

# OF LOVE AND AGENCY: MODELS OF MOTHERHOOD IN SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE AND POETRY

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## Introduction

I will explore three texts that each submit varying models of motherhood for the South Asian diasporic community: *The Sun and Her Flowers*, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, and *Seven*. Each text provides insight into the developing models of mothering and daughterhood that define the various experiences of the South Asian Canadian diaspora. Each text carefully reimagines what it means to be a mother within the diaspora and provides its own critique of and understanding of tradition and agency. When put in conversation, the texts build on each other to form increasingly powerful and thoughtful models of motherhood through love and agency. Beginning with Rupi Kaur's collection of poems, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, multiple models of motherhood are posited. Some models are quick to succumb to damaging patriarchal and colonial tropes, but one, in particular, actualizes a unique dynamic between mother and daughter, stressing the importance of motherly teaching through an example of choice. This model is further built in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, extending the model of choice beyond the individual and shifting to a community perspective. Badami's model further takes on Kaur's shortcomings by confronting orientalist binaries and deconstructing the myth of meritocracy. Finally, Farzana Doctor's *Seven* realizes the highest form of this model by building on Kaur and Badami's constructive themes and creating the experience of motherhood as a mobilizing force. Each piece provides a unique understanding of motherhood, daughterhood, and community as they build upon the ideas of one another and provide models for the South Asian diasporic community.

### **A Model of Choice in *The Sun and Her Flowers***

Rupi Kaur's *The Sun and Her Flowers* is a collection of poems surrounding love, identity, trauma, and relationships. The collection strikes a precarious balance between a reimagination of accessibility for poetry and an overly simplistic understanding of nuanced themes. This oversimplification is particularly prevalent in Kaur's discussions of race and womanhood where her work often creates damaging models of motherhood, daughterhood, and reclamation of agency. Nevertheless, these models are counterposed with some constructions of mothering that submit a new way forward for the South Asian diasporic community, one defined by choice.

In the poem “lessons from mumma” in *The Sun and Her Flowers*, Kaur recalls her mother’s instructions on how to behave and present herself to the outside world. This poem lies in the “rooting” section of Kaur’s poetry book, filled with other mentions of her mother and daughterhood, but is notably the only poem to refer to verbal nurturing or support—of which none detail physical care. “lessons from mumma” hints at the contradictory role of immigrant mothers as they are pressured into teaching the fulfillment of traditional, and usually restrictive, roles for women while still hoping to resist and be cognizant of the systems of oppression that hinder their agency. The poem begins with a mother’s cautionary advice, “when it came to listening/my mother taught me silence/*if you are drowning their voice with yours/how will you bear them* she asked.”<sup>1</sup> The mother’s dialogue in this section appears most plainly as conventional counseling from parent to child, but the daughter’s position as a passive narrator plays a larger role in the understanding of their relationship. The poem fixates on maternal power without resistance and centers the piece around control under the guise of protection. This control quickly becomes dangerous as Kaur’s mother provides instruction that fails to benefit her daughter. Ensuring that her daughter is listening to the needs and opinions of others in silence conveys the mother’s reinforcement of the traditional patriarchy-dictated duty of a woman as an empathetic provider above all. This specific provider model notably encapsulates two attributes above all else: martyrdom and self-sacrifice. By suggesting that her daughter should tend to the needs of others before her own and make the sacrifice of staying silent, the mother depicts the primary role of women as a caretaker of others—usually, men—rather than focusing on their own agency. A model of motherhood so closely tied to having a choice of self-sacrifice is deeply rooted in elite discourse—solely an option provided to higher-class white mothers in Canada. For mothers who fit outside this category, those who are BIPOC, poor, queer, or disabled, for example, the optionality afforded to forgo one’s own needs (i.e. a job, self-care, etc.) is less likely to exist. Thus, the mother begins her corroboration of a white colonial viewpoint, one where martyrdom is seen as heroic. Furthermore, by promoting silence over protest or expression, the mother reasserts the colonial ideas of docility and subjugation in her daughter. Colonial tropes glorify those who are amenable and obedient to their power, making the surrender of individual agency a necessary imperative to maintain supremacy—particularly in assimilationist Canada. The mother’s dialogue inadvertently idealizes these ideas and in turn, maintains the power of patriarchal and colonial viewpoints. But, the previously strict tone shifts to one of empowerment and trust as her mother urges her to claim her voice and responsibility: “when it came to being/*she said be tender and tough at once/you need to be vulnerable to live fully/ but rough enough to survive it all.*”<sup>2</sup> Her mother expects strength and a level of passivity in conjunction with one another and in her attempt to dialogue the power she wishes for her daughter,

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<sup>1</sup> Rupi Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* (Andrews McMeel, 2017), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 122.

subjugates her daughter with her direction. The ideas she perpetuates are best summed up in the paradoxical last stanza in which Kaur writes, “when it came to choosing/ she asked me to be thankful/for the choices i had that/she never had the privilege of making.”<sup>3</sup> After the explicit directions, she expects gratitude for the daughter’s ability to choose—in direct contradiction with the control her mother has exerted over her throughout the poem. As Adrienne Rich explains, “the anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed “mothering,” even if she does this believing it will help her daughter survive.”<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to provide her daughter agency, she inculcates the opposite, hindering the daughter from independently developing a sense of self.

The poems that diverge from the form of “mothering” showcased in “lessons from mumma” are those that discuss a mother’s series of challenges and losses and how she has overcome them. Rather than *telling* her daughter, poems like “to witness a miracle” suggest that *showing* the quality of the mother’s life is the primary gift to her daughter. A woman who has overcome challenges and continues to do so is demonstrating that such possibilities exist and thus offers her daughter something more valuable than physical mothering. Kaur writes, “i want to go back in time and sit beside her. document/her in a home movie so my eyes can spend the rest of / their lives witnessing a miracle. the one who’s life/i never think of before mine.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than the more self-sacrificial, institutionalized, traditional motherly love that is regularly imposed (usually by men) on women, a mother that can “illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities” and “refuse to be a victim” can recognize that “the quality of the mother’s life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter.”<sup>6</sup> As Kaur wishes to “become her /pleated braid. the black kohl caressing her eyelids. the/flour neatly packed into her fingertips,”<sup>7</sup> she hopes to discover her mother in a peaceful state—one that is an example of freedom and possibility despite the struggle and grief-filled spaces depicted in poems like “amrik singh.” Mothers, like the one Kaur writes about, that have been able to demonstrate possibility despite adversity are often giving children a form of mothering much more valuable than one expected in a patriarchal society. Thus, the path to instilling Kaur with her own agency is most promising when her mother continues to struggle and fight for her own freedom and, as a result, that of her daughters.

In “honour your roots,” Kaur highlights the significance of appreciating one’s community and traditions. Whether it be the mention of parents, ancestors, or community more generally, the theme of indebtedness towards one’s community is consistently mentioned in Kaur’s “rooting” section. She opens this poem with a direct

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 243.

<sup>5</sup> Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 143.

<sup>6</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 246-247.

<sup>7</sup> Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 143.

message: “remember the body/of your community/breathe in the people/ who sewed you whole.”<sup>8</sup> She continues, “it is you who became yourself / but those before you/are a part of your fabric.”<sup>9</sup> A present community builds us, whether it be a sole mother or a larger group of people, we learn from their attitudes and experiences. Yet, Kaur ensures the inclusion of “it is you who became yourself,” alluding to the possibility of conflict between community and individual. In the context of a traditionalist, insular community, conflict may arise from patriarchal or colonially dictated norms that have been so deeply rooted in a culture that they are seemingly unnoticeable. These traditions begin to threaten individual agency and thought for immigrant women striving to forge an independent consciousness. By suggesting that these traditions may be “a part of your fabric,” Kaur intentionally omits full subservience to a community or a tradition and creates a delicate balance between the traditional and individual agency.

While many of Kaur’s poems frequent subjects that are pertinent in the balancing act necessary for Brown women, some poems succumb to the Orientalist binary of “repressive Eastern tradition” and “progressive Western modernity” and corroborate damaging merit-centric ideas such as the model minority phenomenon. In poems like “broken english,” Kaur voices her parents’ experience immigrating. She showcases the hardships of her parents in a way that is seemingly just palatable enough to a white audience—implying it is undoubtedly worth it for an opportunity in the “new world” and simplifying collective trauma. Kaur engages in a form of self-orientalism as she uses imagery and a narrative voice that self-identify with constructed immigrant images or ideas. In many ways, the poetry found in the “rooting” section of the book—which is meant to pay homage to her own roots—seems to do the exact opposite by succumbing to the white gaze. The “rooting” section, at points, risks being calcified as the same South Asian immigrant story. The overarching narrative of justifiable struggle, among other tropes, “creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the whole story.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, this ability to cope with and work up “... a country/ that is swallowing us whole”<sup>11</sup> reasserts the narrative that Canada, alongside other countries, is not a systemically racist meritocracy that rewards hard work. This obscures the history of these countries and perpetuates myths that damage interracial group cooperation and comradeship. Novels like *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* and *Seven* seek to readjust this narrative or are careful to succumb to these damaging tropes.

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<sup>8</sup> Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Naben Ruthnum, *Curry: Eating, Reading, and Race* (Coach House Books, 2017), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 133.

**A Model of Communal Mothering in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?***

Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* takes Kaur's most constructive model of motherhood, one defined by providing a daughter with an example of choice, and implements it in a communal setting. Badami broadens Kaur's model and simultaneously steps outside self-Orientalizing images of South Asian diasporic tradition by deconstructing the success of the nuclear family and critiquing meritocracy. Badami ultimately constructs a collectivized form of Kaur's choice model, one that better addresses the intricacies and necessities of motherhood as a South Asian woman in assimilationist Canada.

*Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* chronicles the lives of three women from 1928 to 1986 as they navigate a constantly changing political landscape in both India and Canada. Bibi-ji, a Sikh from a village in Punjab, captured the attention of one of her sister's suitors as a young girl. She moves with this man, who we later come to know as Pa-ji, to Canada where they begin their new lives at the family-owned Delhi Junction Cafe. Bibi-ji runs the shop with ambition and cares for new immigrants as they arrive in Canada, opening her home—albeit reluctantly—to those in need. Her path crosses with Leela Bhat, a half-Indian and German woman born in Bangalore and married into the Hindu Brahmin family of Balu Bhat. Leela becomes another focal point of the novel as she immigrates to Canada and connects with Bibi-ji. The women form a lasting relationship and are further bonded over Leela's coincidental discovery of Bibi-ji's niece in India, Nimmo.

Perhaps the most important feature of these women's lives as they immigrate is the communities they forge. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* the women of the novel experience a form of both physical and metaphorical displacement. The character's physical displacement occurs as they travel to the West or are moved unwillingly, isolating them from their previous familial and cultural ties. Simultaneously, they experience a similar displacement due to the patriarchal attitudes prevalent in India and the West at the time. This doubled sense of displacement adds to the character's overall feeling of alienation, resulting in an unintentional choice to construct an imagined community. For women like Bibiji, Leela, and Nimmo, this imagined community comes in the form of their new friends and families of immigrants: "Both she [Bibi-ji] and Pa-ji were glad to see the new immigrants. They felt a deep affection for these people, even when they were not from Punjab."<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson discusses this idea within the context of nationalism claiming that the nation is imagined when it entails a sense of communion or a "horizontal comradeship" between people who often do not know each other or have not even met; despite their differences, they imagine belonging to the same collectivity.<sup>13</sup> Outside the scope of nationalism and on a smaller scale, within the context of Bibi-ji

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<sup>12</sup> Anita Rau Badami, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (Vintage Canada, 2010), 61.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 2006).

and Leela's move to Canada, these communities become support systems in which the women are able to explore the issues that may arrive in a family or community. Bibi-ji quickly introduces the idea of socializing labor around the household, a subversion of the traditional role of women in the household. New immigrants who are staying with Bibi-ji and Pa-ji are expected to help around their house and restaurant. Rather than creating issues, this sharing and collectivizing of work foster an atmosphere of abundance in Bibi-ji's imagined community. The nuclear family model is also rarely mentioned in this novel; each character, in a way, depends on those around them—similar to the model of motherhood observed in *Seven*. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, Bibi-ji is initially plagued by unhappiness after she finds herself unable to conceive a child. But, as she redirects her energy to her community, her sadness subsides. By “socializing labour, collectivizing housekeeping, and making maternity and childcare social responsibilities” women, and men, are no longer being forced to solely “be a site of productive work, it is no longer necessary—and this is liberating.”<sup>14</sup> This attitude within a community also translates into motherhood as Bibi-ji adopts Jasbeer, Nimmo's son, into her family.

The models of motherhood seen in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* differ greatly from the mother-daughter relationships observed in *Seven*. But both are comparable in their approach to communal mothering. Bibi-ji, Leela, and Nimmo all, at some point in the novel, share their children amongst themselves, where “sharing” can be loosely defined as assuming the care of motherhood for other children. Beginning with Bibi-ji's care of Nimmo's son, Jasbeer, the women arrive at a consensus that will best benefit the child:

All I want is to help my family—for you are the only family I have. The child will have opportunities that you cannot give him here, and all our love and care. And remember, if you and Satpal decide to grant me this wish, Pa-ji and I will be the boy's guardians, not his parents. You will not be losing him, only lending him to us for a few years.<sup>15</sup>

Bibi-ji takes on the role of Jasbeer's mother the most concretely as she raises him as her own and Nimmo, apart from being biologically related to her son, cares for him by “relinquishing her control for the chance he may lead a better life.”<sup>16</sup> This more sacrificial form of mothering is by no means perfect but still showcases the potential that mothering is not solely a private affair but a social and communal one. Though Nimmo is exerting her power as a mother in a way that will benefit Jasbeer, Bibi-ji's approach to mothering Jasbeer becomes increasingly more self-centered as the novel progresses. As Jasbeer begins to struggle in Canada, Bibi-ji deceptively writes to

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<sup>14</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “Communism and the Family by Alexandra Kollontai,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Badami, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Nimmo informing her that her son has been thriving in school and at home. The messages are indicative of Bibi-ji's unwillingness to lose Jasbeer, a self-serving action. It becomes clear that Bibi-ji's activism around her community and willingness to help others may too be primarily rooted in her own self-interest. Her previous desire to help her new community and care for Jasbeer begins to be construed as performative activism, lacking the empathy that has been characteristic of traditional mothering models. Jasbeer's current and potential life in Canada quickly begins to become bleak, and though Bibi-ji is surely not the only one to blame, her lack of empathy is an apparent contributor.

Throughout Jasbeer's struggle, Bibi-ji seeks Leela for advice—notably, more for her own vindication and returns rather than Jasbeers. Yet, Leela shares advice and anecdotes about her own children, challenging the individuated model of competition and focusing instead on collaboration between the women. Each woman encounters troubles with her children, even Nimmo, as the novel progresses; however, their ability to share care early on allowed their children's development—even if it was minimal in the case of Jasbeer. Perhaps a striking balance of the verbal care Leela expresses and the physical one Bibi-ji carries out would bring about the best outcome: a child who values their imagined community and understands the importance of collaboration through the models observed growing up. Though the model is not without its flaws, it submits that the traditional nuclear family that is most popular in Western Europe, Canada, the United States, and in some cases by default diasporas living in these regions, is less than ideal.

Of the many challenges Bibi-ji faces, none seem to bring her more sorrow than her inability to have a child. She blames herself for this, claiming that it was God's punishment for her decision to betray her sister so many years ago. Throughout the novel, Bibi-ji looks to God, or *Ooper Wallah*, when making decisions and vocalizes her good deeds in hopes that God will treat her accordingly. Bibi-ji would collect her good deeds in her head and “add this impulsive act to the list of Good Deeds that were earning her a golden star from the *Ooper-Wallah*.”<sup>17</sup> Additionally, she would attribute all her luck to God, saying “... this child who had been granted to me by the generosity of Ooper-Wallah” and the like.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, throughout the novel, allusions to tragedy or loss are expressed through the voice of an omniscient narrator, specifically in the first half of the book. The seemingly all-knowing narrator hints at the characters' futures: “Gurpreet Kaur did not know it then, ten years later, sixteen-year-old Sharan would stick out her lower lip mutinously, murmur the Why Not question under her breath and change her sister's fortunes and her own as well.”<sup>19</sup> The narrator's voice is god-like as it foretells events in the women's lives before they happen. Badami seems to make a deliberate choice with this style of narration, implying that someone, perhaps

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<sup>17</sup> Badami, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 212.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

God, is looking over the women. Characterizing this narration as God-like seems to affirm the existence of Ooper Wallah and reasserts Bibi-ji's belief in the existence of a cosmic meritocracy, partially based on the traditional religious values she has been exposed to.

The ideology of meritocracy appears frequently in religious texts raising two questions: "Can the faithful earn salvation through religious observance and good works, or is God entirely free to decide whom to save, regardless of how many people live their lives?"<sup>20</sup> These two questions assert God's omnipotence and leave traditional religious thought based on merit behind. Bibi-ji, however, believes in a traditional model of cosmic meritocracy, aligning with the idea that all the good she has done in her life will be rewarded. However, as readers come to observe, Bibi-ji is faced with a tremendous amount of loss as the novel progresses: Pa-ji is killed, and she concurrently loses her family, her community, and her sense of being. If the cosmic meritocracy that Bibi-ji believes in is true, then her life should not have concluded in the manner it did. This idea that God will reward those that are pure and good is the foundation of the phenomenon of "model minorities," as the South Asian diaspora's seemingly higher degree of status is attributed to their ability to respond to oppression in a way that is socially palatable or "good" through assimilation and docility. In the cases of these women, all the good they have done in their lives to protect their families and communities is unacknowledged, calling into question not only the omnipotence of God but also the basis of meritocracy itself and the traditions that perpetuate it. The novel's conclusion and its intentional lack of alignment with this ethic thus subverts the model minority phenomenon and refutes the idea of a cosmic meritocracy, and perhaps more importantly, the traditions that maintain it.

### **A Model of Collective Mobilization in *Seven***

Farzana Doctor's *Seven* showcases a more difficult side of honoring tradition as she explores the intricacies of family and communal relationships, expectations, and development within the context of a conservative religious community. *Seven's* model of motherhood builds on models explored constructively in *The Sun and Her Flowers* and *Can You Hear The Nightbird Call*. It takes on the tradition-individuation balance from a new angle, one that is defined by community rather than individual experience. Kaur's most promising model of motherhood, defined by choice in "to witness a miracle," and Badami's communal mothering model are fused in *Seven* and can be seen as a foundation for the new model that Doctor will explore: a mobilizable community-driven choice model.

*Seven's* protagonist, Sharifa, is a Bohra American who has returned to India. Bringing along her husband and seven-year-old daughter, Zee, she attempts to research her own history and navigate lost family relationships and continued customs.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 37.



Sharifa's trip coincides with the political and emotional unrest of the community as a group of women speaks out against *khatna*—the practice of female genital cutting. Sharifa is forced to weather the evolving ethos of her insular community while building her own agency, as the community's politics quickly becomes personal.

In *Seven*, the roles of mothers and daughters are central to Sharifa's understanding of *khatna* and tradition. While Sharifa's relationship with her mother contains some of the negative tropes associated with a conventional immigrant mother-daughter relationship, Sharifa's trust and admiration for her mother remain apparent throughout the novel. She turns to her mother for advice and guidance frequently: as she looks for a purpose in India, as she becomes involved in her cousin Fatema's fight against *khatna*, and as she seeks to understand more about her own experiences as a child in India—each time being unequivocally trusting of her mother's responses. When Murtuza, Sharifa's husband, questions Sharifa on the possibility that her mother performed *khatna* on Sharifa by asking “Do you think it could've happened to you? I mean ... faith is an odd thing,” Sharifa is quick to respond: “No. I really can't imagine my mother permitting such a thing.”<sup>21</sup> Sharifa frequently and vehemently denies her mother's involvement and knowledge of *khatna*, giving readers the impression that she is overcompensating. Sharifa also cites her mother as being too “modern” or “progressive” for this religious practice and uses this notion to justify her hesitancy towards questioning her. More than her surface-level reasoning, Sharifa's preference to not question her mother is based more on the symbolic meaning it would have, implying the fading of trust and the possibility that their previously unblemished relationship may have complications of its own.

During a trip with her two cousins, Sharifa is told that she had been cut as a child. After bouts of confusion, frustration, and panic, she begins to consider the possibilities: “Did my mother know and not tell me? Did my father? How can I continue to love my *Maasi* [maternal aunt] now? Can I ever forgive her?”<sup>22</sup> Before discussing the topic with her mother, Sharifa grapples constantly with her thoughts: the possibility that her mother was somehow aware of her experience and neglected to tell her, the idea that her mother had betrayed her, or perhaps the idea that her mother was not involved enough to know at all. The tension in their relationship builds without the mother and daughter pair even speaking; in part, Sharifa blames those meant to protect her from her trauma and fails to verbalize this sentiment. Whether it be the untested respect inherent in elder relationship dynamics in Sharifa's culture or simply fear of disrupting a seemingly harmonious relationship with her mother, Sharifa internalizes her anger towards her maternal aunt (*Maasi*) and her mother as a coping mechanism—an act seen as valiant in the imagined traditional conception of daughterhood. As she continues to put off a confrontation, Sharifa straddles the line between this imagined tradition and an actualization of her rage. When connected to

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<sup>21</sup> Farzana Doctor, *Seven* (Dundurn, 2020), 108-109.

<sup>22</sup> Doctor, *Seven*, 197.

imagined traditions, “the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr,” and a desire to split from the influence of these mothers becomes synonymous with becoming individuated and a reclaimer of one’s agency.<sup>23</sup> A complication in the mother-daughter relationship then becomes an essential precondition for reclamation of agency, and, for Sharifa, a necessary means of healing.

In a subconscious effort to realize her healing, Sharifa finally confronts her mother: “‘Why?’ I force out the question that’s been caged in my throat for weeks. ‘Why did you trust them?’” Sharifa’s words are accusatory as blame is placed on her mother, but not without some restraint in her voice.<sup>24</sup> As the pair grapple with the situation, the discussion notably never becomes combative; both women feel the pain and loss of not having been able to stop it. Sharifa’s mother laments:

I really believed that I could trust them. You know, until you’ve had a child, they treat you like you are one. After I had you, they began to see me as more of an equal...I just assumed they would respect my wishes... But that was stupid. Why would they? My mother and sister always thought they knew what was best for me. I should have never left you alone with them.<sup>25</sup>

Before this, dishonesty in their relationship was unspoken and thus never actualized in a corporeal form, creating a seemingly problem-free dynamic. Their conversation and the disruption of their previously physically untainted relationship represent the “womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free.”<sup>26</sup> Through their conversation, Sharifa has become symbolically individuated from her mother; but, striking a balance between freedom from her mother’s figurative hold and the continued strength of their relationship now becomes Sharifa’s challenge.

Preoccupied with her trauma, perhaps rightfully so, Zee has been left at the hands of the same *Maasi* that performed *khatna* on Sharifa. As Sharifa’s confrontation with her mother begins to shift to her relationship with her own daughter, chaos strikes as Sharifa questions Zee’s safety with her *Maasi*. Zee returns home moments later and is immediately met with questions about her whereabouts. “We went to buy vegetables and I fell down and then we went to visit a friend and that’s where we got the bandage. Then... we had ice cream and then we saw Nafeesa again” Zee sputters.<sup>27</sup> To Sharifa’s relief, she gathers that Zee had not been in danger, and that she had not been taken for *khatna*. But, as learned in the epilogue of the novel, Zee’s recollection of the day was entirely fabricated. Zee recalls these moments as a grown woman:

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<sup>23</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 236.

<sup>24</sup> Doctor, *Seven*, 276.

<sup>25</sup> Doctor, *Seven*, 276.

<sup>26</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 236.

<sup>27</sup> Doctor, *Seven*, 277.

I was told to lie down. *Maasi* said, 'We'll clean your knee and put on a bandage.' Then she told me to pull off my shorts so she could check that there weren't any other injuries... Later, I'd blame myself for letting her remove my clothing. Mom told me to never let anyone touch me down there.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Sharifa's strength, her individuation from her own mother, and her reclamation of her agency, this cycle of abuse had continued—one that was meant to be broken once Sharifa began to act with agency and provide Zee with a model to do so as well. Sharifa failed to confront *Maasi* soon enough and subsequently failed her daughter, despite the new model of agency and power she was providing her with. Being unable to balance her newfound freedom from her mother-daughter relationship and the strength that was possible in its unity then becomes Sharifa's biggest downfall, allowing Zee to suffer in the same way she was forced to. Had her mother been quicker to address *khatna*, had Sharifa been quicker to approach her mother, had they found a way to strike this balance, perhaps, Zee wouldn't be a victim of this continued cycle of abuse. Notably, the epilogue centers Zee's perspective and Sharifa is almost entirely absent from the scene. This stylistic choice acts to prevent the theme of maternal guilt from infiltrating the model's bounds. The institution of motherhood finds that "all mothers are more or less guilty of having failed their children... Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?"<sup>29</sup> This guilt is internalized under the institution of motherhood and is what makes motherhood a particularly ambivalent experience. Thus, while it seems apparent that Sharifa likely assumes some culpability for Zee's *khatna*, centering Zee's personal testament serves to stray from the institution of motherhood and focus on motherhood as an experience—an experience of community building, learning, agency, and love.

The persisting theme of motherhood in *Seven* manifests most powerfully in one of the novel's concluding scenes during a protest against *khatna*. This protest epitomizes the strength of women-centered social movements and showcases the development of women's traditional role as mothers, from one associated with identity and political institutions to mothering as a separate and reclaimed experience. As Adrienne Rich explains, there are two understandings of motherhood: motherhood as an institution and motherhood as an experience. In the institution of motherhood, "all women are seen primarily as mothers; all mothers are expected to experience motherhood unambivalently and in accordance with patriarchal values; and the "non-mothering" woman is seen as deviant."<sup>30</sup> The institution of motherhood values outdated female virtues such as subservience and sacrifice based on a mother's identity

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 345.

<sup>29</sup> Adrienne Rich, "It Is Hard to Write about My Own Mother," Literary Hub, April 2, 2019. <https://lithub.com/adrienne-rich-it-is-hard-to-write-about-my-own-mother/>.

<sup>30</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood In Bondage," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1976. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/11/20/archives/motherhood-in-bondage.html>.

as a woman, limiting her reach as a mother and confining her to male-determined views of parenting. In contrast, motherhood as an experience is potentially profound when untainted by the institution. Doctor explores mothering in this alternate context, reshaping the definition of motherhood to be an inclusive term designated to those who care for other women as if they were their own. The form of mothering that *Seven* showcases in the protest, and even much before then, is derived from activities and relationships involving nurturing and caring throughout the novel—not identity. Doctor attempts to reclaim the narrative of motherhood, severing the institutional connections and instead centering the importance of care and constructed relationships in the experience of motherhood in a female-centric model.

In the protest against *khatna* in *Seven*, the relationships between Sharifa and other women like Fatema and Zainab are microcosmic examples of how communities are organized and propelled into action through discussions and the subsequent development of collectivist orientation.<sup>31</sup> Sharifa's discussion with other women throughout the novel prompts a morality of responsibility connected to relationships.<sup>32</sup> In turn, their "mothering" evolves into one of coactive power where each strives to protect the other as if they were their own. In other words, the women share the responsibilities and rewards of their organizing rather than simply exerting power over other women, as seen in the traditionalist view of mothering in "lessons from mumma." After Sharifa discovers that she was cut as a child, for example, the women's discussion evolves constructively as they share their feelings towards those who wronged them in the *khatna* process, *khatna's* emotional and physical ramifications, and discuss how to move forward. The discussion even strikes Zainab, Sharifa's cousin who was previously portrayed as a traditionalist woman unaffected by Fatema's activism, as she remembers parts of her experience: "At least the colouring books, the smell of crayons...my mother smiling at me and telling me how... proud she was of me to be so brave and so good..."<sup>33</sup> The women all have vastly different experiences with *khatna*. Beyond simply sharing these experiences, the women recognize the differences in their stories and use these various narratives to build power that will aid in their collective mobilization. As Audre Lorde explains:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of the difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996), 1661–93. doi:10.1086/230870.

<sup>32</sup> James DeFilippis and Susan Saegert, "Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment: Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker," *The Community Development Reader* (2007), 247–54.

<sup>33</sup> Doctor, *Seven*, 199.

<sup>34</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 2012), 111.

As the women interact with each other's experiences fully, they are able to find solace in their stories' similarities and distinctions—building a discourse and sense of interdependence that can propel action. Thus arises a cooperative form of mobilization in which no one woman's story or experience defines the community. This cooperative interdependence enables the exploration of their narrative as survivors while simultaneously building new visions for the future. Their care for one another sparks discussions on how to move forward and channel their individual experiences into a mobilized force. This ultimately culminates in the protest, a stirring model of collectivist orientation and community organizing at work as “mothers” recognize that the most powerful mothering is not a dyadic exchange but a communal cooperative.

*Seven* transforms the role of the mother while still retaining some of the traditional essences of motherhood. Rather than viewing this traditional role as restrictive, *Seven* attempts to reshape it into one of power and highlight the importance of community organization grounded in the ethics of care. This “community mothering” of peers creates an interdependence within the community, ensuring that the development of each woman's consciousness will also mean the development of the group's consciousness. As Audre Lorde explains, “for women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered.”<sup>35</sup> These women, Sharifa included, begin to understand that the only way to advance their cause and their liberation is through the protection of one another, making it the only viable course of action. During the protest Sharifa recalls, “I think about how I once tut-tutted through the articles about FGM that came my way, assuming the stories were exceptional, not the norm. Not in my community, not in our family, not me. I ignored what I wasn't able to see, the delusions keeping me safe but also stuck.”<sup>36</sup> Sharifa's consciousness of her own past actions is indicative of not only her personal growth but that of the community she is surrounded by, as the sharing of each woman's experience and connection to *khatna* is ultimately acts to develop their group's consciousness. Interdependency between women then becomes the way to freedom and liberation that are not possible to realize when individuated. The power of this community organizing is evident not only in having exposed the malpractices of the local hospital and achieving visibility in the press—though these are also welcome changes—but also in its ability to bring women together for this moment and build relationships within their own community.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Doctor, *Seven*, 316.

### Conclusion

These samples of literature and poetry provide insight into the developing models of mothering and daughterhood that define the various experiences of the South Asian Canadian diaspora. Though the mothers' efforts to bestow agency were often far from perfect, they allow for an alternate interpretation and understanding of what it means to be a member of the South Asian diaspora. In *The Sun and Her Flowers*, Kaur highlights how a mother may model freedom from patriarchy and colonial violence, creating the possibility for her daughter to offset the misogynistic traditional views of women as solely caretakers and martyrs. Kaur's poems were strongest when mothers were observed in periods of reflection or as active agents by their daughters, as these models pave the way for daughters and future models of motherhood. Building on Kaur's constructive model that centers self-reflection and examples of choice, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Creates a model that emphasizes the need for communal mothering and critiques motherhood as an institution. By finding solace in motherhood as an experience, Badami is able to interrogate the efficacy of the nuclear family model, find joy in a community, and lay the groundwork for *Seven's* model. Finally, *Seven* showcases how these motherly models of freedom can mobilize communities and build understanding and empathy, while still empowering individual agency as social movements are spurred. Each piece provides a unique understanding of motherhood, daughterhood, and community as they build upon the ideas of one another and provide models for the South Asian diasporic community.

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