

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Care, Resentment, and Fragmented Female Identity in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Study**

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**Abstract**

Family life often shapes women's emotional world through care, memory, pain, and responsibility. Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* presents a strained mother-daughter relationship marked by resentment, trauma, caregiving, and unstable selfhood. Using psychoanalytic feminism, the study examines how maternal attachment, emotional neglect, and buried anger affect female identity. It aims to analyse the psychological conflict between love and resentment. The study finds that Doshi portrays motherhood as a complex emotional space where care and suffering remain deeply connected.

**Keywords:** psychoanalytic feminism, motherhood, resentment, trauma, fragmented identity.

**Introduction**

Contemporary Indian women's writing gives close attention to women's inner life, family pressure, memory, and emotional survival. Recent novels move from public issues to domestic spaces, where silence, anger, desire, and care shape female selfhood. Psychological fiction supports feminist study because it shows how pain enters the mind and returns through speech, memory, and bodily response. Freud defines repression as "turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (147). Mother-daughter narratives have gained importance in modern literature because they present love as mixed with injury, duty, fear, and dependence. Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* belongs to this line, with a strong focus on maternal memory and emotional damage.

Avni Doshi has emerged as an important Indian English novelist through her careful portrayal of women, memory, illness, and family conflict. *Burnt Sugar* presents Antara and Tara through a disturbing bond shaped by neglect, attachment, caregiving, and resentment. Its 2020 Booker Prize shortlisting brought wider attention to Doshi's work. The novel opens with a striking confession: "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi, PDF p. 7). The line reveals the painful centre of the narrative, where daughterly care cannot separate itself from old

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wounds and hidden anger.

The central problem of the study lies in the conflict between caring for a mother and resenting her past cruelty. Antara's caregiving becomes unstable because Tara's illness weakens her memory, guilt, and responsibility. The narrator states, "For a moment she did not know who I am and for that moment I am no one" (Doshi, PDF p. 15). The statement shows how maternal forgetting breaks the daughter's selfhood. Chodorow argues that "mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves" (109).

The study aims to examine *Burnt Sugar* as a psychoanalytic feminist narrative of motherhood, trauma, and fragmented female identity. The objectives are to study caregiving as an emotional burden, analyse maternal resentment, examine Antara's divided self, and apply psychoanalytic-feminist theory to the mother-daughter relationship. The study shows how family love can carry pain, memory, dependence, and quiet violence.

**e) Theoretical Framework**

Psychoanalytic feminism offers a suitable base because it connects unconscious conflict with gendered family experience. Freud's idea of repression helps read Antara's buried anger and recurring memories. Kristeva's concept of abjection explains disturbed maternal bonds; she writes that abjection arises from "what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). In *Burnt Sugar*, Tara's illness and Antara's caregiving create fear, disgust, pity, and attachment at once. Chodorow's theory helps explain how female identity forms through closeness, dependence, and painful separation. The framework shows that Doshi presents motherhood not as pure sacrifice, but as a field of love, resentment, and psychic injury.

**Motherhood, Care, and Emotional Burden**

Motherhood in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* refuses the familiar image of the selfless, patient, and ever-nurturing mother. Tara stands as an unconventional mother who loves, wounds, abandons, and demands in unstable ways. Her motherhood grows through desire, rebellion, illness, and emotional disorder rather than through steady domestic care. Antara's statement about Tara, "No. She hates anything that seems domestic. Except cooking. She's a wonderful cook" (Doshi 13), shows a woman who does not fit the traditional model of motherly nurture. Such rejection of domestic femininity does not make Tara free from emotional ties; rather, it makes her care uneven and difficult for the daughter to trust.

Psychoanalytic feminism helps read this disturbed bond because the mother-daughter relation shapes female identity from within the family. Nancy Chodorow states that "mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves" (109). In the novel, Tara and Antara remain painfully connected, yet their closeness does not bring safety. Antara remembers severe neglect: "Even after I was born, she would disappear every day, dripping with milk, leaving me unfed" (Doshi 47). The image breaks the ideal picture of motherhood because the mother's body carries milk, but the child remains hungry. Tara's selfishness and psychological distance create a wound that continues into Antara's adult life.

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Caregiving later reverses the earlier relation, but it does not heal the past. Antara becomes the watcher, recorder, and caretaker of her aging mother. She notes medicines, food, memory loss, sleeping habits, and danger. Her line, “I’ve noted down many things about my mother” (Doshi 8), presents care as close observation and daily labour. Tara’s illness makes Antara responsible for physical safety, memory, truth, and family reputation. The home becomes a site of unpaid emotional work, where every small act of checking food, making calls, and reading behaviour reminds Antara that love has become surveillance. Freud’s idea of repression suits Antara’s mind, for repression means “turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious” (147). Antara tries to care, but buried anger returns through irritation, guilt, and sharp judgment. Her resentment becomes clear when she says, “The sympathy she elicits in others gives rise to something acrid in me” (Doshi 7). Care, in her case, does not flow from pure affection. It rises from duty, memory, anger, fear, and social expectation.

A feminist reading of care shows how women often carry emotional responsibility even when they suffer under it. Carol Gilligan writes that “the moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in women’s lives is an injunction to care” (100). Antara faces such pressure because society reads daughterly care as natural, even when the mother has failed in her own role. Doshi challenges the ideal of motherhood by showing care as an emotionally exhausting field. Tara is neither a sacred mother nor a simple victim. Antara is neither a cruel daughter nor a perfect caregiver. Their relationship exposes how family structures place women inside cycles of sacrifice, resentment, dependence, and psychological fatigue.

**Trauma, Memory, and Psychological Conflict**

Memory is not always a calm record of the past. In psychological fiction, it often returns as fear, shame, anger, and unfinished grief. Avni Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* presents memory as a disturbed emotional force in the mother-daughter relationship between Tara and Antara. Antara’s narration moves between the present and the past, and her memories rarely appear in a straight order. Her pain begins with the clear admission, “I suffered at her hands as a child” (Doshi, 7). The line shows that, in a psychological sense, childhood has not ended for Antara. It remains active in her adult speech, marriage, motherhood, and caregiving.

Freud’s concept of repression helps explain Antara’s inner conflict. Freud states that repression involves “turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious” (147). Antara tries to manage her anger, but her narration proves that buried pain has not disappeared. Tara’s illness makes the conflict sharper because the mother begins to lose the very memories that the daughter cannot forget. Antara says, “The reason is simple: my mother is forgetting” (Doshi, 7). Tara’s memory loss denies Antara the chance to receive a sense of guilt, an apology, or recognition. As a result, memory becomes a burden carried mostly by the daughter.

The novel powerfully joins medical memory and emotional memory. The doctor explains that “the hippocampus is the memory bank” and that “the present becomes a fragile thing” when memory weakens (Doshi, 12). However, Antara’s problem is not only neurological. Her pain comes

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from years of emotional insecurity, abandonment, and fear. During one childhood memory, Tara asks whether Antara trusts her, and Antara recalls, “What choice did I have, and what else did I know?” (Doshi, 101). Trust appears here as helpless dependence, not comfort. A child who has no stable emotional shelter learns to attach herself even to the person who causes pain.

Nancy Chodorow’s view of mother-daughter identity formation deepens this reading. She writes that “mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves” (109). In *Burnt Sugar*, such continuity becomes painful. Tara’s wounds pass into Antara’s mind, and Antara carries her mother’s instability as part of her own selfhood. Their bond creates attachment anxiety: Antara longs for recognition, but she fears closeness because closeness has always involved danger. The cycle of resentment and dependency traps both women.

Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection offers another useful frame. Kristeva describes abjection as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). Tara’s ageing body, fading mind, and unpredictable behaviour disturb Antara’s fragile sense of order. When Tara fails to recognise her, Antara says, “For a moment she did not know who I am and for that moment I am no one” (Doshi, 15). The mother’s forgetting threatens the daughter’s very sense of existence. Antara’s conflict finally comes down to love and hatred. She cannot abandon Tara entirely, nor can she forgive her completely. The remembered mother “appears and vanishes,” leaving the child unsure of “what is real or what can be counted on” (Doshi, 10). Doshi presents trauma as a living inheritance, where memory breaks, returns, and reshapes female identity across generations.

**Fragmented Female Identity and Selfhood**

Female identity in Avni Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* is shaped through memory, bodily decline, family pressure, and a painful mother-daughter bond. Antara does not possess a stable sense of self because her childhood wounds continue to disturb her adult life. Her anxiety becomes clear when she meets Dilip’s family and asks, “How much did I want to misrepresent where I lived – and who I was – and could I even recognise what was a desirable cover-up and what was not?” (Doshi, 22). The question reveals her divided self, caught between shame, longing for acceptance, and fear of exposure. Nancy Chodorow’s view that “mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves” (109) helps explain why Antara cannot separate her identity from Tara’s presence. The daughter’s selfhood grows through closeness to the mother, yet that closeness produces anxiety rather than emotional security.

Tara’s illness deepens Antara’s fragmentation because the mother’s memory fails at the very moment when the daughter needs recognition. When Tara fails to recognise her, Antara says, “For a moment she did not know who I am and for that moment I am no one” (Doshi, 15). The loss of maternal recognition becomes a loss of self. Antara’s loneliness does not arise only from marriage or family distance; it also comes from an old emotional hunger. Her artistic practice mirrors this inner disorder. She says, “My art is about looking at where patterns cease to exist” (Doshi, 28). The line reflects her own mind, where memory, trust, and identity move without complete order.

The female body in the novel carries emotional suffering. Tara’s ageing and cognitive decline

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make the body a site of fear, disgust, and dependence. Antara admits that “every sign of her physical degradation feels repulsive” (Doshi, 11). Julia Kristeva’s idea of abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, order” (4) helps read Antara’s response to Tara’s body. The sick mother disturbs the daughter because Tara appears both familiar and strange. The ageing body also reminds Antara of her own future as a woman, mother, and caregiver. Fear of dependency moves through the narrative and unsettles fixed ideas of womanhood.

Doshi also resists traditional female roles. Tara rejects the image of the gentle domestic mother; Antara notes, “She hates anything that seems domestic. Except cooking” (Doshi, 13). Tara’s refusal to live as a conventional wife or mother creates pain, yet it also challenges the belief that women must survive only through sacrifice. Judith Butler’s view that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time” (179) supports this reading, because femininity in the novel appears as repeated pressure rather than natural truth. Antara also searches for selfhood beyond motherhood, marriage, and caregiving, but anger does not fully free her. Doshi portrays female selfhood as wounded, changing, and incomplete. The novel shows that a woman may love, hate, care, resist, and remain uncertain of who she is.

**Findings and Discussion**

The study finds that Avni Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* presents motherhood as an emotionally troubled bond rather than a pure space of love and sacrifice. Antara’s relationship with Tara reveals major psychological concerns such as childhood hurt, repression, anger, guilt, fear of abandonment, and disturbed memory. From a feminist perspective, the novel questions the moral pressure placed on women to care, forgive, and remain patient in painful family relationships. Caregiving produces conflict because Antara must protect the same mother who once neglected and wounded her. Her duty as a daughter mixes with resentment, fatigue, and a hidden desire for justice. Maternal relationships in the novel remain unstable because love depends on memory, recognition, and emotional trust; Tara’s illness breaks all three. Fragmented memory shapes Antara’s female identity because the past returns through shame, anxiety, and irritation rather than through healing. Doshi rejects idealised motherhood by presenting Tara as loving, selfish, vulnerable, and destructive at the same time. The novel shows care as a heavy emotional practice shaped by gender, family, and trauma, without reducing women to passive symbols of duty, silence, and sacrifice.

**Conclusion**

Psychoanalytic feminism remains important for reading *Burnt Sugar* because it connects family experience with unconscious pain, gendered care, and female self-formation. Freud’s idea of repression helps explain Antara’s buried anger, while Kristeva and Chodorow help read maternal ambivalence, bodily unease, and daughterly dependence. The novel brings care, resentment, trauma, and identity fragmentation into one difficult emotional field. Antara cannot love Tara without remembering neglect, and she cannot reject Tara without feeling guilt. Tara’s illness sharpens this conflict because forgetting removes the possibility of apology and moral settlement. Avni Doshi contributes to contemporary Indian feminist fiction by presenting women’s lived experiences without

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sentimental comfort. Her novel shows that motherhood may contain tenderness, violence, need, fear, and fatigue. *Burnt Sugar* finally reveals female life as psychologically complex, shaped by memory, body, family, and unfinished emotional wounds within private and social family spaces.

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