



PROJECTION OF MOTHER IN MEDIA: A STUDY OF INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to highlight and analyse the skewed portrayal of mothers in Indian cinema through their stereotypical characterization and the evolution in their projection over time. The mother figure holds a central position in traditional Indian culture and consciousness. From epics to movies, the Indian mother has been bearing the burden of society's expectations of 'motherhood'. Since the most significant aspect of a woman's life is reproduction, motherhood has been fundamental to the genesis of every ideology related to women. Her identity as a nurturing, son-bearing, procreative power has been invested with sacredness; while her identity as a woman has been effaced and erased: 'glorification without empowerment'¹. This has led to an accretion of stereotypes of the 'ideal mother' in the filmic discourse of the twentieth century: how mothers should be sacrificing, nurturing, altruistic and silent. In this paper, we will try to look into the evolution of the mother in Indian cinema and how despite the evolution, there is a long way to go.

Keywords: empowerment, media, identity, stereotype, other, motherhood, identity



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Introduction

In the 72 years since Independence, Indian cinema has gone through a lot of changes and the portrayal of women especially the mother has also changed overtime. Many writers and activists have spoken about how motherhood in Indian cinema is reinforcement of stereotypical image Such as ideals of altruism, self-denial, purity and self-effacement and it is these qualities that make up their "strength" which is then used to serve the male protagonist. However, in tracing the evolution of the maternal women in cinema, one must see a progression from the ideal home bound mother to career oriented moms who fabulously manage to juggle multiple responsibilities including the one she has towards herself. During the freedom struggle, cinema was used as a medium to illustrate anger and voice the opinion of nationalist leaders and parties demanding independence from British colonial rule. It deployed the figure of mother as a repository of culture and traditions and also as the emblem that embraced the entire nation as

¹ Krishnaraj, 2010

one family. However, after Independence, cinema became a vehicle for addressing social problems and issues. Films showcased the relationships, customs, norms and ethics of Indian society. Cinema now portrayed a society that was both desired and achievable through films and became more relatable to people. It was in the 1950s that coloured films became commercially popular.

This period also marked the beginning of a new era in Hindi films. It was in this period that the female characters started to become visible and enjoyed considerable screen time. However, as Urvashi Butalia very importantly points out that even though women were becoming increasingly visible in cinema, we need to question what kind of visibility it is and who the visible woman is serving. She also opines that the Indian film industry is conservative and reactionary in the ideals it upholds and the values it projects and this, she says is nowhere more evident than on the question of women. Most movies of this times have taken up themes of chastity and honour of mothers exploring concepts like the toil and drudgery of raising children, the emotional and personal cost that must be borne by the maternal body and her fragility and unspeakable choice of surrendering to patriarchy.

Changing portrayal of women in Indian Cinema

‘The mother cult has been, from the beginning, one of the strongest thematic strands in Indian cinema, ranging from noble, self-sacrificing mothers to those who pamper their sons and persecute their daughters-in-law....Thematically, *Mother India*, made in 1957, is one of the most successful as well as one of the most idealistic films in Indian terms’². Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* emblemized the mother as a metaphor for respectability and sacrifice. Although it was undoubtedly the strongest and most memorable on-screen character played by Nargis, *Mother India* left behind a problematic legacy for mother-figures in Indian cinema. Unfortunately, she was more attractive as a sacrificing mother than as a survivor and hence that was the aspect the film explored. Mehboob Khan visualised Nargis’s character as a woman who is abandoned by her husband and has to rear her sons on her own. She is the embodiment of endurance and sacrifice when she goes out farming so that her sons don’t starve to death. Here, we see a new trend of the mother going out and becoming the bread winner of the family which is also visible in the later films. However what one needs to notice here is the fact that in movies like *Mother India*, the reason why the mother goes out to work is always out of circumstance (borne out of her widowhood in most cases), and never out of choice. We never

² Gulzar

see the mother perceive herself in terms of her sense of self because this sense of self is somewhere lost in the multiple roles played by her. In fact, in movies like *Mother India* (1957) and *Karan Arjun* (1995), there is considerable emotional abuse that the mothers had to go through and one very significant aspect which was similar in both these movies was the fact that the mother always waited for her son (the 'hero') to avenge the wrong done to them. This theme is further developed in *Ram Lakhan* (1989), where the mother (Rakhee) waits seventeen years for her sons to grow up and avenge her indignities³ An ideal mother is always the victim, strong only in her fortitude, but never an agent for action/vengeance. One aspect that comes across very clearly is the reiteration of Manu's dictum that "a woman is protected by her father in childhood, husband in adulthood and son in old age".

While talking about the mother in Indian cinema of this period, an image that comes to one's mind is that of the helpless and desolate Nirupa Roy from *Deewar* (1975). The iconic and oft-quoted dialogue of *Deewar*, where Shashi Kapoor's character effectively silences Amitabh Bachchan's litany of possessions with just one line '*Mere paas maa hai*', reveals an ironic take on Feminism. The mother is a possession, albeit a prized one. The commoditization of the mother needs to be noticed. Moreover the fact that Shashi Kapoor's character boasts of having the mother on his side shows how the mother is often used as the plot point for the development of the male protagonist and to condition his behaviour. The "socially dead" widow becomes a convenient sacred object who gets little screen time but a moral edge. This is one of the most used trope in Indian cinema till date used in movies like *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) and to some extent both the mothers in *Mard* (1985). And a very amusing aspect of *Deewar* is that while we all remember the very famous dialogue *mere paas maa hai*, we can hardly recall the name of the mother which speaks volumes about the kind of feeble effect she had on the narrative. The mother's domain in *Deewar* as in many other movies like *Karan Arjun* (1995) was restricted to the home – the kitchen and the prayer-chamber and if she was forced to step out, that was an aberration of the social/moral order that had to be justified. The marginalisation of the mother is also evident in *Karan Arjun* where her motherhood is mythicised when her prayers are answered in the central miracle of the film and her sons return in their reincarnated selves. The fact that Rakhee's character is named Durga in the film is the ultimate regressive

³ Gokulsing & Dissanayake

irony, as the embodiment of *shakti* (power) she is robbed of all power to affect change (except the power of faith) in the patriarchal narrative.⁴

Another very important aspect in the portrayal of motherhood is the fact that maternal instinct in the movies pan all across. In *Postmaster* (1961), Ratan, a pre-adolescent orphan girl is seen morphing from a child to a mother when she takes care of the sick postmaster. This indicates how the society imposes qualities of maternity and femininity onto women from such a young age that caretaking, nurturing and “mothering” become almost a natural instinct. Even in *Mother India*, Nargis becomes the universal mother when she punishes her sons for greater social good. This also reinforces the idea of the invincible ideal motherhood and the indomitable spirit of the mother when it comes to protecting her child.

In fact, in this period we can somewhere notice that the hierarchy in motherhood was getting crystallised. The framework for an ideal mother was being set and anyone who deviated from it, became a bad mother. In later movies like *Beta* (1992), we see that just because Aruna Irani’s character had certain human flaws, the attack was always on how bad a mother she was. The space for human flaw was taken away from a woman if she was a mother (Bad mother ergo bad person). This meant reduction of a mother’s identity exclusively to her role as a mother. The archetypal portrayal of the “bad mother” was depicted through the step-mother figures, like in *Seeta aur Geeta* (1972) and *Chaalbaaz* (1989). These women, through their very ‘modernity’ and bold sexuality, violated traditional social norms and helped to reinforce the notion of undesirability of the modern self-seeking woman, and conversely to deify the virtuous, sacrificing, traditional ideal mother. The narratives of a sexually bold working ‘bad’ mother and a step mother were re-visited in the 1972 movie *Amar Prem* (1972). Sharmila Tagore, a prostitute, becomes the de-facto mother of her neighbour’s son who is in turn troubled by his step mother. The narrative focuses on both her exploitation as a woman and the solace she finds with the child. Thus motherhood is shown to become an important emotional support for both the woman and the child. (However with the changing time, a new way of looking at women would eventually lead to newer perceptions on step mothers like in *We Are a Family*.) According to Butalia, the hypocrisy that equates independence and modernity with “badness” is a product of the middle class morality that pervades Indian films. This categorisation of the mother as good or bad take all talks of women empowerment several steps backwards. Kamla

⁴ Sucharita Sarkar, accessed from academia

Bhasin and Ritu Menon have spoken about how this hierarchy in motherhood and the reinforcement of their stereotypes are damaging to the image and dignity of womanhood.

Another trend that emerged after the 1950s was that women started becoming the agency of the development of the male character regardless of what role she was cast in. Case in point *Beta*. Even though the portrayal of mothers has evolved with time, we see mothers as the plot point till date. Mothers in such roles usually exhibit ideals of altruism, self-denial, purity and self-effacement and it is these qualities that make up their “strength” which is then used to serve the male protagonist. This is evident in commercially successful movies of the 1990s like *Hum Saath Saath Hain*, *Maine Pyar Kiya* and *Hum Apke Hain Kaun*.

However, in tracing the evolution of the maternal woman on celluloid, one must also take into consideration the transitory phases and the rolling changes in the image of the mother with the coming of 21st century cinema. This exercise will perhaps enable one to see if Bollywood’s quintessential Ma has gone from being a ubiquitously benevolent accessory to something more suited to the new times.

With the ushering in of the 21st century, we see a progression from the ideal home bound mother to career oriented moms who fabulously manage to juggle multiple responsibilities including the one she has towards herself. *English Vinglish (2012)*, fittingly directed by a woman-director, Gauri Shinde, is one of the most trailblazing films in the way it portrayed the mother and her journey of discovering herself. The very fact that Shashi Godbole, the traditional housewife has a flourishing self-made business enterprise selling home-made *laddoos* indicates the entrepreneurial spirit and desire for self-fulfilment that Shashi has, which in no way obstructs her maternal role. When circumstances provide an opportunity to Shashi to change herself, she does not remain passive, but grabs it and this depicts the evolution we are trying to look at. The journey to New York is a metaphor for the transformative journey that Shashi undertakes and the fact that she enrolls herself into a conversational English class and transforms herself gives her the scope to find her sense of self. The film also reinforces one of the key binaries of popular Indian cinema: the modernity/tradition binary. The image of Sridevi walking down the Manhattan streets with a trench coat belted on her sari is the perfect visual depiction of the balance she creates between tradition and modernity, the sari and the trench coat. Importantly, Shashi’s final speech was a declaration of selfhood and self-achievement. In fact, the fact that she chose to cherish the values of her family and devote herself to them was her choice. However, one also needs to note that though the movie was path breaking in many ways, it was still feminine rather than feminist and Shashi advocated self-fulfilment without

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social rebellion. Although she begins by ‘seeking an identity beyond the halo of motherhood’ (Krishnaraj 2010), in the end she returns to her primary role of the nurturer.

A seeming paradox is also visible in the portrayal of mothers even today because while the reverence shown to her is considered most sacred and her power in the domestic sphere is absolute, her authority seldom extends beyond the framework of her immediate environment. Mothers in recent movies like *English Vinglish*, *Mom*, *Paa*, *Khoobsurat*, *Dostana*, *Rajneeti* are depicted as the “New” Women who break various stereotypes without placing their femininity on the block and eventually serve to perpetuate male domination.

In movies like *Paa* (2009), where Vidya Balan plays the role of a single, working mother who takes care of her son, Auro, who is suffering from progeria, a notable sidelight was the relationship between the mother, Vidya, and the grandmother, played by Arundhati Nag, which threw light on mother-daughter support-systems that are often so vital to child-rearing in urban families where the mother is a careerist. Even though the story did revolve around Amitabh Bachchan’s character, the very fact that Vidya Balan was not projected as the “irresponsible, bad mother” is path breaking in some ways. The role of the mother in *Paa* is refreshingly different and reflective of a strong mother- daughter relationship and it is the unstinting and unconditional support from her mother that helps Vidya Balan celebrate her motherhood.

In some movies like *Kya Kehna* and *Nil Battey Sanata*, the makers have tried to portray the idea of motherhood in a different light. While one looks at the issue of teenage pregnancy the other dabbles with the idea of growth in the economically weaker sections. The idea of a self-sacrificing mother still holds ground but is somewhere watered down. In place importance is given to the ideas of self-development and growth. This creates space for the entry of single mothers on screen who are not burdened by the ‘guilt’ of their sexuality (like in *Paa*) or the guilt of living life on their own terms. The new age mothers in Hindi cinema are projected as the ones whose love for their children doesn’t lead to them losing their individual identity or agency. Indian cinema is increasingly creating space for working, independent and single mothers like Ratna Pathak Shah in *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008) who is not the typical superefficient housekeeper or the “ideal” sacrificing mother. Instead, as Savitri Rathore, she teaches in a college, reads Naomi Wolf with her feet up, actively expresses her political beliefs, wears the clothes she wants to and doesn’t cook on days she doesn’t feel like. However, even in this movie there’s a dichotomy of the traditional and the new since it is the mother who is responsible for conditioning the son’s personality. Before Ratna Pathak Shah, there was Kirron

Kher who was perhaps one of the first mothers on celluloid to be allowed humour, whims and laughter.

Her role of an ambitious Punjabi matron in *Hum Tum* (2004) really introduced a refreshing take on mothers. Kirron Kher as the mother in *Dostana* (2008) which also succeeded in holding up a mirror to love, sex and heteronormativity displayed the subversion of norms by the mother and this needs to be highlighted.

While discussing the progression in the projection of mothers in cinema, *Badhaai Ho* (2018) was one of the groundbreaking works in recent times. It was one of the first movies to have explored the sexual life of a mother. However, even though her sexuality is channelized, that channelized sexuality has a stigma attached to it and the makers also somewhere made her the plot point in order to make a statement because she gives birth to a girl child in the end. In *Badhaai Ho*, even her motherhood becomes an aspect of shame after a certain point because that motherhood is associated with her sexuality in her 40s. Hence even though it is one of the progressive films of our time, it has certain aspects which one needs to problematize.

In the film *Parched* (2015), the alternate lives of the mother are explored quite well. However, even though she is a strong, independent, single mother who is the authority figure since there's no patriarchy, she doesn't have a voice in front of her son who is stand offish and abusive towards his wife. This is a trend we've noticed throughout in the 20th century cinema where even though the mother is shown to be all powerful in the domestic realm, she is actually powerless in front of her husband or son.

In fact, Indian cinema has continued to explore the aspect of guilt in mothers who strive hard to be the ideal mother in every way, till date. In movies like *The Lunchbox* (2013), the major obstacle in the path of the mother realising her happiness is her child (she cannot escape an unhappy marriage because she is a mother). However, the narrative also portrays a different aspect of her life when her interaction with a strange man is fruitful. Therefore, it's an outward looking scenario where she has the space to explore the side of herself that wants companionship and that is a huge leap that we are looking at. In films like *Tumhari Sullu* (2017) which has tried to take a different stance on motherhood, the mother (Vidya Balan) still has to condition her job as a radio jockey according to the convenience of her husband and most importantly to sync with her being a mother.

However, despite the evolution in the portrayal of the mother on celluloid, we see that certain aspects have remained the same which is why there is still a long way to go. For example in a recent movie *Photograph* (2019), the male protagonist's grandmother adds the suffix "maa ka

dil hai. Samjha karo” to everything that she says. ‘Ma ka dil’ is very instrumental to her behaviour not only towards her child but towards anyone and her personality is conditioned by how she has a mother’s heart. This is very similar of what we saw in Satyajit Ray’s *Postmaster* that the maternal instinct is expected to pan all across. We can then very clearly see that even though *Postmaster* and *Photograph* are movies of two different eras, certain stigmas related to mothers remain.

While we try to analyse the role of mothers in cinema, with the centrality of the mother figure, the experiments being done by portraying different kinds of maternal women and the fact that there are increasing numbers of women directors on the block , we can look forward to more movies with a realistic and empathetic representation of mothers in the years to come.the fact that we have movies like *Badhaai Ho* and *English Vinglish* indicates that mainstream cinema is ready to make bolder choices and give space to different kinds of motherhood. We also need to learn to not put motherhood or any relation for that matter into monolithic blocks and give the on screen mother the space to explore her relationship with her child on her own terms and with her own understanding and for this, it is of utmost importance that we do away with the archetypal projection of women in cinema.

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