

## Qualitative Study of Mother-Daughter Relationship in the Context of Depression

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### ABSTRACT

The mother-daughter bond in the Indian context is considered to be vital as the former is not only the caretaker but also the one who prepares the daughter for her future life. While keeping in mind the paramount importance given to the maternal figure in a family, who is constructed even today as the primary nurturing source, this research aims to understand the impact of maternal depression on female children through the eyes of those who have grown up with a mother either diagnosed or understood to have suffered from depression. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken from three respondents whose lived realities shed light on the intricacies of such a relationship, its impact on them and the image thus conceived in the psyche of the child and how this image has been carried forward till today.

**Keywords:** *Maternal Depression, Mother-Daughter*

Sudhir Kakar writes extensively on the mother-infant relationship in his work *The Inner World*. He observes that this relationship influences the later social relationships of the individual and where there is a lack of the mother due to any reason, the infant develops in a 'psychosocial void'. In his study of Indian daughters and their mothers, Kakar writes how emotional development of the female child is highly dependent on the mother. Daughters therefore internalise the demands and requests of their mothers, especially in their childhood, to maintain approval from the parent.

Yet, one also comes across a mother who is present in her absence due to their own various concerns. Andre Green writes of the 'Dead Mother' who captured in her own mourning is unable to be emotionally present for the child. The article thus aims to understand the impact of maternal depression on female children through the eyes of those who have grown up with a mother either diagnosed or understood to have suffered from depression. The limitation of the article would be the utilisation of "understood" in the sense of relying on the daughters to having to gauge the mother's state of mind. Yet, it is a firm belief that the intention of the article will be conveyed, beyond the initial aim i.e. to highlight the role of emotional involvement of parents with their children and the role of the father in the mother-daughter relationship.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

In his article *The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship*, D. W. Winnicott remarks that an infant is geared towards growth and development, given that his/her inherited potential is directed under a 'good enough' mother. This involves 'holding', which denotes not only the physical handling of the infant but also of him/her being held in the mother's mind as a part of the total environment. This stage occurs before the establishment of object relations, which in turn requires to see the mother as a separate being. When this does occur i.e. the stage of holding along with the attainment of object relations, the infant is able to refer to a 'not-me' possession.

A pillow, or a rabbit plushie with one ear torn off can be an infant's first 'not-me' possession (Winnicott, 1951). The establishing of an Other, apart from the subject, was conceived by Winnicott as a transitioning from the maternal figure to an "intermediate area of experiencing", to which reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott, 1991,3). Winnicott writes, "It is usual to refer to 'reality-testing'...I am here staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby's inability and his growing ability to recognise and accept reality" (Winnicott, 1991,3). Thus, the object establishes the infant's relationship to the mother not as a merged object but as being outside of her and separate from her. The mother's task then is to aid disillusionment in the infant, which is possible only after an illusion has been provided at the outset. Winnicott's clinical illustrations of psychopathology, such as the boy with the string (Winnicott 1971), manifesting in the area of transitional phenomena underscores the role of a lack of a consistent figure. The fashion in which a sense of loss encountered at this stage attains the nature of being fundamental to an individual's manner of integrating their self-experience.

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher's context carries immense importance in the manner it itself entwines with the research through shared lived experiences. In a phenomenological study, one's own situation can be utilised for finding clues about the phenomena one wishes to explore. Consequently, this psychoanalytically informed qualitative research began at a crucial moment.

### *Data Collection*

Semi structured interviews were conducted with all two participants opposed to structured interviews as "the researcher is able to follow up particularly interesting avenues that emerge in the interview and the respondent is able to give a fuller picture" (Harre et al., 1995, 9). They ranged from 30 mins to an hour depending on the severity of the conversation and the willingness of the speaker. Participants were informed beforehand of the confidentiality which was to be maintained regarding identification. Some had refused to be recorded and respecting their wishes, our interviews had to be canceled. The interviews were conducted in a free associative method yet would become directive initially as the participants were curious to know if there were any specific answers which I required.

### *Data Analysis*

The lived experiences of the respondents were taken as the truth and were weaved together at the end to answer an overarching research question which I had started with i.e. the image of the mother thus created. These were narrowed down as themes in individual transcripts and elaborated upon with a clinical edge to them. The attempt has been to look from a phenomenological perspective while keeping in mind the social context in which they are

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progressing from. The fundamental basis of the process was to keep the respondent as the 'expert' of the topic. (Harre et al., 1995).

### GENELIA (23)

Growing up, Genelia's mother was an intense woman. Through the way she describes her mother's anger, one feels that it would overpower everything else. It could be anything which would trigger her, be it Genelia getting late to school or the house being slightly messy, and her mother would always react by getting extraordinarily upset. These mood swings were felt by Genelia even when she was 3-4 yrs of age. Her mother had her at 21 yrs old and it was when Genelia was 3yrs of age that she went to college to complete her education. Little Genelia would often be after her grandmother's house where her mother would come pick her up or be looked after by a maid. At times she would even accompany her mother to the college as it was allowed.

When Genelia was 7yrs old, her mother suffered a miscarriage. Unable to come to terms with it, her mother would cry and not get out of bed for days. Post this, she was diagnosed with depression but Genelia believes that there were some pre-existing emotions and issues which were unaddressed. On being asked as to what was her first memory of her mother, Genelia remembered her being 2/ 21/2 yrs old and waking up to find her mother gone with the house locked from the outside. Crying and trying to find her, she was finally greeted by her mother who had gone outside to use the common washroom. Though it is described as a 'vivid and intense' memory, Genelia notes that it was not her missing her mother which scared her but it was the fear of being alone which did. One wonders then why was this the first memory which sprung up in relation to her mother?

Genelia's mother had felt to be slightly detached from their mother-daughter relationship. While there was a desire from little Genelia's side to connect, it didn't happen and by the age of 4/5yrs when they had a maid looking after her, Genelia never felt like she missed her mother. There were fun times too, when they played together in the park or with her Barbie set but her mother felt like she needed someone to be with her and Genelia did not know how to help. Her father, who was working at odd hours in a hotel when Genelia was young, would try to make his wife feel better. But on receiving her harsh critique and anger, he would go away. Genelia remarks, *"He tried to be there but it didn't work out well."*

Genelia says, *"It was difficult to put into words. I would say 'neend nahi aa rahi, ajeeb sa lag raha hai' (I can't sleep, I feel weird) and they would give me a pudin hara because they would think 'pait mai dard hai' (there is pain in my stomach). So, I would bite my hand a lot...to divert the attention to the pain and I would keep biting my hand and I would keep running around the house in the dark..."*

*"Sometimes I would hit my soft toys a lot, like I would slap my teddy bear....I wasn't attached to them in that sense...(long pause) I don't know. Like right now I am structuring the exact scene, the exact day I remember, I remember sleeping in the exact position, i remember biting my hand and feeling a little better...But I don't know why I am doing that...And that scene is so vivid in my head I keep thinking about I...and it was dark, I couldn't see, my mom was next to me but i still wasn't feeling the comfort I was supposed to feel...Something felt missing and I couldn't point out what it was. I was scared, I was petrified and in the bedroom there was this window and I always felt that somebody's sneaking in from that window. Somebody would take me away from that window if I was to go off to sleep...and...we had this very old rifle in our house and that was on the wall and I*

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would keep thinking that if somebody comes I'll get up and I'll get the rifle and I'll shoot them.”

There were other instances where her anxiety spewed out. In the course of our conversation, Genelia mentions the feeling of suffocation she would feel when someone cuddles with her and even as a child she had never done the same with her toys.

*K (researcher): What is it about cuddling that you don't feel like doing? Is it the physical touch or the emotional closeness which it provides?*

*G: So, I thought about this a lot. So as a child I would do something really bad so what my mom would do was she would tie me up in a bed sheet as a form of punishment. So, my hands and everything, I was like a mummy in a bed sheet. And that used to scare me so much...I would lose any sort of mobility any sort of...I would be screaming till the time she would open me so any time somebody tries to hold me it just feels like that and I suddenly push them out...Though it was for only 5 minutes...*

### **DEBJANI (23)**

Debjani, age 23, begins with three instances in her life which had left a lasting mark. As a child, she remembers the huge window she stared out of as she waited for her mother to come back home. By the time it ticked 6:30pm, there was no sign of her and there was no explanation for the absence. Her father consoled her by saying that her mother was camping at her work place as she got caught up with some work and would be back in a day or so. Little Debjani was not satisfied and still describes the incident with a single word: *abandonment*.

Three years later, Debjani was initiated into womanhood through a ritual in her Assamese community which celebrates menarche. Dressed up as a bride she questioned the purpose of the event and demanded answers. Being not provided any answers by her mother who did not want her asking so many questions, Debjani turned to the person she described as her 'first mother', her elder sister.

Her elder sister is spoken of with such warmth that it came up with any narrative surrounding notions of caring and being taken care of. She says, “[laughs] That's, that's what happens when your mom is absent from your life for a substantial amount of time. You start to give out some other feminine figure that authority. “Her elder sister was the one to cook her favourite food when the dishes made for lunch were boring, she was there to play with her, laugh with her, protect her and also the one to give her the news that the day their mother had not returned for a few days was because she had suffered a miscarriage. Debjani's reaction was shock followed by guilt. She felt like she was an 'insensitive kid' for not knowing any better. This shock also triggered a horrifying realisation that her mother was 'a human'. This, she states, was the first time she saw her mother as a separate individual.

The third incident was the time of a festival where her relatives were visiting. She describes her father as having a 'quirky, weird thing' in that she prefers to have a home cooked meal even in social events. It was then that she observed a disappointed, helpless look on her mother's face as she went back to the kitchen with a sigh. This was the first time she saw her father as one who also made mistakes. From her image of him as a heroic, providing figure he had turned, from this one act, to a human.

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These three incidents were defining events while growing up and in the one and a half hour we spent talking, Debjani's voice would often tremble while talking of her mother while she seemed to have entered back in those memories as she stared off into the distance while describing them. There was also a stronger sense of understanding with her as we both had a few common variables: being the youngest sibling, having an elder sister(s) as a maternal figure and the dreadful realisation of parents making mistakes.

### RESULT & DISCUSSION

Culture does play an important role in constructing how this relationship of the mother and daughter will be made. Consequently, we engage with the figure of the father keeping in mind the “importance of the father as a parent and not only as a sexual partner or keeper of the mother” (Paiva, 2016, 122). It is this true role of being a parent which was put to question in the narratives. While Nupur Dhingra Paiva observes in her work *Keeping Fathers in Mind* their role as mitigators of the relation between mother and child, in the lived experiences of the daughters the fathers were either the instigators of their mother’s sorrow or would show up enough to soothe the anxieties of the children for that moment.

What was missing was a sense of permanency or consistency in the parental presence. Winnicott had noted, “It is not in your [the mother’s] power to make their relationship a rich one; that depends on the father and the children. But it is very much in your power to make such a relationship possible, or to prevent it, or to mar it” [*italics mine*] (Winnicott, 1944, 118). While the latter half of this statement is quite crucial, one must not make the mistake of downplaying the importance of the former half. Fathers also need to take an active role in the lives of their daughters in order to provide them support as a parent. India majorly conceives the father figure as an authoritarian head who is not involved much in child rearing, especially the emotional aspects of it (Paiva, 2016). Yet, the potential inherent in their part as active parents must be utilized in allowing the much needed separation of the mother-infant dyad and also introduce to the daughter the other half of the world (Freud, 2010).

In her article *Multiple Caretaking of Infants and Young Children: An Area in Critical Need of a Feminist Psychological Anthropology*, the author Susan Seymour posits a critique of Sudhir Kakar’s work with regard to the position of the mother in the rearing of the child. Sudhir Kakar’s conception of the Hindu household places the mother as the exclusive figure under whose care the child was relegated (Kakar, 1978). Seymour writes, “None of the ethnographic research on family relations and child care, with the exception of Nuckolls (1996), supports Kakar’s underlying thesis regarding exclusive maternal child care and maternal indulgence”. However, Debjani along with Ruhi and Genelia, two women we will meet later, are products of households where the mother’s task was central in rearing the children. Father’s intervened and also provided support, but while it operated more as a compensation to their mother’s being involved elsewhere, one gets an image of a parent who has an implied option to choose their nature of engagement.

For a healthy parenting pattern to develop, the presence of the father also maintains a respect for the mother's position and inversely, it is the mother which must also provide space for the father to engage in parenting. The stereotypical roles thus attributed will also be deconstructed and allow for a much fluid parenting to take place. Rather than stepping outside the framework of Indian parenting, the highlighted presence of the father within the framework itself can usher in impactful changes.

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The image of the mother thus conceived is borne of complex life instances and processes wherein the psyche still attempts to keep the childhood mother alive within itself. She dominates the living present while herself existing in the past. What stays then with us at the end, as writer and readers, is the life of three individuals who opened us up to their sorrows and happiness, three strangers whose life we are intimately familiar with and the images of three mothers whose own personal dialogue we are unfamiliar with.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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