

Running Head: Image of Mother in Hindi Cinema

Image of Mother in Hindi Cinema: Digressing from ‘Mommy Myth’

Dr. Priyanka Kulhari

Assistant Professor

ARSD College

University of Delhi



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Abstract

Hindi Cinema and the image of mother has been inseparable from its inception. But the image created on the screen is far from reality. The celluloid mother has been dutiful, responsible, flawless and an epitome of sacrifice. She internalized the 'good mother' myth which demands intensive mothering. Her world shrinks to her children only. She takes care of all their needs and devotes her 24x7 to them nullifying her own identity remorselessly and with a feeling of fulfilment. This stereotypical portrayal of mother lacks maternal diversity and shows a huge gap between representation and reality. The present chapter dissects this idea of 'mommy myth' and its projection in Hindi cinema. Discussing some movies, it brings to the light how 'mother-goddess narratives' have worked towards cementing the patriarchy and women domination and how recently it is trying to pave new path in the portrayal of mother image on the screen.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, mommy myth, 'good and bad' mother, biological determination, mother's guilt, patriarchy

Hindi Cinema has been stereotypical in its presentation from its inception; whether its heroic, daring, masculine, saviour hero or submissive, beautiful, virtuous, passive heroine; an honest, loyal, simple servant 'Ramu Kaka' or unmarried, beautiful sister targeted by goons; a greedy, immoral, womaniser 'Lala' or a 'bad' woman or courtesan sacrificing her life for the hero. From the very beginning, Hindi Cinema has succumbed to 'good' mother myth and portrayed mother as a selfless, virtuous, sacrificing and flawless character and placed her on the pedestal of a goddess. A 'good' mother is one whose identity is her motherhood; the sole purpose of her life is her kids. She does not have any dreams or aspirations of hers, provides a healthy and happy environment to her offspring, makes sure that she is with them every time, takes care of their food, education, entertainment, mannerisms and etiquettes. Fiona Green takes this "mommy myth" further and states that 'good' mother is not the one who only performs all these tasks and sacrifices her dreams, friends, space, time, sleep and professional and intellectual growth but the one who after doing all these never feels sense of loss or sacrifice, rather considers it normal, substantial, gratifying, and meaningful. The narrative of Hindi movies is saturated by idealised and conventional images of selfless and satisfied 'good' mothers who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering.

Hindi movies propagating the myth of 'good' mother have contributed to cement the patriarchy and gender roles. Apotheosis of motherhood is one of the countless ploys used by patriarchy to oppress women. Rebecca Feasey¹ in her study on motherhood and mother work states that as a result of intensive mothering which is demanded from a 'good' mother the numbers of stay-at-home mothers have increased. They left their individual identity and profession and went back to the four walls of the house strengthening the concept of public and private space demarcated clearly for males and females respectively. And they did this not because they wanted to become 'good' mothers or wanted to sacrifice what was close to their heart, but

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because they were terrified of being labelled as ‘bad’ mother. Our society has internalized this ideology so deeply, strengthened by the goddess-narrative of Hindi movies, that its too difficult for women to get rid of it. The “mommy myth” discourages the idea of working woman. Therefore, Hindi films have glorified stay-at-home mothers and portrayed the ambitious, working mothers as bad. Vijay Reddy’s ‘Shriman Shrimati’ (1982) and J. Om Prakash’s ‘Apnaapan’ (1977) are two such movies. The narrative of ‘Shriman Shrimati’ projects Aruna, who is an opinionated, fun-loving woman who wants to have her own identity and earn name for herself, against normalcy. “Aruna is identified as an anomaly that needs to be cured by the literal as well as the metaphorical slaps from the patriarchy”².

She is not liked by her husband, her parents and other relatives on screen due to her preference to her aspirations over her motherhood and declared unfit in the marriage as well as society. At the end she realizes her mistake and accepts her sole identity of motherhood. Her character transforms from a woman dressed in western clothes to a woman draped in a saari with bindi and bangles which is “a socially acceptable, culturally appropriate, and romanticized image of motherhood”.³ The transformation in her look also brings into light the negative connotation associated with western ideology and the acceptance of woman of Indian value system. The authoritative look into her eyes gets replaced by an obedient air. Here, motherhood has been used to eradicate her identity as an independent woman. In ‘Apnaapan’, Reena Roy too like Aruna prefers a career to the role of a homemaker. And because not indulging into intense mothering, she does not fit into the defined normalcy of patriarchal society, at the end she is made to grieve and sob for her wrongs. Both these movies among others propagate the message that motherhood is the sole identity of a woman and any woman negating this will suffer which proves how motherhood has been practised as one of the “coercive apparatuses of female domination”⁴ by pushing her into a life of domesticity.

Recently Hindi movies have shown a shift in the image of mother from a stock character to a real one. They are not one-dimensional characters, either a victim or a martyrdom. Now they are assertive women with different traits in their personality. They are not the symbols of Indian culture showcasing Indian morals and value system. They are modern, young, independent and responsible women who will support their kids like friends, guide and counsel them like mentors, but not on the cost of their dreams. Their motherhood is going to become their strength not the shackles of their feet. In ‘Secret Superstar’ (2017), at the end her motherhood gives Nazma courage to come out of an abusive relationship. Chanda in ‘Nil Batte Sannata’ (2016) musters courage to take an unusual step of taking admission in her daughter’s class for the welfare of her daughter. ‘Panga’ (2020) also is a story of the inspiration a mother gets from her son to fulfil her dreams. Mothers were portrayed as the pinnacle of virtue and chastity. What may come, a mother can’t be wrong. She used to be someone one will look up to. But mothers are also human; and as said by William Shakespeare ‘to err is human’, they can also commit mistakes. Some recent movies have shown real mothers who can be authoritative, angry, irritating, interfering and dominating but not tagged as ‘bad’ mothers like the older times. Renuka Sahane directed ‘Tribhanga’ (2021) and Anu Menon’s directed ‘Shakuntala Devi’ (2020) brought freshness to the image of a mother. They both explore different facets of

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mother's personality and free woman from the burden of divinity. They show mothers as flawed, complex and prone to a list of follies that make us all human. 'Tribhanga' "talks of single motherhood, abuse, open relationships and aspirations of a woman." 5

It offers a prismatic view of a mother. Both Kajol and her mother made wrong decisions in their lives, both prioritized their careers and overlooked some heinous accidents in their daughters' lives but the narrative of the movie does not make them suffer and judge them and tag them as bad mothers based on their mistakes; rather shows mothers as human. And like Kajol, at the end, we as spectators also understand that imperfection is an integral part of every human, be it a mother. "When we paint a mother's character with just one shade, we often tend to leave out her most humane qualities, and Shahane challenged this notion in her film where relatability lies in the imperfectness of the mother."6

Just like 'Tribhanga' 'Shakuntala Devi' frees women from a long history of eulogising mother. It shows how a woman bears the burden of being imperfect and suffers from 'the mother's guilt' which is the result of not internalising 'good mother'. Ingrained gender roles and social conditioning make a woman feel that it's her sole duty to raise her child; and if she cannot do that, her conscience pricks her. Shakuntala also becomes a prey to this 'mommy myth' and under guilt makes wrong decision of separating her daughter from her father. Paritosh and Ajay also break the cliché of husband and are supportive. When Paritosh takes responsibility of raising their daughter Anu, he questions the long-standing preaching in the line of biological determinism. This movie also defines 'normal' mother as who cooks food for her daughter, devotes her 24x7 to her child, nullifies all her aspirations and limits her identity only as a mother. But remarkable is the scene when doing all this Shakuntala's heart longs for her dream, her heart is torn between a mother and a woman which shows how this myth of a 'good mother' works for patriarchy to keep woman subdued and dependent. The "mother-goddess narratives" of Hindi Cinema strengthens the 'mommy myth' and gives stress to the real mothers because of the huge gap in the representation and reality, of not being able to attain the unattainable goal of 'good mother'. The lived reality of mothers does not allow them to enter the extreme mothering shown on the screen by Nirupa Roy, Achla Sachdeva and Rakhi Gulzar and invites guilt leading to "a loss of self-esteem for mothers as they compared the reality of their parenting practices to what they considered to be ideal maternal standards".7 This 'mother's guilt' once took away the greatest gift of Shakuntala Devi also i.e., her maths talent. These two movies dissect this concept of 'mommy myth' and bring to the light its harsh reality. A confirmation of the bio-deterministic patriarchal view keeps the fathers free from childcare responsibilities, whereas the mothers bear all the burden of rearing their children.

But some movies like 'Tumhari Sulu', 'Mary Kom', 'Panga' show this responsibility shared by the fathers as well which works like a soothing breeze in the history of stereotypical presentation of motherhood on screen as well as challenges this notion of biological-determinism which believes that all the caring, nurturing and sacrificing are innate in a woman; they come naturally

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to her after giving birth to an offspring. Another break is from the cliché associated with stepmothers. Stepmothers were shown as demonic characters who will leave no stone unturned to make their stepchildren's lives hell. But movies like 'Mom', 'We are Family', 'Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham' shattered this image and turn the stepmothers from devils to darlings. To conclude, it can be said that its necessary to free women from the 'mother-goddess narratives' and 'mommy myth' as they are intimidating devices of female domination. They cement the patriarchy and invite 'the mother's guilt' in women forfeiting their self-esteem. Hindi cinema has strengthened this myth through its stereotypical representations of mother but recently it has shown some digressions from the victim or martyrdom portrayals of mother to assertive, aspirational, complex and flawed characters. It is trying to come out from the revered 'good' mothers and reviled 'bad' mothers' narratives and exploring various facets of mother's personality. It's not only appealing to the emotions but raising some pertinent questions as well on motherhood. Giving a kaleidoscopic view of a mother, it is trying to complete the fragmented self of a woman, though there are miles to go before its achieved.

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