



Book Review

Unraveling the Threads of Grief, Love, and Womanhood: A Feminist Reading of *Thorns in My Quilt: Letters from a Daughter to Her Father* by Mohua Chinappa (Rupa Publications, 2024)

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18405347](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18405347)

Introduction

In *Thorns in My Quilt*, Mohua Chinappa writes to her late father in letters that ache with memory, tenderness, and defiance. What begins as a private act of mourning becomes something larger, a meditation on how women are taught to grieve, to love, and to remain silent within the boundaries of family. Beneath its intimate tone, the book carries a distinctly feminist pulse. It asks what it means for women to speak when speech itself has been shaped by patriarchy, and how memory is often dismissed as sentimental or domestic, but it can be a radical act of resistance. The choice of the letter form feels deliberate and deeply political. By writing to her father, Mohua joins a lineage of South Asian women like Ismat Chughtai and Kamala Das, who turned confession into rebellion. The letter allows her to be contradictory, tender yet angry, vulnerable yet unyielding. In that space between love and resentment, she exposes the raw negotiations that define women's emotional lives.

To Father, from a Daughter

The father in *Thorns in My Quilt* is a familiar figure to many South Asian daughters, loving yet unreachable, protective yet bound by silence. Mohua Chinappa remembers him in fragments: the smell of butter cookies baked with vanilla essence, the feeling of his hand steadyng hers as they walked through Shillong's rain-soaked streets. These are tender memories, but they sit beside moments of absence, his quiet withdrawal when her marriage broke, his inability to stand by her when she most needed him. That contradiction of warmth and distance coexisting is precisely what gives Mohua's narrative its power. Feminist scholar Uma Chakravarti once described patriarchy not simply as male domination, but as a system that entwines affection with control. Mohua seems to write from inside that knot. Her father is not a villain, nor a saint; he is both comfort and constraint. In choosing to portray him this way, she refuses the cultural impulse to idealize fathers or demonize them. Instead, she holds space for the uneasy truth that love can wound and nurture in the same breath.

Feminist Concerns

The ache of the absent parent hovers quietly through Mohua's letters. When her parents withdraw during her marital breakdown, their silence becomes a wound that never quite closes. For countless South Asian women, that moment feels painfully familiar with the realization that love in our families often comes with conditions, and that our grief must remain private so that family honour stays intact. There's something quietly radical about putting that silence into words. Each letter becomes an act of reclamation: of grief, of voice, of the right to speak even when no one is listening.

This tension is at the heart of the book's feminist inquiry. Mohua doesn't present her suffering as universal. She roots it in the middle-class world she knows, one where women are taught to keep up appearances, to protect the family's reputation even as their own hearts crumble. Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty has warned against flattening women's pain into a single story, and Mohua's writing embodies that awareness. Her experience is not



every woman's but it resonates with those who have lived the quiet discipline of endurance.

One of the book's most striking qualities is how it gives weight to memory not as nostalgia, but as testimony. The smell of Shillong's rain, the glow of the government bungalow in Delhi, the lingering taste of cookies are not sentimental details. They are political. They insist that what women remember matters. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, the voices of the marginalized are often silenced not by overt oppression but by being dismissed as trivial. Mohua turns those trivial moments into a feminist archive, showing how patriarchy seeps into the ordinary in the pauses, the unspoken, the everyday neglect.

In claiming the right to write for herself, not to comfort, not to explain, Mohua echoes Kamala Das, whose *My Story* dared to put female desire and disappointment on the page without apology. Mohua's voice trembles at times, but it never retreats. It reminds us that confession, for women, has always been a form of resistance.

Mohua Chinappa's Narrative

At the heart of Mohua Chinappa's letters lies guilt, old inheritance women are taught to carry like a second skin. It seeps into her words as she wonders whether she has spoken too much, or not enough; whether her voice itself is a betrayal. Feminist thinkers like Nivedita Menon have written about this conditioning: *How women are trained to protect relationships even at the cost of their own truth*. Mohua's letters expose that inner struggle with startling honesty. She is both daughter and dissenter, writing through the impossible question: *How do you love your father and still speak against the silence he represents?* What makes her narrative powerful is not resolution, but refusal. She doesn't attempt to tidy her pain or offer easy forgiveness. The letters end without closure and that, too, feels radical. In a culture that prizes reconciliation and harmony, Mohua chooses complexity. She allows grief to remain jagged, love to stay imperfect, and memory to resist tidy endings. That artistic choice places *Thorns in My Quilt* squarely within the tradition of South Asian feminist writing that values process over purity, conversation over cure.

Conclusion

By the end of the book, what lingers is not just sorrow, but a quiet insistence that women's inner worlds deserve to be witnessed. Mohua invites her readers, especially women, to stop apologizing for their contradictions, to speak even when their voices tremble. Her letters remind us that liberation often begins in the smallest, most private acts: in writing, remembering, refusing to forget.

Book Details

Book Title	:	<i>Thorns in My Quilt: Letters from a Daughter to Her Father</i>
Author	:	Mohua Chinappa
Publisher	:	Rupa Publications, India.
Published	:	5 December 2024
Theme	:	Epistolary, Autobiography, Feminism, Chaos, Tragedy.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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