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Portrayal of Women in Geetanjali Shree's Mai: Silently Mother

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ABSTRACT

Geetanjali Shree is a novelist and short story writer penning in Hindi and English language. Her popularity is recognised by the readers after her receiving Booker Prize in 2022. Her writings mostly focus on women's issues and answers to the issues concerned. The research paper prominently deals with her novel Mai: Silently Mother published in English in 2017. It narrates three generations of women through the characters of Mai, Dadi and Sunaina. Mai is the protagonist and representative of the generation trapped in modernity and traditional cultural and patriarchal customs which results in internal conflicts regarding accountability and independence. Dadi is the mother-in-law of the protagonist Mai and representative of the stereotype society. She is very strict and disciplined in carrying out set societal cultural standards. Sunaina is the daughter of the protagonist and upholds the modern societal standards and negates stereotypes in the society. For her, freedom and choice matter a lot. She believes in the principle of leading the life independently. She bravely repudiates the long-standing social norms. This research paper contributes to deeply understand the varied experiences of women and on-going struggle for gender equality. It offers some suggestive measures through the feminist angles to eradicate the deadly cancers in the form of traditional cultural and societal norms.

Introduction

Geetanjali Shree (hereafter Shree) has earned the reputation for her ability to demonstrate the lives of women in Indian cultural and societal structures. Her literary work examines gender issues and patriarchal hierarchy together with cultural norms that interact with contemporary values. In its narrative of Dadi, Mai and Sunaina, the novelist presents three female characters who represent fundamental elements of traditional Indian

womanhood. Through her novel Shree creates an emotional picture of the way women encounter social divisions as well as the barriers established by male-dominated institutions. It describes the cultural progression of women throughout the generations while showing a family's conventional atmosphere in her novel Mai: Silently Mother. Through its female representations this novel reveals the diverse nature of women's personalities and female connections and their disagreement to

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the imposed beliefs and rituals.

Mai

She exists between societal conventions while chasing her personal progress. She belongs to the transitional generation which suffers because society forces her to follow female duties while her heart seeks personal growth. As women try to balance their family obligations with personal dreams, modern women experience a similar internal conflict that Mai expresses in the novel.

Throughout the novel Mai endeavours to keep her child, Sunaina, free from the restrictions which have controlled her through battles of passiveness. Through her actions Mai follows traditional customs yet walks the path of keeping them as she does so. Overall, this point results in various points of contradictions and tensions. The silence of the Mai indicates her thoughtful response to challenging life circumstances that bring her to the state of conflict as she tries to manage both progress and established customs. Mai follows each and every traditional ceremony which marks as acceptable behaviour for mothers and wives in the society. Mai, following the religious and cultural traditions, shows her affirmation to women's duties at home. She doesn't cross the threshold of her home. She readily accepts the disagreement from Dada, Dadi and Babu about decision involving her. Mai conducts small acts of individualism by reading secretly and attending club parties sometimes with Babu and sometimes without Babu from backyard, which shows her inner drive for personal growth. The act of supporting without speaking becomes her power always. Without making more sounds, she sent

Sunaina outside the village for learning art instead of following the traditional norms positioned by Dadi.

Mai's choice to escape from verbal communication serves as an ultimate lens through which her journey is expressed, blocking the need for spoken language. Through this deliberate silence; Shree effectively illustrates the multiple sufferings that women confront in traditional societies, positioning Mai's experience as an emblematic of the internal survival of women in the face of patriarchal dominance. Mai's resilience is particularly noteworthy as she faces the numerous restrictions imposed by her societal framework, embracing silence not as a submission but as a form of patience. Within her familial context, Mai's acceptance to the orders of her husband and children, symbolising societal expectations that mingle into a normative structure for women in traditional settings. Her silence acts not merely as a passive response but as a strategy to maintain her identity within the parameters set by her culture. This acceptance reflects a broader narrative where women, well established in traditional gender roles, suffers personal hardships for the sake of family.

Moreover, Mai's silence reached beyond her situation, resonating with systemic implications. The novel serves as a commentary on the challenges that patriarchy imposes on women, who often uncertain about their own needs of survival in such environments. Shree assigns Mai's character as a vehicle to explore the societal pressures forcing women to swallow their struggles. The narrative critiques the separation between traditional values and contemporary socio-cultural

advancements.

The generational dynamics between Mai and her daughter (Sunaina) reveal the tension between tradition and modernity. While Mai summarises support to conventional norms, her daughter represents a shift towards new modalities that enhance female concern. The evolving societal environment allows the daughter to explore previously unattainable gender possibilities, illuminating the intergenerational differences in women's experiences.

Through her character development, Geetanjali highlights these generational tensions and the evolution of women's roles within their families. The contrasts between Mai, her daughter, and her grandmother serve to explain the progression of women's freedoms across generations. Shree deftly use dialogue to emphasize the powerful influence of customs with the advantages of modern societal changes. Sunaina's found out opportunities for self-direction present a pure contrast to Mai's life, which remains controlled by the prohibitions that define her existence.

The core of the narrative centres on Mai's development towards self-discovery, framed as an important thematic arc. Initially, she sees her identity through the lens of familial obligations, but as the narrative progresses, she begins her journey to uncover her authentic self. This quest is full of inner turmoil; sharpen by social forces that impose rigid roles upon her. Through the perspectives of her daughter, the novel unlocks Mai's repressed desires and the uncover wishes to explain her truth. The novel facilitates the deep exploration of Mai's dual roles as a devoted mother and wife and her

hidden desire for independence. The narrative reaches the maternal archetype, offering readers insights into Mai's psychological landscape through her daughter's observations. This dynamic provides a space for Mai's self-reflection and growth, allowing for a deeper understanding of her struggle for self-identity. Mai learns to recognize her actual worth beyond her prescribed societal role. This resonates with a larger thematic detail regarding women's on-going efforts to accept familial obligations with personal ambitions. The narrative clarifies the extent to which women's identities are moulded by external pressures while also emphasizing the journey towards liberation from prescribed roles.

The evolving relationship between Mai and her daughter Sunaina brings her most central transformation. Through her daughter's perspective, Mai is inspired to reevaluate her existence, renew her connection to a previously suppressed self. The improvement of individual power in one generation lays the basic for next generations to reach beyond cultural limitations.

Dadi

She, the eldest family member, symbolises traditional patriarchal culture which maintains her unquestioned support to past customs. She shows exceptional devotion to customs from the past that demonstrates a lady who maintains traditional patriarchy-affiliated social expectations. Through her traditional perspectives, Dadi accepts subordination of women and assigns worth based on family services. Geetanjali, through the character of Dadi, shows how traditional female elder adopts patriarchal beliefs and transmit to

younger generation.

Dadi believes that household duties for women should begin with early morning cleaning tasks, preparation to cook meals and after serving the men only the women will receive their food. She always forces Mai to perform all these duties and burdened her with these rituals as her thoughts that it's her duty to impart Mai and Sunaina about the familial cores. Dadi always tries to convey them "This is how it has always been." After the death of Dada, she defends the traditional belief that family property belongs to Babu and Subodh. She rejects any challenges to this custom from Sunaina or Mai. She believes that her grandson, Subodh, should get educational and career support but doesn't support for Sunaina's higher education as she will marry and will go in others house. The general societal perception against women as Paraya Dhan is followed by her. Dadi never allows entry to the lower caste people inside the house as considering them as untouchables.

Sunaina

She, as the youngest of the three women, is the modern Indian woman who confronts society by refusing silence. Her personality showcases fearless determination together with a reluctance to obey traditional expectations from women. Sunaina rejects traditional female silence by purposefully choosing her moments to speak against the generations of submissive behaviour from women. Geetanjali describes Sunaina as a representative of new feminist attitudes which battle traditional norms to gain freedom and self-rule. The character of Sunaina represents a path toward liberation from patriarchal oppression that promises better

prospects to upcoming women. Between Sunaina and Subodh financial preference for education goes to him first but her dared argument results in securing her place which allows her to pursue higher education. She also left the village and went to hostel in city. Through this experience Sunaina proves herself to be a strong woman who stands for fair treatment even in her household environment.

Sunaina selects her career as an artist with the full support of Mai and Subodh. Babu was not in favour of her career decision. She selects it as she is not habitual of suppressing her wishes and feelings. Babu and Dadi arrange a programme for her to meet a marriage candidate without her acceptance. She refuses to follow directions and openly defend her wish to get an education and start her career before getting married. The novelist portrays her character as a progressive woman who refuses traditional norms and early marriage. Sunaina dared to choice love without listening to others. She had partner whose background differs from hers until her traditional family arises against their relationship. She proved herself against traditions by selecting her love interest independently since she believes she holds the right to take decisions about relationship.

Conclusion

Mai: Silently Mother examines women's evolving roles by portraying the three generations of women through the characters of Dadi, Mai, and Sunaina. The research paper argues that the novelist supports feminist standpoints by urging society to break the connection between women's silence and oppression. The novel recognizes that women discover personal realization by being proactive in

changing and reshaping the restrictions society sets against them. The research paper exhibits the feminist principles while delivering a quiet forceful view against the patriarchal systems which restrict women in society. The research paper considers that autonomy, liberation and identity are important elements in the life of women. It can be easily achieved through the joint efforts across the different generations.

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