

The Concept of Motherhood in India

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Myths, Theories and Realities

Edited by

Zinia Mitra

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-4387-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4387-4

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to my family, friends and colleagues for their inspiration that has helped me on this difficult route – it is difficult because it is in a flux, shifting and changing its course like a stream. The concept of motherhood has undergone a revolution in India, with women moving away from the home to join the workforce and provide extensive monetary support to their families. Now, with same-sex marriage, adoption, artificial insemination, IVF, and other techniques introduced, motherhood is no longer limited to biological mothering. The concept thus needs to be revisited. ‘India’ in the title of the book is used in the sense of Indian subcontinent.

I would like to thank Mitali Wong, Professor of English, Claflin University, for her encouragement and her foreword to this book. I also thank Professor Tutun Mukherjee, Soma Chatterjei, Anuradha Kunda, Mossarap Hossain, and Daya Dissanayake for their visits to the blind alleys of tradition and returning with new perspectives.

I thank the team of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their cooperation and support.

Zinia Mitra

FOREWORD

The current anthology edited by Zinia Mitra brings together unique perspectives on the complex subject of motherhood. The essays by contemporary scholars address the myths, realities, and theories associated with the concept. Professor Mitra's own expertise is in the myths and realities of motherhood in Bengal, and she undertook a minor research project on the subject at the University of North Bengal. She discusses the theories of motherhood, and includes the following essays in the collection: Tutun Mukherjee's "Mother: Archetype and Beyond," Anuradha Kunda's "Single Motherhood: a Decentralized Status in Search of a Centre," Shoma Chatterji's "Myth, Motherhood, and Mainstream Hindi Cinema," Daya Dissanayake's "Motherhood in Buddhism," and Mosarrap Hossain Khan's "Muslim Motherhood and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971)."

The importance of motherhood in traditional patriarchal cultures is rooted in the teachings of all the world religions. Hence, the connections between world religions and motherhood made in this collection are valuable. The contributors to Professor Mitra's anthology cover the role/myth of motherhood in Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim cultures. With the focus of this volume being on motherhood in the Indian subcontinent, it is advisable for readers to reflect upon motherhood as a transformative process that affects the lives of very large numbers of young women all over the world every day.

There is over half a century of commentary, questioning, and theorizing by scholars in gender studies across the world regarding the biological determinism that impacts the lives of women when they become mothers. And even in this twenty-first century, not all instances of motherhood are women's choices. There is a global awareness that the stagnant or declining birth rates in post-industrial societies have contributed to demands by conservative politicians to revisit liberal abortion laws. Some countries such as Germany and Russia continue to offer financial incentives to women to bear children. Russia gives significant financial stipends to couples who have male babies because patriarchal society perceives that males are needed as future members of Russia's armed forces. The value of bearing male babies in Renaissance Europe was

evident even in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where Macbeth tells his wife, who has none of the softer virtues stereotypically assigned to the female gender: "Bring forth men-children only,/ For thy undaunted mettle should compose/ Nothing but males" (2.1.73–75). Traditionally, in Asian countries, the mothers of infant sons are looked upon more favourably than the mothers of daughters. It is indeed ironic that while motherhood is held in high esteem, in many traditional patriarchal cultures less value is placed on the birth of female infants who will become the mothers of the future.

The dichotomy between the value placed on motherhood and the devaluation of a mother who has given birth to a female infant, in comparison to a mother who has given birth to a male infant, is traceable to economics. The benefits of raising male children who will support their parents in old age versus raising female children in dowry-ridden societies where daughters represent financial loss are still prevalent views in some parts of the world. In areas of South Asia, newly married women are expected to bear at least one child in the first year of marriage to prove their fertility. Similar views are also prevalent in other countries. In this context, Zinia Mitra's anthology is a much needed one in understanding the theories, myths, and realities associated with motherhood.

For many years, as a senior faculty member, I have often been queried by American undergraduates as to whether I have any children. These students are mostly from rural and small town backgrounds. I have often wondered whether the information that I have two adult daughters gives students a sense of security because mothers are viewed as both nurturing and forgiving. The American ideas of 'motherhood and apple pie' represents the common American view that these two things are essentially good for us and nothing can go wrong with them. However, we know that not all mothers are the same, just as all apple pies are not equal in quality. Another cross-cultural expectation across continents is that mothers should conduct themselves in a way in which they become role models for their children. This expectation also applies to fathers in traditional cultures.

In closing, I am reminded of the effect of motherhood on women's identity in West Bengal prior to the women's movement in India. We, as children, were instructed to address women domestic workers with respect by addressing them as "Mother of [their oldest child]," and not by their given names. Over the years, I have observed that this practice has been discontinued in favour of using the woman's first name with the suffix for

older sister. This transition is interesting, suggesting that there is perhaps less emphasis on motherhood as identity across social classes in West Bengal.

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INTRODUCTION

and I wonder how many women
denied themselves daughters,
closed themselves in rooms,
drew the curtains
so they could mainline words.

A child is not a poem,
A poem is not a child.
There is no either/or.
However.¹

Prajâpati (“Lord of Creatures”) said to himself: “Well let me make a firm basis for it” (semen). So He created her, He placed her below and worshipped her, therefore one should worship a woman by placing her below. He (Prajâpati) extended His organ that projects and with it he impregnated her.²

Adrienne Rich opens her *Of Women Born* with a glaring veracity, “All human life on the planet is born of women.”

‘Mother’ (Mata: mother, mater, maternal; Latvian equivalent “mate”) is one of the oldest known words. Roman Jakobson hypothesized that the nasal sound in ‘mama’ comes from the nasal murmur that babies produce during breastfeeding when their mouths are blocked, which is probably why ‘mother’ in many languages of the world contains a nasal sound.³ Pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and nurturing are associated tasks of motherhood. The Collins dictionary defines ‘mother’ as “a female who has given birth to offspring,” and more broadly as a person who demonstrates ‘motherly qualities,’ such as maternal affection. The definition ‘mother’ thus focuses on the gestational capacities of women, the ability to give birth and experience pregnancy, which by extension means look after, care for, protect, nurse, and tend. Lately, ‘mother’ has been defined as a person who engages in the act of mothering. ‘Mothering’ is a term constructed in late modernity that denotes a woman providing the physical and psychological care needed for a child.⁴ Motherly qualities include caring, tending, and compassion, which by extension include cooking, washing, or other necessary activities entailed by the patriarchy from which others/fathers are released.

A woman is physiologically equipped to bear children. She attains motherhood through the act of carrying a child in her womb and giving birth. A deep-rooted biological determinism, employed and interpreted by the patriarchy for its own benefits, lets the society carry on in the belief that all women are to bear children, and assumes that mothering and childcare knowledge come naturally to them once they give birth. Both assumptions are harmful to the women and their children. Women with little knowledge of prenatal care during pregnancy end up with a sense of isolation, which may result in depression. They often fail to filter out superstitious beliefs and practices/family customs from real healthcare issues, resulting in complications during childbirth or giving birth to unhealthy children (health does not only mean physical health). A confirmation of the bio-deterministic patriarchal view keeps the fathers free from childcare responsibilities, whereas the mothers reel under the tremendous pressure to provide the best health, education, and moral wellbeing to their children. Biological essentialism is used conveniently by the patriarchy to overlook the construction of motherhood and assign the childcare-related activities as the responsibility solely of the mother, who could win accolades for being a good mother. As Sarah Hardy puts it, “the idea of a good mother is deployed through material and discursive spaces in order to mobilize subjectivities that are socially adapted and useful.”⁵

I undertook a project on motherhood in 2011–12 through the Women’s Studies department at the University of North Bengal. My minor project involved case studies, and it exposed many things for me. I was introduced to the dichotomy of the convolutions of the real and ideal motherhoods, in which we as mothers are trapped. It was then that I planned to expand parts of my research into a full-length book, with points of views from scholars who would not only engage with motherhood seriously but also open doors and windows in the minds of the readers. Serious work on motherhood is now being done in India as a whole.

To understand the concept of motherhood in India we need to reflect on its ethos, its strong mother-goddess tradition that is reflected in the name by which all women, irrespective of their age, when relationship is not specific, are called “Ma.” Private buses and taxis plying their trade on the streets, sweet parlours, department stores, and restaurants bear names of the mother ‘Ma Tara’, ‘Ma Kali’, or carry the mother’s blessings – ‘Mayer Ashirbaad’ etc. These are reflections of a deep-rooted belief in the mother as the protector and food giver (Annapurna). But, as we shall see, these emotive responses to the mother archetype have little or no connection with the real-life status women get to enjoy as mothers in India. ‘The

Breast Giver' by Mahasweta Devi depicts this phenomenon in a hyperbolic dimension where the maternal figure feeds scores of mouths, but herself remains metaphorically starved.

Motherhood as a lived experience is not measured in the same way as in the past – both mothers and society have undergone changes. Now we have a different familial structure in India, with working mothers, nuclear families, and changing models of parenting. There are homosexual marriages, IVF conceptions (cytoplasmic and nuclear transfers, cloning), and surrogacy to be considered. The concept of motherhood in India thus needs to be revisited.

Maternity was focused on in the United States at the beginning of the millennium. Popular culture turned its attention to high-profile celebrity pregnancies, hi-tech fertility treatments, water births, IVF, and surrogacy. Celebrities in their late thirties and forties went public with their pregnancy experience on TV chat shows.

Hollywood caught up with 'Motherhood' (2009), directed by Katherine Dieckmann, which dealt with a mother's dilemmas over marriage, work, and herself. *The Business of Being Born*, directed by Abby Epstein and produced by Ricki Lake, is a 2008 documentary film that explores the contemporary experience of childbirth in the United States. It compares various childbirth methods, including midwives, natural births, epidurals, and the Caesarean method. It advocated natural and fewer medicalized parturitions. Dr Sears's baby care books have become standard reads, and 'Ask Dr Sear's' grew into a trusted website on pregnancy and childbirth. The culture conjointly witnessed the opt-out revolution, activism, 'momoirs,' and mommy bloggers.

Books that emerged out of a rich feminist tradition of thinking about motherhood in the West may be said to have begun with Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), wherein Rich wrote unflinchingly about women who gave birth to and raised children while decidedly doing their share of the necessary productive labour. Yet, by the 1990s, voices were raised against the idea of the working mothers and in praise of the mothers at home. These voices reached a crescendo just as technology began to reduce the level of physical hardship and economical concerns reduced the size of families. "In the last century the idea of full-time, exclusive motherhood took root and the 'home' became a religious obsession" (Rich 1976, 44). In order to have real choice, wrote Rich, we needed to "understand the power in

powerlessness personified in motherhood in patriarchal culture.” Rich wrote from her personal experience as a woman, a poet, a feminist, and a mother. Motherhood is undeniably an experience determined by the institution imposed on all women everywhere.

Erma Bombeck’s *Motherhood: the Second Oldest Profession* (1983) examined motherhood with heart and humour. A supermom who can balance husband and children is finally a good actor. Bombeck chronicles three decades of frustrations and victories to conclude that motherhood tops the list of professions, not only in its burdens but also its triumphs.

The 1990s propounded further feminist interrogations of the ideology and experience of motherhood. Lauri Umanst’s *Motherhood Re-conceived* (1996) provided a historical account of feminist thought and activism through the 1970s and 1980s, tracing how the feminists struggled against the most oppressive aspects of biological reductivism while at the same time working towards the incorporation of these perspectives and needs of women as mothers. Sharon Hays’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996) critically examined aspects of the ethos of everyday life that are so deeply held and taken for granted as to remain unquestioned and treated as common sense. Books that need a mention here are Naomi Wolf’s *Misconceptions* (2001), Rickie Solinger’s *Beggars and Choosers* (2001), and Ann Crimnden’s *The Price of Motherhood* (2001). Carla Barnhill, in *The Myth of The Perfect Mother: Rethinking the Spirituality Of Women* (2004), addressed several issues of mothers’ struggles that included the home-schooling of children, spanking, working mothers, stay-at-home mothers, depression, and social isolation. She offered a positive view of motherhood based on biblical principles. Judith Warner’s *Perfect Madness: Motherhood Within the Age of Anxiety* (2005) questioned the assumptions about motherhood while dealing at length with mothers who compete for their children to be perfect in most spheres of life and panic at each developmental benchmark.

Motherhood, understood as the apotheosis of women in India, has been recurrently referred to in religious and secular texts since ancient times. From *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, to plays like *Abhigyan Sakuntalam*, to the myths that grew around Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, the texts of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and songs of Rabindranath Tagore, there abound references and stories of reverence to motherhood. Motherhood gained some other kind of limelight in Indian thinking with the publication of *Mother India* (1927) by the American historian Katherine Mayo. Mayo’s *Mother India* is a polemical book, which maliciously attacked Indian

society, religion, and culture. It pointed out the society's ill treatment and cruelty towards animals, untouchables, and women and opposed India's demand for independence from British rule. The book also discussed the problems of child marriage. Mayo singled out the ruinously abating sexuality of Indian males as the core problem that led to sexual aggression, rape, homosexuality, prostitution, and venereal diseases.

Mayo's book created outrage across the country. Newspapers labelled it as defamatory vilification of Hindus and Hinduism. Mayo was accused of being racist, pro-imperialist, and Indophobic. Copies of her book and her effigy were burned in the streets. The book prompted angry refutations and pamphlets in response, which emphasized that she was erroneous and her perception of Indian society was false. Mahatma Gandhi's response is well known – to him, it was a “report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon.”⁶ In order to counter Mayo's assertions, Dalip Singh Saund (later a congressman) penned *My Mother India* (1930). Another important response to Mayo's book was Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *A Son of Mother India Answers* (1928). The title of Mehboob Khan's (1957) epic Hindi film *Mother India* was a deliberate rebuke to Mayo's book. Representations of motherhood have undergone a noticeable change in Bollywood. From the archetype of sacrificing mothers of *Mamta* and *Deewar*, India recently witnessed Bollywood movies like *Kya Kehna* (2000) that argued in favour of the reproductive rights of women in pre-marital pregnancy, celebrated strong single mothers in *Paa* (2009), and the mother hero in *Mom* (2017). The Hindi thriller film *Kahani 2* (2016) directed by Sujoy Ghosh questioned the very concept of biological motherhood.

The recent Bengali film *Ekla Cholo* (2014) directed by Abhijit Guha and Sudeshna Roy deals with a woman's choice of becoming a single mother and the challenges she faces because of this choice, which is still considered out of place in a patriarchal society. Motherhood in the films of India is no longer simply an appeal to the emotions, and thus raises some pertinent questions.

The books on motherhood that emerged in India include Jasodhara Bagchi's *Interrogating Motherhood* (2017). Bagchi gauged the concept of 'mother,' exhuming its paradox, manifestation, and lived reality within the Indian society. The paradox comprises the powerlessness and glorification of motherhood, which in turn legitimizes the oppression that in turn leaches motherhood of its joyful meaning. Bagchi explored the situation of women in colonial Bengal and argued that motherhood had become a tool

for female enslavement situated within the framework of family, culture, state, and scientific and technological enterprises. Bagchi asserted that motherhood in India was used as a nation-building tool against the colonizers and was further celebrated in the imagination of a postcolonial nation.

Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment? (2010) by Maitreyi Krishnaraj presented an overview of the varied experiences and representations of motherhood in India from ancient to modern times. The thrust of the arguments made by the various contributors is that motherhood is an ideology that is manufactured. This is established by investigating institutional structures of society like language, religion, media, law, and technology.

Spectres of Mother India: the Global Restructuring of an Empire (2006) by Mrinalini Sinha tells the complex story of an episode that became the tipping point for an important historical transformation. At the centre of the book is the massive international controversy that followed the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927). Mayo's work exposed the social evils in India, and disclosed the plight of women and child brides. According to Mayo, the roots of the social problems lay in an irredeemable Hindu culture that rendered India unfit for self-governance. Mayo's book was reprinted in the United States and the United Kingdom, and translated into several languages. Sinha traced the trajectory of the controversy from the publication of the book to the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in India in 1929.

Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India by Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya (2016) explores motherhood discourse in urban India from a feminist perspective. It revisits ancient myth and religion, psychoanalysis, literature, and cinema within which motherhood is constructed. The book contributes to the ongoing research on motherhood.

This list of books is not exhaustive. While some books on motherhood might be newly emerging, many others on related topics may have incorporated relevant discussions on motherhood.

Indian mommy bloggers became a vogue with 'Artsy Craftsy Mom' by Shruti Bhat that started in 2010, and 'Bumps and Babies' by Sangeetha Menon that started in early 2012. Other similar blogs include 'My Little Moppet', 'Sishu World', 'Mommyswall', 'Kids Stop Press', 'The Champa Tree', 'Kidskintha', 'Whole Some Mamma', 'MomScribe', 'Kiddie

Story 365', 'Being Happy Mom', 'Being Momma', and 'Confused Parent'. There is also 'Mom Community' with 1.3 million followers, which offers a free menstrual cycle calculator, tips on how to get pregnant, symptoms of pregnancy, useful tips on body care, and counsels on infertility.

Motherhood encompasses a proverbial self-sufficiency that involves putting the requirements of children before one's physical and emotional needs. Mothers need to reflect that motherhood requires some basics like economic security, good health, and happiness – in short, the very things that have been dismissed by the institution praising it. Singe Hammer says: "Not all women become mothers, but all obviously are daughters, and daughters become mothers. Even daughters who never become mothers must confront the issues of motherhood, because the possibility and even the probability of motherhood remains."⁷

Given the historical conditions inherited as a result of masculine hostility to nature from capitalist and self-proclaimed socialist states with women now free to regulate reproduction by separating copulation and conception, rendering them equal to men in the choice of reproduction, women ought to rethink on motherhood to ensure the lost balance between population and resources.

The Concept of Motherhood in India : Myths, Theories, and Realities endeavours to understand the concept of motherhood in the Indian sub-continent created and promulgated through myths that were and are used consciously and compellingly for the subjugation of women, which has drilled into our minds a continuance of the patriarchal lineage. The book endeavours to look into the theories of motherhood, taking into account the changing realities of postcolonial India. The essays explore motherhood from religious, theoretical, political, and modern Indian urban perspectives. The essays on motherhood are by scholars from India and overseas.

This book is divided into two parts:

Part I, 'The Myths', tries to locate motherhood, look at the historical context, and reread the myths as overarching social constructs. It attempts to read into the myths of motherhood established through the ages through slokas, fables, folklore, and literature that have steadily constructed the concept of motherhood from an idealized patriarchal point of view. The one-sided conversations have had very concrete results. At some point, nearly all of us, as mothers, get entrapped in the unrealistic expectations

about ourselves and strive for the impossible ideals of the perfect womanhood/motherhood only to end up frustrated. The chapters interrogate the cultural and religious practices that invigorate and idealize motherhood as a concept while remaining oblivious of the real-life situations that mothers confront, ignoring their health and emotional issues. The essays included in this section are “Mother: Archetype and Beyond” by Tutun Mukherjee, “Myth, Motherhood, and Mainstream Hindi Cinema” by Shoma A. Chatterji, and “Mother is the Buddha at Home Gedara Budun Amma” by Daya Dissanayake.

Part II, ‘Theories and Realities’, takes into account the different theories which have developed around motherhood that attempt to define, explain, and understand the lived reality of motherhood through multifarious approaches. Biological determinism, which believes anatomy is destiny, sees the division of gender roles as natural. Marxism links the oppression of women to the growth of class society. The sociobiologist Richard Dawkins sees the foundations of male-female connections as lying deep in the egg and sperm cells. Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed the nature/culture binary (1969), and affirmed that humans differ from animals because of their capacity for culture, offering his own model of human society. The much criticised hypotheses of Sigmund Freud concerning penis envy and the Oedipus and Electra complexes gave rise to terms like ‘womb complex’ in psychoanalytic approaches to motherhood. Simone de Beauvoir proclaimed that women’s ability to give birth was the source of their subordination. Single motherhood and child adoption have put to question the long-standing preaching in the line of biological determinism.

Mosarrap Hossain Khan’s “Muslim Motherhood and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971)” explores the idea of ‘Birangana’ and the new notion of political motherhood through a reading of Jahanara Imama’s Bengali memoir, *Ekattorer Dinguli* [*The Days of 71*] (1986) and Tahmima Anam’s novels *A Golden Age* (2007) and *The Good Muslim* (2011). The paper examines the ways by which Muslim women negotiated the difficult topography of religiosity and secular nationalism during the war. Anuradha Kunda’s “Single Motherhood: a Decentralized Status in Search of a Centre” engages with motherhood at different levels and questions the very intangible base of the conception.

My work began as a project at the Women’s Studies Centre at the University of North Bengal under the title “Motherhood in Bengal: Myths, Realities, and Changing Perspectives.” Working on the project of motherhood felt like a prolonged labour in itself, ruptured by the reality of

the demanding role of my own motherhood. My returning visitations to the bleak stereotypes still prevalent in our society, the blind male point of view that imprudently ignores the women's perceptions, and the reiterated clichés made me despondently return to the fact that nothing much has changed. However, I discern a faint silver lining in the way the educated young men and women are beginning to think today. Mothering is now seen as more of an activity of bringing up children than the actual experience of giving birth. Girls and boys now question if they should give birth to another life when the world is already overpopulated, and raise questions about carrying forward the family lineage in the male line when the world can actually be one family if we open ourselves to the adoption of destitute children. Perhaps we are one family, as a group of paleoanthropologists and geneticists point out, non-Africans can trace their ancestry to a single populace that emigrated from Africa between fifty and eighty thousand years ago.⁸ Adoptions work in two positive ways: lonely men and women find the warmth of human company and a hungry stomach finds food. It is time to enlarge the very foundations on which the concept of motherhood was built.

We would do well to listen to each other and learn.

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PART I:

MYTHS

MOTHER: ARCHETYPE AND BEYOND

TUTUN MUKHERJEE

*There was a beginning of the universe
which may be regarded as the Mother of the Universe.
From the Mother, we may know her offspring.
After knowing the offspring, keep to the Mother.
Thus one's whole life may be preserved from harm.*

(Tao te Ching, Ch 52, tr. Lin Yutang)

*I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.*

(Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song")

The conversation between two brothers in the Hindi film *Deewar* is unforgettable. The elder brother who has made money through smuggling boasts that he has money, houses, and cars – and what does the poor younger brother have? The younger brother declares solemnly that he has a “mother.” The answer mortifies the elder brother and his bravado pops like a balloon.

Such is the mystical and reverential halo conferred on the mother that she alone can outweigh all material wealth. The archetypical ‘mother’ has always been a generic term synonymous with love, nurturing, and sacrifice. She is a possessor of infallibility and unparalleled virtues. Carl Jung describes three essential aspects of the mother: her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic emotionality, and her Stygian depths. All cultures, from ancient to modern, glorify the mother as Magna Mater, Terra Mater, Mother Goddess, Tao Mother, Adishakti, and so on, connecting them to the Earth, nature, the primeval flows of the lifecycle, transformation, and resurrection. Whether Isis, Gaia, Demeter, Cybele, Cihuacoatl, Kuan Yin, Tara, Durga, or Mary, their mother lore is connected

to the idea of the Divine Feminine conferred with power over human life and destiny. As the universal mother, she can succour and also punish.

This paper explores how much of this aura is transferred to human mothers and their experience or travails of motherhood. Adrienne Rich warns of a fissure between the ideal and the real. In her manifesto *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, she states that all born of women are inevitably connected to motherhood, but cautions that the images, ideals, archetypes, and theories of the archetypal mother are sanctioned and promoted by patriarchal culture to reinforce the conservatism of motherhood as an 'institution' and so "convert it to an energy for the renewal of male power" (1976, 15). This note of caution must be kept in mind as it gives nuance to the ideal and real situations of motherhood. So, in the general understanding, the power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess worship or mother-aura. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's book *Real and Imagined Women* also argues for a dialectical relationship between 'reality' and 'representation', because the study of 'real' women cannot take place apart from the exploration of 'imagined' women.

Erma Bombeck writes in her fascinating book *Motherhood: the Second Oldest Profession* that:

Motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all, a mold that is all-encompassing and means the same to all people ... No mother is all good or all bad, all laughing or all serious, all loving or all angry. Ambivalence runs through their veins. (1983, 10).

Indeed, motherhood is a life-changing experience and women's response to it across generations, societal practice, background, and age cannot be the same, so the aspect of 'ambivalence' is understandable. But instances of really 'bad' mothers are rare, although, according to Sudhir Kakkar:

The theme of the bad mother merits particular attention in the Indian context not just because it exists, but because it is characterized by a singular intensity and pervasiveness ... In all societies the image of the "bad" mother combines both the aggressively destroying and the sexually demanding themes. (89–90)

In this regard, Indian myths and history do not quite offer a Medea analogy, but wicked stepmothers and mother impersonators are many.

Fictional representations of mother and motherhood invariably repeat the archetype. Let me share some of my often-read narratives on motherhood. Through school and college, books like *Little Women* and Gorky's *Mother* were read avidly. Recalling *Mother* now suggests several intertextual connections, especially with Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. Both narratives are about a mother's love and support for her revolutionary son and his ideology. The context for *Mother* is the Russian Revolution of 1905 in which Gorky himself was involved. The narrative is said to be based on real people and incidents. It was published in an English translation before its Russian version, and Gorky wanted the translation to be considered as the original. The story is of Pelagueya Nilovna, a factory worker who hopes to bring up her son Pavel Vlasov well so he is not an uncouth brutal drunkard like his father. Her anxiety is similar to that of Paul Morel's mother in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, but while Mrs. Morel is educated, Pelagueya is not, yet out of love involves herself deeply in her son's activities and interests, and even tries to educate herself. Pavel grows up a gentle intellectual who becomes involved in the Leninist socialist movement, and soon starts bringing his ideologues home. His mother embraces them all with love and becomes their 'nenko' or 'mamasha'. The young revolutionaries win the support of factory workers who are locked out of the factory. When they are arrested after the May Day demonstration, Pelagueya commits herself to her son's fight and participates in socialist activities, secretly circulating their pamphlets. During the ensuing trial, Pavel delivers an impassioned and stirring speech but is found guilty and sentenced to exile in Siberia. Pelagueya devotes herself fully to her son's cause and decides to spread Pavel's fiery words. She is caught by gendarmes at the railway station with a valise full of mimeographs of the speech, and is beaten and choked. Now fully converted to the socialist cause, she exhorts the surrounding crowd before losing consciousness: "People, gather up your forces into one single force! ... Fear nothing! There are no tortures worse than those which you endure all your lives!" Rereading *Mother* triggered intertexts like Gulzar's film *Mere Apne*, a Hindi remake of an earlier Bengali film *Apanjan* by Tapan Sinha. The unlikely protagonist of *Mere Apne* is Anandi, a poor ageing widow who becomes 'Nani Ma' to a bunch of misunderstood, aimless, rudderless, and unemployed youths who get sucked into political violence and gang fights. She creates a surrogate family for them with her gentle care, affection, and sincere interest in their troubled misguided lives. She shares their angst and advises them. The other text is Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* (1974), concerning a mother seeking the truth about her son after his unidentified body is released by the police as prisoner number

1084. The context is 1970s Bengal during the intensity of the anti-establishment Naxalite Movement that drew in so many young people, who were killed in so-called ‘encounters’ with the police. Sujata wonders how the family – and particularly she as his mother – had been so unaware of Brati’s ideology and preoccupations. She wants to understand the reason for his death and learns that 1,083 people have died with him fighting for their revolutionary cause. She wants to embrace them all in her love as the ‘universal mother’ and is moved by their death-defying dedication to the struggle. She herself is transformed in her mourning for her son and the yearning to ‘know’ him, and through that process discovers herself. The story is told in flashback after a passage of two years after the incident. The time has been punishing for Sujata struggling against patriarchy and middle-class morality that refuse to even acknowledge Brati for fear of social stigma. Sujata’s journey ends with her overpowering mental anguish and an apparently burst appendicitis. These narratives present the processes of mothering that builds a relationship between the mother and the child that is non-patriarchal and defies institutionalization. This becomes increasingly evident in many other narratives on motherhood that were written from the late twentieth century onwards.

Motherhood is often defined as an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is also seen as a moral transformation whereby a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because in one way or the other she is attached to another individual – her baby. But does motherhood really efface the mother or abrogate the woman’s selfhood and identity? As there is pain, travail, and stress that test a mother, there is also joy, happiness, and a sense of fulfilment. The mother does not lose her selfhood; rather, she passes her spirit on to her children. Two exceptional memoirs explore the difficulties and hardships that grandmothers and mothers overcome to leave behind a rich and creative legacy. Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, which inspired an earlier essay of mine on my own mother,¹ and Louise Erdrich’s *The Blue Jay’s Dance* elaborate that, despite their difficult and stressful lives, our foremothers rejoiced in their creativity that Walker says must be recorded and celebrated. Walker’s essays collected in the anthology are about black women who had to obey their slave masters and, after abolition, their husbands. They bore and raised children and did back-breaking housework. They were not really free and were still enslaved with no scope to pursue or fulfil their dreams.² Walker embraces them all collectively as mothers and grandmothers, and writes: “They were

Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality, which is the basis of art, that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane” (233). In the particular essay that gives the book its name, Walker wonders how these women – oppressed, silenced and pulverized by circumstances – kept their creative spirit alive, and asks what fed their indomitable inner strength. She writes about her own mother: “it is to my mother – and all our mothers who were not famous – that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day” (357). Walker recalls that her mother was overworked, bringing up her large family of eight children as well as working as maid to supplement their family income, yet found opportunities within her domestic life to let her creativity thrive. It seemed that, through sheer strength of will, she transformed the rocky land around their humble home into a beautiful garden that passers-by stopped to admire. Walker recalls that her mother spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits, and winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all their beds. She made all the clothes they wore, their bedsheets and linen. Walker recalls that there was a never a moment for her to sit down undisturbed to unravel her own private thoughts, never a time free from chores, yet she revelled in her work and found joy in telling stories to her children. These heart-warming stories came naturally to her and later became Walker’s stories, who wanted them to be retold and shared. Learning from the legacy of her own mother, Walker believes that every mother is somehow responsible for the achievement of her daughter. She believes that any artistic output by a person is also a product of their mothers and grandmothers. Indeed, the children are their best creations, their very own wonderful gardens. Walker reveals how she found and understood herself while researching her heritage.

In her memoir, Louise Erdrich traces her winter pregnancy through spring and summer that is actually an amalgam of her three pregnancies. It is inevitable that, along with physical and emotional changes, the experience brings raw emotions to the surface and an introspectiveness that impacts all aspects of one’s being. Erdrich connects with the passing seasons and identifies the changes in nature with her own mental and physical changes as her pregnancy advances. Landscape figures prominently in her dreams and her thoughts. She writes, “I fall sick with longing for the horizon ... I want the clean line, the simple line, the clouds marching over it in feathered masses. I suffer from horizon sickness” (91). Her dreams are

deeply Native American and metonymical, in which the persons, creatures, and spaces inhabiting the realms of the unconscious actually represent other persons, creatures, and spaces from her conscious everyday life. The connections are both tenuous and mystical. The narrative is probably a metaphorical representation of a specific Native American ritual of 'the dance of the blue jay' performed during the advent of spring. The participants chirp and caw, perching and twittering in bird fashion, seized with a desire to escape and explore open vistas. This is also the style of Erdrich's writing. Furthermore, Erdrich tries to structure her identity as wife and mother through domestic rituals such as cooking, which though done mostly by her husband, provide moments of shared joy of togetherness. Reminiscent of Walker's mother's efforts, for Erdrich gardening is a pleasurable activity which links her to the memory of her Ojibwa grandfather, her Polish grandmother, and her mother and father – all avid gardeners. It is not only the actual and physical planting of gardens, the desire to make things grow, that gives her pleasure, but the mental activity of planning them in the dead of winter, of leafing through seed catalogues and imagining gardens in the mind, giving her a sense of self and rootedness, and therefore peace. She writes in luminous prose:

Drowsy with possibilities, I fill the snow-sheeted yard with crab-apple trees, pink and white blossoms studded with bees ... These pictures vanquish the frozen monotony and calm me, but of course they also exceed the reality of what will, in truth, turn out to be my garden ... Full of the usual blights, mistakes, ruinous beetles and parasites, glorious one week, bedraggled the next, my actual garden is always a mixed bag ... The ground I tend sustains me in easy summer, but the garden of the spirit is the place I go when the wind howls. This lush and fragrant expectation has a longer growing season than the plot of earth I'll hoe for the rest of the year. It is finally the winter garden that produces the true flowering, the saving vision. (32–3)

Again, like Walker, Erdrich recalls her foremothers to make sense of her role as a woman, a mother, and a writer. Not only do the female members of her family provide her with a sense of self, but she feels connected with other female writers whose example has been decisive in her own work. She says:

Every female writer starts out with another list of female writers in her head. Mine includes, quite pointedly, a mother list. I collect these women in my heart and often shuffle through the little I know of their experiences to find the toughness of spirit to deal with mine. (144)