

From Maternal Paradox to Empowered Mothering:
Reconfiguration of Motherhood in Contemporary
Hindi Cinema



Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

for the Award of Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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It is certified that the work contained in the thesis titled “**From Maternal Paradox to Empowered Mothering: Reconfiguration of Motherhood in Contemporary Hindi Cinema**” by **Pratyusha Pramanik** has been carried out under my/~~our~~ supervision and that this work has not been submitted elsewhere for a degree.

It is further certified that the student has fulfilled all the requirements of Comprehensive, Candidacy and SOTA.



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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I, **Pratyusha Pramanik**, certify that the work embodied in this thesis is my own bona fide work and carried out by me under the supervision of **Dr Ajit Kumar Mishra** from 2018 to 2023, at the **Department of Humanistic Studies, Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi**. The matter embodied in this thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree/diploma. I declare that I have faithfully acknowledged and given credits to the research workers wherever their works have been cited in my work in this thesis. I further declare that I have not willfully copied any other's work, paragraphs, text, data, results, *etc.*, reported in journals, books, magazines, reports dissertations, theses, *etc.*, or available at websites and have not included them in this thesis and have not cited as my own work.

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Acknowledgement

Although the doctoral journey very often seems to be a lonely and a difficult one, it is also one of the most rewarding times of our life, where each day comes with a new challenge, and each challenge offers us something to learn. I had embarked on this journey immediately after my Postgraduation with the youthful desire to “follow knowledge like a sinking star” As this journey almost comes to an end, it does not look anything like I had imagined it to be, but I would like to think it has made me a little older and a lot wiser. This journey has given me a way of life, and a way of looking at the world and I am glad that I chose to pursue this degree and also managed to complete it and this would not have been possible if I did not have these people by my side. Just how it takes a village to raise a child it also takes an army to finish a thesis.

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28 August 2023.

Pratyusha Pramanik

Preface

“Motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all, a mould that is all-encompassing and means the same to all people ... No mother is all good or all bad, all laughing or all serious, all loving or all angry.”

Erma Bombeck, *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession*, 1983

In a patriarchal society, a homogenised idea of motherhood is endorsed by essentialising, naturalising, and idealising motherhood for all women. Women are reduced to their reproductive role, as they are expected to produce, preserve, nurture, and train the future citizens of the nation-state. When these women fail to perform these culturally and socially ordained duties, they are labelled as bad mothers and are marginalised. In India, with liberalisation and globalisation, women have stepped outside their private realms and moved into non-traditional roles; they have also problematised the conventional mothering practices. They are practising mothering with agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy, which have so far been denied. Recent cinematic representations in Hindi Cinema have registered this reconfiguration of motherhood, and there has been an ongoing shift in depicting mothers who are disrupting the dominant discourses of mothering practices prevalent in India. This changing discourse of motherhood and its representation has also brought to light the challenges these mothers face while negotiating these changes and the strategies they adopt to overcome these challenges.

In India, motherhood studies is an emerging discipline, and only a few scholarly works exist. The representation of unconventional mothering practices in the Indian context remains unexplored in the existing scholarly discourse. The present thesis studies the representation of the reconfiguration of motherhood in Hindi Cinema and offers an

insight into the socio-cultural changes being brought about in contemporary Indian society. The study thus investigates how women as mothers care for their individual selves while being and becoming mothers; it also studies the experiences of mothers of disabled children or children who identifies as queer and the experiences of women who adopt technological aids to become mothers while negotiating the societal label of being the bad mother. These women are marginalised as bad mothers for failing to adhere to the societal parameters that society uses to determine the position of women: firstly, whether a woman is able to perform her socially and biologically determined role as a reproducer, and secondly, whether on becoming a mother she is able to perform the duties of preservation, nurturance, and training. Based on this, the thesis has identified four distinct themes, which have been discussed in the four chapters. The thesis is held together by the theoretical framework of maternal paradox, intersectional feminism, and empowered mothering, which brings together how aspects of a person's social and political identities assimilate to create different modes of privilege and discrimination, and the feminist ethics of care that these women may adopt to overcome the maternal paradox. Such an intersectional approach helps to formulate an understanding regarding the several factors that participate in weaving together a woman's identity not just as a mother but also as an individual.

The thesis comprises six chapters; the first chapter, *Introduction: Motherhood, Maternal Paradox, and Beyond*, traces the background of Motherhood Studies in the Western and Indian discourses. Thereafter, it maps the history of the representation of mothers in Hindi Cinema and identifies the knowledge gap. The research methodology and theoretical framework are also discussed in this chapter. The next chapter, *Mothering the Self: Changing Stories, Changing Lives*, is a study of the representation of working mothers who prioritise their self-actualisation and higher-order needs over

their caregiving and familial duties, thereby questioning the hegemonic idea of mothers being selfless and sacrificial. These mothers are now represented as individuals with their own dreams, desires, and aspirations besides being mothers. The third chapter, *Mothering the Disabled: Empowerment Beyond Grieving*, looks at the representation of mothers who care for disabled children; these mothers break the stereotypical notion that ideal mothers give birth to healthy children only. Mothering the disabled requires greater skill and understanding; it is emotionally demanding as they go through parental burnout and chronic sorrow as they accept their children's disability and their roles as perpetual caregivers of their disabled children. It is important to develop a greater understanding of the strategies adopted by such mothers to overcome their maternal paradox. Similarly, the third chapter, *Mothering the Queer: Overcoming Maternal Dilemma*, deals with the mothers of queer children, and it traces their trajectory of acceptance and their journey towards unlearning their heteronormative outlook to become queer sympathisers. These mothers are caught in a paradox- on the one hand, they have their traditional familial values, which expect them to raise a socially acceptable child, and on the other, they are faced with the societal expectation to love their child unconditionally. Finally, in the fourth chapter, *ART and Motherhood: Towards Maternal Choices*, the thesis takes up mothers who embrace motherhood through Assisted Reproductive Technology. In Indian society, the idea of adoption and technologically-enabled motherhood is not yet accepted in a sympathetic light, so this chapter attempts to develop an understanding of the stigma associated with infertility and the paradox of choosing technologically-enabled mothering practices that allow women to become mothers, overcoming her biological restriction, while also limiting her choices within the biological paradigm. The chapter also explores how ART and the surrogacy industry have been a blessing for a privileged section of society, including

queer parents, while exploiting some unprivileged women who choose to become mother-workers as a means of livelihood. The sixth chapter, *Conclusion: Redefining Motherhood*, synthesises the observations and analysis undertaken in the foregoing chapters. The previous chapters have identified strategies for practising empowered mothering that the mothers adopt to overcome their maternal paradox. These strategies are discussed with respect to the reconfiguration of motherhood in contemporary Hindi Cinema. The chapter also discusses the future directions for motherhood studies in India.

The marginalised mothers discussed in the thesis are not isolated individuals whose stories are far removed from reality; instead, they are everyday women around us who have been silenced and their untold stories ignored but have now found a voice to share their experiences with the changing dynamics in the Hindi film industry. These films not only take a step towards making society more inclusive through public awareness, but they also open avenues for institutional and societal reforms, which could lead to maternal benefits, institutional childcare facilities, care facilities for families of the disabled and counselling facilities for families of the queer, and normalising equal childcare responsibilities shared by both parents.