eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A MONTHLY, OPEN ACCESS, PEER REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
Volume 05, Issue 02, February 2026

The Price of Freedom: Female Agency and Emotional Inheritance in Avni Doshi's Burnt Sugar

Dr. Fatima Ashana[1]
[1]Department of English, VSSD College, Kanpur

Received: 20 Feb 2026 Accepted & Reviewed: 25 Feb 2026, Published: 28 Feb 2026

Abstract

Avni Doshi's Burnt Sugar (2020) reconfigures the notion of womanhood in twenty-first-century India by exposing the tensions between memory, motherhood, and freedom. The novel's portrayal of a daughter's fraught relationship with her mother becomes a lens through which the emotional legacy of patriarchy is examined. Situated within the larger framework of Developed India @2047: An Initiative to Transform the Nation, this paper argues that Doshi's narrative offers an intimate metaphor for the nation's psychological transformation. Just as India envisions a future of gender equality and inclusive growth, Burnt Sugar confronts the residues of emotional inequity and generational trauma that hinder women's autonomy. Through an analysis grounded in feminist theory—drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's notion of "the Other," Gayatri Spivak's idea of the "subaltern voice," and Julia Kristeva's exploration of abjection—this paper interprets Doshi's work as a psychological allegory of women reclaiming selfhood from inherited oppression. The study emphasizes how emotional agency, memory, and forgiveness become tools of empowerment, and how such microcosmic liberations align with India's macrocosmic vision of social and moral advancement by 2047.

Keywords: Avni Doshi, Burnt Sugar, female agency, emotional inheritance, memory, empowerment, gender equality, Developed India @2047

Introduction

When India envisions its centenary of independence in 2047, the idea of a "developed nation" cannot be confined to economic statistics alone—it must also include moral, emotional, and gendered development. Literature, as a mirror of society, becomes a vital participant in this process of cultural introspection. Contemporary Indian women writers, especially those in the global diaspora, are articulating new idioms of resistance and selfhood that speak to the heart of Developed India @2047. Among them, Avni Doshi stands out for her fearless exploration of memory, maternal ambivalence, and the complex negotiations of freedom. Her Booker-shortlisted novel Burnt Sugar offers a searing portrayal of intergenerational tension and the cost of female autonomy in a post-liberalization India still haunted by patriarchal residues.

The protagonist, Antara, struggles with caring for her aging mother Tara, who is losing her memory. This reversal of roles becomes symbolic of a deeper inheritance: Antara carries within her the trauma, neglect, and rebellion of her mother's unconventional life. "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure," Antara admits (Doshi 5). The line captures the paradox of love and resentment that defines not only the mother-daughter bond but also the emotional topography of Indian womanhood—caught between tradition and self-realization.

In the context of Developed India @2047, Doshi's novel functions as a critique of the emotional infrastructures that sustain inequality. While policies, education, and economic reforms address external inequities, the novel draws attention to internalized patriarchal patterns—guilt, silence, and the inability to forgive—that stall the evolution of a truly liberated consciousness. Doshi's narrative thus becomes both personal and political: a call

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A MONTHLY, OPEN ACCESS, PEER REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
Volume 05, Issue 02, February 2026

to confront the psychological debris of patriarchy if India is to realize the moral dimension of its development by 2047.

Avni Doshi's Burnt Sugar operates within a complex web of feminist discourse that interrogates not only structural oppression but also emotional inheritance. The novel resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other," where female identity is constructed in opposition to the masculine universal (Beauvoir 1949). Tara's rebellion against domestic norms—her decision to abandon her husband, join an ashram, and later live an unconventional life—is a defiance of the "Otherness" assigned to women. Yet, her rebellion transfers its emotional cost to her daughter. Antara's bitterness, born from neglect, underscores Beauvoir's observation that freedom for women often entails navigating the psychological consequences of their predecessors' revolt.

From a postcolonial-feminist lens, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the subaltern woman—one whose voice is mediated, distorted, or erased by dominant narratives—finds echo in Doshi's mother-daughter dyad. Tara's subalternity is double-edged: while she resists the patriarchal household, she remains entrapped in a spiritual patriarchy within the ashram that exploits her vulnerability. Antara, in turn, inherits her mother's subaltern silence, internalizing the trauma as emotional chaos. "It is possible that we never stop loving the ones who hurt us," she reflects (Doshi 72). The act of narration becomes her subversive speech act—a reclamation of agency through storytelling.

In Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the mother's body and presence evoke both attraction and repulsion. The abject, as Kristeva writes, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). Antara's relationship with Tara exemplifies this collapse; she oscillates between caring for and rejecting her mother, mirroring the psychic struggle of an emerging self against inherited disorder. This psychological abjection, when read within the Indian context, parallels the nation's ongoing negotiation between its spiritual heritage and its modern ambitions.

Finally, Nivedita Menon's concept of "seeing like a feminist" provides a contemporary Indian lens for understanding Burnt Sugar as a narrative of cognitive emancipation. Menon argues that feminism in India today is less about confrontation and more about reinterpretation—of norms, memories, and affective economies. Antara's act of remembering, therefore, becomes an ethical project: by recounting her pain, she transforms it into awareness, aligning with the feminist vision of a nation where women's emotional lives are recognized as central to development.

The emotional axis of Burnt Sugar revolves around the unstable bond between Antara and her mother Tara, through which Doshi explores the paradox of liberation and dependence. Tara's youthful rebellion—leaving her husband and joining a spiritual commune—represents an act of defiance against social conformity. Yet, this rebellion creates a vacuum of care, leaving Antara emotionally untethered. Doshi's irony is sharp: the mother who sought freedom from patriarchal restraint becomes herself the source of another woman's confinement.

The novel opens with Antara's sardonic voice: "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi 5). This admission immediately subverts the sentimental myth of maternal sanctity. Tara's fading memory literalizes the erosion of inherited structures; she forgets, but Antara remembers too much. Doshi uses memory loss as metaphor for a generational struggle to move beyond trauma—both personal and cultural.

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A MONTHLY, OPEN ACCESS, PEER REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
Volume 05, Issue 02, February 2026

Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 295) finds tragic resonance here. Tara's attempt to "become" an autonomous woman defies the domestic scripts of her milieu, but she never learns to reconcile freedom with responsibility. Antara inherits the anxiety of this incomplete emancipation. Her resentment is a critique of liberation without empathy—a reminder that feminist awakening must be ethical as well as existential.

The ambivalence between mother and daughter reflects India's broader transition from colonial patriarchy to postcolonial modernity. As Developed India @ 2047 envisions equality, Doshi's fiction warns that social transformation cannot proceed without healing emotional wounds transmitted through families and institutions. Tara and Antara embody the psychological costs of freedom deferred.

Memory in Burnt Sugar is less an archive than a battlefield. Tara's Alzheimer's disease externalizes the national struggle to remember selectively—to cherish progress while suppressing pain. Antara's obsessive documentation of her mother's deterioration, through notes and sketches, becomes an act of resistance to erasure. She states, "If I don't write it down, it will be lost, and then I will be lost with it" (Doshi 113). Her anxiety mirrors a generation of Indian women determined not to let their experiences vanish into silence.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's notion of "narrative identity," one may argue that Antara's narration reconstructs selfhood through the very act of remembering. Each recollection functions as both confession and protest. The daughter's language is dry, clinical, almost punitive—an attempt to impose order on chaos. Yet, the more she narrates, the more she discovers complicity: she is bound to her mother through a cycle of hurt and dependency that no amount of rational documentation can break.

From a postcolonial perspective, Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 1988) gains new dimension here. Both women speak, but their voices are mediated by emotional power structures rather than colonial ones. Tara's silence is imposed by age and illness; Antara's by guilt. Doshi reconfigures subalternity within the domestic sphere: the home becomes a site of epistemic violence where love is indistinguishable from domination.

The politics of forgetting thus operates at two levels—personal and cultural. In a nation striving toward Viksit Bharat 2047, forgetting the emotional histories of women would mean perpetuating the same silences that once stifled them. Burnt Sugar insists that progress must include the memory of pain, for only through acknowledgement can genuine development—of individuals and of the nation—occur.

For both Tara and Antara, freedom is a fragile construct—desired, feared, and often misused. Tara's search for liberation in the ashram exposes the commodification of spirituality in modern India. "Everyone was looking for God, and I was just looking for a room of my own," she tells a fellow seeker (Doshi 89). The line echoes Virginia Woolf's dictum that a woman needs "a room of her own" to create freely, yet Tara's room offers neither safety nor purpose. Her spiritual experiment collapses into another patriarchal structure where gurus replace husbands.

Antara's form of rebellion is quieter but equally radical: she seeks control through art. Her obsessive sketches of insects and decaying bodies suggest an aesthetic of endurance—transforming disgust into meaning. Here Kristeva's abject returns: Antara reclaims what repels her, turning decay into creation. "The rot is the most interesting part," she observes (Doshi 142). By confronting the abject, she performs an act of psychological cleansing, aligning with Kristeva's view that the abject "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses, and yet I live."

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A MONTHLY, OPEN ACCESS, PEER REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
Volume 05, Issue 02, February 2026

This transformation from repulsion to recognition symbolizes the emergence of emotional agency—a theme central to Developed India @ 2047. A truly developed society must empower citizens, particularly women, to transform pain into expression rather than suppression. Doshi's art-metaphor anticipates this social ideal: emotional literacy as a foundation for equality.

Moreover, Nivedita Menon's call to "see like a feminist" (Menon 2012) underpins Antara's journey. Menon argues that feminist vision dismantles hierarchies not through aggression but through awareness. By narrating her own bitterness, Antara becomes aware of her inherited violence and begins the slow process of release. This introspective freedom, however fragile, marks the beginning of what the nation too must achieve—a self-knowledge that transcends denial.

Avni Doshi's Burnt Sugar concludes without catharsis; Tara's memory continues to fade, and Antara remains divided between care and resentment. Yet this unresolved ending is profoundly political. It affirms that healing is not an event but a process—one that mirrors India's journey toward 2047. Development, in Doshi's allegorical framework, requires the courage to confront buried griefs: maternal, cultural, and historical.

The novel thus extends the feminist discourse from private anguish to public vision. Antara's voice, brittle yet brave, becomes emblematic of a new India that refuses to sentimentalize its past or sanitize its emotions. In acknowledging the psychological debris of patriarchy, Burnt Sugar gestures toward an ethics of emotional reconstruction—a vital component of a developed nation.

As India approaches its centenary of independence, Doshi's narrative reminds us that freedom without empathy remains incomplete. Empowerment begins not only in policy but in perception: in the capacity to see the self and the Other without distortion. The transformation of the nation, like the reconciliation between mother and daughter, depends on remembering responsibly and forgiving intelligently. The price of freedom, Doshi implies, is emotional maturity—and only through such maturity can the dream of Developed India @ 2047 truly be realized.

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Sex. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage, 2011.

Doshi, Avni. Burnt Sugar. Hamish Hamilton, 2020.

Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.

Menon, Nivedita. Seeing Like a Feminist. Zubaan, 2012.

Ricoeur, Paul. Memory, History, Forgetting. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, U of Chicago Press, 2004.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. Hogarth Press, 1929.