

Exploring Memory and Motherhood in Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton*: A Detailed Book Review

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Girl in White Cotton (Burnt Sugar)

By Avni Doshi

Publisher: Fourth Estate India; 1st edition (10 September 2020)

Language: English

Paperback: 288 pages

ISBN-10: 9390327946

ISBN-13: 978-9390327942



Abstract: This review attempts to explore *Girl in White Cotton* (or *Burnt Sugar* in the US) through the philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Motherhood transcends mere childbirth, it includes upbringing and emotional connection to the child, which is often overlooked by the society while describing it. Antara's displacement from her father's home to an unfamiliar setting serves as a metaphor, symbolising the unsettling and bewildering influence exerted by her mother. I have chosen three important themes from the book which have resonated personally from *Girl in White Cotton* i.e. Memory Game, Complexity of Motherhood and Carrying the Lineage (of memory, trauma, and the resilience of resistance).

Keywords: Motherhood, Memory, Lineage, Generational Trauma.

I don't remember the last time I encountered a book whose first line completely whirled my sanity, and inspired me to gather a heart full of courage to proceed to reading it. Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton*, also published as *Burnt Sugar* in the USA, played with my ability to deal with intricate human psychology like a ping pong ball. The opening words "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 8) shattered all the perpetual glorification of motherhood in a second.

Doshi challenges the narrow perception of motherhood upheld by the patriarchal society as the sole truth. Antara, the narrator of the book, travels back in time to the memories of herself as a child. The



memories are of unimaginable emotional turmoil that she had to suffer through. The writer follows a non-linear narrative in the book to switch between the incidents of past and present.

In the realm of my exploration, memory takes on the role of a knowledge repository, echoing the insights articulated in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, where he explains that power and knowledge are aligned to each other. The power to punish relies on the knowledge and understanding of people, and this knowledge is considered valid because it comes from those in power. Therefore, power and knowledge are like two sides of the same coin – one can't exist without the other.

Upon knowing that her mother suffers from dementia, Antara takes extra care of her mother, Tara. Her desperate and persistent efforts to evoke memories from the past stem from a desire to use memory as knowledge, and a source of power. On the other hand, Tara does not want to acknowledge that she is forgetting the past. She believes the current state of her mind is the reality, and no amount of convincing from Antara could help it. Tara's deliberate disregard for the past memories also signifies her intentionally running away from it, which signifies her not surrendering to Antara.

This knowledge of memory gives Antara, the narrator, the power to hold over Tara because she knows the treatment of her mother is utterly inhumane. She wants to ensure that Tara has the knowledge of the memory of the choices that she has made in her life.

“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...” (Doshi 8). The pain from her childhood overtook her entire existence. Now when the tables have turned and she has taken up the role of a caregiver, there is no way she could have let Tara (the pain giver) forget what she has done to her.

However, Tara's resistance to acknowledging her memory loss highlights a tension between memory as a source of knowledge and the individual's perception of reality. The resistance that Tara shows to recall her past by asserting her own agency and control over the narrative of the power dynamics playing between herself and her daughter.

The writer mentions many important aspects of psychology, depression, social evils, and patriarchy in her writing. I would like to focus on two themes that intrigued me the most.

Memory Game

“...memory is a work in progress. It's always being reconstructed” (Doshi 118).

The entire novel is written in the form of fragments of memories by the writer. These memories are not just about personal experiences but also a "timeline of trauma."

Tara never accepts that she is presenting the symptoms of Dementia. “The doctor says my mother has become unreliable” (Doshi 151). Antara does everything in her ability to ensure that her mother does not completely forget the past because if she does, there wouldn't be any way to baffle her with the guilt of it. The more Antara tries to preserve the memories in her mother's mind, the more Tara



dismantles them. "It seems to me now that this forgetting is convenient, that she doesn't want to remember the things she has said and done" (Doshi 47).

In the book, Doshi brings up the memory game establishing what power the generational trauma that flows through memory holds and its importance over the constitution of the self of an individual.

"She continues talking about how difficult things were. These tales have been passed down from mothers to daughters since women had mouths and stories could be told. They contain some moral message, some rites of passage. But they also transfer that feeling all mothers know before their time is done. Guilt" (Doshi 173).

The Complexity of Motherhood

The book ventures motherhood in a unique light. Motherhood according to social standards is the highest achievement of a woman and whose essence is often confined to the physical act of giving birth. We very frequently come across how people emphasise the 10 months of physical body development in the womb as the most important reason to love and respect "mothers". Ironically, the years that follow the birth of a child are very less talked about. Those are the damaging years.

Antara was only a child when her mother left her father's house with her to Osho, a place the little child absolutely had no idea of. The place weirded out Antara. "My earliest memory is of a giant in a pyramid". She says that she was the smallest in the room and had no idea how she would manage to be any bigger. She describes the disciples as pyramids, who were terrifying, having hair, pimples, and large pores on their noses, jumping, stomping, dancing, and holding each other. They did nothing other than scare her.

On the other hand, Tara makes the most of the time at hand. She is entirely immersed in the activities involved to impress the Baba at Osho. She too laughs and coughs, her face beaming with red colour. Antara tries to "hold her [Tara's] hand, but she pulls it away and begins to stand" (Doshi 57). On this disastrous night, she becomes engulfed by the crowd. Antara flaps her wings and screams, "Ma! Ma! Ma!" (Doshi 58), but Tara doesn't notice.

There she meets Kali Mata, who takes her to the washroom and gives her water to drink. She behaves in the most gentle way with her, asking her important questions like, "What's the matter, pretty girl?", "Is there anything I can do?", "Tummy ache?", "Pretty girl, will you wait outside for me?" (Doshi 59).

Kali Mata is not an Indian, she looks different with her blue eyes and skin tone. Antara spends most of her time with her, who looks after her when she is scared, wipes her face, untangles her hands when she wakes up from sleep, and keeps her close to herself, in contrast to her biological mother who remains busy in enticing the Baba in the ashram for sexual pleasure. She occasionally comes to her, sometimes to hug her, and sometimes to beat her up for not having food.

Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (351) argues that womanhood is not an inherent trait but rather a socially constructed identity imposed upon individuals based on their birth sex.



Similarly, motherhood is often seen as an essential aspect of being a woman. The expectation of becoming a mother is deeply ingrained in societal norms and the expectations that society puts on them vehemently disdain their human existence. The irony is that to “appreciate” and justify these impositions (under the name of expectations), they are further elevated to the position of a deity of worship.

Through the representation of Tara, Doshi shatters the idea of the perfect universal motherhood. She humanises mothers and shows the flip side of any imposed social and gender role. Motherhood is as much a roleplay as being someone’s sibling, friend, teacher, or student, and any roleplay depends on what the core of an individual holds. There can not always be a magical transformation of a human being in the arrival of a child to a selfless caregiver.

Creation involves a huge power claim. As Michel Foucault points out that power is the control of the body and its energies, the imposition of a docile body on an individual, (Foucault 146) more often than not, the mothers treat their children as if they are inanimate beings devoid of their own emotions. They are trivialised, disregarded and even ridiculed in several circumstances. Antara has similar memories of Tara because she hardly considered her existence relevant or significant during her days in the ashram.

“I had been taught for most of my life that the moment for living was yet to come, that the phase I was living in, a perpetual state of childhood, was a time for waiting” (Doshi 137).

Carrying the Lineage:

Generational Trauma is one of the prominent themes of the novel. The first time it stuck with me was when she wrote why she was named “Antara”. It is ‘Un-tara’. “Antara would be unlike her mother. But in the process of separating us, we were pitted against each other”.

“He [Antara’s husband] says my mother and I have always shared some version of our objective reality” (Doshi 118).

Through the course of the book, we see that Antara leads her life by resisting her mother. The memories of this power play are so traumatic in her mind, that even when she has a house and a family of her own and is far from her mother, she still resists her in her head through the smallest of things, as if the presence of her mother is oddly lingering with every action of hers. Through all of these, she never backs out from her responsibility of taking care of her mother, Tara.

De Beauvoir's concept of “The Other” (Beavoir, 26) elucidates the unequal power dynamics between men and women, where women have historically been relegated to the position of the Other, the object, or the deviation from the male-defined norm. Similarly, in Antara's narrative, there's a power struggle between herself and her mother, where Antara feels pitted against her mother in an oppositional relationship. This struggle symbolises the imbalanced power dynamics where Antara, like many women, feels like the 'Other' in relation to her mother's expectations and societal norms.

Later, she gives up her wish of naming her daughter to protect her from becoming a part of intergenerational trauma. Resistance is the only way to break the shackles of age-old social



oppressions, particularly those less discussed, which have persisted for centuries. This surrender of power shows the first streak of a positive lineage that she carries forward for her daughter. Doshi knots three women in a wounded thread that keeps them entangled.

The events recounted in the book left a deeply unsettling impact on me. By the end of the narration, I could feel the exhaustion of the narrator in her words. They don't seem as free-flowing as at the beginning of the book. Antara abruptly ends the narration, when at a family gathering she feels like an alien, standing in front of the mirror and losing the sense of herself. The novel's ending gives us an understanding that not only did Antara derive pleasure from her mother's misery but her mother too obtained equal pleasure from her daughter's misfortune.

While Antara gradually fades into invisibility for the people around, and for the readers, I cannot help but wonder at the absolute brilliance in the Doshi's plot-narration, which unapologetically brings down the image of an ideal motherhood and acquaints us with the selfish side of a woman who happens to be a mother.

“We are all unreliable. The past seems to have a vigour that the present does not” (Doshi 151).

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