

## Maternity beyond Stereotypes: A Feminist retelling of *Tribhanga*

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### Abstract

In India, the veneration of motherhood coexists with the oppression of mothers at the intersections of caste, class, and location. The Manusmriti demands, 'woman was created for the exclusive purpose of giving birth, to men for the continuation of the line' (Krishnaraj 58). Adrienne Rich believes that patriarchy constructs the institution of motherhood, while the women experience it compulsorily. Bollywood's portrayal of a 'mother' has undergone significant transformation in terms of character portrayal, behavioural perception, and the ultimate insight into what mothers truly are. Reading the movie *Tribhanga* as a cultural text, I will attempt to locate the maternal stereotypes anchored in an Indian family. This paper will try to make a critical distinction between the self-sacrificing mother and the mother having agency. Stereotypes about motherhood lead to 'maternal guilt' in working mother such as Nayan in this movie. We are shown several facets of motherhood in this film by the portrayal of three kinds of mothers. Nayan prioritizes writing over sacrificing her wishes for her children. Nayan's daughter, Anu, decides to raise her children alone. Masha, Anu's daughter, decides to be a conventional mother who appears 'weak' to confront the mechanisms of patriarchy. Instead, she fears the repercussions of her mother's boldness in not depending on a man. Identification and analysis of the multiple aspects of motherhood not only show what is wrong with motherhood, but also pinpoint the way out.

**Keywords:** Indian mothers, social constructions, matricentric feminism, cultural studies

### Introducing atypical mothers in Indian cinema

Movies are mostly produced keeping in consonance with the large socio-cultural factor of any country. Feminist film studies scrutinize the representation of mothers on screen. Indian cinema is the space where the women are structured according to the male gaze. Laura Mulvey's article "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" popularizes the term 'male gaze'. She comments, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female... Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey, 808-809). It is a phallic mannerism to restrict the scope of women. Some cinemas deal with the social issues pertaining to women like rape, molestation, but the main purpose of the narrator is to represent the male heroes who solve the problems faced by the women. Investigations on motherhood showcase the discrimination between male and female regarding the salary, ethics of care, lack of opportunities and others. Indian cinema presents a few mothers who think about themselves, but those films remain underrated. It's true that the way women are portrayed as moms in Indian Hindi films has changed throughout time. In the past, women were frequently portrayed as meek and restricted to conventional household responsibilities, such as

motherhood. But in recent times, there has been a change in the way that women—including mothers—are portrayed. They are now shown as strong, independent, and authoritative figures.

Mothers are portrayed by Sridevi Kapoor in *Mom*, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan in *Jazbaa*, and Kriti Sanon in *Mimi* as multifaceted individuals who nurture and even support the economy. Difficulties remained, particularly when women were criticised for daring to put their own needs first. Now enter *Shakuntala Devi*, a story whose protagonist struggles with guilt about putting her job ahead of being a single mother. In *Helicopter Eela*, Kajol plays the Tech-Savvy Mom, a character, who emphasises how a mom uses technology in the digital age and reflects the variety of duties and demands. In movies, a mother is no longer the woman who is always waiting for her child at the door with a "puja ki thali." These days, movie parents are untidy and imperfect. They are real.

### Unglorifying sacrificial motherhood

Renuka Shahane's movie *Tribhanga: Tedhi Medhi Crazy* (2021), frames three types of maternal practices with three generations of mother- Nayantara Apte, a writer, Anuradha Apte, an Odissi dancer and Masha, a typical housewife. Nayantara's life is caught in between her desire to be a mother and the stereotypical mentality of an Indian family that only understands the domestic duties of a woman. This movie gives us the glimpse of the problems an Indian mother must face. When Nayan begins to write something, her mother-in-law taunts Nayan by interrogating Nayan's children whether their mother has no hands. Nayan wants a place of tranquillity to complete her fiction. Her love for writing reflects in her dialogue, "I can't live without my writing" (*Tribhanga* 35:10) In reply, her mother-in-law with anger complains to her son, "Your wife can't cook, she doesn't do anything in the house. Why should I praise her? All she does is write! Even if one of her children is dying, she won't stop writing" (*ibid* 40:06)

Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of one's Own* (1929) shows her concern that woman has never been approved to have their own time, privacy or the tradition to progress in their career. Writing is more difficult for a woman, than it is for a man. Society and the family imprison a woman and want to alienate her from the public space. It is her duty to look after her children, but her husband can easily cherish his dreams. Woolf demands, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 152). No problems arise when Nayan's husband goes to work, but Nayan's passion of writing problematizes the 'fame' and 'peace' of the family. It is ridiculous that a father is becoming successful by ostracizing his wife at 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nayan leaves the 'prison'- the house of her husband, where she cannot live with her choice. Her husband never asks the whereabouts of their children. Nayan decides to change the surnames of her children as their father has no contribution to their children except his 'sperm.' She tries to dismantle the phallic power of her husband by disowning his surname. The school refutes the revolutionary idea of removing the paternal existence from a child's identity. Nayan goes to court and after 10 years of fight, she finally makes it happen. The school teacher even makes ludicrous comment at Anu(Nayan's daughter), asking her the reason behind the mother's surname after her name! So, this is the omnipresence and omnipotence of patriarchy. Inheriting one's father's name is a patrilineal custom that is widespread in India. Since the father is the 'head' of the family and his lineage is to be continued, it is customary for the child to take on the father's last name. For the most part, the mother and her role are ignored. The idea that a woman should only have one sexual partner—her husband—is the foundation for all

of this. Despite the fact that a lot of adults decide to use their mother's last name or middle name as their middle name. Pablo Picasso made the decision to adopt the last name 'Picasso' from his mother. In tribute of his mother, Sanjay Leela Bansali, a well-known Indian director, takes her first name, Leela, as his middle name. Alternatives exist, but they are not recognised. Furthermore, it is evident everywhere that stereotypes which glorify inequality are prevalent.

Nayan finds a new partner, named Vikramaditya in her life. Vikramaditya sexually molests Anu without Nayan's knowledge. Anu is not comfortable with her mother, and for this reason she cannot open up about this sexual harassment. She writes her anxieties to a magazine. Nayan gets to know about this and seems to be shocked. She divorces Vikram, but cannot get back the trust and love of Anu. Nayan cannot become a friend to her daughter as she remains busy in writing her fictitious stories. Nayan wishes her children to be the characters of her stories, so that she can make them realize Nayan's situation, and her fondness for the imaginative world. Eventually, she gets arthritis. This disease finally stops her pen. But, she continues her autobiography with the help of a male writer.

Helene Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* disbands the constraints of phallogocentric thought. Cixous vilifies Sigmund Freud who demarcates woman as 'lack' and 'dark continent.' Cixous wants to articulate a feminine libidinal economy to deconstruct the hegemonic authority of 'phallus'. She asserts, "Write yourself; your body must be heard. Then will spring forth the immense resources of your unconscious" (Cixous 145). Cixous uses the metaphor of Medusa who laughs at singular phallic power and invokes woman's multiplicity. Cixous's thought can substantiate the journey of Nayan as a writer. Like Nayan, every woman should raise the inner creative mother within her to get liberated from the androcentric world. But what is the real consequence of getting liberation in this way in an Indian family, is clearly picturized in this movie. Nayan dies at the end of the movie. She explains that she feels sorry for prioritizing her career over her domestic liabilities. Sukumari Bhattarji asserts, "...motherhood came to be increasingly glorified; it is an emotional and ideational compensation for the reality which in most cases was imposed upon her. In India, it was extolled in an inverse ratio to the demotion of woman's position in society. The apotheosis of motherhood has reached a greater height in India than anywhere else?" (Krishnaraj 58). Women's ability to pursue their personal self-actualization and engage in larger society is hampered by the responsibility of childrearing. According to Divya Pandey, the family as an institution continuously intrudes, manipulates, reorganises, and redirects the experience to suit the particular goals of a given family. This means that the subjective experiences of motherhood and mothering are ones in which social relations between the sexes do not dominate alone (Krishnaraj 7). Adrienne Rich distinguishes between "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential-and all women-shall remain under male control" (Smith 116).

### Single mother by choice

Anu, the second generation of mother, chooses to remain a single mother. Stereotypes regarding women place them in the category of 'Other' and prevent them from playing active, participating roles in society, such as heads of households and employees. The 'Other' of the family formations is the mother-headed single parent family. Anu comments about the condition of her mother in the hospital, "She's great. She's in a coma. Silent zone. Perfect" (*Tribhanga* 55:36). She wants her mother to be silent, to be a 'normal' mother, though she herself breaks the tagline of a normal mother, ironically. Anu's interrogations about 'choices' are really

fascinating. She asks, “When did we even have a choice? Did we get to choose our parents before we were born? In our childhood did anyone ask us what we wanted? We never had a choice. We don’t have a choice” (*ibid* 01:12:10). These questions can make you numb for a moment. Nivedita Menon in her *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), asserts that we cannot escape the boundaries of an institution, named ‘family’- “‘Family’ is an institution with a legal identity, and the State recognizes as a family, only a specific set of people related in a specific way...A ‘family’ can only be a patriarchal, heterosexual family: a man, his wife, ‘his’ children.” (Menon 5). Family is based on inequality that wants woman’s life to be strictly policed. Anu objects for not having a choice to leave her careerist mother, Nayan. Masha, Anu’s daughter blames Anu for not having a choice to have the name of a father in her life. A mother never has a choice, and if she makes a choice for herself, nothing but a chaos will emerge in her life.

Anu is attached with her womb during her pregnancy. She remains silent when her Russian husband attacks her, but she kicks him out from their house when he hits her swollen belly. Anu stops calling her mother, Nayan, ‘mom.’ She starts calling her by her name and even pushes her away from her house. Nayan immediately comes to Anu the moment she gets the news of Anu being physically tortured by her boyfriend. But Nayan does not appear to be that kind of mother who sacrifices her whole life for her family, looking after the requirements of her children. Unfortunately, she has her dreams too. Anu and Robindro consider Nayan a failed mother and break all the connections with her. It is believed that a wife needs her husband during her pregnancy for protection, for taking care. But Anu delivers her child in the absence of her husband who physically abuses her. She single-handedly raises her daughter. The positive thing of a privileged family and an independent woman is that, at least she can afford a choice. A single mother can inspire and motivate others by showing them how to raise a child on their own. The patriarchal mindset that portrays males as secondary providers and mothers as nurturing, selfless carers have an impact on both fathers and moms.

### Intentional victimization

Talking about the third generation, there is Masha, daughter of Anu. She is pregnant and she does a ‘gender determination test’ as according to her in-laws’ opinion. Her in-laws opine that a girl’s birth is a risk. The main purpose of marriage for women is to have male children. Even a woman’s womb did not belong to her. It was believed that the woman’s body only served as the soil and that the guy supplied the seed. Anu rages at Masha for doing that test under force- “What you do with your body, is not your choice?” (*Tribhanga* 45:51) Masha declares that she does not want to have a ‘choice’ that her own mother once makes. For that ‘choice’ she is called an ‘illegitimate’ child throughout her life. Though her in-laws are patriarchal, conservative, still she will accept everything to give her baby a father’s identity. When Masha is in school, her class teacher asks her to know the ‘charge’ of her mother. Masha wants to commit suicide that time. This is how a patriarchal society sees a mother without her husband. A husband, a marriage gives woman the social security. If someone wants to remain single mother, society labels her nothing but a prostitute. Simone de Beauvoir claims, “She is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is Absolute- she is the Other” (Beauvoir xxii). Beauvoir claims that woman is the other as she could not define herself, but is defined by men and is expected to depend on men. This otherization silences the voice of women. If men separate themselves from the domestic responsibilities, then women must do the same. If a husband abuses the wife, she should isolate herself from him too.

The single mothers debunk the myth of a 'good' mother to manage their own space. This single parenting is always stigmatized. A single-mother-by-choice shows that she is capable, and economically stable to support her family. Single motherhood disrupts the archetype of the conventional power relations. The heteronormative people have assigned the gender roles to the parents. If someone wants to disrupt the gender roles, the society starts slut-shaming her. Anu is not an exception.

A mother only is assigned for ethical responsibility. She lives for others. What is normal for a father, is abnormal for a mother and this is the unbreakable norms of our society. Emmanuel Levinas argues, "The Face of the Other at each moment destroys and over-flows the plastic image it leaves me..The face is a living presence; it is expression"( Levinas 50-51,66). So, a face demands care. Levinas believes that we should never let the 'Other' alone- "to forget oneself is to take care of the other" (228). In this context of care, Levinas' opinion is clear to us that we should selflessly prioritizes the 'Other.' Problem arises when Levinas demands that woman as a human, is equal to man; but as a sexual entity, she is submitted to him. Woman can only be liberated from the expectation of being 'Other', or the only responsible gender, by raising certain arguments against the traditional hypermasculinity. The distinction of sexual identities is a dangerous conspiracy. Both the men and women deserve equal rights. Levinas' interpretation of the biblical reference about the birth of Eve from the rib of Adam is a defence of masculine supremacy.

### **Conclusion: Possibility over challenges**

"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 and world that is open and free" (Nnaemeka 5)

It is never enough to simply flip an oppressive concept, such as viewing motherhood in a "new" way, in order to obtain freedom. When a group of people collectively reject an oppressive construct like motherhood, it becomes null and void, and consequently freedom generates. Evaluating the lives of three different mothers of three different generations, one can come to the hypothesis that patriarchy is in our blood. Nayan dies with a guilt for prioritizing her dreams. Anu hates Nayan for not looking after her and Robindro. Masha allows patriarchy intentionally as she does not want to do something 'extraordinary.' Masha wants to fit in the male-chauvinist society as she feels herself a victim of her mother's bold decisions. 'Tribhanga' means deconstructed, something which is atypical. This movie is about the victimization of mothers and the celebration of choices, also. The purpose of Indian cinema is not only to entertain. They are responsible about how they are locating the women characters. Cinema, possibly can provide the alternative identities of a mother, beyond the stereotypes. Cinema has to come up with the progressive portrayals of mother and their families to make them realize their ambitions, to do justice to their role in the Indian society; not as a 'goddess; but as a human being. The rapid advancements in reproductive technologies have made it possible for men and women irrespective of all sexes and gender orientations to have a range of parental configurations. Programmes in women's, gender, and cultural studies must take into account the multitude of mothering that exist across gender, class, race, and location in addition to the expanding corpus of scholarly work that discusses the maternal experience. Mothers are not inherently selfish when they have self-interest. Our future mothers can be liberated from the obligations as designed by the society. Positively, we can at least start the conversation because of such revolutionary films like *Tribhanga*.



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