

Am I turning into my mother?

ZARA ZUBAYER

My mother used to ruin most of my school events by drawing eyeliner under my eyes. In every childhood photo taken on her digital camera, you'd see a little girl with dramatic kohl-stained tear cheeks, wrapped in one of her sarees, which she had tailored to my size. At 20 years of age, I wear my eyeliner dark and bold, something my angsty younger self would probably never have predicted. I obsess over every little detail of my life and get overly emotional over World War II films. More shockingly, I find myself saying, "that's too sweet" on the first bite of a dessert. Eventually, in moments of eerie silence, the realisation comes quite dauntingly that I'm turning into my mother.

The paradox of turning into the very woman you spent your teenage years resisting can be quite an unsettling feeling, one you can't easily make peace with. The epitome of teen angst is the arguments over clothes, slammed doors, and dramatic meltdowns. Much of adolescence becomes a tug-of-war between who we think we are and who our mothers expect us to be. Rebellion becomes instinctive, whether in style, opinions, or emotions. And then, somewhere in your late teens, you suddenly find yourself voluntarily mirroring her habits; getting anxious

over the most trivial matters, consuming bottomless cups of tea as a magical fix to all your problems, and, in my case, inheriting her fear of fast-moving buses on Dhaka's main roads.

As you grow older, the lens through which you saw her slowly begins to shift. The tables turn, and suddenly you feel anxious when she is outside and not picking up your calls. You're the one reminding her to take her medication and watch her health. You begin to understand that you haven't just adopted her habits, you have inherited her nervous system. Many of us carry our mother's anger, the sharpness of her irritation, or her ability to leave a room thunderstruck by rage. Others call their mothers "overbearing", only to realise they've developed the same perfectionistic urge to control every detail. And some of us receive the best

parts: her empathy, her endurance, and her capacity to love.

The complexity of it becomes more visible over time. Her work ethic is revealed through your inability to rest until the task at hand is completed. The way you enter a room and immediately read the emotional temperature might be an echo of her compassion and selflessness. It's not just quirks, but her characteristics that your younger self probably ridiculed at some point. I used to wonder why my mother refused to sit down before everyone had eaten until the first time I cooked for a group of people. Between analysing whose plate needs a refilling and whether there'll be enough for everyone, my appetite became secondary, like hers.

Of course, the transformation isn't comforting for everyone. Many people have rather complicated relationships

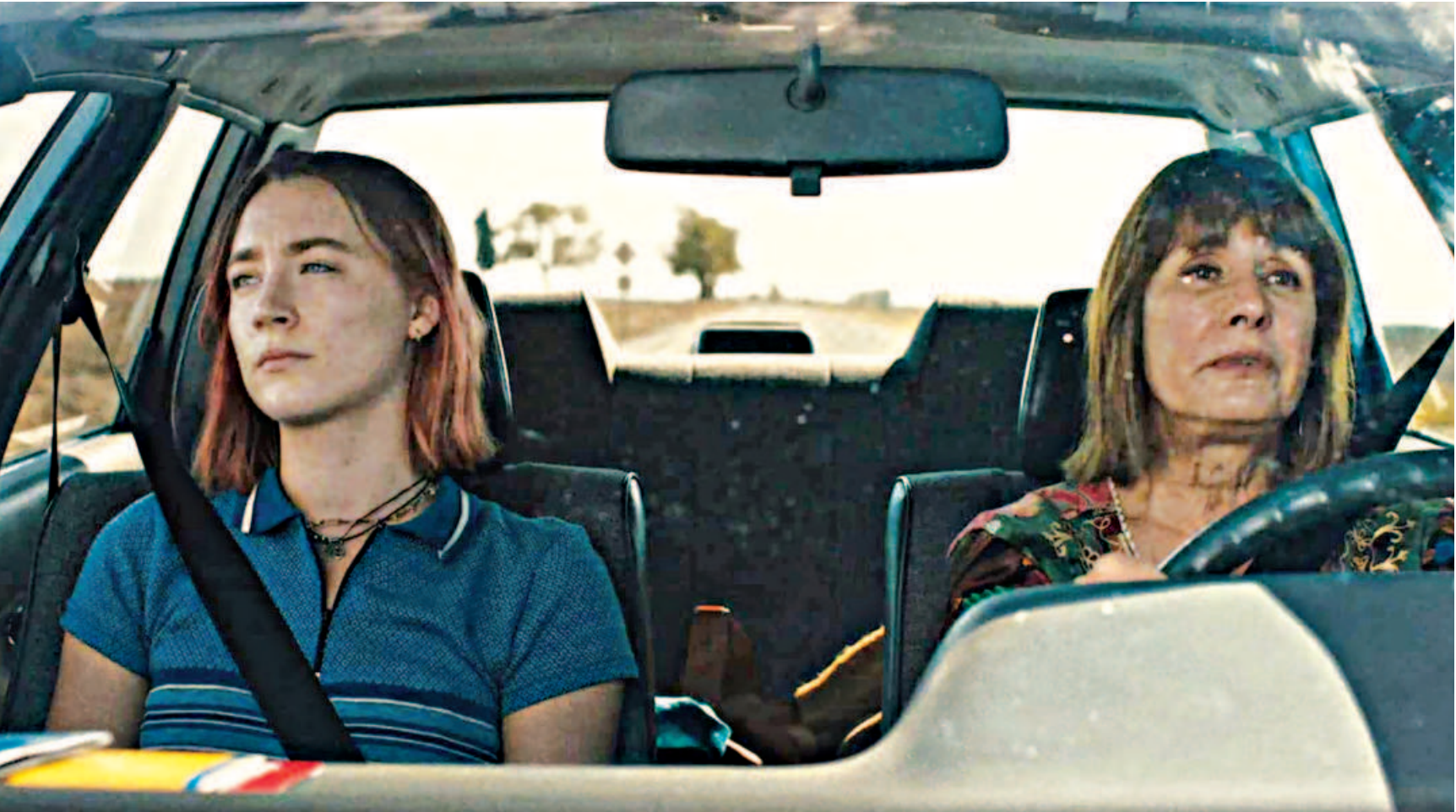
with their mothers, which can evoke a sense of discomfort when they see someone with a conventional, healthy dynamic. You're not used to letting your guard down around her, let alone finding similarities that you were adamant to accept. And when you do see the parallels, it's hard to name the emotions that you never learned how to describe or share, only feel. I've seen the women in my life express different forms of maternal warmth, and it's fascinating to see how their own histories shape their instinct to nurture.

There is also the idea of epigenetics, that some emotional responses are shaped by the experiences of the women before us. Our personalities are not entirely shaped by our mothers, but there are certain emotions that often feel like they've lived in us long before we could name them. It becomes a concept of generational pattern,

something epigenetics explores for those interested in the science behind our emotional inheritance.

Despite the dynamic we have with our mothers, these suddenly evoked feelings of becoming her make you see her through a lens of identity, not duty. The first person I ever critiqued was her, holding her accountable for her words, choices, and actions. Little by little, through smudged eyeliner and the sarees borrowed from her, my scrutiny turned into understanding. Becoming even a fraction of her made me realise that resemblance doesn't have to be a warning, but it can be its own subtle form of reconciliation.

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Looking into the ethos of self-help books

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Walk into any bookshop, and you'll encounter the same promise repeated in different fonts: your life can be optimised, streamlined, or upgraded. All it takes is the right book. Titles like *Atomic Habits*, *Rich Dad Poor Dad*, *Ikigai*, *Steal Like an Artist*, or *Surrounded by Idiots* assure us that fulfilment, wealth, creativity, or clarity are just a framework away.

Life is messy, contradictory, and often unfair. Self-help books offer order, breaking down living into systems, habits, and rules. In a world that feels overwhelming, this reduction can bring a sense of relief. However, in these books, complexity is flattened, structural realities are obscured, and human experience is reduced to tidy formulas. Much of what passes for insight is common sense: get more sleep, move your body, set boundaries, focus on what you can control, and be kinder to yourself.

To stretch these truisms into 300 pages, they are padded with rebranded concepts, anecdotes, and motivational fluff. Habits are not formed in a vacuum; they are shaped by class, disability, trauma, culture, and chance. Yet many self-help texts speak as if everyone starts from the same baseline and has the same margin for error. When success is framed as the inevitable outcome of the "right" mindset or routine, failure becomes a personal moral flaw.

If the system didn't work, you likely followed it incorrectly.

This reflects something broader about our cultural shift. Self-help literature is the perfect product for late capitalism. Feeling anxious? That's a personal failing requiring better habits, not a reasonable response to economic precarity, the climate crisis, or social fragmentation. Can't find purpose? Buy a book about Japanese philosophy; don't question whether your job is meaningless or your community has dissolved. The genre takes problems that might demand collective action or structural change and redirects them inward, toward personal responsibility and self-management.

We live in a fast, individualised, solution-orientated world, where problems are expected to be fixable. Self-help literature mirrors this logic of productivity culture, treating the self as a project to be optimised and measured. You are encouraged to audit your time, your thoughts, your relationships, and your emotions.

This is not to say self-help is useless or malicious by default. Many readers genuinely find comfort, motivation, or a sense of agency in these books. For someone emerging from chaos, a checklist can be a lifeline, offering structure and stability. The problem arises when these tools are mistaken for universal truths, or when personal optimisation is treated as a substitute for social change.

So how might we engage more healthily with self-help literature? First, recognise it for what it is: not an instruction manual for living. Extract

what resonates, discard what doesn't, and don't let any author convince you they've decoded human existence. It also helps to read laterally. Pair self-help with other forms of reading: history, sociology, fiction, philosophy – literature that explores ambiguity, provides context, and sits with difficult questions rather than rushing to answers.

Most importantly, resist the idea that a good life can be fully systematised. Human beings are inconsistent, relational, and embedded in worlds they did not choose. You cannot checklist your way out of grief, audit yourself into authentic relationships, or optimise your path to meaning. These books sell the fantasy that life's complexities can be solved through individual willpower and the right mental models, as if we're all just poorly programmed machines awaiting the correct software update. But sometimes, wisdom lies in sitting with ambiguity, sharing burdens, and accepting that being human is not a productivity problem to be solved.

Perhaps the most honest self-help book would be one that admits life is complicated, change is hard, there are no universal answers, and that's okay. It would be a short book. It probably wouldn't sell.

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Winter and understanding seasonal DEPRESSION

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It starts with a strange feeling you can't quite put a finger on. You may notice that the greyish weather happens to coincide with your mood, and you feel almost like the sunless sky. Colours look muted, favourite food items don't taste as good, and beloved songs don't make you hum in the shower. Everything feels off in a way you can't really describe or shake off.

Initially, you may chalk it up to stress or the gloominess of the days. Slowly, feeling off manifests into feeling bad and eventually into feeling worse. No matter how you feel, you can't seem to gather the energy to recover. If you're someone who's been through it before, you recognise signs of another episode of seasonal depression.

Seasonal depression, clinically referred to as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), isn't just an emotional reaction to gloomy weather; it's a type of depressive disorder with a distinct seasonal pattern, often beginning in late autumn or winter and remitting in spring or summer.

Seasonal depression is often mistaken for something mild or temporary like winter blues, but it doesn't simply resolve itself with time, unlike short-lived emotional downs. The cold of winter, paired with dark mornings and early nights, can make every day feel the same.

Over time, this can lead to dissociation, where you feel detached from yourself or the world. It's not because you want to escape, but because your mind is overwhelmed by the monotony.

Winter is frequently glamoured, perceived as peaceful, and more pleasing than summer with soft mornings, quiet streets, and cosy routines. But winter is selective because it's more enjoyable for people who can tolerate shorter days without severe emotional cost. When winter is treated as universally gentle, it leaves no space for people fighting an internal, psychological struggle.

Reduced daylight during winter is

strongly associated with SAD. Shorter days send weaker signals to the brain's biological clock, an area in the hypothalamus, which helps regulate circadian rhythms. This leads to symptoms of SAD, such as fatigue, hypersomnia, low energy, etc.

Research has found that the rate of serotonin turnover in the brain tends to be lower in winter. Serotonin is a key chemical involved in mood regulation. Serotonin activity and the efficiency of its transport affect emotional stability. Meanwhile, melatonin, the hormone linked with the sleep-wake cycle, is naturally released in response to darkness. Some individuals show prolonged melatonin rhythms during winter, which may contribute to increased sleepiness and disrupted sleep patterns experienced in SAD.

These biological changes aren't experienced equally by everyone. People already prone to mood disorders such as depression or anxiety, or those with genetic predispositions, are more sensitive to seasonal influences. For them, winter actively interferes with how the brain processes emotion.

What looks like laziness from the outside is often a nervous system struggling to function.

You might assume that you'll feel better after winter. But for many, that isn't the case. Seasonal episodes can linger when months of emotional exhaustion have taken their toll. Some people are left rebuilding motivation after spending entire months on autopilot trying to get through each day.

This is why winter may not be enjoyable for everyone. Framing winter as universally welcoming ignores the reality of those whose mental health deteriorates during the season. Seasonal depression is not a mindset problem and can't be cured by sunshine alone. The cold is cosy to many, and for others, it's a battle to endure.

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