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Mothers Born or Produced?: An Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Well-Behaved Indian Women

By Shivalika Agarwal\(^1\) and Nagendra Kumar\(^2\)

Abstract

The word motherhood has been used for centuries without thorough examination of what it encompasses. Literature exhibits the changing reality and needs of mothering irrespective of the outcome: imposed motherhood, and institutionalized mothers. Motherhood has been bifurcated in meaning as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential--and all women--shall remain under male control” (Rich 13). A woman’s biological capacity to bear and nurture a child has been a significant factor in the existence of human life. Another facet of this is the development of the child’s identity while growing up close to the mother. On the one hand, a son gives up or is given up by his mother at a certain age; daughters, on the contrary, have no reason to be given up, and thus the mother-daughter bond is cultivated to be permanent. The paper explores Well-Behaved Indian Women (2020), the debut novel of Saumya Dave, to discover this relationship in three generations of women. The authors examine how motherhood is practiced in the ways a woman is brought up under a certain set of beliefs by her mother, and how she transfers the same set of beliefs to her own daughter. This shift edges towards an inflicted identity that is not one’s own. The daughters and mothers in the novel suffer separation resulting from their conflicted identities and go on journeys of self-analysis to resolve these conflicts. We seek to examine their struggle by highlighting select concepts in motherhood studies.

Keywords: Well-Behaved Indian Women, Saumya Dave, Motherhood, Separation, Institutions, Mothering, Women, Matrifocal

Introduction

Motherhood has been a ratiocinating discourse of examination and discussion in social, economic, psychological, and literary studies. Women writers, in specific, address the agency and the aligned issues of motherhood. Adrienne Rich concludes her seminal work Of Woman Born with the affirmation, “The words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through” (Rich 239). Motherhood researchers are often intensely interested in how different cultures posit ideas about motherhood through various art and media, how the discourses of motherhood develop over time, and how these changes vary by race, class, religion, and country. Min Jiao, in her article “Mothering and Motherhood: Experience, Ideology, and Agency,” records about researchers’ “exploration into the maternal issues as conveyed in literary works or cultural products, and examination of the disparity between the institution and the experience in relation to the issues of identity or subjectivity, or agency” (Jiao 542). Research indicates that the issues

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and problems associated with motherhood are disparate and specific to the mothers’ cultures. The historiography of motherhood so far, however, predominantly concerns “Anglo-Saxon or white, middle-class mothering” (Jiao 542). Theory, literature, and fiction about Indian motherhood remain sparse. Another significant concern, adding to the problem of the meager literature available, is the lack of the mother’s perspective within matrifocal narratives. In critically addressing motherhood, this article discusses how mothers are represented in Indian society and the inflections laid on Indian mothers across diverse literary traditions. The narrative we have chosen, out of the modest number of texts available, is Well-Behaved Indian Women (2020), the debut novel of Saumya Dave, an Indian writer based in New York. Primarily a psychiatrist and mental health advocate, Dave became interested in representing the position of mothers in Indian society after giving birth to her son. She once mentioned on her social media, “I was told many times that my books wouldn’t be published because there ‘wasn’t space’ for stories with South Asian characters” (Dave, [@SaumyaJDave]). She further responded, “If I could speak to my younger self, I’d remind her that we all have stories that matter, and we always need more stories that represent our world” (Dave, [@SaumyaJDave]). Correspondingly, her novel Well-Behaved Indian Women is a representation of three generations of women: Mimi (grandmother), Nandini (mother), and Simran (daughter). The novel explores the plods of mothers, the obligations of a mother in Indian society, and mothering as a production of an ideological individual who follows and propagates the patriarchal development of mothers.

Motherhood carries a set of predefined notions and ideologies. Adrienne Rich, in Of Woman Born, writes that “Motherhood—unmentioned in the histories of conquest or serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration, and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism” (Rich 33). Considered a leading theorist on the physiological power of women over men, Rich emphasizes how a woman’s biological capacity to bear and nurture a child has been subject to imposed definitions and ideas of how to be a “good mother.” Motherhood was, and remains, accustomed to a sense of goodness, “something regarded as so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism representing irrefutable and unquestionable goodness and integrity” (“Motherhood”). The fundamental concern of this article is to analyze whether Indian mothers are practicing mother-centric, autonomous mothering or whether the patriarchal institution of motherhood has been imposed on them. Motherhood has been contested in meaning, as put forward by Adrienne Rich “… the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (Rich 13). This division initiated the difference in the concepts of “mothering” and “motherhood,” a division which Andrea O’Reilly discusses in the introduction to the volume, From Motherhood to Mothering:

The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. (O’Reilly 2)

Well-Behaved Indian Women is a fictional scrutinization of the mother-daughter relationship. The novel addresses the intrinsically ideological motherhood of Indian families, continued by patriarchal dominance, and the long lineage of daughters who inherit the same motherhood memories and practices. This institutionalizes both the process of becoming a mother and the process of feeding women the same ideologies which will be imposed on new
mothers. The novel draws on the lives of three generations of women: Mimi the grandmother, Mimi, the mother Nandini, and the daughter Simran. It explores and depicts the struggles of motherhood, the duties of a mother in Indian society, and mothering not as a natural process of love and nurturance but as a fulfillment of the institutionalized expectations for a mother. Nandini switches roles with Mimi, adopting the motherhood that was practiced when she was a daughter. She unconsciously carries forward her mother’s identity and later attempts to transfer it to Simran. Understanding the prevailing maternal identities being adopted by mothers becomes paramount in unmasking motherhood. Maushart construes that to be masked in motherhood “is to deny and repress what we experience, to misrepresent it, even to ourselves” (Maushart 1-2). The mask of motherhood confers an idealized and unattainable image of motherhood that causes women to feel guilt and anxiety about their experiences of mothering (O’Reilly and Podnieks). This curbs women from clearly speaking about what they know and “from hearing truths threatening to face” (Maushart 7). Unmasking motherhood begins when mothers speak about their mothering experiences truthfully and authentically. It is nearly impossible for a mother to fit into the idealized mask of motherhood. Unmasking oneself as a flawed, ambivalent mother with multiple emotions remains an essential aspect of unraveling the oppression and hardship of mothers.

The mind and body of a woman go through significant changes when becoming a mother, and women’s biological power of procreation becomes a reason for their psychological strength. In her book Feminine Psychology, Karen Horney notes, “the biological point of view woman has in motherhood, or in the capacity for motherhood, [is] a quite indisputable and by no means negligible physiological superiority” (Horney 60). Nevertheless, this superiority has not been utilized effectively for centuries, and mothers are still struggling to gain authority in their motherhood. Myrl Coulter, when referring to Of Woman Born, also asserts that the “twentieth century’s much needed critical investigation into the institution of motherhood was launched by a pen,” Rich’s pen, which becomes the initiator of new discourses of maternity (Coulter 37). Moreover, Andrea O’Reilly focused on the need for studies about motherhood as a separate area, and she coined the term “motherhood studies” (O’Reilly 5) to “acknowledge and highlight scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate area of study as well as a discipline distinctive from other studies” (Lynda 4).

Following the distinct meanings provided by Rich, O’Reilly further divides the area of motherhood studies into four interconnected leagues of inquiry: first, motherhood as an institution/ideology, investigating the ideologies, thoughts, and dominant principles of motherhood in the image of patriarchy; second, motherhood as an experience where research is based on the personal and professional quality of life as mothers; third, motherhood as identity/subjectivity, looking at how the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering shape a sense of the self in a woman; and fourth and last, motherhood as an agency where the discussions are about the powerful/powerless binary that motherhood creates in the lives of mothers. Scholarly works and research based on these divisions of meaning emphasize the need to decentralize the preconceived notions and assumptions related to motherhood and instigate agency and authority in mothers to choose their mothering needs on their own.

Marianne Hirsch, in the introduction to The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, argues why the voice of Jocasta, Oedipus’s mother, in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, is silent and missing and questions the place of Jocasta’s story in the story of Oedipus. She expounds, “I am asking not only where the stories of women are in men’s plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters” (Hirsch 4). She also concludes that to understand “Jocasta’s maternal story,” we have to start the process of understanding “with the mother” (Hirsch 5). With the emergence of motherhood studies as an established academic discipline within the last five decades, child-centricity has been questioned in theory and fictional narratives. Indeed, a major, if not defining, goal of this
discipline has been to elucidate “the voice of the mother” and analyze the transformation into motherhood from the mothers’ perspective. Marianne Hirsch addresses what happens when “mothers write their own experience as mothers” (Hirsch 176). Fictional narratives become a prominent source for discerning the ongoing issues of maternal discourse.

This article, therefore, begins with the mother and for the mother. The study examines how the author uses the textual capacity to accept, embrace, negotiate, reconcile, resist, and challenge the traditional interpretations of motherhood and maternal roles. The paper also establishes alternative practices and visions of motherhood in the present and future through critical study of the novel. Textual representations reflect and help shape the familial realities of mothers and reflect how the personal realm of being a mother becomes a cultural experience. Through the study, we map the silence of the mothers in Indian narratives, focusing on the gradual movement from what Hirsch describes as “silence to speech” in Well-Behaved Indian Women. Our overarching goal is to show how mothering is shaped by how a woman is brought up by her mother and to highlight the matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives of silenced mothers with the help of various theoretical insights.

**Motherhood as an “Institution”: Mothers Produced**

Pamela Courtenay Hall claims that “women are naturally mothers, they are born with a built-in set of capacities, dispositions, and desires to nurture children … [and that this] engagement of love and instinct is utterly distant from the world of paid work” (Hall 59). The concept of women as “born mothers” has been a disputable idea since the inception of Motherhood Studies. The infliction of compulsory mothering directs women to a social ethos of motherhood that is not plausible in the practical lives of women. Even in contemporary times, society imposes the rules and regulations of motherhood on women as if it is a granted responsibility and not the biological superiority of women to birth, nurture, and mother a child.

Mimi is a maternal figure with two different belief systems, that of a mother and a grandmother. She is a mother with a pre-decided set of rules as a part of the patriarchal set-up, and she does not have the authority to be a mother on her own terms. This is defined as “an abdication of maternal authority” (Ruddick 111), where Mimi is captured in the greater ideology of patriarchy. In contrast, as a grandmother, she is empowering, supportive, and understanding, which she could not be as a mother. Mimi, while trying to justify Nandini’s life to Simran, states:

> You know, I’m the one who made the mistake. She didn’t know what she was doing. None of us did. We all jumped from our father’s house to our husband’s. And we were taught not to defy anyone, to just deal with everything and keep it to ourselves. Was she depressed? Of course, she was. But people in India barely believe in depression now, and they definitely didn’t then. She was trapped. I should have realized it earlier. Done something. (Dave 216)

Nandini was an obedient child, interested in studies and books, but she had been an understanding daughter, just like her mother. The latter had known the limitations of being a mother as well as a woman. This is why she supported her mother in every possible manner, without question. When Mimi talks about Nandini’s childhood days, she states, “When she was eight or nine years old, I told her not to tell my in-laws about these [school] visits. She kept that secret without asking any questions” (Dave 198). But when Mimi is set free from the

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3Mimi has been attracted to teaching as a profession, and particularly to educating young girls. But due to her being a mother and wife in a patriarchal set-up, she was not allowed to visit schools, but she nonetheless took Nandini to visit school, meet young girls, and teach them. She requested Nandini never to reveal this secret to her in-laws.
shackles of patriarchy (her husband primarily), her beliefs, her power, and agency as a mother fall back into her own hands, and her treatment towards her granddaughter is quite contrasting to what she could do for her daughter as a mother. She understands the importance of being an independent woman and further explains it to Simran:

You see, most people eventually make peace with their lives, but that doesn’t mean that things turned out the way they wanted. And when you’ve been living in a certain way for so many years, you lose that faith you used to have in yourself when you were younger (Dave 199).

Mimi here becomes the joining knot between the strings of the institutionalized motherhood that she transferred to Nandini and the independent mother full of power and agency over her mothering that she tries to become later.

When Nandini becomes a mother, she adopts the same identity as her mother and becomes a similar kind of mother. She thinks and assumes that she is not an institutionalized mother like Mimi. But as we see in the conversation between Mimi and Simran, it becomes evident how sentimentalized that her role as a mother is:

Nandini became like me as a married woman. Obliging. Deferential. But she seemed better, stronger when she became a mother. She was so determined to make sure that you didn’t have to struggle, even if that meant she had to put aside some of her own things for a while. But then again, she also felt the need to prove to everyone that she was an adequate mother. She was always torn that way. (Dave 217)

She runs in the race to practice what Meredith Michaels and Susan Douglas term the “new momism” in The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women. They write about this contemporary discourse of motherhood, “intensive mothering,” as the “ultimate female Olympics” (Michaels and Douglas 6). They further elaborate on this discourse, noting that it implies that “women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (Michaels and Douglas 4). This definition of motherhood that women have been following is an eminently idealized one that imposes impossible standards.

We say that mothers are not born but produced because of the implications that the ideology of motherhood brings into women’s lives. Being a woman in itself constitutes a reason for subjugation in Indian society, and becoming a mother is a doubly undermining process. Becoming a mother is a biological process in which a woman holds superiority. But, the agency of when to become a mother and how to “perform” motherhood is still not in their own hands. In her article “The Performativity of Motherhood: Embodying Theology and Political Agency,” Irene Oh mentions that “the context of caring for children plays a determinative role in establishing women’s agency. Mothering one’s own children cannot be assumed as the status quo against which the self-conscious agent asserts her authority” (Oh 8). Therefore, the tradition of nurturing children does not define the mother’s autonomy, but she can seek agency in the decision of whether or not to become a mother, and when, how, and why, if she chooses to do so.

Further, Andrea O’Reilly postulates that there exists a thin line in mothering “between absurdity and thoughtfulness, essentialism and experience” (O’Reilly 198), which becomes vague in the case of Indian mothers. The division of motherhood and mothering based on the presence of agency is still not prevalent in the Indian scenario. A mother, like Mimi or Nandini, is expected to practice intensive mothering, identified by four major interconnected themes:
that mothering is essential and natural to a woman, that the mother is the essential caregiver of her biological children, that children require full-time mothering, and that for mothers who choose to work, children shall always be the priority. This definition of mothering becomes the historical foundation and construction for women. Fulfilling the role of mother involves following these social registers religiously. Sharon Hays writes that this intrinsic and intensive mothering is nothing but a historically constructed cultural model for appropriate childcare, threatening the mother’s position in this dualistic relationship of the mother and the child (Hays). Women struggle to survive and prove themselves to be “adequate mothers” in a designed setup that was created not “by mothers” but “for mothers” without their say.

Mimi was a reticent mother who could not make her own decisions in the male-dominated family structure. Mimi’s inability to fulfill her aspiration to teach girls impaired Mimi’s agency and authority as a mother in her life and in her daughter’s life. Nandini, though living in a different geography, becomes a similar mother to Mimi, who gave up on her career first for her husband and then for her daughter. She ponders that becoming a mother brings sacrifices and compromises; therefore, her conception of motherhood is pictured according to her own experiences with her mother. Nandini, in the process of proving herself an adequate mother, succumbs to the inflicted institutionalized motherhood: “It’s just the way things have always been for me. I don’t even know how to be without people’s approval. I guess that’s how I’ve defined myself for years” (Dave 277).

When women become mothers, they are expected to be nothing but a mother, in a private space with and around the children, and to become their confidant (Rich). The lives of mothers and children are so connected that the mother is not expected to do anything else except fulfill their children’s needs. Andrea O’Reilly states:

> The ideology of good motherhood today demands more than mere physical proximity of mother-child: contemporary mothers are expected to spend, to use the discourse of the experts, “quality time” with their children. Mothers are told to play with their children, read to them, and take classes with them (O’Reilly 206-207).

When transitioning into motherhood, women are burdened with being equal to goddesses without any expectations, negative emotions, or demands. Sara Ruddick reminds us of how this “idealized figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow on many actual mothers’ lives” (Ruddick 31). This shadow covers the lives of Mimi and Nandini to such an extent that it takes them more than half of their lives to take a step ahead of it. Simran also mentions, “And I know Mom. She won’t do what she wants with her life if she thinks mine is still a mess” (Dave 249). This is the reality captured and transferred from Mimi to Nandini. She also gives up on her dreams and choices until she is a mother, and Nandini chooses the same path because being a mother in an Indian household burdens the mother with the well-being of the child, especially the daughters, so much so that her personal life is either sacrificed or set aside indefinitely. Mimi and Nandini are identical as mothers, but their ways of dealing with the institution of motherhood and patriarchy differ. Mimi voicelessly holds on to society’s expectations, while Nandini, in a Western setting, does not actualize being subjugated and is, instead, a freestanding wife and mother. Mimi’s professional and personal front is compromised, and she imparts the same to her daughter with the delusion of deciding the best for her children. Mimi, on the one hand, acknowledges the maelstrom that patriarchal motherhood brings in her and

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4Nancy Chodorow records in her seminal work *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) that it is because of the gender difference that a son gives up or is given up by his mother at a certain age and forms a whole new life after this separation; daughters, on the contrary, have no reason to be given up, and thus the mother-daughter bond is permanent.
her daughter’s life. On the other hand, Nandini does not endorse it until affronted with the abnegation of her daughter. It is then that Nandini introspects about her failures to “[set] the right example” (Dave 311) as a mother and how both Mimi and Nandini had assumed that “ambition was a curse” for them as mothers. They believe that they had surpassed their destinies and became “scandals” in society before they became autonomous individuals (Dave 327).

Mothers are not exempt from feeling the whole range of human emotions. As sociological studies confirm, ambivalence and anger are typical and expected dimensions of motherhood. It takes honesty, courage, and support for them to express these very normal emotions in public. In Writing from The Margin & Other Essays, author Shashi Deshpande describes these emotions as ones that are not deemed customary for a mother but indeed occur to mothers naturally:

When I became a mother, I found such a discrepancy between what I was told about how mothers felt, and what I really felt, that I was deeply disturbed. It was only as a writer that I could get across this disturbing split and approach reality. And I realized that motherhood does not turn you overnight into a different person. It does not make you a nobler, stronger, more loving, and lovable individual. You are the same person, except for the enormous bond that suddenly appears between you and the newborn. In fact, we know that mothers can be selfish, jealous, possessive and that they can even at times be cruel (Deshpande 2).

Holding back genuine and human emotions becomes a reason for mothers’ loss of identity. Mary Kay Blakely remarks in her memoir of motherhood, “mothers are reluctant to admit even having bad days, let alone all the miserable details leading up to them” (Blakely 11). Expectations meet reality and the ambivalence mothers face causes them to fake their lives and emotions. Matrifocal narratives, in this situation, become the mouthpiece of the sufferings of mothers. “To destroy the institution doesn’t mean abolishing motherhood,” Rich formulates, “It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence as any difficult but freely chosen work” (Rich 280). Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy coined the term “daughter-centricity” to illustrate that we learn less about “what it is like to mother than about what it is like to be mothered” (Daly and Reddy 2). They further emphasize the importance of the mother’s story, noting that of those few fictional narratives that “begin with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective,” seldom of these “hold fast to a maternal perspective; further, when texts do maintain this perspective, readers and critics tend to suppress the centrality of mothering” (Daly and Reddy 2–3).

Saumya’s narrative starts with the mother, revolves around motherhood, and explores the complex yet fragile relationship between a mother and daughter. Nandini buries all her ambivalence and negative emotions inside her, never really digging into the accumulated silences. When motherhood captures one’s identity entirely, this depletes and abates the self. self. When a woman is ambivalent about motherhood or denies the regularized notions of self-abstaining, she is treated as an outcast and shunned by her own family. Nandini, in the novel, is expected to be like her name, a goddess, the symbol of chastity and domesticity, an epitome of a so-called perfect mother. Despite her emotional and professional trauma, she is expected to forgo her emotional vulnerabilities and become a “good mother.” Unsupported and alone, she is cornered by the model of motherhood as a woman’s destiny. When she first leaves her daughter and husband for some time alone, she is accused of being an inadequate wife and mother. She is confronted by her husband and daughter, who think of her as the divine mother and not a human of flesh and blood with wishes and aspirations.
A feminist counter-narrative of motherhood imagines and implements a view of mothering that empowers women instead of oppressing them within the patriarchal institution of motherhood (O’Reilly). This alternate mothering could place mothers as “outlaws from the institution of motherhood” (Rich 21). Indian writers can challenge these conceived notions and myths regarding motherhood and help Indian mothers to reshape them. Fictions like *Well-Behaved Indian Women* bring a positive consciousness to the institutionalized injustice happening to mothers and flip beliefs regarding motherhood. Motherhood memoirs, matrifocal narratives that subvert canonical motherhood, plots of mothers referring to multiple facets of their life, and stories of the varying dimensions of a woman’s life other than being a mother have been essential tools for contemporary writers in deemphasizing ideological and idealistic motherhood.

**Separation and Maternal Development**

Rozsika Parker introduced the concept of “maternal development” in 1995 to challenge the absolute emphasis on children’s developmental priorities, and place mothers at the center of their own lives (Parker). We want the idea of maternal development to go beyond the notion of the mother as a subject in her own right. We also want to locate the concept of separation as the possible solution for the advancement of mothers as individuals, as depicted by Saumya Dave in *Well-Behaved Indian Women*. The previously discussed idealized form of mothering regards maternity and mothering as natural to women. This idealization over the centuries resulted in the contemporary conception of intensive mothering, which has delimited mothers’ power and powerlessness. Because of this restriction, mothers’ selfhood and subjectivity are inadequately constructed. Patricia DiQuinzio critiques the facade of this maternal agency that is present yet not present. She writes, “Individualism and essential motherhood operate together to determine that women can be subjects of agency and entitlement only to the extent that they are not mothers, and that mothers as such cannot be subjects of individualist agency and entitlement” (DiQuinzio 13).

Luce Irigaray remarks, “You look at yourself in the mirror. And you already see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, who are you?” (Irigaray and Wenzel 63). Irigaray explicitly states that a mother and daughter are inseparable in identity. Giving a lyrical voice to the mother-daughter relationship, she anticipates how a mother is produced after a daughter imbibes everything that her mother has been. Therefore, it becomes difficult for mothers as well as the daughters to build separate identities. The role of a mother since ancient India is portrayed as a “passive factor of reproduction,” as defined by Sukumari Bhattacharji in her research article “Motherhood in Ancient India” (Bhattacharji 50). Motherhood has been viewed as a source of fulfilling the desire and preference of male progeny in Indian society. In this process, both mothers and daughters are given a back seat. This is why daughters have learned the same sacrificial and glorified divine motherhood while growing up, and they have been unconsciously trained to practice that as mothers.

Struggles in a mother’s life are not only at the familial level but also at the social, economic, emotional, and psychological levels. In this symbiosis of the mother-daughter relationship, a temporary loss and “separation” have to occur to empower both the mother and the daughter (Friday). In her novel, Saumya Dave depicts how the process of separation leads to self-achievement in the mothers and daughters and how this separation becomes a push in the realization of the worth of a mother as a multifaceted human being. Motherhood is a part of the female identity, not the complete identity (Rich). She also believes that “letting go” (Dave 326) defies the patriarchal hold on motherhood. Women and daughters get a chance to grow individually, away from the “gaze of others” (Ruddick 111). When under this gaze, mothers “relinquish authority to others, [and] lose confidence in their own values” (Ruddick 111). Similarly, to find themselves and exist beyond their mothers, Mimi, Nandini, and Simran...
also had to undergo separation to understand each other better and actualize their lives and identities beyond mother-daughter relationships. Saumya writes, “Maybe her relationships with her mother and her daughter were hinged on letting go to become a whole, a delicate dance between separating and joining, losing and finding” (Dave 326). The separation is not permanent, but the strength that the mothers gain to become independent women is enduring.

Saumya has been vocal in demonstrating the realities of mothers in Indian culture across various geographies. When based in India, Mimi and Nandini suffer from the same destiny as Nandini and Simran experience in a foreign setting. Separation becomes a standard measure for both the duos to explore themselves beyond motherhood. Mimi and Nandini both bargain on their personal and professional fronts to accomplish the duties and responsibilities of a “good mother” in the patriarchal world. Nandini also mentions to Simran, “That’s how it was [is] for women in India. We’re taught to bottle up everything and put on an ‘everything’s fine’ face for everyone, even our own families” (Dave 303).

The psychological struggles of mothers have been discussed by many researchers and authors. Jane Flax writes:

What women want is an experience of both nurturance and autonomy within an intimate relationship. What makes this wish so strong and, for many women, so unattainable is that psychological development occurs within the patriarchal family—in which the mother is the primary nurturer and the father is the symbol of authority. The psychological difficulties that this arrangement causes are reinforced and compounded in later life by the inability of many men to be nurturers, an inability created due to patriarchal family structure, and homophobia, which makes the intimacy between women suspect. Women’s need for nurturance is not neurotic, but it can lead to self-defeating behavior under certain conditions. (Flax 172)

Characterizing mothering rules has become virtually impossible for women as they remain defined and controlled by the extensive patriarchal system. Mothers do not make the rules but are merely enforcers. Therefore, motherhood is an experience of “powerless responsibility,” and to gain this power back and achieve an identity other than a mother requires separation (Rich 52). Nancy Friday explains this struggle:

If mother didn’t let me go, doesn’t let me be myself, if she and I continue to be merged in symbiosis, then all the praise in the world isn’t going to help—because there isn’t any me. There isn’t any self-image. There is only “we,” and anything good said about me merely because I am an extension of her will make me uncomfortable. It says I am praiseworthy only as part of her; by myself, I barely exist at all (Friday 70).
Simran has suffered due to Nandini’s inflicted identity and controlling motherhood. She does what her mother expects from her and tries to please her. Her eyes and Nandini’s eyes are opened when Neil makes an appearance. Neil, although a recent acquaintance, changes Simran’s purview towards life. A mutual liking between them gives Simran the confidence to pursue a path that not only changes her life, but also that of women around her. Simran confronts Nandini, “And you think nothing was forced on me? Really? God, all you’ve ever expected is for me to be like you” (Dave 180). She is recognized and accepted as an image of her mother, not only in New York but also when she visits her Nani (maternal grandmother, Mimi) in India. Nandini’s ex-mother-in-law exclaims, “Is this . . . Your . . . Hers? Are bapre, she looks exactly like her” (Dave 251). Simran considers Mimi the only genuine person to understand her choices and demands. Simran expects her mother to be ever-understanding, ever-giving, ever-sacrificing, and ever-bountiful. Simran calls her mom “the worst out of everyone” (Dave 193) for not acting or reacting as expected. The mothers Mimi and Nandini are expected to sacrifice everything to appear appropriate to everyone, but this expectation is never satisfied. Ultimately, even the children create a life of their own, but there are prejudices and assumptions about the mother’s performance as a mother. Building an identity with her grandmother, away from her mother, helps Simran understand herself and her mother better. This separation is an inkling of how Mimi has evolved as a character and an individual. Anne Woollett and Ann Phoenix construe the “dual, and hence often conflicting, nature of motherhood as an experience and development which is mainly lived out in a private, domestic sphere, but which is evaluated within the public domain” (qtd. in O'Reilly 217).

A mother has to go through the either-or split to establish identity. This is why separation is necessary, just as Nandini has to leave her family and move to another city alone, disappointing everyone by choosing her work. Saumya commentates:

Nandini told herself she wouldn’t be one of those wives like her mother or sisters. When the time was right, she would pursue her goals. She couldn’t accept the possibility that her aspirations were larger than her capabilities, that she would have to downsize her dreams to accept an ordinary life. No, once her duties were fulfilled, she would move on from all of this. (Dave 209)

Ironically, given what Nandini decided for her, she downsized her dreams to fulfill the duties of a mother and wife. Simran’s criticism of her as a mother pushed Nandini to rethink life. Nandini achieves a self in her professional life, love life, and mother-daughter bond after being separated from her daughter. Dave notes: “She and her mother are closer now through long-distance phone calls than they were in all the years they spent together in India. Maybe in their family, the women came together only when they separated” (Dave 349). Not only Nandini but Mimi also achieved satisfaction through this separation. She emphasizes, “But I’m happy with my life now. I have regrets, but who doesn’t?” (Dave 199). Mimi becomes the bridge between Nandini and Simran to evaluate the worth of being an individual and not only a mother. At the same time, Simran understands the value of being herself and the individuality of her mother: “Simran plucks The Awakening and tosses it onto the bed and thinks of her mother, who has never been able to truly just be with herself until now” (Dave 381). The generations of women transfer motherhood to their daughters. Yet, Saumya Dave vigorously and successfully addresses the issues of motherhood in Indian culture and hints at the possible solution to the problem—acknowledging the individualism and the multifaceted identities of mothers. The last line of the novel successfully portrays the importance of mothers’ individuality and their compelling developed sense of self: “Slowly, she becomes herself” (Dave 382).

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5 An expression of astonishment that could be negative or positive; sudden joy or regret.
Women have been deprived of the majority of resources prevailing in the predominant patriarchal social structure, but there have been debates and discussions for their freedom and rights. Mothers have additionally been destitute of attention, autonomy, agency, and experience. There has also been a limited amount of investigation, research, and contestation about Indian mothers. We have reached a point where the phrase “feminization of poverty” could be replaced by “maternalization of poverty,” as inequalities and discrimination are the most disproportionate among mothers (Daly and Reddy 1).

Conclusion
In conclusion, Well-Behaved Indian Women, while acknowledging Indian motherhood, constructs the mothers not as born but as produced according to the patriarchal myth of idealized motherhood. Nandini and Mimi symbolize Indian mothers, as well as mothers around the globe, who have compromised their agency due to institutional ideologies and beliefs which take away their authority as mothers. The act of birth not only gives birth to a child but also to the mother. Yet, this birth of the mother is not as splendid a festivity as the birth of a child. Moreover, it brings a range of rules, regulations, institutional beliefs, and impositions that overburden mothers. In the Indian social order, women have naturalized “intensive mothering” as per the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Likewise, mothers in the novel are expected to switch their “natural mothering” to “intensive motherhood.” Well-Behaved Indian Women conveys the level of stigma that mothers have to suffer within the Indian patriarchy, which is perpetuated by women who have been practicing institutional motherhood. Mothers like Charu and Megha further this subjugation and marginalization of mothers and cultivate self-sacrifice in daughters to execute “correct” mothering in them. Narratives like Well-Behaved Indian Women provide us with hope and a lens to overcome this conflict, which needs to be prioritized within the investigation of Indian motherhood to help change the situation of mothers. The critical investigation of Indian literature can unravel, identify, locate, and help resolve the position of mothers as objects produced for the needs and development of society. Mothers are born along with the birth of their children and should fulfill and enjoy their mothering with autonomy. The development of mothers and daughters as individual subjects and the exploration of their subjectivity depends on this.

Works Cited
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