

Chapter-1

Introduction: Motherhood, Maternal Paradox, and Beyond

...a mother is, at the most elementary level, both weakness and power, innocence and manipulation, self-denial and self-interest. It is the paradoxical reciprocity of the two that creates a version of the master-slave dialectic, which leads to confusion on the part of observers, and miscalculation by both ‘oppressors’ and ‘reformers’

Nita Kumar, Afterword *Mai: A Discussion in Mai: Silently Mother, 2022*

As I became deeply involved in the women’s movement, the scales fell away from my eyes. My mother emerged before me in a new light. I often wondered-did she get the space she wanted? Did she realize it was her right? Or had she succumbed in life making sacrifices because that was what was expected of her? I began to reflect about my mother’s struggle from time I could remember, her feisty fights, her total support to us-so that we, her daughters could enjoy a better life.

Jasodhara Bagchi, Foreword to *Janani: Mothers, Daughter, Motherhood, 2013*

Since the inception of the feminist movement, at its watershed moments, several feminists have engaged with the discourse of the personal as political, especially while trying to define and understand their mothers (Woolf, 2014; Rich, 1976). Mothers are assigned a significant role in constructing the worldview of their children and preparing the future citizens of the nation. Through stories, songs, and lullabies, they help their children acquire a multidimensional identity. Although the procreative role of women has been celebrated and glorified in all heteronormative societies, it has in fact, led to their oppression. “In patriarchal motherhood, it is assumed (and expected) that all women want to be mothers (essentialization), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalization), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization)” (O’Reilly, 2016 b). In other words, patriarchy has always glorified motherhood as the most prized position for women. However, this glorification of motherhood by patriarchy has not empowered women who are mothers

(Bagchi, 1990). Whether women as mothers represent a site of empowerment or a means of oppression, is what constitutes the very idea of the maternal paradox.

Mothering is a culturally and socially configured practice which has been designated as an integral part of a woman's life- a woman is not born a mother; she becomes one. Across countries and generations, mothers have thus been looked at through the lens of sacrifice and endurance. The act of mothering is associated with the act of nurturing and caregiving. Biological determinism has shaped constructions and images of mothers, where mothering is considered as being a natural and biologically imperative phenomenon (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010). Numerous feminist scholars such as Butler (1990) and Jackson and Scott (1996) have challenged these ideas and disrupted assumed connections between womanhood and motherhood that are historically, socially, and culturally reproduced. Yet women continue to live their lives amid dominant gendered, heterosexual, and cultural assumptions that all women want to become biological mothers as a natural consequence of partnering with a man (Letherby, 1994). 'Compulsory heterosexuality' is one of the primary criteria that shapes constructions of motherhood and women's mothering experiences regulating them both within and outside boundaries (Rich, 1976). Heterosexuality is imposed on women through motherhood and it becomes a key site where sexuality, gender, and sex intersect (Jackson, 2006). Over the years and across the globe, normative family structures and practices revolve around the good mother who keeps the family together; this image of the good mother is unique in different cultures and ethnicities, yet they are mostly, married, middle-class, heterosexual women. Hence, same-sex or multiple parents are frequently invisible in the imaginings of the community, government policy, schools, workplaces, childcare and even in extended families (Rawsthorne, 2010). Thus, for women, it is not only important to become a mother, but also important for

her to become a good mother and adhere to the culturally set standards of good mothering propagated through the collective imaginings of the community.

It was Ruddick (1989) who degendered motherwork by treating 'mother' as a verb instead of a noun. According to her, motherwork primarily involves preservation, nurturance, and training the child to be socially acceptable. These practices lead to a set of "intellectual capacities which [the woman] develops, metaphysical attitudes that she assumes, and the values she affirms in..." her child; and these practices make her a mother, and not any biological or social imperative (p. 24). This implies that anyone who is capable of mothering can become a mother; yet only women are deemed suitable for motherwork which indeed restrict them to the role of a reproducer. However, when a woman resists the patriarchal notion of motherhood by claiming an independent identity as a woman beyond her role as a mother or performs non-traditional mothering, she is vilified and blamed for being a bad mother (Miller, 2017). These mothers are then blamed and shamed not only by society at large but also by their close relatives, spouses, and sometimes even by their children. They are made to feel guilty for being failed as a mother, even if they may be successful otherwise. The image of the bad mother and the concomitant blaming is practised to ensure that women continue to strive towards becoming good mothers. Bad mothers have been strategically represented in texts and cinema to portray what a good mother should not be or should not do. This paradox of good/bad mothers highlights what the culture fears about women in general and mothers in particular. As a result, the vilification of mothers who adopt alternative mothering strategies is not only common in western culture, but can also be seen as a reality in the Indian context. The narrative of mothering depicted the good Indian mother as self-sacrificial, healthy-male childbearing, and economically dependent. Here, mothers have been glorified while being denied empowerment

(Krishnaraj, 2010, p. 182), thus leading to the silencing of diverse maternal experiences and the predominance of a hegemonic narrative of mothering.

However, this social desire to monitor women through their reproductive capabilities and maternal responsibilities is currently being challenged by women, who have problematised the good/bad mother paradox. Women who are prioritising their dreams, aspirations, and well-being and voicing their maternal ambivalence are still marginalised and treated as bad mothers, but they are gradually acquiring narrative empowerment as they are being represented in cinema and literature. Cinema and literature are crucial ideological instruments that propagate prevailing ideas about gender roles and power dynamics. They not only reflect the social reality but they also actively mold and shape it by fostering a prevailing narrative. Therefore, the thesis investigates the representation of mothers in Hindi films to trace the trajectories of unconventional mothering practices and examine their implications for mothering and motherhood in India.

Global Discourses on Motherhood

Since the inception of the feminist movement, it has been concerned with the significance of motherhood and mothering in women's life. The topics of motherhood and reproduction have been subjects of intense debate and discussion within the feminist movement, which have clamoured for several changes in the society, but only some of these changes have been possible. For instance, during the First Wave of Feminism in Great Britain and the United States, women sought for equal rights and put forth the argument that since women are maternal therefore, they are moral and respectable, hence they deserve to be granted the right to vote (Porter, 2010). However, this glorification of motherhood and the maternal is countered, and during the Second Wave of Feminism, motherhood was considered as an oppressive tool which was the

source of women's inequality, so Beauvoir (2009), Firestone (1970), and Friedan (1993) called for an end to physical reproduction by women while celebrating the arrival of contraceptive technologies. Beauvoir asserts that access to birth control and legalized abortion would empower women to exercise control over their pregnancies without restrictions. A woman's ability to conceive is influenced by both her strong desire and some degree of chance. Without widespread use of artificial insemination, a woman may wish to become pregnant but struggle to conceive. Conversely, she might face the burden of unwanted pregnancies and be compelled to give birth against her wishes (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 546). On a similar note, Firestone highlights how the biological difference of the sexes have been the reason behind the subjugation of women. She also noted that before the introduction of birth control, women in history were constantly subject to the dictates of their biology, dealing with menstruation, menopause, and various challenging aspects of female health, such as painful childbirth, breastfeeding, and caring for infants. These biological factors made women reliant on men (whether family members, partners, or societal structures like clans, governments, or communities) for their survival (Firestone 1972, p. 8). These feminists considered that technology could emancipate them from the barbaric pain of pregnancy. Through the emerging reproductive technologies, the differences between men and women could be effaced as women defy their fixed biology as they free themselves from the "tyranny of reproduction" (Firestone, 1972, p. 11). Radical feminists such as Judith Blake and Leta S. Hollingworth have also discussed coercive pronatalism where women are forced to become mothers, which in turn becomes a means of their oppression. This reproductive role is the primary reason for women's eternal relegation to 'otherness'- "The low social and philosophical value given to reproduction and to

birth is not ontological, not imminent, but socio-historical, and the sturdiest plank in the platform of male supremacy.” (O’ Brien, 1981, p. 75).

Despite the persistent attempts by feminists to bring social relations of reproduction at par with those of production, the issue was not resolved, and debates continued to rage through the 1980s and 1990s in the West, and continues to be a major issue in India. This dichotomy is fraught with a great deal of social significance. The reproductive domain ensured the reproduction of labour-power not merely through procreation, but also through ensuring social reproduction by maintaining the existing social relations. Hence, reproduction was the underbelly of production, ensuring its long-term social existence and formed the basis of dominance of the male productive sphere over the female reproductive sphere. In the West, with technological aids for housework underdeveloped capitalism, a large portion of white middle-class women either joined or aspired to join the job market. It is this body of women who faced the greatest conflict in their self-development in motherhood. Unlike some of working-class, mostly black, but also middle-class families in which the extended family helped the mother to retain the job (often in the unorganised sector) the middle class white families that formed the basis of the bourgeoisie, had upheld the ideal of the 'nuclear' family in which maternity was a frighteningly isolated affair, where motherhood bandied about as women's biological destiny appeared to blot out all other aspects of her young aspiring life that was about to open out into fruition of all her multifarious efforts put in to reach a kind of life of her own (Bagchi, 2017). These Second Wave feminists have often been blamed for vilifying reproduction and instigating women to opt out of motherhood. Yet, decades later, Lauri Umansky’s book *Motherhood Reconceived* (1996), provides a historical analysis of feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s and speaks of these feminists while critiquing biological reductionism was also trying to incorporate the

perspective and experiences of women as mothers while highlighting their role in the economy. She asserts that the feminist movement from the late 1960s vigorously and positively addressed the notion of motherhood, quite contrary to the prevailing criticism that feminists vilified and ignored the needs of mothers and children. She charted the journey of feminists from their radical ideology to the cultural feminism of the 1970s, thereby pushing motherhood to the fore as a powerful universalising issue. Feminists strongly endorsed motherhood through such activities as 'feminist psychoanalysis, ecofeminism, spirituality, and the antipornography movement' (Weiner, 1997, p. 457). The book notes in the epilogue that feminist mothering theory is still considered the 'metaphorical cement for a fragmented movement' (Umansky, 1996, p. 12).

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, was the first work that directed scholarly attention on motherhood studies and was first published in 1976. However, scholarly interest in motherhood studies gained momentum two decades later, only in the late 1990s. Rich distinguished between motherhood as institution and mothering as practice. She identifies 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. (Rich, 1976, p. 7)

On the one hand, the patriarchal institution of motherhood is male-defined and male-controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, on the other hand, the experience of "mothering" is female-defined and female-centred and is empowering to women. Whereas motherhood operates as a patriarchal institution to constrain, regulate, and dominate women and their mothering, mothers' own experiences of mothering can, nonetheless, be a site of strength, especially if mothers can define mothering for

themselves” (Hallstein, O’Reilly, & Giles, 2020). Rich is also the first feminist scholar in the arena of motherhood studies who has highlighted the potentiality of empowered mothering.

Following Rich, Sara Ruddick has examined the experience of mothering, as opposed to the institution of motherhood; she has also developed a theoretical framework and vocabulary for the analysis. According to her “it is the practice of mothering that makes one a mother, not a biological or social imperative [and] [t]herefore, the title of ‘mother’ is not strictly limited to biological mother, or even women” (LaChance Adams, 2010, p. 727). Thus, Ruddick’s positioning of the word “mother” as a verb instead of a noun, degendered motherwork, thereby divesting care from biology she destabilizes the gender essentialism of motherhood (Ruddick, 1989, p. 17). It is only in 2006 that Andrea O’Reilly coined the term “motherhood studies” to categorise the legitimacy and autonomy of the scholarship on motherhood. She was also the founder and director of The Motherhood Initiative (1998-2019). She founded the Demeter Press, the first feminist press on motherhood. She also happens to be the author and editor of eighteen books on motherhood. With her extensive work on Motherhood Studies, she remains the pioneer of modern motherhood studies because of her discussion on empowered and feminist mothering (2004, 2008, 2016a). In *Mother Outlaws* (2004), she proposes eight rules of ‘good’ motherhood as prescribed by contemporary patriarchal society. She also discusses how these patriarchal ideologies of motherhood make mothering deeply oppressive to women because it requires the repression or denial of the mother’s selfhood; it also assigns mothers all the responsibility of mothering but gives them no real power over the child. Such ‘powerless responsibility’ denies a mother the authority and agency to determine her own mothering experiences. Moreover, in defining

mothering as personal and non-political work, patriarchal motherhood restricts the way mothers can affect social change through feminist childrearing and maternal activism.

Arendell (1999, p. 3), too speaks of the existence of the hegemonic notion of the good and 'natural' mother in the West; one who is 'heterosexual, married and monogamous... White and native-born... not economically self-sufficient... not employed'. 'Good mother' discourse and images are culturally and temporarily located. In affluent Western societies, good mother discourse is also implicated in constructing good mothering practices as 'intensive' (Hays, 1996). In her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996) besides discussing the notion of 'intensive mothering' and contemporary expectations of working mothers, she also identified three themes- firstly, "mother is the central caregiver"; secondly, "mothering is regarded as more important than paid employment"; thirdly, "mothering requires lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources". These guidelines were implemented on women during the postwar period so that they could perform good mothering. Working mothers are expected to be nurturing and unselfish while engaging with their children, at the same time, they are to be competitive and ambitious at work. She charts the historiography of the ideology of 'intensive mothering,' which expects mothering to be child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive. This form of mothering came in vogue when more women achieved economic independence and were able to cater to the needs of fewer children while being equipped with labour-saving devices and household help. Even if these women had a career, the limited time they spent with their children was so designed that it compensated for their absence for childcare. In attachment theory, women as mothers are expected to be constantly wise and kind, putting their needs aside as they exclusively focus on nurturing their children (Buchanan, 2017). As Goodwin

and Huppertz (2010, p. 2) note, the good mother being ‘white, heterosexual, economically dependent, and child focussed’ obscures from sight diverse motherhoods and mothering practices. The constructed dichotomy between good and bad mothers also upholds heterosexual notions of nuclear families, monomaternality and supports heteronormative practices (Park, 2013). Social divisions between genders and binary constructions around being a man (father) or a woman (mother) as well as being heterosexual or ‘homosexual’ persists. These imagined binaries are enmeshed with other social categories such as class and ethnicity but vary with individual ‘socially located biographies’ (Jackson, 2006, p. 106). Thus, mothering exists within heteronormative, sexist, racist, and classed societies that shape the dominant cultural discourse. These dominant discourses very often cast away those mothers, who are deviating from the dominant discourse. Their mothering practices and motherhoods are considered as deficit and therefore they are marginalised and are treated as unconventional. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky also published an edited volume, *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America (1998)*, which contributed to understanding the demonisation of those women represented as 'bad mothers'. The volume discusses mother blaming as a historical process starting from 1600s to the twentieth century. The book emphasises how historically 1. any problem of the child is caused by the mother; and 2. the mother damages the child by being too protective, not protective enough, or both. The book includes contributions by literary scholars, psychologists, journalists, sociologists, and legal scholars thereby appropriately highlighting how mothers across cultures are victims of mother blaming. Motherhood scholarship has also covered debates on how women balance paid work and mothering in works such as *The Price of Motherhood* by Ann Crittenden and *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars (2005)* by Miriam Peskowitz. In *The Price of*

Motherhood, we get a detailed account of how motherhood is a key factor in gender inequality. Crittenden has calculated the “mommy tax” or “motherhood penalty” that American women continue to pay even now on account of the absence of public childcare which runs into millions of dollars. This includes the occupational costs, financial insecurity, and the unpaid caregiving that they perform because of the gender inequality which continues to persist in the society. Although the study is based in America and focuses on upper-class white women, the perils of the caregiving community can be largely generalised. The core of the contradiction is that raising children produces human capital that generates economic production. However, childrearing is invisibilised in national accounting except when paid workers take it up. Even professional caregivers are extremely underpaid and overworked. The book ends on the note of how it is the next milestone of feminists to raise the concerns of mothers and caregivers by bringing necessary legal and economic changes so that women can bring children up without putting themselves down. Peskowitz’s book picks up from here and deconstructs the debate between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers. She elaborates how working as a mother or not is not a personal choice but rather has significant public consequences.

Mothering in America is not an isolated task; it is deeply ingrained in social, cultural, and economic issues. Recent books that challenge the sexual contract, such as Petra Bueskens’s 2018 book on *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, also deal with the economic consequences of mothering. Buesken builds her theoretical position on Carole Pateman’s assertion that the social contract from its inception relied on the existence of the sexual contract which aids oppression of women leading to the subjugation of women as wives and mothers. The book focuses on the contradiction between women’s maternal and individualised selves.

The contemporary scenario shows that women are free as individuals while being constrained as mothers. Women are now free to act as individuals, which was impossible within the old social contract. However, these free choices like delaying marriage and motherhood, gaining education, and pursuing a career are being performed along with other responsibilities that continue to fall upon women. On becoming mothers, women see a sharp increase in the gendered division of labour within the family, as women take up much of the childcare and domestic work. Buesken builds her arguments based on historical, theoretical, and philosophical investigation and a thematic case study of ten working mothers, so her study seems to be well-rounded.

Additionally, Patricia Hill Collins' *Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing of Motherhood* has laid the foundation of the intersectional approach to motherhood studies. She highlights how for white feminist mothers and their children a relative degree of economic security exists and these women enjoy racial privileges that allows them to see themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy instead of members of racial ethnic group struggling for power. Whereas for black enslaved women it was simply the question of survival. Motherhood studies until then focused on the plights of white, middle-class, stay-at-home mothers. The shift from radical feminists to cultural feminists also gradually looked at mothers and caregiving in a more inclusive light. Following Hill Collins, there have been scholarly works focusing on different mothering experiences that draw on intersectional feminist thought. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (2005) by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kafelas is a book about single women in low-income groups choosing motherhood over marriage. Contrary to popular opinion, the study finds that low-income women choose late marriage not because they value marriage

any less but because they value it more. Elaine Bell Kaplan is *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unravelling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood* (1997) elucidates the affirmative value of motherhood for marginalised black teenage women. Sociologist Ruth Sidel's *Unsung Heroines* (2006) challenges the stigma around single mothers. Her study is intersectional and deals with single mothers from diverse races, ethnicities, religions, and social classes who embraced single motherhood through divorce, widowhood, separation, and some who never married. The connecting thread between them is that none of them had planned on being single parents. Nevertheless, these women are committed to their families, holding fast to traditional American values, and creating positive new lives for themselves and their children. Finally, *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* (2020) also focuses on the depiction of mothers in literature, culture, art, and popular culture and various intersectional mothering practices. Representation of diverse motherhood and mothering practices has become an essential part of motherhood studies. Cultural, textual, and artistic spaces are accepted, embraced, and negotiated to challenge traditional conceptions of mothering to create alternative practices and visions for mothers in the present and the past. While the book discusses celebrity mothers, mothers in religion, and songs, it also discusses matrifocal voices in literature and maternal memoir through an intersectional feminist lens.

As can be noted from this section, the scope of motherhood studies and feminist intervention have gradually widened and motherhood scholars have identified four interconnected themes or categories of enquiry: institution of motherhood, motherhood as experience, maternal identity or subjectivity, and finally maternal agency/activism. In the first category, "motherhood as an institution," one studies the ideology of motherhood, examining policies, laws, ideologies, and images of patriarchal motherhood. In the second category one studies "motherhood as an experience" and

investigates the work that women do as mothers. In the third category, “motherhood as identity or subjectivity,” one examines how a female’s sense of self is affected by the institution of motherhood and practices of mothering. In the fourth category “motherhood as agency,” one discusses motherhood as a site of empowerment and political activism. It emphasises maternal power and ascribes agency to mothers, giving rise to the view of mothering as a socially engaged enterprise that seeks to effect cultural change in the home through feminist childrearing and the world-at-large through political/social activism. Currently, the discipline is focussing on the multiple positionalities or subjectivities of mothers, on the social representation of women and mothers in language and finally, on how mothering is experienced, practised and socially constructed in the context of social inequalities such as homophobia, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism and especially in non-Western contexts and in postcolonial setups such as India, Africa, and other countries.

Indian Discourses on Motherhood

Wifehood, it is held, is always personal, but motherhood is the abandonment of personality, the core of renunciation

Advaita Ashrama, XIV Parental Guidance—A Mother in *The Life of the Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, 1912

Every woman is a mother in embryo. That is her supreme function in life. That is her social mission

Lala Lajpat Rai, as cited in Kishwar *The Daughters of Aryavrata*, 1999

In India, the ideology of motherhood does not originate from a solitary, defining, and dramatic event; instead, it has evolved over time because of the combined impact of cultural and political influences that built up gradually. (Nandy, 2017, p. 54). The mother iconography has had roots in popular religious and socio-cultural practices. The mother and the motherland have been glorified as “*Janani janmabhūmishā*

swargadapi gariyasi” (Trans: Mother and motherland are greater than heaven; Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 73). The Mother, the Mother Goddess, and the Mother Nation are prevalent tropes which are recurrent in cultural texts and popular imaginations. The oldest available cultural artifacts in the pre-Aryan civilization in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa bear testimony to the mother cult. The principles of fertility represented by the embodiment of the mother is the oldest testimony to the sense of continuity of the species. Not just birthing but the process of nurturance that makes it incumbent upon humans to recognise the value of the mother. After the nomadic Aryans settled down to cultivation and reaped the harvest of the fertile land of the Gangetic delta, they came to worship *Prithvi* or *Bhumi* the mother who provided them with security and prosperity. However, these Mother Goddess and the non-hegemonic Mother Goddess of pre-Aryan tribal societies who usually presided over epidemics, diseases, and droughts and so on has been gradually appropriated into the hegemonic Brahminical models of motherhood that are compliant towards full patriarchal control over all resources, most of all over women’s sexuality (Bagchi, 2017). Kosambi (1962) pointed out that in the food-gathering stage, the mother goddess was prominent, but a change in economy induced corresponding changes in caste and cult; sometimes a fusion of the cult took place. Mother Goddesses became consorts to male Gods even though they continued to be worshipped as Durga and Kali and other forms of *shakti*. For example, Goddess Durga is empowered by the male Gods, who give her the weapons to fight the buffalo demon, Mahishashur. She has been further tamed down and sanskritised to suit the hegemonic Brahmanical models of motherhood and is now worshipped with her four children (Bhattacharya, 2007).

Various ancient texts such as the *Dharmasastras* and *Stridharmapaddhati* which extolled childbearing and conjugality as the primary purpose of women. The Vedic

texts too are pronatalist in nature and for the Rigvedic Aryans “a mother apart from her tender motherly care of her children had no existence...” (Upadhyaya, 1974, p. 4).

Speaking of characters from Hindu epics such as Sita, Savitri, and Sati; it is observed-

...such ideal women...portrayed in literature, have moulded Indian womanhood to a new type which has been held as glory of Hindu culture for more than a thousand years... it cannot be denied that there is an element of nobility in the sacrifice and self-abnegation of Indian woman, and it is impossible to withhold the due need of praise, even admiration, from that patient and suffering class of humanity (Majumdar 1953, p. 25)

This emphasis on the procreative role of women is also noticed in the figures of Kunti, Gandhari, or the characters of Ambika and Ambalika who had to bear children with Vyasa, their ascetic brother-in-law, even after the demise of their husbands, to ensure the family lineage. Yashoda, who was the foster mother of Krishna, but has been portrayed as the epitome of motherly love and devotion; she has found expressions in art, literature, popular songs, and is a significant part of public imagination. In this context, it is important to note that Christian discourse on motherhood is like the Hindu model of motherhood. Mother Mary is symbolic of an idyllic and cherished mother who birthed a child even without any sexual intercourse. According to the teachings of the Catholic Church “heterosexual intercourse with a procreative aim as it takes place exclusively within a lifelong marriage constitutes a model of normative sexuality in the teachings of the Catholic Church” (Schutte 1997, p. 41). Use of contraception and abortion is seen as a sin and is thus discouraged. Women’s sole responsibility and religious duty is to raise good Christian children. Since women are blamed for the Original Sin and the fall of man, according to Augustine’s doctrine, women’s only function in society is child bearing and child rearing (Armstrong, 1999, pp. 148-50). In Islam, it is believed that pregnant women earn merits from Allah. According to a hadith if she dies at the time of birthing or within forty days of delivery, she is considered a *shaheed* or a martyr (as cited in Nandy, 2017).

Like elsewhere, the ideology of motherhood in India has been influenced by the religious discourse and it is the prevalence of the Goddess worship that facilitated the empowering of the mother image so that it also became the dominant myth in the anti-colonial struggle of the nation. She is both the protector against evil and the nurturer of her children. Considering the political connotation, Sister Nivedita writes about the Durga Puja- “For the mother of universe shines forth in the life of humanity, as a woman, as family life, as country” (as cited in Krishnaraj, 2010), This trope of the mother and the Mother Goddess was transformed into the worship of the Motherland during the national Independence movement.

A unique dialectic between the ideology of imperialism and the Indian resistance to it resulted in motherhood’s emergence as a pivot of Indian feminism both as myth and reality. In the colonial times, the colonisers criticised the Hindu society for its treatment of women. Women were subjected to severe oppression in the form of social practices like child marriage, perpetual widowhood, *sati* were prevalent and they considered motherhood in a very positive light. However, it is these atrocities against women which became the target of the civilising mission of the colonialists. So, when the anti-colonialists, especially in Bengal had to present a counter-narrative, it is then that the myth of the mother assumed enormous importance in the cultural life of the country (Bagchi, 2017). Bankim Chandra writes in his *Bangadarshan* identifying the ten forms of the Mother Goddess as *Dasamahavidya* - “sees the evolution of Indian society in the ten successive forms, right from the past when non-Aryans were subdued by the Aryans (*Kali*), through the wretched conditions of India under Muslim rule (*Dhumavati*), and right up to the futurist vision of *Mahalakshmi* when Indian society will be prosperous and bountiful”. (as cited in Bagchi, 2017, p. 54). However, it is through his novel

Anandamath that he presented the idea of militant nationalism as a form of devotion towards the Mother Goddess Durga. Invoking the Mother Goddess, he writes-

The gold-adorned autumnal mother image of
The first day's festivity [*Saptami*] smiling.
Floating on water, radiating lights.
Is this Mother? Yes, this is Mother.
I recognise my mother, my land of birth in her image
Of clay, embodying mother earth, adorned
In many jewels but not buried in the
Wombs of time (*Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay Rachnavali*, as cited in
Bagchi, 2017, p. 54)

As a phenomenon it was quite unique - religious, cultural, and the aesthetic domain were politicised with the help of the notion of motherhood. Initially, the Mother Goddesses as Durga and Kali are worshipped by these nationalists to invoke power and strength, and gradually these Mother Goddesses were superimposed against the image of the Motherland. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's use of the Mother Goddess metaphor for the Motherland led extremist leaders Aurobindo Ghose and Bipin Chandra Pal. Ramakrishna's Kali worship also contributed to this line of thinking; Vivekananda in his poem *Kali the Mother-*

Dancing mad with joy,
Come, Mother come,
For Terror is thy name,
Death is in thy breasts,
Thou 'Time' the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dare misery love?
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destructions dance,

To him the Mother comes. (as cited in Bagchi, 2017, p. 58)

This form of worship of *Shakti* as a political ideal was more specific to Bengal, however, the Swadeshi nationalism symbol of *BharatMata* (Mother India) as painted by Abanindranath Tagore was later assimilated into the national movement. *BharatMata* is eulogised as “To her north is the Himalaya, Kanyakumari to the south is forever present. Prayer to this great *Shakti* frees men from re-birth” (*Samavidhana Brahman*, as cited in Krishnaraj, 2010). It is important to note how several popular songs, plays and poems during the nationalist movement came out with the place of prominence given to the mother image in the nationalist iconography used both by the elite and the non-elite across the country (Sarkar, 1987). The influence of popular culture on public imagination continues to the contemporary times as has been explored in this thesis. The representation of motherhood assimilated the destructive *Shakti* into the motherly tenderness that generates confidence. Indira Chowdhury (1998) has discussed the contradictions within nationalist discourse in nineteenth-century Bengal by pointing out the symbiosis between the surrender and devotion claimed by the Mother Goddess, the affect quality of the mother-son relationship in a social order that is deeply patriarchal, and the loyalty demanded by the queen who heads the British Empire. It is the queen's acceptance of family-centric values that made her an icon of the Brahmanical- patriarchal image of motherhood and nationhood. Queen Victoria provided the antidote of heroism and nurturance that the nationalist appropriation of the mother image was trying to achieve in Bengal. A closer look at the strange convergence between the enslaved, resistant Mother India and the enslaving dominant Mother Victoria brings out the aspiring class-caste domination by the Hindu-male elite, torn between the contradictory pulls of a hegemonic future and the foreboding of the doom of dwindling opportunities and expanding exclusions.

Again, the portrayal of the Mother Goddess-Motherland as *Shakti* is modified in Tagore who is seen adoring the country as a bountiful natural land. Tagore in one of his Swadeshi songs eulogises the mothers as-

My golden Bengal, I love you
Your sky and winds have played music
To my ears forever.

(*Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomaye bhalobashi*. as cited in Bagchi, 2017, p. 63)

Tagore differed from this divisive ideology of Hinduising the nationalist model by appropriating a Hindu Goddess as the motherland, which he discusses in detail in *Ghare Baire* (1916). Additionally, this form of idolization of women burdened them with the act of sacrificing everything for the menfolk; and it reduced the role of women to producing heroic sons, who in turn can lay down their lives for their motherland. The glorification of motherhood in colonial India was merely in the domain of ideology, albeit this ideology varied in different times and cultures. However, the glorification has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power. Such an ideology was based on a philosophy of deprivation for women in the world of practice. Jashodhara Bagchi discusses how the abstraction of Hindu Goddess was ultimately a social philosophy of deprivation for women. The nationalist ideology, therefore, simply appropriated this orthodox bind on women's lives by glorifying it. This renewed ideological legitimacy made it even more difficult for women to exercise their choice or autonomy in that matter. Mothers had to contend with the unspoken call to renounce any other form of self-fulfilment. Child-bearing and nurturing became the only social justification of women's lives. Without any control over her own reproductive powers, this amounted to slavery, however magisterial it may have been made to look. Her role and responsibility did not end in

childbirth. The ideal of motherhood permeated the entire lifestyle of women in colonial India. If they were unfed and uncared for, this became their great claim to social recognition and fame - their distinct superiority over their well-fed western counterparts (Dutta, 1990).

Motherhood has been a determining icon in the different levels of the emergence of Indian society: in the shaping of state formation, in the process of global dispensation, and in the impact of the 'everyday' in the lives of women. Motherhood seamlessly fits into the upper caste, upper class patriarchy of the ruling nationalist discourse. The colonial situation and the ideological response of nationalism thus, gave rise to the home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies in various matters concerning the everyday life of the 'modern' woman - her dress, food, manners, education, her role in organising life at home, her role outside the home (Chatterjee, 1990). The concrete problems arose out of the rapidly changing situation-both external and internal in which the new middle-class family found itself. The new woman defined in this way was subjected to a *new* patriarchy. Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programmes, and in time even take up employment outside the home. But the spiritual signs of her femininity were now clearly marked: in her dress, eating habits, social demeanour, and her religiosity. At the same time, material modernity forced upon men a whole series of changes in their dress, food habits, religious observances, and social relations. Each of these capitulations now had to be compensated by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women. They must not eat, drink, or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals which men were finding it difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the

kin, to which men could not now devote much attention. The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of 'female emancipation' with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination. (Bagchi, 1990; Chatterjee, 1990) However, it is during this process of female emancipation that women started joining the workforce of production and gradually found a role beyond the socially ordained role of reproducers. Further, the liberalisation in the late 1990s witnessed a progressive influx of married women into the labour force. Employed-mother families gradually became the norm in urban India. Women in India in the 1990s represented 48.3 percent of the total population, of which women in the labour force was 78.6 million in 1973, 88.9 million in 1982, and 99.4 million in 1983. According to the 1991 census, half of the employed women were in the child-bearing age. An employed mother in India with a young child faces different problems than what an employed mother in any western country does. The problem arising out of a mother's dual role depends on the social, cultural, religious, and traditional environment (UNESCO Report, 1978). So, in the Indian context, if women continued to maintain the 'spiritual signs' of her femininity, she could participate in the workforce. These spiritual signs essentially included her role as a dutiful mother and a loyal wife. As working mothers outside of home have had a slow crawl towards social acceptance and even respectability during recent times, yet they are still expected to continue to respect and embody the spiritual signs and be the primary caregiver of the family.

As elsewhere, in India too, with the inception and advent of reproductive technologies such as contraception and Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) the debate around motherhood started changing. Women now had a choice between whether they wanted to become a mother or not, and how they wanted to become a mother; but in

most cases this choice was not theirs to make because women's womb are controlled continuously through monogamous, heterosexual, conjugal relationships, to ensure progeny. For instance, the instruments of birth control, became tools of population control in the hand of the State; the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic technology was used to perform female infanticide at the same time, and Commercial Surrogacy led to the exploitation of underprivileged women from the global South. But these technologies were also enabling working women to plan their families; again, ART made it possible for some categories, marginalised so far, such as single women or homosexuals, to achieve what is the conventional meaning of 'family' and enjoy the experience of motherhood by conception. The very first Organising Secretary of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay asserted that "birth control was a sacred and inalienable right of every woman to possess the means to control her body and no God or man can attempt to deprive her of that right without perpetrating an outrage on her womanhood" (as cited in Bagchi, 2017, p. 85). However, Asoka Bandarage (1997) has highlighted the limitations suffered by the feminist expectation of birth control as a tool for women's liberation; while it would indeed be so for the privileged upper-class woman, with the knowledge of latest technology and access to social and medical aftercare; the unprivileged poor women often become the victims of experimental contraceptives and unethical and coercive promotional strategies. Studies have revealed how women from slums "who had had abortion favoured planning a family through both spacing and terminating childbirth" (Banerjee, 1997, p. 120) Of the same women, Himani Bannerji (1997) writes- "Among the women we spoke with there is widespread knowledge about one-shot surgical measures, but very little of any 'planning' method that requires clinical supervision, check-ups, some monetary resources, and has a long-term planning horizon." (p. 126) In India, the

cultural practice of son-preference, soon came to misuse the anti-natalist, pro-abortion Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic technology to perform female infanticide in the relatively prosperous families. India continues to suffer from a declining sex ratio due to sex-selective abortion and has wreaked havoc in several parts of India. Campaigns against this inhuman practice have succeeded in getting the state to enact a law Pre-Conception-Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PC-PNDT) Act, 1994, against its misuse, but its implementation has been difficult until now. While ART has facilitated servicing infertile couples in the new language of genetic mothering. It has led to dismembering of women whose birthing process is held hostage by a section of the scientific and technological community. Jyotsna Agnihotri-Gupta in her essay on Assisted Reproductive Technology writes-

In keeping with the consumer culture of our times and the free market of a globalised world, women's reproductive bodies and their body parts (such as eggs, embryos, and uteruses) are entities which have been turned into commodities that are donated or traded, either for use by infertility specialists or research scientists. The 'reproductive industry' is mimicking capitalist industrial production by searching new market cohorts of consumers, seeking cheaper labour power through practices including 'offshoring' and outsourcing. (Gupta, 2012a, p. 10)

ART has been a blessing for infertile women but only at the cost of countless poor women who have become mother-workers who lack decision making agency and are paying the price of living in an ever-sharpening inequality brought on by the neoliberal globalisation that has overtaken our world since the 1980s. These Indian women have become (re)producers who are not always compensated for their service and never possess the necessary agency to deal with the nexus of Doctors, Government, and the Intended Parents. As can be noticed, that several social, cultural, and economic changes have led to the reconfiguration of motherhood and mothering in India, it is important to note if such changes have also been represented in Hindi cinema. Therefore, the following section maps the trajectory of the representation of mothers in Hindi cinema.

Motherhood, Mothers, and Hindi Cinema

Cinema and television have become an important ideological tool through which dominant notions of gender roles and power structures are disseminated- they not only hold a mirror to society; they also influence the society to develop a hegemonic discourse. Betty Friedan's 1963 study of media and its products as a patriarchal tool of reinforcing gender hegemony provides an insight into how repetitive circulation of the unidimensional portrayal of women in popular culture restricting her to "one passion, one role, one occupation" that of a wife and a mother (p. 32). She notes how the image created by the "women's magazines, by advertisements, television, films, novels, columns, and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularisers of sociology and psychoanalysis- shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams" (p. 31). She was one of the first to identify how the feminine mystique coerced women to being satisfied as mothers and housewives and made them feel guilty for subverting their husbands' masculinity and their own femininity, most importantly for neglecting their role as mothers. Based on their adherence to these roles were women identified as good/bad in society, because it is through these myths that people's worldview and thoughts are produced, thereby shaping the dominant ideology. "Those are the vehicles for myths, created by men and constructed from their viewpoint, which are then mistaken for 'absolute truth'" (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 16) Thus, such gender stereotypes are reproduced through their representations in films and other popular medium, thereby playing a major role in sometimes preventing and at other times effecting societal and cultural changes. Because such cultural products which are offered to a large population can desensitise them. A repetition of stereotypes and their implied message, in films and television, leads to the desensitisation of the audiences, whereby they take these messages and

stereotypes for granted (Helsby, 2005; Macionis & Plummer, 2008) Further, while few gender identities and groups are frequently represented, some are left out, in turn these groups are also left out of the dominant ideology and through the lack of representation they are also marginalised in the culture. Therefore, when gender identities are left out of gender ideology, they are also misrepresented or never represented in film and popular media (De Lauretis, 1984; Hayward, 1997).

In the Indian context, Hindi cinema has been mirroring Indian society, culture, and politics and shaping its collective imagination (Dasgupta, 1996; Nandy, 1998, 2008; Prasad, 1998; Rajadhyaksha, 2003; Dwyer, 2010; Niranjana, 2006)-

Hindi cinema can also be seen as a modern mythology, a unique repository of India's public imaginings, shaped by fantasy, nostalgia, and desire, and it is one of the most productive arenas for discerning clearer patterns of India's social imaginaries, which show how India sees itself today, how it hopes to see itself in future and how it views its pasts (Dwyer, 2010, p. 30)

In addition to the 'formula' representation followed by filmmakers, which catered to the audience's taste, Bollywood films between 1947 and 1990 took up the task of constantly perpetuating the ideas of the nationalist project into Bollywood narratives, because the new nation needed new mythologies and new imaginaries. Since the late nineteenth century, Indian nationalists have argued for retaining the "spiritual distinctiveness of its culture" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 120). So, Hindi cinema has been playing an important role in nation building by constructing and defining dichotomies such as tradition/modernity, Indian/Western, and spiritual/material thereby fashioning the dominant ideology of the masses (Ganti, 2004, p. 3). Based on the construction of these dichotomies, an imaginary world was born, whereby besides other regional cinema

Hindi cinema played a significant role in constructing the national culture in India. The Bollywoodisation of Hindi cinema occurred in the late 1990s because of the liberalisation and globalisation, when it attempted to integrate itself within the globalised entertainment industry. This in turn led to several changes in India, with the media explosion, reorientation of the government policies towards the global Indian diaspora, and some changes within the industry itself as it shifted corporate studio houses, multiplex screening, and the more recent emergence and popularisation of the online streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and others. The foreign investment and collaboration have brought in a shift, wherein distributors and filmmakers have their target audience and are particularly creating content for their consumption.

These changes which started following the liberalisation, were best reflected in the change in Hindi cinema's representation of the family. The joint family and familial values have been celebrated in popular narratives across India, including Hindi films. The two great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* revolve around the family system and celebrate the love of family and one's traditional values. The unit of the joint Indian family until the liberalisation was preserved in Hindi cinema as part of the "spiritual distinctiveness of its culture." So, besides replicating the archetypal characters, the films had the conflict between heroes working in the interest of restoring law and order in the society and in the family. With the turn of century these families gradually disintegrated into nuclear families, or the hero or heroine was shown to have just one parent. Even until the early 1990s, films presented the joint family as the ideal Indian family. This climaxed in Sooraj Barjatya's *Hum Apke Hain Koun...!* (Barjatya, 1994) – the story revolved around births, deaths, and marriages, celebrating the Hindu undivided family or Hindu family values. Films like these upheld the ideal of the joint

family, where several generations of a family or adult siblings live and eat together; these families were also the controller of a woman's sexuality. In a country with no welfare state, the family serves the practical purpose of organising food, education, medical care, and allotting them according to its principles. In contemporary times, a joint family is no longer the norm; as newer generations move out on account of employment, space, individual desires, or disputes. The last few decades have witnessed the emergence of the new middle class, with women fulfilling their dreams and earning more money and availing home loans along with their husbands to buy their places rather than having to share with their relatives. These new-age women who are mostly “urban, middle-class” are seeking agency through consumption and display of class mobility and aspiration (Banerjee & Desai, 2021). As the family disintegrated, it is the individuals who emerged as the nucleus of the society. Such colossal rearrangement of the family structure in the society has led to concurrent changes in the portrayal of women in cinema; they are no longer limited to the traditional familial roles of the mother, lover, or sister of the male protagonist. Women are no longer playing roles that are symbols of family, patriarchy, and the nation (Gupta, 2015, p. 107). We are seeing the stories of women who are gradually breaking free of their stereotypical gender roles to make their way into the world (Arora, 2019). They are chasing their dreams, breaking free of their societal shackles, and voicing their anguish. Importantly, there has also been a rising popularity and demand for women-centric films- where women are the driving force behind the plots, and it is their characters that play major roles in the action and the resolution of the film (Anwer & Arora, 2021; Karandikar et al., 2021; Paunksnis & Paunksnis, 2020; Arora, 2019; Manzar & Aravind, 2019).

It is important to note, that the rise of the new woman in Hindi cinema is also analogous with the Bollywoodisation process, which occurred along with the liberalisation, as

more women joined the work forces and became potential consumers as they participated in the corporate cultures of selfcare (Oza, 2012). This emergence of the ‘new woman’ is however, not a recent phenomenon as it is a recurring trope in the times of social change (Banerjee & Desai, 2021). In the Introduction to their book on Bollywood’s new woman, Anwer and Arora observe that Bollywood’s new woman conflates the dichotomy of the morally upright heroine and the sexually appealing vamp. She is a reconfiguration and revamping of the recurrent tropes of Bollywood and is often “constructed as a super woman, imagined as a hybrid figure who amalgamates in herself the sacrifice and resilience of a mother; the dutifulness of a wife; the assertiveness, aggression, and righteous anger of the avenging woman; and the sensuality and sexual allure of a courtesan” (Anwer & Arora, 2021, p. 9). We can notice a similar evolution in the representation of mothers on screen especially in recent times. The mother in the older Hindi films played a pivotal role in keeping the family closely knit; she is fond of love, willing to sacrifice everything for her children; a stereotypical image is a woman in a white sari who dies for lack of medicine, which her son is struggling to pay for. Following the model of Nirupa Roy, who had played goddess in mythological films and then was an iconic mother to Amitabh Bachchan in several films, the mother who loved and sacrificed for her son, most star mothers of the last two decades are former film heroines. Raakhee, a prominent 1970s heroine, played mother to a host of heroes in the 1990s. Older Hindi films divided women into conjugal and maternal women. These categories are now changing as mothers remain maternal but are also conjugal—that is, they have romantic interests. Perhaps the frequency with which widows were seen in the older films helped to deny many women's conjugal roles and make them just maternal figures. Nargis Dutt as the iconic Mother India combined within her the tropes of the ever-sacrificing Mother and the Nation as mother.

She continues to be a cult figure, who is represented and recreated in popular culture. She is the mother who takes care and protects her family and the society at large. At different points in time between 1960s and 1990s Achla Sachdev, Nirupa Roy, Durga Khote, Reema Lagoo, Smita Jayakar became the stereotypical good mothers through films like *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960), *Deewaar* (Chopra, 1975), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Desai, 1977), *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Barjatya, 1994), *Karan Arjun* (Roshan, 1995), they were mostly silent supporting characters who loved their children dearly. And there was also the evil step mother famously portrayed by Lalita Pawar and Aruna Irani in films like *Sau Din Saas Ke* (Sadanah, 1980) and *Beta* (Kumar, 1992) and in others. With the turn of the century, we found the glamorous and friendly mothers in Farida Jalal, Kirron Kher, Ratna Pathak Shah, Neena Gupta, Dimple Kapadia in films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra, 1995), in *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Advani, 2003), *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (Johar, 2006), *Jaane Tu...Ya Jaane Na* (Tyrewala, 2007), and in recent times *Cocktail* (Adajania, 2012), *Khoobsurat* (Ghosh, 2014), *Badhaai Ho* (Sharma, 2018) and others. While these are some yesteryear actresses playing the roles of supporting mothers to the protagonists, but recently we see a trend of actresses in the prime of their careers choosing maternal roles to portray matricentric narratives. Even young heroines sometimes played the roles of mothers like Madhuri Dixit in *Aaja Nachle* (Mehta 2007), Sridevi in *English Vinglish* (Shinde, 2012), *Mom* (Udyawar, 2017), Swara Bhaskar in *Nil Battey Sannata* (Tiwari, 2015), Kajol in *Tribhanga: Tedhi, Medhi, Crazy* (Shahane, 2021), Vidya Balan in *Heyy Baby!* (Khan, 2007), *Paa* (Balki, 2009), *Tumhari Sulu* (Suresh, 2017), *Shakuntala Devi* (Menon, 2020), and *Jalsa* (Triveni, 2022), Kriti Sanon in *Mimi* (Utekar, 2021), Rani Mukherjee in *Mrs Chatterjee vs Norway* (Chibber, 2023) and others. With these characters, the culturally dominant idea of the mother has undergone a vast shift. From the larger-than-life character of

Radha in *Mother India* (Khan, 1957) who has to choose between her son and the society, there has been a shift towards everyday characters like Sulochona Dubey in *Tumhara Sulu* who has to choose between her maternal responsibilities and personal dream. Much like the steadily increasing market for women centric films we also witness an increasing popularity for such matricentric films. Besides such films have also helped to bring forward the diverse experience of mothers without homogenising them and treating them as a grand narrative. Each of these mothers have different experiences to share, they not only come from different parts of the country belonging to different class, caste, religion, and ethnicity, but not all of them are married and living with their spouses in a heterosexual relationship, some are unmarried, or single, separated, widowed living alone, or with mother or other family members, and sometimes just a house help. These films also have a penchant for disrupting the Indian nuclear family of *Hum do, humare do* (We two, ours two). Like women in India, mothers in India are no longer a homogeneous group. They belong to different religions, classes, caste, and socio-economic statuses and have different socio-cultural challenges to battle. Thus, there has been a reconfiguration in motherhood and mothering in contemporary times, which needs to be examined; therefore, the thesis explores the representation of certain unconventional mothering practices in Hindi cinema.

Research Problem, Objectives, and Methodology

Motherhood as a discipline emerged soon after Adrienne Rich's publication of *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* in 1976. It gained momentum only in the late 1980s and 1990s, and it has managed to establish itself as a significant field for scholarly intervention. Andrea O'Reilly's extensive work as a motherhood scholar further contributed to understanding the various aspects of mothering. In India, Motherhood Studies is an emerging discipline and only few scholarly works are present

in this area. Most of these works attempt to establish the correlation between mother as the individual, mother as the nation, and mother as the goddess. This archetype continues to be a popular trope even in the cinematic and textual representation of the Indian mother. Representation of motherhood and mothering practices has become an essential part of motherhood studies. The thesis attempts to address this gap in existing literature by studying the phenomenon of reconfiguration of motherhood and mothering in India. Cultural, textual, and artistic spaces are accepted, embraced, and negotiated to challenge traditional conceptions of mothering to create alternative practices and visions for mothers in the present and the past. It is only a recent trend to see mothers in Hindi Cinema to be financially independent and prioritizing her individual desires, over her motherly duties; it is also unconventional to see mothers who are bringing up disabled children or supporting their queer children while taking up the role of an activist, or women who chooses technological means to become mothers. The representation of unconventional mothering practices in the Indian context remains unexplored in the scholarly discourse because very little attention has been paid to intersectional experiences of motherhood in India. Since cinema has a close correlation with society, a study of the patterns in the lives of cinematic mothers will offer us insights into the lives of real-life mothers. The aim of this research is to examine the emerging trend in Hindi cinema to represent unconventional mothers who negotiate their maternal paradox through practicing empowered mothering. The research objectives can be enlisted as-

1. To examine the reconfiguration of motherhood and mothering and their correlation with certain social and cultural changes.
2. To understand the multidimensionality of the maternal paradox and the various means women adopt to overcome such a paradox.

3. To map the journey of mothers from maternal paradox to empowered mothering through an intersectional lens

Firstly, the research examines the kinds of alternative mothering practices that have emerged in contemporary Hindi cinema and the social and cultural changes that have led to this reconfiguration. Secondly, it analyses how this emerging trend of mothering practices has problematised the maternal paradox and the strategies mothers have adopted to overcome this. Finally, the thesis looks at the journey of women towards empowered mothering which offers them agency and identity. The thesis examines the dismantling of the hegemonic idea prevailing around Indian mothers being self-sacrificial, healthy male-child bearing, economically dependent women in Hindi cinema. It proposes to understand mothering from other dimensions which had been until recently sidelined by the hegemonic discourse.

This research employs films as a source of social and cultural realities because these are “the primary message-centred methodology” which implies that the embedded meanings in the cultural products are being examined to decode the cultural processes and hegemonic ideology that influence them (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 9; Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014). Since films represent gender through the plotline, the audience also develops their expectations of gender through the consumption of these films (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014). A Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of select Hindi films chosen purposively was conducted. RTA allowed the researcher to identify and understand the implicit and explicit themes which are embedded in the story of the films, which can be further understood through corresponding feminist theories. Such qualitative understanding of gender using films and other popular media is an established means of feminist research which, in turn, can be used to challenge and understand the dominant discourse and the encoded messages in popular culture

(Bryman, 2016). This qualitative approach to the analysis of information has ensured that the selected films are examined following the same directions in a uniform pattern (Schreier, 2013). An inductive approach was adopted to identify the recurrent themes in the process and included in the study, and thematically, the manifested and latent meanings were identified and interpreted. While performing RTA after a process of familiarization with the data, a few codes were generated. These codes were then sorted into initial themes after establishing relationships between the themes. The themes and codes were then refined and reworked over a period. The chapters were written after these themes were named and placed within the theoretical frameworks of motherhood studies. The RTA method values the researcher's subjective experience as the primary way to discern knowledge from information. Here, the goal is not to search for objectivity or remove bias, but instead to use the researcher's personal experience and values as the primary tool to make sense of information (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The purposive sampling technique helped to select films which suited the scope of the study and the time frame. The first criterion for selection was that these films are produced post 2000, most of them have been produced after 2010 and some are as recent as December 2022; thereby they can be considered Bollywood productions. The beginning of the century has been considered as a pointer to the emergence of Bollywood because it is around that time Hindi cinema, following liberalisation and globalisation, went through the process of Bollywoodisation (Rajadhyaksha, 2003). Secondly, all these films have been popular and critically acclaimed films, which are easily available in various streaming platforms, thereby implying that these films are popular and continue to resonate among its audience. Finally, all these films highlighted the maternal subjectivity and presented the maternal narrative, instead of relegating the maternal subject to a silent subplot.

Keeping in account these criteria, fifteen Hindi films were selected for the analysis considering the overarching theme of each chapter. The intersectional framework of the thesis recognizes mothering as a diverse and unique sociocultural experience. However, queer mothers, disabled mothers, Dalit mothers and other alternative mothering practices are yet to find adequate representation in Hindi cinema and have therefore not been discussed here. Each chapter takes up four films for the purpose of analysis (only chapter three takes up five films). The films are- *Filhaal* (Gulzar, 2002), *I am Asifa* (Onir, 2010, the first part of an anthology titled *I am*), *Memories in March* (Nag, 2010), *Margarita with a Straw* (Bose, 2014), *Kapoor and Sons* (Batra, 2016), *Tumhari Sulu* (Triveni, 2017), *The Sky is Pink* (Bose, 2019), *Good Newwz* (Mehta, 2019), *Shakuntala Devi* (Menon, 2020), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Kewalya, 2020), *Tribhanga* (Shahane, 2021), *Mimi* (Utekar, 2021), *Jalsa* (Triveni, 2022), *Badhaai Do* (Kulkarni, 2022), and *Salaam Venky* (Revathi, 2022). While restricting itself to Hindi cinema, the thesis risks developing a homogenized idea of Indian motherhood. India being a diverse nation the prevailing mothering practices vary across different states, religions, class, caste, and economic background. However, paying attention to only regional films would restrict itself to a localized understanding of motherhood and mothering practices. Therefore, attention has been paid to selecting films which represent mothers from different sociocultural backgrounds in India so that a unified understanding of the thesis problem can be arrived at. In the next few sections, the theoretical framework has been discussed.

Maternal Paradox and the Good/Bad Mother

...the ideal woman in India is the mother... marvellous, unselfish, all-suffering... Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 1951.

The word 'Ma' has an inexplicable purity... the foundation of true love requires forgoing self-interest and the supreme form of such love can be seen in mothers' love... (it) does not have the stench of sexual desire... she is not corrupted by selfishness...

Dawar, *Nari Ank*, 1948.

Women's role as mothers is considered their a priori *dharma*, that is, their righteous moral duty. Although most of these quotes are from decades back, the procreative role of women is still held in high standard, leaving them with little to no scope for their dreams and aspirations. She is expected to be the epitome of self-sacrifice, self-abnegation, and selflessness, whereby she effaces herself to cater to the needs of others. This selfless woman-mother proliferates in literature, art, cinema, and even government policies and programmes. Women are obliged to become mothers because-

...females are 'naturally' maternal, and thereby motherhood and other forms of care should be their main pursuits. It upholds the gendered landscape of motherhood as an ideal and influences female selfhood, subjectivity and consciousness towards it. The norm functions through self-regulation ("call to oneself" Foucault) and collective practice, both of which bring it 'naturalness' and 'normalcy'. As is the case with norms, conformity wins individuals social acceptance whereas defiance may attract the threat of negative judgement or stigma. (Nandy, 2017, p. 65)

Thus, through this process the 'natural' mother is created politically, culturally, and economically. The maternal subject is constructed through the sanction of socio-economic arrangements, and institutions, rhetoric, law, policy, cultures, and their customs. This leads to compulsions, policing, and performativity which determine women's actions and desires, ranging from their decision to mother or not to mother, their mothering practices, and their attitude towards socio-economic structures,

institutional support, and public arrangements. One such culturally created trope is that of the Good/Bad Mother to blame women when they fail to adhere to the dictates of patriarchal motherhood. Mother blame is the mechanism using which the dichotomy of Good/Bad Mother trope is applied on mothers. Adrienne Rich defines the Good Mother as one devoid of any identity except her motherhood, finding deep gratification and pleasure in the company of children, she is attuned to the needs of others. According to her, motherhood is a patriarchal institution, managed and controlled by men, who have technical and ideological control over all aspects of childbirth and motherhood. Most other early feminists writing on motherhood critiques the cultural construction of the trope of Good Mother. Jessie Bernard (1974) argues that motherhood is not a biological process but a changing social role, composed of norms and tradition of concern for raising children. Douglas and Michaels (2005) consider the myth of the Good Mother as a mechanism of surveillance and regulation to which all mothers are held accountable. This trope is transformed into social control by state control actors like institutions of law and medicine, and cultural channels to designate and punish bad mothers, yet not much scholarly attention has been paid to it in the Indian context. Molly Ladd-Taylor, in her path breaking work on Mother Worship/Mother Blame (2004), starts with a question -Who is a 'good' mother? in her child's school. Soon enough she realised everyone was of the view, anyone but their mother was the Good Mother. She traces the origin of the concept of Good Mother, and how it is rooted in white, middle-class privileges. According to her, mother blaming in America escalated after the 1940s; with any problem in the child being caused by mothers. She damages the child by being too protective or not being protective enough. Paula Caplan (2002) discusses how the Good Mother Myth sets the standards of motherhood extraordinarily high. Her argument can be extended to mean that to maintain power, society needs to

create the dichotomy of Good Mother - Bad Mother to blame Bad Mothers for societal ills. Andrea O' Reilly in *Mother Outlaws* has enlisted the eight rules of being the 'good mother' as prescribed by contemporary patriarchal society. They are-

- a. children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother,
- b. this mothering must be provided 24/7,
- c. the mother must always put children's needs before her own,
- d. mothers must turn to the experts for instructions,
- e. the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood
- f. mothers must lavish excessive amount of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children,
- g. the mother has full responsibility, but no power from which to mother,
- h. motherwork, and childrearing more specifically, are regarded as personal, private undertakings with no political import.

These dictates lead to the construction of the "mommy myth" which idealises and glorifies motherhood and sets almost an unachievable standard for women as mothers. Speaking of the American scenario where the media played a significant role in contributing to the rise of "new momism" which insisted that-

[N]o woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, p. 14).

This form of construction of a hegemonic idea of motherhood leads to marginalising and policing of other forms of motherhood and mothering. In America, it led to the

attack on welfare mothers, working mothers, and black mothers by women themselves who had agency and power. They often targeted a group of other mothers, so that they could feel better. These mothers otherised the stereotype of the lazy, irresponsible, neglectful, and promiscuous welfare mothers which bolstered their courage, and made them feel confident and virtuous, even without being perfect themselves. The welfare mothers or black mothers' marginalisation as bad mothers enable the rest of the white mothers to claim their position as good mothers. Although, the community of mothers are blamed for making this metaphorical club of good mothers, absolving patriarchy of playing any role in this, however, this form of marginalisation is common in mater-normative societies, to ensure, women continue to perform their duties as mothers, while ensuring other women from the community too participates in this patriarchal process. As Ellen Moss notes "Just as any public identity has to be claimed and actively created rather than merely assumed to exist, mothers of all kinds (welfare mothers, black mothers, white mothers, women giving birth, single mothers, rural mothers, mothers of disabled children, lesbian mothers, childcare workers, mothers with AIDS, working mothers, and so on) need to claim civic spaces, resources, and recognition." (1995, p. 413) - however in doing so mothers also need to recognise the need to empower each other in the process instead of targeting each other and setting extreme high standards to achieve.

This construction of Good/ Bad Mother in the present times causes a maternal paradox. The popular imagination of the Good Mother leads to the glorification of a set of mothers who choose to adhere to the patriarchal role of motherhood and oppression of those mothers who fail to do so while prioritising their higher order needs. This Maternal Paradox highlights how systematically motherhood can lead to the disempowerment of women and suppression of their agency and authority because the

mommy myths have been ingrained in society and a certain set of traits suitable for good mothers have been normalised; ignoring the woman's desires, limitations, and context. Whenever, a woman who is also a mother waives her socially sanctioned roles and duties, she may be policed by her husband, children, or any other societal agent. The dilemma that women as mothers face between production/reproduction, tradition/modernity, powerlessness /empowerment, personal/political, private/public all leads to the maternal paradox. As the public sphere becomes more accessible to women, and as they begin to politicise their personal struggles while challenging traditional gender roles, they come face to face with the maternal paradox. Understanding the multidimensionality of maternal paradox is essential to understanding the challenges women face in the process of becoming empowered mothers. Contemporary representations of Indian mothers in cinema and literary texts are not of self-sacrificing angels but of women made of flesh and blood, who face these contradictory pulls. Caught between rejecting the life-giving power that motherhood gives her and seeking an identity beyond the halo of motherhood, this modern woman seldom finds any viable alternative. This does not just question the social construction of motherhood as the inevitable marker of the female of the species, it also tries to look at the mothering practices in the cultural context of India, where the mother as a caregiver, as a nurturer, as an individual, as a country and as a goddess is glorified yet the ideology of motherhood is used as a tool of oppression and marginalisation of these very women. So, the thesis attempts to study the mothering practices that counter the hegemonic ideology of motherhood imposed on women by the institutions of patriarchy and finally lead to their empowerment.

Motherhood and Intersectional Feminist Theory

And yet, it is to my mother- and all our mothers who were not famous-that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 1972.

The intersectional feminist approach recognises that mothering is practised within gendered, classed, ethnocentric, and heteronormative social policies, contexts, and institutions (such as education, employment, health, and legal systems) that shape cultural meanings, social interactions, and subjectivities (Jackson, 2006). Intersectionality, as a term, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities assimilate to create different modes of privilege and discrimination. These identities include one's gender, class, caste, sex, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, disability, and physical appearance. These socio-cultural identities may be empowering as well as oppressing. Intersectional feminism broadens the horizon of feminism and looks beyond the experiences of white, middle-class, cisgender women to recognise the multifarious experiences of women of colour, race, class, caste, sexuality, and other identities. Looking at mothering experiences from an intersectional lens allows us to recognise the differences in experiences of mothering across cultures and borders. Adopting an intersectional feminist lens ensures that the thesis recognises the diverse experience of mothering as against the simplified homogenous patriarchal ideology of motherhood.

Patricia Hill Collins' works on black women and motherhood opened avenues for looking at mothering experiences through an intersectional lens. For instance, Black mothering is situated within multiple social indexes of physical and mental health and

well-being, shaped within a living framework of structural racism. Lewis and Craddock also discuss the longstanding schema of a 'strong Black woman' that often obscures the gentle and more vulnerable side of Black mothering and minimises the mental health needs of Black mothers and their need for emotional, physical, or monetary support. Similarly, the study of indigenous mothering introduces the indigenous ideologies of motherhood that informed indigenous worldviews and ancient traditions of physically and spiritually bringing forth new life since time immemorial. Most importantly, studies reveal how the contemporary physical and spiritual modes of birthing the nation are presented as acts of resistance that highlight the revolutionary possibilities of empowered indigenous mothering. Several such diverse experiences of marginalised mothers have over the years received significant attention as has been anthologized in *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* (2020). In the section titled *Mothering through Difference: Hearing the Voices of Marginalised Mothers* the mothering practices of queer, disabled, black, welfare, indigenous mothers, and voluntarily childless mothers are discussed in detail and that has been a significant influence on the theoretical framework of the thesis. The section explores the lives of mothers marginalised by race, class, sexuality, ability, or any other form of 'othering' revealing how structural inequalities in society magnify existent biases but can also produce empowered and creative responses.

Following a similar line of argument, this thesis examines how motherhood conjoins with other intersectional identities and subject positions of a working mother, mothering a disabled, mothering a queer, mothering through adoption of technological means, all the while keeping in mind the interplay of class, caste, and sometimes also religion. Most of the mothers discussed in the thesis belong to the middle class, upper middle-class, and a few in lower middle-class families, living in urban metropolitan

cities in different parts of the country, two of them are Muslims and one of them in a Sikh woman and the rest are Hindu. In the first chapter working mothers have been examined who prioritise their goals and self-actualisation as much as their roles as mothers. In the second section, mothers caring for disabled have been examined who are treated as deviants and are blamed for the disability of their children. Much like *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* speaks of disabled mothers who may be birthmothers, stepmothers, co-mothers, or adoptive mothers and how disabled mothering offers insights into feminist practices of mothering and how disability may be hidden or visible; it covers a wide range of being in this world, including illness. Both mothers caring for disabled children and disabled mothers requires support, care, and nurturance. The third chapter in the thesis looks at mothers of queer children, and their journey of coping with societal stigma of having failed as a good mother and their journey towards accepting their children's nonnormative sexuality. These mothers are ostracised because they have failed to produce a socially acceptable citizen for the nation-state, they are also blamed by their children for failing to understand them and accept their non-normativity. While discussing queer mothering, Park also discusses how theories and practices of motherhood have been queered by mothers who live outside of the so-called 'traditional' heterosexual nuclear families. Park, on the other hand, examines mothers who are sexually queer (e.g., lesbian, and non-monogamous) challenge the legal and cultural understanding of a family as heteronormative, while parents who are genderqueer (e.g., butch, trans, or intersex) challenge the gendered discourse of "motherhood" itself. Whether straight-identified, femme-identified, or queer-identified, those who mother queerly (i.e., "do" motherhood in ways that deviate from standard practice) also implicitly and explicitly challenge prevailing notions of good mothering. Such deviations from culturally dominant standards of 'good'

mothering often come at a cost, leading some queer mothers to seek social approval through processes of cultural assimilation. Finally, the last chapter in the thesis discusses how women negotiate with infertility and their experience of becoming mothers through Assisted Reproductive Technology; this chapter questions the idea that women and mothers are synonymous; the rise of birth control, a new wave of feminism, and shifting understanding of gender identity have prompted a growing group of women who are coaxed into adopting ART and others who lack the resource and agency to make a choice.

The representation of marginalised mothering practices in the Indian context remains unexplored in the scholarly discourse. The thesis attempts to look at the mothering practices of mothers who choose themselves over their roles as mothers, mothers caring for disabled children and queer children, and women choosing ART as a means of becoming a mother. At the heart of the thesis lies the concept that Sheila Kitzinger's introductory words in *Women as Mothers*- “Mothers not only bear and, usually rear children, nor exist to give men descendants, but are people in their own right”. Prevalent representation of motherhood celebrates motherhood while promoting a standard of perfection beyond the reach of most mothers. As hegemonic mothering practices and representation continue to be part of the cultural narrative, alternative practices are also gradually finding recognition through representation.

Ethics of Care and Empowered Mothering

The concept of empowered mothering has been developed by Andrea O’ Reilly and can be seen as a counter-narrative to conventional motherhood, representing both a theoretical framework and practical approach that questions the prevailing discourse of motherhood. Its purpose is to challenge and dismantle the constraints and oppressions that women face in patriarchal motherhood, ultimately seeking to transform their lived

experiences. At its core, empowered mothering aims to grant mothers the essential attributes of agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy-activism, which are often withheld from them within the confines of traditional patriarchal motherhood. The concept of maternal authenticity is drawn from Ruddick's concept of "conscientious mother" and O'Reilly's concept of "authentic feminist mothers. Maternal authority and maternal autonomy refer to "confidence and conviction in oneself, holding power in the household, and the ability to define and determine one's life and practices of mothering, which means the refusal to, in Ruddick's words, 'relinquish or repudiate one's own perceptions and values" (Hallstein et al., 2020, p. 30). Maternal activism and advocacy involve the social and political dimensions of motherwork. Mothering for feminist mothers is said to have cultural significance and political purpose. A feminist mother is a woman whose mothering is shaped and influenced by feminism in theory and practice. Thus, through the acts of interruption, destabilization, and rewriting, empowered mothering undermines the entrenched, socially accepted patriarchal script of motherhood. By doing so, it loosens the stronghold that normative patriarchal discourse has on shaping the understanding and enactment of motherhood. By highlighting the authority inherent in women as mothers and acknowledging their individual agency, empowered mothers redefine motherhood as a political platform where they can effect societal change. These transformative practices encompass various alternative approaches to socially accepted parenting.

Empowered mothers may choose to mother outside the confines of heterosexual relationships, raise children in same-sex or transgender parenting partnerships, live independently from the father while raising their children alone, reject the conventional role of a wife expected of mothers, relinquish the notion that they are solely responsible for their child's care and upbringing, and challenge the assumption that they must

conform to patriarchal or mainstream expectations in raising their children. These acts empower women to exert their own autonomy and shape motherhood in ways that challenge and transcend maternormativity. Additional practices may involve empowered mothers serving as role models for their children and others, demonstrating alternative approaches to mothering by confronting instances of sexual discrimination, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism within various institutional setups and familial structures. They may also advocate for and bring attention to legal issues concerning the rights of queer community and co-mothers in matters of custody, access, child support, and rights for euthanasia for disabled children. Children also benefit from empowered mothers because empowered mothers disrupt the prevailing notion of patriarchal motherhood by actively shaping the socialization of their children. They encourage their children to recognize and challenge existing patriarchal systems of power. Moreover, they resist conforming to traditional patterns of gender acculturation in their parenting, allowing their children to develop their identities authentically, free from the constraints of gender stereotypes. In doing so, empowered mothers play a vital role in fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for future generations. Afterall-

What a child needs most is a free mother, one who feels that she is in fact living her life, and has adequate food, sleep, wages, education, safety, opportunity, institutional support, health care, child care, and loving relationships. "Adequate" means enough to allow her to participate in the world- and in mothering... A child needs a mother who has resources to enable her to make real choices, but also to create a feeling of adequate control- a state of mind that encourages a sense of agency, thus a good basis of maternal well-being, and a good foundation on which to stand while raising a child. (Smith, 2003, p. 240)

Empowered mothering challenges the idea that a woman to become a good mother needs to direct her act of care externally or towards others, while absolving herself by being selfless. The patriarchal doctrine of motherhood does not sanction the mother to care for herself; because caring for the self is egoism and is done in individual interest and in contradiction one must offer care to others or perform self-sacrifice to obtain

salvation. Empowered mothering prescribes that it is equally important for mothers to care for herself and fulfil and express her selfhood through her work, activism, friendship, relationships, hobbies, alongside her motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016 a).

This can be done through practicing a feminist ethics of care and through this they may also overcome the maternal paradox. A feminist ethic of care reframes caring for others as a fundamental social responsibility. Rather than solely emphasizing maternal sensitivity and altruism as inherent traits, this ethic seeks to emancipate caregiving from its marginalized position and elevate it to a central human endeavour. The aim is to free caregiving from its traditional association with mothers and recognize it as a primary and shared human activity. The contemporary mothers' movement advocates grounding its agenda in an ethic of care, as this approach paves the way for a gender-neutral approach to social policy. By expanding the concept of care as a public good beyond the confines of the maternalist paradigm, there is an opportunity to establish a more inclusive and comprehensive care-oriented language. By positioning caregiving as a collective social duty rather than an exclusive obligation tied to motherhood, a feminist ethic of care framework disrupts conventional notions of motherhood, challenging its individualistic and essentialist aspects. In doing so, it opens space for a more progressive and inclusive understanding of caregiving in society. Thus, this form of care ethics helps in empowering mothers and promoting a feminist agenda in three specific ways-

First, it exemplifies the very core of feminist ideology –that the personal is political. Second, it helps to negate essential notions of motherhood by transforming views of it from an “isolated or individualized experience... [to] the inspiration for a foundation of visions of large-scale social change” (Orlect 3). And third, whether intentional or not, it upsets traditional gender and power relations. (Nathanson, 2008, p. 244).

Thus, when mothering becomes a socially shared responsibility, women as mothers have more time and possibilities; which she can rightly use to mother herself or care for herself. This ethics of care also allow women to accept herself for what she is and master the perception of others about herself. She can gradually overcome the negative evaluation and stigma associated with being a bad mother for having failed to adhere to the societal norms of mater-normativity, which may include being a single mother, or a working mother, or mothering a disabled child or/and a queer child, or adopting technological means to become a mother. Ethics of care enable women to negotiate the mismatch between their own sense of self and the imagined subjects of proper womanhood; because these maternal subjects are constructed through the gendered mandates and discursivities - whereby they must simultaneously negotiate their internalized roles, social imperatives, autonomy, and incapacities. Therefore, practitioners of empowered mothering underscore its capacity to create a dynamic environment in which mothers, children, and other family members can truly embrace their authentic selves (Nandy, 2014). Maternal activists who adopt empowered mothering are purposeful and intentional in their mothering practices, deliberately challenging the norms prevalent in mainstream society. They conscientiously redefine and actively participate in motherwork, imbuing it with social and political significance. This transformative approach to mothering becomes a powerful conduit through which cultural, social, and political change is not only envisioned but also made possible. Further, narratives and lives of such deviant mothers enable other mothers to go along or go against societal yardstick; enabling more women to break through the barriers of cultural entrenchment and conventional feminine imagery, empowered women open expansive horizons and a multitude of imaginative possibilities to choose from. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these choices are still shaped and

constrained by existing structures, which may limit the extent of genuine autonomy and agency that women can exercise. Women who are mothers, not only bear and rear children, but are also distinctly individual human beings. They have their dreams, aspirations, careers, and ideologies before becoming mothers. However, they are often burdened with the patriarchal ideology of motherhood. Having acknowledged this maternal paradox, it is crucial to recognise the alternative practices of mothering that can overcome the hegemonic framework and look at mothering through the lens of empowerment.

