



## PROJECTION OF MOTHERHOOD BY CHOICE IN SELECT INDIAN MOVIES

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**Abstract:** *Women are repeatedly told from their infancy that marriage is their ultimate destiny and they are made for childbearing. Society glamorizes motherhood and celebrates it as a unique attribute of women, hence leaves women with no other option but to celebrate this marvellous privilege of bringing a new life into the world. Second wave feminist believed that such pervasive socialization shapes women's desire to choose motherhood as a blessing.*

*The films selected in this paper show that these celluloid mothers are embracing motherhood by choice. They are reinterpreting ideology of motherhood and refuse to become a part of the institutionalized motherhood. These maternal figures celebrate motherhood as an experience not as inevitable phenomena.*

**Key Words:** *Motherhood, Socialization, ideology, Choice, Celluloid.*

Mother figure was always central in the social, political and aesthetic consciousness of India. In general, Indian cinema in the past has helped in perpetuating a romantic image of mothers. These maternal figures were selfless, sacrificing and constant nurturer. These celluloid mothers strengthen stereotypes refuted by feminist regarding the experience of motherhood. They convey as Kamala Ganesh notes, "not so much the ideas of physical motherhood, but a world-view in which the creative power of femininity is central"(58). But normative motherhood imposes strict control over female bodies and desire. It is believed that "... In maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural 'calling' ... " (Beauvoir 501) It is because of this institutionalized maternity, radical feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan reject motherhood altogether.

Feminists in the western world have challenged the overemphasis on fertility, insist that the link between childbearing and childrearing is a male construct to exclude women from the mainstream. Simone de Beauvoir speaks about *Transcendence* and *Immanence* and debunks the social pressures on a woman to perform the role of mother. It limits the possibilities of women's

intellectual development in the public sphere, whereas male members freely blossom by throwing all responsibilities on the shoulder of their female Partners.

Since the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, the topic of motherhood has emerged as a central issue in feminist scholarship. It is one of the best books on mothering and motherhood. It contains a wide-ranging and far-reaching meditation on the meaning and experience of motherhood that draws from the disciplines of anthropology, feminist theory, psychology, and literature. It also narrates Rich's personal reflections on her experiences of mothering. "But can you imagine how some of them were envying you your freedom to work, to think, to travel, to enter a room as yourself, not as some child's mother or some man's wife?... we have no familiarity, ready-made name for a woman who defines herself, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is self-identified, who has chosen herself?"(Web).

The ideology of motherhood differs according to the socio-cultural context, ethnicity, and class. For instance, in India, where society is mostly patriarchal, the mother goddess is highly revered. In terms of female empowerment and gender equality

the cultural issues like Sati and law of inheritance, custody- right of children were paramount in the consciousness of Indian female activists in the past. Besides that, they demanded to strengthen the law against sex detection, dowry and marital abuse, but they never debated about the choice of being a mother or refuse it.

Indian movies are part of popular culture and portray beliefs and ideologies of majority. Recently these Indian movies have started projecting the changing consciousness of the masses. by repositioning mothers, not as a subject, but as individuals. Initially mothers were in the background but under the impact of the feminist wave more woman centred movies have been made in Bollywood in recent years and issues of pregnancy and motherhood are re-looked.

In literature, Feminist writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and Anita Desai refute valorisation of motherhood as projected by Patriarchal set up but they don't reject maternity altogether. They are not disgusted at the women – centred experience of giving birth to a new life and becoming its nurturer. In Anita Desai's novel, *Where Shall We go this Summer?*, character of Sita questions only the myths, assumptions and oppressive expectations which are imposed on women as a mother at the expense of her feminine sensibilities which negate her existence and curtails any possibility of alternate identity. Sita seeks to liberate woman from institutionalized motherhood not the joy of motherhood.

Mothering has not been shown as an oppressive experience in Indian films like *Bhavana*, *Kya Kaban* and *Mamta*. None of these celluloid women question the idealized mother paradigm and no woman character feels like Sylvia Plath:

A baby! I hated babies. I, who for two and a half years Had been the centre of a tender universe, felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilizes my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth. (web)

Plath dissolves the myth of all women naturally embracing motherhood and wanting to resign themselves completely to domesticity and motherhood. Rather, they feel obvious resentment because "her children stifled her art" (13).

The contemporary debates on issues such as abortion, the use of reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, and single mothers are examined in Indian Cinema also. Debates over motherhood have been fundamental to feminist movements in every country, whether it was the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Japan, India, or China. In this context, issues of feminism are numerous. Some of these are analysed in the Indian context in this paper with references to their cinematic representations. Celluloid uses the tropes of motherhood to reinforce gender ideologies, but it also helps in establishing the individuality and humanity of mothers.

In Kundan Shah's directed film *Kya Kabna*, a young girl Priya Bakshi (Priety Zinta) conceives before marriage. She decides to bring her child in this world against the wishes of her family because unwed motherhood is still a social stigma. Priya says that only if she would have been married, her pregnancy would have been celebrated as sacred. She says "Becoming a mother is the greatest fortune in this world. . . It is one of the greatest blessings of God" irrespective of the fact that her partner is standing with her or not. Andrienna Rich says, "motherhood is sacred as long as its off springs are legitimate- that is as long as the child bears the name of the father who legally controls the mother"(web). Kate Millett says in *Sexual Politics*:

Patriarchal religion and ethics tend to lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of onus and stigma it attaches to sex were the fault of the female alone. Thereby sex which is known to be unclean, sinful, and deliberating, pertains to the male, and the male identity is preserved as a human, rather than a sexual one.(52)

Priya stands erect in the face of social ostracism and confidently says that she will bring the child in this world and will work for his/her better future. She believes that her child has every right to come into the world unlike unwed Julie of the movie *Julie* (1975) who is forced by circumstances to leave her child in an orphanage.

The film *Julie* is a comment on the suffocating social conventions about inter-caste marriage besides depicting the plights of unwed mothers in India. Julie's mother decides to abort that baby, but circumstances compel her to change her decision. Julie gives birth to her baby in a secret place and her mother puts that baby in an orphanage. Julie does not take stand like Priya of *Kya Kabna*. Julie's motherhood is only recognized when her lover Shashi marries her after knowing about the whole truth.

Asit Sen's directed film *Mamta* (1960s) revolves around a character called Deviyani who is married to a vicious man who tortures her physically and mentally and tries even to sell her. Hence, she runs away from his house to save her child Suparna and puts her in a convent. The story highlights the endurance and sacrifice of a mother for her child. She shows exemplary courage to give a bright future to her only child and even murders her debauch husband to save the good name of her daughter who has become a barrister now.

*Shakti: The Power* (2002) was produced by Boney Kapoor. It also tells about a mother's tribulations to save her child from feudal gang war in a rural town of the north eastern state of India. Her husband Shekhar dies in his attempt to stop brawls and leaves Nandini and his son alone. But Nandini is not cowed down by circumstances and battles all alone to give a safe future to her son in Canada. She finally succeeds in freeing her son from the clutches of a gloomy future.

Pravin Bhatt's film *Bhavana* (1984) is also a story about a single mother's struggle to give a decent life to her son Anil. Bhavana's husband Ajay leaves her and marries another woman of his father's choice. She comes to know about his betrayal and

confronts him. Her husband offers her money, which she refuses. She does everything to provide best for her son's future. His son is named after her as Anil Bhavana Saxena. The name of her child itself signifies a big leap towards female identity.

This saree clad woman becomes stylish hooker to give a good life to her son. When her friend Shobha reminds her about moral values she says, "I don't want to be a Devi, I want to be a mother". This statement holds the new morality of woman and contains seed of feminism in itself. "An already mature, independent woman may want to have a child belonging wholly to herself" (Beauvoir 511).

The movie *Chandani Bar* is a story of a bar dancer who raises her children by dancing in a bar. These post modernist mothers give new moral dimension to the concept of motherhood. They assert their sexuality and question the canons of society.

In "Kal Ho Na Ho" (2003) single mother Jaya Bachchan alias Jenifer Kapur runs a restaurant in New York to support her family. She adopts her husband's child, Gia from his illicit relationship with a woman because her biological mother was not ready to care for her. This move shows that motherhood is not only about giving birth, but it is an experience. Besides these Bollywood mothers, there are other movies like *Apnapan* where Reena Roy prefers career over home making. But the script makes her sob and repent for her decision as it was contrary to the interest of Patriarchal society.

The list is endless but these mother figures carry common characteristics. Besides being an exemplification of selfless mother figures, their individualism, independence and assertive choices to become mother bring them on a common platform. They are ready to bear the responsibilities of a mother alone. They are bracing themselves to earn not only bread, but also butter for their kids.

Another film *Astitva* (2000) by Mahesh Manjarekar is a bold film. It talks about adultery and quizzes the traditional concept of motherhood as mandatory phenomena, fundamental in the

foundation of marriage. Aditi (Tabu) craves for the company of her work alcoholic husband Sreekant Pandit. She succumbs in front of her desires and makes relation with her music teacher Malhar Kamat in her husband's absence. She gives birth to a son Aniket. She could not find an opportunity to tell her husband about the father of Aniket.

After twenty five years, Malhar Kamat's legal will arrives at her home in Bangalore. Kamat leaves all his asset to Aditi after his death. Shreekant starts suspecting his wife's fidelity. Aditi tells that Aniket is not his child. She tells him that she loves him unconditionally irrespective of the fact that he was sterile. But had it been otherwise she would have been held responsible for being barren and would have lost her place and value not only in the society but also in his heart.

*Paa* is a story about a twelve year old boy Auro who is raised by his gynaecologist mother Vidya all alone as her partner Amol Arte (Abhishek Bachchan) was not ready to take the accountability of a child and insisted on the abortion. Auro was suffering from a rare genetic disorder called progeria. Later, Amol feels an emotional attachment towards Auro and comes close to him without knowing that he is his own son. When truth is revealed in front of him, he wants to stay with his son, but Vidya says, "Becoming a father, does not only mean giving birth to a child".

These female protagonists reconstitute the way women are looked and their motherhood is visualised. They are not submissive sexual object, but confident individuals who do not shy away from taking responsibilities of their action. This paper provides an insight into the complex relation between Indian culture and Bollywood movies.

*English Vinglish* is a film about self discovery where mother of two children Shashi is not content at home serving her family rather she joins English speaking course in America with her savings to get new confidence. She empowers herself with mastery over English language and earn reverence for herself in the eye of her own family.

Mothers in *Mom* and *Kabani-2* are not biological mothers, but they leave no stone unturned to protect their adopted daughters. A small six year old orphan girl Minnie is sexually abused by her paternal uncle in "Kahani -2". Durga Rani Singh (Vidya Balan), saves that child, Minnie from the clutches of her family. She even adopts Minnie as her daughter, though she is not yet married. She efficiently plays the role of a working mother who is concerned for the future of her daughter. This reflects her refutation of traditional models of mother. For her, being a mother is her own decision, no family pressure is involved. Besides that, her unmarried status is also not a hindrance.

In Sridevi starred movie *Mom*(2017), Devaki fights for her step daughter Arya who is a rape victim. Devaki takes revenge with her daughter's rapists. These female centred movies are a giant leap from movies like *Julie* and *Mausum*.

Another important movie in this series is *Listen... Amaya* (2013), directed by Avinash Kumar Singh. Its leading actors are Farooq Shaikh, Deepti Naval and Swara Bhaskar. It talks about female sexuality and sensibilities. A widow Leela runs a library cafe "Book a Coffee" in Delhi to sustain her family. She gets involved with a widowed photographer, Jayant 'Jazz', and feels soft corner in her heart for him. Leela's daughter Amaya gets insecure about this relationship. She refuses to accept her mother as an individual beyond her role as a sacrificing mother. Leela craves for a personal space in her life. She defies the conventional image of the mother figure where a mother's world ends with her kids.

That does not mean that Leela is not a good mother rather it is only a question about space and humanity of mother figure. The title itself is significant, *Listen... Amaya*, your mother is more than a mother, she is a woman also. She can have her own feelings and dreams. Amaya learns at the end that her mother is an individual who can also need a male in her life.

These female leads are renouncing their passivity and demystifying the image of woman as

mother. In India, where the country itself is a mother figure, “Mother India”, a film by the same name, giving such reinterpretations was not an easy task. Contrary to the catholic precept that “father is the head of the family” and “female heads of households tend to be regarded as undesirable; the phenomenon is a trait of poverty or misfortune” (Beauvoir 33), these celluloid mothers have convincingly portrayed a new paradigm of family where they are the guiding source of their clan, they are reproducer and owner both. Motherhood is a wonderful experience but for that kids should not be biologically produced. Giving birth to multiple kids is a great idea, but equally welcoming is to adopt a kid by one’s own choice.

To believe that a woman is also a human being like any other person, with her own sets of ideas and values still an alien concept. It is tremendously wrong to think that a woman is not

normal if she does not want children. Indian society is still not ready for such iconoclastic ideology. Still cinematic representations have retrieved the real human figure with individualistic attributes from the suffocating loads of traditional expectations, that is a mother. These Bollywood projections have shown that motherhood is a choice, that all women are free to choose, accept or reject it. For a woman, marriage is not about economic dependence as she can do without her partners.

Rachel Blau du Plessis writes in the foreword of *Of Woman Born* that “(M) otherhood is incredibly tangled, a space in which one is learning and changing all the time, understanding process in a new way. Thus motherhood leads to knowledge, to thinking, to literary thinking, and to poetics”(web). These maternal figures are not revolting against conventions, but giving them a new meaning.

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