

Alienation of Women in Uma Parameswaran's The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice)

Dr. Vandana Tiwari

English Department (Guest faculty)

Government TRS College, Rewa, MP

Abstract: *Alienation is a central concern in feminist literature, reflecting women's estrangement from selfhood, autonomy, and voice within patriarchal societies. Uma Parameswaran's The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice) presents a subtle yet powerful depiction of women's alienation rooted in motherhood, domesticity, and cultural expectations. The novel dismantles the romanticized image of motherhood by revealing how women's bodies, emotions, and identities are appropriated by family and society. Through evocative symbolism and intimate narration, Parameswaran exposes the emotional isolation, bodily objectification, and social marginalization faced by women, even within spaces where they are deemed most essential. This research paper examines the various dimensions of women's alienation in the novel, focusing on emotional, bodily, domestic, and social aspects, and situates the text within feminist literary discourse.*

Keywords: Alienation, motherhood, female body, patriarchy, domesticity, Uma Parameswaran

I. INTRODUCTION

Alienation has long been a recurring theme in literature, particularly in works that examine the effects of social structures on individual identity. In feminist literature, alienation often manifests as women's separation from their own desires, emotions, and sense of self due to patriarchal norms. Women are frequently portrayed as central to family and society, yet paradoxically remain marginalized, silenced, and emotionally isolated.

Uma Parameswaran, a noted Indo-Canadian writer, is widely recognized for her exploration of women's issues, cultural identity, and gender roles. In *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice)*, Parameswaran turns her attention to the intimate and often unspoken realities of women's lives, particularly focusing on motherhood and domestic existence. The novel foregrounds the everyday experiences of women whose identities are shaped and restricted by societal expectations of femininity and maternal sacrifice.

The title itself is deeply symbolic. The "sweet smell of mother's milk" evokes tenderness, nourishment, and care, while the "wet bodice" suggests physical exhaustion, discomfort, and loss of privacy. Together, these images encapsulate the paradox of motherhood as both revered and exploitative. While motherhood is culturally glorified, the woman behind the role becomes invisible.

This research paper seeks to analyze how Parameswaran portrays the alienation of women in the novel. It argues that alienation in the text operates on multiple levels: emotional alienation caused by neglect and silence, bodily alienation arising from control over the female body, alienation within domestic spaces, and social alienation reinforced by patriarchal authority. By examining these dimensions, the paper highlights Parameswaran's feminist critique of traditional gender roles and her call for recognition of women as autonomous individuals.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology. The primary source for analysis is Uma Parameswaran's *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice)*. The research involves close textual reading to identify themes, symbols, narrative strategies, and character portrayals related to women's alienation.

The study is informed by feminist literary theory, particularly concepts related to patriarchy, gender roles, bodily autonomy, and domestic oppression. Secondary sources include critical works on feminism, gender studies, and women's writing, which provide theoretical support and contextual understanding.



The analysis is thematic rather than quantitative, focusing on how language, imagery, and narrative voice contribute to the depiction of alienation. The methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of women's lived experiences as represented in the novel.

II. MAIN BODY

1. Emotional Alienation of Women

One of the most pervasive forms of alienation depicted in the novel is emotional alienation. Women are surrounded by family members yet remain emotionally isolated. Their inner lives are rarely acknowledged, and their emotional needs are consistently subordinated to those of others.

Parameswaran portrays women who are expected to be endlessly patient, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. Emotional expression is discouraged, and dissatisfaction is often met with indifference or dismissal. As a result, women internalize their pain, leading to silent suffering and emotional withdrawal.

Motherhood intensifies this emotional alienation. While mothers are central to family functioning, they are valued primarily for their labor rather than their emotional well-being. The woman's identity becomes inseparable from her role as a caregiver, leaving little space for personal fulfillment. This emotional neglect creates a profound sense of loneliness, even within the familial setting.

2. Bodily Alienation and the Female Body

The novel presents a striking portrayal of bodily alienation through its symbolic imagery. The female body is depicted not as a source of selfhood but as a site of duty and obligation. The repeated emphasis on mother's milk and the wet bodice underscores how the woman's body is constantly engaged in service to others.

Bodily alienation occurs when women lose control over their physical selves. Pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are treated as natural expectations rather than personal choices. The body becomes an object regulated by cultural norms, medical authority, and familial demands.

Parameswaran highlights how this reduction of the female body to its biological functions strips women of autonomy. The woman's physical discomfort, exhaustion, and vulnerability are normalized and ignored. This estrangement from one's own body reinforces a broader sense of alienation, as women are unable to claim ownership over their physical experiences.

3. Motherhood as a Site of Alienation

Motherhood occupies a central position in the novel and serves as a critical lens through which alienation is explored. While motherhood is socially idealized, Parameswaran exposes its darker realities. The mother is expected to prioritize others at all times, often at the expense of her own identity.

The novel challenges the notion that motherhood is inherently fulfilling. Instead, it presents motherhood as a role that demands constant self-effacement. The woman's individuality is subsumed under her maternal responsibilities, leading to a loss of self-recognition.

This portrayal aligns with feminist critiques of motherhood as an institution that reinforces patriarchal values. By glorifying maternal sacrifice, society legitimizes women's exploitation while denying them emotional and personal autonomy.

4. Domestic Space and Confinement

The domestic space in *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice)* is not depicted as a sanctuary but as a site of confinement. The home, traditionally associated with comfort and security, becomes a space where women's freedom is curtailed.

Domestic labor is portrayed as repetitive, exhausting, and undervalued. Women's daily routines revolve around cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, leaving little time for self-reflection or personal growth. This monotony contributes to a sense of stagnation and invisibility.



Parameswaran critiques the cultural assumption that women naturally belong in domestic spaces. By depicting the home as restrictive, the novel exposes how domesticity functions as a mechanism of control that reinforces women's alienation from the public sphere.

5. Social Marginalization and Silence

Social alienation in the novel is closely linked to women's lack of agency. Decision-making power is predominantly held by male figures, while women's opinions are marginalized. Silence becomes a defining feature of women's existence.

This silence is not a sign of consent but a result of systemic oppression. Women are discouraged from voicing dissent, and their silence is often misinterpreted as acceptance. The inability to articulate suffering further deepens their alienation.

Parameswaran's portrayal of silence serves as a critique of patriarchal communication structures that exclude women's voices. The novel emphasizes the need to recognize silence as a form of oppression rather than passivity.

6. Feminist Perspective in the Novel

Uma Parameswaran's feminist perspective is evident in her nuanced portrayal of women's struggles. Rather than presenting overt rebellion, the novel focuses on the quiet, everyday forms of resistance and endurance.

The text aligns with feminist thought that emphasizes personal experience as political. By highlighting the ordinary realities of women's lives, Parameswaran exposes the systemic nature of their alienation.

The novel invites readers to question traditional gender roles and recognize the emotional and psychological costs of patriarchal expectations. It underscores the importance of acknowledging women's individuality beyond prescribed roles.

III. CONCLUSION

The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice) offers a compelling and sensitive exploration of women's alienation within the framework of motherhood and domestic life. Uma Parameswaran dismantles idealized notions of femininity by revealing the emotional isolation, bodily control, and social marginalization experienced by women.

The novel demonstrates that alienation is not confined to public or professional spaces but deeply embedded within the home and family. Through symbolic imagery and intimate narration, Parameswaran highlights the silent suffering of women whose contributions are essential yet unrecognized.

Ultimately, the novel serves as a feminist critique of patriarchal structures that normalize women's self-sacrifice while denying them autonomy. By giving voice to women's experiences, The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milk (Wet Bodice) calls for a re-evaluation of motherhood, domesticity, and women's roles in society.

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