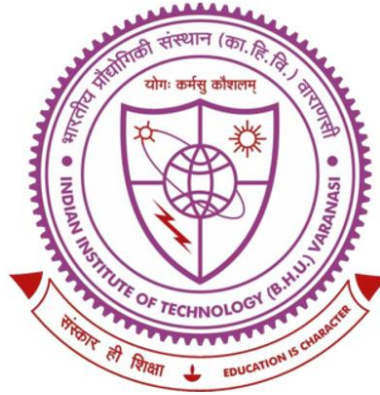


## Extended Abstract

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



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## **Extended Abstract**

Contemporary Hindi Cinema has witnessed a paradigm shift in the discourses concerning motherhood through a steady rise of matricentric narratives. Historically, mothers have been ironically deified in India while being denied empowerment. In its quest for the good mother, the patriarchal structure has not only restricted mothers to their reproductive roles, but has also overimposed the obligatory self-sacrificial, healthy-male childbearing, and economically dependent role on them. It has essentialised, naturalised, and idealised the role of women as mothers by positing that all women want to be mothers and that they find joy and purpose in it. A woman is not born a mother, she becomes one. This implies that mothering is a culturally and socially configured practice designated as an integral part of a woman's life, and motherhood is considered the most prized position for women. Any woman who fails to adhere to these social prescriptions is policed as a bad mother by her family and society. The very consciousness of these cultural narratives also gives rise to the feeling of guilt among those women who prefer to look beyond the boundaries of normative motherhood. The purpose of such hegemonic views of good mothering is to deny women their right to choose between the various possibilities of practising or even rejecting motherhood. The image of the bad mother and the concomitant blaming is practised to ensure that women continue to strive towards becoming good mothers. This paradox of good and bad mothers highlights what the culture fears about women in general and mothers in particular. The dilemma that women experience as they navigate between production and reproduction, public and private, personal and political, tradition and modernity, and power and powerlessness constitute the maternal paradox. This multidimensional maternal paradox that

women encounter while exploring motherhood is socially constructed and needs to be successfully negotiated to attain empowerment.

Rich is also the first feminist scholar in motherhood studies to highlight the potentiality of empowered mothering. Following Rich, Sara Ruddick degendered mother-work, and according to her, mother-work primarily involves preservation, nurturance, and training the child to be socially acceptable, implying that anyone capable of mothering can become a mother, yet only women are deemed suitable for mother-work which indeed restricts them to the role of a reproducer. 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 prioritising their dreams, aspirations, and well-being are still marginalised and treated as bad mothers, but they are gradually acquiring narrative empowerment as they are 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 they also actively mould and shape it by fostering a prevailing narrative. Therefore, the thesis looks into 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.

### **Research Objectives**

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. 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 reconfiguration of motherhood and mothering in India.

The principal research objectives of this thesis are:

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

### **Research Methodology**

The thesis employs Braun and Clarke's model of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) on a purposively selected sample of fifteen Hindi films released between 2002 and 2022. Each chapter takes up four films for 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). The themes generated through RTA have been analysed using the theoretical frameworks of intersectional feminism and motherhood studies. 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.

## **Chapterisation**

The present study comprises six chapters; the first chapter, *Introduction: Motherhood, Maternal Paradox, and Beyond*, traces the background of Motherhood Studies in the Western and Indian discourses. Thereafter, it maps the history of the representation of mothers in Hindi Cinema and identifies the knowledge gap. The research methodology and theoretical framework are also discussed in this chapter.

The second chapter *Mothering the Self: Changing Stories, Changing Lives* studies the emerging trend of representation of new-age working mothers on screen. These mothers are no longer restricted to the larger-than-life caregiving roles; instead, they are now represented as individuals with their own dreams, desires, and aspirations besides being mothers. It also studies how working mothers negotiate the maternal paradox by choosing their desire for self-actualisation over their maternal responsibilities.

The third chapter *Mothering the Disabled: Empowerment Beyond Grieving*, maps the trajectories of care and examines the alternative mothering approaches that mothers of children with disabilities adopt to care for their children and themselves. It explores how these mothers are coaxed into the gendered role of caregiving through a complex process of glorification and blaming, and, as a result, uninterrupted care work, societal surveillance and prevalent stigma severely interfere with the mental, physical, and existential well-being of such mothers.

The fourth chapter *Mothering the Queer: Overcoming Maternal Dilemma*, studies the maternal paradox of mothers discovering the nonnormative sexuality of their children. This discovery

becomes difficult for mothers who either blame themselves for the aberration or are blamed by others for the nonnormative sexual orientation of their children. For mothers, accepting their nonheterosexual children is a prolonged process, and it is fraught with challenges involving mourning the loss of the heterosexual identity of the child as well as accepting their failure to adhere to the culturally sanctioned idea of the good mother, who reproduces a socially acceptable citizen for the nation-state.

The fifth chapter *ART and Motherhood: Towards Maternal Choices*, highlights the maternal paradox of women who overcome the stigma of infertility through the use of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). It also discusses how mothers are reinterpreting the biological experience of motherhood and how the traditional family setup and gender roles are being restructured following the advent of ART-enabled motherhood.

The sixth chapter, *Conclusion: Redefining Motherhood*, synthesises the observations and analysis undertaken in the foregoing chapters. The previous chapters have identified means of practising empowered mothering that the mothers adopt to overcome their maternal paradox. The three major strategies of empowered mothering that the thesis identifies are prioritising self-actualisation, practising maternal activism, and co-mothering the children. These strategies are discussed with respect to the reconfiguration of motherhood in contemporary Hindi Cinema. The chapter also discusses the future directions for motherhood studies in India.

The reconfiguration of motherhood in Hindi Cinema has been a result of social and cultural changes, which has also led to a change in the position of women and their role in society. From the ailing, ageing, weeping, loving, and sacrificing mothers in white sarees who are mostly asexual, there has been a shift towards young, attractive, glamorous, working mothers with personal dreams, desires, and aspirations, and without qualms over an extramarital love interest.

Importantly enough, these mothers have a variety of choices from which they can choose to practise a form of mothering, and they are also presented with the choice of not mothering. Motherhood is no longer restricted to only married heterosexual women, as single women, homosexual couples, and others also choose to become mothers through various non-normative means. This change in the Hindi film industry has been a cultural change that was possible when women started earning, and they also came to be perceived as potential consumers of cinematic content. Women also started practising motherhood with agency, authority, autonomy and advocacy-activism, which has not only helped to reconfigure motherhood through a negotiation of the maternal paradox but has also been providing feminist child-rearing to the future citizens of the nation.