

The Mother-Child Relationship in Contemporary Australian and Indian Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The mother-child relationship is a significant theme in modern Australian and Indian English poetry, as women have a unique role in bearing and raising children due to gender division and biological constitution. However, literature often lacks attention to women's experience of motherhood and mothering, which reflects the impact of gender on societal settings. Motherhood is a universal phenomenon that needs to be studied in a proper perspective, especially considering gender bias, as it affects women's psychological well-being and mothering performance in socio-cultural situations.

This paper aims to explore the differences of gender in mother-child ties, discussing the bonds and interactions between mothers and sons and daughters, as exemplified in contemporary Australian and Indian English poetry. An overview of the poetic paradigms will be useful in studying the psychodynamics of same-gender and cross-gender affinities in a mother-child relationship. The paper focuses on the poetical expressions of motherhood and mothering, as well as children's attitudes towards mothers and vice versa.

Keywords: Gender, Motherhood, Mother-Child Relationship, Australian Poetry, Indian English Poetry

The mother-child relationship vis-à-vis the gender divide is a significant theme in both contemporary Australian and Indian English poetry. Not only by gender division but also by biological constitution, women as mothers have a distinctive role in bearing and rearing children. In fact, motherhood is a universal role or function that nature assigns to women. In the literature of the past, we find little or no mention or attention to women's experiences of being mothers. Although literature is replete with splendid and lavish descriptions of women's beauty and physiognomy, as well as of children's tribute to women as mothers, there has not been due consideration given to women's experiences of motherhood and mothering and the niceties of mother-child bonding, which demonstrates a characteristic impact of gender in the societal setup of any part of the world. Therefore, motherhood is a universal phenomenon and needs to be studied from a proper perspective, especially in light of gender bias, as it affects the psychological being of women, besides affecting mothering performance and child-rearing in given socio-cultural situations and conditions.

The present paper, confined as it is to literary assumptions, cannot study the technical minutiae of biological, psychological, or psychoanalytical reasons for gender workings in mother-child relationships; it will only delve into the poetical expressions of motherhood and mothering and children's attitudes

towards mother and vice versa. It is certainly under the typical workings of gender that mothers have different standards for sons and daughters, and even children have typical affinities in cross-gender relationships. The present paper aims to probe into the differences of gender in mother-child ties, individually discussing the bonds and interactions between mothers and sons and mothers and daughters, as exemplified in a range of situations and circumstances in modern Australian and Indian English poetry. An overview of the poetic paradigms will certainly be effective in studying and understanding the psychodynamics of same-gender as well as cross-gender affinities in a mother-child relationship.

Adding significantly to women's issues and concerns, the anthology of poems entitled *Motherlode: Australian Women's Poetry 1986–2008* (2009) is a ground-breaking work, especially as it brings into dialogue those lesser discussed aspects of maternity, motherhood, and the mother-child relationship, which form the common and quintessential part of female identity in relation to gender inequity in society. The central concern of all the women poets, both mothers and non-mothers, included in the anthology is 'motherhood', which has dual implications for them: a powerful self-expression on the one hand and a baleful trap on the other.

The relationship between mothers and children has been depicted as beset with difficult duality and paradox, operating very subtly in the mould of patriarchy. The feeling of joy and pride in mothering is coupled with the realisation of a tortuous trap in mother-child bonding. As, for instance, in her tribute to Motherhood, Gwen Harwood expresses her profound empathy with women becoming mothers and, at the same time, shows her concern for the gender bias against women: "It is not for my children I walk / on earth in the light of the living. / It is for you, for the wild / daughters becoming women... (p. 19). Mother's selfless love, care, commitment, and service for her children and family have been articulated finely and evocatively:

. . . worn, still good to the last,
then somehow, smooth to a smile
so I should not see your tears.
Anguish: remembered hours:

a lamp on embroidered linen,
my supper set out, your voice
calling me in as darkness
falls on my father's house.
(p. 20)

The concluding lines, however, suddenly bring in echoes of gender issues in a patriarchal setup of family and, at this turn, hint at another story of the role-specific man-woman relationship in a conformist society: father, heading the family and the house; mother, remaining servile. However, the figures of father and husband are largely absent from most of the poems in *Motherlode*, yet they are perceptible as an undercurrent in the see-through feminist proclivity of the women poets. All happenings and experiences take place in a world governed by men. All the same, *Motherlode* explores deeper aspects of motherhood and the mother-child relationship, besides making out a female identity in light of a

woman's fertility and her being the carrier of generations of humanity. The word 'lode', on the one hand, implies the fertile stratum that woman forms for the continuance of the human race, and at the same time, as a homophone of 'load', rings out the burden and trouble that woman has to undergo in mothering and rearing children. Thus, even as a woman finds the bonding with the child vital to her female identity, she is infused with a feeling of regret and resistance towards mothering in her quest for her identity and assertion of her true self. The 'lode' refers to her querying into her being, besides quarrying out her real identity in a world where she is mostly desired to play the second fiddle.

The poems in *Motherlode* depict a paradoxical relationship between mothers and children, equally loaded with exultation and disillusionment. But, even as society has a dogmatist approach to gender roles, women keep taking pride in mothering the human generations. *Motherlode* does not solely portray the anxiety and anguish of Australian women but evenly represents the ubiquitous experience of women as mothers, varying only in socio-cultural conditions. If one looks into some of the contemporary Indian women's poetry during this period, particularly on the theme of motherhood, interesting points of comparison and contrast can be noticed. With regard to their own socio-cultural backdrop, their experience of motherhood has an explicit tone of bitterness. They bear the cultural *load* of gender discrimination in preference for boys, which, at times, leads to dire consequences like female foeticide. For that reason, they convey feelings of resentment and conflict towards their mothers in argumentative and sarcastic tones. They mostly tend to demythicize the image of the mother and do not regard her as ideal and adorable for having given birth to them in a world that does not value and respect them. Mamta Kalia grills her mother for having borne her quite unwillingly:

Looking at my navel
I'm reminded of you, Mamma.
How I lay suspended
By that cordial cord inside you.
I must have been a rattish thing . . .
You, perhaps, were hardly proud
Of your creativity . . .
(“Brat”, *Tribute to Papa and Other Poems*, p. 20)

Contrasting with Australian women's concerns, mothers giving birth to girl children are looked down on in the conservative society of India, and for that reason, modern daughters seem to condemn their mothers for flinging them out in a world that is apathetic towards women. Eunice de Souza too articulates her displeasure with her mother for bearing the girl child with a sense of reluctance: “It was kill or die, and you got me anyway. In dreams, I hack you.” (“Forgive Me, Mother,” *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, p. 118). de Souza's ire is rooted in a sexist bias she finds in the parents preferring a son: “I heard it say, My parents wanted a boy” (Ibid., p. 119). She tries her best to come up to her parents' wishes for a son, but to no avail: “I've done my best to qualify; I hid the bloodstains on my clothes; and let my breasts sag” (Ibid.). The resentment comes to daughters from the realization that probably even their mothers wanted a baby boy. Sunita Jain curses her mother for pushing her into an unwilling wedlock, tethering her “to an elephant foot” (“Mother”, *Till I Find Myself*, p. 81) against her wishes, just because women are born to make sacrifices all the time.

Sunita Jain, in her poem "Anu," captioned after her daughter's name, expresses her love and concern for the girl child. She considers her an alter ego, an extension of herself: "My First-born / my confidant / more me than mine." Some other poems, like "The Occasional Visit," "Those were the Days," etc., speak of Jain's maternal feelings. She records the different stages of growth of her children, right from their early days to their adulthood. However, she is aggrieved at her separation from her son, who goes abroad for his career. Her anxiety increases when she finds her grown-up daughter, whom she had called her own extension, distancing herself, and who now objects even to her visits to her room. In "Daughter II," she states how she always wished all the best for her daughter: "Up to where the earth strangles the sky / I strain to see your happiness . . ." But she becomes upset at her changing behaviour and declares, "One by one, I lay to rest / what in you was mine." Thus, as the daughter grows into an adult, a distance develops between them, or probably there is a repetition of her own relationship with her mother.

Mother-Daughter

Daughters often have more problematic relationships with their mothers, as is evident in both Indian and Australian women's poetry. From *Motherlode*, MTC Cronin's "My Mother" (*from My Mother, Her Mother, Her Daughter, My Daughter, Her Mother, My Mother, Her Daughter, My Daughter*) reveals the tacit irony of the relationship between mothers and daughters, and yet depict similar destinies for them: "There is my mother. / And there is me. / We live like they do at borders. / Together yet divided. / . . . / She shakes me. When I am a child. And I shake forever. / I tell her once "I am going away and you'll never see me again" / and then of course I must keep going back to show myself to her. / She is not surprised. / She also had someone to show herself to. / And we all keep seeing ourselves . . ." (p. 249). Nicolette Stasko's "Poem for Jessica" conveys the feeling of discontent and certain apprehensions experienced by a single mother and her only daughter in their solitude: "I am your mother / nothing else is clear / between you and me." (p. 129). There is a close bond betwixt the two but the mother feels anxious for the well-being of her daughter: ". . . a progression of faces, / all of them, / none of them, yours." (Ibid.). In "To my Daughter at Night", with Biblical allusions, Beate Josephi tells her daughter "when you dream snakes at night / it's because you think of them / not because they think of you. / Yes, I know the story of paradise. / Though I find it hard to believe, / not one animal devouring another. / Aren't we lucky that a woman and a snake / put an end to that lie? / Sweet dreams, my darling." (p. 136).

"The Sewing Room" by Sarah Holland-Batt emotively describes the condition of a devoted mother busy with her odd job of sewing for a considerable part of the day, while the daughter enjoys her playing: "My mother measured the margins / of my known world there . . . / maps I would only outgrow / charted in painstaking tailor's chalk. / . . . / So many weekends remaindered, and for what? / A skirt? You wore it; you took it off." (p. 247). The mother-daughter bonding is, thus, fraught with a challenge of survival in a world mostly insensitive unto women.

Unlike *Motherlode*-poets, Indian women poets do not show much attachment to children for most of them seem to believe that with the removal of the umbilical cord, the bond betwixt the mother and the child also weakens gradually. Mamta Kalia cannot be a 'Pelican' feeding her child on her blood, but she would rather act as "an antibiotic against all infections / A shot in the arm of the family / Hated though awaited." ("No, I'm No Pelican to My Sons", *Poems' 78*, p. 8). However, Kamala Das finds meaning in life when a *son* is born to her: "out of / The wrong was born the right and out of night / The sun-

drenched golden day.” (*The Descendants*, p. 27). She celebrates motherhood as a means of creativity, redemption and self-glorification: Only that matters which forms / . . . the soft / Stir in the womb, the foetus growing.” (Ibid.). But, even her celebration of motherhood seems strongly rooted in culture that has a preference for son. The absence of daughter in Das’ poems presents a striking contrast to that factuality of the traditional Indian society.

Australian poet Esther Ottaway disparages in quite an aggressive tone the sexist bias against women in society and preference for a boy even by mothers, as voiced in “Headless Portrait of a Pregnant Woman”: “Ah! The freedom afforded society / by a woman without a head. Charge, / latent misogynists of either sex! Batten the hatches, / pregnant women! Here come the Meat-measurers: / *I can’t believe how fat you are! Turn around; / if you’re carrying fat on your backside, it’s a boy . . .*” (p. 87). Mostly, a boy is preferred though he may or may not show earnest attachment to his mother who keeps doting on him. Mother relies on her son for support, but is never sure about that, despite her wholehearted devotion to him. In “Madonna of the Dry Country”, Tric O’Heare depicts the plight of a mother, helpless and hapless, invoking and waiting for “her wayward son / to do something,” but with little hope: “Mary’s thoughts are luminous / but her tongue is tethered.” (p. 63).

Mother- Son

In India, the mother, among all relations in a family, has been a figure of great veneration ever since pre-Vedic times. It is only in post-Vedic times that the matrilineal, matriarchal family structures started crumbling, and gradually the father took over. But the umbilical cord has still held the mother and the child in close emotional bonding—sometimes, if not overt, at the subliminal level. In emotional matters, a father’s position is mostly peripheral.

Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel, in his poem “Night of the Scorpion,” does bring in a tinge of emotionality in the concluding triad of lines, even though the poem, for the most part, seems to be a social satire. In this poem, he describes how his mother, when stung by a scorpion, “writhed through and through, groaning on a mat,” and when she recovers, she only says, “Thank God the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children.” Even in her strife for life, the mother’s heart throbs and she worries for her children. This sacrificial role of a mother can also be seen in A. K. Ramanujan’s poem “Of Mothers, among Other Things.” He depicts the spirit of wholehearted dedication in a mother with which she fulfils her obligations for the family throughout life. The poet recollects how busy his mother remained in household work and yet looked after her children with great love and care: “and I see my mother run back / from rain to the crying cradles.” He remembers that his mother did not bother with the pain and suffering she got from losing one of her fingers when it was caught in the mousetrap in the garden. In her old age, she becomes so lean and weak that “Her sarees / do not cling: they hang, loose / feather of a onetime wing.” The poet’s memories of his mother often fill him with feelings of angst and sorrow, he fels as if his “cold parchment tongue licks bark / in the mouth,” when he sees “. . . her four / still sensible fingers slowly flex / to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.”

Similarly, Australian poet Thomas W. Shapcott looks back on the life of his 90 year old mother, who has recently died. He recollects the little things about his mother that seemed to be insignificant or

meaningless when he was too young, but, with the passage of time, he realises how farsighted she had been:

My first memory is my mother's tea-leaves,
double used with half a spoonful
of crisp dry makings to 'freshen them up' . . .
We had toys made from cottonreels and string.
Shirts and pants were from cast-offs.
Flour came in 2lb. bags
Handkerchiefs were made from those.
We were not poor
But waste was immoral and nobody knew
Where tomorrow would lead, she said.

. . .

The poet emotively describes how the children in the family remained with the mother all the time, playing in the kitchen, and she never minded all that:

We grew in that kitchen, underfoot, under the table,
unbalancing the uka-ants, playing tanks and submarines,
opening cupboard doors, helping stack the groceries,
reciting our homework, eating our Saos and vegemite,
asking what's for tea. No other room belonged to us
so fully . . .

The mother seems to have a deep impact on the mind of a son. Indian poet Shiv K. Kumar, in his poem "An Encounter with Death," laments the passing away of his mother, whose *mamata* (motherly affection) was a vital source of emotional comfort and solace whenever he was in trouble, and her vision of life, perceptiveness, and encouraging attitude were his source of inspiration and initiation into creative writing. He was deeply shocked when his mother, "who reclined / against the Mughal pillows on the divan, / like an empress, four score and three," went to sleep eternal. In the following lines from the same poem, Kumar tells about the mysterious communion he had with his mother's spirit for thirteen days after her passing away:

Whenever a door rattles, a nipping
wind howls, a dog whines or
blue-bells clang, I feel her
presence within me.

Mothers are responsible not just for rearing the sons but also bear the onus of preparing them to befit the nation and humanity at large. In "A Mother's Day Letter: Not for Posting," Jennifer Strauss counsels her son in an exacting tone: "Marshal, the necessary march. / But if you come back shieldless, / remember I've no appetite for Spartan / deaths. I want you brave, / concerned, intelligent, alive." (p. 148).

However, at times, the mothers' possessiveness for their sons seems to have a crippling effect on their minds. The sons cannot bear the overly heavy care and tend to evade her commandments. Australian poet Geoff Page, in his poem "My Mother's Letters," wishes to fend off his mother's letters carrying her harsh dictates:

I have my mother's letters . . .
five decades worth of admonitions . . .
I don't destroy them . . . or re-read them.
Their arguments go round and round,

the tone so much *now then, my boy,*
and *don't you kid yourself*
they float like gunsmoke in a cupboard

down there where I keep my shoes.
Genes and history, politicians,
the harshness of a mother's maxims,

they swirl there like the upper boughs
of two tall family trees . . .

Indian poet Jayanta Mahapatra, in his *Autobiography*, describes how his relationship with his mother turned bitter due to her idiosyncratic, rigid, and suspicious nature. He mentions that he had married against the wishes of his parents, for "Perhaps fate had decreed" so, but he could not lead a happy and successful matrimonial life because of his mother's "callous and indifferent attitude" towards his wife, and consequently, he took the painful decision to part with his mother:

Dear Mother: your time is not come
and the sun is swarming all over the day.
We shall watch you run, Mother,
Until you realize you fit in nowhere
Through little bits of your life, your weaknesses;
As you startle at every step
By the laughter of children
In the rustle of your petticoats.

Such expressions of ire and disillusionment with the mother are perceptible even in some male and female Australian poets, including Rodney Hall and Dorothy Porter, among others. But, mostly, the mother remains the centre of admiration, affection, and security for children. Even the mother holds on to her child with all her love and care, even though the latter may not bother her. The child hardly ever realises the concerns of a mother for whom her child is the *raison d'être* of her existence. Notwithstanding a range of blessings and woes, the birthing of a child is consoling, soothing, and

solacing for a woman, making her proud of her being a woman and a mother. Judith Wright's poem "Woman to Child" unequivocally expresses the feeling of a woman mothering a child:

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me;
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood . . .
(p. 313).

Francesca Haig's "Villanelle for a pregnancy test", beautifully conveys the expectant woman's reveries:

The line is drawn, gradually, in blue,
between what my life will be and what it was.
Hand on stomach, I imagine you.
.
.
.
I have not wanted to believe in you,
but my body believes what my brain cannot.
Hand on stomach, I imagine you.

and how my body is a waystation, where you
come and I go. But where do our paths cross?
Hand on stomach, I imagine you.
(p. 74)

Adrienne Eberhard's "Miracle" shows how becoming a mother is a matter of immense pride and inner satisfaction for a woman: "your radiance spreading out, / turning woman to pulsing sun." (p. 78). In "Limbo", Alison Croggon describes how a mother regards the child as her own extension, her own "fragment", and endures the labour pain with patience, pleasure, and pride: "that last bleeding note / bearing / this fragment / in my body / is a joy / beyond the dark / strength of my heart / and yet I choose / this labour . . ." (p. 99). The poem "September 4 & 5" by Kathryn Lomer describes the pains and peevishness of childbirth, yet celebrates the creation of a child as "a poem read over and over until I have the lines / by heart." (p. 101). In "News of a Baby", Elizabeth Riddell, though *welcomes* the baby "to the world of swords / And deadlier words," with the promise of "The stumble of fear in the heart, / The lurch of fear in the bones," yet she hosts him eagerly *as a mother*.

The mother and the child, despite gender differences, stay tied to the umbilical cord. Where mothers regard children as their own extensions, children respect mothers for their selfless dedication to them. Rebecca Edwards, in "Medea's Dream," speaks of the sacrifice a mother gives of her body, heart, and soul, stripping herself of her ego and ease:

I held you so hard against my breast
that your bruised mouth milked me

pulled the white ropes of milk
down from the ache in my shoulders.

...

I unbuttoned my shirt for you.
I stuffed my heart
into your open mouth.
(p. 124)

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