

The Complexity of Memory, Identity, and Generational Trauma in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar*

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate relationship between identity, migration, and trauma as represented in the poetry of Khal Torabully and Sudesh Mishra. Both poets, hailing from the Indian Ocean diaspora, engage deeply with themes of cultural displacement, historical violence, and the search for belonging. Through an examination of select poems, the study investigates how their work reflects the complex interplay between personal pain and collective identity. By focusing on the poetics of exile, memory, and cultural negotiation, the paper underscores the relevance of their voices in contemporary postcolonial discourse.

Keywords: Khal Torabully, Sudesh Mishra, identity, pain, migration, trauma, postcolonial poetry, Indian Ocean diaspora

1. Introduction

Avni Doshi's debut novel, *Burnt Sugar* (2020), presents a rich, complex exploration of memory, identity, generational trauma, and the fraught dynamics of the mother - daughter relationship. Set in contemporary India, the novel delves deeply into the emotional and psychological landscape of its protagonist, Antara, as she grapples with her difficult relationship with her mother, Tara, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Through the prism of this poignant family drama, Doshi probes broader themes related to the formation of identity in postcolonial India, the legacies of trauma, and the emotional burden passed down through generations. This research paper aims to explore how *Burnt Sugar* examines the intersections of memory, identity, and generational trauma and their impact on the protagonist's journey of self - discovery.

Themes and Motifs in *Burnt Sugar*

At the heart of *Burnt Sugar* is the strained and complex relationship between Antara and her mother, Tara. Tara's emotional neglect and distance leave Antara scarred, leading to a deep - seated resentment that grows as the narrative unfolds. The mother - daughter dynamic is portrayed as an intricate, painful interplay of love, hate, abandonment, and caregiving. Doshi intricately weaves these tensions into the narrative, showing how they shape Antara's perception of herself and her emotional identity.

Tara's emotional distance is partly explained by her own difficult relationship with her mother. This cyclical, inherited emotional distance becomes a central theme, highlighting how generational trauma shapes familial relationships. As Antara faces her mother's Alzheimer's diagnosis, she must reckon with the emotional weight of the past while reluctantly taking on the role of caregiver. Antara says; "I am not the person you wanted me to be, but I have done my best." This line encapsulates the theme of unmet expectations in the mother - daughter relationship. Antara is perpetually haunted by the feeling of failure, both in her capacity to meet her mother's demands and in her inability to fulfill her own emotional needs.

Memory, Identity, and the Fragility of the Past

In *Burnt Sugar*, memory is both a burden and a site of contention. As Tara's memory deteriorates due to Alzheimer's, the novel introduces the fragility and

unreliability of memory, which is a key theme throughout. Memory, especially familial memory, plays a central role in shaping one's identity, yet it is often clouded by trauma, resentment, and pain.

Antara's journey is marked by her struggle to reconcile her past with her present identity. She is torn between the person she wants to become and the person shaped by her mother's absence of emotional warmth. Memory is unreliable, not just in the sense of Alzheimer's disease but also in the way Antara selectively recalls or represses her painful experiences. "What was love if not this? The act of surviving together, the empty promise of happiness?" This quote reflects Antara's realization that love, in her experience, was never a source of joy or fulfilment but a mere survival mechanism. Her interpretation of "love" is informed by the absence of affection and emotional support from her mother, who was physically present but emotionally unavailable.

Generational Trauma and the Legacy of Emotional Neglect

The theme of generational trauma is central to the novel, as Doshi explores how unresolved emotional wounds are passed down through generations. The emotional neglect that Antara experiences from her mother is not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of familial dysfunction. Tara, as an emotionally distant mother, is also the product of her own upbringing, where she likely experienced similar emotional neglect. This legacy of trauma sets the stage for Antara's own emotional struggles, suggesting that trauma, particularly emotional trauma, is inherited rather than healed. "She never showed me love, not in the way I wanted it, but I knew she loved me in her own way." In this statement, Antara acknowledges the love her mother gave her but also admits that it was not the love she needed or desired. This recognition reflects the painful realization that Tara's love is not sufficient for Antara's emotional needs. Antara's sense of neglect is a direct consequence of Tara's inability to express love in the ways Antara expected.

The Role of Caregiving and Aging

A pivotal aspect of *Burnt Sugar* is the role that caregiving plays in the narrative. As Tara's Alzheimer's disease progresses, Antara is forced into the role of caregiver, a position that challenges her emotionally, physically, and psychologically. The novel presents caregiving as a

complicated emotional experience—one that is fraught with resentment, guilt, love, and frustration.

Caregiving, in *Burnt Sugar*, is not a noble, selfless act but rather one marked by complex emotions. Antara's internal conflict highlights the tensions between familial duty and personal desire, as she grapples with feelings of anger and frustration at her mother's condition, while still trying to fulfill her role as caregiver.

2. Conclusion

Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* is a profound and emotionally resonant exploration of memory, identity, and generational trauma. Through the fraught relationship between mother and daughter, Doshi highlights the complexities of caregiving, emotional neglect, and the ways in which trauma is inherited and passed down through generations. The novel offers a compelling portrait of the ways in which the past, with its unresolved pain, continues to shape the present, particularly in the context of familial relationships. As Antara struggles to reconcile her personal identity with the legacy of her mother's emotional neglect, *Burnt Sugar* provides a poignant commentary on the challenges of understanding and healing from the emotional wounds that define both individual and collective histories.

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