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M(OTHER)ING AND CARE: ON THE POLITICS OF CARETAKING, AND GENDER

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Abstract

Longlisted for the Booker Prize 2020, Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton* makes material the unexpressed concerns and cares in a mother-daughter relationship. Antara finds herself ushered into a new role — that of mothering her mother Tara who is showing early signs of cognitive decline. This role reversal inaugurates a crisis in the personal lives of the estranged duo and leads us to inspect the implications of a pertinent psycho-social issue — that of care-giving as well as care-receiving. The novel toys with the ideas of time, of order, of madness, and the entangled existence of mothers and daughters, and by primarily referencing works of Ira Raja, Rajib Lochan, and Julia Kristeva, I will attempt to understand how the mother-daughter relationship unfolds in the face of a role-reversal — where Antara becomes her mother Tara's mother.

Understanding Care

In the beginning was the word and to understand the meaning of that word, we delve into its etymological root. Warren T. Reich in his classic article “The Notion of Care” traces the origins of care to the early Latin literature of ancient Rome. According to Reich, and by virtue of its usage in regular parlance, the word “care” is burdened with two meanings, each more pressing than the other. For one, it is synonymous to the worries and anxieties of the world while for the other, care is close to selfless devotion, an act of love or “attentive conscientiousness” (Reich 1995). Reich then places the two meanings of care within the ambit of the myth of Cura who is allowed to “have and hold it (human) as long as it lives” (ibid.) by Saturn. In this sense care, or rather the contract of care, predates the existence of the first human on earth, thereby seeping deep into our existential fabric. With its roots in mythology, care and the act of caring are as fundamental as the emotions of love and anger and by extension central to what it means to be human and to be alive. Following Reich, it is also interesting to note that despite care being the “glue of society” (ibid.), it does not consider being human as its locus but tends either towards divinity or to being pulled down by worry.

I locate the humanness of care precisely between the polar co-ordinates of divinity and worry. To care as a human for another human comes with its share of mixed emotions and responsibilities, and more so when the concerned relation is as intimate as that of a mother and a daughter. It is this humanness, the emotional baggage of care, that I will unpack by attempting a close reading of the novel by Avni Doshi.

The tangled web of life

It is a specimen of native Indian logic universally acknowledged that when one is born in India, one is born into a weave, a ‘taana-baana’ of ‘rishtas’ (which loosely translates to relationships) that needs to be navigated through to spin the fabric of existence and being against the flow of time — birth and death as the definite co-ordinates.

It is also this flow of time that allows one the luxury or rather the mundanity of order. In a way, order precedes existence. Our existence is coded into a system of comprehensibility that allows us to impart meaning to the world around us. To understand that there is any meaning at all also pronounces the notion that this meaning generation is a human-made activity. The ability of humans to scribe boundaries and draw lines is a way of asserting differences, thereby creating and maintaining order. But what if that order is challenged?

In her very nuanced paper titled “Contractarianism and the Ethic of Care in Indian Fiction” (2013), Ira Raja details the inherent ideas of intergenerational contracts and rights that dictate the relationship between (Indian) parents and their children.

The intergenerational contract is the unspoken filial arrangement where it is naturally assumed that the sons, and by extension their wives, would take care of the ageing parents. In the absence of sons, the responsibility falls upon the daughter(s) of the house. The mechanics that drive the contract can also be located in the familial rubrics of duty or ‘Dharma’, and of retributive justice or ‘Karma’, where the former offers a strict notion of adherence to societal rules and expectations and the fear of the latter prevents one from seeking alternative ways of care. While both these ideas may not entirely be restrictive, the definite fallacy of the intergenerational contract is that it assumes a smooth relationship between parents and children. Doshi’s novel is an intervention in rethinking this intergenerational contract. We are introduced to the matrix

of ‘Dharma’ and ‘Karma’ when the protagonist Antara declares that her mother Tara’s misery is the result of the suffering she had caused her while Antara was a child. It seems only natural to her then that “any pain she [Tara] subsequently endured appeared to me to be a kind of redemption — a balance of the universe, where the rational order of cause and effect aligned” (Doshi 2020, 1). This narrative not only provides an insight into the fraught world of the mother-daughter duo but also sets the tone to understand the exhausting world of informal caregiving.

In the novel, Antara embodies this world and makes evident her anxieties in the very beginning: “I wish India allowed for assisted suicide like the Netherlands. Not just for the dignity of the patient, but for everyone involved” (Doshi 2020, 5). As the single child of a single mother, the responsibility to look after her mother falls naturally upon her shoulders. She compares her situation to that of a helpless child who “does not know what is real or what can be counted on” (Doshi 2020, 5). If Antara finds herself at emotional crossroads, her mother Tara buys herself a pack of blades in case “circumstances deteriorated further” (Doshi 2020, 2). A certain shame engulfs her, and her act of buying blades makes evident her subtle refusal to hand herself in to the care of her daughter. She asks Antara to stop “insisting” that she is ill, that she is forgetting things.

Since Antara is the only child of her mother, and with an absent father, her role as a care-giver is loaded with expectations. We know of these expectations as these are embedded not only in a specific socio-cultural milieu but are also inadvertently voiced by Antara and those around her. In her first meeting with the doctor, it is the doctor who verbalizes the intergenerational contract by asking if Tara lives with “someone, a husband or a son.” It is not that the idea of Antara being the care-giver is extraordinary for the doctor but the novelty of it does strike him at first.

In (Hindu) families, daughters — once married — have no bearings or obligations to her parents. Ira writes, that a

married daughter has no reciprocal obligations to her own parents: in fact, reliance upon a married daughter may even be considered “shameful and demeaning”. Particularly in the patrilineal North, the quasi-religious belief that a daughter is “*paraya dhan*” (literally, wealth that belongs to someone else and must, therefore, be returned via marriage) entails parents’ non-reliance on daughters for support in old age. (Ira 2013, 80)

Despite a paradigmatic shift in this outlook where daughters have equal rights on “their” home, the burden on the daughter increases manifold since she is responsible not only for the well-being of her new home but also for her old home. The daughter, then, comes to occupy a liminal status. This becomes true for Antara where she is not only solely responsible for her mother’s well-being but also for her husband Dilip and, by some extension of familial logic, his mother.

This expectation is evident when the doctor casts an accusatory glance at Antara when Dilip’s blood work samples indicate some mineral and vitamin deficiencies. The doctor looks at her for “an explanation” (Doshi 2020, 203) as if she bears direct responsibility for his ill health. The text is peppered with such gendered expectations. For example, Dilip subtly lets Antara know that he “has a family, too”, and then her mother-in-law blatantly voices her concerns about Tara straining the couple’s relationship if Tara were to move in with them. Antara’s liminal position is voiced by her mother-in-law when she tells Purvi (Antara’s friend) that “your husband’s home will never be the same as your mother’s home” (Doshi 2020, 240).

While Antara’s husband and the mother-in-law’s concerns seek to drive a schism between Antara’s new responsibilities and old — caring for her own biological mother and caring for her husband (and his family) — it is convenient for her own father to extract himself from shouldering any responsibilities towards his estranged daughter and wife by claiming that none of it was his “idea”. The politics of care makes it convenient for men to remove themselves from a labour that necessarily requires time, emotional involvement and vigilance — certain attributes

that are confined to the domain of the women. The difference between intensity of involvement and performance is also made evident when Antara remarks that Dilip calls her mother “mom” with such an ease that it perturbs her. She has not been able to make peace with the fact that she has another “mom” through marriage. She “struggles” while it is “easy” for Dilip (Doshi 2020, 28).

The burden of caring, thus, should be shouldered by Antara.

What is to be done?

In “Caregiving for Elderly Parents: A Study From the Indian Perspective”, Rajib Lochan Dhar writes that caregiving can be synonymous with “labour of love” (2012, 248), a metaphor that is capable of masking the emotional and mental struggles that accompany care-giving. There are moments of anger, of resentment, however brief, which indicate that care-giving is not entirely a smooth act. Doshi’s novel incisively provides glimpses into the messy world of caregiving where the daughter’s resentment is made evident through the very first line of the novel — “I would be lying if I said my mother’s misery has never given me pleasure” (Doshi 2020, 1). The angst between Tara and Antara is not unusual or peculiar but predates them — Tara’s mother and Tara too have had their share of a chequered past, as if “the creases have been ironed into the fabric” (Doshi 2020, 11).

For Antara, the act of caring cannot ameliorate the wounds of her past — a significant theme that Doshi begins the novel with. What happens to the wound of a daughter if left unattended? Does it fester? Does it stink? Antara realises that “a few caring gestures” cannot “ease a sickness” (Doshi 2020, 48) that predates the wounded and the inflictor. In her moments of extreme rage and resentment she goes as far as to ruminate over manslaughter and murder. She is surprised that she is thinking such thoughts, and realises that despite it she loves her mother

to death, that she would not be where she is ‘without her’. These glimpses into Antara’s mental scape offer a necessary launch pad to navigate through the complexity of emotions that colour relationships between a parent and their caregiving child.

While the novel does not provide any definite answers as to how one should approach such entangled relations, it does, however, initiate an important conversation around the mental well-being of the caregiver.

The two meetings between Antara and the doctor take into cognizance the importance of a healthy caregiving relationship. For example, the doctor tells her that she can talk to a therapist when caregiving gets too overwhelming. He assures her by letting her know that “caregivers in this role can suffer as much as the patients. It can be very stressful” (Doshi 2020, 90). In another of their conversations, he tells her that being away from her mother would prove to be beneficial in the long run since “the distance” between the two might aid in mending the fragile relationship (Doshi 2020, 162).

When things get too much to bear, Antara contacts a life coach based in the UK who tells her that “caregivers need care too” (Doshi 2020, 207). Although this interjection provokes laughter in Antara, it does pronounce the urgency of taking care of the caregivers’ own well-being. While there is no detailed delineation of how caregiving practises in the UK vary from those in India, it is to be noted that caregiving is still a nascent categorical “practise” in India for caregiving is encased within familial expectations and obligations. Antara’s mother-in-law, who lives in the US, is more welcoming of the idea of keeping a “live-in nurse” (Doshi 2020, 147) for Tara, lest her staying with them permanently damage the conjugal relation of the couple.

Towards the end of the novel, Antara asks the readers to ruminate over intention and reception, act and performance. She questions whether it is possible for the “true essence” of feelings to ever show through acts, asking, “if the act is internalized — would it be an act anymore? Can a performance of pleasure, even love, turn into a true experience if one

becomes fluent enough in it? When does performance become reality?” (Doshi 2020, 265). Antara has no definite answer to these questions — but in the wider rubrics of the conversation around caregiving, these questions pose much importance. How much of an act is caregiving? How much of it is a true experience? Through the novel, Doshi allows us to examine more closely the trials and tribulations in the life of a caregiver, to examine the messiness of life where the relationship between the parent and child are not necessarily cordial, paving way to think of more ethical approaches to caregiving under such circumstances as well as the mental well-being of the caregivers. More importantly, it also weighs in the shared responsibility and the introduction of an ungendered expectation in caregiving — Dilip as a son-in-law is equally responsible for Antara’s mother as Antara is expected to be of his side of family, and while this engagement of Dilip with Tara may help break the gender norms, it also runs the equal risk of being an exception in celebration.

Final Word and M/others

In 2020, while I was still a postgraduate student at the University of Delhi and the Covid pandemic had the world in its firm grips, I was writing my term-end assignment on Julia Kristeva and her concept of time. Unwittingly, my professor had erred and instead of typing out “cyclical time”, he mentioned the same as “clinical time”. The term mystified me because a quick Google search would not let me associate it with Kristeva. It was only later that the error was rectified, but it was too late. I had already begun thinking about this clinical time, and it was not long before I could clearly establish connections. I propose “clinical time” as that time in a woman’s life where her own somatic and psychosomatic experience begin to mirror her mother’s, and her mother’s mother. It also pronounces the temporal shift for her body to be in pain with the burden of looking after herself and her ‘family’.

Despite her resolute claims that she would ensure she does not end up like her mother, Antara begins to understand Tara while she is expecting a baby herself. The presence of an absent father figure in her life allows her to villainize her mother initially, but there is a hint of some coming to terms with her mother’s waywardness and her refusal to conform to the prescribed gender roles. The recurrence of the metaphor of the mirror conveys the idea of the clinical time that I have proposed. In certain moments, Antara sees in Tara a reflection of herself: “[S]he is naked, and steps back to look at her reflection in the glass. She looks at mine, as it appears next to hers, then back and forth, as though she cannot tell the difference. Opposites often resemble each other” (Doshi 2020, 12).

The likeness that Antara creates through the image of reflections also finds a resonance when she traces her lineage, declaring that her mother and her grandmother are all derivatives of the same matter, that they are “deeply connected, and how her destruction would irrevocably lead to (my) own” (Doshi 2020, 227). These cyclical references further fuel the theory of clinical time — there will be a time in each woman’s life where she would have to negotiate and strike a balance between illness and health, between her desires and expectations. I find this idea intriguing at a personal level because every time someone mentions that I look like my mother (who looked like her mother), we create a chain not only of aesthetic genes, but also a chain of expectations in terms of duties and obligations. The evocation of the congruency to my mother is a subtle mental reminder to ensure that I follow in her footsteps, that I adhere to the gendered expectation of being a good daughter just like she was when she took care of my ailing grandmother. After Annika (Antara’s daughter) is born, Antara notes the slight ways through which her mother is discriminated against like not being allowed to hold the newborn baby. These incidents buttress the urge within Antara to take care of her mother — she realises that she loves her mother “to death” and that she would not be able to survive without her — only her mother

has to “[s]top being a cunt” (Doshi 2020, 256). The acknowledgement of the love-hate relationship between them not only fuels Antara’s anxiety, but my own as a reader and a daughter — how would I care for my mother? Can caregiving be oppressive as love? Is there a universal ethic of care, if at all? Perhaps caregiving comes at the cost of self-consumption as well as the consumption of the other — the latent references to autophagy, anthropofagio, and the incident of the lion eating off the lioness’ head serve as larger metaphors for the intricate navigation that entails caregiving. There are no fixed rules for what qualifies as good caregiving as the balance between intention and reception, act and performance will always occupy a certain grey area. However, what is important is the need to integrate men into caregiving practices rather than gendering it or leaving it as a domain reserved exclusively for women as well as removing ourselves from the vocabulary of expectations and guilt that pervades the everyday and are set as benchmarks for women to attain each time she becomes a mother, a daughter-in-law, or a wife. And Doshi’s novel sets the stage for these questions to be out of the magician’s hat after all.

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