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**The Other Her: On daughters of abusive mothers and the silence
about inter-generational trauma in Indian families**

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I recently came across the Korean term “han” through an Asian-American friend. We were discussing how our respective childhoods were mired in parental estrangement. I am a therapist, so I know that early life exposure to balancing on a tightrope of conditional love often manifests as chaotic attachments in close relationships. My friend and I have both struggled with maintaining healthy partnerships. We both have survived intimate partner violence. We both have dealt with absentee fathers and “difficult” mothers with whom we share messy equations. We are both psychologists and in that, we are both wounded healers. In our conversation, we both also agreed that English as our primary language of clinical therapy is often insufficient or even deleterious. This is especially unavoidable when it comes to addressing our familial traumas as non-white children of multiple ethnicities. We can sift through as many prognoses but often, the corporeal and psychological confluence of certain anonymous or blurred losses that hang from us like phantom limbs threaten to drown the liminal coherence of our respective selves.

As we exchanged anecdotes about past romantic relationships that seemed like a fulfillment of the Deleuzian prophecy of repetition and repression, she mumbled the word “han” almost as a reflex action. The monosyllabic term is something she contemplates often these days. It is a trail woven through the emotional landscape of her half-Korean identity. “Han,” as per her interpretation, stands variously and collectively for ache and bitterness. It alternates with a very peculiar kind of hope that is not buoyant but residual – ascetic, even. It could mean mourning and release. It could also mean helplessness and dissatisfaction. She slipped me the caveat that just like the untranslatability of the Portuguese “saudade,” “han,” too, was impossible to pin down to an easy singularity.

Quite like our relationships with our mothers.

I am not sure if there is a word like “han” in Urdu or Hindi – the languages in which my brain and tongue have been socialized – apart from English. Her description did remind me of Denise Levertov’s forever enduring line in the poem “Opening Words” –

Be, beloved, threatened world.

The world I try to “be” in with my mother is both beloved and threatening. A lot of its dichotomy comes from the turbulence my mother symbolizes in its kernel. Over the years, I have tried to assess the complexities of her presence in my life, her role in my being diagnosed with clinical depression at the onset of my teenage years and by extension, the enormous but often poorly navigated terrain of mother-daughter relationships in Indian families. I have also, from time to time, tried to cut the cord between us completely only to end up as her perennial rescuer.

I am also afraid of talking as a “We.” I am afraid I will dither in pointless generalizations even when my intention is to peel back layers of enmeshment, harm, and suppression that are common to several South Asian women like myself. But I am also afraid that the term “South Asian” is restrictive and doesn’t offer the full umbrella for the intersections of various imposed hierarchies that have shaped me. That I am not even sure if I can codify the extent of my socialized identity as “South Asian,” knowing what I know about my mother carefully culling out all my Romanipen; the broken half of my identity bracelet.

I am afraid because I don't speak from the safety of neatly compartmentalized identity markers. I am half Roma, half Indian. I am a resident of margins within margins. I am defined by *fugivity*; internalized metrics of escape to ensure I stay alive.

My ancestry on both sides of my family tree has weathered ruthless subjugation. I now understand that fear gets frozen into the very genetic material of our ubiquity. I speak in my colonizer's language. Like dusk's last light diffracting through a hummingbird's wings, my ethnicity's kaleidoscopic composition is only visible at specific junctures and even then, only when the rest of me is eclipsed to provide a background of a complimentary opacity.

Palestinian-American writer Suheir Hammad echoes through long nights of stubborn aches – “damage is tapestry” (2008).

My mother loves to knit. The happier parts of my childhood with her involve some form of activity: knitting, origami, kite-flying. As long as we were beyond the grasp of stillness, we were congruous – safe. The trouble often arose when she and I would share the frozen darkness of our tiny bedroom in my maternal grandparents' house. On some days, it was the dot...dot...dot... of sobbing under a pillow, half-asleep. On other nights, it was her angry remoteness while laying right next to me. I grew up believing that change and by that extension instability are what kept me safe and loved. I grew up internalizing the need to always be on the hamster's wheel. Always doing. Always escaping. *Fugivity* was my refuge.

Sometimes when the past pours through the keyhole of a trauma relapse, I think of the days where she'd disappear to a nearby tourist town with my stepfather whom she was then dating. I would refuse to budge from under the shade of the henna tree that leaned over our portico. My grandparents would promise that she'd be back when I woke up in the morning. Every time she went away, unannounced, my heart sank several feet in the dismal trench of a child's worse fear – she is not coming back. The only parent I had access to would be gone forever. The only anchor would drown without a hint.

She did come back. Sometimes with gifts – a beanie baby, those love-in-tokyo hair bands, some glittery, faux sandalwood pens. Sometimes with latent anger escaping from her during daily activities like distant smoke-rings rising from an incense stick. Her whole being was a question-mark icebound in time. I came out frostbitten every time I attempted to solve the mysteries of her moods. Mysteries that were far above my paygrade as a 7 years old, shy kid. Despite my tender age, I had already started to recognize the damaged tapestry knitted out of her and my racial, caste, and gender origins.

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Cupboards

S has finally come around to not obsessively checking every cupboard in her house several times before going to bed. We keep a check on the number of days since her last “relapse”. She first came to therapy because she was certain someone in the flat next door was spying on her. Soon, she insisted that everyone in the building was spying on her. We spent several sessions delineating the depth of her fears. It was confounding for me because from time to time it seemed like she almost wanted someone to spy

on her just so she could be “seen.” An empathetic witness. She is particularly suspicious about cupboards. We ran clinical assessments and differential diagnosis to ascertain if we were dealing with some form of schizophrenia. It all came up negative apart from acute anxiety and signs of complex PTSD. When she finally reached her breakthrough, the usually jittery and shaking girl sat in an almost stony silence as she narrated a childhood filled with abuse from her mother later diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. She remembered episodes of bodily harm punctuated by the making and feeding of her favourite dessert; a disturbing seesaw between pain and care. Her conservative upper-caste Hindu father didn’t believe in “publicizing” her mother’s “madness” so no one outside of the household and immediate family knew of what went on within the four walls. Her grandparents often remarked that her birth possibly caused her mother’s “possession.” S’s monsters weren’t under the bed because she often hid there to escape what her mother would do to her in broad daylight. Sometimes, she would hide in cupboards only to be dragged out by her hair. S is no longer a child. S is a bright, young educator herself. She has no present signs for schizophrenia but the possibility of it being passed on to her genetically is still a thorn in both our throats. It has taken a couple of years in therapy for us to make peace with the contradictory truths that as much as her mother was a victim of her own circumstance, she was also a perpetrator of violence against a helpless child. It has taken several breakdowns to attest to the fact that her trauma is not just personal but also inter-generational. That her mother was as helpless as she was harmful. That it is ok for her to miss and even yearn for those glimpses of memory where her mother appears to her as a graceful dancer or a loving parent who oiled her hair on weekends. That it is ok for this collage of her mother to be jagged in some places and it doesn’t mean that all responsibility is abdicated.

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Marsha M. Linehan (1993), the American psychologist who created Dialectical Behavioral Therapy – usually considered to be the most effective therapeutic intervention format for Borderline Personality Disorder – lists 5 directives as part of the therapeutic arc and the one that I often see my mother struggle with is “Distress Tolerance.” Her scale for managing distress is warped.

Distress is a heavy word when you are a 21 years old, backward caste, single mother in India who has been ostracized both within and outside. That’s how old my mother was when she was expecting me.

Distress is how you react to the pigeonholing of being labelled a slur, of being defanged of your sharpest ambitions because you are piercingly alone and the foreigner you married has left without any signs of a return. It comes from being abandoned during your first pregnancy. It comes from walking into the hospital alone as your water broke. Trailing the etymology of distress, I encountered these variations in its root – old French “destrecier” (“to restrain, constrain, put in straits, afflict, distress”), new French “détresse,” medieval Latin “districtiare”/“distringere” (“to pull asunder, stretch out”).

From dis- (“apart”) + stringere (“to draw tight, strain”).

Drawing of lines around a person, through a person. Through their personhood. Epics of Indian mythology are teeming with drawing of lines around women to protect them but often upon closer inspection they are mere plot devices to entrap them and pivot the story for some form of masculine conquest. Novelist Anosh Irani in his brilliant essay “Notes on Craft” (2017) lists how a story’s movement should be towards

healing, not redemption. Healing is uncommon in this framework. Women of colour are expected to bear the weight of everyone's redemption arc.

My mother's personhood was subject to constant dehumanization. A dedicated athlete, she couldn't appear for the selection round for National Games because she wasn't allotted a caste certificate on time and her father was opposed to her participation. He wasn't conservative, he just wanted to protect his daughter from impending humiliation at the hands of upper caste sports selection officials. My mother who was immaculately beautiful and hence was equated to property and attempts at ownership by upper caste men around her. My mother who eventually acquiesced to these attempts and ended up enduring several years of domestic abuse at the hands of my stepfather – an upper caste man who uprooted my entire childhood and subsequently buried it in a landfill of physical and emotional trauma. A landfill that was heaped in equal parts by my mother who was *stockholmed* to accept and surrender to his brutalities. My mother who was my compass and my whiplash all through my childhood and teenage years.

When I look at her now, I can muster compassion for the back-breaking labour that left her own existence a reed-thin, burnt rope. And yet as I struggle through diagnostic criteria, shoddy prognoses and a lifelong game of violent squash with my depression and an auto-immune disorder, I can't help but flare up in rage against her inability to protect me or herself.

My mother lives with an undiagnosed illness in the shape of her borderline personality disorder combined with signs of being bipolar. This is undiagnosed only in the sense that we don't have a formal piece of paper signing off on its grip. I work daily within the realm of therapeutic rehabilitation and am trained to spot the ebbs and flows of human behaviour. Hers satisfies criteria for a psychiatric classification but when I consider it, I am unsure what it would mean for her even if she did agree to it.

We speak about distress and dysregulation a lot when we consider the spectrum of "moods disorder" which includes bipolar I and II. The word disorder in itself is a bone of contention for me because it fails to fully integrate the various loose ends of causation other than just making it overwhelmingly individualized. Erasures of socio-cultural realities amass. We can medicalize her as we have medicalized me in the past but will that be enough for her to recognize the toxicity she directed towards me throughout my life in order to both negate and substantiate my being? Will it be enough for me to forgive her?

It is often in a heated argument when spurts of hidden indignation overpower her usual passive-aggressive commentary that she truly explodes in pain and admits to my damages. She admits that she shouldn't have asked me to be silent about being assaulted by my stepfather. I sway with her as she rises and falls between sunken depths of victimhood and a furious need to assert herself as an aggressor with me. I suspect she abhors me as a reminder of my father. A man has never really forgiven. She barks out the most appalling periods of her survival trying to ration milk for a baby me against a single cup of tea for herself, her only real indulgence. She blames me for it all and then suddenly the phone rings, she gets on with a perfectly modulated voice as if this entire episode with me prior to that ringing sound was a figment of imagination.

Cats

P met me at a poetry reading and later confided in me that she was something of a late-blooming poet herself but restricted her writing to a locked tumblr account. She started therapy a few months from that meeting because she was battling the pressures of a hectic semester at medical school. Her clarity about her own depressive cycles always astounded me. She was stoic but not emotionless even though the thawing towards full disclosure took several months. At her bleakest, she recounted how she excelled at her exams in 5th grade and as she presented her report card to her mother, the first sentence that hit her like a returning boomerang was – “Is this a fluke? Are you sure you didn’t cheat?” The hard slap of doubt in place of celebration and acceptance. P grew up in a fairly liberal Muslim home in India and was governed by her mother’s will. P shone through academic victories only to find every achievement turn into a shifting goalpost and her mother never finding her accomplishments satisfying. P has struggled with seeing validity in the mundane, commonplace, yet essential elements of her life that don’t center her mother’s expectations. The first place where she deviated from measuring her time by “productive” tasks is through adopting and fostering cats. Cats, she claims, taught her how to find mooring without struggling for meaning. P is now in her mid 20s and as she leaves a country where her social identity is tied to sectarian violence for one where she will be a new alien and proceed towards actualizing her career goals, she still struggles to understand what patterned her mother’s dictatorial bent. She refrains from attributing it to immediately obvious markers of religion or social stratification even though she agrees to them. She has chosen, for now, to let this knot remain in its seemingly ossified frame. I don’t push her to change this. For now.

In Trauma and Recovery (1992), Judith Herman states explicitly – “The survivor must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery.”

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These are some research-backed facts about women at large, Indian women specifically and the prevalence of mental health conditions.

1. One in seven Indians were affected by mental disorders of varying severity in 2017. The proportional contribution of mental disorders to the total disease burden in India has almost doubled since 1990. (Vikram et al., 2006)
2. A female (ATB) predominance was observed for depressive disorders; both current (female: 3.0%; male: 2.4%) and lifetime (female: 5.7%; male: 4.8%) for neurotic and stress-related disorders. (Ibid.)
3. Depressive disorders account for close to 41.9% of the disability from neuropsychiatric disorders among women compared to 29.3% among men in India. (Malhotra et al., 2015)
4. Lifetime prevalence rate of violence against women ranges from 16% to 50%. (Ibid.)
5. At least one in five women suffers rape or attempted rape in their lifetime. (CDC, 2010)

My mother is more than statistics. I am more than statistics. My therapy clients are more than statistics. But often within the mental healthcare system of this country, we are not even numbers; not even the headless, nameless dot on a graph. We exist in a vacuum and perish in one too.

Each one of us who carries the trauma of being her mother's daughter is often failed by the oversimplification of a mental health system that still doesn't dig deep enough to search within the socio-cultural depths to our suffering. I am not an extension of my mother but she is stamped over my world in a way that is indisputable and permanent in its watermark. A lot of women who have dealt with maternal abuse struggle with making sense of their own patterns of behaviour juxtaposed against their mothers'. The metronome of this ache is continuous. Certain classifications within the psychiatric framework, particularly for personality disorders, fail to consider the cultural vocabulary for desolation. This is what I often feel when I look back at my shared past with my mother – a series of lonely drawings made on consecutive pages of a notebook that animate themselves when someone starts flipping the pages quickly. The closer you look, the more alive it gets. As a client of mine aptly summarised – “I want to exist in a place outside of this chicken coop of blame and rage; for her (mother) and myself.” Our conditions are investigated as personal failures when in truth, we are carrying the weight of so many generations on our shoulders that appear to others only as shadows at best or ghosts as worst. What we need is the catharsis of shared experiences so we know we are not locked in the heartache of our childhoods. What we want to know is that forgiveness is not a complete sentence and we can rework its syntax as we get better at the language of assessing our pain and harm that isn't always rooted in pathology.

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