

Mothering Desire: Inhabitations, Transgressions and the New Media

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Abstract

The imagination around the figures of the mother is often conflated with her associations with virtues of care, empathy, compassion and responsiveness to the family. Her desires and sexual excess are decapitated within the contours of filial, as well as other human relationships that demand obfuscation of other possible ways of being. The case of Shefali Shah, a Bollywood actor and her relationship with the roles of motherhood in various films is an interesting avenue to unpack the complexities of motherhood—its normative associations, the unbearable conundrums of inhabiting that role, and the possibilities that lie beyond strictures of the accepted forms of motherhood. Through examining her roles in several films and shows, especially by looking closely at *Ankahi*, the fourth segment of the limited series *AjeebDaastaans*(2021) and the film *Darlings* (2022) both released on the OTT platforms, this paper will try to understand the undoing of the hauntings of motherhood that continues to provide a framework of knowledge regarding the materialities of motherhood and forms of resistance foregrounded in the narrative of these visual texts. In addition, this paper will situate her transgressions not in terms of a common understanding of the workings of the normative upon the body of the mother and its overt refusal but seeks to unveil the potentialities of granular, quotidian, and instances from everyday life in charting the negotiations with the norms. Subsequently, the paper will discuss the role of different forms of media vis-à-vis television shows and movies in allowing discussions on the shifting contours of motherhood more expansively.

Keywords: mother; motherhood; new media; desire; transgressions

Shefali Shah, in one of her recent interviews,¹ strongly exclaimed that from now on, she would not engage in roles that situate her within the contours of motherhood, especially those that demand her to play the role of a mother of 40 years old and fixate her character in opposition to the main characters. Her ardent refusal to play such a role is of great interest to me for two reasons; first, her resistance towards the impoverished potential of motherly roles, in my opinion, is rather diminutive, for it overlooks and, to some extent, assumes it to be inutile. Second, the curiosity aroused by that refusal to revisit the site of motherhood and think of its subversive potential when inhabiting the non-normative forms of motherhood(s) that are part of her performative oeuvre. Her resistance, however, need not be thought of as her callousness or indifference towards the many potentialities that it could yield but as a usual distrust and discomfort with the traditional associations of women of a certain stature to play such roles onscreen and the normative associations of women to embody motherhood not only in terms to performance, language, and expectations of every day but as an intrinsic part of their being. The messiness around motherhood and its haunting upon the career of Shefali Shah calls for a critical enquiry into her role as a mother in various filmic texts and ascertaining the eclipsed potentialities within.

This paper looks at the motherly inhabitations of Shefali Shah in *Ankahi* in the fourth segment of *AjeebDastaans* (2021) and *Darlings* (2022) and the transgressions of the motherly figure who resists the workings of the patriarchy, indulge in bodily pleasures and creates an alternate world beyond the strictures of normative life. In addition, in this paper, I argue that to understand the subversive potential of motherly figures, one needs to look at the life of the mother against the contours of the household and beyond—in the liminal spaces that oscillate between the accepted forms of liveable life prescribed for women and the spaces that are outside of the four walls of the house. Much of the readings of empowered women or women who resist the imposition of domesticated life are situated on women who work outside, are independent, have access to the public sphere, are stakeholders in decision-making and have certain worldviews. However, what interests this paper is the messy lives of the mothers who constantly negotiate with the forms of life vis-à-vis one founded upon the institution of marriage. In the process of negotiating with different forces that govern life, they transgress conventions that add valuation to certain forms of living and render others as the deflection from the norm and, therefore, undesirable. These transgressions of the conventions in the normative imaginary remain otherwise

¹For more look at HTentertainment Desk. “Shefali Shah, who played Akshay Kumar's mom in *Waqt*, says: ‘Don’t want to play mother to 40-year-olds anymore.’” *Hindustan Times*, May 12, 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/shefali-shah-who-played-akshay-kumar-s-mom-in-waqt-says-don-t-want-to-play-mother-to-40-year-olds-anymore-101647063458972.html>

obsolete or unimaginable. These lives are not stable but contingent upon the contact and exposure to different forms of life situations and, to quote Sayan Bhattacharya, occur “subjunctively²”. Building upon the performative oeuvre of Shefali Shah’s aforementioned films on Netflix, an OTT platform and engaging in the method of “close but not deep” reading of texts that looks at descriptions and asks the readers to indulge in surface readings to understand the texts beyond the paranoid reading and hermeneutics of suspicion suggested by Heather Love, this paper argues for a reading that allows looking at the figure of the mother more expansively and not in relation to other characters, but how a mother manoeuvres her life against the normative order of things.

Theorising Mother/Motherhood(s) in India

Etymologically, the term mother is usually understood in association with the object of nurturing, which draws its origin from the Old English word “Moder” and the Middle English Word “Modor”, meaning “female parent, a woman in relation to her child” (etymonline.com/word/mother). In addition, the word mother in the late Old English period, as well as in the common parlance, is recognised as “that which has given (gives) birth to anything” (emphasis added). Looking at the origin of the word “mother” and its pervasiveness till today, there is a common thread that binds the contemporary imaginations around the concept of mother. Her being is gauged and analysed and, most of the time registered only when she is looked at from the relationalities that restrict her subjectivities within the confines of familial bounds. As its origin suggests, the relationship of the subject with the object of care is the condition for the flourishing of the subject; otherwise, its imagination either remains impossible or unattainable. To put it differently, the figure of the mother gains social life only when she is looked at from the relationship that exists between her, the family, and society at large.

The figure of the mother in the popular imagination across the globe is thought by her capacity to bear a life vis-à-vis child, nurture it, transform it, as well as prepare the child to face the trials and tribulations of the world. It is through these points of transactions with the object of care that the figure of the mother comes into being. The mother is never an autonomous, individual being; she attains personhood only when she is associated with the other—the object of the flourishing. These transactional

²Bhattacharya in his essay, *Inhabiting the State Subjunctively: Transgender Life-Making alongside Death and Pandemic* argues that subjunctively refers to the “improvisatory, provisional, contingent modes of engaging in the world”. He uses this framework to look at the quotidian negotiations of trans persons that do not resist the structural oppression but build networks and ways to undo the impediments to their thriving. In the context of this paper, I look at this term to understand the subjectivity of a mother that inhabits the systems of motherhood propagated by the male imaginary, at the same time, develops strategies and politics of survival within the liminal spaces beyond the constructions of private and public sphere.

paradigms solidify into a mode of inhabitation commonly understood as motherhood. It is a state of being a mother that renders her life liveable, respectful, and worthy of reaching a sacred status in various societal relationalities, especially in India. However, despite the potential mobility of the figure of the mother by her association with deities, subsequently being worshipped for their god-like attributes, they are still reduced to their purposive enactments of enabling reproductive futurism and, thereby, cultivating an essentialised women's identity (Dev et al. 65). Further, such a construction of common sense around the materialities of motherhood is reproduced in the social fabric and various literary imaginations.

Looking at the rich oeuvre of the works produced by many theorists, academics, and activists across the world, there is an understanding that motherhood is always already pre-given and predetermined. It is constructed rather than experienced as an intrinsic human value primarily associated with women. In India, the image of the mother has sentimental value. She is always an object of desire for her capacity to fulfil things that her male counterpart cannot. Similar constructions are seen in many literary and filmic representations of the mother's relationship with the husband, son, daughter and in-laws and her over-indulgence in the formation of their lives and its paradigmatic normalisation through performances that require obfuscation of her other desires. The associative duties that only she can perform, love that emanates only through such modes of inhabitation and the sanctity of the biological family that can flourish only through the centrality of the figure of the mother also place her within the order of things that need preservation. In the rendering of the mother as somebody who needs to be preserved through the language of love and respect, normative forces inflict violence upon the figure of the mother. This violence escapes the order of common sense because they are never considered violence at all. This violence³ needs to be understood as forces of normalisation that reduce women to specific attributes and performances.

The long history of the representation of the image of the mother in daily soaps in television, advertisements, and mainstream Indian cinema reified the mythic glorification of the mother that showed repetitive patterns in her modes of existence, located her within the contours of household and generated public consciousness around the accepted forms of motherhood. Modes of representation changed significantly when there was an exploration of other forms of motherhood with the onset of new media and alternate streaming platforms. Such a shift in the medium of

³For more look at, Muthukkaruppan, Parthasarathi, et al. "Editorial." *Broadsheet on Contemporary Politics, Violence: Event and Structure*. Vol. 3 No. 1. Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, 2-2-18/2/A D.D. Colony, Amberpet, Hyderabad 500 013, February 2017.

exploration, however, does not guarantee successive material changes with respect to the current status of the mother but presents possibilities for the re-imagination that was otherwise inaccessible and impossible.

Inhabitations in the New Media

The coming of New Media has changed the ways in which viewers consume the content produced online. The experience is more intimate and visceral because of the proximity between the viewers and the streaming platform. Among many new media platforms, OTT platforms, especially such as Netflix, Primevideo, Hotstar, Voot, etc., in India have garnered much attention due to their easy access at minimum subscription rates. In addition, “[i]t has inspired new terms for cultural practices, from “binge-watching and “cord cutting,” to even “Netflix and chill”” (Buck M. Amber et al. 1). Many scholars have argued that OTT platforms are alternate sites that house contents that otherwise don’t see the light of the day in mainstream theatre houses due to explicit depictions of contents that are considered problematic and capable of hurting the sentiments of various people. Its compendious attribute allows multiple shows to be browsed, catalogued and consumed as per the convenience of the respective viewers. Due to its nature of producing content that is supposedly unlike the palatable content in television shows and films screened in theatre, OTT platforms have been rendered subversive. There are a variety of shows that do not make their way into mainstream cinema and find their presence in various online screening platforms. It might not be an understatement to add that the medium allows such transgressions possible.

The conventional depiction of motherhood in several films and television shows situates women as attaining their personhood when they take up the role of mothers, take care of the child and the family, and engage in the complete renunciation of their subjectivities. While embodying the role of a mother, “[i]t is 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” (Mukherjee 16). Indian films have a long trajectory of representing women as mothers who are caregivers and nurturers to not only their children but also to the entire human race, for her figure is conflated with the image of the life creator and nurturer that could shield and provide necessary care to those in need rendering them natural carers. For instance, the image of “Mother India” or “Bharat Mata” in the popular imagination across different mediums in circulation for the consolidation of the figure of life creator and nurturer of all social lives has been pervasive and recurrent in solidifying India’s association with the trope of mother vis-à-vis someone who creates life, houses everybody, and guarantees comfort and care. The imagination around the figure of the mother and its linkages to India is the cultivated common sense that promulgates the understanding of postcolonial India’s reclamation of the lost glory through motifs of fertility, progenitor of life, and force of

sustenance and prosperity. Such imaginations and their transformation into norms that govern all forms of life coalesce into a stereotypical and reductive understanding of motherhood. Therefore, it is imperative to understand that motherhood is an ideology that has been manufactured by a coalition of different forms of power, such as “language, religion, media, law, and technology” (Mitra 6).

The understanding of mothers as caregivers and their instinctual relationship with that role has been the crux of theorisations on care around the 20th century. Theorists like Sara Ruddick and Virginia Held in their works suggested that the caring nature of mothers is intrinsic, thereby reducing them to subservient roles, fixating them within sexist paradigms and denying the significance of different forces and traditional norms in perpetuating such a state of existence (Schaffer 522). However, of late, there has been a significant change in the depiction of mothers in Bollywood films as well. They are more fierce, have non-normative lives, and don't fit into the roles of strict familial boundaries. Despite such a break from earlier forms of representation, her role is still looked at in association with members of the family. Her personhood is always gauged in tandem with the shared existence and mutual dependency on the functionality of the family. Instead of looking at the figure of the mother from the point of view of the family and her situatedness within that habitus, I suggest that it is crucial to look at the figure of the mother as the point of departure to analyse her subjectivities contingent, not upon her relationality with the family but her quotidian gestures that inform the structure of the family as well as critiques it.

The upsurge of contentious shows in Netflix and other OTT platforms has allowed scholars as well as consumers from everyday life to unpack the complexities of human relationships that are often enmeshed in the quagmire of forms of governance and conditions of a liveable life. The shows present an alternate panoramic view of life, often at the crossroads of acceptable and unacceptable forms of living. The transgressive nature of OTT platforms is often the cauldron of controversies that create lives that unsettle the social arrangement of life founded upon morality, politics of policing, and normative evaluation of relationships. Due to an unprecedented relay of content capable of generating extreme views of intolerance, OTT platforms are sites of multiple possibilities. They open up avenues to discuss issues, nuances, ideas, and complexities more expansively.

Desires and Transgressions

Kayozelrani's *Ankahi*, the fourth segment of the long series of films titled *AjebDastaans*, presents Shefali Shah as a mother who belongs to a supposedly well-to-do family and has a complicit marriage where the husband is busy making money,

doesn't love her anymore and the mother is the sole caregiver to her daughter whose auditory senses are slowly losing their abilities. The film opens up with a scene where Shah and her extra-marital partner are lying on the bed—she looks at him gleefully, full of love and warmth. As soon as she leaves the house of the lover and sits inside the taxi, through the flashback technique, the viewers are exposed to the progression of the relationship between the mother and the photographer, who is also deaf. The film represents a family which is on the verge of falling apart due to the hearing impairment of the daughter. The mother tries to keep herself updated with the necessary tools and information, such as learning sign languages and seeking interest in different art forms to cater to the needs of the daughter. Since the father is busy looking for a possible donor of the cochlea for her daughter, the mother ventures into uncharted terrains and eventually finds herself falling for the photographer. There are occasional moments of doubt regarding her feelings for him, especially when the photographer tries to make love to her. However, moments later, her desires towards him takes control of her constraints, and she gives in to the messiness of the situation. The next scene brings back the viewers to the opening scene, where both of them are lying on the bed. Subsequently, the mother fixes herself and gets into the taxi to her home. Her lover follows her and finds her at her home, where he sees her looking at the camaraderie between the previously unavailable father and the daughter. The mother turns and looks at the lover behind and closes the door, pretending to unacknowledge him upon being interrogated by the husband.

Upon reading the film in the first go, it might come across as if, despite her attempts to undo the imposition of the traditional marriage system, she chooses to stay within the familial bonds, giving in to the momentary affection shown by the husband towards the daughter. However, what remains crucial is to think about her character in the liminal spaces where she isn't performing the role of the mother—the spaces beyond the contours of the household and the public sphere. In addition, to understand the subjectivities of the mother, one needs to look at her not in relation to her family but when she is not around them. While the mother is outside the strictures of the house, the self is no longer an associated being—it is autonomous, carefree, and indulges in the pleasures of the body. Even when analysing the deployment of senses, emotions, gestures, and bodily orientations, one can witness a rupture in the linear trajectory of everyday emotions. She is more at home when she is with her lover, unlike the hostile ambience created by her husband and the crisis aroused by the situational conundrum of the daughter's failing sensory abilities. Occasional gestures of awkwardness, a sense of belonging, a sudden rush of affectionate emotions, and assurance of her being and its worthiness around the photograph present the other side of her otherwise banal and constructed life of a mother and a dutiful wife. By exploring the possibilities that lie beyond the impediments of the institution of

marriage, Shah's character exposes its limitation, critiques it, as well as presents her personhood as not contingent upon the overt presence of the institutionalised family.

On the other hand, Jasmeet K. Reen's *Darlings* is set around an unconventional family. In the film, a father figure is absent, the chaotic life of the mother named Shamshun is inaccessible, and there is a portrayal of the abusive marriage of Badru, the daughter played by Alia Bhatt. Mostly revolving around the character of Badru, the film has most of the plot dedicated to the unfurling of the interiors of Badru's abusive marriage. Her husband abused her for three years due to the frustration of the lack of upward social mobility, the ill-treatment at the hands of his colleagues, and consequently, materialising the emasculation of his virility. Despite this, Badru continues to save her marriage by meeting every end possible. The life of the mother, on the contrary, is at the margins—one could never ascertain her rather unconventional singlehood, the absence of a husband, and her notorious relationship with other men of her locality, especially Zulfi, played by Roshan Mathew and Kasim Kasai played by Rajesh Sharma. It is only at the end of the movie that the viewers are informed about the murder of Shamsun's abusive husband by her with the help of Kasim Kasai. She keeps a careful eye on the nitty-gritty of her daughter's life, for she lives in the same residential complex, suggests her daughter to call off the abusive marriage, and also later engages in activity that involves torturing the son-in-law by holding him captive in his own house, creating false narratives of his disappearance, and at last, plotting to kill him.

The character of Shamshun is fascinating because despite being a mother to Badru and caring for her from a distance, as well as from within, by being with her in close proximity, she continues to defy the role of a conventional mother. She is fearless and channelises the same sentiment to Badru by asking her to set herself free from the confines of a violent relationship. The uncertainty of Badru's future doesn't bother her, for she has faced similar tribulations and overcame them fiercely. Unlike conventional mothers who try to pacify the situation of antagonism between the conflicting couple, Shamshun is rather progressive and believes in the annihilation of the institutions of violence and subjugation. The character of Shamshun, apart from fulfilling the duties of a responsible mother, engages in her own bodily desires. In one of the scenes, while investigated by the police, Zulfi, who is speculated to be in love with Badru and also much younger than Shamshun, expresses his love for Shamshun. She is baffled by the sudden confession of unanticipated affection. However, as a response, she kisses him and expresses her contained desires she has been housing for some time. Such an act of free-spiritedness places her character beyond the traditional tropes around motherhood.

In both movies, Shah's role as a mother in the commonsensical reading might be read as adulterous and a deviance from the norms. However, the very act of having a relationship either beyond the strictures of a marital relationship or engaging in a relationship with someone younger debunks the rigidity of relationships, which are based on the normative evaluation of life. The transgressions at the level of social formations critique the sanctity of marriage as an institution that restricts any possible rupture and fixates the woman in a loveless and violent marriage. Her roles evaluate the social situations that are rendered timeless, unbreachable, and sanctimonious. The motherhood that one sees in these two films merges a possible acknowledgement of looking at her subjectivities beyond the lens of a caricatured portrait drawn from the popular imagination and an exercise in reading that assesses various descriptions of motherhood to locate her sexual excesses and many ways of being a mother.

In addition, the figure of the mother in these two films problematises the binary of "good mother" and "bad mother", as suggested by SudhirKakkar. He notes that the idea of a good mother in India is somebody who indulges in the caregiving process of the infants and provides them with a sense of security, comfort, and belonging. However, he also adds that the idea of a "good mother" is part of the male imagination that renders the fulfilment of her personhood when she embodies the role of a "good mother". The idea of a "bad mother" is in opposition to the image of a "good mother". Subsequently, he suggests that in a "bad mother", there is a strong unconscious ambivalence towards the male child, "...for example, aggressive, destructive impulses" (89). Furthermore, he highlights that "[i]n all societies the image of the 'bad mother' combines both the aggressively destroying and sexually demanding themes" (90). In the case of tropes of motherhood played by Shefali Shah, she cannot be neatly fitted into these strict categorisations, for she is both the good mother as well as the bad one. She shows responsiveness to the needs of her daughter and, at the same time, shows proclivities for sexual desires against a hostile regime.

Unlike the already imagined category of "woman" predecided for the subject of feminism as discussed by Judith Butler in the introduction to her seminal book *Gender Trouble*, the representation of mothers and their associative motherhood(s) in *Ankahi of Ajeeb Dastaans* and *Darlings* continuously renegotiates any strict essentialisms and present the unfolding of myriad ways of thinking about their subjectivities. Shah's embodiment of different kinds of motherhood(s) presents a natural appetite for life against an order which seeks to deprive or discipline it (Tharu 1312). These roles resist any forms of disciplining and regulations at the hands of patriarchy and carve an alternate site for the production of multiple personalities.

Conclusion

The reading of multiple forms of motherhood(s) in this paper is not exhaustive because of the different cultural and specific contexts they emerge from. However, the paper proposes an ethics of reading that looks at the descriptions of a deviant mother in two filmic texts to understand their beings in different social habitats. By looking at the manoeuvrings of the figure of the mother, one can look at the disjunctions between the existing imagination and the possibilities Shah's roles generate. To understand the system in greater capacity and resist its coercions, one must inhabit the system, analyse it, and subsequently critique it. Similarly, Shah's refusal to play the role of a mother, as mentioned at the inception, needs careful deliberation, for it is within the contours of motherhood that the arguments around and against it can be made and not beyond it. Her body of work promulgates the issues of motherhood and their subversive potential when looked at the motherly self, not from the eye of the family but from the point of view of the mother, and also her existence as an autonomous self that perpetually redefines the parameters of motherly idealisms.

Additionally, it is to be noted that the representations of motherhood in mainstream media, despite their attempts at highlighting the importance of several reproductive rights, representing empowered mothers and blurring the visions of biological and adoptive mothers, selectively highlight the granular, everyday, and banal forms of resistance. It is only in alternate sites, in this case, OTT platforms, that such occurrences are not rare. The production of subjectivities in these alternate sites is the repository of many underlying and conflicting points of view situated in the figure of the mother, who is often times promiscuous, disreputable, unreliable, as available to her child.

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Mothering Desire: Inhabitations, Transgressions and the New Media

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