



Research article

# Unveiling the 'Mask of Motherhood': Daughter Decodes Mother's Postpartum Struggle in Maya Shanbhag Lang's Memoir *What We Carry* (2020)

Sumana Mukherjee<sup>1\*</sup> & Amrita Satapathy<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management, Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar, India. \*Corresponding author.

## Abstract

Mother and motherhood have always been associated with an unachievable archetype- strong, competent, effortless, untroubled, and invincible. Transmitted from mothers to daughters, this image has symbolized the trope of the ideal mother and motherhood for ages. The incessant expectations from Indian mothers as idols of altruism and boundless affection have generated a fabricated idea of motherhood. This situation often places new mothers in a bind, the starting point of which begins with not recognizing their postpartum struggle. Further, it imposes a burden on such mothers by thrusting them into a state of mental anxiety and depression. Maya Shanbhag Lang's (2020) memoir *What We Carry* deals with the unvoiced and yet crucial topic of postpartum depression. While battling her postpartum depression, Maya seeks her 'perfect' mother's (a renowned psychiatrist) help and support to overcome her post-natal struggles. Unwittingly she realizes that her mother is fighting old age and dementia. By using the theories of Susan Maushart's 'mask of motherhood' and Andrea O' Reilley's 'empowered mothering' this paper seeks to find out how Maya's postpartum depression and her mother's dementia brings out the inherent 'maternal guilt' and the faltering corporeality of motherhood and gives an empowered definition of mothering.

**Keywords:** Mask of motherhood, Postpartum struggle, Maternal guilt, Empowered mothering, Depression, Dementia

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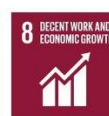
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## Introduction:

Once there was a woman in a river. She held a child in her arms. Her son. She needed to cross the river, but it was much deeper than expected. As the water reached her chest, she panicked. "She saw that she had a choice. She could save herself or she could save her child. They would not both make it. What does she do? (Lang, 2020, p. xi)

Through the recurrent allusion to this myth, Maya Shanbagh Lang (2020), in *What We Carry*, tries to acquaint her readers with the vicious circle of motherhood. It has been observed that most grand Indian mythological narratives focus on the safety and well-being of the child and celebrate 'sacrificial mothers' as the culmination of a woman's existence (Sangha, 2010, p. 1147). Mother and motherhood have always been associated with an unachievable archetype- strong, competent, effortless, invincible, unperturbed in any crisis, and committed to the expected duties. The idea of a mother goes beyond all the parameters of human emotions and endurance and eventually becomes a distant 'other.' Simon de Beauvoir (1956) points out this façade of the great mother's 'other' image. This 'other' image helps society maintain the monolithic motherhood narrative. In *Interrogating Motherhood*, Bagchi (2017) points out how Indian culture puts mothers in an escalated position of a goddess, which eventually creates a contrasting reality "...between the mythical status of mother as a goddess, who is an active agent, and the passive victimhood of mothers in lived life..." (p. 47). Transmitted from mothers to daughters, this image has propagated the trope of an ideal mother for ages. In her groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich (1986) differentiates between the patriarchal ideal of the sacrificial image of 'motherhood' and the real experience of mothering shared by women and explains how the ideal version of mothers stands as a stark contrast to the reality. This anecdote finds its reflection in Sashi Deshpande's (2006) words, where she declares childbirth is "not only a hideously painful process but a cruel and ugly one whose ignominy can never be forgotten" (p. 132); she also refers to, in this context, that motherhood is a 'state of vulnerability' (p. 132). The incessant expectations from Indian mothers as idols of altruism and boundless affection generate a fabricated idea of motherhood, which often places new mothers in a bind, the starting point of which begins with not acknowledging their postpartum struggle. Further, it imposes a burden on such mothers by thrusting them into a state of mental anxiety and depression. Maya Shanbagh Lang's (2020) memoir *What We Carry* deals with the unvoiced and yet crucial topic of postpartum depression.

The postpartum period starts just after the delivery of the baby and usually lasts six to eight weeks when mothers experience depressive symptoms. In this transition period, where women become mothers, they face multiple challenges. In the twenty-first century, where mental health and well-being hold great importance, in India, awareness about postpartum depression has been

relegated to a corner. By analyzing thirty-eight studies involving 20,043 women in different articles published from the year 2000 to 31 March 2016, Ravi Prakash Upadhyay et al. (2017) have found that 22 percent of new mothers in India suffer from postpartum depression. Research conducted by Vatsla Dadhwal et al. (2023) shows how postpartum depression and anxiety (PPD/A) in rural Indian women has become a prevalent phenomenon, with almost 5.6 percent of women dealing with PPD/A. A cross-sectional hospital-based study in Pune, India led by Shraddha Lanjewar et al. (2021), finds that 26 percent of urban mothers are afflicted with postpartum depression. This study also posits that new mothers who get strong social support experience less postpartum depression.

Postpartum struggle has long been a much-avoided topic among women and also in society. Like the unnamed narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1892) short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" laments:

"If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency- what is one to do?" (p. 1148)

Thus, the focus has always been on the joys of motherhood but never on the pain and struggle that ensues after childbirth. The feelings of sadness, tiredness, and anxiety that follow after childbirth make it difficult for a mother to take care of herself and her child. What is normally mistaken as 'baby blues' can be peripartum depression that can last for more than just a few weeks. New mothers undergo depressed mood or severe mood swings, difficulty in bonding with the baby, loss of appetite, crying, irritability, insomnia, and the fear of not being a good mother, among others (Carlson et al., 2024). In addition, lack of mental support from partners and family, higher infant-focused anxiety, and parenting stress make mothers' lives more vulnerable (Upadhyay et al., 2017; Shraddha Lanjewar et al., 2021; T Vatsla Dadhwal et al., 2023). These symptoms have hardly received any attention in society and have thus been left unchecked and unattended. New mothers suffering from postpartum depression or developing postpartum psychosis require medical attention immediately. Agnieszka Gawron (2020) illustrates how postpartum depression still "remains one of the strongest maternal and cultural taboos" (p. 88) and how "...incorporation of postpartum depression into the literary tradition is important not only as an act of breaking "the conspiracy of silence" but also in view of its cognitive, social and therapeutic functions" (p. 98).

In "Writing Autobiography", bell hooks (1999) states "The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release" (p. 84). To portray a realistic picture of this issue of postpartum depression, autobiographical narratives have become a suitable and powerful form. Memoirs have now taken center stage and are at the heart of literary conversations on personal issues that have social and psychological ramifications and have often been relegated to the sidelines. Though the writer of a memoir is the subject itself, his/her experiences and observations on external events have larger implications. As narratives of self-discovery and self-reflection, memoirs situate the subject "in a social environment, as either observer or participant" directing "attention more towards the lives and actions of others than to the narrator" (Smith & Watson, 2024, p. 274). Thus, the boundaries between personal and public, subject and object in a

memoir are not definitive (Smith & Watson, 2024). Hence, the “versatility and openness of the form” (p. 113) undoubtedly helps to uncover secrets and taboos, communicates painful experiences, and subsequently extends the reader’s sympathies and allows them therapeutically to face their anxieties and fears (Anderson, 2011). This is because, unlike an autobiography, a memoir articulates the actual, lived experiences of the subject’s life. It delves deeply into the memoirist’s life and helps the reader gain fresh insights into new perspectives on matters that have received little to no attention. Therefore, for the study of a deeply personal experience like postpartum depression and an eventual discovery of inherent maternal struggle, a memoir can be an apt medium to survey. The gravity of a topic like postpartum depression and its subsequent address through memoirs like Susan Kushner Resnick’s (2000) *Sleepless Days: One Woman’s Journey Through Postpartum Depression* and Brooke Shields’ (2005) *Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression* created awareness and garnered global attention. However, there remains a dearth of literature addressing the postnatal experiences faced by Indian mothers. Maya Shanbagh Lang’s memoir attempts to bridge this gap by sharing her journey and the evolving dynamics of her relationship with her mother. In a conversation with Kavita Das (2020), Lang discusses the portrayal of raw and unglamorous motherhood in her memoir. She highlights how her memoir voices the feelings of maternal vulnerability, invisibility, and loss of self, and advocates for a redefinition of motherhood. By exploring the universal aspects of the puerperal experience and critiquing the idealized cultural image of motherhood, Maya’s memoir adds to the developing field of postpartum literature, as a narrative of “self-understanding, self-improvement, and self-healing” (Smith & Watson, 2024, p. 231)

Therefore, this paper will examine the cultural expectations surrounding Indian motherhood through a close reading of Maya Shanbhag Lang’s memoir *What We Carry* (2020). Drawing upon Susan Maushart’s (2000) concept of ‘mask of motherhood’ that promotes selfless mothers as the ‘ideal’ and Andrea O’Reilly’s (2016) framework of ‘empowered mothering’ which challenges these socially prescribed norms of a good mother, this paper will analyze the idealized image of the perfect mother, which forms a ‘mask’ and conceals the emotional tolls of new mothers. It will also focus on how Lang’s memoir exposes the ‘conspiracy of silence’ (Maushart, p. 5) that effectively enshrouds the ongoing whirlwind of a mother’s life, trapping mothers in a constant struggle between the relentless demands of their newborns and their own physical and mental exhaustion. For this, it will engage in a process of unmasking by highlighting the private, often concealed experiences of motherhood which will reconcile “reproductive power with social rights and responsibilities—a peculiarly female challenge with repercussions for all humanity (Maushart, p.36). By focusing on the challenges of postpartum struggle and depression this paper will investigate how Maya Shanbagh Lang’s memoir challenges societal expectations and promotes a realistic and empathetic understanding of motherhood.

### **The Construction of the “Mask”**

All masks are props for pretending. They can be tragic or comic, serenely composed or agape with horror. Yet every mask, regardless of the content of its expression, projects uniformity, predictability, stasis. ( Maushart, 2000, p. 1)

The dominant cultural ideologies reduce the mother-child relationship to the pathological caregiver-care seeker connection, which begins with the formulation of the 'mask of motherhood.' The traditional psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud is mainly concerned with child development and therefore dismisses pregnancy, giving birth, and breastfeeding, and the process of 'mothering' as purely instinctual to women and declares motherhood as the "culmination of a woman's psychosexual development" (Vallance, 2010). The psychoanalyst John Bowlby's attachment theory suggests how 'physical proximity and secure attachment with parents help infants (six months to two years) in their developmental phase' (Vallance, 2010). As meanings get culturally constructed, the nomenclature 'parent' in Bowlby's theory eventually becomes synonymous with the 'mother.' By keeping the infant's needs in the center, society pressurizes mothers to behave in a certain preconceived way, thus ignoring the vulnerability of new mothers.

Therefore, one fails to recognize the mother as a mere human being who gets tired, depressed, sheds tears, or braves to choose their needs before their children's. One always perceives the mother as a flawless embodiment of idolized motherhood without noticing her struggle against the odds to keep the 'mask of motherhood' from falling. At the beginning of Maya Shanbagh Lang's (2020) memoir, her mother appears as the epitome of a 'perfect mother' who is very sympathetic towards her children's needs, who has "... sacrificed everything for her children", and who shows no symptoms of "maternal selfishness" in her behavior (p. xii). Although sometimes she appears to be a little abrupt in her decisions, "her decisions had always worked out" (p. 3) in her children's favour. Maya appears to be captivated by her confident mother's helpful gestures towards others. She always picturizes her as "a doctor radiating authority, even in a nightgown" (p. 4). She is an Indian immigrant in America who is, by profession, a renowned psychiatrist who shockingly divorces her husband after nearly thirty years of their marriage but is a very 'capable mother' according to her daughter's words. Maya's words prove that she can be anything but not an imperfect mother. Maya herself declares, "I may not always understand her, but I have complete faith in her" (p. 4). Naturally, Maya imbibes that perfect form of motherhood, showcased by her mother, and continually aspires to become one. Psychologist Paula J. Caplan (1981) in her *Barriers Between Women* explains how the ideological construction of motherhood naturally induces the daughters to take up "...the role of nurturer. [s]he sacrifices her wish to be nurtured" (p. 30) because she never sees her mother "choosing herself" (p. xii) over her son.

Therefore, quite thrilled and overwhelmed, Maya, with her new responsibilities, first turns to her mother for support with her nine-day-old daughter. Instead of teaching her "how to manage motherhood, to describe what she has done" (p. xii), her mother unexpectedly looks for ways to escape the situation. Instead of assuring Maya with comforting and sympathetic words, her mother starts to allude to the mythical story of the mother-child crossing a river. Suddenly, she becomes an enigma for Maya to solve. When her mother asks Maya to choose between mother and child, she starts to feel restless. Where all through the years, she has aspired to be 'who her mother had always been'; in the face of the situation, her mother ends up giving her a riddle (p. xii). At that point, "a woman choosing herself" over her child sounds like an 'audacity' (p. xii) to Maya. The ideal image of a mother that subsists in a definition is superlative- she is either as fiercely protective as a mother bear in a jungle or as sacrificing in nature as the selfless King Karna from *Mahabharata*. She reminisces about her immigrant Indian mother who once fought with a disrespectful American dentist just to ensure her daughter's safety. Maya remembers how her

mother once drove from Boston to New York to deliver a comfortable chair to soothe her aching lower back without paying little attention to the latter's exhaustion. Therefore, it seems quite a blasphemous declaration to Maya when her mother withdraws herself and rather advises her not to judge but accept a mother's decision without despising it because "whatever a woman decides, it is not easy" (p. xii)

Fiona Joy Green (2010) talks about the 'mask of motherhood' and how it "contains an assemblage of fronts used by mothers to disguise the chaos and complexity of mothering," which eventually helps to eternalize the 'silence' (p. 691). The reason behind the predominance of this unrealistic standard of being a 'good mother' is partially because "mothers themselves do not want to let others know their plight and suffering and rather love to focus on their child only" (Maushart, 2000, p. 16). When Maya becomes a mother, she begins associating herself with the "woman in the river, up to her chest in rising waters, paralyzed by fear and indecision" (p. xiii). Slowly, she begins comprehending the 'mask of silence', covering the chaos of motherhood. When her mother desperately tries to justify the decisions she has made in her life, she unknowingly prepares Maya to realize the immense pressure mothers feel while putting on the stifling 'mask' of 'good mothering'.

### **"Am I Not a Good Mother"?**

And then began the doubts, the agonies—Was I an unnatural woman? An unnatural mother? Why couldn't I breastfeed my child? Why did I so often feel trapped? (Deshpande, 2006, p. 132)

In the introduction to *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari Thurer (1994) explicates how the current ideologies of 'good mothering' are arduous and abstemious to the extent of being unfeasible. She also adds that "...contemporary myth heaps upon the mothers so many duties and expectations that to take it seriously would be hazardous to her mental health (p. xvi). Maithreyi Krishnaraj (2010) further clarifies that it is not giving birth and mothering that make a mother's life vulnerable but the "social implications for women flowing from the meaning attached to the idea of motherhood..." (p. 22) that inflict a significant amount of pain on her.

The 'mask of silence' (Maushart, 2000, p. xx) denies daughters the discernment of the real and muddled condition of motherhood. When daughters become mothers, the angelic images of motherhood suddenly start to crumble around them as they realize nothing is as they were shown in their childhood. The performance of being a 'good mother' fills the daughter's/new mother's life with innumerable struggles. The same feelings are experienced by Maya when she tries to write letters to her unborn daughter to give her "evidence of how loved she is" (p. 24) and realizes she wants her future mom-version to be "nurturing, loving, adept, someone who bakes pies and gives the best hugs..." (p. 24). But that mother unexpectedly and with time seems "utterly fictitious" (p. 24) to Maya. Although she struggles to achieve that "straight line trajectory" (p. 24), which her mother sets up as a benchmark, she fails to become one. Maushart points out how "the gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, has resulted in a peculiar cultural schizophrenia about motherhood" (p. 7). As a narrator and protagonist of her memoir, Maya delves into the problems of this gap and provides insightful commentary on how it affects young mothers. Her lived experiences provide a sense of fidelity to the narrative, making it a powerful critique of postpartum depression and its impact on motherhood. It also becomes a tale

that positions young and vulnerable mothers like Maya "...as survivors with imagination, energy, and resilience." (Smith & Watson, p. 30)

To Maya, the depths of her gloom hardly make any sense. Gradually, she blames herself, "Why can't I get a grip? You're a mom, I tell myself. You need to snap out of it." (p. 42) For her, motherhood "prove[s] harder, more exhausting, than anything she has done before being a mother herself" (p. 56). She fails to achieve her motherhood story as a 'heroic' one, full of 'self-sufficiency' (p. 56). But what she misses is that being a human being- it is impossible to match the inhuman demands of motherhood. Shari Thurer (1994) explains how the idea of 'good mothering' is oblivious to a mother's desires, limitations, and context and how 'mother blame' is a common practice in this scenario. In her book, *Motherguilt*, Diane E. Eyer (1996) explains how the 'good mother' ideology frames mothers by creating "rigid, unrealistic ideals and then faulting mothers for not adhering to them" which ultimately leads mothers to the "dead-end road of mother-blaming" (p. 34). In the article *The Governance of Mothers*, Michelle Hughes Miller (2020) explains how, by internalizing the 'good and bad mother myths' (p. 462) all the ideological and coercive mechanisms of motherhood convince mothers to blame themselves for their inevitable failures (p. 462). Before Maya becomes a mother, in her imaginary journey of motherhood, maternal martyrdom appears to be a 'bliss'. But in reality, when exhaustion hits her with the newfound 'all-consuming' and 'picture-perfect' motherhood, the first thing she does is accuse herself of her exhaustion and her failure to enjoy her motherhood. Eyer's (1996) statement that "Generations of ideal-manufacturers have taught mothers to blame themselves for the son or daughter who is unemployed, unhappily married, divorced, substance abusing, or even just cranky." (p. xiii) justifies Maya's mother-blaming and self-loathing.

In the real scenario, motherhood is marked with a love-and-hate relationship with the infant known as 'maternal ambivalence' which Adrienne Rich (1986) explains as the "murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (p. 21). The 'mask of motherhood', as Maushart (2000) explains, "ensures that the face of ambivalence, however widely or keenly felt, remains a guilty secret" (p. 111). Erma Bombeck (1983) debunks the myth of 'perfect motherhood' by explaining that there is no 'one-size-fits-all mould' of motherhood that is 'all-encompassing and means the same to all...' (p. 2) and exposes the faulty parameters of 'good/bad mother' by explaining that "ambivalence runs through their veins" (p. 3); ambivalence in motherhood, thus, is instinctual and natural.

Maya shares candidly about her moments of maternal rage towards everything around her. She explains how her mental and physical exhaustion made Zoe's cry "more piercing than usual" (p. 49), how she senses the rising of the "small red balloon of anger" (p. 54) in her chest, how she becomes cognizant of the fact that "each blessing of her life look[s] like a burden" (p. 50) and finally ends up emotionally "trapped in an endless negative loop" (p. 50). Ivana Brown (2010) discusses how the findings of qualitative sociological research suggest that the "lack of preparation and understanding of the true reality of motherhood experience represents one of the factors central to the presence of maternal ambivalence" (p. 51). Maya's struggle makes her rethink the propounded definition of motherhood. She gradually realizes there are no brownie points in sacrificing everything as a mother; rather, it adds to the continuing and faltering corporeality of motherhood.

## Postpartum Anxiety, Struggle, and Depression

What is happiness, exactly? I imagine the woman in the river felt some sliver of relief as the water rose above her. Sometimes it is strangely pleasant to drown oneself, to give into the current and watch the world recede. (Lang, 2020, p. 88)

*What We Carry* (2020) explores the incongruity between expectations and the reality of motherhood, which, as Cheryl Tatano Beck (2002) explains, “emotions of despair and sadness [that] started the mothers’ spiral downward into postpartum depression” (p. 458). A series of discontented expectations mark the advent of the postpartum period, and as new mothers are gradually ushered into the state of motherhood, the disillusionment begins—new mothers develop the tendency to blame themselves for failing their children. Similar thoughts are expressed on the pages of Maya’s memoir. One feels increasingly ashamed for thinking about the money spent to hire a nurse. She generates self-hatred by considering herself a ‘waste of space’ (p. 50). She starts feeling “wading through a pool of black tar with a hundred-pound backpack saddling her shoulders” (p. 49). Maya exhibits self-harming thoughts where she imagines a demonic voice constantly accusing her, “*If you were really depressed, you’d kill yourself. Faker!*” (p. 49) She is overwhelmed when her mother, her ‘backup parachute’ (p. 53), declines to assist her during her days of drudgery with her newborn. When Maya’s anticipation that her mother will always be by her side shatters, she is unable to tackle the refusal and plunges into a state of extreme depression.

Beck (2002) also elucidates how cultural contexts can serve as intensifying agents in postpartum depression (p. 461) and how the abundance of destructive Indian myths that celebrate sacrificial mothers as the normative form of motherhood force new mothers to “believe that no other mothers shared their negative reactions to childbirth” (p. 458). She compares postpartum depression to a ‘chameleon’, which can take on a “different appearance depending on which specific mother is experiencing” (p. 462). What is more problematic in a society is that most women rely on the abstract and theoretical ideals of motherhood, and as their high expectations face a ‘steep learning curve’ (Maushart, p.120), they helplessly struggle to reconcile. Instead of having a heavenly, beautiful reality, they get served with a “lethal cocktail of loneliness, chronic fatigue, and panic” (Maushart, p. 120). As Maya gradually sinks into the pool of loneliness, she finally deciphers that “depression is a broken bone no one can see” (p. 48) and takes up a resolution to get out of this mentally wearying state.

The most important part of the memoir is that Maya not only discloses the details of her postpartum depression but also advises medical assistance and psychotherapy to overcome the condition. Her memoir does not overly pathologize the condition but refutes the general sentiment current in society that PPD/A should be dismissed just as a ‘disorder.’ It implies that the severity of PPD/A has to be realized, addressed, and shared by new mothers and families. The humane appeal through the lines proves that to break the ‘mask of silence’ about postpartum depression, the first thing society needs to do is to acknowledge the presence of postpartum depression. The book brings to light the oft-neglected or dismissed fact that new mothers are prone to this condition and need to seek medical assistance.

Maya states that it takes a little more time to shed off restlessness, loneliness, and anxiety of not being able to enjoy her time with the baby, and the guilt of burdening her husband and family.



With immense support from her husband Noah, Maya finally agrees to hire a nurse for her baby and also consult a psychiatrist. Putting aside her initial shame of spending too much on professional caregiving facilities, she decides to work on herself. Caren, the professional baby nurse, with her deep, soothing voice, wins her trust by taking good care of baby Zoe (p. 45). The medical proficiency of Caren motivates Maya to unburden herself from the immense millstone of maternal duties. She realizes that her depression can only be dealt with fortitude and forbearance. Proper medication and multiple sessions with her psychiatrist finally start to work in her favor, and as the 'red balloon' of anger, pain, betrayal, and confusion slowly begins to fade away, she feels progressively relieved. (p. 56)

As she heals herself from her postpartum depression, she comprehends how demanding she has sounded towards her mother. She apprehends that when the role switches, she is equally demanding as her little daughter Zoe. Maya admits that she was embarrassed about her behaviour towards her mother. She understands that there is no true happiness in subsuming one's own needs as a mother (p. 69) but rather new mothers are required to find a firmer grasp on themselves. As she finds writing to be her own 'coping mechanism' (p. 24), she finally decides to give a chance to achieve her dream through the written medium. Even with her sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion, she becomes aware of a motivating energy working on her mind. She understands the futility of the frivolous activities undertaken by women portrayed in the media and advises new mothers to

"[f]ind yourself. Gather yourself up before it is too late. You are at the risk of getting buried. Maybe you're already feeling buried. Do something that will solidify your sense of self, buttress your retaining walls. Don't worry if it feels scary. It's probably a good thing if it does." (p. 69).

The all-radiating mask of 'composer and compliance' worn by Maya's mother throughout her life, "reinforced the prevailing assumption that nothing is too troublesome" (Maushart, p. 132) in the journey of motherhood. Her mother's initial rejection of helping Maya, by giving the excuse of 'bodily exhaustion'(p. 52), caused Maya to slip into acute depression. Eventually, she comprehends that her mother's consequent exhaustion is not because of her workload but because of carrying the immense ideological baggage of 'maternal guilt throughout her life. Unwittingly, she realizes that her mother is fighting old age and dementia. The memoir also addresses dementia as a catalytic agent that facilitates the deconstruction of the normative and grand image of mother and motherhood.

### **Dementia: A Catalytic Agent for Identifying the Embedded Maternal Guilt**

Among various symptoms of dementia, social withdrawal and failure to engage in a proper conversation with people around are the most common. Instead of making a logical and causal narrative, individuals become 'wounded storytellers' through fragments of different things and moments that produce hallucinations (Simonhjell, 2018, p. 139). Through fragmented conversations at various times, Maya eventually interprets that the 'mother' in the reiterated mythical mother-child story reflects her mother. She becomes cognizant of how her mother, during her early days in America, "spread too thin between work and marriage and motherhood"

(p. 225), makes a desperate phone call to Bombay and asks her parents to help her as a young and struggling mother in the far-off USA. This reminiscence ultimately brings the mother and daughter into the same plane. Maya understands that this particular incident left a deep mark on her mother's life. Throughout her life, she carried a deep sense of shame and guilt in her mind. Therefore, Maya's mother often declines to share any first-hand childcare experiences. She fabricates her stories and advises Maya to conform to permitted and established forms of ideal motherhood because the 'mask of motherhood' never allows a good mother to abandon her child; the child should always be the priority in a mother's life. Maushart (2000) correctly identifies that "the guilt is the most painful abrasion of all creeping fear" (p. 113) and as such, feelings are rarely acknowledged because they challenge the predominant 'mask of motherhood'. Therefore, women undergoing this struggle tend to blame themselves for such feelings. Her condition after immigrating to America perfectly echoes with Sharon Hays's (1996) statement:

If she is a mother who works too hard at her job or career, some will accuse her of neglecting the kids. If she does not work hard enough, some will surely place her on the "mommy track" and her career advancement will be permanently slowed by the claim that her commitment to her children interferes with her workplace efficiency. And if she stays at home with her children, some will call her unproductive and useless. A woman, in other words, can never fully do it right. (p. 133)

Through the changing dynamics between a mother and a daughter, parenting, and caretaking, Maya realizes how she overlooked her mother's emotional and physical drainage by her marriage, the constant dilemma between choosing between career and motherhood, and subsequent sinking into fear and guilt. This disclosure eventually helps Maya to see beyond the closed box of 'perfect motherhood' and saves her from making the same mistakes as her mother. The 'mask of motherhood' ultimately disintegrates, and a new empowered definition of motherhood emerges.

### **A Definition of Empowered Mothering**

Andrea O'Reilly (2016) uses the term 'empowered mothering' as a redefinition of the dominant ideological form of motherhood from various cultural maternal perspectives and positions. It projects motherhood as more "rewarding, fulfilling, and satisfying for women by affirming maternal agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism..." (p. 71). Narratives about such mothering practices enable mothers to embrace their selfhood along with motherhood. Susan Maushart lauds the work of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience And Institution* (1986) as a brave attempt that uncovers the detrimental 'masks of motherhood.' She also adds that 'unmasking motherhood' is the biggest challenge of all the other 'women's issues.' (p. 239). She ends her book by saying that "[w]hen the masks of motherhood do crack through, they will have been eroded by tears that have been shed and shared, by the tremor of secrets unclasped, and by the booming laughter of relief (p. 246).

Maya's battle with postpartum depression and her mother's dementia compels the former to look under the veil. She puts forth her views on how Indian society makes falsified generalizations about women as the 'natural caretakers' and daughters as not "... hardwired to give up their dreams" (p. 224). When she decodes the embedded maternal guilt carried by mothers throughout

their lives, it enables and prompts her to redefine the whole definition of motherhood. She finds out that her daughter makes her “look at dreams anew” (p. 68). She realizes that she cannot urge her daughter to pursue her dream if, as a mother, she is not pursuing her own. She interprets how having a baby is rather not a burden but a way to freedom of the self when she realizes, “Zoe makes me want to be the best version of myself. That isn’t sacrifice. It’s an inspiration.” (p. 60) She understands that if she wants her daughter not “to feel obligated to anyone, especially if it compromises her well-being” (p. 72), she should start prioritizing herself. As she witnesses her mother’s slow decline into dementia, she decides to begin over. Her eventual decision to join a gym marks the first step towards self-care. The gym instructor’s subsequent explanations inspire her “to remember fitness is a process” (p. 119) and “we shouldn’t ask so much of any part” (p. 120). Maya’s experience with motherhood resonates with her belief that “Too much strength can be its own weakness” (p. 120).

Towards the end of her memoir, Maya again comes back to the mythical story of the mother-child in the river and frames a new version of the story where the mother does not die but rather teaches the child to swim. Together, they make a strong team where both of them learn to embrace their own identity and learn to fight back against all odds- societal, mental, and physical. In her own story, Maya feels her daughter helps to cross the river and gives her a “life in its glorious and teeming fullness” (p. 266). As Maya decodes her mother’s struggle, she becomes aware of this vicious circle of transmitting the ‘guilt’ from generation to generation; she decides to break the circle by not replicating the problem in her life. She decides to become, “honest, rather than impressive, vulnerable rather than proud, real rather than mythic” (p. 254). She realizes, “Myths are nice. They just aren’t very useful” (p. 255).

## **Conclusion**

Although globally, around 6.5% to 20% of postpartum individuals can develop depression (Sharma et al. in Carlson et al., 2024), the voices of women suffering from this condition often remain silent. What we discern is that most of the women are reluctant to reveal their unhappiness after the birth of their babies. However, little has been done to investigate “why women take so long to seek help.” (Zauderer, 2009). In most scenarios, as Maushart (2000) explains, the public recognition of PPD has somehow proven to be a ‘two-edged sword’ for women; by dismissing it as a bona fide disorder, society impels the mothers to believe it is an absolute anomaly and a matter of shame. Thus, the “existence of the diagnostic label has tended to drive the normal abnormalcy of early motherhood even farther underground” (p. 116). The deliberate pretension that everything is under control, drives mothers to cling more tightly to the ‘mask of motherhood’.

Therefore, Maya Shanbagh Lang’s (2020) postpartum depression memoir *What We Carry*, identifies as a significant example of mothering and motherhood because of the delicate and humane dealing with this sensitive topic. To reiterate, the memoir in Linda Anderson’s words is “flexible and outward looking” and “unpretentious” (p. 113) in its dealing with a subject that is not much a topic of discussion. Thus, the memoir form becomes all the weightier as Maya refrains from divulging her mother’s name. It flouts Edward Misch’s argument that a memoir is composed of only memories in terms of their etymology and “tend[s] to avoid psychological depth and concentrate instead on external events of which their writers are ‘merely observers’” (Mirsch as

quoted in Anderson, 2011, p. 113) This intentional/unintentional attempt on the part of the memoirist to keep her mother's identity hidden makes it a narrative of every woman and every mother. The unnamed mother, as one of the central characters, becomes a strong foil to Maya. Her namelessness is synonymous with the issue of postpartum depression that is being addressed in the memoir- a condition that remains misconstrued and overlooked, struggling to make itself visible and heard. It signifies society's peripheralization not only of the condition but also of the women who suffer from postpartum depression. Maya Shanbagh Lang, by according a position of anonymity to her mother, universalizes this condition in her narrative deftly. The faceless mother thus epitomizes the face of every silently suffering woman and new mother. In her very absence lies her presence and her strength.

The detailed description of her battle with depression and the use of dementia as a medium to unfold the age-old internalized mask of 'perfect motherhood' (Douglas & Meredith, 2004) aptly aids in the swift movement of the action. The memoir opens endless avenues for research on the severity of dementia as a disease and the changing dynamics of a mother-daughter relationship. As she decodes her mother's postpartum struggle and builds connections with her own life, she eventually connects all the mothers' experiences of maternal struggle and anxiety. Maya Shanbagh Lang's memoir reflects what Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels (2004) say in *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*.

...women, women's magazines, indeed the entire media, must do a better job of telling the full story of what mothering is about—warts and all. Unless we start admitting ourselves and each other that it's not always a walk in the park, our guilt, anger fear, and depression will continue to go underground. (p. 323)

Comprehending the unachievable expectations attached to motherhood, Maya propounds an emancipating and transformative definition of mothering. She ends her memoir by anticipating a gender-neutral way of parenting where men will serve as caretakers in equal proportion to women, by dreaming of a world where there will be no stigma attached to a new mother dealing with postpartum depression. She dreams of a world where, instead of promoting myths of sacrificial mother-child relations, mothers will teach daughters the meaning of self-love and respect by choosing themselves.

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Sumana Mukherjee is a Research Scholar in the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Management at the Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. She works in the broad area of motherhood studies in contemporary Indian fiction. Through literary studies, she wishes to explore and provide fresh viewpoints on the ontological narratives of gender and motherhood.

Amrita Satapathy is an Associate Professor in the School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management at the Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. Her areas of interest include Autobiography and Memoirs, Travel Literature, Indian Writings in English, Creative Writing, Cinema, and Popular Culture. She has extensively published in the form of academic articles, journals, and book chapters and presented papers nationally and internationally as well. She has two books to her credit: 'Shifting Images: The Idea of England in Indian Writing in English' (2011) published by Lambert Academic Publishing, Germany and 'Limning London' (2016), by Authors Press, New Delhi.

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