

All Women Must be Mothers: Indian Cinema’s Role in Shaping the Ideal Woman

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Abstract

The “myth” of the good mother remains a powerful influence used by various institutions to shape women’s aspirations, and this essay explores how Indian Cinema contributes significantly to the market for this myth. The cinematic portrayal of the mother has evolved, reflecting changing political motivations in the country. Tracing back to the foundational years of Indian cinema, the myth was served by gendering the idea of the nation itself. More recently, this concept applies value judgments concerning women’s agency, whether they are exploring sexuality or breaking from everyday gender roles. However, the core premise that a good mother is essentially an ideal woman has consistently prevailed. Borrowing from Sudhir Kakar’s idea of the “bad mother,” as presented in his work *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytical Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978), this essay explores the evolution of the Mother in Indian Cinema, demonstrating how she has consistently carried the burden of being valued as “good” in order to be seen as an ideal woman.

Introduction: The Cultural Foundation of Ideal Womanhood

The relationship between a good mother and an ideal woman is argued here to be that of means to an end. This subtle connotation is a fundamental part of the cultural ethos, particularly within the Hindu cultural imagination that widely grips the country. This link can be traced to the two most important Hindu epics: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Irawati Karve, in *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, points out that the Ramayana is filled with ideal characters, positioning Sita as the ideal woman, while the Mahabharata takes recognition of flaws in its very human characters. Despite their similarities (such as experiencing exiles and both being daughters of the earth, according to Karve 77), Sita has the distinction of being highlighted in her role as a mother. Draupadi, conversely, would never be popularly referred to as an ideal woman, perhaps because her status as a mother is suppressed in the wider narrative that shapes the mass psyche.

Having established these popular narratives that shape the Indian psyche in relating a good mother to an ideal woman, this essay proceeds to analyze how Indian filmmakers utilize this framework in cinematic representations. The analysis primarily focuses on Hindi films produced since 1947, which are often presented as national cinema. The discussion is structured chronologically, analyzing four films: *Mother India* (1957), *Ghare Baire* (1984), *Haider* (2014), and *Lust Stories* (2018).

Motherhood and the Nation-State: Idealization through Sacrifice (1957–1984)

The post-colonial era necessitated strivings toward modernity and industrialism, yet society sought to retain the cultural ethos identified in the values of the village. The mother figure emerged as the perfect vehicle for navigating this transitional paradox.

Mother India (1957): The Nation's Sacrificial Subject

Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) positions the mother, Radha (Nargis), as exceptionally great, with her struggles representing the struggles of the larger community and nation. This was crucial during a decade grappling with Nehruvian development, emphasizing industrialization while recalling the Gandhian essence of villages. Radha's actions, like resuming farming on flooded land primarily to feed her children, win the confidence of the villagers.

Radha is asserted as a good mother throughout, and at the peak of her goodness, she comes forth as an ideal woman for the Indian nation. Her most exceptional act is killing her son, Birjoo, when he attempts to kidnap a village woman, stressing that she could not tolerate a violation on any of the village women. By invoking a psychoanalytical understanding via Sudhir Kakar's idea of the "bad mother," we can understand why Radha's act does not result in her being branded as bad. Kakar suggests a bad mother is one whose affection makes the son dependent and incompetent; Radha redeems herself because her affection did not compromise in ending the "badness" of her son. Consequently, she also redeems herself as the ideal woman.

The self-sacrifice depicted is a feminine value that the film leverages to appeal to the newly independent India to sacrifice for nation-building. Ravi Vasudevan summarizes this equation: the mother's sacrifices form the foundation upon which the state—represented by developmental imagery like large-scale irrigation projects—is erected, confirming that mothers are often subjects of the state.

Ghare Baire (1984): Agency Curbs and Institutional Punishment

Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* (1984) allows the audience to be reflexive about the nationalist movement. Set during the Swadeshi movement, the film focuses on Bimala's evolutionary journey toward exploring her femininity and sexuality, which is crucial for examining the idealism attached to women in the construction of "Bharat Mata".

Bimala evolves from one content with tradition to a sexualized being who is also capable of thinking. Her attraction to Sandip, a hyper-masculine nationalist who embodies hypocrisy, shows how a woman coming to terms with her agency and sexuality is primarily looked upon as indulging in a vice.

Bimala immerses herself in severe guilt for her adultery, particularly after her husband, Nikhil, is killed amidst the nationalist violence. Her freedom, symbolized by Sandip symbolically leaving her with open hair, is seen as coming at the cost of her husband's life. Nikhil's widowed sister-

in-law, clad in white and signifying a tradition of sacrifice, represents the ideal woman. As Wendy Doniger notes, Mahatma Gandhi invented a "gendered nationalism" by making feminine qualities like fortitude, self-sacrifice, and self-control core virtues for both genders (Doniger 625). Bimala's progression toward freedom and open hair winds her up in widowhood, confirming that she meets ideal standards only insofar as she holds to the values highlighted by Gandhi; otherwise, institutional impositions await to curb this freedom. The narrative confirms "what could have been" had she not violated the traditional impositions of monogamy and womanhood.

The Rise of the "Bad Mother": Sexuality, Agency, and Political Accountability (2014–2018)

The transition to post-1990 cinema is marked by the discourse of Mandir, Mandal, and Market, and also the tension surrounding Kashmir. The modern cinematic mother often faces scrutiny in the realm of agency and sexuality, reinforcing her status as a "bad mother."

Haider (2014): The Bad Mother as a Political Subject

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014), an adaptation of Hamlet set against the backdrop of Kashmir tension, carefully problematizes the mother-son relationship. Ghazala Begum (Tabu) is "brilliantly exemplary of Kakar's conception of the 'bad mother'". Although the film shows how Haider becomes a militant, the onus of his aggression is placed on Ghazala's "callousness" in bringing him up. This callousness runs parallel to Ghazala exploring love and sex for herself with her brother-in-law after her husband's enforced disappearance. Her affection for Haider is projected as blinding, making her unable to gauge the "darkness" surrounding her son's path.

This representation aligns with Lila Abu-Lughod's recent observations regarding the narrative of 'Countering Violent Extremism' (CVE). Abu-Lughod suggests that Muslim women are expelled from the sympathetic space of "saving" and are instead tested against "applied parenting skills," where they are deemed responsible for allowing their sons to choose violent extremism.

Crucially, Ghazala's active attempts to keep her son away from militant developments are entirely overshadowed by her exploration of herself beyond motherhood—as a lover and a woman exploring her sexuality. The portrayal of the bad mother is explicitly linked to the narrative of her being anything beyond a mother.

Lust Stories (2018): Modern Adultery and the Motherhood Test

The short film from Netflix's *Lust Stories* (2018) concerning a middle-aged, adulterous wife highlights the persisting power of the motherhood ideal. Her frustrated husband accuses her of being an indifferent, "bad mother" who keeps her children hungry.

When the wife is introduced as adulterous and simultaneously failing the motherhood test, the viewer is instantly susceptible to demonize her and confirm doubts about her not being an ideal woman. The emphasis on her being a bad mother has an immediate impact; adultery alone allows

for the possibility of sympathy, but failing the test of motherhood instantly confirms her unideal status. Sympathy only begins when it is revealed that her adultery stems from the sheer dejection of her marriage, allowing her character to breathe as liberated rather than demonized solely on account of not being a good mother.

Conclusion: The Market for the Myth and the Mystic Ideal

Having traced these films set in different times and talking of disparate political discourses, the pressing theme of the good mother being the ultimate embodiment of an ideal woman is a recurring and near-universal concept.

This notion stems from the societal binaries (Ortner) where women are considered closer to nature due to their reproductive functions, while men are closer to culture. When women are associated with their "natural" functions of reproduction and nurturing, an ideal woman is automatically associated with gentle values. Even unconventional actions, like Radha performing the duties of the male head of the household in *Mother India*, must be contained under motherhood to be appropriate. The fact that a modern series explicitly dealing with women's sexuality (*Lust Stories*) still had to employ the criterion of motherhood confirms that the question of womanhood cannot be considered without her meeting (or not meeting) a certain criterion of motherhood.

The figure of the mother finds its ultimate manifestation in Bharat Mata. While Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, is a concrete historical figure, the Mother of the Nation remains mystic and is not associated with any concrete, potentially flawed human figure. Acknowledging a human figure's flaws would take away the divinity of the ideal. Bharat Mata's mystic status provides the State with "unlimited scope" to innovate and invent new ideals for its citizens. The analysis confirms that a good mother is the easiest universal category to idealize all actions an institution—most often the State—expects from the individuals it bounds.

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