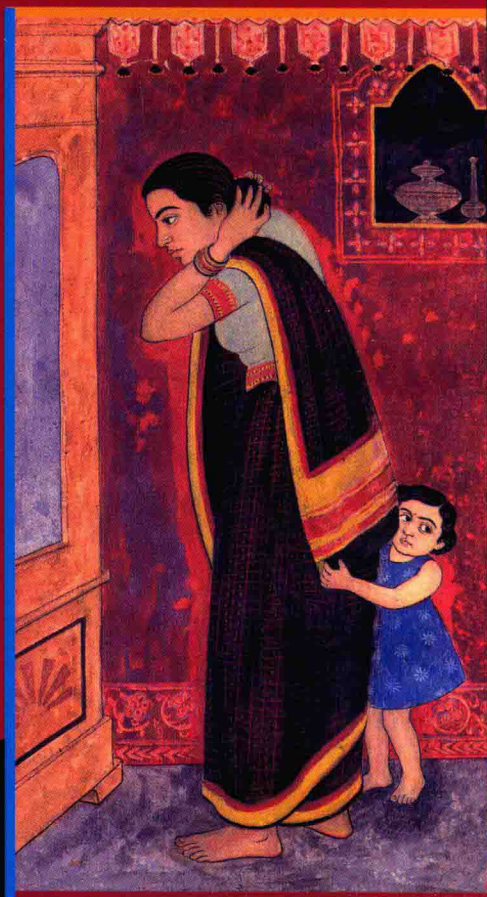


SAGE Classics

Edited by Rinki Bhattacharya



# JANANI

Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood



*Janani—Mothers,  
Daughters, Motherhood*



edited by  
Rinki Bhattacharya



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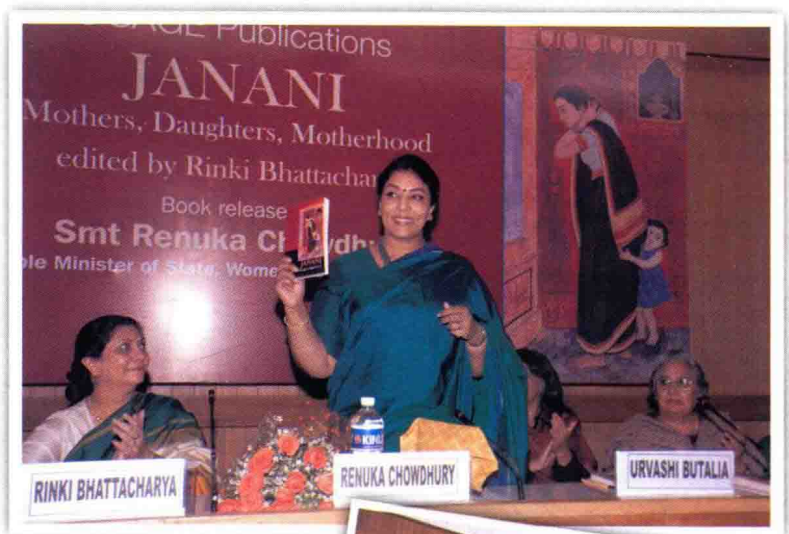
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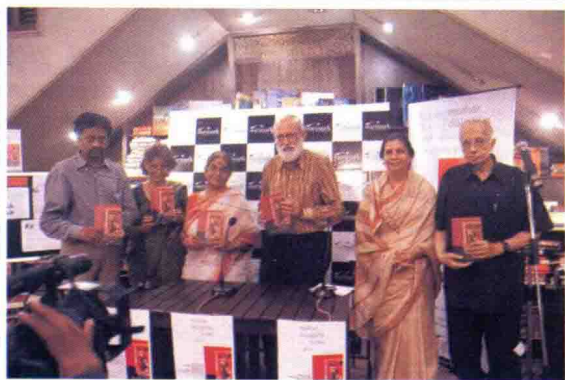
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**Smt Renuka Chowdhury MP**, Rajya Sabha and former Union minister of State for Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India releasing "**Janani—Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood**" in presence of **Ms Rinki Bhattacharya**, author. Also seen in the picture: **Prof Rama Baru**, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU, **Ms Urvashi Butalia**, feminist writer and Publisher, **Dr Zarina Bhatti**, former President, Indian Association of Women's Studies and **Ms Chitra Mudgal**, Renowned Writer, Novelist and Social Activist.



Release of "**Janani—Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood**" at an even held in starmark, Kolkata.

# Love, pain and anger

**M**otherhood is one of the fundamental tenets of Indian womanhood. Patriarchal ideology sees it as the manifestation of "stri dharma" or woman's duty and transforms her either into a self-sacrificing goddess, or rejects her for infertility. *Janani*, edited by Rinki Bhattacharya, propels us into an emotionally charged world of mother-daughter experiential encounters.

Nearly 12 years in the making, this anthology of 19 autobiographical voices coming from diverse fields, was a "spontaneous response", states Bhattacharya, to the maternal experience of the "empty nest" syndrome, when "children, like birds, have flown away". Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Das, Malika Sarabhai, Urmilla Pawar, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Neela Bhagwat, C.S. Lakshmi, Deepa Gahlot, Anwesha Arya are to name a few whose straight from the heart articulations have enriched this collection. The text has a forward by well-known academic and scholar Jashodhara Bagchi, which sets in context the tenor of the collection by recapitulating some of the motherhood debates thrown up by the 1970s' second wave of the Women's Movement in the West.

*Janani* has been divided in three sections, "Our Mothers", "Ourselves" and "Our Children". The exploration of the dual relationship is fraught with a gamut of emotions ranging from love, pain, anger

and gentle humour. Dalit writer Urmilla Pawar's widowed mother sees motherhood as "a cross the woman carries", likening it to "committing *Sati*". When commiserated for her awful fate of being left with three daughters, the mother's grieving voice pronounced: "All children are equal in a

Alamelo too subverted rules while seeming to comply. You don't have to be a biological mother to experience the "magical bond of motherhood" believes Dhiruben Patel, on whom motherhood was thrust.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen's upbringing of two daughters as a single parent aided by a supportive mother, presents a touching and humorous picture of three generational interaction. Shashi Deshpande states "selflessness and creativity are uneasy partners" and concludes, "to be a mother does not rule out everything else in life. I'm a human being first, a mother next." The experiences of an adoptive mother, another woman's determination not to fall into "the minefield of parenthood" and the confession piece "The Mother Who Wasn't", by a woman who had to terminate her pregnancy in her teens and years later, experienced, as a young married woman, the trauma of carrying her child full term only to give birth to a still born daughter, brings alive the multiple shapes of motherhood.

*Janani* is undoubtedly a valuable asset to Women's Studies. It should, however, be read not just by women but men too – by fathers who perhaps need to ponder on what after all makes motherhood different from fatherhood?

**Krishna Sarbadhikary**



**JANANI: MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, MOTHERHOOD**

Edited by: Rinki Bhattacharya

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Pages: 200

mother's eyes". "No I did not love her, but I was proud of her," states Bharati Roy, the emotional restraint giving way after her mother's death, as she acknowledges her love and psychological dependence on her. Ray's mother, a gold medalist and a 1930s graduate of Delhi's Indraprastha College, became a Hindu *pativrata*, neglecting herself. The point of bonding occurs in the last phase of the mother's illness as she admits that her greatest mistake had been. "I have not done my duty to myself." C.S. Lakshmi's mother, in a vegetarian household, cooked eggs for her children, saying it was doctor's advice.

## marie claire

**M**otherhood is a cliché, but this complex, multi-layered exploration by writers from different vantage points is a thought-provoking, intelligent and intimate odyssey into worlds that so far have been little understood.

*Janani* is a richly rewarding read of the many ways in which mother and daughters view their unique and constantly changing relationship. Most stories have a feminist subtext. Memories, insights and renditions are all viewed through a woman's gaze. This makes them refreshingly different while binding them to other writing by women as well.

Depending on one's own experiences, some stories will have greater resonance

than others. To this reviewer, the stories that had more narrative and less comment. Such as 'My Mother's Gardens' by Tutun Mukherjee or 'When Alamelo Shrugged' by C.S. Lakshmi, carried greater poignancy. Miatreyi Chatterjee's story 'My Mother, My Daughter' reveals reality as one experiences it in informal chats with close family members rather than on the printed page! The many evocative descriptions of food also bring alive the primeval association between motherhood and food.

Though *Janani* clearly challenges stereotypical images, the conflict between

the need of young children for their mothers, and the need of mothers for time and space for themselves occurs in more than one narrative.

The editing could have re-moved some of the multiple exclamation marks in some narratives, and there are a couple of spelling errors. But all in all, this is a book that is honest and real. A book for anyone who is interested in human relationships.

**By Gitanjali Prasad**



**JANANI**

Edited by Rinki Bhattacharya  
(Rs 280) SAGE Publications



## REVIEWS | Celebrating mothers

**Reviewed by Sumera S. Naqvi**

THOUGH no woman would consciously deny the divine status she receives on becoming a mother, popular debate in the West today questions the very essence related to the pros and cons of motherhood. Is motherhood a blessing or a curse?

Reasons for the latter are plenty. Not only has sacred motherhood been misused to bolster the patriarchal systems that have for decades flourished in feudal societies, it is an extra burden today for working families trying to make ends meet in capitalist societies. Mechanised lifestyles leave suffocating time limits to raise children on a strict schedule. For parenting these days is not just about raising kids but also consciously providing for their proper education, nutrition and general upbringing. Is motherhood then, a celebrated, fulfilling experience or an adieu to a hassle-free life of freedom?

Having thrown into one fold, poignant accounts of Indian daughters paying "belated homage to their mothers" including single, step and so on, editor Rinki Bhattacharya has reflected through Janani, that the idea of motherhood is still ravishing and idealistically cherished despite the stark industrialised realities clamped on it. "Why do human beings need a motherly figure throughout their life while, on comparison, animals forget their mothers the moment they become self-reliant?" asks Dhiruben Patel, contributor of the essay 'Motherhood and me' in the book. Patel has experienced motherhood not by actually being a mother but by hoping to be one. Though most of us take our mothers for granted for being there and providing us with unconditional love, the world is full of half-animals who forget their parents once they find their own legs to stand on solid ground — a hapless child wouldn't think of a life without a mother.

Though women in the West have been chanting slogans for a reformation in the institutionalisation of motherhood for a long time now, movements supporting them still have a long way to go. Due to longer academic years and challenging career options taken up by women, marriages are delayed, fertility ages of women altered and motherhood experienced late in life. It was reported in the press recently that the biological clocks of Italian women now tick longer — reaching 29-30 years

from 25, while in Germany, the rate of population growth has drastically fallen because many women shy away from raising families. "I would rather be single than too-muchsome!" said a 40-year-old German friend when asked why she hadn't tied the knot.

The late sociologist Jesse Bernard had

their family. These stay-in mothers may have been fairly educated but they stayed back at home to look after their families which included in-laws, children and husbands. In Janani, many daughters have narrated how their mothers were married young and studied after their marriage, not to foster ambitions but for personal enrichment.



A daughter reminisces her mother being very fond of studying but having to curtail it because of her early marriage. Yet another remembers that her mother played a musical instrument very well but she could not pursue her passion with due attention. Though none of the daughters complain of a depressing patriarchal environment in the backdrop of the lives of their compassionate mothers, a die-hard feminist bosoming western overtures may dismiss such sugary narratives for being a hoax into women's enslavement.

Why have the daughters not felt such an injustice against their mothers in the name of absolute motherhood? Perhaps such a premise is food for another book, for she confesses, Janani is a collection of accounts by women who were not "merely mothers. Nor were we those eternally sobbing, sacrificing stereotypes of mothers thrown up routinely on the Bollywood screen!" The contributors are working mothers who, unlike their mothers who took pains at administering every minute detail of devoted motherhood, are "eminent writers, performing artists, activists and feminist scholars". One moving account is by Maithili Rao, a film critic based in Mumbai, who narrates her mother's courageous ordeal, who was married at the age of 17 to a man who was already married and had three children, "the oldest being just seven years younger than her," and showered them with so much love. While another story by Dhiruben Patel, an accredited writer in India, who had no children but felt the pangs of motherhood for the children brought to her tutelage.

These accounts are not a gripe to nature. They are a celebration of motherhood, a reminder of the fact that though mothers in the coming years may face a different set of issues caused by the 'seismic shifts' that reshape cultures and societies in various time periods, a mother's caress will always render cushiony comfort to her child.

jotted some significant points in her book a long time back in recognition of the mother who "fight[s] those aspects of society that make childbearing and child rearing stressful rather than fulfilling experiences". She believed that at the turn of the 21st century, women's movements will have gained an effective base to establish that a woman can be more than just a mother. Too bad, at the turn of the century, issues like maternal leaves for working mothers, dependable social support systems, flexible workplaces, part-time and better opportunities for professional advancement are still insurmountable

Such a litany of issues also resemble the life of a typical working mother in the east, though the environment in which she brings up children is a tad different. She is part of the new brand of women who succeeded the stay-in mothers of yore, who devoted their lives to the kitchen and the bellies of

# By woman borne

Rinki Bhattacharya has edited a collection of stories on motherhood. Rana Siddiqui speaks to her. In Bristol, they have a School of Policy Making for such sufferers, something that India needs to have.

For a person like Rinki Bhattacharya, who grew up in a household frequented by poets, authors and filmmakers, writing, but naturally, comes as a catharsis. The 64-year-old writer, filmmaker, activist and free-lance journalist, and daughter of the famed filmmaker Bimal Roy, Rinki has quite a few book titles to her credit. From penning books on a serious subject domestic violence, as in "Behind Closed Doors: Domestic Violence In India" and "Indelible Imprints, an essay in Uncertain Liaisons", or about her acclaimed father as in "Bimal Roy — A Man of Silence", Rinki, married to filmmaker Basu Bhattacharya, also has brought out a number of cookbooks.

Recently, she was in New Delhi for the release of "Janani", a collection of stories edited by her.

"Janani" (The mother) is a heart-rending collection published by Sage. Well-known personalities like Mallika Sarabhai, Dhruv Patel, Urmila Pawar, Maitreyi Chatterji and others have contributed to the book. Grouped under three sections — "Our Mothers", "Ourselves" and "Our Children", the stories talk of all aspects of motherhood, including what it means to be neglected by one's grown-up children; living widowed and alone; and how daughters view their mother's ordeal.

Says Rinki about the stories in "Janani", "I had no problem in collecting them because I had almost a dozen of them in my stock, which were a result of my meeting several



**TIRELESS CRUSADER** Activist Rinki Bhattacharya

writers across the country. And also when I broached the idea, they only welcomed it, because they had been living with the idea for ages. The book has proved to be a catharsis for all, including me."

## No volunteers

Being associated with several movements that help the cause of women, especially those working against domestic violence, Rinki has just slowed down on practical demonstrations and devoted herself to building her library of stories that she has had collected during several such interactions with victims. She has a reason for this. "I was running an NGO

for the cause of women in Mumbai but I had to fold it up. There were no young committed volunteers willing to join for it had little money. Those who were running it with me got burnt out because of age, financial crunch, space paucity and lack of trained staff. But I am still associated with Awaaz-e-Niswan, a Mumbai-based NGO run by Shahnaz Sheikh who challenged the concept of triple *talaq*. She is also completely burnt out for the same reason. But whenever they need me for any demonstration, etc., I go there."

Not only that, Rinki is as dedicated to her 12-year-old Bimal Roy Foundation that keeps the legendary filmmaker alive in the hearts "of the government and people" by organising programmes in India and abroad. For four years now the Foundation has been felicitating film personalities we seem to have forgotten. "We were the first to honour Waheeda Rahman and Surraiya and last year we felicitated Nimmi," she informs.

The book has also been launched in the U.K, where Sage has a chapter. Rinki says that even the U.K readers will identify with it because domestic violence is a universal truth. "In Bristol, they have a School of Policy Making for such sufferers, something that India needs to have. Though people like Ila Ben Bhatt and Meera Jaisingh have been doing it in their own way, yet we need to sensitise young people to take up the cudgels," she concludes.

## Incredible India

Motherhood, perhaps the purest bond that doesn't need any definition, is the subject this collection of narratives, *Janani*, is all about. Twenty distinguished women, mothers, daughters or both, from different walks of life have come together and contributed to this book. Abandoning their social selves and providing the reader with their innermost feelings and intimate experiences, this book calls for a great read, not only for women but men as well.



**Title:** Janani  
**Edited by:** Rinki Bhattacharya  
**Publisher:** SAGE Publications

January 2007



## I love you mom, but ...

A recently published anthology of autobiographical writings explores the gamut of the relationship between mothers and daughters. **Yasmin Taj** speaks to editor Rinki Bhattacharya on the making of the book.

One doesn't normally draw on the teachings of Rajneesh while referring to a relationship between a mother and her offspring. But the new-age Guru of a forgotten age put it well. "The moment a child is born, the mother is also born. She never existed before. The woman existed, but the mother, never. A mother is something absolutely new," he said.

It makes sense, especially when put in the context of that special relationship between a mother and her daughter. When you are five, she's your goddess — you smear your face with her lipstick and totter around in her high heels. That's the way it is until you are about 13, when she suddenly becomes the most ignorant, benighted, out-of-touch creature on this planet. And then, somewhere between your twenties and thirties, if you are lucky, she becomes your friend again. And continues to be one till the very end.

Rinki Bhattacharya, director of the Bimal Roy Memorial Committee — the film maker was her father — showcases the relationship in a book published by Sage recently. Bhattacharya is the editor of *Janani — Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood*, a collection which brings together autobiographical writings of women from different walks of life — noted authors, artists, academics — who share their experience of being a mother, a daughter, or both. The anthology was recently launched in Mumbai and Delhi.

For Bhattacharya, the idea of bringing together the chronicles of these women and their experiences as mothers and daughters came about quite suddenly. "This was something I had not actually thought about. I am an art critic and I've always observed that most eminent painters have

dealt with mother-daughter relationships in their paintings. Also, I had made a five-minute audio-visual capsule called *Janani*, or mother as the inventor of life, which won a lot of acclaim. I believe that was the germination of the idea of doing this narrative collection," she says.

The contributors to the book include Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Deepa Gahlot, Mallika Sarabhai,

talks about her mother becoming old and ugly and then dying," says Bhattacharya.

Dev Sen writes of her two daughters and her own writer mother. And how, post menopause, a new daughter walks into her life. There is a piece in *Janani* by a Naxalite mother and how she brings up her daughter in spite of adverse conditions. All the narratives underline the view that the mother-daughter relationship is the most

simple, and the most complex, of all ties.

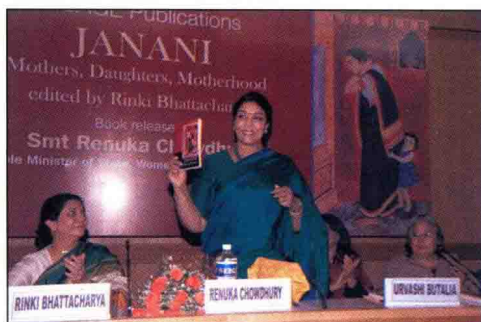
A daughter is a mother's gender partner, her closest ally in the family confederacy, an extension of herself. A mother is also her daughter's role model and her biological and emotional road map. Between these two women can spring a strong affinity and an equally strong tension.

My own experience of being a mother or with my mother would not be without nuances," says Bhattacharya. "Initially, I was a very docile and obedient daughter. But then, as I grew up, I changed and became a rebel. In fact, my relationship with my Mom was quite troubled. After I eloped, my mother never accepted me back, though my father did."

Bhattacharya, who suffered violence in her marriage with director Basu Bhattacharya till she walked out of it, believes that her mother loved her "in her own way though she felt a little threatened because of my closeness to my father". On the other hand, she says, "I love being a mother and especially a grandmother. But I do firmly believe that mothers and daughters can never be best friends. At some point in time, the mother always tends to get protective and questioning and I think it's but natural for her to be that way," she adds.

Why hasn't she written her own narrative then? "I have not written about myself in *Janani* since each of these 19 women has said what I would like to say."

Bhattacharya also reveals that she shares a very strong bond with her daughters. "I am a perfectionist and I almost single-handedly brought up my kids. Every mother and child should have the space where they don't feel threatened, where they can talk to each other about every conceivable thing," she says.



**Woman tales:** Rinki Bhattacharya (left) and Union minister Renuka Chowdhury at the launch of *Janani*

Bharati Roy and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. There is also Urmila Pawar, a Dalit writer, and Bhattacharya's daughter, Anvesha Arya. "Each woman here has her own distinct story to tell and I gave them the space to write it the way they wanted to."

Motherhood, most believe, is a phenomenon that is difficult to define. "That is why this book has a vast spectrum. Many questions are asked and many experiences shared," says Bhattacharya, who has also shot a documentary film called *Char Diwari* on domestic violence. "I do believe that every woman is thinking through her mother. Our mothers are our reference points."

The collection includes true stories on adoptive motherhood, step-mothering, and single motherhood. On the one hand, the reader encounters the gut-wrenching description of an avoidable abortion, and on the other, the firm choice made by a woman never to be a mother. The narratives vividly depict the whole gamut of the experience of motherhood. "Every piece in the book has an element of stark reality."

The opening piece, by Bharati Roy, begins with her mother's death. "Her narration is extremely candid and honest. She actually





THE TIMES OF INDIA

# 'Progressive laws strengthen reformers'

Be it a newspaper article, a book or a documentary — **Rinki Bhattacharya** has tackled the issue of domestic violence in unnerving detail. In New Delhi recently to celebrate the launch of her latest book, **Janani: Mothers, Daughters and Motherhood**, published by Sage, she spoke to **Avijit Ghosh** on the topics closest to her heart:

## What is your book about?

Janani perhaps started 12 years ago when my children had grown up leaving an empty house. It was traumatic. Many mothers face such a situation. My friends were going through a similar phase. We met and shared our situation. This book is about sharing. The narratives are rooted in reality. They are autobiographical.

We get a glimpse of the changing perspective on motherhood. I did not have to coax any of the writers. We all regret not having done enough for our mothers.

## You have written extensively on domestic violence. Do you think the latest Act will help improve the condition of Indian women?

The Act is holistic in its vision. It aims at preventing families from becoming dysfunctional. When there's an act of violence, everyone suffers. The victim suffers, the children suffer, even the pets and domestics suffer. This Act addresses the issue and aims to build a healthier family life by discouraging violence. This will boost women's morale. It will be a deterrent to abusive partners and husbands.

## The Supreme Court recently held that a woman who marries after divorce is entitled to custodial rights of her child. Another ruling was on joint ownership of house. How do you look at these developments?

These are important steps. When a woman wants to leave a violent partner, her first fear, she will lose the children's custody. This keeps women down; they prefer to suffer in

silence. The above decisions offer additional support to women. Let us not forget that famous film stars and pop artistes like Tina Turner have suffered in abusive relationships. One wonders what their lives would have been if they had the necessary social support. They would have jumped out and rebuilt their lives. Women are a powerhouse of resources; they can rebuild lives from nothing. In India, legal reforms are followed by social reforms. A progressive law strengthens the hand of reformers.

## The movies made by your father Bimal Roy often had women in path-breaking roles. Do you think the portrayal of women in Hindi films has changed for the better over the years?

Bollywood thrives on stereotypes and manufactures more stereotypes. A modern looking westernised heroine switches to a sari after marriage. She projects the accepted traditional look. But the issue isn't about portrayal alone, it is about the themes of films. In Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dor*, two traditional women from remote villages make radical decisions. This was such a progressive statement.

## New Women

The word Janani or mother automatically conjures up images of self-sacrificing stereotypical women, playing provider, nurturer to perfection. This book is an autobiographical account of women from many walks of life — noted authors, artists, academics several mothers and daughter — about their experience of motherhood. Expect the unexpected. There is a wee bit of the idyllic and euphoric aspect of motherhood but it is interspersed generously with brutally blunt experiences of motherhood that exist but are rarely acknowledged or talked about. Shashi Deshpande's is one such narration and so is Deepa Gahlot's which reiterates the prerogative of every woman so remain childless, if she so desires. These authentic, humane and intimate narratives explore the whole gamut of motherhood in nuanced detail. A compelling and heartwarming read.



TITLE: JANANI: MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, MOTHERHOOD  
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# Listen To The Ultrasound

By Anita Roy

Until recently it seemed as though all books about mothers fell into two categories: those that told you 'how to', and those that said why you should not. First-wave feminism characterised motherhood as "the biological curse of femininity". In the battle of the sexes, mothers were the turncoats.

More than any other experience, motherhood is about duality: virtually a definition of the divided self. In *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, Rachel Cusk writes that "birth is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed..."

Rinki Bhattacharya's collection is in three parts: 'Our Mothers', 'Ourselves' and 'Our Children'. This simple structure has a curious overall effect of seeing the biological clock run backwards. We start with death beds and end up with cradles.

Five of the eight authors in the first section talk about their mothers' death, and the poignant reversal of roles—when the mother becomes a child to the daughter—that precedes it. The sacrifices made by mothers for their children is a double-edged sword whose legacy is not only emancipation but also guilt. Where Bharati Ray rails against it ("She lived like a shadow of my father"), Maitreyi Chatterji celebrates it: "This is not only one daughter's emotional tribute to her mother but to all the mothers who give up their todays to create

better tomorrows for us."

The second section includes essays by those who, like Dhiruben Patel, haven't given birth, but have nevertheless been mothers. She writes, movingly, that "love for a child heightens one's perceptions and understanding to such a level that one acquires a sixth sense and a third eye". Others paint a bleaker picture. In her brilliant essay, Shashi Deshpande rails against the impossible idealisation of Indian motherhood in which "all attributes are squeezed out of her, so that she is shorn of...even humanhood, leaving behind nothing but motherhood".

Deepa Gahlot's is the only essay against motherhood, and I found myself ruing the missed opportunity for a more serious, hard-edged voice to articulate this position. Her characterisation of mothers as "caged birds" who "lack the courage to be free", I found both simplistic and juvenile.

For a book on motherhood, it's ironic that the strongest piece is on its opposite. Anwesha Arya takes her cue from the opening line of Anne Sexton's poem *The Abortion*: "Somebody who should've been born is gone." It is rare enough that silence shrouding 'the Act' is broken; rarer still that the scars it

**"...All attributes are squeezed out of her, so that she is shorn of...even humanhood, leaving nothing but motherhood."**

leaves are delineated with such unflinching honesty, and in finely-crafted prose.

Bhattacharya points out the lacunae in the book: "None of the authors enter into the grave issue of Indian society's condemnation of women who fail to give birth to children.... Also, the portrait of mothers who burn their young daughters-in-law is absent from this picture gallery." But notwithstanding the gaps, *Janani* is an important first step towards a more politically astute and personally heartfelt portrait of motherhood in all its complexity.



Janani—Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood  
Edited by Rinki Bhattacharya  
SAGE  
Pages: 197; Rs: 280

## The Statesman

29 October 2006

Women from disparate fields – celebrated writers, dancers, activists, painters, academics – have explored the issue of motherhood in this collection of essays. The 19 odd contributors include the likes of Kamala Das, Bharati Ray, Maitreyi Chatterjee, Shashi Deshpande, Mallika Sarabhai, Nabaneeta Dev Sen. While some of the authors have paid homage to their late mothers, others have evocatively expressed their own experiences of motherhood. Some others have thrown light on the hushed issues of abortion and childlessness.

Compelling, humane, thoughtful, sometimes poignant but always brilliant, the book has something to offer to all those who value and celebrate the priceless gift of human relationships.



Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood  
Edited by: Rinki Bhattacharya  
SAGE Publications  
197pp, Rs 280

# Love you mom ...

Autobiographical narratives that explore the unique bond between mothers and daughters



**JANANI—Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood**

**Edited: Rinki Bhattacharya**

**SAGE**

**Price: Rs 280**

**Pages: 197**

## Sujata Madhok

Dedicated to the umbilical cord that binds mothers and daughters life-long is a collection of twenty essays on motherhood. *Janani* has been lovingly, thoughtfully designed. Its cover is a mother-nad-child painting by K K Hebbar that evokes an Indian mother in a moment of self-reflection. The essays within reflect the same thoughtful, emotional exploration of the experience of motherhood.

Customarily, in India, it is the mother-son relationship that has been the stuff and substance of folklore and fable, literature and popular culture. In that sense, a book on the mother-daughter relationship is a departure, a small rebellion. *Janani* offers a score of authors, artists, academics and journalists the opportunity to explore this unique relationship. They speak in different voices, sometimes as mothers, at other times as daughters and often as both.

Nostalgia lends its aura to so many of the essays, as women lovingly recreate the lost worlds of childhood. In a thought-provoking foreword, academician Jasodhara Bagchi comments on the paradox that Hinduism links motherhood to a pantheon of goddesses. The mother goddess herself is called Shakti or energy, imputing divine power to motherhood. Yet, notes Bagchi, "motherhood is so far one of the most disempowering of social roles in

traditional or poor families." The woman's unique, magical power to procreate renders her singularly powerless in patriarchal societies.

Nevertheless, many mothers have made spaces within patriarchal structures for themselves and their daughters, rejecting tradition, gifting freedom to their growing girls. Perhaps it is no coincidence that several of the women who wrote these essays have been active in the autonomous women's movement. Their mothers gave them the self-confidence and independence to go forth and challenge the traditional order.

C S Lakshmi's "When Alamelu Shrugged" recalls how at critical moments her mother shrugged off tradition and "gave her daughters wing".

Married at the age of eleven into a traditional south Indian Brahmin family, Alamelu was creative and unconventional in many ways. She turned even cooking into "a mode of communication, assertion and adventure". One of the loveliest sections in this volume is Lakshmi's recollection of her mother's kitchen redolent with the fragrance of jackfruit jam and tender mango pickle, hot ghee and fiery rasam.

In her youth Alamelu learnt to read English from her husband and taught him Tamil. She stopped playing the veena for years because of her husband's disapproval but

was skinny!

When Lakshmi's father opposed her going to college in Chennai, Alamelu took a bank loan against her jewellery, bought a suitcase and four brightly coloured saris and put her daughter on the train.

It is mother like these whom the book celebrates, Marathi dalit writer Urmila Pawar's story about her mother is stark in its depiction of rural poverty. Her mother worked hard to bring up her children after the early death of her husband, received a jolt when the elder son died and another when her second son died. Immersed in grief, surrounded by disempowering rituals in a traditional society, she somehow found the courage to embrace her daughters and assert that she was still a mother.

In another section of the work, activist Jyotsna Kamal shares the joys and trials of single mothering her daughter Chetana, carrying her to demonstrations and meetings and giving her a singularly unconventional childhood. Chetana has bloomed through it all and today is both friend and daughter.

Like C S Lakshmi, Tutun Mukherjee celebrates her mother's creativity. Drawing inspiration from Alice Walker's emphasis on "the matrilineal legacy of creativity that is passed on", Mukherjee recalls how her mother expressed herself in intricate needlework and lace and in creating mouthwatering delicacies in the kitchen. "For my mother, the kitchen was a microcosm, a place of power in a patriarchal household, where the woman's control remained uncontested," She says. The kitchen garden was an extension of that space where mother grew herbs and leafy vegetables, limes and lemons and berries for chutneys, Mukherjee also speaks of Naomi Lewinsky's concept of the "Motherline" which is the "biological, historical/cultural and unconscious feminine legacy that gets passed on from mother to daughter to granddaughter".

Rinki Bhattacharya's collection brings together many tender memories laced with sharp insights on the unique bond between mothers and daughters. The book that will stir nostalgia in every reader who chooses to look into her mother's gardens.



later she taught it to her daughters. Her excuse for teaching Lakshmi to dance, at a time when it was not considered entirely respectable, was that the doctor had advised dance as exercise since the girl



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