


Identity Exploration and Representation of Motherhood in the Poetry of Ranu Uniyal

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ABSTRACT

Ranu Uniyal, one of the important personalities of confessional mode, is always under review for her obsessive openness and pervasiveness, but she reaches her destination by displaying the sterling image of patriarchy. Uniyal's poems not only present the everyday lived reality of ordinary women but also the strong independent women having power and who must outbrave the societal regulations and norms to assert their identity as human beings full of love and affection. Ranu Uniyal's poems incorporate the strong experience both as a mother and as the daughter of powerful mothers whose personalities shape their identity as women. Among the modern Indian poets who are writing in English today, she has been ranked with such poetesses of dissatisfaction and discontent as Kamala Das. By engaging with the everyday life of her mother and her motherhood, the poet tries to understand the reality of universal motherhood in a poetic way. The studies of Ranu Uniyal's poems add a new dimension to Indian poetry in English through the subtle and honest probing of man-woman relationships. She does not debunk the whole ideology of motherhood in her writing. Instead, her critical understanding of motherhood paves the path for women's agency, autonomy, and identity regarding motherhood.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Self-identity, Male-authority, Motherhood, identity.

Ranu Uniyal is one of the most influential voices of the existent era. Her poems are not disjointed single pieces of ideas and experiences. There is an underlying unity and continuity of sagacity in her ebullient poems of joy, grief, and passions, which focus on the recurring elements of unconventional love and lust, frustration and despair, the flow of motherhood and womanhood, and most importantly, the concept of New Women in the ambience of banal society. The modus of "openness" and honesty that she chooses is rarely witnessed in the writings of other contemporaries. Most of her poems are a shred of incessant rummage for womanly desire, propensity, and love through unidealized perspectives.

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Received 08 May. 2023; Accepted 11 May. 2023. Available online: 25 May. 2023.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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Ranu Uniyal's poems purvey voices to the suppressed sexuality and contravene the socially acceptable nuances of love without battling an eyelid. She is bold, stalwart, and pertinacious in her verse choice. The heights of her poems mirror the glorified and apotheosized society conducted by patriarchal establishments and pierce the reader's conscience and cognitions. She

is tremendously anxious about the women and their fate, the questions of gender, race, class, and the relationships of men and women being very explicit.

A deeper understanding of the structure of gender relations in the so-called patriarchal system is crucial to understand motherhood in India. The formation of the structure is not only shaped by the issues of gender stereotypification, rather it is molded by the socio-political, cultural environment where it is situated. The process of subjugation of mothers in the domestic sphere and reproductive sphere is reinforced through multiple patriarchal mechanisms to perpetuate the subjugation of women in varied forms. The traditional myths of motherhood continue to idealize the institution of motherhood even today.

Motherhood is supposed to be the most essential aspect of a woman's life. It has been glorified in literature, music, and films for years. With the advent of feminist movements, feminist theorists also critically engaged with the concept of motherhood and how the conventional presentation of motherhood normativised a specific image of motherhood as ideal, therefore negating other manifestations of motherhood. Motherhood is informed an institution by the patriarchal imposed ideology. Often motherhood is rendered as the most glorifying experience of a woman's life, but the renowned poet like Ranu Uniyal has felt the need to rectify the picture by rendering the pain, suffering, and desolation of motherhood. Fictional texts by Ranu Uniyal's poems like "Ma's imperfect advice," "Like You Mama," "Amma," "A Poem for My Son", "All is Fair...", "Mother and the Little that I Know about Her" will direct us to uncover the layers of the multiple power structure of patriarchy which control motherhood in varied form.

The poem "All is Fair" elicits the traditional mother's attitude and outlook toward sexual desire, which is chained to societal norms. The very stereotypical institution thus marginalized her into the position of an object under the panoptic gaze of the society. Despite having sexual desire, the socio-cultural impositions force the female individual to fragment her identity into

specific stereotypes, to lose the unity of being, and to be self-alienated for the time being. Hence the poet says:

Young girls fragile as flowers,

In full bloom, must not desire. (All is fair: The Day Went Strawberry Picking in Scarborough 17)

To be sure, the female speaker is a counteractive individual who can dare to take the assertive steps of falling in love with someone and consummate her sexual desire as a token of love. The poet introduces a generation to a subject that is taboo- the sexual yearnings of a woman. Ranu Uniyal being a trendsetter and iconoclast, defies all conventional and traditional motherly restrictions and opens a window into the intricacies of the female mind and thought process, and makes tussles with the patriarchal setup which controls the quest for love and acknowledgement of the body's carnal desire. A celebration of sheer youthful sexual exuberance hints at whereas the poet challenges moral conduct.

Children evermore play an integral part in revitalizing the ever-barren life of women in male-dominated private spheres. This situation pertains to Uniyal's poem "Mother and the little that I know about her." Baby's 'toothless smile' and impeccable face always help the mothers in general to deface the boundless tears and attain an invincible spirit and strength to face the miserable life. Women are compelled to adhere to the stereotypes and ideal models of good mothers, wives, and sisters. It is considered to be a limited identity for women.

Every mother immolates themselves for the sake of their children, but the children remain apathetic in their duty towards their aged mother. The children are not least bothered about the mother's little need for love, affection, and emotional bonding and never observe the love expressed by their love-lorn Mother and; hence she is shattered down wholly. It has been brought to light that the mother used to love her offspring even in adverse and unfavourable circumstances. The poem confronts itself as reminiscent of bygone days when the mother was forced to keep herself busy in the domestic sphere. At the same time, her palm often jingles and 'sweat' flows continuously. During her youth, by getting her children, she spent her days only caring for the rearing of her beloved children, and her world was increasingly narrowed as she avoided all contact with the outer world. Nowadays, being old, she does not identify her own self that once had that the poet expresses "her own body she treats like an alien." The poet also describes her mother's fragile face -"on her face like folded seams of an old Kanjevaram silk wafer thin." By describing all these little incidents of her mother's life, the poet shows her

regard for her mother, who once was her protective angel. Motherly pain, anguish, agonies, and suffering are opened up explicitly in the poem, and the poet draws a harsh reality of everyday motherhood.

Through the poem “Like you Mama,” the feminist personality of Ranu Uniyal asserts her own individual choice of not being a traditional sacrificing conformist motherhood like her mama who spends her time in domestic chores, that is ‘washing and scrubbing, beating the clothes’. She expresses her despondency and disillusionment that her mother had to suffer in this sterile, dehumanized, and exploitative world. The articulation of the female psyche is candid here as the female speaker asserts her individual choice of not being a mother like ‘mama’. She has rebelled against the authoritarian societal norms that mould the womanliness in women as if they are made to bear and rear the children. The poem itself is a contravention against the consequent dwarfing of womanhood and norms, which are prevalent according to the whims of males. Unlike her ‘mama’, she seeks to infringe the systematic long-rooted customs in order to secure an anomalistic position as a spokesperson of feminine essentialism instead of being a ‘dutiful ‘and ‘loving’ mother. Most prominently, the poem is a gainsaying against the reality of every sacrificing motherhood. Thus, the poet asserts her individual choice of not being a mother like her mama. Like her mama, she does not want to lead her life the way her mother spent her whole life in the domestic chores. Thus she says:

I wouldn't want to be like you mama.
washing and scrubbing,
beating the clothes till they are stark clean

The poet feels sympathy for the traditional lives of motherhood where women's lives exist only to cook, to clean and care for children, husband and all the family members that she expresses in the lines of the poem:

With those endless meals
For pa and boys

The poet also describes the very conventional and everyday mundane living of her beloved sacrificing mother:

Weary and sick, at dusk
you would hastily
brush your hair

and tighten the folds of saree

around your waist.

I would not want to be like mama,

She shares that after doing all these expected domestic works, she becomes ‘weary’, and ‘sick’ and she did not even time to brush her hair and wear her sari properly. Her mother sacrificed both her mind and body under the pressure of domestic chores. She did not even get little time to care for herself. The poet expresses her anguish about her inner self not getting a life like her mother. Instead, she is very aspiring to get an independent life that challenges the traditional sacrificing motherhood in their little world and she anticipates being a complete woman. Thus she says:

hoping to change

our little world

The poet is also telling about her mother’s incomplete degree that she sacrificed for the sake of children and family that Beauvoir said in her *The Second Sex*, as if women are made to bear and rear children. The poet, again and again expresses that she does not want to be like her mother as ‘dutiful and ‘loving’ .Thus she says:

I wouldn’t want to be like you mama,

Dutiful and loving

Left lone and weak,

Shut, in a one room flat . (Like You Mama, 32)

As a tender and loving daughter, the poet experiences the reality of her mother’s life, and she becomes quite aware of it, and she is not willing to get such sacrificing motherhood. Her ultimate identity as a woman is lost. Her life becomes worthless.

Ranu Uniyal, one of the most vibrant voices, has successfully imprinted the concept of motherhood in one of her poems entitled “A poem for My son.” To her, every child is precious to a mother, and from the womb, a maternal bonding that is a symbiotic attachment gets initiated. A deep psychological condition is visualized throughout the entire poem for the beloved son. During pregnancy, the mother is happy about having the baby, and this happiness does not stop Uniyal from laying out the reality of giving birth, which is not precisely happy. It is calm before something awful. The mother passes through the pain, suffering, trauma, and

feelings of nervousness before this dying procedure and forgets afterward to pave the way toward a new life. The problem of congenital cataracts, what the newborn has, becomes dim in contrast with the motherly love. The impact of malformation never ever vanquishes maternal altruism. This very moment doesn't put the motherly emotions and feelings at stake, and despite having a cumbersome situation, she wishes to continue her motherliness to an incapacitated child in search of aesthetic pleasure and enlightenment in the middle of the turmoil of feelings. The baby's angelic smile fills the void of emotional disconnection from what the mother had been just after its separation from the womb. This effective breakage is replaced as the 'tiny thumb' comes to the breasts. This tiny thumb is the only companion to her, while the other part is 'fragile.' She spends the night through 'foliage of hidden dream' that is very unpleasant and prolonged.

The whole happiness is centered on the child's 'one look,' 'one smile,' 'one touch' and 'one prayer' that is to be with you now and forever. The poet says:

Your smiles are precious

And so are your words

And yet it hits me

Staggers my steps

Smell of sticky silence that has long been. (Uniyal, "A Poem for My Son" Across the Divide 47)

A significant message is pervaded the entire poem- every child is special to her mother, either is normal or physically and mentally retarded. A child is a blessing and an ultimate shelter to the mother. The greatest gift of a mother's heart is her child, in whom she finds her utmost unconditional love and pleasure, which helps her to live long.

A mother's anomalistic outlook gets flourishes in "Ma's imperfect advice." The female speaker's pieces of advice are imperfectly perfect. Her mother used to advise her not to be clinging to old-bad memories of greedy, selfish people that always haunt her and become a hindrance to observing the very peaceful days ahead. Throughout the poem's entire range, a parallelism is made between old-bad memories with 'blunt razor,' 'barbed mirrors,' and 'title saucer' – emblems of danger in life. A mother's mature experience of the harsh reality of life is observed and displayed through the verses. The poet could not help herself without sharing her mother's deteriorative suggestions to forget about the bad memories of the past, which may

suck away all the tumultuous energy of doing something good. To her, the beauty of nature destroys itself when it takes revenge and brings natural calamity that is awfully dangerous for leading life in her own way. One should not be upset at the cunning attitude of others for trapping her. Without any hesitancy, the mother puts forth the height of the hard-core fact that mean-minded people pretend to be good for the sake of their personal avail an advantage and subsequently leave the sooner their self-interest gets accomplished. The mother's edification leads her to ignore these 'foggy minds' of companions. Thus the poet shares her mother's imperfect advice:

...Fuggy minds are
better left alone rotting inside closed bodies. Parched skin
Fails to absorb beauty and clarity that rests within, mottled
mules has no road to climb (Uniyal, "Ma's Imperfect Advice" The Day We Went Strawberry Picking in Scarborough 64)

Women play the role of second fiddle in this society. Ranu Uniyal, through her confessional tone, broadens the border for women before the world. A woman is the epitome of beauty, and this beauty is caged, locked inside the four walls of the domestic universe. The poem 'Amma' is confessional in tone, dualist in meaning, and rebellious in nature. The poem parades her bravery, her principles, her undying optimism, and optimistic pessimism to some extent. A selfless, sacrificing mother figure is like a 'potted money plant' that is dependable on others.

She feels exhausted and suffocated within the domestic chores like the leaves of the potted money plant. Thus the poet describes:

It is a potted money plant in a blue-china.
Its leaves odd and even.
There is something in them
That reminds me of you. (Uniyal, "A Poem for My Son" Across the Divide 35-36)

The poet compares the sacrificing old mother's hand to the leaves of the potted money plant, which is odd because it has lost its liveliness limitation within the pot. Birthing and mothering are the ultimate destiny of women's lives. Mother does not get enough time to establish her own individual identity. Mothers are confined to the reproductive domain of the home, and they are denied access to the public world. The poet challenges the patriarchal ideology of essentializing motherhood which is considered to be the main hindrance to women's emancipation. The attitude of submissiveness, forsaking, and self-sacrificing is nothing but a

‘false consciousness.’ Institutionalized patriarchy and culturally constructed phallogocentric structure discard the concept of motherhood. The individual choice of motherhood is never valued. Childbearing and child-rearing are socially manipulative. They exclude women from other productive roles, confine women into the domestic sphere, and restrict their entry into the public domain. Patriarchy cramps their creativity and uses them as objects in a male transaction. Motherhood sucks away women’s own personal interest and independence. Mothers are neglected and left with nothing when separated from their children because they invest all their time and energy in their children and families. Natural motherhood is artificially shaped by patriarchal institutions, the women’s ultimate success is to be a mother, and the female body and maternity are controlled by patriarchy. Mothers or women are limited only as women not as human beings. They are considered only as sex machines for production. Mothering for women is not at all a natural instinct but rather a set of social pressures and uncontrollable social circumstances that display a woman’s feelings for giving birth to children. In the patriarchal structure of society, all her cherished dreams never become complete, and she suffers from an existential crisis. Motherhood is a patriarchal conscious strategy that prevents women from realizing their full potential as a complete human being. Women’s identity is only celebrated and formed by culturally constructed motherhood.

To Uniyal, women are made weak and stereotypical, and they are bound to behave in conformity with society. She adequately places a mode of expression that is often satiric, ironic, and bitter in meaning as she is annoyed, tired, and irritated, observing how mothers are treated, and rigid systems mold them to fit inside the domestic hell. She has made her utmost endeavor to de-center the so-called patriarchal value system by coding and decoding it. This poem encounters a society full of cultural dominance, orthodox values, and a primitive foundation with a hegemonic scheme. Maternity was women’s private wealth, and capturing those maternity men became the controller of women. By keeping women constantly busy in childbearing and rearing, men become the independent source of production of economic and men becomes the owner of wealth. The responsibility of maternity beyond bearing and breastfeeding is socially constructed. Motherhood is nothing but a social practice that should be obviously altered.

The poem “The Dream Vulture” unravels the traditional mother’s outlook on her sibling as a doll and her daughter’s open defiance of it. She opposes, ‘A Barbie is not what I want to be.’ She does not want to be a material object at the hand of others. She wants to express her own

individual identity as a human being. She wants to go beyond the domestic space of her everyday materialistic world. Working-class mothers, in general, forget to regard the hidden desire and intentions of their babies. For lower-class women, the taking of motherhood is not often a choice, and at the same time, they have no sufficient knowledge of birth control and economic efficiency. For lack of knowledge of birth control and economic dependency, they suffered tremendously due to unwanted pregnancies. In a patriarchal world, lower-class babies are neglected, tortured, and consumerized like a Barbie doll.

The poem “A New Year Gift” also recounts the paradoxical glorification of the power of God in a conventional and nonconventional way from the perspective of a traditional mother’s outlook and her nonconventional daughter’s credence. The poet condemns the presence of the active agency of God in the everyday lived lives of passive victimized motherhood. Motherhood is also controlled in the spiritual domain by their false consciousness of God. The poet vehemently criticizes God’s apathy in the relentless suffering of ordinary mothers in the domestic sphere of four walls. The poet describes:

I wish my God to speak
Your God is always silent

The poet thus negatively presents the ideal image of God. Thus, Poet tells her mother:

I donot want your God
Will you please make a new God for me? (Uniyal, "A Poem for My Son" Across the Divide 27)

The poet tries to find a new space for women’s emancipation by making a new nonconventional God beyond the conventional aspect of God.

Ranu Uniyal’s poems manifest Indian women in such a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. She continues to neglect the conventional genre of the dominant and imperious culture or the male-oriented universe in her writing of poetry. Uniyal’s inner world unfastens a profound symbolic significance for all bruised and battered womankind. The poet intends to see through the layers of glorification of motherhood, and she tries to explore the realities of the motherhood, its pain and suffering, its trauma and depression, and its struggle and survival. Ranu Uniyal enhances the optic to represent motherhood both from normative and non-normative perspectives in her poetry. Her wide references to multiple standpoints in her poems on motherhood inform her own viewpoint as a feminist poet as well as a critic of motherhood. She highlights both the points of conformism and non-conformism,

where a woman's choice of motherhood is prioritized, and motherhood does not become a patriarchal imposition. She does not debunk the whole ideology of motherhood in her writing. Rather her critical understanding of motherhood paves the path for women's agency, autonomy, and identity regarding motherhood.

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