

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Defeminization as Identity and Survival: Reconfiguring Womanhood in Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and *The First House*

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ABSTRACT

Avni Doshi, in her *Burnt Sugar* (2020) and *The First House* (2026), presents her female protagonists as strong women who resist the culturally prescribed models of femininity. This article proposes defeminisation as a critical approach to analysing Doshi's representation of women who survive patriarchal structures by refusing, disrupting, or psychologically withdrawing from established feminine roles. In her novels, defeminisation does not signify the rejection of femininity itself; rather, it is a strategic dismantling of the identities imposed upon women as daughters, wives, mothers, caregivers, and objects of male and female expectation. In *Burnt Sugar*, Antara and Tara share an adverse mother-daughter relationship in which both women struggle against the demand that femininity must be synonymous with sacrifice, affection, obedience, and maternal self-sacrifice. Antara's anxiety about becoming "Un-Tara" paradoxically reveals how deeply patriarchal definitions of femininity have entrenched themselves in female consciousness. In *The First House*, the unnamed protagonist's husband's demand for divorce and physical separation leaves her in an existential crisis because marriage has become inseparable from her sense of self. Her subsequent fragmentation, withdrawal from domestic routines, immersion in astrology and mythology, and eventual movement towards an autonomous identity constitute a second form of defeminisation. Through these protagonists, Doshi

demonstrates that the feminine self is neither natural nor stable but constructed through family, marriage, motherhood, memory, and societal subjugation. Yet defeminization is not represented as uncomplicated liberation. It is also a survival mechanism: adopted by women as they must sometimes become less recognisably "feminine" to resist the emotional labour demanded of them by patriarchal society. Doshi's fiction therefore complicates conventional feminist narratives of empowerment by showing that survival may require estrangement from the very roles through which womanhood has been culturally defined.

Keywords: defeminisation; female identity; patriarchy; survival

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Contemporary Indian women's writing increasingly interrogates the assumption that femininity is naturally aligned with self-sacrifice, motherhood, marriage, emotional availability, and domestic responsibility. Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and *The First House* participate in this interrogation through protagonists who are unsettling precisely because they resist becoming "good" women according to culturally recognisable definitions. Doshi's women are not exemplary feminist subjects. They are angry, ambivalent, selfish, frightened, sexually and emotionally complicated, and sometimes cruel. Their resistance does not always produce freedom; frequently, it produces guilt, alienation, fragmentation, or further conflict. It is precisely this contradiction that makes the concept of defeminisation useful for reading Doshi.

The term, as employed in this article, does not refer to biological transformation or to a rejection of female identity. Instead, defeminisation describes the process by which a woman distances herself from socially prescribed performances of femininity. These performances include the expectation that women should nurture without resentment, remain emotionally available, preserve marriage, forgive familial injury, place children before themselves, and construct their identities through relationships with men and family. Judith Butler's account of gender as a repeated social performance is particularly relevant here: femininity is produced through reiterative acts rather than simply expressed as an essential inner truth (Butler). Doshi's protagonists expose the instability of those acts by refusing,

forgetting, disrupting, or becoming incapable of performing them. This is especially significant in *Burnt Sugar*. Recent scholarship has read the novel through maternal ambivalence, feminist phenomenology, and the rejection of "patriarchal motherhood." Routray argues that the novel refuses to reduce Tara to the role of mother and instead foregrounds her desires and individuality. Vijayakumaran and Marx similarly argue that *Burnt Sugar* exposes the conflict between culturally idealised motherhood and mothers' lived experience. The present argument extends these approaches by asking a related but distinct question: what happens when women survive patriarchal expectations by becoming less compatible with the feminine identities imposed upon them?

Defeminisation in *Burnt Sugar*: Motherhood, Daughterhood, and the Refusal of the Feminine Ideal

Burnt Sugar begins with one of the most disturbing formulations of maternal ambivalence: "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (Doshi, *Burnt Sugar*). The statement immediately destabilises the expected emotional vocabulary of daughterhood. Antara does not occupy the position of the grateful, loving daughter; instead, she acknowledges resentment and even pleasure in her mother's suffering. Doshi thereby removes Antara from the moral category of the "good daughter." This refusal is connected to Tara's own refusal of conventional femininity. Tara does not accept the idea that motherhood must consume the woman who becomes a mother. Her history includes her rejection of conventional domesticity, her relationship with the ashram, her sexuality, her abandonment of predictable social roles, and her refusal to behave according to the expectations of respectable womanhood. Her defeminisation is therefore double-edged. On one hand, it represents agency: Tara attempts to live as a person rather than as a socially sanctioned mother.

On the other hand, her rebellion leaves Antara emotionally abandoned. The novel thus avoids the simplistic opposition between patriarchal womanhood and liberated womanhood. Tara's attempt to escape femininity produces both freedom and injury. Her daughter inherits the unresolved consequences of that escape. Doshi's achievement lies in refusing to romanticise Tara's rebellion. As Doshi herself has observed, Antara is "completely a product of her parents," and motherhood does not automatically provide her with a stable sense of self. Antara's name becomes a crucial symbolic expression of this struggle. She explains that Tara named her "Antara, intimacy" because she wanted her daughter to become unlike herself: "Antara was really Un-Tara" (Doshi, *Burnt Sugar*). The prefix "un-" is significant.

Antara's identity is conceived negatively, as a separation from the mother. She must not become Tara; she must become the opposite of her. Yet this attempt at differentiation paradoxically binds the daughter more tightly to the mother. Antara's identity remains structured around Tara. Defeminisation therefore becomes a mode of identity formation. Antara tries to construct herself through refusal: she refuses her mother's choices, questions motherhood, and remains suspicious of the sentimental language surrounding the family. Yet the novel demonstrates that rejecting one model of femininity does not automatically produce an autonomous self. The daughter may continue to be governed by the very patriarchal structures she rejects. This is particularly evident in Antara's own experience of motherhood. Her pregnancy does not resolve her identity crisis. Instead, motherhood intensifies it. Doshi resists the familiar literary pattern in which pregnancy or motherhood becomes a redemptive discovery of female selfhood. The author has explicitly rejected the assumption that Antara "find[s] herself in motherhood"; instead, motherhood makes "the holes" in her identity more visible.

The repetition of maternal behaviour across generations is consequently crucial. Antara fears becoming Tara, yet motherhood exposes how difficult it is to escape inherited patterns. The novel asks whether a woman can become an autonomous subject when femininity itself has been transmitted as an emotional inheritance. Defeminisation thus becomes a survival mechanism. Tara survives by rejecting conventional domestic femininity; Antara attempts survival by emotionally distancing herself from the maternal role. Neither woman achieves uncomplicated liberation. Their strategies are forms of resistance that carry psychological costs.

The Female Body and the Politics of Refusal

Doshi's defeminisation is also embodied. Patriarchal femininity frequently disciplines the female body by defining how a woman should look, behave, reproduce, nurture, and desire. In *Burnt Sugar*, the body becomes a contested territory between mother and daughter. Tara's criticisms of Antara's body reveal the internalisation of social surveillance, while Antara's own relationship with pregnancy and motherhood unsettles the assumption that female embodiment naturally produces maternal fulfilment. This is where defeminisation becomes more than an attitude. It becomes a struggle over bodily ownership. The female body is expected to be available—to marriage, motherhood, reproduction, sexuality, and caregiving. Doshi's women repeatedly resist this availability. Their refusal may appear selfish because patriarchal culture frequently defines female self-possession as selfishness. Sara Ahmed's analysis of the "feminist killjoy" provides a useful framework here. The woman who refuses

happiness on patriarchal terms becomes a disturbance to the social order. Routray's reading of Tara as a "killjoy" is particularly illuminating because Tara refuses to perform the happiness expected of the mother. Defeminisation can consequently be understood as a killjoy strategy: the woman ceases to provide the emotional reassurance that patriarchal relationships require from her.

The First House: Defeminisation after the Collapse of Marriage

If *Burnt Sugar* explores defeminisation through motherhood and daughterhood, *The First House* develops the concept through marriage. The unnamed protagonist initially understands marriage as the organising structure of her existence. She confesses: "Marriage was a solution and I wanted to be dissolved" (Doshi, *The First House*). The word "dissolved" is crucial. Marriage has not merely provided companionship; it has promised the disappearance of individual uncertainty. The husband's decision to leave therefore produces more than heartbreak. It creates an identity crisis. The protagonist asks: "Where would I go and what shape would I take if he left me?" (Doshi, *The First House*). The question identifies the central problem of the novel: if femininity has been organised through relational identity, what remains when the relationship disappears? *The First House* is particularly important because the protagonist is unnamed. The absence of a personal name can initially suggest erasure, but it also creates an interpretive opening. The woman becomes less a singular social identity than a consciousness attempting to reconstruct itself. The title itself refers to the first house in astrology, associated with the self, persona, and outward identity. Recent criticism has identified this connection between the title and the protagonist's struggle to recover a sense of self after marital collapse.

The novel begins with a literal and symbolic loss of identity. When her husband announces the end of the marriage, the protagonist thinks: "My head is missing" (Doshi, *The First House*). The missing head symbolises the collapse of the rational, socially legible self. Wifehood has functioned as an organising identity; without it, she becomes temporarily unrecognisable even to herself. Yet this collapse eventually creates the possibility of defeminisation. The protagonist stops performing the expected functions of domestic femininity. The garden remains unwatered; the refrigerator is neglected; garbage accumulates; she forgets ordinary routines. From a conventional social perspective, these behaviours signify failure. She is no longer successfully performing the role of wife and mother.

But Doshi complicates this "failure." The protagonist enters a radically different psychological state in which pain becomes a source of perception. Her anguish has

"clarity" (Doshi, *The First House*). The loss of domestic functionality becomes paradoxically connected to a new consciousness. The domestic woman disappears, at least temporarily, and another subject emerges.

Defeminisation as Survival

The significance of this transformation becomes clearer when the protagonist's marital dependence is considered. Her husband has been part of the household's economic and emotional structure. His departure exposes the vulnerability of a woman whose identity and security have been tied to marriage. The contemporary review of the novel notes that the protagonist is financially dependent and that her writing career has stagnated after motherhood. Her survival therefore requires more than emotional recovery. She must reconstruct a self outside the marital system.

Astrology, mythology, the goddess Diana, the cicadas, the garden, and the natural world become alternative systems through which she interprets herself. These symbolic systems may initially seem like signs of psychological disintegration, but they also constitute an attempt to create meanings outside conventional domestic language. The protagonist no longer understands herself exclusively as a wife or mother; she begins to encounter herself as a body, a consciousness, an observer, an artist, an astrologer, a daughter, and a woman. Her defeminisation consequently becomes a form of survival. Patriarchy has taught her that a woman's stability is in marriage. When marriage disappears, she must learn to survive without that definition.

The novel's movement from the flooded domestic space towards the Ganges is particularly suggestive. Recent criticism reads this trajectory as a movement from breakdown towards a tentative form of liberation, while resisting the temptation to call it a simple transformation from suffering to freedom. The water motif can therefore be read as a symbolic dismantling of identity. The protagonist enters water not simply to recover the woman she was but to allow the previous construction of self to dissolve.

From Feminisation to Defeminisation: A Comparative Reading

The protagonists of the two novels are separated by circumstance but connected through a common struggle. The maternal past shapes Antara; the unnamed protagonist of *The First House* is destabilised by marital abandonment. One confronts the burden of motherhood; the other confronts the disappearance of wifehood. Both discover that identities presented as natural are, in fact, socially constructed. In *Burnt Sugar*, Tara refuses to be only a mother. Antara refuses to accept the daughter's obligation to forgive. In *The First House*, the unnamed protagonist must

cease to be only a wife to become a self. In each case, defeminisation functions through refusal. The difference, however, is important. Tara's defeminisation is comparatively active: she pursues desire and freedom even when those choices conflict with maternal expectations. Antara's is defensive and psychological. She distances herself from emotional dependence because intimacy has become associated with injury. The protagonist of *The First House* initially embraces the feminine ideal of marital dissolution—she wants marriage to absorb her—but is subsequently forced to survive its collapse.

These women demonstrate that femininity is not merely something imposed externally. It becomes internalised as desire. The woman may want to be the ideal wife or mother because she has been taught that such an identity guarantees a sense of belonging. Defeminisation therefore involves a painful process of recognising that the self one has desired to become may itself have been socially manufactured. This is why Doshi's novels resist easy feminist triumphalism. The women are not simply liberated by rejecting patriarchy. Their rebellion produces loneliness, guilt, maternal conflict, marital instability, and psychological fragmentation. Nevertheless, their refusal is politically significant because it makes visible the violence hidden within supposedly natural feminine virtues.

Defeminisation and the Possibility of a New Female Identity

The ultimate significance of defeminisation in Doshi is that it opens a space between being a woman and performing femininity. This distinction allows the protagonists to survive without accepting the entire ideological package attached to conventional womanhood. The novels do not suggest that women must become masculine to become free. Rather, they dismantle the assumption that qualities such as dependence, tenderness, sacrifice, forgiveness, domesticity, and maternal selflessness are inherently feminine. Doshi's women may be nurturing, but they may also be angry; they may love their children but resent motherhood; they may desire intimacy but fear dependence; they may seek family but simultaneously experience family as oppressive. Such contradictions are not weaknesses in the representation of femininity. They are the point.

Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as lived experience is useful here. The institutional structure of motherhood demands female sacrifice, whereas lived motherhood can contain desire, anger, ambivalence, exhaustion, and individuality. Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* dramatises this contradiction with unusual intensity. Recent scholarship likewise identifies the novel's

central concern as the conflict between maternal archetypes and the complex individuality of actual mothers.

The First House extends this logic from motherhood to marriage. Marriage, like motherhood, is presented as an institution that promises security while potentially absorbing female identity. The protagonist's crisis begins when she realises that the institution she believed would stabilise her existence has also become the structure through which she has defined herself. Defeminisation is therefore both destructive and productive. It destroys inherited identities, but that destruction creates the possibility of another self.

Conclusion

Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and *The First House* can be read as two stages in an extended investigation of female selfhood. In the first novel, the mother and daughter struggle against the oppressive emotional meanings attached to motherhood and daughterhood. In the second, the unnamed woman confronts the collapse of wifehood and the terrifying necessity of becoming an individual outside marriage. The concept of defeminisation makes it possible to understand these protagonists without reducing them either to victims or to liberated feminist heroines. They are women who survive by refusing the emotional scripts assigned to them. Their refusal may appear to be selfishness, madness, maternal or marital failure, or emotional coldness. Yet Doshi deliberately asks the reader to consider whether such judgments are produced by the same patriarchal standards that make female selfhood difficult in the first place.

The protagonists do not simply reject femininity. They expose its constructedness. Tara's refusal to become the self-sacrificing mother, Antara's resistance to the sentimental obligations of daughterhood and motherhood, and the unnamed protagonist's gradual movement beyond wifehood all suggest that identity becomes possible only when inherited definitions of womanhood are dismantled. Defeminisation is therefore a mode of identity because it enables the protagonists to distinguish the self from the roles imposed upon it. At the same time, it is a means of survival because patriarchal structures often make conformity itself psychologically destructive. Doshi's fiction consequently offers a challenging proposition: sometimes a woman must cease to be the woman society recognises before she can begin to recognise herself. The resulting self is neither traditionally feminine nor conventionally liberated. It is fractured, ambivalent, resistant, unfinished—and therefore alive.

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