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Abstract

Nayomi Munaweera, a Sri Lankan born novelist portrays the vivid differences in the characteristics of the mother roles in her novels. Mother, who is seen as a sole person who stands for the children is characterised as one who leads to an horrible deed in the novel *What Lies Between Us*. Water is considered as the gift of life. It is considered as the first womb which has the power to give and take away. Similar to water, the mother also gives and chooses what it takes. Motherhood is characterised as a primal bond which is a relationship that guides the children to the sacred and protects them from the damnation.

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MOTHERHOOD : AN EMOTIONAL BONDING IN NAYOMI MUNAWEERA'S *WHAT LIES BETWEEN US*

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Nayomi Munaweera, a Sri Lankan born novelist portrays the vivid differences in the characteristics of the mother roles in her novels. Mother, who is seen as a sole person who stands for the children is characterised as one who leads to an horrible deed in the novel *What Lies Between Us*. Water is considered as the gift of life. It is considered as the first womb which has the power to give and take away. Similar to water, the mother also gives and chooses what it takes. Motherhood is characterised as a primal bond which is a relationship that guides the children to the sacred and protects them from the damnation.

Keywords: Motherhood, water, primal bonding, gift of life, Native mother, American mother

Nayomi Munaweera, a Sri Lankan novelist migrates to Nigeria in her childhood due to the Civil War in Sri Lanka. The conditions in Nigeria are also not favourable for the author and they then migrate to the USA. The Sri Lankan Civil War remains a high matter of concern for the novelist. The characters are made to migrate from Sri Lanka to the USA where they imagine that the conditions would be preferable. They develop an inbuilt discrimination within themselves on the basis of their identity. The Sri Lankans couldn't be accepted in the USA as such. They are expected to alter themselves for a better living in a new place.

Munaweera's second novel *What Lies Between Us*, establishes the concept of motherhood which is portrayed a sacred bond between the parents and the children. The mothers in both the novels are introduced as characters who take a stand for their children at their times of need. Ganga the protagonist is introduced as a character who commits a never acceptable crime at the beginning of the novel. She herself states that, "People write to me. Mothers mostly, they spew venom. That's not surprising. I have done the unthinkable. I have parted the veil and crossed into that other unseen country. They hate me because I am the worst thing possible. I am the bad mother" (*What Lies Between Us* 7).

The notion of the resident mother and the American mother is presented in the novel by Munaweera. The concept of motherhood in America is enormously diverse from the idea of motherhood of Indians. Americans never deem anyone as a good mother. They consider the motherhood as an important job in their life. They feel that there are thousand ways to fail in this important job. The failure may happen either from the body or from the heart. According to the Americanised concept of motherhood,

The women who is unable to breastfeed is a failure. The women who screams for the epidural is a failure. The woman who picks her child up late knows from the teacher's cutting glance that she is a failure. The woman who shares her bed with her baby has failed. The woman who steals herself and puts on noise- cancelling earphones to erase the screaming of her child in the next room has failed just as spectacularly. They must all hang their heads in guilt and shame because they haven't done it perfectly, and motherhood is, if anything, the assumption of perfection. (*What Lies Between Us* 7)

A Sri Lankan mother and an American mother is characterised to have a radical distinction in the novel. A native or a Sri Lankan mother is filled with the characteristics of a delicate person. She is kept like a hothouse flower amidst the beautiful carved furniture. The American mother is considered to belong to a broader area. She is recognised as a part of the world. In the novel, Ganga's mother follows the traces of the native mother. Ganga's mother is revealed as "Neither education, exposure nor westernization seem to affect the "traditional-minded" in Munaweera's text, such as Ganga's mother, who resort to the "heirloom of culture" as a fossil to carry and maintain" (*wordpress*).

Her sister is portrayed as a symbolic interpretation of the Americanised mother. Ganga's mother restricts her from some deeds which may have harmful impact in Ganga's life. Ganga's aunt is considered as a person who is more liberal in person. She even takes the rights to send magazines, frocks and all girlish things to Ganga when they are back in the Island. Her aunt's deed of introducing her slowly to the American ways helps her to adapt to the American lifestyle in her future.

Ganga's mother can never tolerate the fact of her daughter adapting to the cultural changes in America. Ganga tries to adhere to the new style of life. Her mother warns her that she must not consider herself as an American and that she must follow the Indianized way of dressing. Ganga's mother tries to tell her the fact that saving one's own chastity is behind the dressing style of a girl. Ganga cannot accept the fact as she considers the reason why she was sexually exploited by Samson, the male servant in Sri Lanka despite her native dressing. She feels depressed and wonders why, "Shame is female; shame is the price I must pay for this body" (56). Ganga's mother is depicted as a lady who has an illness and at times remains shut in a room. The silence is considered as an interpretation of the sufferings that the people had to undergo in the nation. The family members consider her as delicate and take good care of her. The father and the daughter understand that the timely silent attitude of her will change and that she would later take care of them. The moment she overcomes her silent behaviour, she rushes out with all vigour to take care of her daughter and to adhere to her needs.

Ganga in the novel portrays the similarity between her deed and the war. She states how the war results in complete destruction to an entire clan. The people have to stay back with a fear for their life. They do not have internal peace within them. They are in a continuous discrepancy about the trauma that they have to endure. The people are completely shattered because of the war. Though they try to laugh at the war, the hidden pain within them is something which will linger with them for generations. Munaweera in the novel depicts the people's inbuilt pain that the war has within them. She states her idea through the voice of Ganga, "The war was just something we lived with. There was no other choice. We even make jokes about it because that was the only way to survive.... The only ones who don't have it are the lucky dead. So the war is not my excuse. The war happened to other people. I leave the story of that other, bigger war for some other teller" (61).

Munaweera through Ganga describes the changes that the war brings both on a physical and an emotional level to the mind of Ganga. She claims the fact that the war is not just a normal one like what the readers feel. The war has a greater meaning. The effects of the war are enacted within the body and between the bones of the people who have to face it. "It took the small, delicate creation that I was, smashed it with a hammer, and set it upside down. All my pieces fell in the wrong order. I was separated from myself and empty, echoing spaces were opened in me for a darker inhabitant. No one knew, no one suspected. And yet even this smaller war is not my excuse. My sin is only and ever my own" (61).

According to Susan Hatters Friedman and Phillip J. Rensick, "Psychotic mothers who fear that their children may suffer a fate worse than death due to persecutory delusions should either be hospitalized or separated from their children. These mothers may be reluctant to share their delusional ideas. Delusions may sometimes be elicited through a sympathetic exploration of their concerns for the safety of their children. In some cases, the only evidence of concern is frequent

checking by the mother on the health and safety of her children. Though psychotic mothers may have less warning about filicide, psychiatrists can ask about hallucinations or delusional thoughts regarding the children. Among Indian mothers with postpartum severe mental illness, a recent study found that mothers with delusions about their infant engaged in more abuse" (*World Psychiatry* 138). Ganga in the novel is described as a character who commits an unforgivable act. She kills her own child which she considers as the right decision. She forfeits the future of the child and considers that such a birth in this world would create deep pain in her. She feels that it is better for the child not to be born as a member of the history.

Munaweera in the novel has symbolized an animal instinct of a Chinese mother moon bear who kills the own child unable to tolerate the pain it undergoes. An ancient custom consisted of a custom where thousands of moon bears are captured and stuffed into small crush cages. Due to the heavy crowd and the lack of space in the cage they are unable to stand upright or turn around. They may be locked in the cages like this for decades. In a later stage, the stomach of the moon bear is slit to collect the precious health giving liquid. Human beings ingest this bile for various painful afflictions.

A mother bear unable to withstand the crying of the cub, breaks open the iron bars in which she is locked. She pulls out the cub from the other cage and strangles it to death. She later smashes her head against the wall until she dies. Ganga in the novel tries to safeguard the infanticide she committed by portraying the deed of the moon bear. The moon bear does not commit this deed out of its own interest. The animal is forced to commit the deed due to the suffering the young one has to endure. Ganga narrates this incident to display the fact that the deed that the animal did is similar to what she did. Her only intention is described as to protect the child from the tortures of the world. In the context of the novel, Munaweera brings forth an event where she portrays the fact that Ganga is sexually assaulted by the male servant in their home. These torments make her perform this dreadful deed.

Ganga is terribly disturbed by the deed she is forced to commit. In *The Hindu*, Anne Zaaidi states that, "Crimes committed against children are among that few of us can claim to comprehend, and certainly among the hardest to forgive. For parents, particularly mothers, accused of hurting their children either directly or through neglect, society reserves the harshest punishment" (*Inheritance of Loss*). Ganga is portrayed as a character who throughout the novel repents on the merciless deed she commits. The story line is considered as a narration of the deeds that changed her life forever. The childhood story of Ganga has in it the grip to hold the audience, but Munaweera fails to convert this impetus to a meaningful end. The stereotypes and traditional readings of customs, rituals and cultural figures, as Munaweera presents them, are valid and present, but are showcased as trivializations and without a depth that may assist in the representation of the complexity of cultural practice.

The entire story of Ganga seems to be her arduous journey for receiving and accepting the truth concealed inside and outside. The famous neuroscientist, Anil Seth comments in the *weekend university* that the human beings don't just passively perceive the world, the people actively generate it. The world as the people experience it, comes as much, if not more, from the inside-out, as from the outside-in. Hence if the inside is the reflection of outside and vice versa, it is necessary to unfold the inner sensory experiences of the female protagonist in relation with the experiences in the exterior world.

Ganga's name in the novel itself signifies to the name of the River Goddess. In the ancient Hindu epics, the Goddess Ganga flows down all the way from the frozen Himalayas across the immense stretch of the subcontinent and into the welcoming Ocean. She is considered to be birthed out of the purest snowmelt. The river Ganga is an elixir of life. The name indicates to the flowing water which mentions the fact that all the people are connected to each other and thus are bound to be there for each other.

Munaweera in her novel *What Lies Between Us* depicts the deep and natural bonding between the mother and the child. The deed she commits is safeguarded by her as a result for the lack of

freedom she suffers after the birth of the child. The murder she committed is a very grave deed that Ganga's mother has always supported her and stood for her during all her struggles. She tries to stand for her daughter during all her initial struggles. Munaweera highlights the motherly instinct of Ganga's mother who always wishes to safeguard and protect her daughter from both the war and the people.

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