Chapter Six

Conclusion

The study has sought to travel through the world of mother-daughter bonds asking many questions, arriving often at dazzling insights, and occasionally at seemingly contradictory answers (the quintessential Indian paradox). As in the methodology adopted by Women’s Studies this study has sought to find answers to its fundamental questions by using the tools of the history of women’s movements, feminist theories, psychology and sociology with special reference to the Indian context to bring forth many interesting findings. At the same time it resists the eternal Indian temptation of deifying or romanticizing mothers and attempts to portray the Indian woman as she stands.

The most important finding is that the hypothesis put forward at the beginning of this work—that the course of the plots of novels by Indian English women writers with female protagonists is determined by the nature of the bonds of the protagonists with their mothers—is true. Each novel included in the study appears to deal with entirely different premises, and positions the protagonist in singular circumstances. However, irrespective of the importance given to any other factor it is seen that the nature of the mother-daughter bond determines the development of the plot.
A close analysis of the closures of these novels points to the recurrence of certain plot structures. A satisfactory, lasting resolution of the dilemma each of the protagonists is involved in is seen to be arrived at only by those protagonists who have a strong bond with their mothers developed out of an in depth understanding of them. The mother-daughter bonds which are deep-rooted in love seem to act like the touch of Midas for a daughter. From this bond she gains the courage to deal with all the problems which life puts in front of her. Positive acts of support may not always flow from the part of a mother in India but yet the bond remains the most vibrant source of positive energy for a daughter giving her the courage to act positively, meeting the various challenges life throws her way. Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promises*, Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*, Anjana Appachana’s *Listening Now*, Kavery Nambisan’s *On Wings of Butterflies*, Namita Gokhale’s *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, Gita Aravamudan’s *The Healing* all provide ample evidence for the fact. Supporting the major finding in the thesis, the study further finds that in the case of the category of mother-daughter bonds characterized by the daughter’s indifference to her mother, satisfactory resolutions always elude the grasp of the protagonists. Maya (*Cry, the Peacock*) on the parapet moving towards her death, Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?) on the beach gulping down her words in painful swallows and Jaya (*That Long Silence*) stuck in the waiting-game she detested, are each lonely figures.
Another finding of equal interest is that the mother-daughter bonds characterized by hatred cannot remain so for a long period of time. Time and again Indian English fiction by women brings out this fascinating truth that no daughter can perpetually hate her mother. Referring to the cases of teen-age rebellion in girls, Amye Walters states that the “dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship changes as the daughter ages” (n. pag.). In this study we find the many protagonists who initially hate their mothers undergoing a reversal of attitude as they grow older. The protagonists who initially hate their mothers like Devi (*Thousand Faces of Night*), Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*), Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Virmati (*Difficult Daughters*), and Priya (*Paro: Dreams of Passion*) separate themselves from their mothers and create lives of their own in mutiny. Each achieves all that they had desired in life in terms of education, material success, financial security, and prestige. But they also face unhappiness and disillusionment. Each of these five protagonists is shown symbolically going “back to the womb” from where a period of intense introspection takes them to a new understanding of their mothers, paving the way to the solving of the crisis in their lives. It is pertinent to note that even as they hate their mothers, the mothers are shown to have a prominent place in their thoughts. Much of their rebellious acts are in their minds addressed to their mothers. In fact this constant speculation over what their mothers would have to say indirectly hints at the place the mother has in the subconscious mind of the daughter. It is this habit of constantly thinking
about their mothers that leads when the time arrives to intense introspection and a resultant change in attitude. As the daughters grow older their perspectives on the actions of their mothers too undergo changes and they begin to read the life circumstances, challenges and choices of their mothers differently. The understanding thus gained removes the cobwebs of inaction leading to positive resolutions.

Any bond, whether it is characterized by love or hatred is thus seen to provide hope, whereas indifference to one’s mother is seen to be a certain recipe for tragedy. Conclusions of the novels included in this study are measured not in terms of material success but in terms of levels of inner peace experienced by the protagonists and her ability to act decisively to put an end to the dilemma she finds herself in. A clear understanding of one’s self is mandatory for such action and as Nancy Friday succinctly puts it, “Understanding what we have with our mothers is the beginning of understanding ourselves” (1).

After studying the differences between men and women for several years John Gray wrote, “Instead of being goal oriented, women are relationship oriented . . . to them relationships are more important than work and technology” (19). Kakar agrees to this statement wholeheartedly and submits that this fact becomes even more pronounced in the case of Indian women, “For although in most societies, a woman (more than a man) defines herself in relation and connection to other people, this is singularly true of Indian women” (“Feminine Identity” 45). This fact plays
a major role in the dissatisfaction that Indian women who have gained
success at the cost of losing out on meaningful relationships experience in
life. Forging alliances can be read as a positive skill for women and this
ability too is seen to depend on the nature of the initial bond with their
mothers. Nortar and McDaniel point out how “the earliest and most
profound bond women form with each other” (1) acts as the blue print for
all their bonds in the future—with men, other women and especially their
own children. Female characters like Janu, and Janu’s mother Mani
(Ancient Promises); Geeta (Inside the Haveli); Padma, Padma’s sister
Shanta, and Padma’s daughter Mallika (Listening Now); Eva (On Wings of
Butterflies); Bharati, Sita, and Jayanti (The Healing) all have strong bonds
of love and understanding with their mothers which find a reflection in the
ease with which they bond with others. Similarly we find that characters
like Sita, Maya and Jaya who are unable to relate to their mothers find the
very same difficulty in forming any sort of attachments with others
especially their own children. In tune with the earlier finding, one finds
that while the daughters Devi, Indu, Saru, Ira and Virmati hate their
mothers they are unable to form solid bonds with any others and once they
purge themselves of their ill-feelings they find themselves amending their
relationships with others for the better. This clearly reveals how important
harmony with their mothers is for daughters.

Tuula Gordon in her Feminist Mothers talks of how the bond with
her mother “connects women to life and to others in a way which gives
them capacities for peace and coexistence which men lack” (61). Clearly it is in the best interest of daughters to bond rather than resist their mothers, and most women in India seem to intuitively know this fact or else learn it through the hard way of pain and suffering. In India mothers might not always be the first ones women turn to for help when faced with troubles yet curiously we find that in all the novels, lasting solutions are always arrived at through women, mostly mothers. Change comes through female support. Men can only provide temporary material solutions while women especially mothers are the ones who are shown providing satisfactory, permanent solutions. As Chodorow remarks, “Men cannot provide the kind of return to oneness that women can” (“Psychodynamics . . .” 155). Chitra Divakaruni a writer who has written prolifically on bonds between women in India echoes this knowledge in an online article titled “What Women Share”

In . . . friendships . . . with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share—menstruation, childbirth, menopause . . . Oh we fight too, we’re sometimes furiously competitive and bitchy and exasperated. But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves, uncomplicated by all the emotions that complicate our other relationships: duty, lust,
romance, the need to impress or control. We can be women and know that, as women, we are understood.

(n. pag.)

What she calls “deep and primal” clearly starts with the instinctual attachment with the mother that an infant forms. Cross-culturally, segregation by gender is the rule and hence women tend to have closer personal ties with each other than men. Divakaruni notes that though clashes too take place, ultimately it is these bonds that form the most uncomplicated means to contentment in life. This is the very same truth that we see mirrored in mother-daughter bonds. There might be conflicts and petty jealousies but ultimately the daughters feel at peace only after having reconciled their differences with their mothers.

The reasons for the conflict are seen to have its base in culture and not biology. Unlike suggested by Freud and later developed by his followers this study finds the theory of “Electra complex” or “negative Oedipus Complex” to have no significant role in those novels where daughters are seen to hate their mothers as fathers are nearly inconsequential in these works. Instead the cause for the sullying of the bond can be traced to the role that mothers play as agents of patriarchy. In India child-rearing is considered to fall exclusively within the purview of mothers and hence they find themselves duty-bound to condition their daughters into the feminine role that the culture expects from them. Mothers who have experienced life in a strong patriarchal set-up realize
the need for their daughters to fall in line as a life of rebellion against the
dictates of the society is never easy. This process of disciplining naturally
leads to conflict. Thus the mother-daughter relationship is seen to
encompass conflicting feelings of love, anger, worry, resentment, envy and
need. Helena Michie identifies it as “the ambivalence of the mother-
daughter relation, the painful tension in the female subject between love
and matrophobia, likeness and unlikeness, the need for nurture and the
need for separation” (qtd. in Roy & Kundu 278). It is only on
understanding one another that the inherent conflict in the relationship can
be resolved. Sudhir Kakar writes that in India "a mother’s unconscious
identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son"
(“Feminine Identity” 49), yet tension is inherent. Only when the daughters
begin to realize that the many acts of denial are in fact disguised
expressions of love, can true understanding be achieved. All women are
daughters and must resolve the conflict inherent in the mother-daughter
relationship if they are to understand themselves and ultimately to
establish their own identity.

The study also finds beyond doubt that female identity in India need
not always be read in terms of the Western notion of socio-economic and
sexual independence. In fact Indian women writers appear to focus more
on the ability of women to change their lives. It has to be remembered that
strength in India has a different definition. To the spiritual nature of India
stoicism is an acceptable way of life, and resilience a compliment.

Deshpande ruminates through Indu:

A woman’s life they had told me contained no choices. And all my life, specially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The women had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered . . . have they been born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength . . . and these women I don’t know if you can really call them weak. They have an inner strength we know very little of. The weak have their weapons, just as the strong. (RS 6-9)

Deshpande realizes that there is strength in all women, in one form or the other. Indu who decides the course her life should take with boldness, not hesitating to enter into a physical relationship with Naren would be a pet character for a radical feminist. At the same time Deshpande also reveals the strength inherent in Mini who moves into an arranged marriage with optimism and appears to Indu to be even more mature than her. Thus both appear strong though admittedly in radically different ways. This is the nugget of truth that women writers have been bringing out through their various narrations. Each woman has her own version of strength within her. As has been observed by Mehrotra, “a sub-culture of female strength has always existed in India, and what is often not noticed is that girls are
socialized into this too” (226). At the base of this sub-culture lies the fact that Indian women cleverly adapt the older tradition and their newer needs to suit their lives. In their book *Indian Women: An Inner Dialogue* (1989) Indira J. Parikh and Pulin K. Garg gathered the experiences of many Indian women and explained the methods adopted in redefining themselves in the following terms:

. . . the struggle to grow out of given roles and into new roles; to defy roles and the prescriptive absolutism of tradition but at the same time to carry forward the spirit and wisdom contained in the social structure and in the cultural role of women; and, eventually, to define and crystallize personal identity around meanings which integrate the old and the new and give it a different shape. (13)

Clearly for an Indian woman change is never radical but one which finds an arithmetic mean between the past and the future. Books written by Indian women novelists too reflect this ground reality. Their works have a fine resonance attentive to both prescriptive roles based on idealized models of a bygone era and the emerging cognitive map of modern society. They locate the daily lives of women in relation to fresh interpretations of myth and tradition, never dismissing the old entirely but at the same time moving on to the new courageously. Furthermore, in bringing about this change women mostly follow an astute method of not openly defying but covertly, gradually bringing about the desired changes.
and women especially older women help the younger ones in the process. Anuradha Roy writes:

Every society creates its own particular attitudinal patterns. The head-on confrontation with unacceptable social mores, a common path towards individuation in the West, is less feasible in the Indian context. Here the most natural and widely-adopted strategy of resolution is that of accommodation and compromise. (117)

To Euro-American feminists, the term “compromise” is unacceptable, suggesting a cowardly surrender. To most Indian women it is, according to Sudhir Kakar, “the most acceptable accommodation of conflicting emotion, of pressures satisfactorily resolved” (“Feminine Identity” 49). In the Indian context a negotiated compromise willingly chosen can be a gainful route to self-fulfillment.

The basic focus of these women is on survival and in the process tradition, religion and other individual women become sources of power to these protagonists. The world of men remains in the periphery. In a world where a woman’s “life is hedged in by an enclosed space which permits very few options, and when the odds are against her,” (Mukherjee Realism and Reality 99) support becomes the key word for survival. Analyzing the works we find the emotional quotient, most important for survival being time and again provided by the mothers. We discover in these works the contemporary equivalent of one of the characters in a fairy tale who
appears at the crucial moment to help the protagonist become herself—the mother.

The help provided may not always be the kind which radical feminism expects, but more in tune with the cultural possibilities in India, which as has been explained earlier is different from the West. If liberation is taken to its logical conclusion it would also mean the break up of the family as a social unit. And in India family is sacrosanct. As the Kakars write, “If there is one ‘ism’ that governs Indian society and its institutions, it is familyism” (The Indians 20). Indians have always viewed the individual as secondary to the society. Forgetting oneself for “the greater common good” is though painful considered necessary in India. Kakar borrows from Schopenhauer’s imagery:

. . . human beings are like hedgehogs on a cold night. They approach each other for warmth, get pricked by the quills of the other and move away till, feeling cold, they again come closer. This to and fro movement keeps on being repeated till an optimum position is reached where the body temperature is above the freezing point yet the pain inflicted by the quills—the nearness of the other—is still bearable. The balancing point is different in various cultures. In India, as compared to modern Europe and North American cultures, the optimum position entails the acceptance of more pain in order to get greater warmth. (The Indians 198)
“The Indians feel,” as Jhabvala notes, “that they are but drops in the ocean, and the sooner they merge with others the better it is for them and society” (Derrett 22). Paromita Vohra in her search for the meaning of feminism in India through a documentary titled *UnLimited Girls* finds that even emancipated women who call themselves feminists have no qualms to admit that in practical life, “It’s basically ‘we’ comes first then ‘I.’” The remedy for an Indian woman lies not in individual therapy but in social reconstruction.

It has to keep in mind that a mother and a daughter in India might have a tough time perceiving their relationship as anything special as the birth of a daughter is often a cause for mourning in many parts of India. But, as Kakar points out “the objective facts of discrimination” against the daughters as captured in statistics is vastly different from the perceived “subjective reality” (*The Indians* 47). The mother-daughter relationship in India has often consisted of mothers pitying daughters the hardships they would endure and the lack of power they would have over their lives, and daughters hardly daring to question their mother’s own hardships or lack of power. This study was begun with the notion that mother-daughter relationships in today’s feminist climate would be under particular strains: that the indissoluble, wide-ranging changes in women’s lives would create distressing discords and differences in this relationship, which has been fundamentally concerned with teaching the traditional roles of wife and mother. However the study revealed that, though there often is strong
disapproval, and even clashes across generations, one can also at the same time find mothers and daughters who have always encouraged each other. The most natural tendency for women in spite of all the so-called competition, jealousy and hatred between them is to bond. They have always given each other crucial support and thus succeeded in creating alternatives to values which tend to limit women’s lives.

One aspect of special note is that unlike expected in none of these books do we find the existence of the mother who keeps loving and sacrificing for her children expecting nothing in return. The clichéd version of the devoted, loving, silent, suffering, Indian mother is clearly absent in all these works. Instead one finds mothers who are often impatient, intolerant, confused, and ones who hastily jump to conclusions, or carry grudges for an inordinate period of time. In other words, mothers in these works are human. Usha Bande too echoes this sentiment when she writes that in post-Independence writing the mother is a recognizable human being with her “strength and weakness, her magnanimity and greed her powerlessness and frustrations” (*Mothers and Mother-figures* 2). We also find both mothers and daughters doing many potentially painful things out of their love for the other. But unlike the highly publicised eulogies of motherhood, the sacrifices come out of their understanding of each other and are not a blind adherence to the role specified for the mother by patriarchy.
This study has been aware that by highlighting the importance of the mother-daughter bond on the course of action in the life of the daughter there is a chance of the mothers being blamed for all the troubles in a daughter’s life. But the study clearly brings out the fact that conflict is inherent in every bond and the basic principle of conflict is that each among the involved persons undergoes a certain amount of change at the end of it. As Jean Baker Miller has asserted, any interaction between two persons of very different states of psychological organization results in the creation of new states of mind in each person (129). Moreover it is basically seen that more than the mother’s actions and intentions it is the daughter’s perception regarding those actions and intentions that matter. Extending Saussure’s theory on language one can actually say that the relationship between the intentions and actions of a mother and her daughter’s reading of it is arbitrary. The onus is thus placed on the daughter and not the mother and each daughter is in these works seen to have arrived at this knowledge. Understanding each other thus becomes the key to success in life. Well-developed fiction can provide a powerful message of comfort, reassuring daughters that others too have experienced the pain and confusion of growing independence, and direct them towards bonding with their mothers.

This thesis does not intend to judge the decisions made by any of the protagonists but only to take a closer look at what helped these women to listen to their hearts or in other cases stopped them from knowing what
they really want. An attempt is being made to cartographically represent
the patterns that exist in mother-daughter bonds in post-Independence
Indian women writing. The study has limited itself to those works dealing
with middle-class, educated, female protagonists. The three core chapters
based on love, hatred and indifference between mothers and daughters are
not intended to have exhausted the various types of mother-daughter
bonds. Neither does this study claim to have arrived at a fool-proof
equation through concentrated study of fourteen works. But, taken as a
representative sampling the trajectories revealed can definitely play an
important role in helping us to better understand the Indian woman and the
issues facing her in contemporary living.

Ideologically, the study reveals a move from victim feminism to
power feminism in India. The misogyny caused by patriarchal tutelage
which leads to the emasculation of women is in the study replaced by a
coalition of women which results in a better perception of self-esteem. The
former emphasizes female powerlessness; the latter, according to Naomi
Wolf “starts with the assumption that women can marshal their power and
win” (Fire with Fire 179).