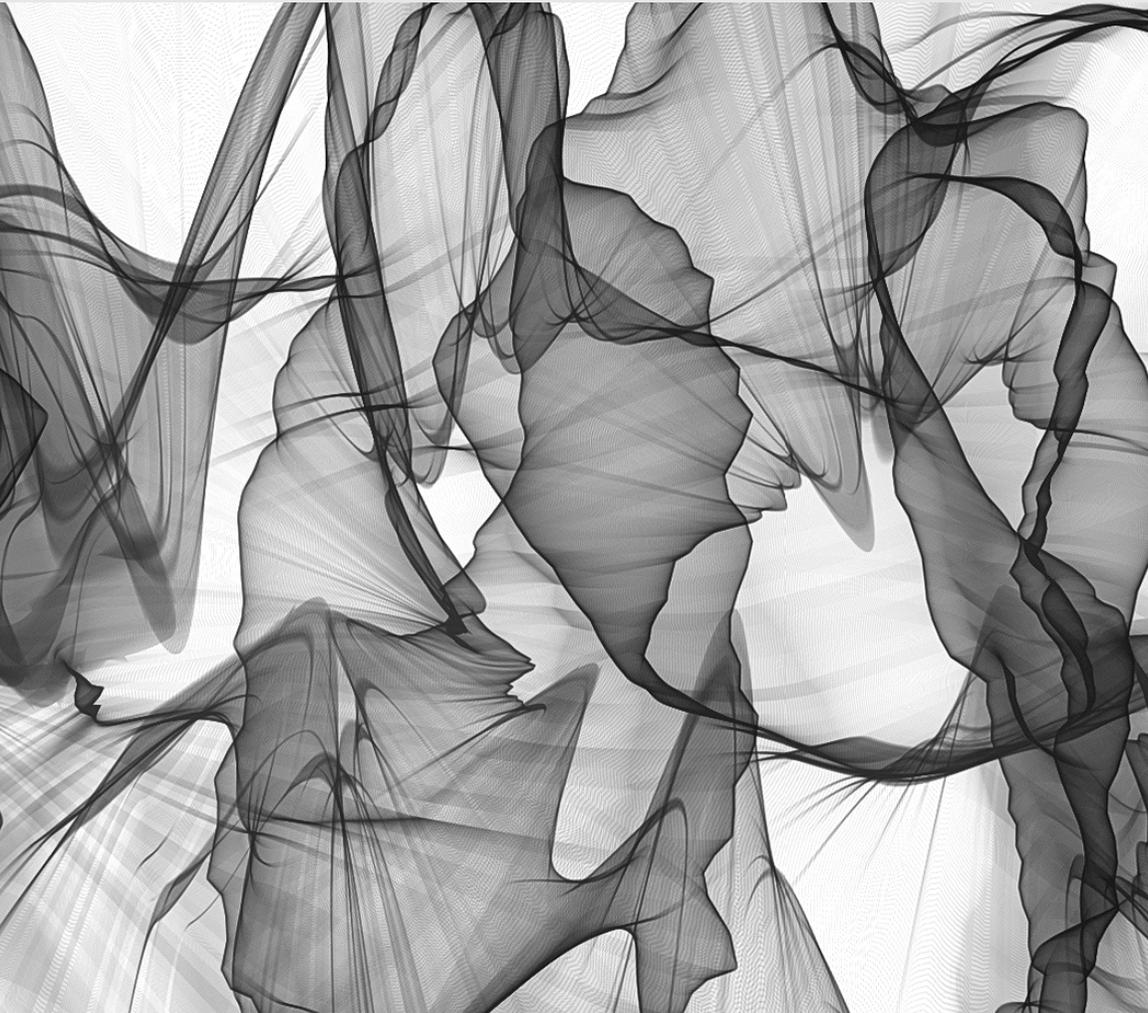


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Letter from a Mother to a Daughter to a Mother: Caste, Patriarchy, and Intergenerational Trauma of Narcissistic Abuse

This creative nonfiction piece is an autobiographical narrative of a daughter, career feminist, and survivor of maternal narcissistic abuse. Written as a letter to her daughter, which is frequently interspersed with the author's own internal monologue with her narcissist mother, it demonstrates how narcissistic abuse by mothers passes on as intergenerational trauma from mother to daughter through the abused body. By centring the intergenerational trauma of narcissistic abuse by mothers, this letter challenges mainstream discourses around motherhood that uphold the image of the sacrificing and loving mother. It also reveals bad mothers not just as cultural tropes or emblems of patriarchy but narcissistic individuals who actively sabotage their daughters' lives through their own unprocessed traumas. The letter is ultimately a feminist intervention because it shows how systems of caste and patriarchy combine not only to create narcissistic mothers but also to shelter their abuses. In other words, it demonstrates the inseparability of individual and systemic abuse. By centring the body—at once abused and hurt but also loving and desiring—as the main source of experience and healing, it proposes a vision for feminism that acknowledges the intertwined nature of individual and systemic forms of gender violence and elevates queer kinships, as sources of love and nourishment, beyond the figure of the biological mother.

Dearest M,

This letter is not a cliché. Don't let it be. Yes, like most such letter legacies we see in movies and read about in books, it is meant for you to open at some point in your life. Perhaps when I am gone. Perhaps when you are at an age when your childhood innocence has given way to the perils of adulthood. Or perhaps when you yourself stand at the cusp of parenthood. Or perhaps never.

But always remember: This letter is not a cliché. It is not the validation of the strength of womanhood or of the beauty of motherhood or of the selfless love of a mother for a child. This letter is a messy rendition of the wishes and whimsical desires of people that are lived at the expense of their children's bodies and of the fleshiness and pain of motherhood that nobody wants to talk about. People idolize motherhood, place it on a pedestal, and some of these people in your life might be shocked if you show them this letter, may pity you for having a mother who would cut open the venomous pain in her soul onto a piece of paper, and may even explain it away as the random rantings of your mother—a middle-aged hysterical woman—because yes my darling, the people who uphold the sanctity of motherhood the most are also quite often the most afraid of encountering its dark side and women's deepest desires. Such is the irony of a society that demands too much from women while giving them too little. Don't let these people ever take from you what you are about to read and understand in the following pages my dear daughter. This letter is not a cliché! Don't let them drag you back to the world of mothering clichés. Don't let it be.

This is a letter about the fine line between love and hate. Pleasure and pain. The self and the other. Indulgence and abuse. This is a letter about how the world works and about how narcissistic abuse by mother figures manifests as the silence of daughters, for the world is too invested in the beauty of motherhood. This is a letter about how the emotional abuse and neglect by mothers as well as their murderous excesses—their pride, their desires, their trauma—are passed on through the crushing disembodiment of their daughters. She did this to me M, my mother. She birthed me into this world—into her own nightmarish vision of domestic hell. And what else could she do? That was her job. A beautiful, light skinned, North Indian, dominant-caste girl. She was born only to procreate the dominant-caste race.¹

M, I'm sorry to be telling you things today about your Nani, my mother, that I never mentioned all these years. What's the point I thought. She was far enough away to not be a constant presence in our lives and to not use you, my children, to manipulate me and deceive the world around us. Manipulate? Deceive? Yes, my dear. Those are words that people don't want to hear associated with mothers. The same people who might make you feel ashamed for having a mother who slams motherhood are the ones most spellbound by the veneration of the selfless and loving (grand)mother. And why wouldn't they be? Motherhood in our culture has always been under attack and so many pressures. At once symbolizing the unconditional love that a human mammal has for their child, motherhood has also historically stood for the love of one's nation and the pillar on which patriarchy has rested and thrived.² Who has been at home taking care of children and the elderly while wars are fought? Who has had to sacrifice personal desires to work outside the home in order to

be with the children? Within this larger systemic context of patriarchy and nation (sorry my dear for going all academic on you, but I couldn't help including some reading recommendations in this letter!), defending individual mothers against perceived slander is an understandable and ethical feminist gesture.³ From the unpaid reproductive labour of motherhood to the over- and undermedicalization and scrutiny of mothers' bodies—as well as the glaring racial, religious, class, gender, sexuality and ability-based discriminations that result in accusations against certain mothers for inflicting adverse consequences on their babies⁴—the unacknowledgement of mothers' labour, pain, love, and desire is truly emblematic of our misogynist, heteronormative, and patriarchal culture. However, what I am about to tell you about Nani isn't mother slander because it isn't about her at all, as it had been all my life from childhood until well into adulthood. For a change, this narrative is more about me, a daughter, and you, my daughter. It is about us and the powerful nature of intergenerational trauma. It is about how trauma passes from mother to daughter and manifests as aches, sores, and memories in the body and how the collective systems of patriarchy, caste, and motherhood produce and facilitate individually abusive mothers, who suffocate their children and prevent them from speaking up and breaking the silence of narcissistic parental abuse. The system, my dear, our society, has already set me up to be a monster in writing this candid letter to you. Our society can only read this letter as an attack on a mother rather than the journey and heartfelt confessions of an abused daughter and her attempts to heal the passage of motherhood from her body to her daughter's. But I am alright with that my darling because all that matters at the end is that you understand.

So as I was saying, always remember that motherhood can of course be beautiful, selfless, and full of love. But it can also be ugly, selfish, and a site of intergenerational transfer of trauma. My mother committed a sin by birthing me into a cruel world in which she could not give me love and her sin passed on from me to you. I love you M, but believe me, it has taken a lot of emotional and psychological work and time for me to feel this love and say it. I was a wreck when you arrived—all nine pounds of you with your perfect little fingers and toes—but I couldn't love you. I didn't love your older brother for even longer. They call it postpartum depression my love, but I know that was my mother's sin living through my traumatized body—a body so crushed by the lack of love and support and so tired of pretending to be tough, to be feminist, and to be normal. It was a body that had only given but never received love. Your mother's body. From her mother's body. I write this to clear the sins of mothers who don't love and who birth daughters who are unable to love. I am coming clean to you M. So please, read on.

Love M. Never underestimate the power of love. How many times I held you and your brothers in my arms, knowing how much you meant to me,

feeling a stir of heavy, beautiful emotions but unable to love. Here I was—a transnational feminist studies professor with astute understanding of institutional and systemic discrimination and violence. Yet I could never understand what felt so violating at a personal level when I lectured on families and mothers and caring labour. When I confront people and situations that demand my love, I still have to stop myself from going numb and from feeling that if I give too much of myself, I will only get hurt. How many times have I stood speechless in a room of elite feminists or even my less privileged peers who talk about their gender and race-based abuse but have had a loving family to go home to? They had mothers to take them into their arms and to look after their children while they could be the best of who they were, despite the structural racism and sexism of our world. I have had to bite my tongue in a world where on the surface I have privilege—and, yes, I do have privilege, such as caste privilege, light-skin privilege, English-speaking privilege⁵—but how do I tell them, how do I tell the world that I never had the most important gift you can give a human when you bring them into this world? How do I say that, well, at least you had your mother's love to fall back on. I never had that. I love you, M. Always remember that.

And love is precisely why we need to talk about the abuse committed by narcissistic mothers. Mother, the socially framed and upheld highest pillar of love and comfort, can also be the source of greatest pain and injustice for her child when she is a narcissist. I am no expert here, my love, on the topic of narcissism. I am not a psychologist or a therapist. But I am a feminist scholar, and I am aware of how historically women, quite often mothers, have been labelled “mad” and “hysterical” to mask and explain away the injustices of patriarchal abuse.⁶ And in writing this letter to you as a daughter and as your mother—after having gone through some years of qualified therapy that has identified me as a survivor of maternal narcissistic abuse—I hope to make a feminist move by subverting the labels often associated with women who speak out against abuse. By shockingly exposing the messiness, trauma, and fleshiness of intense narcissistic maternal abuse, I hope to show, for both our sakes and also to some extent for my mother, two crucial things. One is that systems of caste, nation, and patriarchy, and relatedly motherhood, create and often mask maternal abusers. But in addition to that, and more importantly, how some acts of feminist subversion—in this case the candid confessions of a mother-daughter and her attempt to think about narcissistic maternal abusers through the society and the body—necessarily involve discomfort on the part of readers. It requires them to reckon with the ideas of motherhood that they themselves have grown up with and with their own life and childhood as a part of a society that keeps connections between individual bodies and systems of oppression invisible.⁷

A narcissist mother can come in all shapes and forms—from the outright

malignant narcissist mother to the apparently homely looking, caring mother. “How lucky you are to have a mother who cooks such wonderful meals for you,” they said. What could I say? How could I tell them the truth? How can I even now speak my truth? It has taken forty-three years of living, two years of therapy, and many failed relationships to realize that my mother didn’t give me love—the most important ingredient to make a child feel safe and explore the world and develop tools to navigate tough situations and relationships in a healthy way. It has taken many heartbreaks, bouts of severe depression, and postpartum anxiety to realize that not only did she not give me love but that she also actively despised my existence, jealously competed with me, and sabotaged every meaningful connection I endeavoured to make with other people.

You did this to me Ma. Remember that fateful evening just after my divorce in 2008? Remember when I told you that your brother had sexually abused me for eight years and how I had endured it in silence? A counsellor whom I happened to speak with randomly at the time had told me that telling you this fact will start healing the painful chasm that had always divided us. But little did she know, nor did I, that your narcissism was the real reason why that gulf existed between us to begin with. That your narcissism meant that I was nothing more than your status symbol, a vessel for your desires and visions of womanhood. That when I told you this shameful fact, you would simply lash out at me saying, “You are only saying this to get sympathy” and “Shut up, such things happen in families all the time.” And as if that weren’t enough, implying that it was most likely my fault for bringing the abuse upon myself. I had failed you in every possible way as a daughter by breaking the silence around my abused body. I had shaken the mythical fortress of honour built around dominant caste women’s vaginas. The consequence of that, combined with your perplexing jealousy (how many times did you yell at me in hysterical rage, “You think you are beautiful, but you are not! Remember that!”), turned out to aggravate your hatred towards me. You did this instead of taking me in your arms as a loving mother and telling me that even though the abuse happened, it was all going to be okay. That’s all I wanted, Ma: love.

The greatest gift that parents give you is the gift of love and safety that enables you to develop tools to navigate the world and survive healthily. I know what you are now thinking my dear M: “Oh please mom, you are one of the most social and well adjusted people I know!” How do I tell you my dear daughter that beneath that veneer of social charm, strength, and self-sufficiency is a child, a little girl, who could never grow up—a girl who still suffers constant anxiety, who always puts others first, and who always double guesses herself and her intuitive prowess. I have always tried to be as normal as possible because I know now that nothing that happened to me was normal. I was taught to be nice but not kind. I was taught that affection disguised as

love was always, and always, conditional. Nani only loved me when I did as she demanded, and even then, I was never quite right. I was supposed to be cheerful around people but not laugh too hard. I was supposed to do well in school yet was verbally abused for studying too much—“Who is going to marry a girl who is only into books? Have you even entered the kitchen yet?” Whatever I felt in my gut was always wrong; it had to be affirmed by her. I was repeatedly told that I was selfish if I wanted anything and that I should be selfless and think about others. So yes, my darling daughter, your mom is a vivacious, intelligent human who still deep down suffers heart palpitations when you kids are late coming back from hanging out with your friends: “What happened to them? Are they alive? Was it my mistake to send them? Am I a bad parent? What if I am the reason something has happened to them.” I am a middle-aged woman who still cannot answer the question “What do you want?” without feeling selfish, without thinking about others around me. And even though I know that I am a spectacularly gifted intuitive and emotional person and that my gut and my heart are the source of my strength and compassion, they still bear the scars of repeated insults and abuse from my childhood and lie dormant in situations where I need them the most, leaving me spiraling and anchorless, falling back into unhealthy habits and memories acquired through a lifetime of abuse. My mother’s voice still haunts me relentlessly, creating much self-doubt. So don’t be fooled by what you’ve grown up seeing my dear. It has all been built on layer upon layer of sedimented trauma and pain.

And this is where feminism failed me in as much as it saved me. In some ways, feminism has failed daughters of narcissistic mothers. Don’t get me wrong M: Your mother is a diehard feminist. Had it not been for the power of feminist thought, the joy of feminist activism that I was so lucky to partake in after that dreadful betrayal by my mother in 2008, and later the intellectual rigour of reading and discussing feminist works for my PhD, I would have never understood how gender oppression is so deeply systemic. I would have never seen how my own mother was also oppressed by the same system of dominant-caste honour in India—which is tied to women’s bodies and shrouds sexual abuse in silence⁸—as I was. Feminists are so right in pointing out that the concepts of choice and empowerment are structural; it is our social location and context that inform the choices we make. But there is also an individual, agential aspect of choice that often gets overlooked in feminist analyses. Not all oppressed women choose to oppress. Not all folks born into misery choose to accept their fates. There is a driving force that is deeply embodied—passionate, energizing, and exhilarating—that drives people to choose and achieve the most extraordinary things under the most excruciating circumstances. Think about gender oppressed folks in any walk of life—arts, sports, politics—and think of your own humble mother, who chose to run

away from her abusive home and country to build a life and family for herself with zero money in Turkey, a land unknown to her people, which was also possible of course because of her educational privilege. What is that frenzied passion that drives our bodies to commit death defying feats and achieve dizzying success in the face of structural doom? Where is the feminist language for that kind of embodiment that cannot be captured in such words as “agency” and “resistance”? These words somehow remove the fleshy messiness of fighting and loving and living within systems of oppression and replace them instead with a more distanced, sanitized, conceptual, and somewhat orientalist aura? As if all those oppressed people (read: only women of colour) exist under oppressive systems that either kill them or are resisted through their agency. Done. Does that make sense? I need to explain this in the flesh my darling, for this is a kind of fleshy feminism that my words are just not able to capture. If you are reading this while I am still alive and alert, come and ask me, and watch my face and body and hands and legs move and twist and contort and sway and swing as I explain to you what I mean.

You did this to me Ma. They told me repeatedly that I was wrong, those flying monkeys, the narcissist enablers, the society, those aunts, your husband-my father. They told me that I was overreacting, that I was hypersensitive, even that I was a liar. They gaslighted me, those flying monkeys, the narcissist enablers, the society, those aunts, your husband- my father. They told me that you were a wonderful person with a heart of gold. They told me that even though you were cold on the surface, deep down, you were the one who loved me the most and had only my best intentions in mind. And I believed them Ma. For what is a child to do in a world where the hegemony of biological maternal love remains unchallenged? I believed them all along, giving you the benefit of doubt, and blaming myself instead for a love that I never felt. All that guilt-tripping worked, Ma, because I was primed to be guilt tripped. I was led to believe all along that deep down all your abuse was driven only by your love and concern for your daughter, and so all the negativity that I was feeling was ultimately my fault. Such is the power of the maternal love illusion. So convincing was the brainwashing by your supporting group of enablers that until recently, I kept on trying to explain away your behaviour. As a feminist professor, I know that you are also the victim of caste-based gender oppression and of child sexual abuse, although of the latter I have no proof. Every time you said something to hurt me, I kept on reminding myself of how it must have been for you, a girl in her early twenties, to have been married off and sent away to a far-off land—a girl who had never stepped outside of her small northern province in India but was handed over to a man you had barely known and shipped away. And then, a year later, you were pregnant. You were sick all the time, all alone, and then had to make it back home, seven months pregnant, as dominant-caste Indian tradition demands. There, you suffered

scorching heat of the Indian summer and appeased your husband's family with round-the-clock cooking and cleaning, which would finally be alleviated in July, as you moved to your natal home, and the first monsoon storm took away your pain but also gave you one in the form of a baby girl. This child was another reminder of your tormented womanhood, another burden that you too would have to bear only to get rid of later. But the fact of the matter is Ma that no matter how hard I try to explain away your meanness, your cruelty, your irrational jealousy, and vile abuses as symptoms of systemic gender-based violence of your body, there is no excuse for what you did to me. I understand your pain Ma, for I too am a woman, but I cannot rationalize your abuse. And I am damn angry Ma—angry with you and angry with this world full of enablers, like my father, who protect narcissistic monsters like you. And I will remain angry, not because I can't change you—no one can—but to remind myself to never do the same to my own children, especially my own daughter, my darling M.

So much of this is resonating for you as a woman isn't it M? And here of course I am taking the liberty of imagining your future gender; you may not even identify as a woman. But as someone who would definitely be seen by many to embody some kind of womanhood, so much of what I am saying resonates with you doesn't it my dear? You can say that my experiences are not symptoms of narcissistic maternal abuse but rather simply of the patriarchy that we live under—common experiences of most women who are constantly dismissed and gaslighted and asked to shrink themselves and their desires. Of course they are. They are symptoms of systemic gender inequality. But they are also symptoms of narcissistic abuse. And this is precisely the point that I am trying to make. How can one separate the system and the individual? We are all products of a society. It is the system of caste-based national abuse of Indian society that enables narcissistic mothering. Caste-based racial discrimination works through women's bodies by keeping the dominant caste women's honour tied to her vagina and sexuality within the domestic confines of heterosexual monogamy at the expense and dispensability of caste-oppressed women's bodies.⁹ My mother's narcissistic need to control my life and sexuality was invisible to others precisely because it upheld the systemic norms of a dominant caste society driven by the sexual control of young women. Her inability to love is most likely caused by herself being raised in a toxic patriarchal, dominant caste society where women are unloved and unvalued. She once told me how lucky I was that my parents celebrated my birthday. When she was a child growing up, with four sisters and two brothers, it was only her brothers' birthdays that were remembered and celebrated. Imagine what kind of feelings of self-love and self-worth a girl would have growing up in a society like that? So the point I am trying to make here is not an individualistic or a systemic one; instead, I am arguing that the individual and the system are inseparable

and that narcissistic abuse finds shelter and therefore remains invisible within a patriarchal culture of gender-based abuse.

I will in fact go so far as to say that perhaps one of the greatest indications of the inseparability of systemic gender oppression and narcissistic abuse by mothers is the fact that daughters of narcissistic mothers growing up in a toxic white capitalist patriarchy are rendered more susceptible to all kinds of other abuses than those who grow up in healthy, loving families. Yes M, I am talking about grooming. Narcissism grooms people for all kinds of past and future abuses: sexual, emotional, and physical. My sexual abuse as a child would have happened in any case but was made much easier because of the narcissistic abuse I had been experiencing at the hands of my mother. Since I was unloved and constantly devalued as a person, how could I have trusted my gut, how could I have approached parents I knew would never believe me? How could I have stopped my abuse? How could I not have become easy bait for another narcissist, several years down the line, this time my white mother-in-law? She was, once again enabled by a system of white patriarchy that upholds white womanhood and used the familiar tools of manipulation, jealousy, and mixed messaging to utterly gut my self-worth. She used my lack of confidence as a young mother to physically and emotionally distance me from my first born, your older brother. On the day he was born, she took him away from me and put him in another room. She constantly told me how much work babies were, yet she never helped me in any meaningful way, which further fuelled a lifetime of insecurities. I remained a silent and distant spectator to my own decline and that of my relationship with my baby. I had already been raised to believe I knew nothing and that speaking up was being disrespectful and selfish. What could I say or do? Deeply triggered and made to feel further shame for a body that I had already been shamed for throughout my life—a brown lactating and nursing body so vile to my upper-middle-class white mother-in-law's racist sensibilities—I just kept on drowning slowly and slowly into a void of postpartum depression and anxiety that I could never come out of even by the time you were born. Will you forgive me my darling for not loving you both enough when you were babies (I had healed significantly by the time your younger brother arrived), for not remembering your early years in detail because they were too traumatic, and for not being kinder to the little girl you were because I had still not learned to nurture the little girl in me who had been so crushed by narcissistic abuse? I am so sorry M. But I do love you. Never forget that.

You did this to me Ma. Your constant control, criticism, and scrutiny of my body fundamentally altered my relationship to it. Well into my adulthood you would talk to my cousins behind my back, telling them to stop complimenting me to my face, because their compliments will somehow give me an illusion that I was beautiful. What illusion Ma? I see daughters of loving mothers,

many of them my own friends, who are so confident in their bodies and the way they look because they were loved, and their opinions are always upheld and respected by their mothers. And I get so jealous. How could I ever even begin to feel beautiful in a body that was always in excess yet never enough? Too sexual but not light skinned enough. Too thin but not good enough to wear everything. My hair too curly but not thick enough. My limbs too awkward and clumsy. My nose too big. My skin too oily. I could go on and on. These are not feelings anyone else made me feel. Only you, Ma. My body wasn't enough, wasn't good enough to warrant any attention. When a jealous roommate in college burned my foot with boiling water, the scar was just not big enough to show to a doctor, the pain just not great enough for my screams and the attention I was supposedly seeking. When my face erupted in cystic acne (years later I can say from the poison you were feeding me, both the food and your trauma), I couldn't sleep or face the world because of the blood and pus and deep scars that marred my face. Yet you still didn't deem it necessary to get me medical attention or to just hug me once and tell me that I was still beautiful, that my hormones will eventually calm down, and that it'll be alright. When I was sick from a mysterious infection for over a month and couldn't get out of bed, you said I was exaggerating my illness instead of showering me with care and love. When I gave birth—not once, not twice, but thrice—all alone in foreign lands with no one beside me, you didn't think it was necessary to come and physically and emotionally support your only child and her body. My body was worth nothing when it lay cold and hungry in a rat-infested Turkish hostel, slipping away from the life that you had chosen for me, a life in which, for you, I might as well have been dead.

Yet my body was also too much. It was always inviting too much attention, always wanting too much sex. It was always asking for too much rest. Do you remember how you kicked me out of bed weekend after weekend and splashed water on my little face on Sunday mornings because the rest that my growing child's body needed after a week of intensive schooling was an inconvenience to your pathological desire to constantly clean? Do you remember calling me “a burden on this earth” because apparently I never did enough chores? Your jealousy and your own narcissistic insecurities know no bounds. Shame on you.

As a system, patriarchy, M, thrives through a similar disembodiment of girls', daughters', and children's bodies, just like individual narcissistic abuse. Disembodiment doesn't mean that the body is invisible in this system. It is both at once hypervisible and invisible at the same time—just like my body was to my mother, at once not enough and too much. In a patriarchal system, such as the society we live in, our bodies are invisibilized through hypervisibilization; our desires are shrunk by the constant shaming and sexualizing of our bodies. Our carnality is erased in the name of honour,

selflessness, and morality. My dear daughter, when this happens in the kind of society we live in, our bodies are rendered powerless and susceptible to whatever people, in my case a narcissistic mother, throw our way. Therefore, our only way to fight back against a system that crushes our bodies, creates narcissistic monsters, and upholds motherhood by invisibilizing the pains and tortures rendered by narcissistic mothers is to reclaim our bodies, recentre our desires, and listen to ourselves. But how do we do that?

Science is now supporting what feminists and survivors of narcissistic abuse have been saying for a long time. It is all about centring the lived experience of our bodies and reinvesting hope, beauty, and faith in them.¹⁰ All our life force M is in the gut. Gut bacteria. Good gut bacteria are what make you healthy and thrive. Good gut bacteria cured your raging eczema as a child. Those itchy, red sores all over your body were my painful legacy to you; you were born from a hurting body, which still carried the trauma of abuse it had yet to heal from. As you grew inside me, I was still in pain and had out of many years of practice of disregarding my body, shunned it and had become blissfully unaware of what I ate, what I exposed it to. I firmly believe my darling that your horrendous eczema was the physical manifestation of my unprocessed trauma—the passing of my mothers' lovelessness and sin and the severance of my own sense of self from my physical body.

But I listened and learned, M. Moreover, I started feeling. My body. My pain. I went to therapy. I immersed myself in works of radical women of colour feminists.¹¹ I actively sought out and basked in the pleasure of meaningful physical intimacies and adventurous sexual encounters.¹² And I started healing. I started listening to my gut again as well as to my heart, head, and body. This healing is still an ongoing process; this act of reinventing one's relationship to one's body. It is never complete, and there are always setbacks because old habits die hard. The body always remembers, M. Just when you think you have mastered your pain and defied patriarchy and narcissism, memories come flooding back, and even the slightest trigger sends you spiraling into depression, and you lose connection with your body again. But the body is also resilient. You just have to listen to the gut. Gut bacteria. We nurtured your good gut bacteria through good food, love, and care. And so began our metamorphoses—you and me—our resistance. Our own act of feminist defiance. Your eczema healed slowly and slowly. It was a process. And, sure, we know that it can sometimes be triggered. But we also know our bodies now, and we love ourselves. We know that we have each other, and that everything, my darling, is going to be alright.

It is late my love, and I have to go. But always remember that your mom loves you. And don't worry about me. Although I never had that much idolized mother's love, I learned to love myself and to be kinder to the little girl inside of me. Once I accepted that I can't change my mother and reinvented my

relationship to my body—and understood through the lens of feminism and experience why racial- and caste-based systems of patriarchy need to invest in the ideal of motherhood—while turning a blind eye to narcissistic abuse by mothers that they themselves create, the pain started to ease. I started seeing other ways of loving and models of motherhood and kinship that can be fulfilling even if they don't emanate from a biological mother. I surrounded myself with powerful mother figures—feminist mentors, teachers, activists, and friends—who have been instrumental to my growth and healing. It is because of my chosen mothers that I am alive and writing this letter to you. I sincerely hope that you too are able to surround yourself with such love from your chosen families and remember that as important as the love of your mother is, love is beautiful and comes in all shapes and forms.

Most importantly, though, always remember that this letter is not a cliché. It is not just some assortment of words but a soul laid bare in the flesh. Touch it, feel it, own it. It is borne of your mother's body—the pain of trauma and desire intertwined in the flesh that is yours. Do whatever you want with it but remember it always comes back to the body and not the words. This letter is about us, mother and daughter. And although people around you may be shocked at how it brutally exposes our most intimate lives, this letter is also beyond us as individuals. It is a feminist manifesto about caste, patriarchy, intergenerational trauma, narcissistic abuse, pain, and love that is lived through the flesh. This letter is not a cliché. Please my darling: Don't let it be.

Love,
Mom

Endnotes

1. There is feminist scholarship, my dear, on the ways in which eugenic ideas of nation and development have always worked through the wombs of child-bearing folks, especially those from privileged racial and ethnic groups. This is most evident in fascist regimes, such as Nazi Germany, but also takes place today in 2022. Tanika Sarkar's book is one recommendation in the context of India.
2. There is a plethora of popular culture imagery and movies (remember the Bollywood classic *Mother India* we watched together?) that thrive on this topic, and there exists many feminist works on it (see for example, Yuval-Davis).
3. Demeter Press is an excellent source for scholarship and other writings on motherhood, including feminist analyses of mother blaming (see for example, Reimer and Sahagian).
4. Oh my, I can go on and on about how medicalization of motherhood continues to penalize mothers from different race and class backgrounds

- (particularly Hessler).
5. And these are obviously not mutually exclusive my dear. Being of Indian origin, my dominant caste status has, in fact, endowed me with the privilege of a certain kind of education and success that remains systemically inaccessible to many in India (see, for example, Varghese et al). For you, your mom has always been Indian, but you must understand that Indianness in the United States obfuscates the brutal workings of caste (see, for example, Chakravorty et al). Therefore, acknowledging caste and other privileges remains vital to my feminist ethic in discussing the workings of motherhood, self, narcissistic abuse, and lack of love. Oh, and I hope you read Yashica Dutt's memoir for a nonacademic but no less thoroughly researched and extremely personal and powerful take on the origins and everyday workings of caste in India.
 6. I will refer you to a Demeter volume once again (see Wong).
 7. This my dear is a profoundly philosophical and difficult concept to grasp. In simpler words, we don't always think about how our bodies, social worlds, and ideas are connected. What is the connection between the corporeality of mothering and social ideals of motherhood? Rethinking those connections has always been a part of my own scholarship on feminist phenomenology.
 8. Oh my, where should I even begin pointing you to the literature on sexuality and caste? Chatterjee's classic essay is a good one.
 9. See Sharmila Rege for a powerful read.
 10. For instance, in the context of the United States, I highly recommend Cherríe Moraga et al.'s seminal collection.
 11. Here, I am specifically referring to anything and everything by Audre Lorde and the activism of the Combahee River Collective (of which Lorde was a part).
 12. The underrated role of the erotic and pleasure in everyday activism is now increasingly being brought to the fore by feminist and queer activists from around the world. For example, see an interview of my friend Moses on the same topic (Khubchandani). And also check out adrienne brown et al.

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