

‘Mere Paas Ma Hai’: Bollywood mothers

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Abstract

Bollywood films are one of the most significant arenas that vividly connect India with the world; yet if there is one character that is distinctive in Bollywood film with the rest of the world, it is the mother. Portrayals of mothers and motherhood have always played a significant part in such films, be it stereotypical ‘ma’ or out of the box mothers. The research is an appraisal on the variants of mothers who have significantly left a mark in the Bollywood landscape. The paper is based on selected films belonging from post-independence period to the more recent 21st century. Good and evil, selfishness and altruism, jealous and all lost mothers-----Bollywood has all the recipes. Hence an analysis on the movie mothers would help us to elucidate on the various conceptions surrounding traditional and also not so traditional moms.

KEYWORDS: Mother, Motherhood, Bollywood, Tradition, Globalization.

Mothers are the most integral part of our lives; and their significance has been touched upon in every aspects of culture. Popular literature and cinema have time and again reified the glory of the mother and motherhood. The roles played by mother, sometimes stereotypical, and often rebellious have acted as a catalyst to unfold the story further. She is often portrayed as mother earth or as country, thus emphasizing the value of respecting and protecting the mother. The paper is an attempt to understand the portrayal of mothers in popular Hindi cinema from the early days of talkies till the contemporary era. The task as such is notorious enough provided the enormous amount of films released every year; hence films which have mothers as integral characters are only taken account over the years.

P.K.Nayar (2006) argues “To an extent, all commercial Hindi films are written by spectators themselves, since their acceptance or rejection of the films defines the success ‘formula’.” The oral narratives portrayed through commercial Hindi films are repetitive as “...because the Hindi film; as in oral tradition, must repeat known materials.”[ibid: 2006]. Mothers’ roles, likewise are shown in consonance with such traditions, although there have been deviations, in particular in post-global era.

Mother earth, nation and sacredness:

Early days of popular Hindi cinema(1940s -1950s) emphasized loyalty to the nation, and mother played an important role as a representation of the ‘land’, as livelihood. For M.K.Raghavendra (2016),”Anmol Ghadi may be the first to introduce the figure of the

sacred mother, and ‘mother-as-bread-provider...as a convenient symbol for the land.’” Another film worth mentioning is Raj Kapoor’s ‘*Awara*’ (1951) whereby the way it treats the ‘mother’. The protagonist, Raj lives with her mother in a slum desolated by his father who is judge by profession. Set within the context of class based inequalities and life experiences, the father represents “...apathetic patriarchal state authority”(Raghavendra:2009) and mother as conventional land and livelihood provider. The film that stands apart and is inevitable to mention is Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957).It not only symbolizes the mother as ‘mother earth’, as an epitome of sacrifice and suffering against feudal oppression; she is also a protector of her community and does not think twice to kill her son who chose the path of evil. She is all sacrificing and at the same time a symbol of protest against unjust. M.K.Raghavendra (2016) while observing the villains of Indian cinema argued that until 1960s “Mothers were usually emblems of correctness, but stepmothers and mothers-in-law could fail as role models”. *Mughal –E-Azam*(1961) a historical magnum opus, has been a witness of another memorable role of that of mother. Torn between the obligations towards her husband and mother’s concern for her son’s happiness, Jodha Bai chooses loyalty towards her homeland. Referring to the films of the sixties, Chitra Prabhu(2012) argues“...the mother has to be someone as strong to restrain this wild young man, which was provided by the equally stubborn, outwardly stern, yet soft deep within matriarch.... This mother would not compromise when her family’s honour was at stake”.Two other movies of the 1960s that deserve notable mention are *Mamta*(1966) and *Aradhana*(1969) as both displayed the strong mother in the face of adversities. *Mamta* was an ill-fated woman turned nautch girl mother’s struggle to protect her daughter from meeting with similar fate;*Aradhana* dealt with “...premarital love and motherhood...., a mother finding fulfillment in her son’s dreams”(Mukhopadhyay:2016).

Corruption and mother:

The 1970s marked a significant shift in the ways Bollywood films hitherto have been portrayed; from being good old happy ending romantic to “A new angry, bitter, harder-hitting Bollywood had arrived on the scene...”(Banker:2001). The angry young man, iconize by Amitabh Bachchan became the trademark of the decade. Driven by corruption, unjust system and inequalities, the protagonists’ had to battle through all odds in order to win it for her all sacrificing mothers or for the masses. The mothers would be the generator of virtue and inner strength, and her sufferings and hardships make the ‘hero’ to become the ‘desired symbol of value’. The most notable movie of the decade is *Deewar* (1975), whereby the mother is portrayed as ‘nurturer, home and nation’. She is objectified as the most valuable possession in response to any way of worldly material comforts as when the younger brother Ravi replies, “*mere paas maa hai*” (I have mother) as counter to Vijay’s boasting of luxuries of life. The mother also symbolizes a figure akin to the state to curb out criminality and corruption by making her sacrificing her evil son. In *Trishul*(1978),the unwed mother seeks out to son to avenge injustice done on her. *Golmaal* (1979) and *Khoobsurat* (1980) are two other films belonging to the decade of late70s that deal with mother and motherhood albeit in different ways. The mother in *Golmaal* is fake and disguises herself to save the face of the orphaned protagonist Ram Prashad Sharma, in the process developing the maternal affection and care for them.

Khoobsurat on the other speaks of the matriarch, who is conservative, an ardent disciple of tradition and discipline, who binds her family by clock time. Unlike other popular movies whereby the mother is subordinate to the patriarch or of traditions, here she herself is a symbol of authority and a pronouncer of values.

'Ma' in transition in 1980s and 1990

Several commentators like Chitra Prabhu, Ruchi Agarwal and Jai Arjun Singh have observed the fading shine of mothers in 1980s where women in general were reduced to be passive components in films. Around the late eighties, however, a certain 'liberal' movie mothers have come into being, thanks to the extended family based films initiated by Rajshri Productions. *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989) brought in a new age mother where one hears 'mom' instead of 'maa'; the mother threw darts, was aware of miniskirts and jeans and bobcuts. The mother was a friend with whom the son can discuss about his prospective girlfriends and tastes. Even the appearance of the mother was afresh as she was a relief from the hitherto grey-haired, pale appearing mothers. The saga went on in later Rajshri movies of the 1990s.

The 1990s ushered in a gradual transition in the values of mothers and their relationships with sons and daughters, however, mostly confining the voices within the patriarchal set up. Among early 1990s films, *Beta* (1992) spoke about the relation of the son to her stepmother. The myth of the evil stepmother is present in the film, although in the later part the real intentions of the biological son arise conscience in the mother, who can depart anything but her 'real son' (stepson). The plot thus questions the stereotypical conventions of the goodness associated with 'biological motherhood'. The decade also saw the mother who seeks revenge through her sons on the injustice meted to her family and her husband. *Karan Arjun* (1995) and *Soldier* (1998) portrayed the defamed mother who departs from the previous "all enduring mothers". The mother in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) is rather a friend, with whom the daughter can share her diary of dreams. Residing within a conservative extended family setup, she proclaims for her daughter's emancipation against rigid sacrifices to be made by women and even encouraging eloping with her lover when crises emerge.

Breaking the mould and contemporary mothers:

The consequences of globalization and the dispersal of the Bollywood market worldwide affected the content and the ways films were made. The transition brought about newer avenues in relationships. The present 2000s decade has seen a steady change in the characterization of mother. For Jai Arjun Singh, "...mother representations- especially in films with urban settings- have been more varied than they were in the past". Not negating the traditional mothers, new age mothers were confident, self-dependent, vocal, asserting rights, in tandem with the contemporary attire and lifestyles. Besides, the sexuality of a woman is less suppressed now after becoming mother and less refrained from having any sexual desires or identity. In *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), one of the male protagonists Siddharth Sinha falls in love with a divorcee mother Tara Jaiswal, eventually leading to souring in relationships with his friends and mother. The mother of Siddharth

is worried for her son's alleged affair with a person almost of her age. Illegitimacy, i.e., children born out of wedlock is an issue which sensitized less in Bollywood films. However the decade saw an appraisal of the issue in the film *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), where "...the mother of the husband discovers that her daughter-in-law has been bringing up her son's illegitimate child as her own" (Deakin and Bhugra :2012). Here the mother is rearing the husband's illegitimate child along her own which marks a shift from the conventions associated illegitimacy attributable always with a woman.

Of late, the anxieties (cultural conflicts) brought about by contemporary social scenario found resonance in portrayal of mother and motherhood too. For example, the film *Dostana* (2008) portrayed the loud mother who is apprehensive about her son's possibility of having gay affair. As an orthodox mother, she is even shown performing witchery to cure her son. Another mention of mother's response to present cultural conflicts can be found in the movie *Ishaqzaade* (2012) whereby the mother sacrifices her life trying to protect her daughter-in-law who belongs to a different religion. The mother here is a symbol of protector in the face of community who values respect for the traditions more than individual lives. Cheeni Kum (2007) saw the mother lending support to her son finding love at the age of 64 while *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) delved with the issue of dyslexic child and his mother. The mother represents the aspirations of middle class parents having normal expectations from the child, not realizing his incapability to do so. Like other moms, she "...is ready to do as much as possible within her limits for the betterment of her child." (Prabhu: 2012). Besides, single parent mothers have also been prime in movies like *My Name Is Khan*(2010) and *Paa*(2009) who overcome the social obstacles and bear up children by their own efforts, tenacity, hard labour and earning, without disposing off their own desires. The last films that deserve worthy mention surrounding mother and motherhood are the movies *Kahaani*(2012) and *Kahaani 2*(2016) which are perfect juxtapositions on the overarching conventions surrounding motherhood. *Kahaani* sets departure with the feelings, sympathy and admirations surrounding a single mother-to-be ; revealing in the end that the protagonist Vidya Bagchi was not pregnant at all. Such revelation contrasts with the sanctity of motherhood in Bollywood. *Kahaani 2* dealt with a single woman who rescues an orphan from sexual abuse, and taking up responsibilities as a mother.

Conclusion:

The portrayals of mother and motherhood have dominantly been stereotypical, representing the care and nurturing, sacrificing and all enduring. The wider socio-political and religious structures have often pervaded Bollywood storytelling, with mothers at times being instrumental representations of protest and proponent of overarching values. Even in stereotypical roles, the mother has been the primary source of inspirations, ideals and desired symbol of value for the protagonists. Of late, the changing mother has been a symbol of emancipation, aspirations of the classes, and practitioners of her own desires. Mother and motherhood is independent of being in relation with paternal authority; myths of cultural conflicts often find a way out through the voices of mother. Hence the mother is historically both a symbol of conservation and also of change.

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