

Mother Figure in the Short Stories of Jai Nimbkar

Dr.G.Hampamma
Professor of English
MITS, Madanapalle.

The works of Indian women short story writers in English are stuffed with the psychological dilemmas, anxieties, and sufferings undergone by sensitive persons caught in a world of uncertain values of the society and culture. Their stories are primarily woman-centered. The search for self, self-analysis, and a probe into the existential problems of woman are the recurrent themes in their writings. Another important relationship depicted interestingly in the works of women writers is that of a mother and a daughter. The mother figure is always treated with love and reverence in our literature. Jai Nimbkar also presents mothers and motherhood in her stories “The Mother”, “Turning Points”, “Peanuts for the Monkeys” and “The Phantom Bird”.

Mother is a universal figure. Her selfless and endless love for her children is much glorified. At the same time the daughter is considered to be a financial burden and hence a son always is preferred, even by the mother. Despite her desire to have sons a mother’s love for the daughter cannot be denied at the same time. According to Sudhir Kakar,

The special maternal affection reserved for daughters, contrary to expectations derived from social and cultural prescriptions, is partly to be explained by the fact that a mother’s unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son.¹

Jai Nimbkar’s “The Mother” from *The Lotus Leaves* illustrates very well the oppressed and suppressed condition of rustic mother in the so called under-dog society. G.S. Balarama Gupta says: “. . . it is her most memorable story where in the focus is on the stark realities of life which, however thickly stark, cannot arrest the flutters of a maternal heart”.² The mother is very anxious about her sick child who lies in a crib hung from the ceiling. The child’s presence in the crib is evident only from its “brief weak attempts at coughing and the stertorous sound of its breathing” (67). The woman puts a dampened piece of cloth on the baby’s forehead and returns to the stove for making “bhakri” (67) for her family. She is startled when her four-year old son flops down beside her and thrusts his head under her sari to suck her breast. She thinks for a while and then allows him.

“. . . her face relaxed abruptly as her breasts felt relieved of the milk the baby had not been able to drink for two days. For a while she stopped her work, half closed her eyes and gave herself up to the purely sensuous joy of it” (68).

When her husband, along with their two other children, comes home for meals, the woman requests him to take the baby to a private doctor saying that it is too sick even to cry. Her “voice was strongly high-pitched and tender like a child’s, but her words had an obstinate ring to them”. (69) But the husband ignores her request saying that he is not a man “made of money” (69) and so cannot pay ten rupees to a private doctor. Finally when the woman demands for money the husband takes the baby once again to a government doctor.

When the husband returns, carrying the baby in his arms stiffly instead of carrying her upright, he looks as though “he were leading a funeral procession, followed silently and humourlessly by the boys”. (70) The woman immediately flicks away the thought. The doctor

diagnoses that the baby has something wrong in her chest which needs three or four injections which are expensive. But the husband says that he doesn't have the money to afford such injections.

The woman comes to a conclusion: “. . . he doesn't care because she is a girl. If it had been one of his precious idiot boys, he would have borrowed a hundred rupees for medicines” (70). She recalls the time when he was very sick and she had been able to afford the expensive medicines he needed only because “. . . she had slaved uncomplainingly at several jobs and then also at home, nursing and caring for him for months”. (70) But now it would be of no use reminding him of it. The husband confirms that he may lose his job if he asks the lawyer (his master) to lend him some money, as the loan he had taken for their elder daughter's marriage is not yet repaid. Though unkind, he assumes that the baby would be alright the next day. The woman nods numbly. Her momentary flash of anger drains away and her face assumes “its habitual languid, almost sleepy quality” (71).

As the baby shows no improvement the next day, the woman goes to the lawyer's wife and requests her for twenty rupees saying that she would work for her until the money is paid back. But the lawyer's wife refuses to help her reminding how they had not listened to the advice to get an operation done after the birth of the twins: “You people go merrily on having countless children, and don't care to think about how you are going to support them. Why should you expect me to pay for your stupidity and irresponsibility?” (71) When the husband comes to know of his wife approaching the lawyer's wife, he beats her a lot. But the woman's cry that the baby is dying never reaches his ears.

The next morning, the woman finds the baby's condition worse. Deciding not to care her husband, she rushes to the lawyer's wife again and begs for money, with a face, puffy and pale and protruding eyes, full of tears. The lawyer's wife finally gives her the money, with all “contempt and disgust” (72). The woman runs home with the money “in one of her bursts of energy” (72), bundles the baby in a blanket and starts for the private hospital. In the sudden sunlight she finds the baby's face turned bluish gray, the little chest still and the “stertorous sound” (72) stopped. All the little facts consolidate into knowledge – this is “a dead body” (73).

The protagonist of “Turning Points” gets an opportunity to present her paper in New York and also to work there for six months as a guest lecturer. But she rejects the offer for the sake of her 23 year-old son, a medico. She is completely devoted to her precious son after the death of her husband. At that time their son, Bichu, was still a small child. Her senior colleague, Jagdeesh proposed to marry her years ago, but she had to make a choice and the choice clearly to be in Bichu's favour, fearing Jagdeesh may not be the sort of father Bichu needed. He still cares for her so deeply that he takes as much of the burden of administrative work off her shoulders as he could. She too loves him in “a muted non-urgent way” (124).

When the protagonist gets an opportunity to go abroad, Jagdeesh advises her to take time and decide over her leaving. The same day, during dinner, Bichu says that he and his girl friend want to get married as soon as possible. His mother's advice to postpone the marriage till the completion of his education is kept aside with his words: “What's the point in waiting once we have decided to marry?” (129) She had never expected her son to be so irresponsible as to expect her to support both of them, perhaps for many more years to come. She wants to convince him but in vain. She realizes that it is not going to fit in with the strategy she must follow if she wants to save herself a small space in his life:

“This devious sparring had never been part of our relationship, and I hated Sarita for making it necessary. I recoiled at the prospect of working for them and keeping house for them and hating every minute of it and not able to show it” (129-130).

She simply could not let herself face the worst in herself. So the only way to prevent it was by running away. So she immediately takes the decision and tells Bichu that she would not be present at the time of their wedding only to realize that her absence would not really matter to him. The next day she confirms to Jagdeesh that she is very much prepared to go abroad. But unexpectedly she learns that Jagdeesh also is leaving for the same place. Jagdeesh worries if she would change her decision after learning this. But now there is no reason for her to stop: “. . . For the time being I had no right to hope, or let him hope, since my choice had not been governed by his needs” (130).

Though it is primarily to run away from her selfish son, her acceptance to go along with Jagdeesh brings a hope to lead a new life with him. Once she had rejected Jagdeesh for the sake of her son. But now because of her son she gets closer to Jagdeesh paving the way to live the life for herself with the support of a person who cares for her a lot. She takes a deliberate step to liberate herself from the shackles of traditional roles – the decision to turn a new leaf is the essential point.

Woman’s new assertiveness need not be a duplicate of male aggressiveness; rather, it could become a model of how human beings can assert their inner strengths and convictions without trampling upon the rights of others. “Peanuts for the Monkeys” presents a resourceful, self-reliant woman’s search for identity in seeking her mother-hood. Preeti is a staunch aspirant of a better future. Vikram, her two-year-old son, is of secondary importance to her and she keeps him aside and takes up career more seriously. Without letting herself to be in two minds she readily accepts the offer to go abroad leaving her son in the care of her mother-in-law though she does not have a cordial relation with her.

But the mother in Preeti does not stay peacefully abroad. She counts the days to get back to him. She returns only when the child turns four. When Preeti holds her arms out for her son, Vikram, he looks at her “without recognition” (61) and shrinks away, hiding his face in his grandmother’s neck. “The child seemed to have no relationship to the child of her imagination, or even the child of the photographs on whom, after all, her imagination was superimposed”. She thinks: “. . . if it were someone else’s child, I wouldn’t give him a second glance.” (61)

During the years of her absence which represent “half his life” (61), Vikram very much gets acquainted with his grandmother and fails to recognize Preeti as his own mother. Preeti also fails to attract her son. She tends to observe him “objectively” (62) and finds fault in the upbringing of her son – regarding his growth, way of dressing, eating, and so on. She hates her mother-in-law for calling the child with a pet name Vickoo instead of Vikram. Her husband tries to convince her: “I am sure no permanent harm has been done. Now he is all yours and you can bring him up exactly as you like”. (62)

Preeti tries to lure the child with the toys she had painstakingly chosen for him. But the child “gravely” (64) carries all of them to his grandmother. This becomes the pattern. Preeti fails “to assume control of Vikram without his co-operation” (64) and she feels that his grandmother is always there to see to it that he does not cooperate with her mother: “She was very smart, and very devious. On the surface she was sweet and persuasive, but she maneuvered every situation to her own advantage.”(64) Preeti accuses her mother-in-law of stealing Vikram away from her and supposes her to be her greatest enemy. She develops an ill feeling towards her, and thinks that her mother-in-law was doing everything quite intentionally: “So she can get back at me by

making him hate me. She has never liked me, never liked the fact that you (Preeti's husband) married me without consulting her". (68)

Preeti is not the one to suffer for long because of her own misunderstandings. She is a new woman who very well knows how to come out of her loneliness. She finally decides to forget the fact that Vikram was her first child and decides to have another child which "will be my (her) child, and it will be mine (hers) utterly". (69). Preeti presents the voice of a woman who wishes motherhood finally to become a choice for women.

The title story, "The Phantom Bird" depicts the struggle of and misunderstanding between the generations, especially, between the mother and daughter. Sagarika who is called Sagar by everyone is nearing twenty and is bulky, and unattractive. The "grossness" (11) of her body sickens her mother. In contrast, her mother, Rohini is attractive and still retains her youthful figure and looks. Before Sagar's birth she had an overwhelming desire "to create someone in her own image, to leave her behind as an enduring mark of her own existence" (23). Now she is "disappointed not by Sagar's lack of beauty but by her refusal to care about her appearance" (23). Sagar refuses to accept "any curbs on her diet" (23). There is nothing charming or pretty about her:

She looked merely sloppy and uncared for, and consistently resisted Rohini's attempts to make her wear clothes which would hide rather than accentuate her dumpiness, or teach her the importance of good grooming. (23)

Gautam, Sagar's father thinks that Sagar can make him "feel inadequate as no one else ever had, by asking some simple but impossible-to-answer question." (22) He is sure that she asks "more questions than any other child" (22), and she probably keeps "a mental tally" (22) of all the ones he could not answer. According to him, "the only reason for these unsatisfactory encounters with his daughter must be that she took a malicious pleasure in showing up the deficiencies in his knowledge." (22)

The parents are thus worried in their own way while Sagar begins to feel "whatever the reason . . . the things her parents talked about, cared about, had no bearing on her life, did not touch her world".(21) She always feels her mother stands in her way to freedom. To better the relation the parents take Sagar to Manali for holidays. Very often Rohini feels "a wave of affection for her daughter, a need for her companionship" (19) and she promises herself that she is "going to be more patient and understanding."(19) But every time Sagar's wavering ways make Rohini go off balance and the relation between them worsens further.

Sagar gets fascinated about how the hippies have come away from their homes and how they lead their lives in their own way without harming others. She tries to develop friendship with Tony, a hippy. "The acceptance of the idea that life did not have to be forced into a rigid frame, or planned for with any great foresight, but could be lived simply by meeting whatever exigencies arose" (35) is suddenly presented to her as a possibility. She feels as if she is "looking at things from the other end."(35) Rohini pecks Sagar at her behaviour and at her wandering and conversing with the hippies. In a blaze of anger she suddenly asks: "What kind of a girl are you that you can't keep away from men? Are you so sex-crazy that you have to pick up scum?"(39) This makes the situation grave. Heart-broken, Sagar leaves her parents, goes to Tony and tries to find peace and solace among a group of hippies.

Gautam, quite unexpectedly, experiences "a wave of protective tenderness" (40) towards his child. He wants "to envelop her with love and keep her from ever getting hurt" (40). They decide to go back to Bombay, but Sagar stays back. She lives on her own for a few days "walking around aimlessly, eating when she felt like it, and finding after all that she was

enjoying the freedom, the feeling of not being accountable to anyone but herself” (47-48). She wonders if that was what “being grown up” (48) meant. She spends a great deal of time observing the hippies. She senses the security a proper family can provide for a child – “some kind of fairly permanent nucleus” (50). After some time she begins to worry as for whether she had “fled one prison only to build another kind of prison around herself.” (51-52) She realizes that though the hippies are like “ascetics practicing self-mortification in order to go beyond pain and pleasure, to attain Nirvana” they have not yet reached “the state of supreme indifference” (55). They are not even sure of reaching that. She feels quite shaken and disturbed to see how the society wants to clear away these “riff-raff” (55) called hippies. When she learns about the nocturnal sexual activities of the hippies with “horror and shame” (58) she discovers that she has disregarded a secured family. Since the moment she came to Manali, very often she has heard the call of a bird. She has been in quest of that bird – phantom bird. Now her quest is all over for she has found the reality that home is the only place that can give protection, parents are the real companions, and only they can give a secure existence. “With tears of anger and self - disgust starting in her eyes” (58) she thinks:

“What am I doing here? All this was only a worthless gesture, nothing more. If I hold a mirror up to myself, it will show me my mother’s face. They were sure of themselves, sure of me. They merely gave me the chance to find out what they knew all along. I am their daughter.” (58)

She returns to her parents with this realization. But unfortunately it is the mother who fails to understand her and to receive her with love, once again leading Sagar into the same old state of depression. “. . . The tension in her grew into a big red ball and then broke into millions of fragments” (60).

The literary representation of mothers is complex and fraught with contradiction. Mother-daughter relations, Marianne Hirsch finds, are particularly ambivalent, as daughters negotiate their way through ‘the fluctuations of symbiosis and separation’ in their relationships with their mothers, in a quest for their own sense of self.³ Jai Nimbkar is a meticulous craftsperson and conscious stylist, known for her bold themes. She feels that a literary artist must creatively get involved in society and seek a full revelation in the works of what she or he finds in the world around. “Turning Points” is a feminist discourse on women’s equal opportunities versus traditional concepts of the family. “the Mother” mirrors the condition of female gender in the illiterate society. Jai Nimbkar uses the mother’s question and puts forth the idea that family planning should bring about a more fluid understanding of maternity and of the family and contribute to women’s changing aspirations. A mother always tries to find “herself” in her daughter. In “Phantom Bird”, Rohini wishes to make her daughter a replica of herself, both physically and mentally. But in doing so, she overreacts and builds between them a wall of ice that becomes too thick and strong to be broken. Instead of helping her daughter come out of a state of depression she indirectly becomes the cause to lead Sagar into it. The representations of mother-daughter relationship here renders the daughter in crisis.

Works Cited:

Sudhir Kakar, "Feminine Identity in India", *Women in Indian Society*, p.49.

G.S. Balarama Gupta, "Indian English Women Short Story Writers: An Overview", *Vikram Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 1, 1993, p. 41.

Hirsch, Marianne, "The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism"
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p.20.