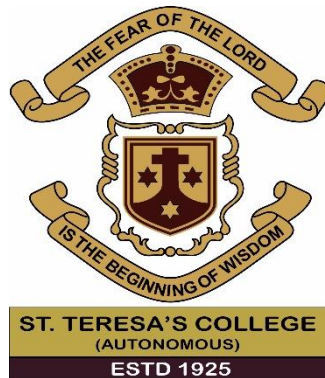


**DEMYSTIFYING MOTHERHOOD AND TRAUMA IN MAYA
SHANBHAG LANG'S *WHAT WE CARRY: A MEMOIR***



*Project submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University in partial fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in
English Language and Literature*

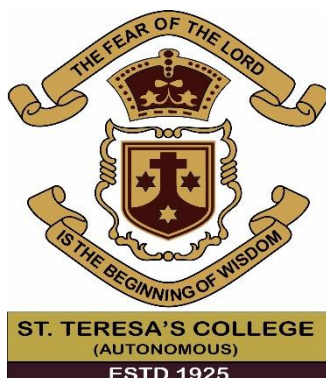
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I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Demystifying Motherhood and Trauma in Maya Shanbhag Lang’s *What We Carry: A Memoir*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Lakshmipriya P. Santhosh, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Centre for Research, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title of recognition.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Demystifying Motherhood and Trauma in Maya Shanbhag Lang’s *What We Carry: A Memoir*” is a record of bona fide work carried out by Riyan Joseph Raju under my supervision and guidance.

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An Abstract of the Project Entitled:
Demystifying Motherhood and Trauma in Maya Shanbhag
Lang's *What We Carry: A Memoir*

by

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The project analyses the realities of motherhood in Maya Shanbhag Lang's *What We Carry: A Memoir*. The study subverts the popular perception of motherhood glorified by societal norms and reinforced by gender roles. The introduction offers an insight into gender roles and glorification of motherhood, a preface to the genre of memoir and a synopsis of the book. The first chapter provides a basic understanding of motherhood studies. The second chapter makes an in-depth analysis of Maya Shanbhag Lang's work using the theory of motherhood studies and the third chapter examines how the paternal figure induces trauma through the concept of developmental trauma. The conclusion draws the observation that the institution of motherhood is essentially a patriarchal construct designed to oppress women and motherhood is something that is learned rather than an inherent characteristic of women.

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Introduction

The subject of motherhood has been a topic of discussion throughout the years. Being a mother is so closely tied with a woman's identity, so much so that women are often shamed when they do not exhibit a desire to become mothers or unable to conceive. Even if they do become mothers their behaviours and attitudes become a subject of severe scrutiny and much criticism.

Patriarchal values and traditions have been notorious for the suppression of women's freedom and desires. These values propagate the idea that a woman can become complete only after becoming a mother. There also exists a great deal of complexity surrounding the manner through which one becomes a mother. A woman is only considered a "real" mother if she gives birth to her child. This effectively discredits the mother status of those women who become mothers through the process of adoption, surrogacy, and so on. Thus, deceptive in nature, these values construct unrealistic and unattainable standards to which women are forced to conform.

From a very young age, girls are raised to take upon the role of perfect mothers and are pressurized to become mothers after a certain age. The idea that a woman can exist as an individual without becoming a mother or being tagged as one is considered preposterous not only in the Indian culture but similar views can also be found across cultures. The patriarchal society has taught us that the ultimate goal of a woman's life is to become a mother. Her accomplishments are discredited or devalued if she doesn't have the ability to reproduce. Such women are pitied, blamed and even shunned from families and communities. Women who hold their jobs even after bearing children are generally considered to be selfish and neglectful of their duties and responsibilities towards their children. The humiliation inflicted on them is so

harsh that women who don't desire to become mothers hide behind "medical conditions" that prevent them from fulfilling their "destiny"— becoming mothers.

The gender roles ascribed to men and women makes the experience of motherhood considerably more difficult for women. In addition to pressurizing women to become mothers, they are also expected to take up the complete responsibility of child-rearing. While mothers are held responsible for children's all-round development, the father is rarely held accountable for the same. His duties are limited to providing food and financial security. Rarely is he burdened with parental duties and is often seen shirking from it. On the other hand, the mother is expected to partake in all activities concerning the kids, irrespective of the fact that she may or may not hold a job like her significant other.

The glorification of motherhood is yet another toxic culture that needs to be gotten rid of. This glorification reproduced through the various forms of media makes us internalize certain images of motherhood that drives women to match them. Of the popular images of motherhood, the most common and famous is the image of the sacrificing mother. This mother sacrifices it all – her career, well-being, desires, comfort, and identity of self– for the sake of providing her children with all that is accepted as the best. And extensively propagated through the media, women internalize such unrealistic images and strive to live up to it. Attempting to do so causes a great deal of mental, physical, and emotional trauma. This also reinforces the notion that women are worthless if they cannot or choose not to become mothers. The image of an idealized mother as a self-sacrificing, tireless, superhuman doesn't benefit anyone, except for patriarchy and capitalism which feeds on it, and it's especially harmful to the child and his/her future. Mothers do play a vital role in the development of a child. It is true. But so does the father. It is incorrect to assume that

a mother has more to invest in a child's well-being than a father. Both the parents hold equal responsibility.

Motherhood has always been glorified in the Indian culture. Ranging from myths, stories, and films, the portrayal of motherhood is associated with the image of the self-sacrificing woman who renounces her individuality for her children. She's taught that such sacrifices and rejection of one's own identity for the sake of children is somehow supposed to be rewarding and fulfilling. We refer to mothers as goddesses, supreme beings. Women are led to believe that they are goddesses taking care of the world. Such glorification of motherhood or the role of mother, is not limited to any particular culture. It is universal in nature.

Evidence of such toxic practices can be observed in literature and various other art forms. Art has always been a medium for expression and a sphere for subverting the existing unjust social practices which have no particular relevance or importance except for the fact that it is tied with age old practices and traditions. We see a rise in the number of women talking about the reality of motherhood, eliminating all the sugar and spice that has been added to make it desirable. They expose truths such as postpartum depression, exhaustion, anxiety and such issues which are not actively discussed.

The word 'memoir' hails from the French word *mémoire* or *memoria*, which translates to memory or reminiscence. The memoir, as a literary genre, can be defined as "any nonfiction narrative writing based on the author's personal memories." The assertions made in the work are thus understood to be factual. The author of a memoir may be referred to as a memoirist or a memorialist. It is essentially a narrative that is written from the perspective of the author about an

important part in their life. Though a separate genre, memoir is often merged with autobiography. While both the genres share few common characteristics there are some significant factors that aid us to differentiate between the both. Though it is also written from the author's perspective, the narrative of an autobiography spans the author's entire life. And although subjective, its primary focus is centred on facts of their life's entire timeline (celadonbooks.com/what-is-a-memoir/).

The authors of a memoir pick out a determining moment in their lives and try to recreate it through storytelling. Here, the feelings that the author felt and the assumptions that he/she assumed are crucial to the narrative. Memoirs include all the facts of the event but the story is told in the way the author recollects it. The first recognized memoir was written in A.D.397 by St. Augustine of Hippo called *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. The work shows us the intimate parts of the saint's life and we get to see the inner working of his mind. Although the book is technically an autobiography in structure, the intimacy of the narrative was a new phenomenon (celadonbooks.com/what-is-a-memoir/).

A first-generation Indian immigrant writer, Maya Shanbhag Lang is a passionate teacher who holds a Ph.D. degree in Comparative Literature and lives outside New York City. As a child who began writing poems when she was eight or nine years old, to take up writing as a career was unimaginable to Lang, owing to her parents' professions- her father, an engineer and her mother, an accomplished physician. Instead, she took up several other careers like a pre-med, a management consultant, an academic, and a career in the non-profits. It was only after the birth of her daughter, Zoe that Lang began to consider taking up writing as a serious profession and pursue her dreams. She is now a recognised writer who also has a decade long experience of working as an editor for aspiring and established authors.

Regarding her education, Lang graduated magna cum laude from Swarthmore College, earned her Masters from the New York University and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from SUNY Stony Brook.

To date, Lang has authored two books. Her debut novel, *The Sixteenth of June* was published on June 3rd 2014 by Scribner and her most recent, *What We Carry: A Memoir* was published on April 28th 2020 by Dial Press. Both the books were well received and gained numerous awards. The debut novel was long listed for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, Finalist for the Audie Award for Best Audio Book, and named a Must-Read Novel by CBS and InStyle. *What We Carry* was a subject of much praise and was nominated for several awards. It was named a New York Times' Editor's Pick, an Amazon Best Memoir of 2020, and a Must Read/Best Of 2020 by Parade Magazine, Bustle, Times of India, PopSugar, and several others. Lang's work has also been featured in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Times of India, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and others. Lang is also the recipient of the Neil Shepard Prize in Fiction, and has received awards from the Rona Jaffe Foundation and The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

In *What We Carry*, Lang explores the complicated relationship shared by mother and daughter while navigating through motherhood. She exposes her difficult relationship with her father, an awfully practical man, who constantly policed her entire childhood and a significant part of her adulthood. As a child who grew up idolizing her mother, Lang suffers quite the shock when she learns the truth about her mother. The stories and sacrifices of motherhood and the lies Lang's mother built around it comes crashing down when her mother is diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Lang, through her book, reveals the challenges of motherhood, the emotional, physical and mental distress a woman is subjected to during this particular period, the

shame that is inflicted on the mother and so on. She brings to light the fact that motherhood is a unique and challenging experience for every woman and how everyone copes with it differently.

The book begins with Lang's mother, Suhas, telling her a story of a woman in the river. This woman was holding her son in her arms. She wanted to cross the river. As she was crossing, she realized the river was much deeper than she expected and as the water rose to her chest, starts panicking. Suhas informs that the woman had two choices. She could either save herself or save her child. There was no way both of them could make it safely to the other side. Suhas does not reveal the outcome of the story but instead tells her daughter that one must not judge the woman because whatever the woman chose was not easy. Lang is surprised at her mother's indifference to the ending of the story. A woman choosing herself is unheard of, especially one who chooses herself over her child. As a parent who constantly kept reminding her children of the miseries she had undergone to make them happy, her mother's indifferent stance to the woman's choice flabbergasted Lang.

As a child, Lang grew up idolizing her mother, an accomplished geriatric psychiatrist who immigrated to the US from India in the 1970s and raised a family while completing her residency. As a result of a punishing and emotionally absent father, Lang and her mother shared a very close bond. They bonded over science and talking about her mother's patients. Suhas often reminded her children of the difficulties she had to endure while raising them, how she sacrificed her happiness for their sake, how she relocated to an alien land to provide them better opportunities, the way she took care of her 6-month-old son all on her own while redoing her residency, and so on. Growing up listening to all these stories, her mother came to resemble a perfect human being, a person who could do no wrong. To Lang, her mother was a

confident woman who radiated authority. She did everything right and could do no wrong. Her mother matched the image of an ideal mother.

Lang's career is a stark contrast to her mother's. She was a confused individual who felt like she did not fit anywhere. She had acquired a Ph.D. in comparative literature but was no scholar. She admits that she did it to be impressive, the same reason why she had done anything in her life. By the time she was in her late twenties she had already been a pre-med, a management consultant, and an academic. She also had a career in nonprofits. She was in a constant search for an identity. Lang married Noah; a lawyer four years older to her. He held a glamorous sounding job that he despised. He hated the mistreatment of the employees by his colleagues and the lack of representation of minorities and females in positions of power. Lang says that his pragmatism and conscience makes his work life difficult for him. So, when Noah was offered a better job in Seattle, they decided to take it. Lang was thrilled because she could now evade the questions of what to do with her life as they were moving. Seattle seemed perfect to the both of them. But to Lang it never felt like home. She starts working for an animal shelter group to keep herself busy. Soon Lang discovers that she's pregnant and they're both ecstatic. Lang is secretly relieved too as she doesn't have to reinvent herself anytime soon now that the baby is coming.

To Lang, her mother's love looked like suffering. As she was about to become a mother herself, she accepted this suffering image of a mother. It is when she has a child of her own that her relationship with her mother starts to change. As she nears her due date, Lang feels terrified and unprepared for motherhood. When she turns to her mother for support and assistance on how to care for a child, her mother doesn't provide her satisfactory answers. It was as though her mother was trying to evade from the very subject of motherhood.

Lang feels like she's doing a bad job being a mother as she's unable to satisfy the needs of her daughter, Zoe. No one had taught her that it was normal to feel helpless. She assumed that she had to know everything about taking care of a child. Her mother comes to stay with Lang and her husband for a few days to help them with the baby. But she wasn't being the perfect grandmother Lang had envisioned her to be. She looked completely out of her element and was visibly uncomfortable. Though Lang is annoyed with her mother's behaviour she lets it go. Soon her mother returns to New Jersey, where she lived, and Lang is left to her own devices.

After a few months, Lang gets diagnosed with postpartum depression. She calls her mother who advises her to see a shrink. The sessions with the shrink weren't helpful in the beginning and the medicines did not make her feel any better either. Burdened with the thoughts and voices in her head, Lang calls up her mother and confesses to suicide ideation. She begs her mother to come and help her. But her mother did not budge and told her that if she were to get on a plane, she would die and that would only worsen the situation. Lang is stunned at her mother's reaction. Her mother's lack of proper concern makes her angry. This anger brings her life into focus. It inspires her to seek help and get better. A couple of weeks later her meds kick in and she starts to feel normal and seems to enjoy her life once again. When Lang shares with the therapist what had happened, her therapist tries to convince her that her mother was trying to evade her responsibilities by not coming to help Lang in her time of need. He refers to the incidents that had taken place during her childhood and teenage years as proof. But Lang adamantly defends her mother's actions. She says that her mother knew exactly what she was doing and that she was using a sort of reverse psychology to help Lang.

Both mother and daughter ignore what had happened and try to move on. But Lang is unhappy because she feels like she has lost that magical bond with her mother. Life goes on. Lang decides to be a stay-at-home mother. With her husband back at work, which requires a lot of traveling, Lang finds it difficult to manage things on her own. But then she's reminded of how her mother managed all by herself. Determined to handle everything, she develops an unhealthy routine to take care of her child and the house. Her mother feels guilty upon hearing how Lang manages to handle everything on her own. Lang's self-sufficiency takes a dangerous route. She makes the baby food from scratch; washes the exterior windows of the house and throws themed parties for the neighbourhood kids. She discovered that she gets more attention when she faked her feelings - pretending that taking care of her child all by herself without any external assistance wasn't a big deal. In this manner, Lang receives a lot of sympathy and she savours it. Conforming to the perfect stereotypical housewife gives her a false sense of fulfilment. She reflects that her earlier assumptions about motherhood - the sacrifices - was correct and declares that sometimes it's comforting to just give in and drown in the expectations.

After a series of bizarre events, Lang and her brother suspect that their mother could be suffering from Alzheimer's. They take her for a check-up where she's diagnosed with dementia, which apparently the mother knew as she had already diagnosed herself. This is the pivotal part of the book where the lies and stories of her mother unravels. Upon a conversation with her mother, Lang discovers that her mother did have help during the early months of her motherhood. When things became too hard to handle, the mother's parents flew in and lived with her, taking care of her 6 months old son and managing the household. The parents took the infant

with them to India where he lived until he was five before returning back to the States.

Lang feels duped and is furious at her mother for concealing the truth and feeding her with false stories. She realizes that the shrink was right - that she twisted logic to give her mother credit that she did not deserve and that Lang was so determined to have a mythic mother that she invented one. She realizes that the woman in the river was actually her own mother, that her mother was trying to come clean by telling that story. Her mother so badly wanted to be the woman who sacrificed herself for her children that she fabricated stories of sacrifice and suffering. But Lang understands that it was shame that prevented her mother from telling the truth. Her mother felt ashamed because she couldn't be the mother that sacrificed anything and everything for her children and had to depend on others to raise them.

Another trip to the doctor's reveals that the mother's physical health was quickly deteriorating. Following the advice of the doctor, Lang decides to bring her mother into her house and take care of her. She's determined to better her mother's health. Lang juggles her work, taking care of Zoe, working out, and caring for her mother. After months of doing so, Lang suffers from caregiver burnout. She ponders over the changes that accommodating her mother had brought into her family's lives. What happened with Zoe, repeats again with her mother - getting accustomed to the role of caretaker that she stopped seeing her self-worth outside of her role as a caretaker. She decides to put her mother in an assisted living facility ten minutes away from her house. Lang does face some difficulties but her mother is finally transferred. Though the mother was uncooperative in the beginning she finally settles down and starts enjoying her life. During a conversation with her mother, Lang is revealed the true ending of the story - the woman in the river chose to save herself and once she

makes that choice, everything else follows. Lang says that when a woman chooses herself, it means that she has the audacity to see her own worth.

Towards the ending, Lang reminisces on the many things that had taken place in her life. She reflects on how she and her mother are inextricably tied to one other, how she should start to give herself credit for the things she has achieved, and how her mother cared for Lang and her brother in her own way. Most importantly Lang understands that letting go is a crucial part of life and how in doing so we strengthen our bonds.

The first chapter of the work briefs us on the history of feminism and throws light on the theory of motherhood studies. The chapter highlights the lack of a motherhood based theory and details how the emergence of motherhood studies came to compensate for it. The second chapter analyses the book in the light of the theory and emphasizes on motherhood as an institution, experience, and identity. The third chapter conducts an enquiry into how Lang's father sowed seeds of trauma in Lang during her childhood and adolescent period. the chapter also explores how the absence of a healthy father figure negatively impacted Lang's own parenting. The conclusion sums up the entire project and talks about the relevance of the topic in the current scenario and how we as a culture and society need to let go of the unrealistic standards set for motherhood.

Chapter One

Motherhood Studies

The term feminism refers to a collection of movements aimed at achieving equal political, economic, and social rights and opportunities for women. It's a woman-centered movement focused on female empowerment and upliftment regardless of any differences. Feminism is mainly focused on women's issues but as it strives for gender equality it has come to include all genders. Feminism views the patriarchal notions of gender roles as a restriction of human potential. It also examines women's roles in society and their personal experiences. Feminist theory can be found across disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, communication, psychoanalysis, economics, literary criticism, education, and philosophy. Feminists have struggled for acquiring basic human rights and extending them to women such as the right to property, the right to vote, to promote women's rights to bodily integrity and autonomy and reproductive rights, protection from any form of harassment, equal pay, and opportunities.

Feminist history can be divided into four waves. Occurring in the 19th and the early 20th century, the initial wave of feminism mainly concentrated on acquiring women's right to vote. It also aimed at promoting equal contract and property rights for women and opposing ownership of married women by their husbands. The period between the 1960s – 1980s saw the rise of the second wave of feminism which focused on the issues of discrimination and inequality. The slogan “The Personal is Political” rose to fame during the second wave and revealed that women's cultural and political inequalities were inextricably linked. It also helped

women to comprehend how their personal lives reflected sexist power structures. A popular figure during this period was Betty Friedan whose book *The Feminine Mystique* exposed how women were victims of false beliefs that led them to internalize that a woman can only find fulfilment through child rearing and homemaking. As a result, women tied their identity with their husbands and children and lost their sense of identity in the role of a caregiver. In the early 1990s, the third wave set out to rectify the shortcomings of the second wave. The most inclusive of the previous waves, the third wave demonstrated the importance of race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and nationality as crucial factors when discussing feminism. This period witnessed the emergence of new feminist currents and theories, such as intersectionality, sex positivity, vegetarian ecofeminism, transfeminism, and postmodern feminism. It focused on a more post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality. Here, the binaries such as male–female were seen as artificial constructs created to maintain the power of the dominant group. The third wave to a great extent focused on reproductive rights for women. Feminists stood up for women’s right to bodily autonomy and demanded the basic right to have access to birth control and abortion. Several marches and protests were conducted for the same which showed how much the matter of reproductive rights meant for the third wave. The fourth wave of feminism began around 2012. It is distinguished by a focus on women empowerment, intersectionality, and the use of digital tools. Intersectionality is a defining characteristic of fourth-wave feminism. It refers to the inclusion of all women regardless of any differences. It advocates for the inclusion of women from marginalized communities and transwomen. Fourth-wave feminists demand equal pay for equal work. They also advocate extending to boys and men the opportunities that are sought for girls and women to overcome gendered norms. According to Kira

Cochrane, a British journalist, fourth-wave feminism is "defined by technology" and characterized particularly by the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and blogs to challenge misogyny.

Feminism and feminist theories have had a strained and conflicting relationship with the study of motherhood. Feminism's reluctance to accommodate motherhood and theories associated with it stems from the inherent characteristic of motherhood which makes it a place of women's oppression and the view that "motherhood has everything to do with a history in which women remain powerless by reproducing the world of men" (Allen 316). But according to Samira Kawash,

...motherhood studies need the perspective and commitment of feminism as well as the institutional resources that feminism and women's studies has accumulated over the past four decades. At the same time, feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities. (997)

Over the past few decades, a growing body of scholarship on motherhood and mothering, informed by a feminist theory and politics, has highlighted the complexity of mothering experiences and developed theories of motherhood that move beyond pre-existing understandings of motherhood as a biological mechanism. Then again, an intersectional and diverse experience of motherhood seem to exist largely outside dominant disciplinary trends. These exclusions can cause serious intellectual implications. They call out the fundamentals of feminism and women studies which rests on the empowerment of all women irrespective of any kind or degree of discrimination.

The lack of a motherhood-focused theory or a motherhood-centred theory propounded the creation of motherhood studies. The topic of mothering and motherhood was something that remained among women in a private domain until its rise to prominence in the late 1990s and the early 2000s when they became important intellectual topics across academic disciplines. The idea of motherhood studies is rooted in Adrienne Rich's landmark book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* where she analysed motherhood as a patriarchal construct and a site of women's oppression. Rich also put forth the possibility of mothering being an empowering experience. While considerable amount of intellectual work on motherhood studies first emerged within feminist and women's studies scholarship, it was Dr. Andrea O'Reilly, who in 2006, coined the term motherhood studies to demarcate it as a recognised and autonomous academic field. Given the vastness of the motherhood research explored till date, it's impossible to list all themes traversed; however, some examples are: sexuality, queer mothers, Black mothering, Muslim mothering, indigenous mothers, Latina mothers, incarcerated mothers, third-wave mothering, mothering and globalization, mothering and domestic violence, religion, public policy, economics, literature, work, popular culture, the maternal body (both able and disabled/differently abled), health, care work-caregiving, ethnicity, environment, militarism, young mothers, motherhood and feminism, mothers and sons, and mothers and daughters (<https://www.bu.edu/>). Of the many leading portals of motherhood studies, one is *The m/other voices foundation*, a non-profit organization in The Netherlands. It came into being in 2014 from Deirdre M. Donoghue's research project *(m)other voices: the maternal as an attitude, maternal thinking, and the production of time and knowledge* at Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art. Several other organized initiatives within academic communities

are starting such as the *Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, a feminist scholarly and activist organization on mothering-motherhood based in Toronto, Canada. As a continuation of the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* that started in 1999, *The Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* was re-launched in 2010. Related to maternal feminism and considered as a feminist practice, motherhood studies consist of three interconnected themes or categories of inquiry: motherhood as an institution, motherhood as an experience, and motherhood as an identity or subjectivity.

Rich in her *Of Women Born* made two important theoretical insights. The first of these is the distinction she made

...between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (13)

The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the term “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women. Thus, the reality of patriarchal motherhood should be distinguished from gynocentric or feminist mothering. In simpler terms, the institution of motherhood is a male-defined site of oppression whereas, women’s own experience of motherhood can be a source of empowerment and power. Feminist historians assent the fact that mothering is not fundamentally an inherent or biological function but essentially a cultural practice that continuously changes in order to accommodate altering economic and societal factors.

Rich stresses two features of modern ideology of patriarchal motherhood that are distinctly harmful to mothers. The first one is the assumption that mothering is natural to women and child rearing is the sole responsibility of the mother and that it should be carried out as “intensive mothering”, a term coined by feminist writer Sharon Hayes. The second one is the custom that issues mothers the sole responsibility for mother work but with the absence of power to regulate the conditions under which they mother.

The view that maternity is something natural to women and that women are naturally mothers stems from the belief, Pamela Courtenay Hall notes, “that women are born with a built-in set of capacities, dispositions and desires to nurture children [... and that this] engagement of love and instinct is utterly distant from the world of paid work [...]” (337). This assumption over the last five decades gave rise to and resulted in the ideological concept of “intensive” mothering. According to Hayes, intensive mothering is defined by three themes: “first, the mother is the central caregiver”; second, such mothering requires “lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child”; and lastly, “the mother regards mothering as more important than her paid work” (8). According to feminist theorists, this discourse becomes oppressive to mothers not because children have these needs but because society and culture demand that only biological mothers are equipped to fulfil them. As Petra Buskens explains

Infancy and early childhood are periods of high emotional and physical dependency and, moreover this is not a pure invention of patriarchal science. [...] *The problem is not the fact of this requirement but rather that meeting this need has come to rest exclusively, and in isolation, on the shoulders of biological mothers.* (81)

Most women mother according to the conditions laid by the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the patriarchal ideology of intensive mothering. In simpler terms, women's mothering is specified and controlled by the patriarchal society in which they exist. Mothers do not make the rules, they are mere vehicles of their enforcement. In Rich's opinion, motherhood is an experience of "powerless responsibility". A mother raises her children in the values and traditions specified by the dominant culture. According to Sara Ruddick, a mother is monitored by what she calls the "gaze of others". Anyone that inhabits her external environment can judge her and find her lacking. As a result, when a woman moves away from such dictated practices and mothers on her own terms, she is shunned and isolated from the patriarchal dominated community.

Thus, these two features of modern ideology of motherhood make the experience of mothering deeply oppressive to women because of the first belief—intensive motherhood—requires the repression of the mother's own selfhood, while the second—powerless responsibility—denies the mother the authority and agency to determine her own experiences of mothering.

Because the experience of mothering is not inherently oppressive, unravelling the patriarchal narrative of motherhood opens up a space for the vocalization of counternarratives of mothering, especially women-centred experiences of mothering. A feminist counternarrative of motherhood deals with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is empowering and not oppressive. Also known as radical, authentic, feminist, or gynocentric mothering, this type of mothering, in Rich's words, situates mothers as "outlaws from the institution of motherhood". By giving importance to maternal power by assigning an agency to mothers and value to mother work, this new outlook gave rise to the view that

mothering is a socially involved practice that seeks to bring cultural change in the home through feminist child-rearing and the world at large through political and social activism.

By emphasizing the woman's experience of mothering and the meaning she and her culture attach to it, we are going to look into the importance of the position of the mother in these cultures and how it becomes a site of power and resistance. Motherhood Studies stresses the fact that the lived experience of being a mother, "is not a singular practice" and that the verb "to mother" cannot be understood as a rigid category of practice because "even among similar mothers practices vary significantly" (Chandler 273). This gives validity to the argument that the practice and experience of mothering is not something universal and that mothers employ different methods to resist oppressive structures. Recent studies conducted have shown that there is a contrast between culturally specific forms of mothering and their implications for what constitutes empowerment for each group of mothers. We are going to examine the validity of these studies in the scenarios of African American, Indigenous, and South Asian mothering.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, black motherhood as an institution is "both dynamic and dialectical" through which black women "express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment" (Collins 176). The African American communities were the first to recognize that "vesting one person with the full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible," which has resulted in othermothers— "women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities"—being central to the institution of black motherhood (Collins 178). In the African American context, black

women play a crucial role in providing economic support and are not financially dependent on men. Culturally, mothers and motherhood are highly regarded and child-rearing is seen as a collective responsibility. Thus, in African American culture motherhood constitutes a site of empowerment and respect rather than one of oppression and powerlessness. Indigenous mothering shares similarities with African American mothering in the way that it is assigned a great cultural value, in its understanding of mothering as a collective responsibility, and viewing it as equivalent to any work important to the community. Rather than viewing motherhood as a domain of a woman's obliteration of individuality, it is seen as a site of leadership and authority for women. Childcare is understood to be a collective responsibility rather than an individual one in Indigenous communities.

Emerging studies on South Asian motherhood also provides a more nuanced understanding of motherhood by showing how it is a source of empowerment for women in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and surrounding areas, despite being entrenched in patriarchal understandings of motherhood, which place excessive demands, expectations, and responsibilities on mothers in these areas. Jasjit K. Sangha, in her work on South Asian motherhood, reveals that South Asian experiences of mothering are governed not only by gender but by "other systems of oppression that intersects with gender such as race, caste, class, sexuality and ability" as well as the conditions of migration (415). Within the confines of these intersecting forms of oppression, power and decision-making ability work differently for different South Asian mothers, since "a mother may have access to power because of her caste, class and social status and yet succumb to restrictions on her mobility and sexuality in order to maintain her *izzat* (honour)" (Sangha 415). Likewise, "a mother may have

privileges due to her geographic location after migration, yet face a severe decrease in her standard of living due to barriers obtaining paid work” (415).

Mothers are constantly negotiating and renegotiating their performance and identity within the constructs of the rules and regulations for good mothering. According to mothers, the mother-child relationship plays a significant role in shaping women’s identities, and while the other roles that they carry might shift in importance, the role of a mother prevails as the crucial factor in the making of decisions and choices. When women become mothers, they lose their gender identity for a motherhood one. The identity of gender they have been performing is abandoned for the new one. Bailey (1999), in her study of self-identity and the transition to motherhood, found that “...the process of individualization which dominates the rest of these women’s lives receded with the imminence of motherhood” (344). In her study of first-time motherhood narratives, Miller (2005) maintained that: “over time, a new social self as mother has to be learned” (15).

The identity of “mother” becomes the central identity that surpasses other identities, regardless of the ways in which women perform motherhood or whether they embrace the ideology of motherhood or not. Oftentimes, when choosing motherhood, women surrender not only the future choices of how to act as a mother but also one’s future identity as a woman. Copper (2007) struggles with this and says: “I face the assumptions that my motherhood somehow defines my life, instead of being a small but important part of it” (187). Societal expectations and dominant conceptions (focused on white middle-class experience) contribute to the formation of contemporary mothering identities. It is imperative that the concept of mother is understood as a social construction. When people share their experiences of mothering, through the many forms of media, they’re establishing the expectations of

what proper mothering should resemble. The audience, in particular mothers, conform to these expectations and attempt to merge them into their own identity. A study by Marshall (1991) showed that pregnant women received advice, solicited and otherwise, from well-meaning friends, family, and medical professionals that molded the pregnant women's notions of motherhood. These women were encouraged to put the interest of their child above everything, including their own needs and desires. The instant a woman announces her pregnancy, she is swamped with information about her new responsibilities and begins to build an identity of mothering based on the perceived expectations of others (Heisler 2008). Post-pregnancy, this process continues as mothers are burdened by instructions about what behaviors and attitudes constitute those of a "good mother." Thus, societal expectations influence identity. This becomes problematic when one is unable to satisfy the perceived expectations of their role. Failure is inevitable because these expectations are unrealistic and impossible to live up to and maintain.

Chapter Two

The Journey of Motherhood

What We Carry takes us on a journey of motherhood – both Suhas' (the mother) and Lang's (the daughter). It showcases the mother-daughter relationship, the complexities of it, and talks about how caregiving and parenting are not altogether that different in nature but a mix. Though it seems similar, in the beginning, Lang's and her mother's journey through motherhood is strikingly different. While her mother gets the support she requires when things get difficult, Lang doesn't, harbouring illusions that her mother had set for her. She tries to do it all on her own claiming that her mother had to go through more of a difficult time with it than her. What we must keep in mind is that motherhood, experienced by both the women, though different, are interconnected. That Suhas' motherhood, or more accurately her stories of it, deeply influenced and affected her daughter's motherhood.

One theme the book explores in detail is the glorification of motherhood. It's almost as if hunting a prey, luring it to its death by showing something that captures its attention. The idea of motherhood is so enticingly packed, presented, and distributed among women that everyone wants to be a part of it. They want to be regarded as goddesses, worshipped, and praised for their sacrifices. Patriarchy convinces them to feed off these meaningless praises while it selfishly benefits from their service. It essentially makes fools out of women by limiting their potential, curtailing their voices and reducing them to the status of caregivers.

Lang and her mother shared a very close and strong bond - "My mom and I laugh gaily, basking in our shared affection. She knows what she means to me. I

know that she knows. It pleases us both – mom and daughter, in need of nothing and no one else.” (Lang 12). They were partners in suffering. Her bond with her mother was the result of a punishing, emotionally abusive and misogynist father. While her father told Lang that women were worthless, slut shamed her, and mentally abused her so much so that he sucked the joy out of the things she loved like reading books and being an athlete, her mother painted a totally different picture. To her mother no one was worthless and everyone was worthy of being saved. Her mother painted a world full of possibilities. In her world there was sympathy and understanding. Being a psychiatrist, her mother had an exquisite way of listening to people. When her patients were misdiagnosed or were prescribed wrong medications, she was furious on their behalf. This pleased Lang. She says, “I liked thinking of her as the champion of the underdog because it meant there was hope for me as the underdog of the family” (Lang 17). Lang also liked the thought that her mother did everything for her and her mother’s priority was Lang. When she talked to her mother on the phone, she felt like she was home - “My mom and I talk often, sometimes daily. ...She’s my first phone call, the one who makes any piece of news real, any achievement official, any blow less painful...My joy at getting her on the line is palpable, like an addict getting hold of a drug” (Lang 11).

It is important that we understand motherhood as an institution constructed and powered by the patriarchy. This patriarchal institution is male controlled and is a site of female oppression. It propagates the idea that women have to become mothers in order to achieve fulfilment. It makes use of myths, stories, and other forms of dissemination that sets unrealistic expectations and standards for women to achieve and convinces them that if they don’t meet them, they’re failures and makes them question their worth. Here, a woman’s worth is measured in her ability to become a

mother and to adhere to the role as prescribed by patriarchy. This institution also forces women to follow the technique of intensive mothering, which essentially means that the mother has to subsume her needs for her children, she should consider mothering to be more important than her paid job. True to its name, intensive mothering is intense. It demands that mothers give their undivided attention to their kids, should always be occupied with them, and so on. Something else this patriarchal institution impresses on mothers is the image of a self-sacrificing woman. They push this image of a self-sacrificing mother as their logo. God forbid if a woman puts her own need before her child's. This institution claims that a woman has inbuilt capabilities to become a mother, that it's something they're born with rather than a cultural practice. According to them a mother must take the sole responsibility of the child. It is also a responsibility that doesn't hold any power. The mother raises the child but according to the terms dictated by the dominant culture or practice. This practice denies the mother the power to determine her own experiences of mothering.

In *What We Carry*, we witness how the patriarchal idea of motherhood made it harder for both Suhas and her daughter, Lang. In the initial pages, Suhas is shown to be the "perfect" mother, the mother who sacrifices and endures for her children, who came to the States to provide her children with better opportunities and wants to make their lives easier. She is also portrayed as a self-sufficient mother who goes great lengths to fulfil her duties of motherhood. As Lang grew up, she saw her mother's love in the sacrifices she took and the sufferings she underwent for them. Lang says "Everything she does is for my benefit. This is what a mother's love looks like to me. It looks like suffering" (Lang 5).

Suhas painted an image of a self-confident woman who had all answers to hide the fact that she herself was a clueless mother just like others. The decisions

she took always impressed Lang and had her approval - “This is the thing about my mom: She may be cryptic, but she is always right” (Lang 5). Suhas wanted her kids to view her as a mother who was available to them at all times. She portrayed herself as a sympathetic and understanding person. She was the kind of mother who helped her kids no matter the degree of assistance required. She travelled great distances to make sure her kids are well and comfortable. Lang’s mother,

... hopped in her car at the drop of a hat. If I so much as cough on the phone, there she would be at my doorstep, her car stuffed full with various items: a pot of lentil soup, Swiffer Dusters, a twelve-pack of paper towels I couldn't fit in my tiny closet, a wide spectrum antibiotic (just in case), two-pound container of cookies, boxes of Claritin. (Lang 14)

Once her mother lugged a heavy recliner through the hallways of Lang’s dormitory when she complained of backache. When asked how she did she just replied that he was a mother and that’s how she did (Lang 15).

Though Suhas tried imitating the “perfect” mother, she couldn’t always hide her true self, for which she compensated with acts of sacrifices, characteristic of mothers - “She was not sentimental or effusive, had never read to me as a child or baked me cookies, but she would travel great distances for me and carry astonishing weights. When I most needed her, she was there” (Lang 15). Like many other parents out there who recounts stories of difficulties they faced while raising their kids, Suhas also presents one to her kids:

My mom came to America when my brother was six months old. It's the only story of motherhood she ever recounts. It was the most difficult period of her life, redoing her residency while dealing with an infant and my father, who, in

refusing to change diapers and expecting to have his meals cooked for him, was essentially another child. My mom didn't have the help of a supportive spouse the way I do, plus she had a demanding career in a foreign country.

(Lang 29)

Here, we also see that the sole responsibility of raising the children was placed on Suhas. She did not have a supportive spouse who helped her instead, he burdened her with more duties. Suhas maintained the ideal image of a woman -

She was orderly and prim: no visible hair on her arms or legs, no need to pluck her perfectly arched brows or tend to the skin above her lip. I never saw her double over with menstrual cramps, never even heard her pass gas... She was a hairless efficient wonder. (Lang 35)

She ardently followed Indian customs and traditions like not addressing one's husband by his name.

Once Lang becomes a mother and starts leaning on her for help and advice, Suhas is visibly uncomfortable. Afraid that her cover of a perfect mother will fall apart, she starts making senseless excuses to get out of situations related to mothering where Lang needs help with and evades the questions of motherhood, posed at her. When Lang shares the difficulties she faced as a new mother, Suhas says "I had to use cloth diapers. Can you imagine, washing them? You have it so much easier!" (Lang 86), which leads to Lang feeling inadequate and insufficient as a mother. When Lang calls her, Suhas tries to get out of the conversation if it was about the difficulties Lang faced while mothering but if she calls with charming stories of Zoe, Suhas offers a happy conversation. She did not want her daughter's reality, instead she wanted the illusion that her daughter was doing fine.

“Just in case. Her whole life was oriented around those three words” (Lang 107). All her life, Suhas was controlled by anxiety. Anxious of fitting into the role of the “perfect” mother, anxious of her this image of a mother crumbling, and anxious of her future. All these anxieties restricted her from enjoying life and enjoying her children. This anxiety of hers made her spin illusions of her motherhood that almost led to her daughter’s death. She gave her daughter and everyone around her an illusion that she knew exactly what she was doing. Her practice of creating illusions about her motherhood stemmed from a place of shame and fear of judgement.

Lang’s motherhood is deeply influenced by her mother’s stories and illusions of motherhood which mainly involved sacrifices her mother made and how she found fulfilment in being a conventionally perfect mother. Growing up hearing stories and myths about female sacrifices and endurance, Lang is convinced that in order to give her daughter good care she must consider her daughter her only priority and nothing else, not even herself. So, when she hears from her mother a myth of a woman in the river choosing her life over her son’s, the possibility of it shocks Lang. Through the book Lang shows how early mothers are expected to start sacrificing their needs as soon as the baby is born -

Oh no, we encourage co sleeping here, the nurse answers. Oh, I say, faltering, but I haven't slept at all. I think I need, you know, to rest. The nurse frowns. Your labor was easy. No complications. You’ll learn to nap when the baby naps. (Lang 26)

Lang also talks about how myths and other forms of discourse on motherhood set unrealistic standards for women and how easily women are influenced by it -

Someone gave me a book of Indian illustrated classics when I was young, Hindu myths in comic book form. It was filled with legends of female suffering: Sita swallowed up by the earth; Shakuntala carried up to the heavens. I inhaled those stories, intoxicated by all that feminine virtue. (Lang 32)

Lang seems to go in and out of realizing the truth that motherhood is a hard task when it comes to her own mother –

I realise now the same thing happened with my mom. I'd wanted her to tend to me, and only when she didn't did I see my own expectations - expectations that now shame me. She had flown across the country for me, and I had behaved like a child. Do the demands of motherhood ever cease? (Lang 33)

Lang also talks about the biases in treatment towards men and women where women inevitably are at the receiving end of shame and guilt. Once, when Lang goes out with her daughter for a walk, it starts to rain. Unable to get the raincover over the baby stroller, she runs home taking the baby seat in her arms. When she reaches home her husband bursts out laughing but she starts crying. She's afraid of the stares and judgements -

As a mom, I don't feel permitted to make mistakes. If someone saw Noah fumbling with rain cover, he'd get sympathy points. What a great dad! People would think. It doesn't work this way for moms. If someone saw me I'd get frowns. Why would she take her baby out in this weather? These imagined judgements overwhelm me. (Lang 42)

Lang talks about the double standards of the society which always privileges fathers and blames mothers. She speaks the truth. If it was Noah who was caught in a similar

situation, he would get sympathies and appreciation. It's only because Lang is a mother, people judge her for not comforting or providing relief to her daughter fast enough.

When her husband eventually has to return for work, Lang is terrified. She sees failing her parental duties in his absence as she is alone. Overwhelmed by the expectations she's supposed to meet and the legacy of her mother's motherhood and lack of emotional support, Lang falls into depression. And even when in depression she blames herself-

The depths of my gloom hardly make sense to me. Why can't I get a grip?
 You're a mom, I tell myself. You need to snap out of it. . . I know that
 depression isn't a matter of willpower, but I'm furious with myself for my
 inability to get out of bed. My legs aren't broken. yet if a fire engulfed the
 house, I would not budge. It fills me with shame. What kind of a mother am I?
 (Lang 42-44)

This is what patriarchy does to mothers. This is how they play them dirty. Lang was never taught that asking for help was an option, that it was okay to be clueless or feel inadequate as a new mother. Even though she had a supportive spouse and family they failed to understand the crux of her insecurities. Her mother's illusions and stories of motherhood loomed over, burdening her. Though she's aware it's not her fault that she fell into depression and she can't just command herself to get better, she still blames herself for not caring for her daughter and feels "...guilty for not enjoying her." (Lang 50). When Lang turns to her mother for support, she's denied help out of her mother's fear that if she makes herself available to Lang, then her façade of the perfect mother might fall apart. When her mother refuses to help her when she most

needs it, Lang, though angry at first, lets it go thinking it to be a glitch in an otherwise perfect mother daughter relationship. She twists logic to clear her mother's position in her head and free her of any fault. She preserves her mother as someone who could do no wrong. She holds fervently onto this illusion of a mythic mother that she loses the sight of the real one.

Lang finally attempts the oldest trick in the book – to fake it, to pretend that she is the casual, breezy and effortless mother who doesn't mind taking care of her child without any external support. Though she's panicking on the inside she invalidates her feelings and presents an image of a mother who isn't shaken by the difficulties or demands of motherhood. Her goal, instead of caring for her daughter and herself in a healthy manner, takes a turn. She seeks validation from others. She wants to feel validated as the perfect mother so she continues this cycle and begins

...to feed on this cycle, faking my feelings to get the reaction I crave. I take on tasks no sane person would attempt. I wash the exterior windows of the house, steam the curtains, and throw themed parties for the neighbourhood kids, making all the food and decorations by hand. (Lang 87)

Lang seems to be compensating for not being the perfect mother. Something else about this male defined motherhood is that, however strong and aware one is of what's happening, there's always a moment where one falls down the rabbit hole, there's always a period of delusion. This happens to Lang too - "Perhaps my initial assumptions about motherhood were correct after all, that convenience and pleasure should be batted away. Self-sacrifice certainly feels like the right choice. The rewards are concrete: compliments, praise, "likes" (Lang 88).

All this boils down to acquiring attention and validation. To be identified as the conventionally perfect mother image. During the period of motherhood, women have no identity other than of the mother. They are made to lose all the other roles they play, the things that identify them beyond the role of a mother. When there is a lack of identities that make who you are, then one is susceptible to these kinds of delusions. Moreover, such thoughts and “values” have been ingrained into women’s heads from time immemorial. So, they’re bound to haunt them, to make them doubt their capabilities and their performance as mothers. Thus, in the patriarchal institution of motherhood, women are prisoners in their own minds and bodies, a site of their emotional, intellectual, mental, and spiritual oppression. Here they mindlessly commit to the stereotypical role of a mother and try to live up to the expectations, but fail. So inevitably, because the desire to become that particular image is so strong that they resort to means of faking and pretension to feel fulfilled.

The experience of mothering is extremely different from the institution of motherhood. Unlike the institution of motherhood, it is not inherently oppressive. It untangles the patriarchal narrative and opens up a space for the vocalization of women’s lived experiences of mothering. The experience of mothering deals with the reality of motherhood- the postpartum depression, anxiety, exhaustion, the feeling of isolation, wanting to be left alone and so on. It stresses on the woman’s experience of mothering and the meaning she attaches to it, as opposed to the dominant culture from whose pressure she is not free from. It reveals the truth that the experience of mothering is not a universal one and that it is different for each woman. Here, the experience is a site of rebellion and empowerment because by speaking and practicing the truth, women attempt to free themselves from the unrealistic expectations and standards set for motherhood. The experience of motherhood is affected not only by

gender but also by other factors like class, caste, sexuality, conditions of migration and so on.

Illusioned by her mother's stories of motherhood, Lang equates being a good mother with sacrifices and rejection of one's self. Strongly influenced by this, she decides to become a stay-at-home mother which she describes as her "...first taste of motherhood" (Lang 22). As her due date draws closer and closer, Lang is filled with dread. Even though she's excited to meet the baby she feels insecure and unsure of her role as a mother. Lang says,

I am frightened, but as a mom I'm not supposed to feel that way. I am supposed to intuitively know how to handle an infant. I feel isolated, but I'm not supposed to feel that way either. I'm supposed to radiate contentment. I don't know how internalized these messages. I only know that when people elbow Noah and say, "How are you doing? Nervous? Scared?" I want them to do it to me. (Lang 23)

She feels troubled when others assume that she's completely prepared and ready for motherhood and has it all under control. What puts Lang the most at unease is that she doesn't know what to expect out of motherhood or how to navigate through it.

Whenever she leaned on her mother regarding questions and assistance on motherhood, she did not receive a satisfactory or helpful answer. When Lang attempts to manoeuvre through the feelings, confusions and questions of motherhood, like others sharing similar fate, she falls prey to the stereotypical image of a mother – "...nurturing, loving, adept, someone who bakes pies and gives the best hugs, who reads stories and sings songs" (Lang 24). As Lang wasn't someone like that, the person she was told to resemble felt "...utterly fictitious" (Lang 24). Her model of an

acceptable mother was based on her own mother, whose stories never revealed enough details. This drives her into panic and says “My daughter needs someone who has answers. I have nothing but questions” (Lang 24).

Soon after the birth of her daughter Lang feels neglected. She’s not even given a moment to recuperate and is expected to take on her duties of motherhood as soon as she has birthed her child. All this overwhelms her. Lang’s first week as a mother is a struggle -

Zoe won't take a bottle. Her weight drops by more than 10 percent - a red flag. One terrifying day, she doesn't produce enough wet diapers or respond to stimuli and, dehydrated, requires medical attention. Never before have I felt like a failure. I can't meet her basic needs. . . I am drowning just a few days into motherhood. If I can't handle my first couple of weeks, what does that say about me? (Lang 26-29)

Thus, begins Lang’s journey self-doubt. Whenever she got exhausted or overwhelmed with the pains of motherhood, Lang thinks back to her mother’s stories – “Sleep deprivation, breastfeeding: to her they required no comment. I want to be as strong as she was. I want my story of motherhood to be every bit as heroic, not filled with these embarrassments (a baby nurse! A shrink!) but one of self-sufficiency” (Lang 55). We see Lang going through a plethora of confusing thoughts and emotions. One moment she understands that motherhood is bound to be difficult and that it’s okay to feel overwhelmed and to need or ask for help. On the other hand,. she berates herself for not achieving the qualities attributed to the “perfect” mother and adopts unhealthy routines to cope without help.

Lang understands that her daughter's well-being depends on her own well-being. That if only Lang is healthy and stable that her daughter is going to feel the same - "As Zoe absorbs her world, I see that I anchor it. It's sobering. If I want the voice in her head to be one of encouragement, I have to give that gift to myself. By taking care of myself, I am taking care of her" (Lang 69). Lang realise that her

... assumptions about motherhood have all been wrong. I feared I was supposed to have all the answers. I didn't know my daughter would help me find them. I worried she would be an obstacle to my dreams, not the reason I went after them. Zoe makes me want to be the best version of myself. That isn't sacrifice. Its inspiration. And so, after Noah comes home from work, after making dinner and putting Zoe to bed, I go to a late- night coffee shop. It isn't easy. I feel guilty for leaving... But once I am at the cafe, once I am at my usual table with nothing but my own thoughts, it is bliss...When tasked with caring for a human being, when asked to subsume one's own needs, this is when we require a firmer grasp on ourselves. Rather than telling new moms to indulge, to do frivolous activities women in movies do, we should say this: Find yourself. Gather yourself up before it is too late. You are at risk of getting buried. Maybe you're already feeling buried. Do something that will solidify your sense of self, buttress your retaining walls...Perhaps this is what we should give new moms: A laptop and a cup of coffee. A notebook and a pen. Permission to dream. (Lang 72)

Lang falls again from the rational wagon. She wants to be the self-sufficient mom who manages everything on her own. But she's lonely. As her husband is away, Lang doesn't have anyone to lean on and her mother remains aloof

from her troubles as a mother. Lang takes on so much stress and activities to perfect her image of the flawless mother that it starts to physically affect her -

Everything I don't say comes out in my body. My back pain turns so acute that I develop a limp, sciatica zapping me with each step. I have to stand like a sumo wrestler to lift Zoe out of her crib. Every month a new symptom flares. Hip bursitis, herniated lumbar discs, a torn rotator cuff, tendonitis, thoracic outlet syndrome: My medical file fattens. When a doctor suggests chronic stress as a culprit, I laugh mirthlessly. "I'm a mom," I say. He looks baffled.
(Lang 86)

Lang comes back to her senses when she gets an agent to represent her and her book. It yanks her from the world of "neatly stacked baby food purees and sparkling windows." She realizes that she's been living a life of illusions where "home is picture-perfect, motherhood all-consuming, and martyrdom synonymous with bliss" (Lang 91). Signing the contract shakes her to confront the reality that she was afraid to chase her dreams and she hid behind her daughter to escape from it. It was easy to drown herself in her daughter and the activities surrounding her because she was rewarded for it.

Lang can't seem to let go of the idea of the self-sufficient mother, a result of her own mother's stories. When she turns to her mother with her difficulties of having to work on her book and taking care of Zoe and the domestic activities, her mother, instead of asking her to get someone to help her reminds her that she has it so much easier as she has a flexible timetable as opposed to her mother who did not have that luxury when she was redoing her residency with a six-month-old infant. Lang instantly feels guilty and decides that "If my mom could do it, so can I" (Lang 95).

So, she begins an unhealthy routine to cope up with her situation where she barely sleeps in order to get everything done all by herself. And at times when she feels like she's going to drop dead from the exhaustion, she reminds herself that her mother had a more difficult situation and how she got through it without any help. When Lang starts to go to the gym, as a way of taking care of herself, her gym instructor observes that she wants to get everything right on the first try. He reminds her that everything's a process and by only slowly moving through it can we achieve good results. According to him "We shouldn't ask so much of any one part. Too much strength can be its own weakness, you know" (Lang 120). This reminds Lang of her pursuit for self-sufficiency and she vows to change it.

Because of her mother's dementia, Lang gets to know that her mother actually had help during her initial years of motherhood. She learns how her maternal grandparents flew to America to help her mother and take care of her older brother. Learning this information unsettled Lang.

I regret doubting my abilities as a mother. I feel naïve for having been duped so easily...My mom and I had stood in the same river. She didn't tell me about the rescue boat that arrived to save her. she left it out even when I asked her how she swam. Exhausted, I blamed myself for not being stronger. (Lang 125)

She felt angry and devastated because she thought she was being an inadequate mother according to her mother's stories. When she found out that she was living a lie, she felt irrepressible anger. When Lang took the decision to move her mother into her house, she did so because she wanted to get to know her mother by caring for her. She wanted to separate the myth from the reality. She wanted to know who her mother actually was, separated from who she thought her mother to be. During this

process, both the mother and daughter are able to set down their illusions and walls. They form a genuine bond.

Lang talks about how being maternal is a selfish act, how we may not realize it but that it's the truth. She says that when mothers do something for their children, they do so because of their fears. They don't want their child to be bullied, pitied, or looked down on. She remembers how her own mother did things for her, how when she felt sick in college her mother used to come bearing a plethora of items. She "...knew it was a gesture of love, but those items felt like they had nothing to do with" (Lang 162) her at all. She says that maybe mothers do certain things for their children which they wished someone did for them when they were a child. Lang says that mothers are actually

...daughters, reaching back in time for the mothers we wish we'd had and then finding ourselves...we forget, I think, in the act of caring who is being cared for, that it is not our own hair getting brushed, our own mouths being fed, our own needs being met. We do what wasn't done for us. We hope it will be enough. (Lang 162-163)

Mothering is doing what one thinks is best for their children and while doing so taking care that one doesn't exhaust themselves. When Lang goes to gym, at night, she says that "It's a way of tending to myself after a day of tending to others...a way of honoring the decision to put myself first, even if just for an hour" (Lang 169).

While making sure that her child is getting cared for, Lang also makes sure that she herself is getting cared. She recognizes "that if I constantly play the superhero as a mom, my daughter will never know my struggles" (Lang 207). She wants her

daughter to know the reality, the truth of things. She wants her to know that nothing comes easy and that whatever looks easy could've taken years to perfect.

After a few months of caring for her mother, Lang realizes what's it's costing her – her relationship with her daughter, time with herself and her husband and lack of social relationships. She registers that she has once again hidden behind her role as a caretaker and drew validation from it, that she has “stopped seeing my self-worth outside of my role as a caretaker” (Lang 223). She suffers from caregiver burnout and though it pains her, decides to move her mother into an assisted living facility. She does so because she doesn't “...want to hang in there. I want to thrive. I want this for my sake, but also for Zoe's. I want to show her that women can thrive, that we don't have to be overburdened, that our value isn't in our sacrifice, I want to show her that we are our own best thing” (Lang 224). Lang detests that women are considered as natural caretakers. She wants to believe that “daughters aren't hard-wired to give up our needs.” She hopes that one day there'll be a country where gender roles are thrown out of the window, where women and men are given equal opportunities and responsibilities.

About the way her mother raised her, Lang says that

She didn't always know how to care for me the way I wanted. She cared for me the way she knew how. Seeing how she planned for me and my brother, I see that she loved us – of course she loved us – maybe not in the ways that spoke to me, but in ways that made sense to her. I don't have an imprint of my palm from kindergarten. I don't have framed pictures of the two of us. I have no letters from her. I have aluminium crutches and an ironclad insurance policy. That was my mother. (Lang 225)

thus proving that the experience of mothering is different for different women. When she was a young girl, she thought that her mother did not care too much because she was preoccupied with her job. It was only when she became a mother herself that she realized that her mom was exhausted from the constant pressure of staying in a marriage that was draining her and also from maintaining the façade of a “good” mother. She was overworked and overwhelmed. What drained her was the constant feelings of guilt and shame.

The actual outcome of her mother’s story of the woman in the river is that the woman chooses herself over her child. So, when the woman emerges from the river, she has to provide a story detailing what had happened. This story that she tells represents her and defines her not only to the world but also to herself. According to her mother, Lang imagines “the woman still holding on to the child after she has let go. That is your error. The story is not about her letting go...The story is about the woman choosing herself. Once she makes that choice, everything follows.” (Lang 240). In choosing to finally let go of the expectations and standards set for motherhood and in deciding to shift her mother to an assisted living facility, Lang is choosing herself, her mental and physical well-being. In doing so, she feels liberated and unburdened. Lang talks of how by choosing herself she became stronger and more accommodating to her daughter, how by freeing and strengthening herself she does the same for her daughter, that having a child needn’t be an obstacle rather an inspiration to choose oneself and chase one’s dreams.

To Lang,

The answer is to be honest rather than impressive, vulnerable rather than proud, real rather than mythic. I don’t want to give my daughter grand heroics

she will later find daunting. If I edit my story the way my mom did, omitting here, glossing over there, my daughter will build me up in her mind as someone who didn't struggle. (Lang 254)

Lang admits that she benefited each time she asked for help and that she doesn't regret getting it. She only regrets the hard time she gave herself. She regrets the fact that she wasted her time feeling guilty when she could have been free (Lang 255). Lang remarks that she doesn't resent her mother for choosing herself over her kids. She only wished that she could've owned her choices (Lang 265). To Lang when a woman chooses herself "It means having the audacity to see her own worth" (Lang 265) which Lang finally does.

With regards to the identity of a woman as mother, it is important that we understand it to be a product of societal expectations. From the moment a woman announces her pregnancy, she's suffocated with information and the do's and don'ts of motherhood. This and the experiences of other mothers shape a woman's identity as a mother. Her identity as a mother becomes central to her identity of self and surpasses all the other identities that she has. This takes away her individuality and discredits all her accomplishments as her biggest accomplishment lies in being a mother. The transition into the identity of a mother from the identity of woman is a conflicting area and a tricky one as sometimes women drown in their identity as a mother. Sometimes the acceptance of this identity closes all their future possibilities of acquiring a new identity. The identity of being a mother also becomes a crucial factor behind all the decision making and choices. If a woman gives birth to a child, then she's a mother, it doesn't matter if she embraces the ideology of motherhood or the way she performs it, the identity of a mother locks in and denies access to any future identities.

The very first impression of Lang that one gets is that of an incredibly confused individual -

I wasn't sure, however, what to do with my degree...I'd wanted a PhD for the same reason I'd ever done anything: to be impressive. At twenty- eight, I had a series of stints behind me. I'd been pre-med, then a management consultant, then an academic. I had leapt from one role on to the next. None fit. (Lang 6)

Growing up, Lang felt like a misfit who did not belong anywhere. She was also uneasy to discover her true self or potential. She makes an active effort to run away from it, afraid to embrace what or who she actually is. Her history of running away from it can be seen on several occasions in the book. When her husband, Noah, was offered a better job in Seattle, she was happy for him. But she's happier because she could "...duck the question of what to do with my life. We were moving across the country! It was like being handed an alibi" (Lang 7). This is also very evident when she finds out that she's pregnant. Though she is happy about the pregnancy she is "...also relieved. Here is a temporary shelter from the grand question. I won't have to reinvent myself. The baby can be a way of buying myself more time" (Lang 10). So, to a person who was unsure of who she is, becoming a mother was seen as an escape route rather than a motivation to get her act together.

The first time she uncovered a part of herself and what was to be a significant part of her identity was when her father insulted her by calling her a writer. According to Lang "...the word writer is an arrow hitting an altogether different target. Writer! I can't believe there's a word for what I am. I sit up straighter inside "(Lang 61). But the fear of it made her reluctant to pursue it – "I sought to be impressive because I was scared to face my desires" (Lang 68). Fear was a crucial

factor in Lang's decision-making process. Whether it be choosing a career or being a mother, Lang was always governed by her fear. She tried to be the mother who put the needs for her child above her own. While there is nothing wrong in doing so, that's not who Lang was and she was aware of it. Still, she did it anyway for the fear of failure and rejection. Slaved to this fear, she denies herself the growth and the formation of one of the most important identities of hers i.e., being a writer. Instead of focusing and spending time on things that mattered, Lang tries to escape them with the illusions of trying to become the stereotypically considered good mother and wife - "I don't know if I can ever get an agent to represent me, but I can get my home to represent me pretty nicely" (Lang 88). As it happens with everyone when things take time or fear rejection, Lang starts to fall back to things that are comfortable and familiar and deludes herself into thinking that's what she actually needed - "Being the perfect housewife fulfils something in me. I tell myself it's all for Zoe. I am giving her the sort of lovely, ordered home I never knew, an environment where she will feel nurtured. I tell myself that she prefers homemade baby food..." (Lang 88).

Towards the latter part of the book, we see Lang letting go of her fear and embracing who she actually is - a writer, an athlete, and a mother. She understands that she does not have to sacrifice all her other identities simply because she's a mother. Lang observes that it's difficult to acknowledge certain parts of oneself but it's important that we pay attention to what makes us uncomfortable - "Writer. Athlete. Mom. Some words fit right away. Others take time. What matters is that we hear the dissonance, pay attention to what makes us uncomfortable" (Lang 253). Lang regulates the roles that she performs and makes sure that one doesn't drown the other, especially the role of the mother.

Chapter Three

Understanding Motherhood Through Trauma

Certain important psychological and neurobiological changes occur at the beginning of motherhood. These modifications provide the mother with the means to care for her newborn. While being a beautiful experience, motherhood is also naturally stressful, particularly for mothers who have unresolved trauma. Previous studies have examined how unresolved trauma can impair a mother's caregiving abilities, which interferes with the growth of safe attachment in her own child (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6363675/).

Trauma can be understood as an emotional reaction to a profoundly upsetting or distressing event or experience which typically leads to physical or psychological harm. A variety of events can cause trauma like abuse, neglect, accidents, natural catastrophes, war, or violent crimes. Anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, emotional numbness, and physical symptoms like fatigue, headaches, and muscular tension are some of the ways in which trauma manifests in an individual. Trauma can have long-term consequences for a person's mental and physical health.

“Developmental Trauma is a term used in the literature to describe childhood trauma such as chronic abuse, neglect or other harsh adversity in their own homes. When a child is exposed to overwhelming stress and their caregiver does not help reduce this stress, or is the cause of the stress, the child experiences developmental trauma” (www.porticonetwork.ca/web/childhood-trauma-toolkit/developmental-trauma/what-is-developm). This type of trauma can disrupt a child's sense of safety

and attachment, as well as render it difficult to forge healthy relationships. It can also lead to depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and even self-harm.

Lang's struggle to attain the image of the perfect maternal figure can be understood as a response of developmental trauma. This trauma stems from the neglect she experienced from her father, an agent of the patriarchy. Growing up, Lang's father was an emotionally absent figure in her life. This paternal neglect paired with acts of cruelty, in a way, forced Lang to depend on her mother as the sole parental figure. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Lang saw her father, not as an independent adult but as a man-child who was a constant burden to her beloved mother. Her father asserted himself as the self-proclaimed patriarch of the family even though it was her mother who was the real head of the family and she earned more than him. But this fact was never to be acknowledged (Lang 33).

Lang also mentions how she was a target for her father's unnecessary acts of cruelties. He constantly called her worthless and fed a very young and impressionable mind that women "...aren't as *smart*" as men (Lang 33). He also constantly tried to control her thoughts and actions through which she was made to feel powerless. For instance, reading was an activity that helped Lang to escape the chaos of her dysfunctional childhood home. But her father severely looked down on this practice as he understood reading to be an act of her disloyalty, an act that showed that she rather be in a fictional world than his house. It was her father who first instilled a sense of inadequacy in Lang. Whenever Lang achieved something he would constantly invalidate her success, efforts and feelings. As a child, when she got into the track team and the tennis team, he would take her to additional practice sessions where she was pushed beyond her limits. This resulted in her quitting both the teams

as she sustained physical injuries from these sessions. According to Lang, “If only I were stronger, he wouldn’t need to yell. I knew he was trying to toughen me up. As he explained, I should be grateful. His words made logical sense to me. I should ignore my own exhaustion. I should wake up at seven a.m. in the summer to clean the house...These felt like reasonable points for self-improvement” (Lang 85). We observe in the course of the novel how this inadequacy makes an appearance in Lang’s own experience of motherhood where she constantly resort to extreme acts like making baby food from scratch, organizing extravagantly themed children’s parties, and household chores that definitely require additional assistance such as washing the exterior windows of the house.

Her father’s anger towards her makes no sense to Lang or to the readers. But we can understand his attitude to be a result of feeling emasculated. He was bested by his wife, a woman, in all aspects of his life. She dominated him financially, socially and even in their family life. He then takes his frustrations out on the relatively powerless figure in the family - the young Lang. In her mother’s opinion, “People with problems can’t be there for their children,” she sometimes told me...*Your father is one such person*. She never spoke the words, but I felt them (Lang 87).

The physical, mental and emotional abuse Lang suffers at the hands of her father drives her to attempt suicide. This was the only solution she could find to the problem of her father (Lang 102). Though she was unsuccessful in her attempt, she defiantly stood up to her father when he found out about it. In the later part of the novel we observe how an adult Lang deals with her father. After her parents’ divorce she only saw her father on rare occasions. She describes their awkward meetings as “bad dates” where her father only talked about himself, never enquiring about the happenings in her life. In the end, Lang stops accommodating her father’s infantile

behaviour and stands up for herself by putting herself first even though it was not an easy thing for her to do. She says “Despite the advice pouring in from all sides, it is wordless Zoe who makes me rethink the situation. She prompts me to think about good parents instead of good daughters. I don’t want her to feel obligated to anyone, especially if it compromises her well-being. If that applies to her, it must apply to me” (Lang 95).

The absence of a balanced and healthy paternal figure drove Lang to view her mother as her complete, glorified parental figure. The fact that Suhas could manage a highly demanding job with two infants and an uncooperative husband made her into somewhat of a superhero for Lang. It is exactly this image that she tries to establish for herself. For Lang, her mother stood for everything her father wasn’t. While her mother was secure and sensitive, her father was insecure and insensitive. According to her father, Lang was worthless. But for her mother nobody was unworthy or beyond help. For Lang her mother was the “...champion of her patients. I made this her defining trait because of what it meant for me. By turning up the volume on her compassion, I gave it to myself, a kind of vicarious empathy. She was on her patients’ side. Therefore, she was on mine” (Lang 221).

Though it was Lang’s father who first instilled the seed of inadequacy in her, Suhas’ stories about motherhood were instrumental in the deepening of this inadequacy. Suhas portrays herself as the self sacrificing mother who undertook great difficulties, moving to a foreign country, staying in an unhappy marriage and so on, for the well-being of her children. So naturally Lang’s initial perception of a mother’s love was that of suffering (Lang 5). While narrating fabricated versions of her experience of motherhood, Suhas depicts herself as a self sufficient mother who is capable of managing everything on her own with no external assistance. She tells

Lang how she had to balance a demanding career while caring for an infant child and performing domestic chores without the help of a supportive spouse.

In reality, Suhas did not fit into the conventional idea of a mother. But she tried to cloak this issue through the act of overcompensating. Lang describes how her mother would bring her various things like huge packets of tissues, a wide spectrum of medicines, and large amounts of food whenever she felt unwell. She also relates an incident where her mother drove all the way to Boston to pick up a recliner that Lang needed and dropped it at her dorm room in New York, all in one day (Lang 29). Such overcompensatory acts can be interpreted as trauma responses. For Suhas it was a technique to conceal the kind of mother she really was - not a mother who fit into the patriarchal mould of motherhood but the kind of mother who had help during a challenging period of her life. Lang is also seen mimicking her mother in this manner. She “takes on tasks no sane person would attempt... wash the exterior windows of the house, steam the curtains, and throw themed parties for the neighbourhood kids, making all the food and decorations by hand” (Lang 87). Both mother and daughter resort to such extreme acts to feel seen and validated by others. The rewards of such acts “are concrete: compliments, praise, “likes” (Lang 88).

Harbouring on illusions generated by her mother, Lang is ashamed to ask for help when she is unable to satisfy the needs of her own daughter. She feels useless and helpless due to her incapability to meet the basic needs of her newborn child. “My first week as a mom is a struggle. My milk is slow to come in. Zoe won’t take a bottle. Her weight drops by more than 10 percent—a red flag. One terrifying day, she doesn’t produce enough wet diapers or respond to stimuli and, dehydrated, requires medical attention. Never before have I felt like a failure. I can’t meet her basic needs” (Lang 43). Unable to meet the insurmountable standards of motherhood propagated

by her mother, Lang falls prey to postpartum depression and confesses to suicide ideation. Postpartum depression can be considered as a consequence of trauma. It interferes with a mother's caregiving responsibilities towards her newborn and could lead to extreme mood swings, difficulty in bonding with the infant, extreme loss of energy, thoughts of harming oneself or the baby, frequent thoughts of death and suicide and so on. Lang feels disillusioned following her phone call with her mother who refused to come to her aid even when she confessed to having self destructive thoughts.

In a way, Lang's understanding of the concept of parenting is derived from the absence of a paternal figure while growing up. Lang's idea of her mother as the only parental figure during her childhood and adolescent years, in a way encouraged her to take on the same role and burden of responsibilities in her own experience of parenting. Though Lang's husband is a supportive force, Lang unintentionally takes up the complete responsibility of parenting and in addition to that she also volunteers to become the primary caregiver for her ailing mother. In short, Lang cares for her daughter, her mother and herself. This can also be seen as an act of overcompensating. The title of the novel, *What We Carry*, can be viewed as a reference to Lang's developmental trauma. She carries her share of memories, ingrained concepts, her mother's fabricated views on motherhood. What Lang carried from her past to her present is what she made use of later on in her life.

In the end, Lang emerges victoriously from a harrowing experience. She understands that healing is not a linear process and that she doesn't have to be perfect all the time. Instead it is more important to pace oneself and to put oneself first. In doing so she is breaking generations worth of trauma and paving way for her daughter to forge healthier relationships.

Conclusion

Feminism and motherhood have always shared a troubled relationship. Feminism's reluctance to accommodate motherhood was rooted in the inherent characteristic of motherhood which made it a domain of women's oppression and powerlessness. Thus, the topic of motherhood remained in the women's private sphere until its rise to prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2006, O'Reilly coined the term motherhood studies to mark it as an academic field.

Rooted in Rich's *Of Woman Born*, motherhood was understood to be a patriarchal construct and a site of women's oppression. Rich contributed to the possibility of motherhood as an experience of empowerment. The term "motherhood" refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women. It perpetuates the idea that mothering is natural to women and child-rearing is the sole responsibility of the mother and that it should be carried out as "intensive mothering" – where the mother is completely dedicated to the upbringing of the child and regards mothering more important than her paid work. It gives mothers the sole responsibility for motherwork but with the absence of power to regulate the conditions under which they mother. The experience of mothering on the other hand is exclusive and personal to each mother. It is the meaning that a woman attaches to her position as a mother. Because the experience of mothering is not inherently oppressive, unraveling the patriarchal narrative of motherhood opens up a space for the women-centered experiences of mothering. It gives importance to maternal power by assigning an agency to mothers and adds value to motherwork. This gave rise to the view that mothering is a socially involved practice. In regards to the mother's identity, women are seen negotiating and

renegotiating within the constructs of rules of good mothering. A woman's identity, especially her identity as a mother, is formed by societal expectations and dominant conceptions of mothering. When she attempts to live up to these unrealistic and unattainable expectations, she inevitably fails, causing her to question her worth.

The lived experience of motherhood fuels mothers to reclaim their identity of self and prevents them from drowning in their identity as a mother. Women have the potential to change how society perceives motherhood. One way of doing this is to not follow the models set by mothers and grandmothers and to make a path of one's own. Active participation in discussions concerning the reality of being a mother can help women to change how society as a whole comprehends the concept of motherhood. Through the process of reflecting, responding and resisting expectations surrounding mothering, women can make motherhood a site of empowerment.

What We Carry highlights the issues, difficulties and experiences of motherhood. It exposes the reality of motherhood and provides an unfiltered and raw outlook into the journey of motherhood. The book asserts that women are more than just the role of mother that they play, that they are individuals of great calibre and worth, that they exist outside the domestic sphere and have a separate life of their own that does not involve their children or partners. We are informed how motherhood can be a difficult period for women and is not something that comes naturally as it is popularly made out to be. Through the book, we understand how all women are susceptible to the dangers of the patriarchal notion or image of a perfect mother and how it affects their individuality and rationality. Lang's record of her struggles with motherhood provides a sense of peace and relatability to other women battling similar struggles of motherhood. Lang, through her book, exhibits the importance of breaking

out of delusions, unfair and unrealistic standards set for women in their period of motherhood.

Thus the project stands to promote awareness regarding the reality of motherhood and the difficulties women, especially women who are mothers are subjected to by exposing the age-old standards and stereotypes surrounding the institution.

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