Population First

Volume 12: May 2023

From the Editor's Desk

We are thrilled to present this edition of Tana Bana—the monthly newsletter of Laadli—with the theme of family and gendering in light of the International Day for Families, celebrated on May 15.

This newsletter is an endeavour of Laadli, the media advocacy campaign of Population First, which has been awarding the Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity (LMAAGS) for gender-sensitive journalism since 2007. The awards are supported by UNFPA.

Since the "sacrosanct" Indian family—heteronormative, patriarchal, and Brahminical—has invisibilized and romanticised women's domestic labour, and studies continue to show that the family and its associated institutions of marriage and motherhood constrain women's aspirations, the lead article delves into the patriarchal paradigm of labour.

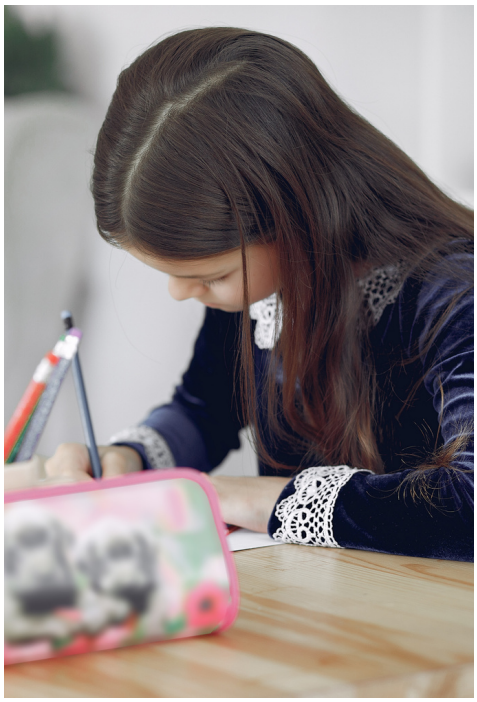
This edition features an interview with Dr Aqsa Shaikh, Associate Professor of

What's Inside

From the Editor's Desk...

Jamia Hamdard, who discusses queering the Indian family, the family as a site of violence, and how hate speech and propaganda have stigmatised the minority Muslim community during the pandemic, alongside the rising anti-secular sentiments. West Bengal-based poet and essayist Moumita Alam reviews *Lies That Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden* by Nilanjana Bhowmick.

Alam dissects middle-class homes, arguing why we must engage with narratives that are both political and religious to understand the gender divide in Indian society. There is also an article on how recent Indian films and web series have been breaking stereotypes and stigma associated with motherhood, and embracing queer parenthood.



This newsletter is a labour of love, and we would like to take a moment to thank our contributors and readers for their time and support. We eagerly await feedback and suggestions with humility.

Laadli stands in solidarity with the victims of caste and gender oppression, victims of communal hatred and state apathy, protesting wrestlers, and Pride beyond June.

I sincerely thank Dr AL Sharada, Director of Population First, for entrusting me with the guest editorship of this edition.

From the Editor's Desk...

I would also like to express my gratitude to Hetal Vora, Programme Officer at Population First, for being an enthusiastic manager and a talented co-writer for the film commentary.

Mohabbat zindabad,
Sanhati Banerjee

Meet the Editor, Sanhati Banerjee

The Great Indian Family and 'Missing' Working Women

Lead Article >>>>>

by Sanhati Banerjee

The 'ideal' Indian family has thrived on women's unpaid domestic labour. However, with Indian women exiting the workforce en masse, several structural barriers including marriage, motherhood and glorified domestic work are being debated across India Inc and among policymakers, feminists and civil society stakeholders. As the world observed the 2023 International Day of Families last month, we ask, is the traditional 'happy' Indian family antithetical to evolving feminine and feminist aspirations, ambitions, and assertions?

In August 2022, when asked to speak on the challenges, or the 'unseen barriers', women are facing in our country today in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), Justice Prathiba M. Singh, hailed the Manusmriti — one of the many texts among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism — as giving a respectable position to women.

She stressed upon the significance of strengthening the core values of the Indian family system, urging women to stay in joint families in order to receive the necessary support to steer their careers. "That way, we share our resources. Sharing is caring, we do not need to be selfish to say 'I need my time, I need this.' You can be a little more adjusting and compromising, but the benefits of a joint family system are far more than what in a nuclear family," she said. She went on to say that women should never seek sympathy: "Don't ever go and say my child is ill, I want to go home, I want to do this, I want to do that.

You can always take an off, but you don't need to give the reason. Just say it is a personal difficulty."

Women have always been told that the family is a safe space; it accords respectability and security. However, with growing economic agency, women no longer need a patriarchal stronghold as a safety nest or a marker of social respectability.

At the time of writing this, Justice Bharati Dangre observed that a mother cannot be asked to choose between her career and child, granting permission to a woman to go abroad with her daughter. Meanwhile, the Bombay High Court recently passed a judgement in favour of a single and working woman to adopt a child, emphasising the need to let go of "mediaeval conservative concepts of a family".

Indeed, as we weigh into the patriarchal paradigm of labour, it's worthwhile to understand that the International Labor Organisation (ILO) estimates unpaid care work to be a critical barrier preventing women from entering the workforce and sustaining the demands of the workplace.

In her paper Building India's Economy on the Backs of Women's Unpaid Work: A Gendered Analysis of Time-Use Data, infrastructure and industrial development economist, Mitali Nikore writes that this disproportionate burden of unpaid care work creates what is called 'time poverty', which inhibits women's ability to dedicate time to paid work and acquire the skills necessary to grow in the career pipeline.

Indeed, even prior to COVID-19, Indian women were spending about 8X more hours on care work as compared to men, according to 2019 data; the global average is 3X.

Why Feminism Must Reject Manuvad

The Indian heteronormative family has historically framed women's labour in ritualistic roles of cooking and caring apart from labour-intensive religious duties. Brahmanical patriarchy has historically cast the Hindu woman as the ideal wife and mother, which in turn, has validated her as an ideal member of the nation State.

A Business Insider article published in May 2022 highlighted that married working women is still a relatively new concept in India as per a National Family Health Survey (NFHS) survey. The report revealed that only 32% of married women aged between 15 to 49 years are employed, whereas, this percentage is much more for married men in the country, which is 98% for the same age group.

Tied to male figures of authority, the oppressor-caste Hindu woman's respectability has been legitimised vis-à-vis the heteronormative Hindu family, akin to the nation State. Deified as the chaste wife and the selfless mother and dehumanised and desexualised as the widow, her identity spectrum has been sealed as that of the supreme caregiver, often within the joint family structure.

This very Brahmanical Hindu family, which has survived on the romanticised and invisibilised labour of women, perpetrating violence against Dalit women, is antithetical to rising and assertive identities of women, who desire economic and emotional autonomy both within and outside this structure, and who do not wish to pay the patriarchal tax for being ambitious.

The motherhood narrative is only scientific, democratic and progressive when it includes the right to safe abortion, the right to say no to motherhood, the flawed mother and so on.

In the absence of enabling child and eldercare networks, amid a reluctance of public-private stakeholders to reshape the patriarchal lens of motherhood and a still evolving paternity leave spectrum, how are Indian women supposed to navigate the burden of conservative family values?

It is absurd, anti-feminist, and coercive, to even suggest that an inherently casteist and misogynist scripture, the anti-constitutional Manusmriti could serve as a playbook for today's women. Glorification of such a text amid an increasingly polarised climate where India is a cesspool of gender and caste-based violence and Islamophobia is in dangerous liaison with the rising agenda of the Hindutva forces.

Historically, women have been shamed for speaking up for themselves, and hence, it is dangerous to dismiss a woman's legitimate right to self-care as selfish. Time is political for women, not a luxury.

Any idea of a 'good' or 'moral' Indian working woman — earning money without the agency to make choices — and still abiding by the caste-dictated kinship networks where romantic love is censured, gendered violence is normalised, and marriage is decided by modern-day Manus is everything that feminism is not.

The Trans-National Indian Family

In conversation with Dr Aqsa Shaikh, on queering the Indian family, the family as a site of violence, and how hate speech and propaganda further stigmatised Muslims during the pandemic, impacting their access to dignified healthcare. Dr Shaikh is associate professor of Community Medicine at Hamdard Institute of Medical Sciences and Research (HIMSR), Jamia Hamdard and the director of the Human Solidarity Foundation, a Delhi-based not-for-profit that runs a charitable clinic.

Edited excerpts from the interview:

Tana Bana: Looking at 'trans-gressions' both within and outside the system of the Indian family, what do you think are some of the ways in which gender non-confirming identities have been challenging the status quo of the traditional Indian family?

Dr Aqsa Shaikh: When you talk about queer persons in the context of the family, the nature of the relationship is rebellious as the system of the family doesn't accept them. This system of family is typically a heteronormative, patriarchal, and Brahminised one. When we talk about the entity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex,

asexual (LGBTQIA+), especially transgender persons and visibly transgender persons in terms of *hijra, kinnar* or Aravani communities, a lot of them have either succumbed to the demands of their biological/legal families and left them or have been thrown out by their native families. And in this regard there is something unique in the South Asian system — the *hijra gharana*, *kinnar samuday* or the *jammat* system, which in spite of their drawbacks are systems where transpersons have created their own communities, with a grandmother-mother-daughter kind of a family tree where the older folks take care of the younger ones and vice versa. There's a sense of democracy, and these systems have been in existence for centuries parallel to the State-sanctioned/government family system.

For a lot of queer people, especially the new generation of queer folks, there's an emerging concept of the chosen family, where members choose certain people to be a part of their family. However, the legal recognition of the chosen family is still limited. In such a scenario, the question arises: Who can make medical decisions for queer people — the biological or the chosen family? In addition to addressing these challenges, we have to also locate this evolution of the concept of family as much within the queer community as within other movements such as the feminist movements, anti-caste movements, which are collectively making the traditional family churn.

Tana Bana: Alongside the modernising families, do you see a tendency to uphold the traditional Indian family and anti-secular sentiments?

Dr Aqsa Shaikh: There's been a backlash on interfaith marriages and The Special Marriage Act, 1954, which is in keeping with the growing erosion of secular values and an emphasis on the endogamous, biological family. With the government increasingly giving credibility to the biological family, the ideology is also penetrating law. The Uniform Civil Code, for instance, fails to recognise the indigenous systems of family practised by various tribal communities. Another

example would be the Surrogacy Act — Section 2(1)(zg) mandates that a surrogate mother can only be a woman who is genetically related to the intending couple or intending woman — which reinforces the State ideology of the authority of the biological family. Similarly, the chosen family of queer persons often comes under the wrath of the authorities. There are polyamorous and polyandrous relationships or interpersonal settings, which involves a third partner, sometimes by mutual consent. But, in the absence of legal recognition, what happens to them? Who will take care of them?

Tana Bana: Historically, the public health machinery has perpetuated dominant social stigma and biases, denying health rights and dignity to marginalised populations. In present-day India, with a rising Hindutva nationalism on one hand, how has this affected minorities, especially since health doesn't exist in a vacuum?

Dr Aqsa Shaikh: Health does not exist in a vacuum; rather it is rooted in socio-economic contexts. Unfortunately, the right to health is not a part of our constitution. However, Right to Life is guaranteed in the Indian constitution. But, marginalised communities are burdened with navigating an unfriendly healthcare system. When I say there is a problem of access, I do not merely mean a lack of geographical or economic access but a lack of access owing to their marginalised identities.

During the peak of the pandemic, there was a propaganda of "Corona *jihad*" against the minority Muslim community, labelling them as super spreaders, thus stigmatising them. This resulted in a call for boycott for Muslim fruit sellers, weakening their health-seeking behaviour. Often subjected to the Islamophobic slur of being labelled as 'child-producing factories', Muslim *hijab/niqab*-wearing women were doubly marginalised. The issue is not about them not getting admission to a hospital but about the interaction not being dignified.

Similarly, the chosen family of queer persons often comes under the wrath of the authorities. There are polyamorous and polyandrous relationships or interpersonal settings, which involves a third partner, sometimes by mutual consent. But, in the absence of legal recognition, what happens to them? Who will take care of them?

Tana Bana: Traditionally, the Indian family has often perpetrated violence, abuse, neglect and silenced victims/survivors, not letting them heal let alone seek justice. How should we rethink family and freedom, health and healing, while still navigating a heteropatriarchal, queerphobic, and transphobic society?

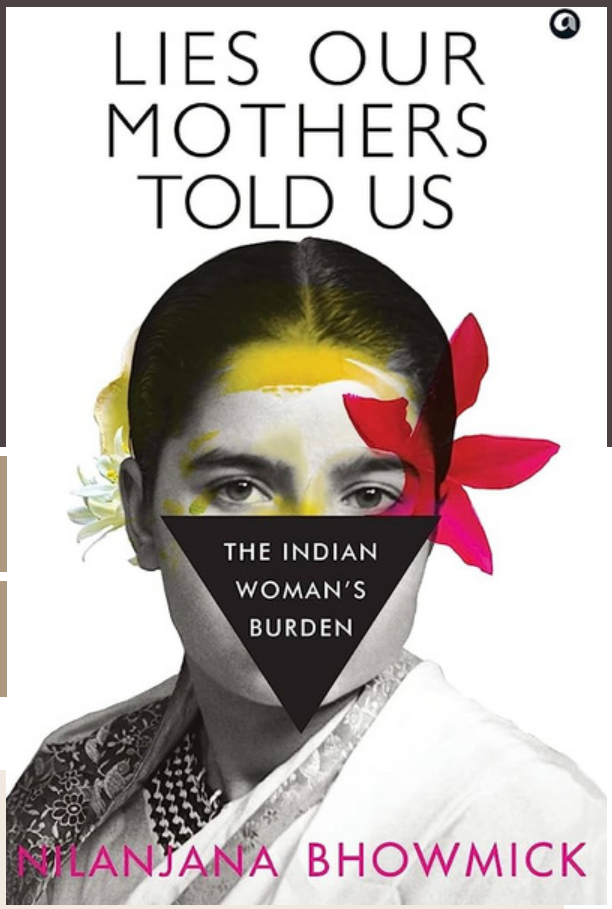
Dr Aqsa Shaikh: Family is a sacred space within Indian society. However, for a lot of queer individuals and other minorities, the family has been a site of constant physical, surgical, medical and emotional violence.

- For instance, if an intersex child is born with a larger clitoris — there's nothing called a normal clitoris — the child is made to undergo a procedure to cut it short to the usual. This is akin to female genital mutilation. This doesn't help the child lead a better life; on the contrary, when they grow up to realise their family perpetrated this surgical violence upon them it leads to trauma.
- Medical violence includes conversion therapy, which when undertaken medically entails the administration of electric shocks and psychotropic drugs, and when undertaken in the absence of medical supervision, parents and family members generally turn to spiritual *babas*.
- The family also perpetrates sexual abuse in terms of corrective rape; forcing a boy/teenager to have sex with a sex worker in order to make them "straight".
- These intersect with their health-seeking behaviours, leading to high levels of mental stressors, mental disorders, and mood disorders.

As told to Sanhati Banerjee

****This is an abridged version of the interview published in the Laadli blog site.***

Lies That Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden



Author: Nilanjana Bhowmick

Review by: Moumita Alam

In Lies That Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden, author Nilanjana Bhowmick writes: "Middle class homes are a secret laboratory of patriarchy — it is where patriarchy has thrived and continued to thrive." In an intimate review of this book, Moumita Alam unpacks the patriarchy in the home and the world and beyond.

How can a reviewer review a book when she becomes a part of the book? Nilanjana Bhowmick's *Lies That Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden* is such a book. This book jolts the whole middle-class patriarchy and opens up the hellhole of a typical, snobbish class that is always busy covering the voices of women with a lid. While one reads the book, she can feel the patriarchal worms coming out from that open hellhole. And the reader, if she is a woman, can't help but pause after every chapter or line, gulp down her tears or shout out loud finding her invisible pains in the black ink of the words. When Bhowmick claims that the book is every Indian woman's book, she can't be more true.

The book has 20 chapters and the first one sets the tone of the title. Each chapter stands tall with the author's unique and relentless pursuit of mixing data with the flesh and blood experiences of real women. Thus when I read about the working woman cutting vegetables on the train so that she can go home and serve dinner on time, I pause for a moment and the face of my female colleague haunts me.

" If we annex 'working' only to the women who are in paid jobs, then aren't we agreeing that the unpaid labour of the women folk who slog like hell in homes is not 'work' at all? "

My female colleague rushes to her work without any proper tiffin and lunchbox and depends on midday meals for her everyday lunch. She can't even ask her in-laws for a proper meal though she is a 'working woman'. Though the term working woman is misleading.

If we annex 'working' only to the women who are in paid jobs, then aren't we agreeing that the unpaid labour of the women folk who slog like hell in homes is not 'work' at all? In every Bengali household, women's unpaid labour remains unrecognised and the women are well-versed with phrases like '*saradin barite ki kaaj koro!*' (what do you do in staying all day at home).

This curt comment not only denigrates women's labour at home but also sabotages them in the household power politics of negotiations and compromise. The women end up believing that they are unproductive and hence they have just one thing remaining with them, which is to make every effort to keep the 'husband god' happy. Bhowmick addresses this invisible struggle of women folk when she mentions a woman's journey:

"Appreciation is, however, hard to come by. 'People think what's there in cooking or housework — it's not rocket science. We cook three times a day all year long, even in the oppressive heat of the summer months,' she tells me. 'My husband didn't help before but now he does, maybe because he thinks, now that I am 'working', I need help. But the point is that I needed help before too. But whatever, I am glad he helps me now. When I upload videos of him helping me, there are comments on my vlog shaming me for making my husband work at home,' she laughs."

When the woke men claim, things are changing, the author doesn't buy their belief rather she questions, "In my many conversations with woke men in the country, I have been repeatedly told that 'things are changing'. Are they?"

The author successfully feels the pulse of the ground reality when she questions the middle-class woke men's effort to normalise gender roles.
It's true that nothing much has changed, rather 'evolved' is the right word here.

In the capitalist, patriarchal economy women are now 'allowed' to work where being a part of the workforce and earning members of the formal economy doesn't necessarily translate into their own financial independence and social agency. It's not an urban myth but a reality in several homes that women continue to hand over their salaries to their fathers/husbands and are passive buyers and investors, labouring away to a consumerist cannibalism masquerading as empowerment.

The author's intense groundwork and knowledge of the ground have made her aware of the fact that some flagship programmes of the government both State and the Centre fail because of the patriarchal obsession,

"Most parents do not think twice about appropriating a girl's bicycle — a benefit provided by the government in many States to allow girls to go to school — for her brother, or registering a business or property in a woman's name to take advantage of women-specific subsidies (ensuring that she signs away those rights in a separate set of documents)."

It's true that nothing much has changed, rather 'evolved' is the right word here. In the capitalist, patriarchal economy women are now 'allowed' to work where being a part of the workforce and earning members of the formal economy doesn't necessarily translate into their own financial independence and social agency.

The author tells the stories of bloggers who are earning money through blogs where they mostly show their daily routines. It's empowering them. But the question remains unanswered, are the blogs not also normalising women's slogging in middle-class households?

To bring gender equality in the framework of Indian society we have to work on our lexicons both religious and political. We can't say a woman is 'empowered' if she is highly paid and still succumbs to the patriarchal, misogynist nexus of her day-to-day life. Empowerment should be an all-encompassing word. But the book has not addressed this issue sufficiently. The rising right-wing fundamentalism of all religions is harming women and giving air to the male-dominated narrative further reinforcing women's archetypal roles and legitimising censorship. But the book is silent about it.

Yes, the book has shown us the disease but the causes that if unaddressed soon push the disease to the metastatic stage haven't sufficiently been addressed. But it's again too much to ask from an author in a single book. Yes, our mothers told us lies but why and how and the whole system that is behind it? - we need a thorough change from the bottom to the top.

Still, the book should be in everyone's closet, not just another book to show the elegance of the *babu bhadralok* culture. Rather this book should be in every home for every right reason. It's a mirror to the pan-India middle-class world which has maintained the status quo by silencing the voices of women.

Moumita Alam is a poet from West Bengal. Her poetry collection, The Musings of the Dark was published in 2020. The book has about a hundred poems written in protest against the humanitarian crisis from the abrogation of Article 370, the Delhi riots, and the Shaheen Bagh movement.

The Evolving Womb: Mapping Motherhood in Movies and Web Series

An account of the multi-hyphenated motherhood or many motherhoods as seen in some of the recent Indian cinematic content. This article traces the evolving arcs and themes breaking away from any singular notion of motherhood and the rhetorical trope of Bharat Mata.

-By Sanhati Banerjee and Hetal Vora

When Karishma, aka Lata Solanki, portrayed by Tilottama Shome, says, *"Kisi ne pucha mujhe kya chahiye? (Did anyone ask me what I wanted?)"* in Netflix's *Delhi Crime* Season 2, she boldly questions the lack of consideration given to women's desires and choices. As a cold-blooded criminal, Karishma challenges societal expectations by abandoning not only her husband but also her four-year-old son. Her poignant query to DCP Vartika Chaturvedi (Shefali Shah), asking if anyone ever asked her what she wanted, resonates with the theme of women's agency. This often-overlooked aspect finds a different context in the film *Paheli*, where Rani Mukerji's character experiences a mix of sadness and joy when asked about her choice by Shah Rukh Khan's character.

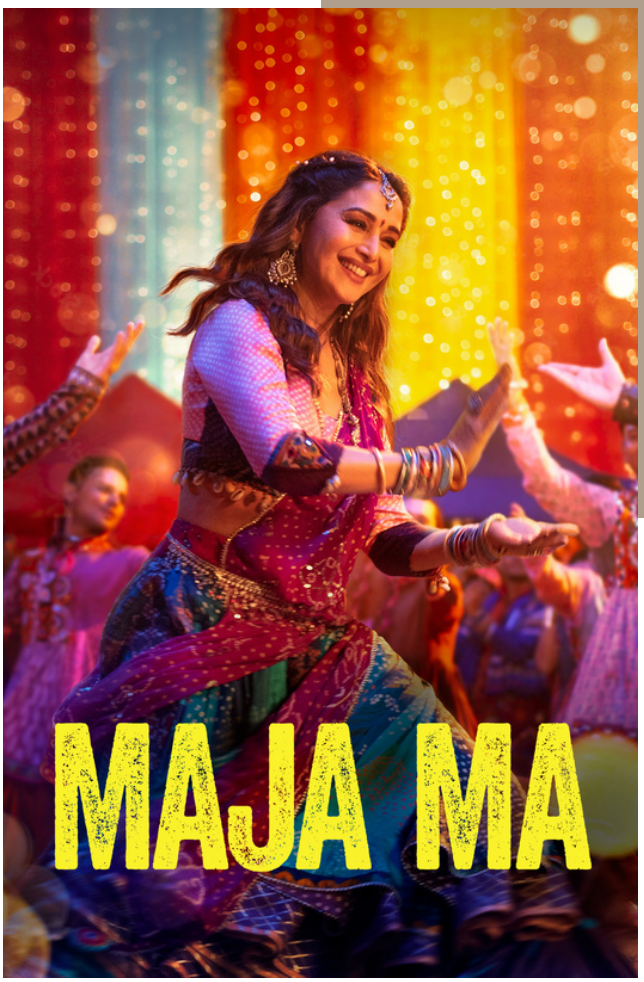
The unfortunate truth is that women, especially those from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds like Karishma, are rarely given the luxury of choice. The emerging portrayal of motherhood in Indian cinema is gradually stripping it of its sanctity, presenting it as a potential burden imposed on several women.

The power to choose motherhood is intertwined with the right to access safe abortion, an aspect often shrouded in horror stories due to legal and healthcare barriers. *Sara's*, a Malayalam film available on Amazon Prime, champions a woman's right to bodily autonomy. The film dismantles the traditional notion of motherhood as a sacred duty and reveals that it may not be essential for all women simply because they are female. Sara (Anna Ben), a young filmmaker, candidly expresses her lack of interest in motherhood, highlighting that not all women possess the maternal instinct or find it necessary for their fulfilment. By addressing the tenet of 'my body, my choice', *Sara's* challenges the romanticised view of motherhood perpetuated by patriarchal norms.

Another film, *Mimi*, explores the topic of surrogacy, which remains taboo in India. Despite some inaccuracies regarding the legal and medical aspects, the film touches on the commodification of women's bodies and reproductive labour. However, instead of providing an informed perspective on the complexities of surrogacy, Mimi devolves into a moralising narrative that idealises traditional motherhood. The protagonist, Mimi, portrayed by Kriti Sanon, willingly sacrifices her dreams and transforms from a spirited woman seeking financial independence to a conventional and selfless mother.

This misguided approach reinforces the harmful stereotype that money compromises a woman's ability to be a good mother.

In recent movies like *Maja Ma* and *Badhaai Do*, the theme of unconventional parenthood and the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals is explored. *Maja Ma* sheds light on the pressure faced by Pallavi (Madhuri Dixit Nene) to conform to societal expectations and get married. The film questions whether Pallavi's revelation of her lesbian identity diminishes her capabilities as a mother and challenges the belief that heterosexual couples are essential for successful parenting.



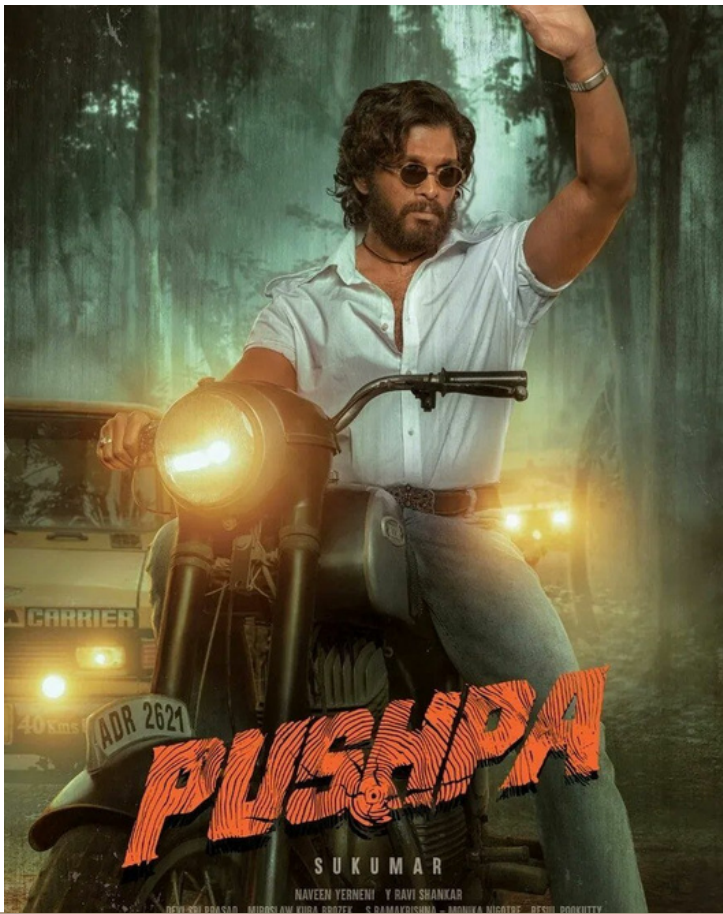
Similarly, *Badhaai Do* sensitively portrays unconventional parenthood and emphasises the importance of support and acceptance in non-traditional family structures. These films showcase intentional parenthood within queer relationships, highlighting the power of love and commitment in creating safe and nurturing environments for children.

Amidst the evolving portrayals of motherhood, Netflix's *Mai* and *Darlings* offer refreshing perspectives. *Mai*, set in the Lucknow underworld, features Sheel

Chaudhary (Sakshi Tanwar), who defies societal expectations and seeks revenge for her daughter's death. This character breaks the mould of the traditional avenging mother by challenging the decorum and morality associated with middle-class motherhood. *Darlings* addresses the issue of intimate partner violence and portrays a mother, Shamshum (Shefali Shah), as a strong ally to her daughter, supporting her decision to leave an abusive relationship. These narratives subvert traditional tropes.

In the mega hit film *Pushpa: The Rise*, the working-class male protagonist searches for his father's name, which is equated with legitimacy/respect. Despite the class struggle, it is important to avoid such regressive themes that undermine women's agency, especially at a time when women are fighting for their reproductive rights and freedom.

We can only hope to see more thought-provoking portrayals of mothers across identities and demographics on screen. And not necessarily only portrayals of good mothers but problematic mothers, narcissistic mothers, mothers who are also women/individuals and so on.



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