

Of Motherhood and Marginality: Mapping the representation of Motherhood through select Cinematic and Literary narratives

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Abstract

Hindi Cinema prides itself on devoted mother figures whose lives are centered on the idea of motherhood. From the very famous, “Mere Karan-Arjun kab aayenge”¹ to “Mere paas Maa hai”², Indian Cinema has been witness to an idealistic image of motherhood. The symbolic, mythical mother represented in literature and cinema is very different from the real mothers out there whose voices and images one can finally spot in the recent cinematic and literary portrayals. Within the corpus of feminist criticism, motherhood has always been seen with ambiguity; liberating yet oppressive. The questions which I thus, intend to explore in the paper are largely concerned with the representation of the marginalized vis a vis the maternal discourse.

Keywords: Cinema, Literature, Motherhood, Hindi Cinema

The idea of motherhood in most cultures is premised on a set of extremes; a committed; self-sacrificing mother versus an evil, inhumane stepmother. There is a third kind which is a ‘barren’ woman; a non-mother. When one is not a mother; one is a non-mother. Motherhood still remains the reference point; in case of a ‘barren’ woman, the negation takes the center-stage. The same is not the case with men; there are hardly any references to a ‘non-father’ in any language, as Adrienne Rich points out in her book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.

In the Indian context, the film *Mother India*(1957) interestingly juxtaposes the idea of

¹ In a scene from the 1995 Bollywood film, Karan Arjun ; the mother is seen to be constantly asking-“When will my Karan-Arjun come?”

² This is an iconic dialogue from the 1975 film Deewar, where the actor Shashi Kapoor in a heated argument with Amitabh Bachhan, proudly affirms-“ I have my mother with me.”

motherhood and homeland; the rhetoric used in the freedom movements in the pre-independence period. The mother in the film is shown as a deft, sturdy woman who dedicates her life to nurturing her sons. The use of symbolism is noteworthy; almost every reference to motherhood has a parallel reference to *matra-bhumi*³; the site of nurture and growth. The symbolic image of the mother harvesting the land with a plough tied to her back connotes her commitment and strength as a provider; in tune with the mother earth. The mother is visibly quiet in the family discussions and is the last one to eat after everyone has finished off their meals. In one scene, she is just left with a meager portion when the children demand for another serving and she is seen to be feeding the children out of her own share. The landscape of motherhood is smeared with sacrifices. She is loving and giving; but can also be violent and destructive. The last scene where the mother kills her son to supposedly protect the honor of women in the community is an echoing of the earlier scene where the earth is flooded; enraged and ruinous; threatening to consume all. Mother in the film is neither a person; nor a type; she is an idea; representing benevolence and hardness in the face of turmoil. Motherhood is righteousness; someone who is always more humane and morally upright.

In one of her diary entries, Adrienne Rich writes,-“Perhaps one is a monster- an anti-woman- something driven and without recourse to the normal and appealing consolations of love, motherhood, joy in others...”(Rich,22). She talks about the *performative* aspects of femininity; of which motherhood is one crucial aspect. It is imperative to mention that motherhood for most women is about performing a ‘gender role’. On the other hand, we have also been fed on tales of women like Medea who ‘devours’ her own children to punish her husband. Medea is the equivalent of a monstrous woman; a mother who behaves in the most un-motherly way possible. Rich quotes the writer Slater who explains how in the fifth century Greece, the fear of the maternal was persistent which can be seen in mythical figures like Rhea, Medea and Clytemnestra. (Rich, 122)

Motherhood is often viewed as a static state; governed by the codes of self-sacrifice and devotion. Once a mother; always a mother is an oft-quoted assumption. Motherhood is believed

³ Motherland

to bring about an absolute effacement of all other facets of a woman's persona. When it comes to motherhood; the idea of labor is always seen as an extension of her duties as a woman. This idea becomes normalized to such an extent that largely, the chores related to a child's upbringing are handled by the mother in most patriarchal cultures. The mother often vents her angst and suppressed emotions by taking it out on the children. The only way she feels 'in control' of her life is through her equation with her children.

The last few years have signaled a defining shift in the way we understand Motherhood. Especially in the regional cinema mainly Malayalam; one begins to see the changing tones of maternity. A film like *Sara's* (2021) helmed by the brilliant Anna Ben is a necessary step to initiate discussions on the ambitions of a modern Indian woman who is caught between the real and the ideal. The film revolves around a young, ambitious woman who has no dreams of becoming a mother and prioritizes her career over fitting in the gender fabric. In a patriarchal society; motherhood is revered and is seen as a necessity for a woman. There is no alternative to being a mother. In the changing times; where a woman has moved beyond the four halls of the house and ventured into the public territory; what does it mean to be a working mother whose role as a mother is not primary but is merely one of the many roles she performs? There are new ideas concerning motherhood in cinema which reflects the changing priorities of women in today's world. In films like *Good Newzz* (2019) and *Mimi* (2021); one looks at the transforming scenario where adoption, surrogacy and IVF procedures are being discussed comfortably.

In 2001, Shyam Benegal directed *Zubeidaa* where one witnessed the titular character Zubeidaa prioritizing her second marriage over motherhood. She is offered to make a choice between her son and the man she desires; Zubeidaa chooses the latter; thus redefining the image of a mother in the Indian cinema. One sees her pining for her child; but she is also more than a mother. Even the most mainstream films in *Bollywood* with highly unrealistic characters have offered us glimpses of mothers voicing their concerns. In Karan Johar's *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) ; we see a mother dying due to complications during her pregnancy. The film romanticizes her death and celebrates her generous acts of leaving behind a legacy of love, friendship couched in self-sacrifice in the form of some hand-written letters. A mother is

supposed to be the carrier of culture, knowledge and conduct. She has to serve and constantly ‘perform’ the act of mothering.

One crucial dimension of the process of motherhood is that it involves physicality of a woman. It is an extremely tangible process, where the body gets impacted irreversibly. A father has no such bodily experience when it comes to giving birth to a child. In one scene in the film *Good Newzz (2019)*, Kareena has an emotional outburst, explaining how women have to undergo multiple levels of physical transformation in pregnancy. From losing hair to mood swings; loss of appetite to gaining weight; the body goes through so much. The emphasis on the body results in the taboos/restrictions/shaming in relation to mothering. The onus on the body leads to very diverse experiential domains of a father and a mother. This crucial divider makes way for an entirely different engagement of a child with both parents. Unlike a mother, the father is hardly involved in the early learning/socializing phase of a child. In Ambai’s story *Yellow Fish*, one gets an insight into the mind space of a woman who has lost her child. The grief is bottled up since she cannot communicate her suffering with the husband. The mouth of the yellow fish reminds her of her daughter. Ambai weaves the narrative beautifully using powerful metaphors and fluid expression; couched in the experiences of femininity and motherhood. The aesthetics of Ambai’s text is premised on the search for a woman’s vocabulary.

From breastfeeding to nursing; a mother’s language is the first vocabulary a child gets accustomed to. In a way; a mother’s role is indispensable for a child. In the absence of the mother; a foster-mother would take on the same role. In one scene in the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi(2022)* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali; while admitting the children of the community to the local school, Gangubai is asked to mention the father’s name; to which she pointedly retorts,- “Maa ka naam kaafi nahi hai kya?” meaning,-“Is mother’s name not enough?” The name and identity of a child is validated through the father’s name. A mother’s name is secondary to a child’s existence.

Patriarchy celebrates mothers and condemns non-mothers. However, the patriarchal system also controls women’s reproductive rights including the right to abortion. A woman is shamed and dismissed as impure when she is menstruating or pregnant. In the Indian context, the

mother is considered untouchable for few days after delivery. “The ritual purification of women after childbirth is found among Jews, Christians, and Arabs, and from the Caucasus to southern Africa.” (Rich, 163)

Accounts of childbirth and pain associated with it can be found in multiple literary and cinematic representations. Adrienne Rich talks about the paucity and inaccuracy of such narratives due to men’s unfamiliarity with the processes of labor. Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of the classic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, died of childbirth. On her death Rev. Richard Polwhele had remarked that, “she had died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they were peculiarly liable.” (Rich, 168)

In the last few years, accounts of women challenging the romantic representation of pregnancy have been unearthed by feminist critics. The text *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari Debi is interesting for underlining a different outlook on motherhood. At one point in the text, Debi talks of motherhood as an exhausting task; sickened by the intermittent births of her children. Nowhere in the text, do we see a trace of glorification accorded to the idea of mothering. Debi instead, in a very subtle way deflates the grandeur associated with motherhood; focusing instead on the everyday challenges that a mother with many children has to face in a patriarchal setup. “My first child was born when I was eighteen and the last when I was forty-one. God only knows what I had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either.” (Debi,126)

Over the years, we have seen changing connotations of motherhood and the recent short film *Geeli Puchhii*(2021) by Neeraj Ghaywan in the anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans* is a case in point. Here, one notices the intersection of gender and caste along with sexuality to gain new perspectives on maternity. The two women in the film Bharati Mandal and Priya Sharma are similar in terms of their gender and sexual identities but are still divided along the lines of caste. As the plot develops, we see a glaring dissimilarity between them owing to their social positions. Both women are victims of patriarchy but it works differently for them. Priya being a Brahmin middle-class woman has to follow certain codes of propriety and femininity while Bharati who is

a Dalit is placed outside that structure. For an upper caste middle-class woman, also called a *Bhadralok mahila*⁴; there is a constant attempt to conduct herself in opposition to the working-class or lower caste woman. Motherhood is celebrated and expected of a dutiful *Bhadralok mahila* which can sometimes be restrictive for her due to the non-availability of choice. In the film, Priya does not want to be a mother since she is a queer woman who feels unable to love her husband. There is a point in the film where the budding relationship between the two queer women comes to a halt when Bharti comes out in relation to her caste identity. Priya instantly leaves her hand; suggesting the rupture of the intimacy that the two share. The act is also a consequence of her age-old conditioning about the impurity of the ‘Untouchables’ as well as a stimuli for the reminders that are constantly fed to her about preserving the ‘sanctity’ of the family. This act of ‘Other-ing’ meets a full-fledged development in the consequent scene where Priya’s birthday cake is being cut inside the boss’s cabin. Priya asks Bharti to wait outside despite her much-evident affection for the latter. The scene is remarkable for the multitude of meanings that it leaves behind. It is after this pivotal moment that Bharti decides to take things in her hands. She becomes more acutely aware of the divide that is between her and Priya; and eventually uses the same tool to turn the tables in her favor. Bharati convinces Priya of the benefits of motherhood; aiding her in the process by providing her own room to Priya and her husband to freely engage in sexual intercourse and offering to be her replacement in the workplace. In the meanwhile, Bharti manages to venture into the ‘forbidden’ space; using the vocabulary of the *Bhadralok* culture. She speaks the language of motherhood and femininity; backing it with her family and caste identity of midwifery. At one point, Bharati narrates her ordeals of losing a child and in turn; being divorced by the husband. Both women are restricted by motherhood in some or the other way; however it is the *Bhadralok mahila* whose life remains tied to motherhood. The film brilliantly projects the gender spectrum concerning sexuality, family, motherhood and further connects it to other identity markers of caste and class.

Ismat Chughtai’s story *Touch-Me-Not* in a similar vein touches upon the problems faced by a middle-class Muslim woman during her intermittent pregnancies. The idea of childbirth is her only resort to validate her existence and secure her position in the family. Chughtai being

⁴ Middle-class woman

extremely observant of and sensitive towards the gender imbalance in the society writes with absolute awareness of the condition of women in a patriarchal society. Bhabhijan hasn't been able to deliver a child; which is gradually bogging her down. The threat of losing her position in the family looms large over her. "Lying in her bed, Bhabhijan seemed to hear the shehnai of Bhaijan's second marriage...She knew that another miscarriage would be her husband's ticket to a second marriage." (Chughtai, 214) When she is finally pregnant, her husband starts losing interest in her. The story uses humor and sarcasm to address the deep-rooted gender biases in the society. The idea of the family being obsessed with the progeny is mocked at. Bhabhijan who was able to exert some kind of power over the husband in lieu of her beauty and charms, starts dreading the loss of it which is her only claim to security. This power according to Mary Wollstonecraft is illegitimate and only guarantees momentary certainty. Wollstonecraft in her essay *Vindication of the Rights of woman* blames women for being concerned only about the body and not the mind. Bhabhijan witnesses a woman delivering a child inside the compartment of a train and gets so petrified of it that she has a miscarriage again. Apart from hinting at the bhadralok family's obsession with the offspring; the story also captures the varied experiences related to motherhood by bringing in the class factor. A peasant woman's experience of motherhood is starkly contrasted with that of Bhabhijan, who is a middle-class woman. The peasant woman gives birth in a train; without having to worry about propriety and decorum. Both women lie on either ends of the spectrum; divided by class but united in their sufferings.

In relation to motherhood and women; the subject of prostitutes and sex-workers is an engaging one since it brings to mind women who lie on the margins of the society and are positioned outside the familial structure. These women are seen to be the antithesis of motherhood; they are everything that a mother is not. Unlike a mother; a prostitute is related to profanity, decadence and crudeness. The recent *Gangubai Kathiawadi* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali attempts to generate a new discourse on motherhood and the related aspects. There are numerous scenes where the sex-workers in Kamathipura are shown to be dealing with the bleak possibilities of motherhood. In this world, where women are hiding their young girls for the fear of their exploitation; Gangu emerges as the matriarch; taking over the responsibility of the entire brothel and proudly declaring herself as the mother of all the young kids in the area. Another

recent film *Darlingss*, featuring Shefali Shah and Alia Bhatt has a very interesting take on the subject. Shefali is an offbeat mother; who is more of a friend than a guardian; she is protective; fierce and giving; but is also independent, self-sufficient and edgy. At one point in the film, she suggests her daughter to do away with the husband by poisoning him. She has no tolerance for violence and male chauvinism. There is a scene in the film where the supposed lover of the daughter confesses that he finds the mother desirable. The scene ends with the two kissing and establishing their love. One would hardly find such a scene in the Hindi cinema; daring to celebrate and own a mother's sexuality and desires. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* famously said that a woman who writes thinks back through the mother. The implication is that for women, mothers serve as important reference points; on how to conduct themselves in a male-dominated society. Mothers are seen as carriers of tradition and hence the idealistic portrayal of mothers is an attempt to propagate and strengthen gendered performances. In *Darlingss*, the mother is herself a victim of domestic violence and her experience is a crucial reminder of how the daughter should not behave. One can notice a larger shift in the portrayal of mothers as 'grey' characters rather than black or white in Indian cinema.

The idea of motherhood is interesting in the Indian context for its paradoxical connotations. The romanticizing of motherhood is juxtaposed with the absence of a support system for mothers. One notices the presence of myths, symbols, ideas related to the sacredness of motherhood which are transmitted through cultural practices to posit the greatness of mothers and mothering. The irony lies in the fact that these traditions and practices hardly result in anything substantial to address the issues related to mother's rights. On top of that, the privileges of motherhood are only available to women who tick all the required boxes guaranteed by patriarchy, for instance, mothering a male child, legitimate motherhood, shaming elderly mothers, non-acceptance of differently-abled children etc. Mothering a girl-child is not celebrated; instead it is synonymous with a burden that a parent has to redeem oneself of through her marriage. Once the daughter becomes a mother; that too of a male child, the purpose is served. This loop continues; perpetuating the gender stereotypes further. In a recent film, *Jayeshbhai Zordaar (2022)*, the discussion is about the preference given to a male child and the cycle of violence that accompanies this relentless desire for a progeny. This desire often turns

violent which can be seen in the numberless cases of female infanticide. One also needs to consider the dilemmas a woman faces in mothering a male child. For the sons, there are hardly any references or ideas related to non-patriarchal masculinity.

A child born out of wedlock or as a result of inter-caste or community marriage is vehemently shunned. Codes of conduct in relation to marital alliances are put in place by the community which functions in association with the gender norms to ensure the continuity and sacredness of the caste/social group. One understands how caste and gender norms work in tandem to keep the social structure in place. Thus, sexuality is strictly controlled by the authoritative structure of the *samaj*.⁵ The control is firmly placed on women; making the idea of sexual control for men redundant and invalid. For the female transgressor; the threat is secured through the channel of gossip and rumors which in turn seeks to disrupt the kinship network of the entire family. Ranajit Guha's *Chandra's Death* provides a nuanced analysis of a woman's sexuality and its surveillance in the context of rural Bengal. "Female sexuality was so relentlessly and comprehensively subject to surveillance that the only relief a woman could have from the combined rigor of a loveless marriage and domestic drudgery lay in subterfuge and secrecy."(Guha,50)

Motherhood when seen within the feminist canon has produced diverse reactions from critics and scholars. It remains a complex territory which for some is fraught with limitations and for some, a liberating and empowering experience. Simone de Beauvoir said, "It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved."(17, Beauvoir) Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born*, talks about two kinds of experiences related to motherhood- Motherhood as an institution which is oppressive and enforcing; motherhood as an experience which is rewarding. She talks about the difference between Mothering and institutionalized motherhood and how the latter dismisses processes which threaten the reliance of women on men. For example- unmarried mothers, menstruation, abortion etc. The second-wave feminism raised concerns about sexual and reproductive rights of a woman which also led to an inquiry into motherhood and the concerned aspects. The problems and

⁵ society

restrictions imposed by motherhood were analyzed and worked upon by scholars. Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity. (Allen 315)

The need to revise the existing approaches related to motherhood was increasingly felt owing to the inclusion of intersectional framework and more context-based studies. For instance, non-White feminism spoke of a different tangent in relation to motherhood in their cultures. Bell hooks claimed, -“Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated” (Rich, 134-35). The attempt is to situate motherhood in the localized setup and study it as a subjective experience rather than a monolithic one.

While motherhood is celebrated; anything which does not fit into the canon of patriarchy-licensed motherhood is shunned. What curtails women’s rights and freedom is not the choice to be a mother but the regressive norms of institutionalized motherhood. Any deviation from the codes of motherhood is discouraged and condemned. Motherhood and its limitations have also to do a lot with the spatial dynamics. Before the 19th century, mothers would work on the fields; home and outside while taking care of the children. Later, spatial mobility and motherhood were connected to class codes and gender behavior. Hence, a middle class mother was expected to serve the interests of the family and child within the private space. A working woman is expected to prioritize her motherhood over her career. Motherhood thus, becomes more of an expectation- fulfillment journey for a woman rather than that of self-exploration. Patriarchy uses motherhood to limit women’s access to spaces around them. Symbolic figures or characters serve as crucial role-models for women; guiding them how to function and behave. A mother staying within the precincts of the ‘home’ was seen as an after-effect of the Industrial Revolution where safety measures and concerns regarding women’s degrading health within the factories were discussed. Friedrich Engels famously said that in a patriarchal family; the husband is the bourgeoisie while the wife and children are the proletariat. The recent feminists have also hinted at the linkages between motherhood and capitalism. “The reproductive domain ensured the

reproduction of labor power not merely through procreation but also through ensuring social production by maintaining the existing social relations. Hence, reproduction was the underbelly of production...”(Bagchi, 16)

The current debates surrounding the representation of motherhood are specifically related to the invisibility of queer mothers, motherhood and workspace, demystification of rituals; busting the glorification of motherhood etc. The focus is on more context-based studies on motherhood. In the Asian and African countries; where the idea of community still holds importance; mothering is seen as a plural idea where the act of motherhood requires the participation of the extended family, servants, nurses, community etc. In the current scenario; research on motherhood addresses problems in relation to women in academia as well. A recent film called *Badhaai Do*(2022) has initiated a discussion on the issue of parenthood in relation to a homosexual couple. The largely neglected subject of homosexuality and maternity/parenthood is finally getting some light. *Badhaai Ho*(2018) addressed the issue of an ageing woman’s pregnancy and her embracing of motherhood. Indian Cinema’s entry into the forbidden space to touch upon taboo subjects related to motherhood is a brave move; which might help to deflate the age-old myths and norms associated with motherhood.

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