



# Unveiling the Layers: Exploring Identity and Maternity in Suniti Namjoshi's *The Mothers of Maya Diip*

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**Abstract**— This paper investigates the intricate layers of Identity and Maternity in Suniti Namjoshi's poignant novel, *The Mothers of Maya Diip*. A critical exploration of the text unravels the complex web of relationships, cultural norms, and personal narratives that shape the protagonist's journey. By examining the intersections of feminism, queer identity, and motherhood, this analysis reveals how Suniti Namjoshi's work challenges traditional notions of love, family, and belonging. Ultimately, this study demonstrates the novel's powerful portrayal of the self as a multifaceted and dynamic entity and its enduring resonance in contemporary discussions of Identity and Maternity.



**Keywords**— Identity, Maternity, Personal narrative, Feminism, Motherhood

Identity refers to the complex concept of self, encompassing multifaceted attributes that define an individual, including one's values, experiences, beliefs, relationships, and affiliations. Identity can be personal, which contains unique experiences and personal traits that distinguish one person from another. Identity can also be social, which includes group memberships and roles that shape our sense of belonging and connection to others. Identity can also be cultural, with shared norms, customs, and traditions, which define a collective heritage. Erik Erikson, a prominent psychologist, remarks that- "Identity is the sum total of all the identifications we have made, the sum total of all the roles we have played" (Erikson 161). Identity is characterized by its constantly evolving dynamic nature, influenced by interactions with the surrounding environment and others. In this context, maternity refers to the roles and experiences associated with motherhood, encompassing not only biological motherhood but also social, emotional, and cultural aspects of nurturing and caregiving. Feminist scholar Adrienne Rich writes, "Maternity is a relation, not an identity" (Rich 39). Maternity shapes our sense of self, values, and beliefs, influencing our relationships, and is deeply intertwined with our identity. The intersection of maternity and identity forms the focal point for exploration in this paper, revealing

the complex ways in which experiences of motherhood shape our sense of self. Sociologist Sara Ruddick states, "Maternal identity is a relation between a woman's sense of self and her experience of mothering" (Ruddick 34). This intersection highlights the dual nature of maternity, constraining and empowering our sense of identity while defining our places within the world and shaping our understanding of ourselves. This intersectional dynamic, which explores the interconnectedness of Maternity, Identity, and cultural heritage, is exemplified in 'Mothers of Maya Diip' a novel by Suniti Namjoshi, an acclaimed Indian-born writer and poet. Born 1941 in Mumbai, India, Namjoshi has had a distinguished career spanning multiple fields. She served as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service and held academic positions in both India and Canada. Since 1972, she has been affiliated with the University of Toronto's English Department and resides in Devon. (Namjoshi) Namjoshi's literary career spans over two decades, with over 20 published books. Her impressive work collection includes poetry collections like "Poem" (1967), "Poems of Govindagraj" (1968), and "More Poems" (1971), novels like "The Conversations of Cow" (1985), "The Mothers of Maya Dip" (1989), and short stories like "Feminist Fables" (1993). Known for her provocative and

innovative works, Namjoshi explores themes of identity, lesbianism, feminism, mythology, and post-colonialism.

Building on the intersection of Maternity and Identity, Suniti Namjoshi's novel "The Mothers of Maya Diip" (1989) presents a powerful exploration of these themes in a visionary utopia created by women, for women. This novel is divided into three parts, systematically introducing, describing, and concluding this visionary society's aftermath. Through this structure, Namjoshi masterfully examines the complex interplay between motherhood, identity, and community, offering a thought-provoking critique of patriarchal norms, power dynamics, and societal expectations. K.S. Vaisali, in her article, "Mothers in a Conflict..." observes that

"Namjoshi uses 'parody' as a strategy to articulate a caricature of the patriarchal construct of the image of femininity, which involves both the rejection and subversion of its requirements. Wit, humour, satire, irony, and parody become her major tools. Deconstructing the logic of 'normality,' they strip the veil of familiarity from normality to reveal its cruelty, perversity, and unnaturalness."(K.S. Vaishali)By caricaturing traditional feminine ideals, Namjoshi highlights their artificiality and absurdity.

"The Mothers of Maya Diip" unfolds on the mystical island of Maya Diip, a place steeped in enigma and legend. At the heart of this tale are the mothers, an ensemble of complex and diverse characters, each weaving her unique thread into the rich tapestry of the island's history. These women, linked by the shared experience of motherhood, navigate the intricate pathways of longing, love, and loss. The current paper focuses on a matriarchal society and the characters' journey to this unique setting, offering a subtle exploration of sexuality and identity. Suniti Namjoshi's characters often feature humans and animals living together, blurring the lines between species. This narrative technique is evident in "The Mothers of Maya Diip," where humans and animals coexist as characters, sometimes sharing identical perspectives and experiences. Two characters, the Blue Donkey and her friend, Jyanvi, embark on a journey to a mysterious matriarchal society at the invitation of Rani Saheb, a ruler of a maternal island named Maya Diip. Blue Donkey is dubious about the existence of such an island as "there were rumours...that a matriarchy did exist, but no one was quite sure whether it was historical fact, a legend or a dream."(5). They were hosted by Saraswati at Bombay Airport. Jyanvi instantly falls in love with Saraswati; she

finds her- "Arms, legs, and limbs/ the curve of (her) throat" (7) attractive, but she stops herself from expressing herself in the initial meeting. The connection between Saraswati and Jyanvi later creates a ripple effect of conflict on the island. In Maya Diip, motherhood is essential to achieve adult status and to decide the status of the mother/citizen. Factors like bearing a girl child, being a biological mother, and adoption determine the identity of the mother, being lesser or Grade A, and respect in society. Being a mother of a boy brings disrespect and denounces the status of a mother. Rani Saheb, the ruler of the island, is a "Grade A mother three times over (that was the maximum), she was the product of a Grade A mother three times over, she had magnificent teeth, an excellent appetite, she was always clad in green, and she always prevailed, or, at least, she frequently did" (9) Although a matriarchy, the power relations work the same as patriarchy on this island. Through the eyes of characters Blue Donkey's and Jyanvi's experiences, the story highlights the societal importance of motherhood and the intricate power dynamics it entails. The roles and societal structures underscore the importance of motherhood and the complexities of achieving status within this system. Jyanvi has feelings for Saraswati, making her struggle to navigate the societal expectations around relationships. Jyanvi delivers a poetry recital, revealing her inner turmoil and confusion regarding her relationship with Saraswati. The reaction to her poem reflects the societal norms and expectations, and Jyanvi is left feeling isolated and misunderstood. Her condition portrays the intricate dynamics of a society where maternal roles indicate status, identity, and personal relationships are intertwined with societal expectations. Jyanvi faces the consequences of her views on children and motherhood in a matriarchal society. She is placed in a therapeutic cell, signifying society's disapproval of her beliefs. The Blue Donkey visits her, explaining the gravity of her situation and how it has offended the core values of the Mayans. Jyanvi's poem is interpreted as an affront to motherhood. A special hearing was arranged to determine her fate. During the hearing, Jyanvi's previous status as a Grade C mother is questioned, and she struggles to articulate her role in a patriarchal society, which is foreign to the Mayans. The Mayans find her experiences and perspectives perplexing, highlighting the cultural differences and misunderstandings. Eventually, the Matriarch assigns Jyanvi the role of a personal servant and Grade C mother to Gagri the Good, the Matriarch's granddaughter. This development led Jyanvi to seek solace in a walk along the beach with Saraswati, which naturally became a discussion about motherhood and the societal structure. Jyanvi expresses her frustration with the unfair distribution of money and societal roles, particularly her forced role as a caretaker for Gagri the Good. Saraswati tries

to ease Jyanvi's concerns, but Jyanvi is adamant in her disdain for the societal expectations of motherhood. Jyanvi's struggle with her role and her relationship with Saraswati intensifies. She is conflicted between her desire for Saraswati and her frustration with the obligations of being part of Saraswati's life, especially regarding mothering responsibilities. This conflict reveals Jyanvi's inner turmoil as she grapples with societal norms, her identity, and her feelings for Saraswati. It ends with a symbolic request by Jyanvi for the potted rose from her cell, signifying her desire for freedom and independence from societal constraints.

Jyanvi, still struggling with her role in this society, represents a poem at the Matriarch's behest. Her story, subtly critiquing the societal norms around motherhood, initially displeases the Matriarch but eventually leads to her appointment as the Matriarch's Personal Poet. This event symbolizes a turning point for Jyanvi, acknowledging her talents and offering her a path to reconcile her identity with societal expectations. Jyanvi's struggle with her role and her relationship with Saraswati intensifies. She is conflicted between her desire for Saraswati and her frustration with the obligations of being part of Saraswati's life, especially regarding mothering responsibilities. The Matriarch's decision to name Gagri and Saraswati as successors sparks a power struggle among her daughters, revealing deep-seated conflicts. The family's tension escalates, leading to the Matriarch's arrest. Meanwhile, Saraswati worries about her daughter's welfare. Shyamila and Pramila confront the Matriarch, demanding a reconsideration of the succession, but she remains firm. This confrontation underscores the struggle between traditional and new aspirations as each character grapples with identity and the future of their matriarchal society. Eventually, the Matriarch announces her abdication and plans to return to the forest, leaving her daughters stunned. Saraswati and Jyanvi form an unlikely bond as they navigate the power vacuum of the Matriarch's abdication. Saraswati initially seeks to become the next Matriarch for the sake of her daughter, Sona, but Asha's claim on behalf of her daughter, Gagri, sparks tension. As the Blue Donkey prompts them to decide on a new Matriarch, Saraswati, and Jyanvi engage in a heartfelt conversation. Saraswati, recognizing Jyanvi's growth and selflessness, surprisingly offers her support if Jyanvi chooses to reign. Jyanvi, initially hesitant and feeling unfit, is swayed by Saraswati's words and the Blue Donkey's encouragement. Despite knowing the mothers of Maya may not accept her, Jyanvi agrees to take on the role, with Saraswati promising that as Gagri's Guardian and her Consort, the mothers would accept her. Their exchange showcases a deepening trust and understanding between Saraswati and Jyanvi as they put aside their differences and

work towards a common goal. Despite initially seeking the throne herself, Saraswati's willingness to support Jyanvi highlights her growth and selflessness, while Jyanvi's acceptance of the role demonstrates her newfound confidence and willingness to lead.

Hence, this transformative moment encapsulates the novel's nuanced exploration of Identity, Maternity, and power dynamics. Ultimately, *The Mothers of Maya Diip* systematically unpacks the intricate relationships between these concepts within its matriarchal framework, revealing the complex interplay between personal identity, maternal relationships and communal expectations. The complex interactions of Mothers, Rani Sahiba, Saraswati, and Jyanvi, showcase the diverse facets of feminine experiences, the performance of identity, and the challenges inherent in motherhood and maternity.

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