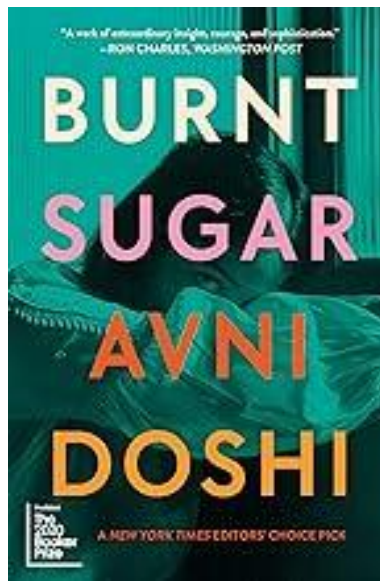


Mapping the Contemporary Contours of Motherhood: An Analysis of Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*

Divya V Menon, M.A.

Assistant Professor, Department of English
C.H.M.K.M Government Arts and Science College, Tanur
Kerala 676307, India
sivanidivya@gmail.com



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Abstract

Avni Doshi's novel, *Burnt Sugar*, unfolds around a mother who adamantly refuses to sacrifice her desires for her child, Antara. Antara grapples with the consequences of her mother's choices and the exercise of free will that lands her in an existential crisis rooted in societal perception.

The story explores the contradictions and tensions inherent in Antara's simultaneous socialization into patriarchal norms and her recognition of her mother's humanity. The suffering and shame of being an outsider contribute to Antara's profound sense of alienation. *Burnt Sugar* refrains from idealizing motherhood and instead portrays it as a space where women must reclaim their identities as individuals while also embracing their roles as mothers.

The narrative challenges the fates of women who defy these conventions and delves into abstract notions of motherhood, juxtaposing them with the raw, embodied experiences of maternal ambivalence. The story presents a mother who is deeply connected to her child yet retains her individuality and free will. Tara, the mother in the story, is presented as a unique individual with her own desires, yearnings, and choices. Doshi's subversive narrative framework challenges the traditional construction of motherhood as a restrictive and limiting role by realigning mothers' identities as individuals with their own aspirations and life goals.

Keywords: *Burnt Sugar*, Avni Doshi, Motherhood, identity, individuality, maternal ambivalence.



Avni Doshi

Photograph by Sharon Haridas

<https://www.avnidoshi.com/about->

An American woman writer with Indian ancestry, Avni Doshi was born in 1982 and raised in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Doshi has spent seven years in India, where she has held curatorial positions at several galleries. She graduated from Barnard College in New York with a B.A. in Art History and from University College London with an M.A in Art History. Doshi's writing is known for its honesty, rawness, and humour. She explores complex subjects such as female sexuality, motherhood, and mental illness in her works. Her works have been praised for their insights into the lives of Indian women and their willingness to challenge traditional social norms.

Avni Doshi's debut work, *Burnt Sugar*, achieved international recognition by winning the Sushila Devi Award in 2021 and earning finalist positions in the 2020 Booker Prize and the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction. Through the narrative of the Wild Lady Tara, Avni portrays a multifaceted analysis of issues, incorporating myth and memory, that demonstrate how women continually shape and reshape their life stories. Tara's character symbolizes a deeper exploration of the collective memories and life stories of women that are intricately interwoven within the narrative. Doshi's portrayal of Tara, her evolution, and the influence of memory on her identity serve as a microcosm of the intricate experiences that define the diverse spectrum of womanhood. The narrative explores the complex interplay between myth and memory, emphasizing the boundless potential for transformation and self-discovery within the female experience.

Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* is a captivating and poignant story that meticulously explores the intricate aspects of the mother-daughter relationship. The novel examines the nuanced and complicated nature of the relationship between Antara and her mother, Tara, against the background of contemporary India. The most fundamental relationship, which has been defined by an interplay of love, resentment, memory, and identity, serves as the crux of the narrative.

Antara, the protagonist of the novel, is pictured grappling with the weight of her mother's Alzheimer's disease, a condition that thrusts her into the dual role of being both a daughter and a caretaker. Even when she yearns for a sense of identity and freedom, she remains inexorably tied to her mother's past and present. Doshi beautifully captures this ambivalence through Antara's words, "I hated her, really. She was a weight on my chest, and I couldn't breathe" (Doshi 10).

This effectively conveys Antara's inner turmoil and her fundamental struggle in the relationship with her mother. It serves as an effective illustration of how deeply personal mother-daughter relationships can be, where affection and animosity constantly coexist. Antara's emotions reveal the intricacies of a relationship distinguished by years of dependability and a journey of recognition and self-discovery that has been profoundly affected by Tara's illness.

Tara, on the other hand, is a character wrapped in mystery. Tara's portrayal brings forth a combination of pity and disappointment. As Antara delves deeper into her mother's past, she exposes a lady who previously defied norms, lived fervently, and made unconventional decisions. Chandni Bhambhani and Anand Inbanathan, in their article "Not a Mother, yet a Woman: Exploring Experiences of Women Opting out of Motherhood in India," say

Motherhood is a role and institution that defines a woman's identity and provides her adult status in Indian society. A girl, from her childhood, is socialized to be a future mother and reproducer of the family. In this context, when a woman is not a mother, either by circumstance or choice, she is deemed as "incomplete" with a "deviant" identity. (Chandni Bhambhani and Anand Inbanathan, 1)

When examined within the confines of this particular framework, Tara's maternal role deviates notably from conventional paradigms. The mother-daughter relationship is further complicated by the dichotomy between Tara's youth and her current state as a helpless, bewildered elderly woman. Antara's perceptions of her mother are challenged by Tara's independent and unorthodox younger self. This information intensifies Antara's inner agony as she struggles with the knowledge that her mother, too, was once a young woman with ambitions, goals, and transgressions. It is the complexity of these emotions that enables Doshi to create an elaborate portrayal of Antara and Tara's relationship, one that transcends mere maternal and filial bonds.

Memory and its connection to identity are central themes in *Burnt Sugar*. In her journey to understand her mother's past, Antara painfully realises that memory is a fragile and elusive entity. Antara's struggle is further worsened by Tara's dementia, which appears to erase the essence of the woman she once knew. Doshi poignantly conveys this idea through Antara's perspective: "The past seemed to be shrinking, leaving behind just traces of the person I used to be" (Doshi 20).

The depiction of memory loss is both evocative and emotionally distressing. It undermines the emotional intricacy of the mother-daughter bond. Antara experiences a sense of being wiped from her mother's memory as the memories that previously connected them start to vanish from her mother's consciousness. This narrative element serves as a powerful

metaphor for the larger human experience, in which memory plays a crucial role in one's sense of self as well as serving as a storehouse for one's identity. For Antara, watching her mother's memories fade away is similar to witnessing the gradual dissolution of the very essence of Tara as she once knew her. This is a profoundly emotional aspect of the mother-daughter relationship in *Burnt Sugar*, where the erosion of memory represents the erosion of self and identity. Doshi writes

Reality is something that is co-authored,' the woman says. 'It makes sense that you would begin to find this disturbing. When someone says that something is not what you think of it as, it can cause slight tremors in the brain, variations in brain activity, and subconscious doubts to emerge. Why do you think people experience spiritual awakenings? It's because the people around us are engaged. The frenzy is a charge that's contagious.' 'Are you saying my mother is contagious?' 'No, I'm not. Though maybe I am, in a sense. We actively make memories, you know. And we make them together. We remake memories, too, in the image of what other people remember.' 'The doctor says my mother has become unreliable.' 'We are all unreliable. The past seems to have a vigour that the present does not. (Doshi 78)

The mother-daughter relationship in *Burnt Sugar* is permeated by guilt and resentment. Antara's role as an attendee to her mother forces her into a position for which she is not prepared. She grapples with the responsibility of caring for a woman who was often distant and neglectful during her own childhood. The palpable gravity of this responsibility is undeniable and Antara articulates her feelings: "I think I am being erased. Not by Alzheimer's, but by my own mother, by her memories of me" (Doshi 50). The burden of the task she has undertaken is both a moral obligation and a source of inner turmoil, adding further layers of emotional complexity to their relationship. The weight of this, coupled with the memories of a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship, becomes a source of deep-seated guilt and resentment for Antara. The sense of being "erased" by her own mother takes a significant emotional toll on her, leaving her physically and mentally exhausted.

Tara guards many hidden truths about her past, and the revelation of these secrets has a significant impact on her relationship with Antara. As Antara discovers the truth about her mother's early life, she is forced to confront the woman she believed she knew. The act of

revealing these truths is both a betrayal and an opportunity for greater comprehension. The interplay of secrecy and revelation becomes a central element of the mother-daughter relationship, further complicating their connection.

The secrets that Tara guards are essential to the progress of the narrative because they introduce a degree of complexity that blurs the lines between love and betrayal, trust and mistrust. The revelation of these secrets serves as a catalyst for a deeper understanding of Tara and the impact of her choices on her daughter's life. Doshi uses these secrets to underscore the convoluted nature of the mother-daughter relationship, where the past continually informs and sometimes fractures the present. The secrets and revelations in the story create a complex and nuanced emotional world, allowing the reader to experience the characters' emotions on a deeper level.

The cultural and generational differences between Antara and Tara are also highlighted in the novel. Tara's generation belonged to a more traditional, patriarchal society where women had limited agency and were expected to conform to societal norms. In contrast, Antara's generation is part of a more modern and progressive society where women enjoy greater opportunities and freedom. The two women find themselves in conflict and misunderstand each other as a consequence of these generational differences, which emphasize the challenges of integrating the past with the present, traversing the shifting cultural and generational landscape. These differences create a clash of values and expectations, leading to conflict and misunderstandings. The evolving landscape of cultural and generational change serves as a backdrop against which the mother-daughter relationship is tested and strained. This dynamic reflects a broader theme in the novel, where societal and generational shifts impact the dynamics of families and their relationships.

In *Burnt Sugar* Avni Doshi expertly crafts a story that dives into the multifaceted nature of the mother-daughter bond. The problematic emotional landscape that characterizes the relationship between Antara and Tara is shaped by the novel's exploration of memory, identity, guilt, and cultural differences, among other topics.

Through the lens of this multifaceted relationship, the novel grapples with profound questions about self-discovery, forgiveness, and the enduring ties that bind individuals to

their families. It serves as a testament to the enduring and complex nature of the mother-daughter bond, a relationship that continues to evolve, challenge, and shape throughout their lives. The novel poses interesting concerns regarding the nature of memory, the influence of secrets, and the enduring bonds of familial ties. It provides deeper reflections on how relationships between parents and children can be a source of strength and a cause of strife. It can be concluded that in *Burnt Sugar* the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship is characterized by its profound emotional resonance, leaving an enduring impact on the reader's psyche that extends well beyond the closure of the text.

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