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The Deified, Defiled Mother: Damodar Mauzo's *Karmelin* as a Critique of the Phallocentric Ethics of Sexuality and Motherhood

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Abstract: This article discusses Damodar Mauzo's 1981 novel *Karmelin* as a critique of the patriarchal machinery and the deified symbol of motherhood that restricts women to their role as mere reproductive vessels. Not only does the deification of the mother-icon set dehumanising standards that women must admit to, but in order to preserve the pristine, unstained identity of the mother, it also necessitates the denial of female desire and sexual autonomy. Mauzo, in his construction of the protagonist Karmelin, problematises the socio-religious ethics that are imposed on the female sexed body under the garb of ideal motherhood. This paper investigates the novel's eponymous protagonist and her means of self expression through a body that creates a narrative of its own. Using Julia Kristeva's application of 'abjection', as is theorised in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1980),* this paper discusses how in its objective to preserve the pristine image of motherhood devoid of female sexuality and desires, the mother-icon collapses upon itself, thus, failing to be upheld as the natural order.

Keywords: Abjection, autonomy, mother-icon, sexuality, transgression.

Introduction

Karmelin (1981), which won Damodar Mauzo his Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983, remains a landmark example of Konkani literature following its revival after the liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule in 1961. Konkani's recognition as a "language of importance" (Kripalani 7) by Sahitya Akademi in 1975, the National Academy of Letters in India, saw a rise of Konkani literature with key literary figures like B. B. Borkar, Ravindra Kelekar and Manohar Rai Sardesai. Having experienced a revival originating from the liberation of Goa, Konkani literature in the late 20th Century saw a remarkable dissemination of the spirits of freedom, self expression and identity.

Additionally, in the hands of writers such as Mauzo, Konkani soon became the locus of raising resistance against cultural erasure, as well as a fertile ground for voices and narratives of dissent within the community. Even before the subsequent translation of *Karmelin* by Vidya Pai in 2004 which led to its recognition and readership pan-India, the novel's treatment of female sexuality and

expression had received substantial critical admiration. In an interview with Jerry Pinto, Abhay Sardesai remarks:

> "Nothing prepared me, however, for the way the novel opened out to probe the multiple possibilities of human desire. Prior to *Karmelin,* one had read stirring erotic passages in the works of writers like D. H. Lawrence and Anais Nin. There was a delicate touch to the sensuous accounts in *Karmelin* and some of it was movingly atmospheric" (Pinto).

Owing to the long history of diversity and ethnic exchanges within, and beyond the geopolitical boundaries of the nation, India, by the middle of the 20th Century, had already been established as a melting pot of cultures and ideas. This created socio-cultural constructs and symbols that are variegated, but nationally relevant. The same rings true with the creation of the idea that is the ideal feminine, and by extension, the ideal mother. Borrowing from the centuries of cultural exchanges, the idea of the mother that was sublimated and reinforced upon the populace of the Indian subcontinent was the one that has been supplemented by the codices of the patriarchal machinery. While on one hand, this machinery relied heavily on the glorification of the mother-icon, on the other, it pruned away the agency and the meshed aspects of identity, desire and expression of the sexed female body.

Although a more favourable climate for women's emancipation had been generated at the beginning of the 20th Century, the mother-icon as supplanted within the nation had little to show in terms of identity beyond patriarchal structures that reinforced the conservative restraints that kept the mother-icon in place, granting her a cosmetically supreme space within the confines of the heteronormative family. This was further problematised by the binary of pre- marital and post-marital idea of the woman in the domestic space.

Within the domestic framework, the identity of the Indian woman rarely communicated roles beyond that of the wife, the mother, and the mother-in-law. The heteronormative family structure and the patriarchal ideologies sanctified the mother-icon, systemically dictating and enforcing the post-marital space over individuality and agency. The Indian socio-cultural scenario of the 20th Century being religiously rooted, mother-icon is also substantiated with the ancient paradigms of epic proportions, often carefully and selectively chosen so as to serve the narrative of the phallocentric power-wielders.

The Construction of the Sexed Body

While *Karmelin* opens in medias res, Mauzo adopts his novel as an introspective exercise where Karmelin recollects her life following the death of her alcoholic husband, Jose. In an attempt to scrutinise and piece back together her identity that has been fragmented by the patriarchal machinery, Karmelin relies on consolidating her memories of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. In her construction of temporal lived experiences, Mauzo takes his readers along a journey through Karmelin's childhood as she loses her family to typhoid, and is adopted into a family comprising her paternal aunt Mai, Paai, and cousin Agnel. Karlemin's recollection also involves her Christian

upbringing, memories of her school, and Agnel through her stepping into adolescence and growing consciousness of her body and sexuality.

Karmelin's sexual exploration begins with her affair with Agnel, her cousin. For the first time, the body of the child metamorphoses into that of the woman, adding newer implications within the socio-cultural framework as that of the sexed body, and is therefore, subjected to social constructions of her appeal and fertility. As an adopted child in a Christian family, Karmelin is brought up in accordance with the religious dogmas that govern women. Although her first pre-marital sexual union with Agnel does stem from desire, Karmelin's conformity to her religious faith weaves within her the gravity of her transgression. Thus, in a moment of unsurety before giving into her desires, Karmelin is compelled to ask Agnel to promise if they will "get married soon" (Mauzo 61). Her hope in the eventual marital communion with Agnel encourages her to break the norms of tradition and religion. However, her body, in expressing its sexual needs and fulfilling them, creates a narrative of its own, a narrative of resistance against the patriarchal structure.

Although inexperienced the portrayal of Karmelin's desire was, her guiding Agnel on the way to her pleasure grants agency to the character. Her self-expression paves the way for her claiming the right to sexual satisfaction by being an engaged participant in the act of sex, rather than being a passive receptacle, conventionally perceived to the collective conscience as the castrated female, the sexually insecure body or the recipient of sexual objectification. In addition to Karmelin's sexual acts being an extension of her love towards Agnel, Karmelin's eagerness to participate in more such experiences with Agnel at the beach is also a expressing herself and gaining autonomy over her body. Karmelin owns her body and by her willingness to offer and receive pleasure, she claims her power and authority over her own body, putting a dent in the patriarchal structure: "Karmelin could hardly wait for Sunday to arrive. Like a tiger that has tasted blood yearns for it again and again, I've begun to yearn for sex, she thought." (Mauzo 63).

Karmelin and Agnel's trysts at the beach disturb the social order as Mai, Karmelin's adoptive mother, grows suspicious of them, leading to an evident surveillance and investigation of the affair between Karmelin and Agnel. Their premarital, albeit consensual sexual relationship, is perceived socio-religiously as an act of physical and moral transgression, and construed as a vigorous threat to the fabrics of society. It mandates the regulation of Karmelin's sexed body. As a result, Mai sees Karmelin as a threat to her plans of finding a lucrative bride for her son, and Paai, Karmelin's adoptive father is the one to remind her of the tenets she must uphold as a dutiful Christian, "Whoever bears sorrow with fortitude manages to survive in this world… You must learn to bear your grief too." (Mauzo 71). And in complying with having to lose Agnel, Karmelin's loss is not just the loss of her lover, but also her bodily autonomy, her desires, and her ways of self-expression that she must willingly lose in order to be able to exist in the space she considers home.

Following Belinda's birth, Karmelin's identification with the mother-icon is set into motion; examining the growing space between the identity of the mother and her body within domestic confinements. It is only with Karmelin's visit to Pali that temporarily reinstates within Karmelin her identity as a woman with desires, bodily autonomy, and the need for gratification. Pali, a region

known for being rich in natural resources, becomes an extension of the female sexed body, serving as a reminder to Karmelin of her own desirability, and briefly awakening within her the memories of Agnel and their trysts by the Goan beach. With Belinda asleep, Karmelin is momentarily rid of her identification with the mother-icon; although she makes sure her transgression would have no witness. Away from vilifying eyes, this remains Karmelin's only autoerotic expression, performed in suppression and secrecy, as Mauzo makes it evident:

> "She was quite alone here, she realised, full of delight. She shut the window and drew the latch on the door. She pulled off her blouse and under garments and ran a hand slowly over her bare breasts. A wave of desire coursed through her body again! She picked up the mirror that hung on the wall and held it before her body." (Mauzo 136).

It is interesting to note that while Karmelin's autoeroticism and gaze is vital in regard to her mode of self-expression as a way of reclaiming her body from the patriarchally constituted mother-icon, it is not simply a performance towards physical autonomy. Mauzo writes, "Karmelin stared at herself, entranced" (Mauzo 136). While Karmelin looking into the mirror as a form of self-expression and identification recalls Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is not merely a reconstruction of her identity as a sexed body. Rather, it is a celebration of having transcended not only the mother-icon, but having gone beyond patriarchal hegemony and gender conditioning altogether.

Within the spheres of her marriage to Jose, Karmelin is a mere object of pleasure that can be manhandled and violated by her husband, reducing her human value and stripping her of her agency within the post-marital space. To an abrasive Jose, Karmelin is but a body, a channel for his sexual release, a passive participant without any sexual desire and agency. Karmelin's autoeroticism thus stems not from her appeal through the male gaze as a desired object, rather, through having agency over her own body, through her self-identification that alludes to her subjectivity. Karmelin's ecstasy over having identified herself as the sexually desirable subject goes beyond mere sexual enjoyment, but is celebrated as for having been able to reconstitute an identity that can be desired and maintained by the self, that can outgrow the enforced mother-icon; where "everything was perfect" (Mauzo 136).

The Desexed Maternal Body and Establishing the Mother-icon as the Natural Order

In conjunction with the socio-patriarchal setups, religion plays a vital role in keeping the sanctity of the mother-icon intact by regulating women's agency, sexuality and desire. Through religious texts, doctrines, cultural narratives and rituals, the ideals of a sacred motherhood thereby created uphold a phallocentric context in shaping the binaristic role for women within the domestic space. Additionally, religion mandates fertility as a measure of a woman, further problematising how the female body is perceived within the scope of religion, where sexual union serves not the purpose of pleasure and autonomy, but in the interest of reproductive performance.

It is for the sake of the same reproductive performance that limits Karmelin's sexual availability as an object to Jose, and Karmelin's desire is hardly paid attention to. Her relation with

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Jose is only brought forth in the light of Jose's role to play the 'husband' every night. Mauzo further illustrates the lack of Karmelin's sexual desire and autonomy in her marriage as thus:

> "It was always like this, from the third day after their marriage till now…it didn't matter at all whether Karmelin was interested or not…But Karmelin didn't turn away, ever. It didn't matter to her whether Jose had his fill of her body as she lay before him, dead in mind and spirit." (Mauzo 106).

Karmelin, a devout Christian by faith, undergoes a similar indoctrination growing up, which in turn, dictates her experiences of sexual intimacy and expression, pregnancy, and motherhood. Karmelin's elder child, Belinda, is born within the socially-sanctioned conjugal ties between Karmelin and her husband, Jose, which invariably consolidates Karmelin's affections for Belinda, highlighting the all-pervading presence of religious doctrines that create the dichotomy between what is moral and what is not. The night before Belinda is born, Karmelin has a nightmare that marks the beginning of the parturition period. The nightmare wakes Karmelin up to the onset of her labour, presiding over and overwriting her individual identity with that of the mother-icon, an imposition which takes over as the natural order, something from which "she cannot move" (Mauzo 127).

With her labour pain intensifying, Karmelin seeks help from her mother-in-law, laying bare a new extent of the indoctrination that awaits her in her journey towards the mother-icon. Her call for help is further problematized by her predecessor as the mother-icon, her mother-in-law, who responds with, "The pain has just started, isn't it?...There is a lot of time left. Go back to sleep. We'll see what happens in the morning" (Mauzo 127). This response also aligns with the religious appropriation of pain as a physical symptom of parturition. The *Genesis Book* of the Christian Old Testament recalls labour pain as a suiting punishment for Eve's transgression, claiming, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy childbirth; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16).

Indeed, Belinda's birth is long and arduous, and by fulfilling the Biblical conditions of 'greatly multiplied' sorrow and pain, Karmelin steps into the role of the nurturing, benevolent, forgiving mother. Belinda's birth records a crucial moment in the trajectory of Karmelin's life. She is no longer Karmelin, or Jose's wife, but her identity as Belinda's mother takes over, establishing the mother-icon as the natural order as deemed by the collective consciousness, which must not be disturbed.

Transgression and Identification with the Mother-icon

Karmelin, as a novel, problematises the ethics of motherhood and sexuality as perceived by the collective consciousness. The image of the mother-icon in the Indian subcontinent has always remained that of physical and sexual purity, and is heavily insistent on demanding celibacy of the mother-icon. Reading *Karmelin* as a text and interpreting the female sexed body as a site of autonomy and resistance goes against the conventionally held views and values of the Indian mother-icon, essentially asking the readers to arrive at an alternate understanding of the mother-icon as the natural order.

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In this regard, it is crucial to look at Karmelin, her autonomy and journey as an active participant in offering and receiving pleasure, as well as her transgressions through Julia Kristeva's lens of 'abjection', theorised in her 1980 work *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* that suggests the maternal body as a site of abjection, an undefined liminal space that offers a blurred understanding between constructed and genuine performativity; and how the meaning-making and performativity of the same critique the phallocentric deification of the mother-icon as a vanguard or regulator of female sexuality and desire.

Kristeva's work lays down an understanding of the sociocultural and psychological dictates that influence the instinctive reaction of horror when faced with something it recognises to be repulsive, or as a threat to the defined distinction between the subject and object. Kristeva notes this in-between space of the subject and the object as the 'abject,' observing that "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another in order to be" (Kristeva 10). And in order to preserve the integrity of a well-defined identity, it is the human reaction of horror that catalyses a forced breakdown of meaning of the liminal 'abject.' In *Karmelin,* the mother-icon having already established socio-culturally as the natural order, recognises female desire and sexuality as the deviant, or a threat to a defined identity of motherhood, which must be disarmed.

Karmelin's desirability, already having made concrete against her mother-icon, wakes her up one night with Rosario "right on top of her" (Mauzo 144). While the sexual encounter does offer gratification, it raises unanswered questions in Karmelin's mind, as she struggles to derive an objective meaning - "But why did she remain silent even after she awoke? Why didn't she drive the man away? Because she was scared? No! Her body had savoured these moments of pleasure… she didn't care for Rosario, maybe, but her body craved fulfilment…" (Mauzo 145). While Mauzo neither provide his protagonist, nor readers with a defined symbolic meaning, a possible interpretation may be drawn from Kristeva's application of the 'abject' in *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection,* which forces a human reaction in a threatened breakdown of meaning when faced with the loss of distinction between the subject and the object. According to Kristeva, the abject inhibits the space that "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (*Powers* 2), suggesting a 'pre-objectal relationship.' It is only when the abject, or the undefined sexual encounter between Karmelin and Rosario threatens Karmelin's identity as an abiding Christian wife, whose "desire shall be to thy husband" (Genesis 3:16) that she is forced with the responsibility to separate herself, i.e., the subject, and coerce a possible meaning of the encounter.

Furthermore, Belinda's presence in the room where Rosario and Karmelin engage in sexual union is also crucial in encasing the narrative of shame and guilt that emerges from Karmelin's identification with the mother-icon. Not only does Jose's presence in the room amplify the dimensions of the act of Karmelin's infidelity by prioritising sexual autonomy and desire, but Belinda as the enforcer of the ideals of the mother-icon that completely decimates Karmelin's "bliss" following the encounter, essentially desexing her body and rendering her the status of the defiled mother. It is through Belinda's cry and the knowledge that she has been a witness of "grievous sin"

(Mauzo 150) that the mother-icon present in Karmelin mutilates the expression of her union with Rosario, replacing the sexual bliss with fear.

> "Rosario left her bed but Karmelin lay there trembling blissfully for a very long time. [...] She woke up at day break but she lay there with her eyes shut letting the pleasant memories wash over her. Suddenly she felt a twinge of regret as Belinda began to cry. Belinda! Karmelin felt that she had sinned last night and the child was a witness to that. She'd committed a grievous sin as she satisfied the demands of her body even as the child born of her womb lay by her side" (Mauzo 150).

Rachel Williamson in "Embodying Ambivalence: Abjection and The Problematic Maternal Body" observes the body "as a locus of evil and immorality in philosophy" (Williamson 142) where socio-religious dogmas have culturally appropriated the maternal body in order to regulate reproductive performance and "reduce women to their biological essentialism" (Williamson 143). When faced with the threat that her desire might once again lead to the desecration of the mother-icon, Karmelin's acute stress response is to flee from Pali, to virtually engage in self-mutilation by severing connections with the space that embodies and reflects her sexual desires, and is therefore deemed unsuitable alongside her ideals of motherhood. And "soon they were on their way" (Mauzo 151) back to the socio-religiously prescribed domestic space where the sanctified meaning of the mother-icon as the natural order will not be disturbed.

Abjection and a Critique of the Mother-icon

Kristeva in her work also notes the maternal body as the primary site of abjection, a liminal space where the forced breakdown of meaning arises from the loss of a distinct separation between the self and other, and in order to attempt a possible meaning-making, the maternal body must be treated as a site of abjection. The mother-icon having already constituted her union with Rosario as a sin, the abjection on Karmelin's part having realised she's expecting her second child arises out of the inability to distinguish herself from the "seed of sin" growing in her womb.

Once again, the patriarchal mother-icon that constricts the female body to the womb as the sign of her fertility and worth, as the natural order takes precedence, and dismissing Karmelin the mother's sexual identity as the abject. It is the mother-icon that dictates the expulsion of the foetus, a result of the transgressive sexual union, in order to preserve the sanctity of Karmelin's identity as the mother-icon, the construction of the domestic system with Jose, and the integrity of the order of her Christian faith. Karmelin resorts to wishing that the child is stillborn, and in an extreme effort where she "must wretch it out" (Mauzo 152), she moves past her Christian dogmas by wishing for the "evil soul" (Mauzo 156) to intervene during her gestation period, and in order to arrive at a forced separation of identities, although unsuccessful, attempts to induce a miscarriage by consuming a papaya.

Following the birth of Camilo, Karmelin's second child, the process of abjection is complete as having gained an entity separate from his mother, Camilo now becomes the sole proprietor as the

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embodiment of Karmelin's shame and guilt for having committed a 'grievous sin.' And while socio-cultural dogmas insist on Karmelin a performativity of her motherhood, the birth of Camilo marks a complete failure for Karmelin to identify with the mother-icon. Camlio's cries for maternal nourishment and sustenance are almost always ignored as Karmelin, with the pre-objectal space that characterises the site of abjection being lost, grows indifferent towards him.

Unlike Belinda whose presence can be noted throughout the novel, Camilo's name appears only once in the novel, as if in religious performativity, when he is baptised, and is henceforth mentioned as 'the child'. In addition to the forceful separation by denying Camilo an identifier, this also construes Karmelin's failure to identify as a maternal presence in his life. The mother-icon recognises only Belinda as Karmelin's child by virtue of socially sanctioned reproductive performativity and legal marriage to Jose and gains precedence over Camilo, although whose conception is resulted from Karmelin's pleasure and sexual autonomy, as the embodiment of the "seed of sin" (Mauzo 152).

The novel as a critique of the mother-icon comes as the admission of Karmelin's failure to be maternal towards Camilo by her general indifference and refusal to identify him as her own child. As a result, Camilo grows up fragile and malnourished; "he was two years old but he seemed like an infant of eight months, so stunted was his growth. Karmelin felt sorry for the child but she felt no affection for him" (Mauzo 178). Karmelin's only genuine maternal affection for Camilo shortly before his demise erupts not from her conscious mind governed by the mother-icon, but rather, from a subconscious performativity of motherhood when she is fevered and delirious. With her fevered state greatly influencing her actions, Karmelin refuses Isabel's offer to take Camilo to her house to avoid him getting afflicted with fever. Left alone with her child, Karmelin, in an penultimate attempt to reunite with a child she has shunned for long, draws Camilo closer and attempts to nurse him:

> "She was filled with remorse at the injustice of it all as she held the child close to her heart. She would lavish all her affection on him from now on, she decided as she lifted her blouse and held him to her dry breast" (Mauzo 180).

While her body's inability to nourish Camilo one last time is significant in the novel, this performance also marks for the first time since her union with Rosario, Karmelin's attempt to be dismissive of the patriarchal mother-icon, and by claiming Camilo as her own child comes Karmelin's acceptance and owning of herself as a being with desire and autonomy. Shortly after, Camilo passes away when he falls from his bed in Isabel's house. While the fall might not have been lethal for another child his age, it is Camilo's vulnerability arising from the failure of the mother-icon to identify Camilo as Karmelin's child that proves fatal for him. Karmelin admits the same and identifies Camilo's death as a fault on the part of her own in an attempt to console Isabel:

> "He died of hunger. There was no milk for him. [...] It's all my fault" (Mauzo 184).

Through the lens of Kristeva's observation of the abject and the need for the natural order to expel any perceived threat, *Karmelin* thus becomes a poignant text critiquing the patriarchal construct of

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the mother-icon, the dereliction of which in recognising the sexed female body can lead to the regulation of female autonomy and desire, and through its failure to preserve life the mother-icon collapses upon itself as the abject, and as the actual threat to the natural order.

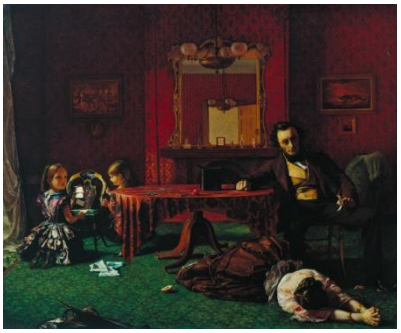

Fig. 1.Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present,* No.1, 1858.

Fig. 2.Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present,* No.2, 1858.

Fig. 3.Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present,* No.3, 1858.

An intriguing connection can also be made between *Karmelin,* and a series of three oil paintings by the Victorian painter Augustus Leopold Egg, titled *Past and Present* (1858). The triptych can be interpreted as a sequential narrative examining the Victorian Christian dichotomy between the 'Angel in the House' and the 'Fallen Woman.' In the series of three miniatures, the first painting of the series documents the collapse of domestic bliss, as the 'sinful' woman prostrates before her husband, and the presence of her children testifying the gravity of her sin of having tarnished the image of the mother-icon. The second painting in the series mourns the untimely death of the heartbroken husband, with the third painting drawing a conclusion over the 'fallen wife', as she rests beneath the Adelphi Arches by the Thames, enveloped in shadows, clutching her possibly dead, illegitimate child.

On one hand, the triptych consolidates as a warning, taking note that infidelity and polluting the mother-icon are crimes that cannot be redeemed, while on the other, through its narrative of guilt framed through the untimely death of the husband, and the eventual arrival of the illegitimate child, possibly dead, it further lays down the urgency for the Victorian 'Angel of the House' to adhere to the Christian standards of the mother-icon. While *Karmelin,* as a novel, somewhat fulfils the conditions laid down by the triptych through Camilo's death and Jose's eventual alcoholism that takes his life, neither of them arise out of Karmelin's act of sexual transgression in Pali. This goes on to show that although the conditions were ultimately fulfilled, it was not an outcome of the transgressive act.

While Jose's alcoholism and gambling tendencies were foreshadowed earlier in the novel, they existed before Karmelin's transgression, as well as independent of Karmelin's presence in Jose's life. Camilo's death, in addition, was not an aftermath of Karmelin's 'grievous sin,' rather it was the abjection of the mother-icon that perceived Camilo's birth as the threat to the natural order. It was

the same abjection of the mother-icon that insisted on the inconsistency in the ideals of motherhood by refusing proper sustenance to Camilo and leaving him frail and malnourished, revealing how by failing to preserve life, it failed to uphold the primary requirement to be lauded as the natural order.

Conclusion

The assessment of *Karmelin* through the notions of body as a site of violence and self-expression, and the contradiction of care and conflict towards her children are subjects of relevance and insightful consideration. Tracing her passage through the vicissitudes of life, her character overcomes the exploitative and burdening dictums of the mother image and sexual expression. Her transgression goes against the structure laid down by the society which gives birth to the guilt and in transcending these constraints she eclipses the forces that bind her. Helene Cixous in 'The Laugh of The Medusa' conveys the same in the following lines:

> "Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune" (Cixous 876).

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