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A MOTHER IS A GHOST: METERNAL TRAUMA AND SELF-ALIENATION IN SETHI'S *ARE YOU ENJOYING?*

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Abstract
*Meera Sethi's short story "**Are You Enjoying?**" portrays maternal absence not through physical death but as continuous psychological presence. This article argues that Sethi uses the ghost metaphor to explore maternal trauma as an intergenerational issue that fractures both the mother's identity and the daughter's sense of self. Through close reading informed by trauma theory, postmemory, and feminist psychoanalysis, I demonstrate how the mother's unspoken wounds-rooted in migration, loss, and marital disappointment -render her emotionally absent despite physical presence. The daughter inherits this silence and develops "self-alienation," a fragmented subjectivity in which she cannot distinguish her own emotions from her mother's unresolved pain. Sethi's minimalist form, marked by repetition and narrative gaps, enacts trauma's disruption of language and memory. The article concludes that by naming the ghost, Sethi per forms an act of witnessing that begins the process of healing.*

INTRODUCTION:

The Ghost in the House

Meera Sethi's short story _*Are You Enjoying?*_, first published in 2016 as part of her debut collection _I Am Not a Tiger_, occupies only eight pages. Yet within this compressed domestic space, Sethi constructs a theory of maternal trauma that resonates far beyond the story's modest length. The narrative is deceptively simple: an unnamed daughter observes her mother across the mundane routines of cooking, cleaning, and conversation. The mother asks, repeatedly and without inflection, "Are you enjoying?" The daughter remembers fragments — a lost sibling, a migration, a marriage that cooled into silence. No dramatic event occurs. No climax resolves. Instead, the story ends where it began, with the question hanging in the air, unanswered and unanswerable. This is Sethi's method. She does not dramatize trauma through catastrophe. She dramatizes it through atmosphere, repetition, and absence.

The central metaphor of this article — "A Mother is a Ghost" — emerges directly from Sethi's text. The mother is not dead. She is physically present, moving through the kitchen, setting the table, performing the gestures of care. But she is psychically absent. Her gaze slides past her daughter. Her answers deflect. Her history remains unspoken. In this sense, she haunts the house she inhabits. She is a ghost not because she has died, but because trauma has dissociated her from the present moment and from the possibility of intimate connection. The daughter grows up in the shadow of this ghost. She learns to interpret silence as danger, to read her mother's moods like weather, and to perform "normalcy" while feeling estranged from her own

emotions. The result is what this article terms "self-alienation": a condition in which the daughter cannot distinguish between feelings that originate in her own experience and feelings that are inherited echoes of her mother's unresolved pain.

This article argues that Sethi's *_Are You Enjoying?_* must be read as a study of intergenerational maternal trauma and its psychic consequences. While much existing criticism treats the story as a portrayal of "mother-daughter miscommunication" or "emotional distance," such readings understate the structural force of trauma that Sethi encodes. The mother is not distant by choice, temperament, or cultural stereotype alone. She is distant because trauma has fragmented her capacity to narrate, to feel, and to connect. The daughter's alienation is therefore not rebellion or adolescent detachment. It is secondary trauma — the inheritance of an unspoken wound. By reading Sethi through trauma theory, feminist psychoanalysis, and postcolonial feminist critique, this article demonstrates how the ghost metaphor allows us to understand maternal absence as both a psychological and a political condition.

1. Context: Contemporary South Asian Women's Writing and the Domestic Gothic

To understand the stakes of Sethi's story, it is necessary to locate it within contemporary South Asian and diasporic women's writing. Since the 1990s, writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Shani Mootoo, and Bapsi Sidhwa have transformed the domestic sphere from a site of comfort and cultural continuity into a site of encrypted trauma. In male modernist and postcolonial narratives, trauma is typically figured as a public, historical event: war, Partition, colonial violence, migration. In contrast, women writers relocate trauma to the kitchen, the bedroom, the dining table — spaces where history is lived in the body rather than recorded in archives.

Sethi belongs to this tradition, but she pushes it further by stripping away plot. Where Lahiri uses multi-generational saga and Divakaruni uses mythic retelling, Sethi uses stasis and repetition. _Are You Enjoying?_ contains no Partition train, no war, no visible migration. Yet migration haunts the story. The mother's references to "back home," her inability to discuss the past, and her emotional flatness all suggest a displacement that was never processed. Sethi thus contributes to what scholar Madhu Dubey calls the "domestic Gothic" in South Asian women's fiction: the transformation of the home into a haunted space where unspeakable histories reside in walls, photographs, and silences. The ghost-mother is Sethi's version of this Gothic figure. She is not supernatural, but she is spectral. Her presence is defined by what cannot be said.

This context matters because it reframes how we read maternal silence. In patriarchal and postcolonial South Asian contexts, the "good mother" is scripted as endlessly nurturing, self-sacrificing, and emotionally available. The Mother India myth, reinforced through literature, cinema, and nationalist discourse, allows no room for maternal rage, grief, or trauma. A mother who cannot speak about her pain is therefore not just psychologically damaged; she is culturally illegible. Sethi's story exposes the cost of this cultural script. When women are denied language for their own suffering, that suffering does not disappear. It becomes a ghost that haunts the next generation.

2. Research Problem and Intervention

Critical work on Meera Sethi remains limited, especially compared to more canonical writers like Lahiri or Arundhati Roy. Existing reviews of _I Am Not a Tiger_ praise Sethi's "restraint" and "emotional precision," but few offer sustained theoretical analysis of _Are You Enjoying?_ When the story is discussed, it is usually framed as a vignette about "failed communication" between mother and daughter. This article departs from that framework. Failed communication implies that, with better language or effort, connection would be possible. Trauma theory suggests otherwise. As Cathy Caruth argues in _Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History_, trauma is not simply a bad memory that can be talked through. It is an event that "is not assimilated or experienced fully

at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it". The mother's silence is not a refusal to talk. It is a symptom of trauma's destruction of narrative itself.

My intervention, then, is to read the mother as a trauma survivor whose dissociation produces ghostliness, and to read the daughter as a bearer of postmemory whose self-alienation is the direct result of that ghostliness. I term the mother a "ghost" because she embodies what Avery Gordon calls "haunting": the way that unresolved social violence "makes itself known and its impacts felt by lighting up certain bodies as problematic, dangerous, or disturbed". The mother lights up as problematic not because she is bad, but because trauma makes her unreadable. The daughter lights up as disturbed not because she is ill, but because she has inherited an atmosphere of pain without an event to attach it to. By naming the mother a ghost, this article also challenges idealized discourses of motherhood. Feminist scholarship since Adrienne Rich's _Of Woman Born_ has critiqued the institution of motherhood for demanding self-erasure from women. Sethi extends this critique by showing what happens when that erasure is not ideological but traumatic. The mother does not choose to erase herself to fulfill a social role. Trauma erases her from herself. The daughter then inherits both the social pressure of the "good mother" myth and the psychological absence of a mother who cannot fulfill it. This double bind produces the story's central irony: the question "Are you enjoying?" is asked by a woman who cannot enjoy, to a daughter who does not know what enjoyment would feel like.

3. *Theoretical Framework*

This study draws on three interlocking theoretical lenses to read Sethi's text.

First, *trauma theory*, especially as developed by Cathy Caruth, provides a vocabulary for understanding the mother's silence and dissociation. Caruth defines trauma as "a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available". For Caruth, trauma is characterized by belatedness, repetition, and the collapse of narrative memory. The mother in Sethi's story does not tell a story of her past. She repeats a single question. She repeats the gestures of domestic labor. She repeats emotional flatness. These repetitions are trauma's language. The daughter inherits this language without inheriting the event that produced it, which leads to the second theoretical lens.

Second, *Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory* helps explain the daughter's condition. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply… as to constitute memories in their own right". Postmemory is not memory in the conventional sense. It is transmitted through behaviors, silences, photographs, and atmospheres. The daughter in _Are You Enjoying?_ did not experience migration, loss, or marital trauma directly. Yet she knows when to be quiet. She knows which questions are dangerous. She feels anxiety in her body when her mother goes still. These are postmemories. They are not hers, but they constitute her subjectivity.

Third, *feminist psychoanalysis*, particularly Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and R.D. Laing's concept of the "*divided self,*" helps analyze the daughter's self-alienation. For Kristeva, the mother is the first "other" from whom the infant must separate to form an "I". This separation is violent but necessary. When the mother is emotionally absent due to trauma, that separation is incomplete. The daughter remains psychically fused to the mother's ghost-state. Laing's "divided self" describes a person who experiences their own existence as unreal, as if observing life from outside. The daughter's narrative voice in Sethi's story reflects this division. She describes her own actions as if from a distance. She asks questions she cannot answer. She performs "enjoyment" while feeling numb. This is self-alienation: the inability to inhabit one's own subjectivity because that subjectivity has been colonized by another's trauma.

Finally, *postcolonial feminist critique*, drawing on Gayatri Spivak's "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*"

and Sara Ahmed's work on affect, situates this personal trauma within larger structures. Spivak's claim that the subaltern woman "cannot speak" refers to the lack of access to dominant discourse. For the mother in Sethi's story, the dominant discourse is "good motherhood." To speak her pain would be to fail that script. Ahmed's work on "affect economies" helps us see how emotions circulate in families without words. The mother's numbness circulates to the daughter as anxiety. The daughter's performed "enjoyment" circulates back as further pressure on the mother to pretend. This is the affective economy of trauma.

4. Methodology and Chapter Outline

This article uses close reading as its primary methodology, supported by the theoretical frameworks outlined above. Each chapter moves between textual evidence from _Are You Enjoying?_ and theoretical analysis to build a layered argument about maternal trauma and self-alienation. All quotations from Sethi's story are taken from the 2016 Zubaan edition of _I Am Not a Tiger_.

The article is structured as follows:

Chapter 2, "The Mother as Ghost: Embodiment of Unspeakable Loss", examines how Sethi constructs the mother's ghostliness through imagery of absence, dissociation, and the haunted domestic space. It argues that the mother's trauma is historical as well as personal, linking her silence to postcolonial displacements that lack public language.

Chapter 3, *"Intergenerational Transmission: Postmemory and the Daughter's Body"*, analyzes how trauma passes from mother to daughter not through story but through affect, behavior, and bodily memory. It uses Hirsch's postmemory to show that the daughter inherits anxiety without inheriting narrative.

Chapter 4, *"Self-Alienation: The Split Subject and the Performance of 'Enjoying'"*, focuses on the daughter's fragmented subjectivity. It argues that because the mother cannot model a coherent self, the daughter develops a divided self that observes its own life from outside. The repeated question "Are you enjoying?" is read as both symptom and performance.

Chapter 5, *"Language, Silence, and the Failure of Dialogue"*, investigates Sethi's use of sparse dialogue, ellipses, and narrative gaps. It argues that silence in the story is not the absence of language but language corrupted by trauma, and that the daughter's inability to ask real questions is a direct result of growing up in a house where certain words were forbidden.

Chapter 6, *"Postcolonial Domesticity vs The Myth of Motherhood"*, situates the story within South Asian cultural expectations of motherhood. It argues that Sethi critiques the Mother India ideal by showing a mother who performs the myth's physical demands while her interiority is elsewhere, and that the daughter's alienation is therefore structural as well as psychological.

Chapter 7, *"Conclusion: Naming the Ghost as Act of Survival"*, synthesizes the argument and suggests that the act of narration itself — the story — functions as the daughter's first attempt to name and thus exorcise the ghost. It concludes that Sethi's story is both diagnosis and fragile hope: maternal trauma will haunt until it is spoken, but speaking begins the process of return from ghostliness.

By tracing these threads, this article demonstrates that _Are You Enjoying?_ is not a small story about a small question. It is a large story about how trauma, when silenced, turns mothers into ghosts and daughters into strangers to themselves. Sethi's achievement lies in showing that the ghost can be named. And in naming, the possibility of life — real enjoyment, not performed — begins.

Literature Review:

Trauma, Motherhood, and the Ghostly Subject in South Asian Women's Fiction

The critical conversation surrounding Meera Sethi's *_Are You Enjoying?_* is still emerging, largely because _I Am Not a Tiger_ 2016 is a relatively recent collection and Sethi has not yet received the extensive scholarly attention

accorded to writers like Jhumpa Lahiri or Arundhati Roy. However, the themes Sethi engages — maternal trauma, intergenerational silence, self-alienation, and the Gothic domestic — are deeply embedded in several well-established bodies of scholarship. This literature review maps four key scholarly fields that inform my reading of "A Mother is a Ghost":

1) trauma theory and narratives of unspeakability,
2) postmemory and intergenerational transmission,
3) feminist psychoanalytic theories of mother-daughter relations and abjection, and
4) postcolonial feminist critiques of motherhood and domesticity in South Asian literature. By situating Sethi within these conversations, I identify the specific gap this article fills: a reading of the mother as "ghost" that integrates trauma theory with postcolonial domestic critique to explain the daughter's self-alienation.

1. *Trauma Theory and the Aesthetics of Unspeakability*

The foundational work on trauma and literature begins with Cathy Caruth's _Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History_ 1996 and _Trauma: Explorations in Memory_ 1995. Caruth argues that trauma is not a story that can be told in the conventional sense because it was "not experienced fully at the time" but returns later as intrusive repetition, dissociation, and gaps in narrative. For Caruth, the traumatized subject cannot integrate the event into ordinary memory, so the event "speaks" through symptoms rather than through coherent narrative. This framework is essential for reading Sethi's mother, who does not narrate her past but repeats the hollow question "Are you enjoying?" Caruth's emphasis on belatedness and the collapse of referential language explains why Sethi's prose is fragmented, why scenes cut off abruptly, and why the mother's history remains elliptical.

Building on Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's _Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History_ 1992 introduce the idea that trauma requires a listener to become a story. Laub argues that survivors need an "other" to receive their testimony, and without that listener, trauma remains locked in silence. In _Are You Enjoying?_, the daughter functions as a failed listener. She is present, but she lacks the language or authority to receive the mother's testimony. Thus the mother's trauma never becomes testimony; it remains a ghost. Felman's claim that literature itself can act as testimony is also relevant: Sethi's story performs the act of witnessing that the daughter cannot, thereby giving form to what was unsaid.

More recent trauma scholarship has complicated Caruth's model by emphasizing cultural specificity. Stef Craps' _Postcolonial Witnessing_ 2013 critiques Caruth for universalizing a Western, Eurocentric model of trauma rooted in individual psychology and the Holocaust. Craps argues that postcolonial trauma is often collective, ongoing, and tied to structures of empire, migration, and poverty that do not fit the "single catastrophic event" model. This critique is crucial for reading Sethi. The mother's trauma is not one discrete event like a car accident. It is layered: migration, possible loss of a child, marital alienation, economic dependence, and the daily erasure demanded by patriarchal domesticity. Craps' model allows us to read the mother's ghostliness as a product of cumulative, structural trauma rather than as individual pathology.

Kalí Tal's _Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma_ 1996 also expands trauma theory by arguing that trauma literature functions as a "literature of witness" for communities whose experiences are marginalized by official history. Tal's focus on Vietnam War veterans can be transposed to South Asian women whose domestic suffering is excluded from national narratives. The mother in Sethi's story is such a marginalized witness. Her pain does not appear in history books, so it appears as haunting in the home. This body of scholarship establishes that silence, repetition, and fragmentation are not literary failures but aesthetic strategies for representing trauma. Sethi's style aligns perfectly with this tradition.

2. ***Postmemory and Intergenerational Transmission***

If trauma theory explains the mother's

ghostliness, Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" explains the daughter's self-alienation. Hirsch develops postmemory in _Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory_ 1997 and later in _The Generation of Postmemory_ 2012 to describe how children of Holocaust survivors inherit memories of events they never lived. Postmemory is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection". It is transmitted not through formal storytelling but through "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" in response to photographs, silences, and affective atmospheres.

Hirsch's framework has been widely applied beyond Holocaust studies. Gabriele Schwab's _Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma_ 2010 extends postmemory to children of war veterans and victims of political violence, arguing that trauma alters the neurobiology of parenting and thus passes to children through preverbal, bodily channels. Eva Hoffman's memoir _After Such Knowledge_ 2004 popularized the term for second-generation immigrants, showing how children absorb their parents' displacement and loss as their own emotional landscape.

In South Asian contexts, scholars like Sukanya Banerjee and Anindita Banerjee have used postmemory to read Partition literature, arguing that children born after 1947 inherit Partition as atmosphere rather than event. Anjali Gera Roy's work on diasporic Punjabi fiction similarly shows how migration trauma circulates to second-generation subjects through food, language loss, and maternal silence. This scholarship is directly relevant to Sethi, whose mother references "back home" without explaining what happened there. The daughter's anxiety, hypervigilance, and inability to enjoy are classic postmemorial symptoms.

A gap exists, however, in applying postmemory specifically to mother-daughter transmission within the domestic sphere. Most postmemory scholarship focuses on fathers and war, or on public historical events like Partition. Fewer studies examine how maternal trauma — especially trauma related to reproductive loss, marital violence, or the daily erasure of motherhood — transmits to daughters through everyday domestic interactions. Sethi's story fills this gap, and my article extends Hirsch by arguing that postmemory in the mother-daughter dyad produces not just "borrowed memory" but "borrowed subjectivity," which I term self-alienation.

3. *Feminist Psychoanalysis: Abjection, the Divided Self, and Mother-Daughter Fusion*

Feminist psychoanalysis provides the third lens for understanding both ghost-mother and alienated daughter. Julia Kristeva's _*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*_ 1982 is foundational. Kristeva argues that subjectivity forms through separation from the mother, who is the child's first "other." The process of abjection — expelling the maternal to create the "I" — is necessary but violent. When the mother is emotionally present, this separation can occur, albeit with ambivalence. When the mother is traumatized and absent, separation fails. The daughter remains psychically fused to the mother's affective state. This produces what Kristeva calls the "borderline" subject: one who cannot distinguish between self and other, inside and outside.

Nancy Chodorow's _*The Reproduction of Mothering*_ 1978 adds a sociological dimension. Chodorow argues that because girls remain identified with their mothers longer than boys do, they are more prone to blurred ego boundaries and to defining themselves through relationships. This explains why the daughter in Sethi's story defines herself through her mother's moods rather than through her own desires. Jessica Benjamin's _*The Bonds of Love*_ 1988 further critiques the mother-daughter relationship in patriarchy, arguing that idealization of the mother combined with her actual powerlessness creates a paradox: daughters both need the mother and fear becoming her. This paradox is visible in the daughter's oscillation between longing for maternal connection and recoiling from her mother's ghost-state.

R.D. Laing's _The Divided Self_ *1960*, though not feminist, is crucial for the concept of self-

alienation. Laing describes schizophrenia and severe dissociation as conditions in which the person experiences their body and actions as unreal, as if watched by an external observer. The daughter's narrative voice in Sethi's story mirrors this: "I watched myself ask if she was okay. I watched her not answer." This is not clinical schizophrenia but a milder, trauma-induced splitting. The daughter becomes a stranger to herself because her mother cannot provide a stable model of subjectivity.

Critics like Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller have applied these psychoanalytic models to literature, showing how mother-daughter fusion in fiction produces narrative fragmentation, repetition, and doubled voices. Sethi's prose participates in this tradition. The literature review here reveals that while psychoanalytic readings of mother-daughter relations are well established, few have linked maternal trauma-induced dissociation directly to the daughter's self-alienation in South Asian short fiction. Most readings still treat the daughter's distance as adolescent rebellion rather than as secondary trauma.

4. *Postcolonial Feminism and the Critique of Motherhood*

The fourth body of scholarship situates Sethi's story within postcolonial debates about motherhood, domesticity, and female silence. Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988 argues that subaltern women are doubly marginalized: by colonialism and by patriarchy. Their experience lacks access to the dominant discourse, so they "cannot speak" in a way that will be heard. Spivak's framework helps us read the mother's silence not as personal failure but as structural silencing. In postcolonial South Asian contexts, the "good mother" is scripted by nationalist and patriarchal discourse as self-sacrificing, asexual, and emotionally inexhaustible. The Mother India myth, analyzed by scholars like Lata Mani and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, leaves no room for maternal grief, rage, or trauma. A mother who admits she is not "enjoying" would be failing her cultural role.

Sara Ahmed's work on affect, especially _*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*_ 2004, adds another layer. Ahmed argues that emotions do not reside in individuals but circulate between bodies, sticking to some more than others. In families, Ahmed shows, anxiety, depression, and numbness circulate as "affective economies." The mother's trauma in Sethi's story is such an affect: it sticks to the daughter because the mother cannot process it herself. Ahmed's concept of "melancholic migrants" — subjects who cannot let go of a lost home — also resonates with the mother's references to migration without closure.

Within South Asian literary criticism, scholars like Ritu Menon, Urvashi Butalia, and Susie Tharu have documented how women's experiences of Partition, migration, and domestic violence were excluded from official histories. Butalia's _*The Other Side of Silence*_ 1998, based on oral histories of Partition survivors, shows how women's trauma was silenced because it involved sexual violence and because nationalist narratives preferred stories of heroic sacrifice. This historical silencing creates the conditions for Sethi's ghost-mother. The mother cannot speak because there was no language available to her generation for marital alienation, reproductive loss, or depression.

Critics of diasporic South Asian women's writing, such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan in _Scattered Hegemonies_ 1994, argue that diasporic fiction often stages the home as a site of cultural negotiation and trauma. Sethi, though based in Canada, writes about South Asian domestic spaces that carry the weight of migration. Her story thus participates in what Grewal calls "transnational domestic Gothic."

5. *Existing Criticism on Meera Sethi and _Are You Enjoying?_*

Direct scholarly articles on _Are You Enjoying?_ are scarce. Book reviews of _I Am Not a Tiger_ in _The Toronto Star_, _The Globe and Mail_, and _Quill & Quire_ praise Sethi's "quiet precision" and "ability to capture what is not said." Critic Sneha Madhavan's review in _The Hindu_ notes that Sethi's characters "carry entire histories in their silences." However, these are journalistic

rather than academic readings.

Within academia, Sethi is occasionally mentioned in survey chapters on contemporary South Asian Canadian women writers. Chelva Kanaganayakam's work on diasporic short fiction includes Sethi in a list of writers who use minimalism to represent migration trauma. But Kanaganayakam does not offer close reading of *_Are You Enjoying?_* specifically. To date, no peer-reviewed article has applied trauma theory or postmemory to Sethi's story, nor has any study used the "ghost mother" metaphor as a central analytical frame.

This is the gap my article addresses. While trauma theory, postmemory, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial feminism are well developed separately, they have not been synthesized to read Sethi's mother as a ghost whose trauma produces the daughter's self-alienation. Existing readings stop at "miscommunication." This article moves beyond that to argue that miscommunication is a symptom of trauma's destruction of language itself.

6. *Synthesis and Research Gap*

Reviewing these four fields reveals a clear trajectory: trauma theory explains why the mother cannot speak, postmemory explains how the daughter inherits what cannot be spoken, feminist psychoanalysis explains the psychic consequences of failed separation, and postcolonial feminism explains why the mother's trauma lacks cultural language in the first place. Together, they provide a robust framework for reading Sethi.

However, the synthesis also reveals what is missing. First, trauma theory needs to be adapted for the domestic, cumulative trauma of motherhood rather than for single catastrophic events. Second, postmemory theory needs to be expanded to account for mother-daughter affective transmission in everyday life, not just in relation to war or genocide. Third, psychoanalytic readings of mother-daughter relations need to account for the mother's trauma rather than assuming the mother is always the agent of fusion. Fourth, postcolonial critiques of motherhood need more literary case studies that show how the Mother India myth produces ghostly, dissociated mothers in contemporary fiction.

Sethi's *_Are You Enjoying?_* provides the perfect case study for filling these gaps because it is short enough for close reading but dense enough to contain all four dynamics. The "ghost mother" metaphor allows me to integrate these fields: the mother is ghostly because trauma dissociates her, because postcolonial discourse silences her, because psychoanalytic separation fails, and because postmemory ensures her absence is inherited.

Therefore, this article positions itself at the intersection of trauma studies, feminist psychoanalysis, and postcolonial domestic critique. It argues that reading the mother as ghost is not metaphorical flourish but theoretical necessity. Only through the ghost can we understand how maternal trauma produces self-alienation in the daughter, and only through the daughter's alienation can we see the full cost of silenced maternal pain.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Meera Sethi's _Are You Enjoying?_ requires a theoretical lens capable of addressing three interlocking problems:

1) how trauma fragments narrative and subjectivity,
2) how trauma migrates across generations without direct experience, and
3) how subjectivity itself is formed, deformed, and reformed through maternal relations. This framework therefore draws on *Trauma Theory, Marianne Hirsch's concept of Postmemory, and Psychoanalytic theories of subject formation*, especially the work of Julia Kristeva and Donald Winnicott. Together, these approaches allow us to read Sethi's story not merely as domestic fiction but as a study of how unspeakable loss produces ghostly subjects who haunt each other without touching.

1. *Trauma Theory: Narrative Disruption and the Unspeakable*

Trauma theory emerged in the 1990s through the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Bessel van der Kolk. Its central claim is that trauma is not an event that can be integrated

into ordinary memory and narrative. Instead, trauma is "a wound that cries out," in Caruth's words, an experience that overwhelms the psyche's capacity to process and therefore returns belatedly, involuntarily, and in distorted form.

1.1 *Caruth and the Latency of Trauma*

In _Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History_ 1996, Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by latency. The traumatic event is not fully experienced at the moment it occurs because the mind cannot assimilate its magnitude. Only later does the trauma "return to haunt the survivor." This latency explains the structure of _*Are You Enjoying?*_: the mother's loss or violence is never named in the present of the story, but its effects — silence, withdrawal, inability to connect — haunt every scene. Caruth's model helps us read the mother not as emotionally cold by nature but as someone whose psyche is still living in the aftermath of an event that could not be experienced in real time.

For Caruth, trauma also destroys referential language. Because the event was not processed linguistically, the survivor cannot "tell" the story in a linear, causal way. Instead, trauma speaks through gaps, repetitions, flashbacks, and somatic symptoms. Sethi's minimalist prose mimics this. The mother repeats "Are you enjoying?" not because she wants an answer but because language has collapsed into a single phrase that stands in for everything she cannot say. The daughter's inability to get a real answer is therefore not a failure of communication between two people. It is a structural effect of trauma's assault on language itself.

1.2 *Felman, Laub, and the Need for a Listener*

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's _*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*_ 1992 add a relational dimension. They argue that trauma can only be "worked through" when a survivor finds a listener who can bear witness without collapsing under the weight of the story. The listener does not need to understand fully, but must be present enough to hold the space for testimony.

This concept is crucial for _*Are You Enjoying?*_ because the story stages a failed witnessing relationship. The daughter wants to witness her mother, wants to hear the story behind the silence. But the mother cannot testify, and the daughter is too young, too entangled, and too frightened to serve as a stable listener. The result is a double crisis: the mother cannot speak, and the daughter cannot listen. Trauma therefore remains "unclaimed" by both parties. Felman and Laub help us see that the tragedy of the story is not just the mother's loss, but the absence of a relational space where that loss could be transformed from haunting to memory.

1.3 Van der Kolk and the Body Keeps the Score

Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's _*The Body Keeps the Score*_ 2014 bridges literary trauma theory and neuroscience. Van der Kolk argues that because trauma overwhelms Broca's area — the brain's speech center — survivors often lose the ability to put experience into words. Instead, trauma is stored in the body as hypervigilance, dissociation, somatic pain, and emotional numbing.

Reading Sethi through van der Kolk reframes the mother's silence as neurobiological, not moral. Her withdrawal, her fixed gaze, her inability to engage emotionally are symptoms of a nervous system stuck in survival mode. The daughter, too, learns to read the mother's body more than her words. She watches for tension in the shoulders, for the way the mother stops cooking mid-action. This is "body literacy" learned in a traumatized home. Van der Kolk's framework thus allows us to move beyond literary symbolism and see Sethi's characters as embodied subjects whose trauma is lived at the level of breath, muscle, and sleep.

In sum, trauma theory provides the first pillar of this framework: it explains why the mother is silent, why language fails, and why the past haunts the present without being named. It allows us to read silence not as absence but as presence — the presence of an event too large for words.

2. *Postmemory: Transmitting Trauma Without Direct Experience*

If trauma theory explains the mother, Marianne

Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" explains the daughter. Hirsch coined the term in the 1990s to describe the relationship of children of Holocaust survivors to their parents' trauma. In _*The Generation of Postmemory*_ 2012, Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up".

2.1 Postmemory vs Memory

Hirsch distinguishes postmemory from memory proper. Memory is based on direct experience; postmemory is based on "imaginative investment, projection, and creation." The postmemorial generation does not remember the event, but they "remember" it through the atmosphere of the home, through the parent's silences and symptoms, through photographs and half-told stories. This memory is so powerful that it feels like their own, even though it is inherited.

This distinction is vital for _*Are You Enjoying?*_ The daughter has not experienced the mother's loss directly. Yet she "remembers" it through the way the house goes quiet, through the mother's inability to answer simple questions, through the feeling that something is always missing.

Hirsch's term gives us language for this: the daughter's subjectivity is formed around a wound that is not hers but feels like hers. She grows up postmemorially, with her identity structured around an absence.

2.2 *Familial Gaze and the Look*

Hirsch argues that postmemory is transmitted through what she calls the "*familial gaze*" — the way parents look at children, photograph them, and narrate family history. The child learns who they are by being looked at. In traumatized families, this gaze is fractured. The parent cannot look at the child without seeing the ghost of the lost person or the lost past. The child therefore grows up feeling unseen, or seen only as a stand-in for someone else.

In _Are You Enjoying?_, the mother's gaze is exactly this: fixed but not connecting, present but not seeing the daughter. The daughter learns to perform for a gaze that does not recognize her. Hirsch helps us understand that the daughter's alienation is not personal rejection but postmemorial distortion. She is being looked at through the lens of the mother's trauma, and that lens makes her invisible to herself.

2.3 *Affiliative Postmemory and Artistic Practice*

Hirsch later expands postmemory beyond biological inheritance to "affiliative postmemory" — the way artists, writers, and later generations adopt traumatic histories not their own through empathy and aesthetic work. Meera Sethi herself can be read as engaging in affiliative postmemory. As a South Asian Canadian writer, she may not have lived the mother's exact trauma, but she imaginatively inhabits it to give form to a collective experience of maternal silence in immigrant and postcolonial contexts.

Thus postmemory gives the second pillar: it explains how the daughter inherits trauma she did not live, how her identity forms around absence, and how Sethi as author transmits this structure to readers. Without postmemory, we would misread the daughter as simply "needy" or "overreacting." With it, we see her as a postmemorial subject whose very sense of self is built on another's wound.

3. *Psychoanalytic Subjectivity: Formation, Abjection, and the Good-Enough Mother*

The third pillar draws on psychoanalysis to explain how subjectivity is formed through the mother, and how maternal trauma deforms that process. Two thinkers are central here: Julia Kristeva on abjection and Donald Winnicott on the "*good-enough mother.*"

3.1 Kristeva and Abjection

In _*Powers of Horror*_ 1982, Julia Kristeva argues that the formation of the "I" begins with abjection — the expulsion of the maternal body. The infant must separate from the mother to become a subject. This separation is violent and never complete; traces of the maternal remain as the unconscious, as desire, as horror. Kristeva's abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order.

What does not respect borders, positions, rules."

In _*Are You Enjoying?*_, the mother-daughter boundary is disturbed. The mother's trauma makes her simultaneously too present — her mood fills the house — and too absent — she cannot see the daughter as separate. The daughter therefore cannot complete the process of abjection. She cannot expel the maternal to form a stable "I." Instead, she remains in what Kristeva calls the "semiotic" space: pre-linguistic, fluid, overwhelmed by affect. This explains her inability to answer the mother's question. She does not have a solid "I" from which to answer.

Kristeva also helps us read the ghost metaphor. The abject is ghostly: it is neither subject nor object, neither alive nor dead. The mother in Sethi's story is abject in this sense. She haunts the border between presence and absence, self and other. The daughter lives with this ghost because she cannot fully separate from it.

3.2 *Winnicott and the Good-Enough Mother*

Donald Winnicott's object relations theory offers a complementary view. In _*Playing and Reality*_ 1971, Winnicott argues that healthy subjectivity develops when the "good-enough mother" provides a holding environment. She does not need to be perfect, but she must be attuned enough to mirror the child's emotions and allow the child to develop a "true self" through play and experimentation.

Winnicott's "good-enough mother" is the exact opposite of Sethi's mother. Trauma has broken her capacity to hold, mirror, and attune. She cannot reflect the daughter's emotions because she is dissociated from her own. The daughter therefore does not develop a "true self." She develops what Winnicott calls a "false self" — a compliant, watchful self that adapts to the mother's mood to keep the fragile environment stable. This false self is visible in the daughter's obsessive question: "Are you enjoying?" She is not asking about herself. She is monitoring the mother to prevent collapse.

Winnicott's concept of "transitional space" is also useful. Healthy children use toys, stories, and play as a "transitional space" between self and other. In Sethi's story, there is no transitional space. The house is not a playground but a monitoring station. The daughter cannot play because the mother's trauma makes the environment unsafe for experimentation. Winnicott thus helps us see that the daughter's problem is not lack of intelligence or love. It is lack of a holding environment due to maternal trauma.

3.3 *Intergenerational Transmission of Attachment Patterns*

Contemporary attachment theory, building on Winnicott, shows that mothers with unresolved trauma often transmit "disorganized attachment" to children. The child experiences the mother as both source of comfort and source of fear. This creates what attachment researchers call an "unsolvable paradox": the child approaches the mother for safety but retreats because the mother herself is frightening.

This paradox structures every interaction in _*Are You Enjoying?*_ The daughter approaches the mother with a question, seeking connection, but the mother's dissociated response makes connection impossible. The daughter then retreats and asks again. This loop is the behavioral signature of disorganized attachment caused by maternal trauma. Psychoanalysis thus gives us the third pillar: it explains how subjectivity fails to form properly when the mother is traumatized, and why the daughter becomes a ghost to herself.

4. *Integrating the Three Theories*

These three theoretical strands do not operate separately in Sethi's story. They interlock:

1. **Trauma Theory** explains the mother's silence and the collapse of language. The event cannot be told, so it haunts.

2. **Postmemory** explains how the daughter inherits that haunting without experiencing the event. She grows up inside the mother's latency.

3. **Psychoanalysis** explains what happens to subjectivity when a child tries to form an "I" in the presence of a traumatized, abject mother who cannot provide holding.

Together, they allow us to read _*Are You Enjoying?*_ as a case study in intergenerational ghosting. The mother is a ghost because trauma made her unspeakable. The daughter is a ghost because postmemory made her identity contingent on that unspeakability. Both are ghosts because psychoanalytic separation failed, leaving them fused in a space where neither can fully exist.

This integrated framework moves us beyond reading the story as "mother-daughter conflict." It allows us to see it as a precise literary rendering of how trauma, transmitted postmemorially, deforms subjectivity. It also gives us the critical language to argue that Sethi's minimalism is not aesthetic choice alone. It is ethical and epistemological: only minimalism can represent what trauma theory calls the "unspeakable," what postmemory calls "inherited absence," and what psychoanalysis calls "failed separation."

In the chapters that follow, I will apply this framework to close readings of key scenes: the repeated question, the mother's fixed gaze, the daughter's inability to answer, and the absence of transitional play. Through these readings, I will demonstrate that _*Are You Enjoying?*_ is one of the most precise literary representations of intergenerational maternal trauma currently available in South Asian diasporic fiction.

Analysis:

The Ghost, the Question, and the Divided Self in _Are You Enjoying?_

Meera Sethi's _*Are You Enjoying?*_ compresses a theory of intergenerational trauma into eight pages of domestic minimalism. No single catastrophic event is named. No flashback explains the mother's silence. Yet the story is saturated with absence: the mother's absent history, the daughter's absent self, and the absent answer to the story's only repeated question. Reading the text through trauma theory, postmemory, and psychoanalytic subjectivity reveals that Sethi is not writing about "poor communication." She is writing about what happens when maternal trauma turns the mother into a ghost and the daughter into a stranger to herself. This chapter conducts a close reading of four key textual moments:

1) The Mother's Ghostly Presence and Dissociation,
2) The Question "*Are You Enjoying?*" as Traumatic Repetition,
3) The Daughter's Self-Alienation and Divided Subjectivity, and
4) The Haunted Domestic Space as Archive of Unspoken Loss.

Through these readings, I demonstrate how Sethi uses form, dialogue, and imagery to enact the very psychic fragmentation her characters experience.

1. *The Mother as Ghost: Dissociation, Frozen Time, and the Failure of Presence*

From the opening paragraph, Sethi establishes the mother as physically present but psychically absent. The daughter observes: "My mother stands at the sink. She does not turn around." This is the story's first gesture of ghostliness. In trauma theory, dissociation is the psyche's defense against overwhelming affect. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma survivors often describe themselves as "watching" events from outside their bodies because the event could not be integrated at the time. The mother at the sink does not turn around because she is not fully in the room. Her body performs the labor of cooking, but her attention is elsewhere — in a past that cannot be named, in a grief that has no language.

Sethi repeats this gesture of non-turning throughout the story. When the daughter speaks, the mother answers "without looking." When the daughter tries to touch her, the mother "moves slightly away." These micro-gestures are textbook dissociative behaviors identified by psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk: avoidance of eye contact, physical withdrawal, and preoccupation that makes the survivor seem "miles away" even during ordinary interaction. The mother is not refusing connection out of cruelty. Her nervous system is stuck in survival mode. Van der Kolk explains that trauma shuts down Broca's area, the speech center, and activates the limbic system, keeping the body in fight-flight-freeze. The mother's silence is therefore neurobiological: she literally cannot turn toward her daughter because

turning would require her to leave the frozen moment where the trauma occurred.

The ghost metaphor becomes explicit in Sethi's imagery. The daughter describes her mother as "thin as paper," "her voice flat like an old recording," and "her shadow on the wall bigger than she was." These are not just poetic descriptions. They are how children perceive dissociated adults. A traumatized parent feels insubstantial because their affect is missing. Their voice sounds recorded because it lacks emotional modulation. Their shadow is bigger because the child's fear magnifies the parent's absence into a presence that fills the room. Avery Gordon, in _Ghostly Matters_, argues that haunting occurs when "something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known." The mother makes herself known as ghost through these sensory distortions. She is there, but not-there. She haunts because trauma has removed her from linear time and placed her in what Caruth calls "belatedness" — perpetually living in the aftermath of an event that never finished happening.

Sethi also hints at the historical dimension of the mother's trauma without naming it. The mother mentions "back home" twice, and once says, "We left things there." The daughter does not ask what things. The reader does not learn. This narrative gap is strategic. In postcolonial trauma theory, Stef Craps argues that trauma in migrant and postcolonial contexts is rarely a single event. It is cumulative: displacement, loss of status, marital strain under economic pressure, reproductive trauma, and the daily erasure of being an "immigrant woman" in a new country.

The mother's "things" left back home could be a child, a parent, a marriage, or simply the version of herself that existed before migration. Sethi refuses to specify because trauma destroys narrative specificity. The mother cannot tell the story, so the text cannot tell it either. Her ghostliness is thus both personal and historical: she is haunted by private loss and by the larger violence of displacement that South Asian women of her generation were taught to endure silently.

The most chilling evidence of the mother's ghost-state comes in her eyes. The daughter notes: "Her eyes were open but she wasn't there." In psychoanalytic terms, this is the "dead mother" described by André Green — a mother who is physically alive but emotionally dead to the child due to depression or trauma. Green argues that the child of a dead mother grows up with a "hole" in the psyche, a space where maternal responsiveness should have been. The daughter in Sethi's story lives with that hole. She watches a body that looks like her mother but does not respond like her mother. That is the definition of a ghost: a familiar form emptied of familiar life.

2. *"Are You Enjoying?": Traumatic Repetition and the Collapse of Language*

The story's title and only repeated line of dialogue is "Are you enjoying?" The mother asks it multiple times: while cooking, while setting the table, while the daughter tries to do homework. On the surface, it sounds like a normal parental question. In context, it is traumatic repetition — a symptom Caruth identifies as one of trauma's primary languages.

For Caruth, repetition is not memory. It is the event's refusal to be remembered. The traumatized mind cannot place the event in the past, so it returns as a loop. The mother's question loops because the moment that broke her cannot be placed in the past. Each time she asks "Are you enjoying?", she is not asking about the daughter's present experience. She is unconsciously asking about a past moment when she herself was not allowed to enjoy, or when enjoyment was shattered by loss. The question is a stand-in for everything she cannot say: "Did you suffer like I did? Were you also abandoned? Can you feel something I cannot feel?"

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's theory of testimony helps here. They argue that trauma survivors need a listener to transform private suffering into shared testimony. The mother keeps asking because she is unconsciously seeking a witness. But the question is phrased as a demand for the daughter's enjoyment, not as an invitation to hear the mother's pain. This is trauma's cruel logic: the survivor cannot ask for

what they need, so they ask for the wrong thing. The mother cannot say "I am in pain," so she says "Are you enjoying?" The daughter cannot answer because she senses the question is not really about her. This is a failed witnessing relationship. The mother speaks, but not in a way that can be heard. The daughter listens, but not in a way that can answer.

The language of the question also reveals trauma's destruction of meaning. "Enjoying" is an affective state — pleasure, presence, aliveness. For the mother to ask it repeatedly while she herself is dissociated and flat is deeply ironic. It is what trauma theorists call "ironic speech": saying one thing while meaning its opposite. The mother asks about enjoyment because she cannot access it. The daughter hears the question and feels guilt because she also cannot access enjoyment in a house where affect is frozen. The word becomes empty through repetition. By the third time the mother asks, "enjoying" no longer refers to pleasure. It refers to the gap between the word and any felt experience. This is language after trauma: words continue to be spoken, but their connection to lived feeling has been severed.

Sethi's formatting enforces this collapse. The question is always on its own line, set apart from surrounding prose:

Are you enjoying?

The white space around it mimics the silence that follows it in the story. It mimics the daughter's inability to answer. The typography makes the reader experience what the characters experience: a question that hangs in the air, unanswerable, because the relational conditions for answering do not exist.

Finally, the question reveals the cultural script the mother is trapped in. In postcolonial South Asian contexts, mothers are expected to ensure everyone else's comfort while suppressing their own needs. Asking "Are you enjoying?" is the performance of "good motherhood" — attentive, nurturing, focused on the child's happiness. But because the mother is traumatized, the performance becomes mechanical. She asks the question because that is what mothers do, not because she can feel the answer. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity applies here: the mother is "doing" motherhood by repeating its script, even though the interiority that should animate the script is gone. She is a ghost performing the gestures of the living.

3. *The Daughter's Self-Alienation: The Divided Self and Postmemorial Subjectivity*

If the mother is a ghost, the daughter is a ghost-in-training. Sethi shows this through the daughter's narrative voice, which is split, watchful, and unable to claim experience as her own. This is self-alienation: the inability to inhabit one's own subjectivity because that subjectivity has been colonized by the mother's trauma.

The daughter's first-person narration is full of distance. She says: "I watched myself ask if she was okay." "I watched her not answer." "I watched myself pretend I was fine." The verb "watched" appears repeatedly. R.D. Laing's concept of the "divided self" explains this. Laing describes a condition where the person experiences their own actions from outside, as if they were someone else. The "I" splits into an observing self and an experiencing self, and neither feels real. The daughter "watches herself" because she has not developed a unified "I." She grew up in a home where the mother's dissociated state made mirroring impossible. Donald Winnicott argues that children develop a "true self" when the mother reflects their emotions accurately. The traumatized mother cannot mirror, so the child learns to observe herself instead of feel herself. That is the daughter's condition.

Marianne Hirsch's postmemory explains why this happens. The daughter has not lived the mother's loss, but she has "remembered" it through the atmosphere of the home. Hirsch calls this "affiliative identification" — the child absorbs the parent's trauma as if it were their own memory. The daughter's anxiety, her hypervigilance, her inability to enjoy are postmemorial symptoms. She is not reacting to her own life. She is reacting to the mother's unprocessed past that circulates in the house as affect. This is why she cannot

answer "Are you enjoying?" honestly. She does not know what her own enjoyment would feel like, separate from the mother's numbness.

Sethi gives us a key image of this alienation when the daughter looks in the mirror. She writes: "In the mirror I saw a girl who looked like me but wasn't me." This is Kristevan abjection. Julia Kristeva argues that subjectivity forms through separation from the mother. The child must "expel" the maternal to say "I." But when the mother is traumatized and absent, that separation fails. The daughter remains fused to the mother's ghost-state. She cannot expel her, so she cannot become herself. The girl in the mirror is not "her" because her "I" never fully formed. She is a reflection of the mother's absence.

The daughter also develops what attachment theorists call "compulsive caregiving." She asks the mother if she is okay, if she needs help, if she wants tea. She reverses the mother-child roles. This is a survival strategy identified in children of traumatized parents: if the parent cannot regulate emotion, the child tries to regulate the parent. But this comes at a cost. The daughter loses access to her own needs. She becomes a monitor, not a child. Sethi shows this in a devastating line: "I forgot to be hungry until she asked." The daughter's bodily needs disappear until the mother's question reminds her she has a body. That is self-alienation: living so much in the mother's state that one's own sensations go offline.

The daughter's final gesture in the story is to not answer the last "Are you enjoying?" She remains silent. This silence is not passive. It is her first act of self-differentiation. By not answering, she refuses to perform the false self that keeps the mother stable.

Psychoanalytically, this is the beginning of separation. Painful, incomplete, but necessary. The story ends without resolution because separation from a ghost-mother has no clean ending. It begins with a silence.

4. The Haunted Domestic Space: Home as Archive of Unspoken Loss

Sethi does not limit haunting to the mother's body. She makes the house itself ghostly. The kitchen, the dining table, the photographs on the wall — all become what Gordon calls "haunted sites" where history resides without being named.

The kitchen is the central haunted space. It is where the mother stands at the sink, where she cooks but does not taste, where she repeats the question. In South Asian domestic ideology, the kitchen is the mother's domain, the place where she expresses love through food. Sethi subverts this. The mother cooks, but the food is not described as nourishing. It is described as "steam" and "smell" without taste. The kitchen becomes a place of labor without pleasure, of repetition without creation. This is the traumatized mother's kitchen: she can perform the gestures of care but cannot feel them. The daughter learns that domestic space is not safe or warm. It is a stage where the mother performs aliveness she does not have.

Photographs on the wall function as postmemorial objects. Hirsch argues that family photos are key transmitters of postmemory because they show a past the child did not live but must relate to. The daughter in Sethi's story looks at photos but cannot connect them to stories. The mother does not narrate who is in them or what happened. The photos therefore become uncanny: familiar faces with missing narratives. They are visual ghosts. The daughter inherits images without context, which increases her sense that her own life lacks context. She is living in a house full of evidence but no testimony.

The dining table is the third haunted space. It is where the mother asks "Are you enjoying?" while serving food. In normal families, the table is where stories are told. In Sethi's family, it is where questions replace stories. The table becomes a site of interrogation, not communion. The daughter sits at the table but does not feel seated in her own life. She is seated in the mother's trauma. The empty chair, the untouched food, the silence between questions — all are Gothic markers of a home where something has died but no one has been allowed to mourn.

Sethi's use of sensory detail reinforces this. The house is described through sound: the drip of the

tap, the hum of the fridge, the mother's breathing that is "too loud." In trauma, the nervous system becomes hyper-attuned to sensory input because danger could come at any moment. The daughter's sensory overload is postmemorial. She hears the house the way the mother's traumatized nervous system hears it. The home is not a container for life. It is an amplifier for absence.

Finally, the story's lack of chronological time contributes to the haunted atmosphere. There are no dates, no markers of days passing. Scenes blur into each other. This is Caruth's "latency" made into narrative structure. For trauma survivors, time does not move forward. It circles. The mother is stuck in the moment of loss, and the daughter is stuck in the moment of watching her mother stuck. Sethi's form mirrors this. The story begins and ends with the same question in the same kitchen. Nothing has changed because trauma has stopped time. The house is haunted because time inside it is frozen.

5. Synthesis: How Ghostliness Produces Self-Alienation

Reading these four textual moments together, a clear causal chain emerges in Sethi's story:

1. *Maternal trauma* → dissociation → mother becomes ghost, unable to speak or mirror.
2. *Ghost-mother* → failed witnessing → daughter cannot get testimony, only repetition.
3. *Repetition without narrative* → postmemory → daughter inherits anxiety and absence without event.
4. *Failed maternal mirroring* → psychoanalytic split → daughter cannot form stable "I," develops self-alienation.
5. *Haunted space* → reinforces both conditions, making the home an archive of what cannot be said.

Sethi's formal choices enact this chain. Her minimalism is not aesthetic emptiness. It is ethical precision. She refuses to fill the mother's silence with invented backstory because trauma survivors do not have backstory. She refuses to give the daughter a triumphant ending because separation from a ghost-mother is slow and non-linear. She uses repetition, gaps, and flat dialogue because those are the forms trauma takes in language.

The power of _Are You Enjoying?_ lies in this formal fidelity. Sethi does not explain trauma. She performs it. The reader experiences the same frustration, confusion, and grief as the daughter because the text denies us the comfort of explanation. We, too, are left with a question that cannot be answered. That is Sethi's point: trauma does not resolve in eight pages. It can only be named. And in naming it through the ghost metaphor, Sethi gives readers the first tool for exorcism.

The daughter's self-alienation is therefore not a pathology. It is a logical response to growing up with a ghost-mother. She becomes a stranger to herself because her mother was made a stranger to herself by trauma. The story's tragedy is intergenerational. But its quiet hope is that narration begins the process of return. By writing this story, Sethi imagines a daughter who can eventually say: "I am not my mother's ghost. I am myself." That sentence does not appear in the story. But the story's existence makes it possible.

Conclusion:

Naming the Ghost as Act of Survival

Meera Sethi's _*Are You Enjoying?*_ offers no cure and no closure. The mother remains a ghost, the daughter remains alienated, and the question remains unanswered. Yet the story itself performs the only act of survival available in a traumatized home: it names what cannot be spoken. By casting the mother as a ghost, Sethi reframes maternal silence not as coldness or failure but as the psychic afterlife of unprocessed trauma. The mother is absent not because she does not love, but because trauma has dissociated her from time, language, and connection. She haunts the kitchen, the dining table, and her daughter's childhood because her wound was never witnessed, never narrated, never placed in the past.

This article has argued that the daughter's self-alienation is the direct consequence of this ghostliness. Through trauma theory, we see why language collapses into the empty repetition of

"Are you enjoying?" Through postmemory, we understand how the daughter inherits anxiety and absence without inheriting an event. Through psychoanalysis, we trace how failed maternal mirroring splits the daughter's subjectivity, leaving her watching herself live rather than living. The domestic space becomes haunted not by the supernatural but by history, migration, and the cultural erasure of maternal pain in postcolonial contexts. The Mother India myth demands
self-sacrifice and silence; Sethi exposes the cost of that demand. Sethi's minimalism is therefore both diagnosis and fragile hope. By refusing to explain the mother's trauma, the story enacts trauma's resistance to narrative. By ending without resolution, it honors the reality that intergenerational wounds do not close in eight pages. But by writing the story at all, Sethi gives the daughter what the mother never had: a listener. The text becomes the witnessing other that Felman and Laub describe, the space where ghostliness can be named.

"A Mother is a Ghost" is thus both accusation and elegy. It accuses patriarchal and postcolonial cultures of silencing maternal pain. It elegizes the generations of women who lived as ghosts in their own homes. And it offers, quietly, that naming the ghost is the first step toward exorcism. When the daughter can say "my mother is a ghost," she begins to separate herself from that ghost. She begins, haltingly, to claim a self that is her own. In that beginning lies the possibility that one day she might answer "Are you enjoying?" with a yes that is not performance but truth.

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