy unusually prolonged. And it is an eccentricity to carry the baby 14 long years. Her friend sarcastically says that even 'Ram' in 'Ramayana' returned home after fourteen years from the forest. But as a matter of fact, her maternal love is unparalleled.

Baby, talk to me. Only to me. Tell me where you come from.

Say where I must deliver you.

Do you know me, baby? I am your mother.

Why do you wait within me? Wait so long? Make me carry you everywhere?

I wait because you are not ready to receive me.

I thought you waited because you were not ready to come to me.

You were wrong.

I am ready, baby. What can I promise you that will bring you birth?

Tell me you will love me into being. Tell me you will not be afraid.

That would be untrue, baby.

Then tell me you will live with your fear and your doubt and, even so, bring me light (p.63).

She didn't want her child to experience the dark side of the world and the unpleasant life in it. She discharges very tough physical work bearing the baby in her womb. She tolerates her difficulty just to prevent her child suffer the hard and bitter realities of the world. Such a state of mind in Naina could be an outcome of experiences in her personal life. Hence as a mother to her child, she never wanted it to be delivered. At the end of the story with the help of Dr.Chi and Dr. Johnson she delivers baby in October on Diwali day, on the day Ram came from home from exile.

In another story '*The Distance between Us*' Shauna Singh Baldwin presents a different theme even though time, responsible bonds and entanglements disconnect women from their home land, they crave for their origin. It is because every mother is another mother's child. Attachment with the mother land and attachment to one's mother are drawn as similar entities in this work.

Karanbir Singh's mother in her senile phase wanted to have a photograph of their house in Multan a petty but genuine longing of a mother from where she migrated forcibly to be away from her mother land. She had a sentimental attachment with her house. "A bus service had opened up between India and Pakistan. My mother was dying and I knew she wanted a picture of the house in Multan where was born." (p.231)

Anjana Appachana's single collection of short stories '**Incantations and other stories**' many stories highlight mother's love. The story '*Her Mother*' deals with the interpersonal relationship between the mother and two daughters or between two daughters. The theme of the story can be better understood and felt, seemed from the viewpoint of the mother, though the other characters' reactions and responses add to the comprehensive understanding of the story. The title, '*Her Mother*', itself explicitly supports the importance of 'Mother' in daughters' lives and the pivotal role played by her in shaping their future.

"To quote Ramanathan in "*Her Mother*" the mother intervenes through a letter to her daughter who is doing Ph.D. in America. Throughout the letter we can feel the motherly love." ( 3/9)

The daughter, the younger one is a well-educated woman doing a Ph.D. in comparative literature is American, after a successful academic career in the Delhi University. The first letter to her mother after her arrival in America, causes an agony of longing, anxiety and frustration in mother's mind as the letter contains words like fine, nice, or o.k. without any details expected by the mother.

"She thought, wiping her eyes with her palla, when all the words when all the words at her command were 'fine', 'nice', and 'okay'. (p159)

"She examined her daughter's handwriting. There seemed no trace of loneliness there, or discomfort, or insecurity – the writing was firm, rounded and clear." (p162, 163)

As an epitome of 'mother hood', she has nurtured her two daughters providing them with all facilities, imparting modern outlook and fair understanding of the community around the influence of foreign culture become enlightened to adopt modern living singles which embarrass the mother. Hers too is a love marriage though she has been accommodative in conformity with

the native traditional living. The elder daughter's marriage, a registered marriage, without any paraphernalia of marriage-celebration causes discontent. Her elder daughter and her husband living miles away from each other, without any scope for conjugal life and child bearing adds to her dissatisfaction.

“The mother had once dreamt of love and a large home, silk saris and sapphires.”

“The older daughter and her husband had had a registered marriage, refused to have even a reception and did not accept so much as a handkerchief from their respective parents. (p164)

She is often overcome with the feeling that she has failed to understand her daughters. The omniscience of motherhood could last only so long, and she could no longer search her daughter's secrets.

The mother while replying to her daughter's brief letter includes several things. Mother's love and affection, her concern for her well-being, her obsessive attachment becomes evident in her letter. Mother's anguish to alien culture, her fear that her daughter will fall prey to the flawed foreign culture is evident.

“Write a longer letter to me, next time, my Rani, she wrote. Try and write as though you were talking to me. Describe the trees, the buildings, and the people. Let your mother experience America through your eyes.”(p.185)

Mothers have an important role to play in the lives of their daughters. She writes, how you will look after yourself Rani Beti. You always had your mother to look after your comforts. I am your mother and I don't mind doing all this? (p.187)

The mother in the story, despite being impacted and soaked in the native culture and tradition has been progressive and accommodative. The younger daughter's affair with her brother-in-law pains her much. She excuses her daughter. She advises her daughter to make prayer one of her daily chores. She would like to see her daughter before she dies.

In another story *'My only Gods'* the place and status of the parents in general and mother in particular have been elevated to “divinity” as perceived and adored by the daughter. Though

parents are the only ‘Gods’ mother has been always with her daughter. Hence “her memories are elated in the mind of the daughter.

“My mother’s embroidery all over the house, brilliant hues of red and gold and green, like the sarees of she wore. Memories fog and fireflies, and Ponni in her purple frock.... her lice....my lice.” (p1)

“It is the mother, the most loving and loveable person in the story who loves her daughter more than anybody else, even God, whom she loves so well. The tender mind absorbs the bedtime stories told by her mother. The daughter so much fond of her mother that she blindly believes in her power to shift truth from lies and to take with God. “As my mother told me my bedtime story. She alternated between the Ramayana and children’s stories.” (p2)

“Mother teaches her children how to live eliciting more details from puranas. Mother imagines the emotions of her children. Managing emotions and purifying those emotions are the integral part of personality development.” (Ramanathan 4/9)

The attachment has been so irreversible and intense that daughter can’t tolerate the separation of the mother and her close movements with the guests who frequently visit the Grandpa’s house. The mother in the story is a traditional woman bound by the principles and ideologies of the mythical characters, having no income of her own, caring for her daughter, leans towards extra-marital relationship. Her loneliness, physical suffering, mutual agony and craving for acquaintance force her to develop an intimate relationship with the unknown, revolting against the cultural tentacles.

Mother’s disappearance from home leaves ‘Void’ and causes intolerable suffering in the daughter’s life. She searches in vain every nook and corner of the house for her mother. “I was inconsolable. I wandered from room to room, looked for her in the bathroom, in the kitchen, under the beds and in the cupboards, finally shutting myself in her wardrobe, smelling her among her saris, her talcum powder smell (p.10)”

The story has a happy ending with the arrival of both mother and father and their reunion. Mother compromises with the situation as she is dependent on and subservient to the traditional dictates. Her “love for the daughter” is an incessant force in the ultimate reunion.

## 2. Conclusion

Womanhood in the society continues to be described from an essentially male viewpoint. This is quite evident of societies especially in the third countries like India. The Diaspora writers mentioned here, whose roots are in India, focus on mother from that angle. In short, it is possible to be a woman, a mother and an achiever. In a family life, the mother as a main caregiver has more prominent part than the father in bringing up children. They vividly portrayed the role of mother in upbringing the children, the sacrifices and the agony of a mother.

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