

Maternal Authority, Cultural Memory, and Identity Formation in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*

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Abstract

In Rani Manicka's The Rice Mother, motherhood appears to be a powerful instrument of cultural continuation, personal wholeness, and self-construction for the family in the diaspora. While some have analysed the novel in relation to Diaspora, Postcolonial Identity, and Gender, few have considered maternal authority and the construction of the next generation's identity. In this essay, I outline Lakshmi's role, which extends beyond domesticity to carry forward cultural knowledge and reconcile culture with belonging as her society evolves. The study draws on Cultural Memory Theory, feminist ideas on motherhood, and postcolonial diaspora as its main foundations. The article will also highlight how motherly power both upholds and sparks disputes within the family. Lakshmi, as the 'memory holder of family traditions', continues to hold her children's and grandchildren's identity while confronting opposition and disagreements caused by generational differences. The effects of migration, eviction, and transmitted trauma create an endless struggle between collective and personal memories. Therefore, motherliness does not emerge in the study as an institution per se but rather as a culturally performed act by means of which memory and identification of individuals are continuously reformed from one generation to another.

Keywords: Maternal Authority, Identity Formation, Diaspora, Tradition, Intergenerational Conflicts

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Introduction

Contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction has widely explored how migration reconfigures identity, cultural continuance, and family bonds, often depicting women as memory-bearers, transmitters of culture, and custodians of family connections amid displacement and disruption. Motherhood here ceases to be defined solely by physical or biological constraints or emotive responsibility and becomes a culturally inscribed process of ongoing negotiation of memory, belonging, and selfhood across generations.

The cultural-historical configurations of cities and the contemporary and historical flows of people, objects, representations, and ideologies in urban spaces generate distinct diaspora spaces and transnational activities. The physical and representational dimensions of urban space, which convey ingrained ideologies and dominant identities of the city, can affect the lived spaces produced by diasporas (Finlay 785).

In Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*, the Sri Lankan Tamil family history under colonial Malaya and war, migration, and social change continues over four generations and illuminates transformations in family relationships and identity. Lakshmi remains the epicentre of the story; her authority derives from sacrifice, endurance, and protection of family traditions. Although it sustains family continuity and memory, her leadership also fuels silencing, distance, and intergenerational tension. Maternal authority thereby becomes a nexus of enduring strength as well as tension.

Despite the attention that the novel, *The Rice Mother*, has received from critics of diaspora, postcoloniality, gender, and memory, the concept of maternal authority has been less extensively engaged to explain how it sustains a culture through memory and mediates the transmission and reception of trauma across the generations of family and the nation-state.

One of the significant ways through which the youth manifest their solidarities and identities in the diaspora is the creation of youth organisations. These organisations, although they occupy a physical space, transcend borders and forge connections and networks with the homeland and other co-diasporics living across the world (Sahoo and Shome 99).

With the help of cultural memory theories, the notion of feminist motherhood, and a postcolonial approach towards diaspora, this article contends that the figure of Lakshmi as mother is the key factor by means of which cultural memory is saved, the trauma of the colonial and other past is transmitted, and the sense of individual self is forged through an interaction between self and other through the mother, for *The Rice Mother* has offered a dynamic, instead of fixed, vision of motherhood that holds an entire history together. As postcolonial identity is built through cultural hybridity and negotiation (Anwar and Habeeb 145), the diasporic family becomes an institution of maternal authority that sustains the self's connection to collective history through cultural memory and emotional legacy.

When consistent memory practices focus on texts, images, and rituals, they result in the establishment and consolidation of a canon that becomes relevant for the identity of the community. The contrast between canon and archive has recently contributed to a conceptual clarification that finds its equivalent in the distinction between “cultural working memory” and “cultural reference memory” (Velicu 2).

Conceptual Framework

The relationship between motherhood and identity has occupied a significant place in feminist, cultural, and postcolonial scholarship. Rather than understanding motherhood as a purely biological role, contemporary theorists view it as a cultural practice through which memory, values, and social identities are produced and transmitted. This perspective offers an effective framework for reading Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*, where maternal authority extends beyond domestic responsibility to influence the emotional, cultural, and psychological lives of successive generations.

Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the lived experience of motherhood and motherhood as a social institution shaped by cultural expectations. This distinction is particularly relevant to Lakshmi, whose authority grows not from formal power but from the responsibilities imposed upon her by family, tradition, and circumstance. Her decisions are guided by the need to protect those around her, yet they often create emotional distance within the household. Motherhood in the novel therefore appears as both an intimate relationship and a demanding social responsibility. This duality helps explain why Lakshmi's authority is simultaneously respected, questioned, and resisted by her children.

The novel also invites attention through the lens of cultural memory. Jan Assmann argues that cultural memory preserves a community's values and experiences by transmitting them across generations through stories, rituals, customs, and shared practices. In *The Rice Mother*, memory rarely survives through written history. Instead, it survives in everyday life through family stories, religious observances, food, language, and inherited customs. Lakshmi becomes the principal guardian of these practices. Her authority rests not simply on her position within the family but on her ability to preserve a collective past that might otherwise disappear amid migration and displacement.

Migration further complicates this process of remembering. Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of cultural hybridity suggests that identity is continually negotiated within spaces where different cultures intersect. Lakshmi's family occupies precisely such a space. Their lives unfold between inherited Tamil traditions and the changing realities of colonial and postcolonial Malaya. As they move between these cultural worlds, identity becomes fluid rather than fixed. Yet this transformation doesn't erase the influence of maternal inheritance. Instead, the maternal line provides a continuing point of reference through which each generation attempts to understand its own sense of belonging. Identity therefore remains dynamic, reflecting continual negotiation between inherited traditions and lived experience, a

view that resonates with Basha and Habeeb's discussion of identity as a product of repeated practices and gradual transformation (Basha and Habeeb 56).

Memory in the novel is also deeply tied to trauma, as represented by Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory—the ways that we as members of a subsequent generation also “remember” experiences we did not ourselves participate in, because they echo in inherited narratives, silences, and emotional responses. While Lakshmi alone endured many of the first hardships that set this family on its difficult course, the emotional fallout of these early experiences did not only follow her. Trauma, fear, grief, loss, sacrifice, and strength are passed down through this family like an inheritance. Subsequent generations take on these emotional echoes without even understanding where they come from, a testament to the extent to which one's identity can be built more from inherited memory than one's own lived experience.

Both approaches provide the conceptual framework for this study and allow me to discuss maternal authority not as a monolithic assertion of power, but as an organic cultural mechanism by which history and memory are maintained and identity negotiated against historical pressures. Viewed through this lens, *The Rice Mother* offers a novelistic portrayal of mothering as emotional labour, cultural continuity, and historical inheritance. As such, Lakshmi exerts an influence far beyond her nuclear family; indeed, she provides a nexus through which issues of belonging, identity, and cultural continuity can be explored generationally.

Maternal Authority and Cultural Memory

Within Rani Manicka's novel *The Rice Mother*, maternal authority does not originate as a bestowed right, but rather as a fraught ethical obligation shaped by displacement, sacrifice, and endurance. Lakshmi's maternal authority is hard-won, arising largely from the emotional labour required to hold a family together when it faces constant peril from poverty, loss of place, and violence. Motherhood is neither a sentiment nor an instinct, but a process that maintains memory in the face of historical exigencies, both to care and to make sense of new worlds.

This understanding recalls Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as lived experience and motherhood as a social institution. Rich argues that the institution of motherhood often demands sacrifice and self-effacement from women while simultaneously investing them with moral responsibility (Rich 13). Lakshmi embodies this paradox from the very beginning of the novel. Her mother accepts a prosperous marriage proposal believing it will secure her daughter's future, even though it requires permanent separation. When the young Lakshmi pleads, “Why can't I just marry someone who lives in Sangra?” her mother's silence is answered only by the painful recognition that “a child's love can never equal a mother's pain” (*The Rice Mother* 19). The remark is deceptively simple. It shifts the narrative away from the daughter's immediate grief towards the hidden emotional burden carried by the mother herself. Motherhood therefore appears not as unquestioned authority but as an experience shaped by painful compromise.

Lakshmi carries this inherited understanding of motherhood into her own married life. She enters Malaya expecting “to live like a queen,” only to discover that prosperity was an illusion and that those who arranged her marriage deceived her. Her response, however, is not surrender. Standing before the modest wooden house that is now her home, she resolves to transform disappointment into purpose. Rather than lamenting what has been lost, she opens every window, cleans the neglected rooms, and imagines herself becoming “the lady of the wooden house” (*The Rice Mother* 32). This quiet act of reclaiming domestic space marks the beginning of her maternal authority. It is built not through domination but through the determination to create stability where none exists.

Lakshmi’s authority is sustained through ordinary rituals that preserve cultural continuity across generations. Cooking, storytelling, religious observances, and language are never incidental details in the novel. They become what Jan Assmann identifies as the practices through which cultural memory survives beyond written history. According to Assmann, communities remember through recurring cultural performances that bind the present to the past (Assmann 37). Manicka situates these performances in the household rather than in public institutions. The kitchen, the veranda, and the prayer room become repositories of inherited memory where Tamil traditions are quietly renewed despite geographical displacement. As your earlier draft rightly observes, Lakshmi preserves “traditional Tamil customs and food practices in Malaya” through rituals, language, and storytelling, allowing her children to remain connected to a cultural inheritance that transcends national borders.

Food, in particular, functions as a language of memory. Lakshmi’s childhood memories are inseparable from sensory experience. She remembers being fed by her mother, recalling that she was once “Mother’s only child, her sun, her moon, her stars, her heart,” and that her mother would search the village simply to feed her with her own hands (*The Rice Mother* 14). These memories are far more than nostalgic recollections. They establish caregiving as a form of cultural transmission in which affection, nourishment, and identity become inseparable. Consequently, when Lakshmi later prepares food for her own family under conditions of deprivation, she reproduces not merely recipes but an entire emotional tradition inherited from her mother.

Manicka nevertheless avoids idealising maternal authority. Lakshmi’s resilience gradually hardens into discipline, and discipline occasionally becomes control. Her insistence on preserving tradition often limits her children’s emotional freedom. Sara Ruddick argues that maternal thinking is fundamentally concerned with preservation, growth, and social acceptability (Ruddick 17). Lakshmi certainly preserves and protects, yet those very acts also generate fear, obedience, and emotional distance. Her children inherit not only resilience but also silence, restraint, and the burden of fulfilling expectations shaped by displacement and historical suffering. Maternal authority thus emerges as a deeply paradoxical force. It protects cultural continuity while simultaneously creating the conditions against

which later generations struggle to define themselves.

This sprawling entrenchment keeps Lakshmi central to the novel's emotional texture, long after the specific incidents have faded. Even without explicit verbal or instructive authority, her presence is sustained in stories and practices and rituals, through gestures recalled, in spaces occupied; Manicka re-imagines the function of the maternal not as direct authority but as a lasting, pervasive cultural authority whose influence on identity is less about forceful directives and more about the silent, recurring processes of daily life. In the dislocated space of diaspora, where the homeland cannot be literally reclaimed, the mother becomes the animate, vibrant archive of history and memory and the discourse of belonging.

Inherited Trauma and Identity Formation

If maternal authority preserves cultural continuity in *The Rice Mother*, it also becomes the medium through which trauma is silently transmitted across generations. Manicka suggests that families inherit more than customs, language, and ritual; they also inherit fear, grief, silence, and emotional patterns that continue to shape identity long after the original events have faded into history. Trauma in the novel is therefore neither an isolated psychological wound nor merely a consequence of historical violence. Instead, it becomes an enduring familial inheritance that influences how successive generations perceive themselves, relate to one another, and negotiate belonging. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that memory functions as both a burden and a means of survival, making identity inseparable from experiences that individuals have not always lived through directly.

Lakshmi's earliest trauma begins even before her migration. At fourteen, she is removed from the familiar world of Sangra and sent to Malaya through an arranged marriage built on exaggerated promises of prosperity. Her final conversation with her mother reveals the emotional violence of this separation. When she cries, "How could you bear to send me away?", the narrative immediately responds with the insight that "Life had yet to teach me that a child's love can never equal a mother's pain" (*The Rice Mother* 19). The episode complicates conventional ideas of victimhood. Both mother and daughter suffer, but each experiences loss differently. The mother's sacrifice becomes inseparable from the daughter's displacement, establishing trauma as a shared rather than individual experience.

This inherited dimension of suffering resonates with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which describes how later generations inherit the emotional consequences of events they never directly witnessed. Hirsch argues that descendants often experience inherited memories so intensely that they become part of their own identity (Hirsch 5). Although Lakshmi alone endures forced migration, wartime violence, and domestic hardship, these experiences continue to influence her children through behaviour, silence, and expectation. Trauma is therefore transmitted not through explicit instruction but through everyday relationships, emotional restraint, and recurring patterns of care and discipline.

Trauma is therefore transmitted not through explicit instruction but through everyday relationships, emotional restraint, and recurring patterns of care and discipline, supporting the argument that trauma reshapes both identity and belonging across generations (Habeeb and Sait, “Psychological and Cultural Trauma” 156).

The Japanese occupation intensifies this process by transforming private suffering into collective historical trauma. The violence experienced by Lakshmi leaves physical and psychological scars that cannot easily be expressed through language. Rather than narrating these experiences openly, she increasingly turns to ritual, storytelling, and strict domestic order. Her silence becomes as significant as her speech. As Dominick LaCapra observes, trauma frequently resists direct narration because it remains incompletely processed, returning instead through repetition, memory, and emotional behaviour (LaCapra 21). Lakshmi’s repeated attempts to preserve family stability may therefore be understood not simply as expressions of maternal responsibility but also as strategies for living with unresolved pain.

The effects of this silence become particularly visible in her children. Jeyan, Mohini, Anna, and Lakshman inherit their mother’s resilience, yet they also inherit her emotional burdens. Their relationships frequently reveal hesitation, repression, and uncertainty rather than open communication. As your original manuscript notes, Lakshmi’s storytelling, strictness, and emotional withdrawal become forms through which trauma is unconsciously transmitted to later generations. Jeyan’s emotional repression, Mohini’s vulnerability, and the family’s recurring conflicts all suggest that inherited pain influences identity as profoundly as lived experience. Rather than presenting these characters as passive victims, Manicka illustrates how each struggles differently with a legacy they neither chose nor fully understand.

The novel’s polyphonic narrative structure reinforces this understanding of inherited trauma. Each family member recounts events from a different perspective, revealing that memory is never singular or complete. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the polyphonic novel refuses a single authoritative voice, allowing multiple consciousnesses to coexist without being reduced to one interpretation (Bakhtin 6). Manicka employs precisely such a strategy. Lakshmi’s memories differ from those of her daughters and grandchildren, yet together they construct a collective family history shaped by migration, violence, love, resentment, and endurance. Identity, therefore, emerges through dialogue between generations rather than through a fixed narrative inherited without question.

Dimple’s decision to preserve Lakshmi’s recollections on cassette tapes represents one of the novel’s most significant acts of remembrance. Unlike earlier generations, Dimple recognises that family history cannot survive through memory alone. Recording her grandmother’s voice transforms personal recollection into a cultural archive. Your earlier draft rightly identifies these recordings as evidence that Dimple inherits “her storytelling spirit” and becomes the guardian of family

history. This moment extends beyond nostalgia. It demonstrates an active attempt to rescue fragile memories from disappearance, suggesting that identity requires continual acts of preservation rather than passive inheritance.

At the same time, Manicka refuses to suggest that remembering automatically heals trauma. Memory remains profoundly ambivalent. It protects cultural continuity while repeatedly reopening emotional wounds. This tension recalls Paul Ricoeur's observation that memory is never a simple recovery of the past but an interpretive process shaped by present experience (Ricoeur 57). Each generation therefore remembers Lakshmi differently. Her descendants inherit not only stories but also their own changing interpretations of those stories. Identity becomes an ongoing negotiation between remembrance and reinterpretation rather than the preservation of an unchanging past.

The Rice Mother challenges the assumption that identity is formed solely through personal experience. Manicka demonstrates that individuals also live within emotional histories they have inherited from others. Trauma crosses generational boundaries through silence, affection, discipline, ritual, and memory, shaping lives long after the original events have ended. By locating this inheritance within the maternal line, the novel transforms motherhood into both an archive of suffering and a source of resilience. Lakshmi's legacy, therefore, survives not because her descendants replicate her life, but because they continue to negotiate the emotional world she leaves behind.

Migration, Dislocation, and Maternal Lineage

Migration in *The Rice Mother* is neither a single geographical movement nor merely the backdrop for the family story. Instead, it shapes relationships, memory, and identity throughout the novel. Lakshmi's journey from Ceylon to colonial Malaya begins a process of displacement whose effects extend well beyond her own generation. Crossing national borders disrupts familiar cultural structures, yet it also compels the family to develop new forms of belonging. Manicka therefore presents migration not simply as loss but as an ongoing negotiation between continuity and adaptation. In this process, maternal lineage becomes the primary force enabling cultural survival.

Lakshmi's migration begins not as a voluntary search for opportunity but as an obligation imposed through marriage. At fourteen, she leaves behind the only world she has known because others decide her future. Her immediate response reveals fear and emotional uncertainty as she silently concludes, "I was doomed" (*The Rice Mother* 20). This brief declaration captures the emotional reality of migration even before the physical journey begins. The novel, therefore, frames displacement first as psychological loss rather than geographical relocation. Leaving home requires painfully breaking emotional ties that have shaped personal identity.

Lakshmi's arrival in Malaya quickly dismantles the promises associated with migration. The expected prosperity proves illusory, while marriage offers neither security nor companionship. Instead, she encounters debt, emotional neglect, and

unfamiliar social conditions. Yet Manicka doesn't portray her simply as a victim of displacement. Lakshmi gradually rebuilds her life through persistence, domestic labour, and emotional resilience. The transformation of the neglected house into a functioning home symbolises this adaptation. Home, the novel suggests, isn't inherited through geography but created through repeated acts of care and responsibility.

This understanding reflects Avtar Brah's conception of diaspora as a "homing desire" rather than a simple desire for literal return (Brah 193). Belonging is continually negotiated through memory, family, and cultural practice instead of physical proximity to the homeland. Lakshmi never returns to Ceylon, yet fragments of that world continue to shape her daily life. Tamil remains the language of intimacy, religious rituals organise domestic routines, and culinary traditions preserve connections with the ancestral homeland. These practices don't erase displacement. Instead, they transform memory into a cultural resource that enables survival in an unfamiliar environment.

Manicka also demonstrates that migration affects each generation differently. Lakshmi experiences exile as personal rupture, whereas her children inherit a more complex cultural identity. They are Tamil through ancestry but Malaysian through birth, occupying a position that resists simple definition. As discussed earlier, they grow up with fractured identities, negotiating inherited traditions alongside the realities of colonial and postcolonial Malaya. Their sense of belonging depends less on geographical memory than on stories, rituals, and maternal instruction that keep the imagined homeland alive.

Maternal lineage becomes especially significant within this changing cultural landscape. While migration fragments traditional communities, the maternal line provides continuity across time and place. Lakshmi's daughters inherit family customs as well as the responsibility of passing them forward. Mohini's obedience, Anna's acceptance of family duty, and Dimple's commitment to preserving family history illustrate different responses to this inheritance. Although they question or reinterpret tradition, none abandons it completely. Cultural identity survives because it remains adaptable. As noted earlier, maternal heritage transcends biology, becoming a form of cultural empowerment that extends across generations. Maternal lineage becomes especially significant within this changing cultural landscape because inherited memories and resilience continue to shape later generations, reflecting how indigenous trauma and cultural survival are carried through family narratives (Habeeb and Sait, "Indigenous Trauma" 46).

Dimple's role deserves particular attention because she transforms inherited memory into deliberate cultural preservation. By recording Lakshmi's stories on cassette tapes, she recognises that migration threatens not only places but also voices and everyday histories. These recordings preserve experiences often overlooked by official historical narratives. They also reflect Jooyeon Rhee's observation that migrant women carry memory through "maternal practices and

rituals,” reshaping both their children’s identities and their own sense of belonging (Rhee 4). Storytelling itself becomes a form of cultural inheritance, allowing later generations to remain connected to histories that migration has fragmented.

Migration also reshapes the meaning of home. Rather than being tied to a fixed location, home becomes an emotional and cultural space sustained through relationships. “Place is a recurring theme in how social and cultural geographers address the topic of migration and mobilities” (Brown and Gilmartin 1168). The family veranda repeatedly functions as a place where memories are shared, departures marked, and generational continuity reaffirmed. As noted earlier, it serves as “a metaphorical bridge between past and present,” connecting family members across changing historical circumstances. Such domestic spaces preserve communal identity even when the wider political world remains unstable.

At the same time, Manicka avoids romanticising diasporic life. Migration brings opportunity but also loneliness, cultural misunderstanding, and generational conflict. Younger family members negotiate competing expectations shaped by education, modernity, and changing gender roles. Their identities emerge through a continuing dialogue between inherited obligations and personal aspirations. This recalls Homi K. Bhabha’s argument that cultural identity develops within an “in-between” space where traditions are neither fully preserved nor completely abandoned (Bhabha 56). Their identities emerge through a continuing dialogue between inherited obligations and personal aspirations, illustrating that identity is relational and continually negotiated through wider human and material environments (Mohamed 63).

The Rice Mother suggests that migration does not erase cultural identity but transforms it. Maternal lineage becomes the thread that connects dispersed histories, ensuring that memory survives despite geographical separation and historical upheaval. Lakshmi’s descendants inherit not a fixed tradition but a living cultural legacy that each generation must reinterpret. By situating this process in the maternal line, Manicka shows that diaspora is sustained through the everyday work of remembering, adapting, and belonging.

Conclusion

Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother* has convincingly argued that maternal authority extends far beyond what society usually understands as the duties of motherhood. Through Lakshmi’s life, the novelist has reconsidered motherhood as a cultural practice that preserves memory and shapes identity while ensuring family continuity in an ever-changing world repeatedly disrupted by war, history, and displacement through migration. Far from presenting an absolute or uncomplicated authority, her authority derives from sacrifice, resilience, emotional work, and the challenging of difficult choices shaped by particular historical situations. This work allows Manicka to move away from idealised pictures of motherhood and re-evaluate maternal authority not only as protective but also as disciplining, nurturing, and sometimes restrained.

Cultural memory clearly plays a dominant role in this identity-forming process. It is Lakshmi, through her own narration of tales, religious rituals, language, prayers, cooking habits, and domestic duties, who maintains this connection that generations of her family will continue to inherit as long as they continue to re-enact these social actions. (Assmann 37) Lakshmi's life acts as a living archive, continually creating, transmitting, conserving, and transforming cultural memory for future generations, even when they are far removed from the specific place and time in which she lives. As Jan Assmann writes: "The memory is maintained by constant performance, not solely by recording." (37) Through the simple domesticity of her kitchen, Lakshmi's life has been preserved by the performance of memory, not merely by written documents

Migration further shapes this process by creating different perceptions of place and identity, in which home becomes a place that can never be simply "returned to". "Migration and dislocation are associated with a sense of ruptured identity and an unfulfilled desire to reconnect with lost culture, with a focus on traditional practices as a way of reconnecting with their roots" (Khan and Sahoo 157). Yet, for Manicka, diasporic life does not create a narrative of loss; instead, it provides a site where cultural identity can continue to be reimagined. Lakshmi's descendants continue to preserve and reinterpret their cultural heritage in ways that reflect the specific conditions of their times, and Manicka clearly highlights the maternal line as an enduring factor in this diasporic continuation.

It illustrates that identity becomes performed in these diverse ways. *The Rice Mother* adds to the body of diasporic and feminist literary work by drawing attention to motherhood not as a solitary personal experience but rather a cultural and historical force in shaping collective identities. By foregrounding domestic and women's lives, Manicka demonstrates how it is these simple acts of kitchen work, veranda chatter, the remembering of stories, the enacting of family rituals and the continued loving endurance of a mother which can preserve and give life to cultural memories of diasporic experience as surely as history in official form can record it. Her identity may not be a direct, received inheritance; rather, she becomes an archive for continuing family, cultural, and diasporic memory for future generations.

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