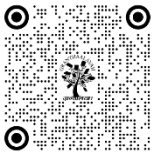


REFRAMING MOTHERHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY BOLLYWOOD: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF VISUAL NARRATIVES

Parvathi T ¹

¹ Assistant Professor on Contract TKMM College, India



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.5455](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.5455)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Motherhood has historically served as a critical locus for patriarchal control, functioning as a mechanism through which women's bodies and subjectivities are colonized. The cinematic apparatus, through its language and imagery, has often perpetuated this patriarchal logic, reinforcing heteronormative and idealized conceptions of motherhood. Visual media frequently participates in the dissemination of cultural propaganda that ensnares mothers within normative frameworks of self-sacrifice, devotion, and moral superiority. However, contemporary Bollywood has witnessed a paradigm shift wherein certain visual narratives challenge these entrenched ideologies by offering mothers greater voice, enhanced visibility, and distinctive identities. This shift has facilitated the emergence of maternal figures who transcend traditional paradigms and actively negotiate patriarchal power structures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood has historically served as a critical locus for patriarchal control, functioning as a mechanism through which women's bodies and subjectivities are colonized. The cinematic apparatus, through its language and imagery, has often perpetuated this patriarchal logic, reinforcing heteronormative and idealized conceptions of motherhood. Visual media frequently participates in the dissemination of cultural propaganda that ensnares mothers within normative frameworks of self-sacrifice, devotion, and moral superiority. However, contemporary Bollywood has witnessed a paradigm shift wherein certain visual narratives challenge these entrenched ideologies by offering mothers greater voice, enhanced visibility, and distinctive identities. This shift has facilitated the emergence of maternal figures who transcend traditional paradigms and actively negotiate patriarchal power structures.

Despite these progressive tendencies, the reconfiguration of maternal identities in popular culture is not without contradictions. While these new representations appear to be empowering, they often fail to achieve complete emancipation and, paradoxically, can become sites of renewed exploitation. Through a feminist theoretical framework, this study interrogates the dual nature of these shifting representations of motherhood—examining both their liberatory potential and their complicity in reinforcing new forms of oppression grounded in neoliberal and capitalist ideologies.

In a country like India, where motherhood continues to be a heavily scrutinized and culturally conditioned institution, women remain burdened by societal expectations that idealize maternal selflessness, emotional resilience,

and moral infallibility. The archetype of the Indian mother—as self-sacrificing, all-embracing, all-suffering, and quasi-divine—persists in public imagination and cultural texts. Although women have historically demonstrated capabilities that far exceed these limited roles, the institution of motherhood continues to restrict their aspirations, desires, and creativity. Contemporary Bollywood, while offering greater narrative space to maternal characters, prompts critical questions about the extent to which these portrayals genuinely subvert patriarchal norms or merely reinscribe them under new guises.

The emergence of these modern maternal figures often imposes new cultural and emotional burdens, obliging women to conform to reimagined standards of motherhood that reflect neoliberal values. Such portrayals can lead to intensified self-surveillance, internalized guilt, competition, and psychological distress. This thesis employs various feminist theories—including postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, intersectional feminism, mother-blaming theory, and sex-positive feminism—to critically analyze how these visual narratives negotiate the intersections of gender, class, caste, sexuality, and capitalism in constructing maternal identities.

Postfeminism, emerging prominently in the 1990s, emphasizes individualism, personal transformation, and entrepreneurial subjectivity. It often redirects responsibility for gendered oppression onto women themselves, subjecting both their bodies and psyches to relentless scrutiny. Neoliberal feminism, which builds upon postfeminist discourse, aligns female empowerment with market logic, validating only those women who are confident, resilient, and aspirational. This framework champions an image of the “progressive” mother who effortlessly balances professional success with familial responsibilities—a notion that obscures structural inequalities and reinforces capitalist ideals. Intersectional feminism, by contrast, highlights the layered oppressions faced by women from marginalized communities, including caste, class, and sexual minorities, thereby expanding the feminist lens to account for concurrent and intersecting forms of discrimination. Mother-blaming theory emerged in the postwar era, attributing failures in parenting and child development primarily to mothers. This theory constructs motherhood as a site of moral obligation, intensifying pressures on women to perform to perfection. In contrast, the principle of shared parenting destabilizes biological essentialism by asserting that mothering is a role that can be fulfilled by fathers, adoptive parents, or other caregivers. Finally, sex-positive feminism foregrounds the idea that sexual autonomy is integral to women’s liberation, embracing the rights and identities of sexual minorities.

This study examines three key cultural texts—Alankrita Shrivastava’s Netflix series *Bombay Begums* (2021), Neeraj Ghaywan’s short film *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), and the Vicks advertisement featuring transgender activist Gauri Sawant (2017)—to explore how these feminist theories manifest in cinematic portrayals of motherhood. Each text provides a distinct representation of maternal identity, offering fertile ground for interrogating the interplay between empowerment and exploitation in contemporary feminist discourse.

In *Bombay Begums*, Alankrita Shrivastava narrates the intersecting lives of five urban women, three of whom are mothers, as they navigate patriarchal constraints within professional and domestic spheres. The series’ episode titles—“Women Who Run With the Wolves,” “Love,” *The Color Purple*, *The Bell Jar*, *The Golden Notebook*, and *A Room of One’s Own*—draw intertextual connections with landmark feminist literary works, suggesting a deliberate feminist ethos. Shrivastava herself states:

“The series explores the complex journey of working Indian women who are ambitious for power and success but have many other battles to fight too. It is the story of their daily hustle, the story of their dreams—sometimes buried, sometimes fulfilled. It’s the story of glass ceilings shattered, and also of the hearts broken in the process... a world that reflects the realities of urban working women” (qtd. in Mohanty).

The three maternal figures—Rani Irani (Pooja Bhatt), Fatima Warsi (Shahana Goswami), and Lily/Laxmi Gondhali (Amruta Subhash)—represent different facets of motherhood in a patriarchal, capitalist society. Rani, the CEO of the Royal Bank of Bombay, navigates her dual identity as a corporate leader and a stepmother struggling to establish emotional bonds with her children. Fatima, a high-ranking employee at the same bank, undergoes a tumultuous emotional journey—from longing for a child, to grappling with the implications of an unexpected pregnancy, and ultimately dealing with the trauma of miscarriage. Her arc encapsulates the conflicts between professional ambition and maternal expectations. Lily, a former bar dancer turned sex worker, becomes entangled in Rani’s life when her son is injured in an accident involving Rani’s stepson. Her subsequent transformation into an aspirational maternal figure embodies a more traditional narrative of sacrificial motherhood, albeit framed within a socially marginalized context.

In Geeli Pucchi, Neeraj Ghaywan explores the intersections of caste, gender, and sexuality through the characters of Bharti Mandal (Konkona Sen Sharma), a Dalit factory worker, and Priya Sharma (Aditi Rao Hydari), a Brahmin data operator. Their complex relationship oscillates between intimacy and power play, ultimately collapsing under the weight of societal expectations. Priya, despite her queerness, succumbs to heteronormative pressures and embraces motherhood within a traditional family structure, thereby silencing her own desires and individuality. The film poignantly reveals how caste privilege, internalized patriarchy, and performative progressivism converge to constrain queer maternal identities.

The 2017 Vicks advertisement, part of the “Touch of Care” campaign, depicts the real-life story of Gauri Sawant, a transgender activist, and her adopted daughter, Gayatri. Told from the child’s perspective, the narrative highlights Gauri’s emotional resilience and maternal devotion, challenging prevailing assumptions about gender and caregiving. The ad asserts that motherhood transcends biological and gendered boundaries, advocating for broader social acceptance of transgender individuals. Gauri’s final act of parting from her daughter, filled with genuine emotion, underscores the universal dimensions of maternal love and care.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- <https://m.economictimes.com/magazines/panache/bombay-begums-will-get-a-netflix-release-on-international-womens-day/articleshow/80767676.cms>
- <https://medium.com/@pumba.communicationcell/vicks-generation-of-care-gauri-sawant-ad-analysis-113c0d37402d>
- <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/06/24/feminism-and-capitalism-the-ideological-dilemma-of-coexistence/>
- <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/01/11/manusmriti-ultimate-guide-good-woman/>
- <https://www.thepsychologicalhook.com/mother-blame/>
- <https://think.kera.org/2010/01/25/rewriting-the-rules-for-a-new-generation-of-parents>