
Sticky Bonds: Maternal Affect and the Disrupted Infrastructures of Motherhood in Avni Doshi's novel *Burnt Sugar*

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Abstract

Avni Doshi's multidimensional novel *Burnt Sugar* mediates in the contemporary literary representations of motherhood by upsetting socio-cultural ideals surrounding maternal virtue and affection. The novel reveals a mother-daughter relationship splintered by negligence, resentment and ambivalence, unfolding the act of nurturing as a precarious practice molded as much by rage and shame as by affinity. This paper situates *Burnt Sugar* within the critical discourse of 'Affect Theory' to bridge the divide between existing readings that condense the novel into either trauma or diasporic identity. Instead, attention is directed towards the transmission of affective emotions – shame, bitterness, aversion, reliance – that both cohere and corrode maternal bonds simultaneously. The objective here is to convey how the novel exhibits the indistinct infrastructures of emotion that underpin caregiving and jeopardize the normative ideals of maternal selflessness. Consequently, it gives precedence to motherhood as an affective practice transcending cultural limits.

The present study, ultimately, establishes that *Burnt Sugar* reframes maternal affect as both corrosive and constituent, positioning maternal identity not as a fanciful essence but as an emotional infrastructure shaped by negotiations and ambivalence. By outlining this affective terrain, the paper aids in navigating non-traditional motherhood as a site of vulnerability, resistance, and survival beyond normative scripts.

Keywords: Mother-Daughter Relationships, Emotional Infrastructures, Maternal Shame, Ambivalence, Affect Theory.

Introduction

Avni Doshi, an Indian-American author and art historian, debuted with the novel *Burnt Sugar* (first published in India in 2019 as *Girl in White Cotton* and internationally in 2020 as *Burnt Sugar*). The novel was shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize and has widely been discussed for its unflinching portrayal of motherhood, memory, and ambivalence. Set in

Pune, the story follows Antara, a young artist, who is forced to care for her mother Tara as she descends into early-onset dementia. Their relationship is defined not by tender affection but by a history of abandonment, a present of resentment, and a persistent hunger for acknowledgment. Tara had once neglected Antara during her childhood, prioritizing her own desires, including time spent in an ashram, over maternal responsibility. With Tara's memory failing, Antara is caught in the paradox of obligation: she must tend to the very woman who denied her care, navigating a bond built on the shakiest of foundations.

The novel opens with Antara's startling confession: "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 1). This sentence immediately sets the affective tone of the narrative — corrosive, ambivalent, and raw. It signals a departure from idealized representations of the mother-daughter dyad, plunging the reader into what Sianne Ngai (2005) terms as "Ugly Feelings"— the non-cathartic, politically ambiguous emotions like envy and irritation that often characterize sustained relations of inequality. Rather than following a linear plot toward resolution, *Burnt Sugar* lingers in fragments of memory, sensory details, and affective residues. At its centre is not a story of reconciliation but of ongoing tension, where caregiving and cruelty bleed into one another, and the past remains a visceral, untrustworthy presence.

This paper situates *Burnt Sugar* within the discourse of affect theory to move beyond readings that treat the novel primarily as a trauma narrative, diasporic text, or psychoanalytic case study. While such approaches offer valuable insights, they often prioritize interpretation of past events over an analysis of how feeling circulates in the present. Instead, this paper argues that Doshi constructs motherhood as an 'emotional infrastructure' — a system of adhesion, circulation, and sedimentation where feelings such as shame, disgust, longing, and reliance cohere and corrode simultaneously. By drawing on theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Silvan Soloman Tomkins, the paper demonstrates how *Burnt Sugar* reframes maternal identity as unstable and transmissible, implicating both characters and readers in its deeply uncomfortable affective economies.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Affect as Infrastructure

Affect Theory provides the conceptual scaffolding for analysing Doshi's novel not just for what it represents, but for what it does. Affect, in this context, is not synonymous with emotion. As Brian Massumi (2002) conceptualizes it, affect is preconscious intensity — a visceral response that precedes linguistic articulation and cognitive appraisal. It is the body's capacity to affect and be affected. Emotion, conversely, is the naming and qualification of that intensity, its capture within social narratives. Doshi's emphasis on smell, taste, and texture enacts precisely this intensity: readers recoil alongside Antara before fully understanding why.

Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2010) work is crucial here. She emphasizes how emotions are not private possessions but 'stick' to objects, bodies, and spaces, acquiring value as they

circulate within social economies. In *Burnt Sugar*, affect sticks to spoons, beds, smells, and gestures: mundane objects become charged with resentment and memory. This ‘stickiness’ explains how feelings persist over time, binding individuals together even in the absence of love. Motherhood, in this light, becomes an infrastructure whose bonds are forged from affective residue rather than conscious commitment.

This infrastructure is often precarious. Lauren Berlant’s (2011) concept of “Cruel Optimism” describes attachments to objects or relationships that sustain individuals while simultaneously depleting them. Antara’s relentless caregiving for Tara is a perfect example in this context. She is attached to the faint, perhaps impossible, promise that her labour might finally yield recognition or repair the past. Yet, this very attachment locks her in a cycle of exhaustion and disappointment, a state of “impasse” where moving on feels as impossible as staying put. Her care is not a solution but a way of managing an ambivalent situation.

Furthermore, the affective climate of the novel is dominated by ‘shame.’ Drawing on Silvan Tomkins (2008) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), ‘shame’ is understood not as mere guilt, but as an interruptive and deeply embodied affect. It is an exposure of the self that reorients bodies and subjectivities. In the novel, shame emerges in Antara’s shrinking posture before her mother’s erratic behaviour, in her compulsive artistic documentation, and in her silence when confronted with questions about her past. Shame is the affect that severs connection, yet paradoxically, it is also what binds Antara to her mother in a shared, unspoken history of inadequacy. By reading motherhood as a site of affect, one can attend to these flows and blockages of emotion rather than treating maternal identity as a fixed essence.

The method employed here is a close reading that privileges form, texture, and sensory detail. An Affect Theoretical approach asks not just ‘What does this text mean?’ but ‘How does this text make us feel, and what does that feeling do?’ (Gregg and Seigwort 2010). Affect is not treated as an explanatory afterthought but as an operative force within the narrative. Sentences, motifs, and sensory cues are analysed as transmitters of feeling. For example, clipped syntax may mimic shame’s interruptions, while looping, unreliable memories embody affect’s persistence. This method requires attending to the minor, often overlooked details — the texture of a fabric, the smell of a room, the rhythm of a sentence — because it is in these visceral registers that affect is most potently conveyed.

Secondary criticism on *Burnt Sugar*, e.g., Chatterjee (2021); Bhattacharya (2021); Kapoor (2022); Ghosh (2022); Mehta (2023); Menon (2023), provides important contexts. However, these analyses often focus on gender roles, trauma, or cultural disobedience. The affect-theoretical approach emphasizes how the novel’s form and imagery transmit unresolved feeling. It aligns with a critical turn that perceives literature not just as a reflection of reality, but as an active participant in the shaping of our affective worlds.

Mother–Daughter Entanglement in *Burnt Sugar***Abandonment and the Ashram, the Origin of Misalignment:**

One of the formative events of Antara’s childhood is her mother’s decision to join an ashram. This act is the novel’s foundational wound, establishing a template of neglect that shapes all subsequent interactions. Tara’s prioritization of spiritual and personal desires over maternal care is not a single event but a lingering atmospheric pressure. Antara recalls the disorientation of that period: “My earliest memories are of sitting cross-legged on the floor of the ashram, waiting for my mother to look at me, to notice I was there” (Doshi 47). This memory captures both spatial abandonment and affective neglect. The ashram, ostensibly a site of spiritual connection, becomes for Antara an emotional architecture of disconnection the place where she learns unreliability as the primary grammar of intimacy.

This abandonment underpins the later caregiving dynamic. When Tara loses her memory, Antara’s assumption of responsibility does not repair the earlier wound but ironically intensifies it. The caregiving bond becomes what Berlant terms “Cruel Optimism.” The hope that tending to her mother might retroactively yield acknowledgment or even an apology only deepens Antara’s depletion. Each act of care is haunted by the care she never received. The physical labour of tending to Tara’s deteriorating body becomes a Sisyphean task, promising a closure that never arrives and thus perpetuating the state of emotional precarity that has defined Antara’s life.

Food, Disgust, and the Materiality of Memory:

Food in the novel is a primary medium for the transmission of affect, particularly disgust and control. It is never simply nourishment; it is a weapon, a test, and a site of humiliation. Antara recalls being force-fed as a child, an act of maternal aggression disguised as care: “She pushed spoon after spoon into my mouth until I gagged, her face triumphant as if my discomfort was her victory” (Doshi 103). This scene is a powerful illustration of affect’s “stickiness” (Ahmed 48). The disgust and shame do not fade but adhere to the memory, to the object of the spoon, and to the act of eating itself.

Later, as an adult caring for her memory-impaired mother, Antara reverses the dynamic: “Now it is I who put the spoon to her lips, and she spits the food back at me as though rejecting me all over again” (Doshi 219). This role reversal is not corrective but cyclical. The same affects — humiliation, rejection, disgust — circulate, just with the roles inverted. The feeding ritual enacts a closed loop where power and vulnerability are exchanged, but the underlying affective charge remains constant. This connects to Julia Kristeva’s (1982) conceptualization of the “Abject”— that which is violently cast out from the self, like spit or waste, in order to define one’s own boundaries. For both Tara and Antara, the rejection of food is an abjection of the other, a desperate attempt to maintain a sense of self in a relationship that threatens to consume them.

Caregiving and the Politics of Recognition:

Tara's dementia initiates a role reversal where Antara becomes the reluctant caregiver. Yet rather than producing reconciliation, this new dynamic intensifies her frustration and magnifies the affective labour involved. Doshi masterfully captures the sensory overload of this work: "The sour smell of her scalp fills the room, clinging to my fingers even after I've washed them" (Doshi 172). Here, Massumi's emphasis on preconscious intensity is palpable: smell operates as affect before it is articulated as a named emotion like 'resentment.' It is a visceral imposition that cannot be washed away.

Antara's caregiving is governed by an unfulfilled, and perhaps unfulfillable, desire for recognition. She waits for her mother to acknowledge her efforts, to see her, but the dementia ensures this acknowledgment never arrives. As Sedgwick (2003) notes, shame reconfigures relationality, producing postures of withdrawal and silence. Antara embodies this posture, caring compulsively while feeling utterly unseen. Her caregiving becomes a form of "Affective Labour," a term coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) to describe work that requires managing one's own and others' emotions. For Antara, this labour is unpaid, unreciprocated, and emotionally depleting. It is work performed not out of love, but out of a sticky, tangled sense of obligation that is itself a powerful, binding affect.

Narrative Form as Affective Transmission

The novel's form powerfully enacts its affective concerns. Its nonlinear narration and fragmented structure mirror the workings of trauma and memory. The past is not a stable, distant country but a series of intrusive, looping fragments that disrupt the present. This formal choice refuses the reader the comfort of a linear plot and a clear resolution. Instead, we are placed directly into Antara's affective disorientation, forced to piece together a history from unreliable and contradictory shards of memory. This structure insists that the past remains sticky, constantly interrupting and reshaping the present. It makes the reader a participant in, rather than an observer of, the novel's central affective state: a persistent, unresolved tension.

Beyond its larger structure, Doshi's prose at the sentence level often performs the affects it describes. She frequently employs clipped, staccato syntax to mimic affective interruption and emotional blockage. Antara reflects on a moment of failed communication: "I wait. She looks away. I speak, but she doesn't hear. I stop" (Doshi 134). The rhythm here is one of frustration and withdrawal. The short, end-stopped sentences create a sense of impasse, embodying the emotional distance between mother and daughter. Shame and neglect are transmitted not only in the content of the words but in the very structure of the sentence. This is a perfect example of what Sedgwick (2003) calls the "Texture of Feeling"—the way that form and style can carry their own affective weight, independent of narrative content.

Moreover, *Burnt Sugar* is a novel of sensory saturation. The primary registers are smell and taste, which operate as direct conduits for affect and memory. Antara remarks,

“Even silence between us has a taste, bitter like burnt sugar lingering on the tongue” (Doshi 88). This central metaphor encapsulates the novel’s entire affective landscape: an inextricable mixture of potential sweetness and acrid bitterness, intimacy corroded by resentment. Affect here is not merely representational but atmospheric; it saturates the language and implicates the reader in a state of embodied discomfort. The constant references to bodily odours, the taste of stale food, and the texture of unwashed hair create an environment where boundaries between self and other feel permeable and threatening, mirroring Antara’s own psychic state.

Relative Resonances: Global “Dark Maternalities”

Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* resonates with a global wave of contemporary novels that challenge the saccharine idealization of motherhood. This emerging subgenre, which scholars have begun to call “Dark Maternalities,” foregrounds maternal shame, ambivalence, rage, and even violence. The Italian author Elena Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter* (2008) is a key touchstone, portraying a protagonist, Leda, who confesses to abandoning her young daughters for several years to pursue her own intellectual and personal freedom. Like Antara, Leda articulates her guilt and resentment without seeking redemption, troubling the cultural script of the ever-nurturing mother. Doshi’s contribution, however, situates this ambivalence within the specific Indian domestic and cultural context, where filial piety and maternal self-sacrifice are particularly sacrosanct, making Tara’s and Antara’s transgressions feel even more pronounced.

Other texts in this constellation push the boundaries further. Elisa Albert’s *After Birth* (2015) presents postpartum rage and disillusionment, while the Latin-American author Ariana Harwicz’s novel *Die, My Love* (2019) dramatizes a mother’s violent impulses toward her child. Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* (2021) uses surrealism to render maternal rage as a literal animal transformation. A quieter but equally profound exploration is the Canadian writer Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* (2018), which dissects the ambivalence of whether to become a mother at all, treating it not as a natural destiny but as a monumental and possibly regrettable choice.

Placing Doshi in this constellation highlights her distinct focus on caregiving as affective labour. While Ferrante and Harwicz focus on abandonment and rage, Doshi meticulously attends to the stickiness of obligation, the sensory residue of memory, and the slow, grinding work of tending to a deteriorating body. By embedding her narrative in the textures of Indian middle-class domesticity — the ashram, the claustrophobic flat, the politics of household help — Doshi adds a crucial dimension of cultural and material specificity to this broader literary turn.

Implications for Motherhood Studies and Literary Criticism

By reframing *Burnt Sugar* as an exploration of motherhood as an affective infrastructure, this analysis intends to contribute to the field of motherhood studies in several dimensions. Doshi’s work dismantles the notion of maternal virtue as innate or natural. It

demonstrates that motherhood is a relationship charged with contradiction, ambivalence, and negative affects, shaped by social and material conditions rather than biological destiny. The novel powerfully illustrates the material and emotional work of caregiving. This aligns with feminist political economy and disability studies, which have long sought to make visible the devalued and often invisible labour of care that disproportionately falls on women. An Affect-Theoretical close reading shifts the focus of literary analysis from representation to transmission. It highlights how a novel's form, style, and atmosphere can directly implicate readers in unresolved feelings, offering a more embodied and ethically complex reading experience.

These aspects underscore the necessity of moving beyond moral binaries in analysing maternal narratives. Motherhood is not simply nurturing or neglectful, selfless or selfish; it is a complex, sticky, and deeply ambivalent infrastructure built through affective flows that persist across time and generations.

Conclusion

Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* performs an unsparing exploration of maternal intimacy as an affective infrastructure. Through its visceral portrayal of abandonment, feeding, caregiving, and sensory saturation, the novel reconfigures motherhood as a volatile system of adhesion and erosion. Drawing on Ahmed's 'Affective Economies,' Berlant's 'Cruel Optimism,' Sedgwick and Tomkins' Theory of 'Shame,' and Massumi's notion of 'Intensity,' this study demonstrates how Doshi reframes maternal affect as both corrosive and constitutive — the very glue that holds a broken relationship together.

By situating *Burnt Sugar* alongside the works of global authors like Ferrante, Heti, and others, the analysis shows how Doshi participates in a global literary turn toward "Dark Maternalities" while grounding her narrative in specific Indian cultural contexts. The novel's true power lies in its formal and thematic refusal of reconciliation. It leaves behind powerful affective residues: the bitterness of shame, the nausea of disgust, the ache of longing, and the sheer exhaustion of reluctant care. In doing so, Doshi's work insists on seeing motherhood not as an Ideal to be achieved, but as a site of profound vulnerability, resistance, and survival beyond the reach of normative scripts.

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