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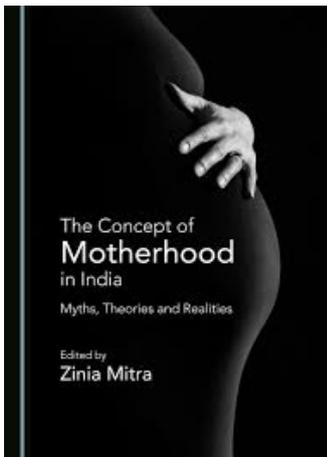
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## TEXT Review

### Motherhood through a different lens

*review by Claudia Pharès*



Zinia Mitra (ed)

*The Concept of Motherhood in India: Myths, Theories and Realities*

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle UK 2020

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As the home becomes a site of resistance, the personal becomes political. Mothers fought to reshape motherhood outside its patriarchal essentialist parameters. This is an ongoing battle that has yet reached parts of the world where freedom to health, education, and safety are still an issue.

In the introduction to this edited collection of writings on motherhood in India, editor Zinia Mitra begins with a quote from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*: 'All human life on the

planet is born of women' (1). Mitra convincingly addresses the power women hold in supporting and caring for the world of tomorrow. This sets the tone for Mitra's book as recognizing the seemingly prevailing lack of recognition of the important role mothers have in current societies, whether in India or the rest of the world.

Mitra teaches English at the University of Bengal, in India. The idea behind the book stemmed from her interests in exploring conflicts between the idealised and real lived experiences of mothers in India. It consists of an anthology of essays written by scholars on the evolving concept of motherhood experienced in India from past to present times. The book is divided into two parts containing three essays each. Part I, 'Myths', explores the influence of myths and folklore on the representations and stereotypes of motherhood. The contributing texts are: 'Mother: Archetype and Beyond' by Tutun Muherje; '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', pertains to contemporary ideologies and influences surrounding motherhood in India and how these shape the current image of the mother. In the first essay, 'Bodies and Embodiments: Theories of Motherhood', Mitra covers how contemporary psychoanalytical, developmental and gendered theories have influenced the experience of motherhood in India today. The second, 'Motherhood and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971)', by Mossarap Hossain Khan, examines the lived experiences of Muslim mothers. The third, 'Single Motherhood: A decentralised Status in Search of a Centre' by Anhuradha Kunda, explores how single motherhood has become more accepted in contemporary India.

While Part I covers older conservative ideologies regarding motherhood Part II presents a more progressive interpretation on the same concept. This book's linear framework effectively encompasses the editor's method to cover various explorations of the concepts of motherhood over time. The selection of contributors reveals a caring approach in addressing the different concepts of motherhood experienced in India through the disciplines of history, arts/culture, myth/folklore, religion, psychoanalytical theories, feminism and social studies.

In essence, this anthology confirms how astoundingly disempowering representations of motherhood have been in India until recently. Current day motherhood in India is beginning to be socially accepted as a multifaceted concept deviating from its original patriarchal social constructs.

As a visual artist and a mother with an interest on mother-centred feminism, I have encountered strikingly similar findings surrounding the image of the mother and motherhood in Western culture throughout my own Masters Degree research. The book

conveys feelings ranging from outrage to a sense of hopefulness when it comes to perceived and lived experience of motherhood. This collection of scholarly essays gives a concise overview on how patriarchy has shaped the concept of motherhood in India until recently. This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in understanding how time, history and culture have managed to slowly change a non-Western society's narrative surrounding the concepts of motherhood.

Part I: 'Myths' examines the various contrived and reductive definitions of motherhood, which mostly verge on biological essentialism. This section supports that motherhood is a patriarchal construct that subjugates women to impossible standards. As observed in Tutun Muherjee's essay: 'Although vigorously challenged by feminists from 1970s onwards, cultures like India which are predominantly patriarchal define woman's essential purpose to be her reproductive function... (19) The text exposes how patriarchal motherhood denies mothers a voice and their subjectivity on how they choose to be a mother. The author further defends the idea that motherhood is in flux and cannot be defined through preconceived ideals.

Shoma A Chatterji's essay in Part I unpacks how mainstream Hindi cinema today is embracing a more progressive image of the mother. Indian cinema was originally strongly influenced by the mother archetype. Patriarchal culture has similarly shaped Hollywood cinema in projecting idealised heteronormative portraits of women and mothers throughout history. In her essay Chatterji cleverly dissects how mainstream Hindi cinema has represented the mother and motherhood with Goddess-like attributes such as all-sacrificing, all-forgiving, all-loving. These unrealistic standards are also embedded in the motherhood narrative in Western culture. Andrea O'Reilly, motherhood studies professor and feminist theorist, asserts that in Western cultures, the 'good mother' is portrayed as being altruistic, devoted, cheerful, patient, loving, selfless, and child-centred (O'Reilly 2016: 12).

Fortunately, the real lived experiences of motherhood fuelled mothers to reclaim their subjectivity through self-empowerment, activism and political stance extending from the domestic setting. In Part II, this is exemplified in Mossarap Hossain Khan's essay on political motherhood during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 as seen through a memoir and novels. Khan draws attention to how that war instigated the rise of the Muslim mother as 'political mother' in Bangladesh. Concurrently and on the flip side, women who experienced war rape or 'birangona' were no longer considered deemed to be evoking the mother or motherhood. It is interesting to acknowledge how political motherhood was encouraged to flourish beyond the private domestic sphere and how the latter became enmeshed with sentiment of nationalism. Whereas 'birangona', who were essentially war victims, were outcasted regardless of their ability to convey nationalistic pride and/or reflect motherhood attributes such as nurturing and caring. Khan compellingly sheds light on the

conflicting representations of motherhood for Muslim mothers and how the powerful influence of a nation's governance was responsible for it.

Chatterji compares and contrasts different Hindi movies from the early days to contemporary day Hindi cinema. The various descriptions of selected Hindi movie plots seem to identify different types of mothers extending beyond the diminutive patriarchal idealised image. This clearly supports Chatterji's point of view of a positive change in mainstream Hindi cinema.

As previously identified, Indian myths and folklore have influenced the projected unrealistic image of the mother as seen in the early days of Hindi cinema. On the same token, so has religion over time. However, the original core values of Buddhist religion glorified the mother and motherhood in an empowering manner. Daya Dissanayake's essay on the mother as Buddha states 'Motherhood is a higher state than the masculine and the feminine' (44). The author points out how culture, politics, demography, economy and society may have all been factors negatively influencing the modern interpretation of Buddhist Dhamma doctrines. Over time, it demoted mothers to lesser members of society as the weaker sex. Dissanayake supports her point through analysis of various excerpts of sacred texts. In essence, these new versions of the doctrines robbed mothers the respect and veneration originally appointed to their image and identity.

Part II contains more relatable content to me, especially with Zinia Mitra's essay 'Bodies and Embodiments: Theories of Motherhood'. The author explores Western theories on motherhood by feminist writers such as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan, to name a few. Mitra repositions strong feminist perspectives on motherhood in relation to psychoanalytical, anthropological, and political theories. The essay's strength lies in the extensive research in supporting the various perspectives on how the concept of motherhood is predominantly patriarchal in nature and how feminist writers have attempted to challenge this. The recurrent theme in Part I that ideal motherhood is unattainable resonates in this essay too. I agree with the author that although the concept of motherhood is evolving, there is still a prevailing sense of idealism regarding what constitutes being a mother today.

In support of examining the projected ideal of motherhood within and beyond the household, Anuradha Kunda's essay unpacks a new concept in modern India: single motherhood. As a single mother myself, I empathised with the harsh experiences of stigma associated with raising children by myself after a divorce. Following my decision to end my relationship, I was overwhelmed with shame and a sense of failure stemming from my own limiting beliefs surrounding single motherhood and those of the circle of people I was then part of.

A recurring theme in this book is the contriving nature of patriarchy in relation to the idealised experiences of motherhood and the resulting lack of subjectivity and freedom experienced by women. Kunda draws comparisons between the single motherhood as portrayed in Margaret Atwood's 'The Edible Woman' and Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things', demonstrating how cultural context shapes the experiences and leads to different fate. One concludes that single motherhood is becoming more acceptable in India for independent women with great financial stability. I wonder, what is the experience of single motherhood in women in vulnerable financial situations? The inclusion of this essay is valuable for depicting a progression towards freer lived experiences of motherhood in India. It clearly shows that there remains ambivalence towards the concept of single motherhood. Nonetheless, motherhood in India is shifting towards a more empowering image reflective of modern lived experiences of motherhood.

### **Work cited**

O'Reilly, A 2016 *Matricentric Feminism: Theories, Activism and Practice*, Demeter Press, Bradford ON.

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