

The Reluctant Mother: A Study of ‘Motherhood’ as a Tool of Patriarchy in Bollywood Films

Rituparna DAS

Techno India University, India
ritu.seasonflower@gmail.com

Abstract: A 2021 advertisement by Preganews, a pregnancy toolkit, celebrating upcoming Women’s Day, has attracted public attention for its sensitive portrayal of infertility in women. The advertisement portrays a joint family where the younger daughter-in-law is being pampered by everyone as she is heavily pregnant. But the elder daughter-in-law who is an accomplished teacher is wistfully sighing at the attention lavished upon the younger one. The camera pans through the awards and certificates that she has obtained through her outstanding accomplishments. The background narration identifies her as unhappy because she is incapable of conceiving a child. The advertisement ends with a message emphasising the need to “embrace those women who are complete” in themselves. Behind this embracing message, therein lies a sinister implication that normalises motherhood as an obvious phenomenon of adult female life and portrays childlessness as some form of disability or deformity that needs compassionate understanding.

Keywords: *mother, motherhood, patriarchy, Bollywood films.*

Martha Gimenez in her essay *Feminism, Pronatalism, and Motherhood* writes that conceiving motherhood as a taken-for-granted dimension of so-called women’s normal adult role has always been one of the key sources of women’s oppression [Gimenez, 1983: 296]. I will argue that Bollywood has cunningly used such a convention as a clever tool of oppression to restrict physical and mental mobility in women. The above-mentioned advertisement has received many positive feedbacks, perhaps because in a country where the role of a woman is primarily defined by her motherhood it has tried to show things differently. But to view motherhood as an individual’s personal choice rather than as a natural process of women’s life is still a far cry for the Indian media.

Glorification of motherhood is nothing new as it has been practiced across time and places. Feminists’ critics have fought among themselves in order to determine whether motherhood is a glory or a fetter to tie a woman with. Jeffner Allen considers motherhood to be utterly 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,

1983: 315]. But Adrienne Rich in her *Of Woman Born*, makes the crucial distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, which according to her, is not inherently oppressive [Rich, 1995: n.p.]. Motherhood, like any other feminist concept, is very subjective and therefore it is difficult to fit it under any single umbrella term. However, irrespective of all arguments, it might not be an exaggeration to perceive the dangerous proximity between motherhood and patriarchal domination.

When we are talking about the cultural context of India, motherhood has a much deeper significance than its surface meaning. Even before the country could free itself from the clutches of colonization, it had tried to give a concrete shape to the abstract idea of nationhood in the imaginary figure of Bharat Mata or Mother India. The image, arising from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1880) and later receiving a graphical structure in Abanindranath Tagore's painting of the same name in 1905, became the nationalist icon for India that was slowly emerging as an independent nation. The image became so popular that a film was made a decade after the Indian Independence, celebrating this conglomeration of motherhood and nationhood. *Mother India* (1957) defined the role of motherhood in Bollywood that comprises of sacrifice, selfless love and infinite tolerance – the parameters that Bollywood could not do away with even half a century later. In Bollywood cinema, motherhood is an absolute concept lying beyond the periphery of questionability and revision and in such paramount stasis there lies the problematics. Bollywood cinema has never abandoned the view on womanhood and motherhood as anything but identical. Yet such lineage of representation is not new as, according to the Vedic tradition, each woman is considered to be a mother. The Vedas talk about the seven mothers that include the cows and the earth as well – anything or anyone that sustains life is called a mother. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are replete with examples where a man addresses a woman as “maatah” or “mother” even if the woman is younger than that man. Hindu tradition has got a whole paraphernalia of goddesses who are worshipped as mother figures. Patrice DiQuinzio writes, “equating the feminine and the maternal and thereby assuming the naturalization of maternal identity in such terms is typical of patriarchal understandings of femininity” [DiQuinzio, 1993: 11].

Various ancient Indian texts show that other than women have chosen the ascetic life since a woman's foremost role is to produce male children as the earth must produce crops. In *Hiranyakesin Grihasutra* it is mentioned that, immediately after the wedding ceremony, the couple must pray to generate a male child and the woman must never have an empty lap or “a sunyopastha” [HG, 1892: 1:6:22:14]. *Satapatha Brahmana* says that an infertile woman can be discarded because she is supposedly possessed by an evil spirit called Nirrti [SB, 1996: Vi: 2.3:13, V: 3:1:13]. Such myopic obsession of refusing to view a woman sans her motherhood is in itself a mechanism of oppression and domination. Yet this obsession has been passed on through centuries and has been celebrated through various art forms including cinema in India.

Since the time of *Mother India* in Bollywood, the celebration of motherhood has remained static while the image of the mother changed according to the time. Sometimes there are possessive mother and evil mothers-in-law in the form of Lalita Pawar (e.g. *Dahej*, 1950, *Saas Bhi Kabhi Babu Thi*, 1970) and other times there are kind mothers in the form of Nirupa Roy (e.g. *Grahasti*, 1963, *Deewar*, 1975). One may also find unmarried mothers fighting against all odds to bring up their children (e.g. *Aradhana*, 1969, *Kya Kehna*, 2000). But the most intriguing is that there is hardly any reluctant mother in Bollywood films. The desire for motherhood has been an obvious condition for the very existence of the women in Bollywood films. Even blockbuster films like *Maine Pyar Kia* (1989) that was made and marketed as a romantic love story promotes motherhood to be the only possible desire for women. We see that the sole objective of an eighteen-year old girl, Suman, is to marry her lover and have babies with him. The very idea that a woman can find her fulfillment only in motherhood is a staple ingredient not only for Bollywood but also for the associated entertainment industries as well.

In the 1994 final interview for the Miss Universe contest, when the Indian contestant Susmita Sen was asked what the essence of being a woman is, she replied "The origin of a child is a mother, who is a woman... That's the essence of being a woman." Sen was not only the winner of the year but also started her career in Bollywood, immediately after winning the competition. Sen's discourse is beyond an individual's opinion on motherhood, rather her answer provides us with a glimpse onto the social construct of gender roles that has continued resonating since ancient times. The idea presented by Sen, as I have argued before, is a byproduct of the systematic infiltration of imposed gender roles in India. As for cinema, since it is a mirror to real life, such cultural ramification is made visible in Bollywood films.

Perhaps no film has so efficiently assorted the patriarchy assigned gender roles in a single narrative than the 1982 film *Shriman Shrimati* has done. The film is about a middle-aged couple Shankar Lal and Parvati Lal who have taken it upon themselves to purge the households from the negative influences of the erring women. They land up in the household of Madhu and Aruna to mend their troublesome home by teaching a good lesson to Aruna. Aruna is portrayed as an outspoken, fun-loving woman who aspires to obtain social recognition. She works for women's rights and is vocal against the injustice against women. But the narrator of the film, along with her husband, Madhu, considers her activities juvenile and futile enough for any dutiful wife and mother to perform. While Aruna perceives her motherhood as the manacle that is withholding her from fulfilling her dreams, Madhu identifies her reluctance towards motherhood as something against normalcy. When Aruna complains of her physical discomfort due to the baby kicking in her womb, Madhu says, "Good! what the father could not do, the son has done." Through Madhu, the film not only normalizes desire for motherhood as the only possibility, but it also desensitizes cruelty against women. The metaphorical kick that Madhu decrees as the punishment for the reluctant mother comes down as a literal slap on Aruna's face when she points finger at Madhu's

own failure in life. The slap that Madhu hurls right in her face resonates on two other occasions – once when her father attempts to hit her as she has failed to fulfill her socially ascribed gender roles of wife, mother and daughter; and the other time when an imposter justifies his rape attempts on Aruna by calling her an aberration from the normal as she has prioritized her career ambitions over her identity of a mother and a wife. Aruna is identified as an anomaly that needs to be cured by the literal as well as the metaphorical slaps from the patriarchy and her final cure comes in the way of Shankar and Parvati who also share the names of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Shankar and Parvati successfully efface Aruna's identity as an independent woman by fragmenting her into the roles of an obedient daughter, dutiful wife and self-sacrificing mother. They provide an ultimate moral yardstick for women who must embrace motherhood as the only fulfillment – an idea not very different from Sen's proclamation on the Miss Universe platform.

Bollywood has aggrandized motherhood to such a gigantic proportion that childlessness has eventually become a singularly binary vice. In Bollywood, anything is better than a childless woman, so much so that it has many a time justified the otherwise socially unacceptable practices like polygamy, stealing or forcefully obtaining babies, as we see in the films like *Bemafa Se Wafa* (1992) or *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (2000). The former shows Ruksar who is incapable of producing children, marrying off her husband to her best friend, Nagma. The latter reveals an even more disturbing premise as we see Raj and Priya hire a prostitute, Madhu, who would copulate and carry Raj's child in exchange for some money. While the films use Ruksar and Priya as the site where the social expectation from the childless women is thrust upon, they reduce the position of Nagma and Madhu to the mere existence of a baby-making machine. Nagma and Madhu, both have to leave after their contributions in baby-making – Nagma commits suicide and Madhu leaves the country. Motherhood is as an active agent that exacts sacrifices and demarcates the social position for women - the wife sacrifices her undivided right on her husband so that the child can come into existence and the "other woman" sacrifices her life and the child so that the child can thrive in the patriarchally defined social system where there is no place for children out of wedlock. But whether it is the wife or the "other woman", it is the woman who gets ground around the axis of motherhood. Polygamy in the name of reproduction has been so well accepted a practice in Bollywood that another contemporary film, *Gharwali Baharwali* (1998), goes to the extent of normalizing cohabitation of both the wives together with the husband and the child – which is even legally unacceptable.

In Bollywood, motherhood is that trump card against which no woman can play. It is like the Laxman Rekha of the *Ramayana*. In the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana drew a line around Sita and asked her to stay within the boundaries; Sita ignored his warnings and overstepped the border only to fall prey to Ravana. If a woman dares to defy motherhood, she instantly becomes the archetype of evil; therefore, motherhood can be conveniently used as a trap to stop a woman whenever society

finds it fit. Be it her love, her career or her independence – a woman must sacrifice it if motherhood comes in her way.

In the 1994 blockbuster, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...?*, the female protagonist Nisha willingly sacrifices her love for Prem because society demands her to spend the rest of her life being the mother to her dead sister's newborn baby. A 1996 film, *Mr. Bechara*, deals with a similar premise where Anita, a patient of temporary memory loss, does not want to go back to her true love, Ajay, just because she finds herself committed to the child that she has mistakenly fostered as her own during the period of her memory loss.

The scenario has not changed with Bollywood stepping into the present millennium. *Murder* (2004), a Bollywood remake of *Unfaithful* (2002), brings in the element of motherhood to emphasize the intensity of the female protagonist's guilt of adultery. For Simran, it is her motherhood that makes her discard the romantic ambitions and come back to the secure cocoon called family. Similarly, three years later, in another movie, *Life in a... Metro* (2007), Shikha, a lonely housewife who tolerates her husband's adultery and takes care single handedly of her daughter, finds it impossible to break free from the clutches of her abusive husband and chooses the man whom she truly loves as motherhood occurs in her life.

Towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century when the awareness of gender role and identity is growing stronger it is perhaps the time to explore the possibility of the other side of the narrative where motherhood can be viewed as something optional rather than integral. Though Indian cinema has journeyed over a century and stepped into the new millennium more than twenty years ago, it could not fully do away with the preconceived notion of the feminine desire of motherhood, which remained invariably constant. That is why films such as *Aitraaz* (2004) or *Zeher* (2006), that portray women willingly opting for abortion, invariably ends up demonizing women who actively refuse to become mothers. Such active choice in motherhood does not go well with Bollywood that works as an ideological apparatus to reinforce stereotypical gender roles and ignore the blindspots in the discourse on motherhood. Perhaps nothing could exemplify that blindspot in Bollywood better than a 2020 movie entitled *Thappad*. The film has received many positive reviews for its supposed feminist angle that talks about a woman's courage to stand up against society and divorce her husband who has slapped her. Unlike the 1980s when Madhu's slap on Aruna was socially accepted without even a cringe, 2020 is a year when Amrita's determination to stand against her physical assault is commended across the media. However, when Amrita realizes that she is pregnant with her husband's child, she determines to fulfil all her duties in her husband's family as a good daughter-in-law and a devoted mother to his future child – the very roles that she has been questioning before. The film leaves us with no blank space for the thought as to whether Amrita really wants to carry out her pregnancy with a man for whom she has no respect. Yet, *Thappad* has earned an impressive box office return, though the country went to lockdown due to COVID-19 just after a few days after its release. On the other hand, a thematically experimental film of 2016, *Ki & Ka*,

has failed miserably at the box office despite its revolutionary concept of househusband and primary female breadwinner in Indian society. The film brings out many ideas bashing patriarchy, one of which is the female protagonist Kia's outright refusal to conceive a child because of her priority lying in her identity as an independent and career-oriented woman.

To conclude, we can say that Kia, like any woman who believes motherhood to be an active choice rather than a natural phenomenon, definitely is a transgression in the Bollywood myopic standard of womanhood where there is a thin line between sainthood and damnation defined by a woman's choice of motherhood. Bollywood has yet to grow up to accommodate women like Aruna and Kia who are very much a part of the contemporary society yet who, like their Bollywood counterparts, are silenced and negated in the mainstream discourse on Indian women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, 1983: Jeffner Allen, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women", in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited by Joyce Trebilcock, United States: Rowman and Allanheldpp, 1983, pp. 315-330.
- DiQuinzio, 1993: Patrice DiQuinzio "Exclusion to Essentialism in Feminist Theory: The Problem of Mothering", in *Hypatia*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1993, pp. 10-11 (online).
- Gimenez, 1983: Martha Gimenez, "Feminism, Pronatalism, and Motherhood", in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited by Joyce Trebilcock, United States: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983, pp. 287-314.
- HG, 1892: *Hiranyakesin Grihasutra*, 1:6:22:14, translated by Hermann Oldenberg, 1892, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe30/index.htm>.
- Rich, 1995: A. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, United States, W. W. Norton, 1995.
- SB, 1996: *Satapatha Brahmana*, Vi: 2.3:13, V: 3:1:13, translated by Patrick Olivelle, 1996, https://archive.org/stream/dli.ernet.15999/15999-Dharmasutras_djvu.txt.