MYTHIFICATION OF GENDERED IDEAL 'MOTHER': AN OVERVIEW OF PERFORMATIVE MOTHERING IN INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

As a concept, motherhood has long been structured as a paramount and necessary measure of human life. Following the notion of motherhood, there are some defined characteristics, duties and responsibilities for the 'mother'. There is always a threat of traditionally formulated rituals for keeping the identity that is 'mother'. If somebody fails to follow the rules, the person will be punished. The ideology of motherhood is exclusively linked with the notion of the gender structuration process. 'Mother' must always be a woman. No man is considered a 'Mother' just because he is not biologically fit for giving birth. This normativity is been followed by the mass media. The dialectic of motherhood codifies the 'mother' with the traditional value system of society. The traditional mythic concept of motherhood is propagated through the mass media. Even mass media works for strengthening the mythic concept of motherhood as a grand sign. Gradually, it becomes a discourse. As a strong mass media film also follows these rituals. The paper will focus on the concept of motherhood as performance rather than the concept based upon sex – gender binary. Here, I have selected a few Indian Hindi and Bengali language films for discussing the issue. The paper will show how film as an apparatus of the culture industry propagates the hegemonic structure of motherhood by following the notion of the 'ideal mother'. The paper will observe how the film makes the structure of motherhood unalterable and how it distresses society.

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A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

2

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Introduction

"Hegemonic motherhood is a patriarchal construction." (Arendell, 1999)

Motherhood is a strong construction of patriarchy, which is completely linked with a woman's body. The dialectic of motherhood ties women's identities to their roles as child raisers and nurturers. As Prof. Bagchi stated,

"WOMEN'S exclusive confinement to reproductive function and the attendant emphasis on nurturance have rendered the domain of motherhood especially vulnerable to patriarchal control" (1990).

So, the concept of motherhood has been considered through the lens of the gender matrix. According to Chodorow, the ideology of motherhood is exclusively associated with the notion of the gender structuration process. Motherhood is the only asset of women. There is no space for men, just because they are not biologically fit for giving birth. There is a famous and glorious saying that "the moment when a child is born, that time a woman becomes a mother". Irrespective of class, caste, race, and geographical boundaries, motherhood is a glorified ideology that is based upon the factor of giving birth. Naturally, the rest of the people do not get the same reward or appreciation for not fulfilling the criteria of achieving the identity.

According to Prof. Bagchi, "Socially and ideologically the glorified Indian mother belonged to the world of myth" (1990).

The mythicized ideology of glorified gendered motherhood exists all over the world. It is common in nature. The possible reason is,

"…human culture is dependent on masses of signs and shared meanings, inherently

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
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A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

3

social and intersubjective" (LÓPEZ-VARELA, 2011).

The sharing of existing signs through the various forms of representation creates ideologies that are strong by nature. The defined structured ideology of motherhood is also cultivated through social and historical construction processes (Bassin, Honey, & Kaplan, 1994; Glenn, 1994; Risman, 1998). Here, mass media is one of the forms of representation that constructs the ideology by cultivating the culture. The popular structure of the family is based upon a binary oppositional construction process that divides the duties and the responsibilities of the parents. A bread-earner father and a homemaker mother who is dedicated to her family. Mother has to keep the identity of a 'good mother' by sacrificing selfhood, interest outside of motherhood, and even sexuality (Glenn, 1994); she should not be employed (if she is employed, she must maintain the balance between her workplace and exclusively home), exclusively dependent upon earning husband and son. So, if we consider all these duties and rituals are the conditions of motherhood, then why is it always linked with a woman's body?

Focus of the Study

According to Prof. Bagchi, "Patriarchy, whether in its more traditional or modern form constantly tries to glorify motherhood as the most prized vocation for women". (1990)

Following the statement, it can be said, motherhood is a profession. On the other hand, it is a performance, too. So, why is it considered a gendered performance? The focus of the paper is to examine how mass media, especially film, idealizes a performance or/ and a profession concerning gender identity. To establish my argument, I have taken two aspects of discussion; one is how film pushes women to become 'ideal mother', and the second is how film propagates motherhood as a performance and/ or profession based upon gender matrix. For this study, I have selected five Indian Hindi and Bengali language films. The films are Rituparna Ghosh's 'Unishe April' and 'Titli', Haranath Chakraborty's 'Chalo Paltai', Sajid

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

4

Khan's 'Hayy Babyy' and Mahesh Bhatt's 'Tamanna'. 'Unishe April' and 'Titli' will be discussed in the first part of the discussion, and 'Chalo Paltai', 'Hayy Babyy' and 'Tamanna' - these three films will be discussed in the second part of my study.

(I) 'Ideal Mother': Strategic Womanhood

The dominant ideology legitimizes the 'good mother' by justifying the 'bad mother' who is unfit for the defined frame of hegemonic motherhood, which is based upon some rituals such as caregiving and commitment to her children for energy and affection; it is understood as a universal model of motherhood. These all are the conditions of the ideal mother. So, women's lives are been controlled by the regulations of hegemony. After globalization, the concept of the 'new woman' (Sunder Rajan, 1993) and 'modern and Indian' woman (Munshi, 2004) emerged. Simultaneously, the newly emerged woman's identity is connected with the identity of the mother. The new identity of a woman constructs a condition which consists of a double identity, such as a 'good' wife, mother, and daughter-in-law in the private space (home) as well as 'good' in professional (job) life. Women should maintain a balance between their identities with having modernity. The basic condition of a mother should be 'dutiful' towards her home and professional life also. If she fails to maintain these fields, she would face the threat of losing her identity. Here, the selected films propagate this threat strategically.

The identity of the 'ideal mother' has never been questioned. The notion of a 'monstrous' or 'bad' mother has no existence in Indian culture (Chatterji, 2000). This culture is propagated through mass media.

"…psychoanalytic feminist analysis of mothers in 1980s popular culture found that the representation of mothers perpetuates patriarchal norms by separating female sexuality, work, and motherhood into distinct spheres: Female sexuality and work are still constructed as threats to the construction of the ideal mother" (Johnston and Swanson,

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

5

2003).

The selected two films demonstrate that the protagonists (mother) are not at all 'good'. They are not suitable for the defined idealized structure of motherhood. In 'Unishe April', Sarojini (Aparna Sen) is a 'selfish professional mother' who is busy with her dance profession, and in the film 'Titli', Urmila (Aparna Sen) is acted as being the 'sexual mother' of Titli who had a crush on Rohit Roy (Mithun Chakraborty). The paper is going to show how these two films represent mothers based on 'women' identity.

The Professional Selfish Mother Sarojini

The first sequence of the film 'Unishe April' consists of the frames of some flashback scenes. It starts with the death sequence of Mithu's (Debashree Roy) father, Manish (Boddhiswatta Majumdar), and from that very point in time, Sarojini is been depicted as a professional mother who is busy with her dance profession. The entire film shows that due to her dance programme, Sarojini was frequently absent during Mithu's upbringing. She does not have any knowledge about Mithu's boyfriend. In the entire film, Mithu was upset, but her mother did not try to know about her pain. Even after receiving the news of getting the award for her dance, without a little concern for Mithu, she went for Chennai. This way, the entire film illustrates her as a 'bad mother'. When Sarojini returns due to the cancellation of her flight, Mithu constantly challenges her mother about her relationship with her father. Sarojini replied, her father used to get angry with her just because she earns more than him and she is more successful than him, and it was the reason for her inferiority complex to her father. Sarojini even said, "I should never get married at all. I am not born for taking care of family." Even at the end of the film, Sarojini forgets the death anniversary of her husband. This way, she is been depicted as a 'selfish professional mother'. At the end of the film, a very significant message is been uttered by Mithu: "for the wellbeing of children, women

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

6

should 'ADJUST'".

Mother in 'Titli': Urmila Being Sexual

In the film 'Titli', Urmila is been depicted as being a 'SEXUAL MOTHER' who had a love relationship with Titli's crush (Rohit Roy). When Urmila puts a flower in her hair, suddenly Titli feels jealous and assumes her mother had a romantic relationship with Rohit because that moment they were alone and they had a romantic conversation, they were laughing, singing, and reciting which Titli listened to. As per the condition of the 'ideal mother', a mother should not look beautiful in the absence of her husband.

Here, the director has strategically used the concept of 'body work' (termed by Gedalof), the mother identity. A sequence of the film shows; after returning her husband Urmila wears a silk night dress which symbolizes her sexuality. The sequence continues with a scene where Urmila and Titli, talking about Urmila's love relationship with Rohit Roy. At that moment, thunder rages outside, and Urmila goes to shut the window. For the stormy wind suddenly her shawl slipped, and her shoulder revealed. Titli notices that her mother has wearing a silk night dress that is cut away close to the breast. She was shocked because she had never seen the sexualized body of her mother. Though Urmila gets conscious and covers herself with the shawl. Following Butler's "Bodies that Matter"; here the director used the silk night dress to make Urmila sexual. As per the codification of idealized motherhood, the mother should not have a connection with lustful sexuality except with her husband. If she had any romantic intimacy with others before her marriage, she should not again get connected with the person. These two films strategically propagate the notion of idealized gendered motherhood by showing it through the woman protagonists.

(II) Motherhood: Gender-Specific Performance/ Profession

The film 'Chalo Paltai' and 'Hayy Babyy' is based on gender reversal parenting

(mothering as performance); and the film 'Tamanna' has been picturized on child rearing (cannot say parenting/ mothering/ not even fathering) – these three films have shown the protagonists (male/ hijra) are not fit for mothering. In the Film 'Chalo Paltai' we have seen a widower, Subhomoy, taking care of his kids Gourav and Munni; in the Film 'Hayy Babyy' Arush, Ali, and Tanmay take care of Angel; and in 'Tamanna' a hijra Tikku, takes care of Tamanna. However, in many scenes, they are been projected as incapable of nurturing the kids. At the end of the film, Tamanna rejects Tikku. Subhomoy failed to control his anger and bit his son, Gourav. As a result, Gourav goes into a coma. In the film 'Hayy Babyy', Angel's fathers keep her outside of a house on a rainy night, and she becomes ill. This way, the societal normativity of parenting has been shown through these films. Following hegemonic normativity, women must take care of their children. In these three films, we have seen that to nurture a baby, it needs a woman. If these conditions are not fulfilled, the children and the performer of mothering will face trouble.

In the film 'Chalo Paltai', when Subhomoy fails to take care of his kids, that time we have seen a woman character introduced in the film content. But she is not their biological mother, and that's why she is not allowed to perform mothering. She has not been shown as an 'ideal woman' (who is 'eligible' to become a mother). Being a man, Subhomoy is also been shown as unfit for performing motherhood. Though in many scenes he sacrifices many things for his kind. However, just because 'motherhood' is a gender-specific performance that's why he has been depicted as a failed parent.

On the other hand, the three fathers of the child Angel are in the film 'Hayy Babyy'. As per the hegemonic construction, parenting is connected with marriage. At the beginning of the film, we see Angel's parents not get married to each other. That is why Arush is not eligible for parenting. And as per the Indian Hindu Marriage Act, marriage is permissible for one time (until divorce). At the end of the film, we see Angel's biological parents get married

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

8

following the Hindu Marriage Act. After getting married, Arush got the identity of his father and got permission to take care of his child. But Ali and Tanmay did not get the chance to take care of Angel. In the film, it has been shown that just because they are men (they also left their job, sacrificed their sleep, and cried for not performing well– these all are also done by women), they are not perfect for child rearing performance (mothering), and for their negligence/ignorance, Angel could have died.

In the Film 'Tamanna', we have seen Tikku taking care of Tamanna. Being a hijra, Tikku is not fit to become a biological father or mother. That's why at the end of the film, 'Tamanna' goes to her biological mother; she did not think about Tikku, who left his/her profession to rear Tamanna. Tikku has also done all the duties that are defined by the hegemony for rearing a child. Just because Tikku is not biologically a woman, he is not eligible for performing motherhood. But the question is, should a performance/ profession be idealized based on sex/ gender?

Filmic Process of Idealizing Gender-Specific Motherhood

Mass media is one of the means of the culture industry (Adorno, 1972) that produces culture. It has the power to strengthen the existing culture as well. By moulding public opinion, mass media can formulate strong ideologies (new and existing). Hegemony has its own culture, which controls the societal system for making a strong base for its long life. "Culture is produced and consumed within social life. Hence, particular cultural artefacts and practices must be situated within the social relations of production and reception in which culture is produced, distributed, and consumed to be properly understood and interpreted" (Durham, 2006). The interpretation is also dependent upon the regulation of the hegemony. So, the meaning derivation and consumption are controlled by the ruling power. Following the concept, it is significant to recall the term 'culture industry'. So, as a form of mass media, film is nothing but a "window onto the wider cultural world" (Gokulsing,

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

9

Dissanayake, 1998). Following Adorno, it can be said that mass media is an agent of a culture production system that represents the philosophy of culture and generates a new form of principles as well.

Some social systems produce psycho-social orders. By constant practice, the ruling institutions control the systems, and the order of hegemony becomes the norm. Hegemony constructs some identities to control the system. These normative identities have been followed in every discipline of the society. This way, the rituals become stronger, which makes people unconscious to think beyond the framed structure. This process can be identified as mythification. As an agent of the culture production system (culture itself produces myth), film also follows the same process as the other means of cultural industry. As a part of society, filmmakers also share the same experience of idealized gender-specific motherhood, and it has been reflected through their creations. As an audio-visual medium, the film has a strong effect on its audience. Continuous depiction of the normative ideal of motherhood becomes the 'icon' of the women. Simultaneous depiction of the 'ideal mother' and (or) 'non-perfect mother' creates a distinctive perception of motherhood. Along with that, if a 'mother' does not follow the structure/ norms of the hegemony, the person will get pain and rejection. The result would be the same if 'motherhood' were a performance/ profession performed by a non-woman. This way, motherhood becomes a space that is only associated with womanhood. Following Prof. Chattopadhyay,

> "...mass media are the main players exerting cultural power". So, "it is important to look at conditions for the cultural artefact's production in relation to socio-economic class structure, gender–role expectations, and specific visual codes of the time" (Boyd, 2010).

It is significant to look at the politics of the idealization of gender-specific motherhood, the strongest matrix of womanhood. It pushes women to perform 'ideal motherhood' by

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

10

sacrificing their selfhood and even their interests. However, if the film propagates motherhood as gender gender-neutral performance, then women's status will automatically change. The women would get a chance to perform in the system of capitalism, which is already strategically captured by the males.

Politics of Mythicized Gendered Motherhood

According to James Lull; 'Culture is a context' of everyday life. The hegemonic culture becomes mythicized norms through the cultivation of mass media. As a form of mass media, film facilitates to form of an ideology of gendered motherhood through the continuous representation of this kind of content. Mass media can present the image to the audience, and it sets the agenda which is made by 'dominant ideology' through the 'Cultivation Process' (Walter Lipmann). Continuous representation of a specific issue in a structured way makes a specific psychological ground for its audience (ISA[1], Althusser, 1971), which becomes unable to think differently from the hegemonic structured definition. The audience is being treated as an 'atomized mass' by mass media, which assists hegemony to strengthen its ideology. This way, the gendered performance of motherhood became a myth that affects gender parity.

Conclusion

Visual media has strong effects to shape culture, and make new ideologies; it even has the power to strengthen existing ideologies.

"Imagology has gained a historic victory over ideology" (Kundera, 1991).

Through the image and content, the film makes visual culture, which manipulates the audience by considering them as passive, vulnerable, marginalized and emotional. This way, it becomes easy for the audience to accept peer idealized hegemonic norms. Following the trend, film shows motherhood as the only space for women. As a result of the simultaneous

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
April-June 2025 I Fourth Year I Third Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

11

representation of motherhood in media makes the dialectic of mothering gender is rigid, which rejuvenates the notion stiffer. All though it is performance or/and job like other.

End Note:

1. Ideological State Apparatus.

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12

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 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

13

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