

‘Working for/from Home’: An Interdisciplinary Understanding of Mothers in India

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Abstract

Situated in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, this paper begins by looking at the recent advertisement by Amul praising mothers who are ‘working from home’ and ‘working for home’ during the lockdown, with an accompanying cartoon visualizing the iconic Amul girl sitting beside her mother who is working on her laptop while keeping an eye on her daughter; in a juxtaposed cartoon, the mother is cooking in the kitchen while simultaneously scrolling through her smartphone. Amongst my groups of women friends, the advertisement elicited strong and contradictory responses: ranging from approval of the appreciation for maternal work to disapproval at the missing father. In order to critique this advertisement, I would use the lens of Motherhood Studies, an emerging area of scholarship that is inherently interdisciplinary. Reading the advertisement as a cultural text, I will attempt to locate the maternal stereotypes embedded in it: the merging of the *stay-at-home mother* and the *working-mother* into the ideal neoliberal mother-worker, the *supermom* who effortlessly balances work and home, even in extraordinary times like the pandemic and lockdown. These entangled maternal stereotypes have been reified in popular consciousness through mythic, religious, literary and filmic artefacts. A cross-disciplinary tracing of the stereotypes will reveal the motherhood constructs and the cultural expectations that mothers encounter, and also attempt to explain why and how these constructs and expectations operate. The paper will look at the possibilities of resistance to these stereotypes, germinating in feminist, or posthuman, or matricentric approaches to motherhood. I will use the critical distinction between motherhood-as-ideology and mothering-as-agency to understand maternal resistances, some of which may be located in the responses to the Amul advertisement. The paper will conclude by assessing the emergence of Motherhood Studies as a legitimate field of interdisciplinary humanities and/or social sciences.

Keywords: cultural studies; Indian mothers; interdisciplinary; matricentric feminism; motherhood studies

1. ‘Working from Home’ and ‘Working for Home’

In April this year, during the national lockdown, Amul, the popular Indian butter (and dairy) brand, brought out a doodle advertisement (which is their trademark) dedicated to the urban Indian mother (Amul_India, 2020). The cartoon is titled, “Mom is where the heart is” and it shows the mother working at her job from the home and, simultaneously, working for the home. Although the cartoon is divided into two halves, the mother’s professional work and domestic or care work are not segregated temporally or spatially. In the first half, the mother is cooking while checking her phone at the same time to keep track of her professional work. In the second half, the mother is helping her daughter, the Amul mascot, in her studies, while working on her laptop and speaking on phone at the same time. Significantly, the father is absent in both sections of the advertisement, although it may be assumed that even the father is at home and is working *from* the home because of the ongoing national lockdown. At the bottom corner of the advertisement,

there is a slogan, “Favourite all-rounder” referring to the mother’s capacity to smoothly and efficiently juggle the responsibilities of work and home, even, or especially, during critical periods like the Covid-19 lockdown, without any visible (in the text of the advertisement) assistance from the father.

2. Unpacking motherhood stereotypes: the sacrificing, stay-at-home mother

If we unpack the cultural text of the Amul-mother advertisement, we can trace several motherhood stereotypes embedded in it. For this purpose, I will use the lens of Motherhood Studies, an emerging area of scholarship about mothers, motherhood and mothering that is inherently interdisciplinary. The entangled maternal stereotypes that are manifested in and through the advertisement have been reified in popular consciousness through mythic, religious, literary and filmic artefacts.

In the advertisement, we have traces of the ideal stay-at-home mother, who is devoted to the service of her family: here she is cooking for her family, and supervising her child’s education. She is the self-sacrificing nurturer, the primary caregiver of her children, and a domestic goddess. This construct of ideal motherhood is a product of heteropatriarchal ideology where the perfect mother would produce sons (to perpetuate the family lineage), socialize daughters into becoming obedient replicas of their mothers; and excel in taking care of the ‘private sphere’ of the home and family. In Indian culture, this traditional motherhood stereotype is reinforced in several ways, for instance, through the nurturing mother-goddess “*ghar ki laxmi*” (or Annapurna) cult in Hindu religion that glorified and deified the self-sacrificing mother dedicated to the hearth and home. Religious studies scholars have pointed out that, “Colloquial phrases about the ‘Lakshmi of the home,’ popular in many Indian languages, refer to the quality of auspiciousness of women who play the proper wifely [or maternal] role” (Ganesh, 2010, p. 82). The idolization of self-abnegating motherhood is reinforced through the selfless, sexless, devoted mother icon in popular Hindi films who always fed *gajar-ka-halwa* to her son or put protective *tika* on his forehead. Nirupa Roy is the female actor most often associated with this maternal image, notably in films like *Deewar*, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, in both cases where she was the mother of sons. Historians like Altekar have noted how “motherhood is the cherished ideal of every Hindu woman. The birth of a son immediately heightens her status.” The filmic mother epitomized by Nirupa Roy and other female actors has reified and disseminated the historical glorification of self-sacrificing motherhood.

3. Unpacking motherhood stereotypes: the ‘working mother’ who is a ‘supermom’

However, with modernization, and even more so with the opening up of markets under neoliberalism and globalization in the 1990s, another maternal stereotype gradually gained visibility: that of the ‘working mother,’ often visually represented through gadgets like the laptop or smartphone, as is also the case with the mother in the Amul advertisement. The term ‘working mother’ is immediately set up in opposition to the ‘stay-at-home mother.’ If mothers are regarded as ‘working’ only when they are in paid employment outside the home, then it devalues and invisibilizes the ‘mother work’ done by the mother in the home. ‘Mother work’ is unpaid, often unseen, labour, and it includes both care work (birthing and nurturing the child/ren; cooking for, and taking care of, the family members) and housekeeping work (taking care of the household, includes work like cleaning the home, doing laundry and washing up).

Setting up a false binary between ‘working mother’ and ‘stay-at-home mother’ also veils what Arlie Hochschild coined as the “second shift” which refers to the second part of a working mother’s day in which she comes home after working outside the home and has to take up care work and housekeeping work at home. There has always been a shockingly large gender gap in

average hours spent on domestic work in Indian families, even during the lockdown. Instead of working towards demanding structural changes that will rebalance this unequal gendered division of labour, motherhood stereotypes produce 'maternal guilt' in 'working mothers' and a sense of inadequacy and inferiority in 'stay-at-home' mothers. Such binarized stereotypes also lead to media-circulated 'mommy wars' that encourage invasive scrutiny and judgement of both 'working' and 'stay-at-home' mothers to evaluate who is a 'good mother' according to the cultural expectations of India's heteropatriarchal society (Peskowitz, 2005).

In the neoliberal market regime, the concept of the good mother refers to the mother who is both a good reproducer (birthing and nurturing future ideal neoliberal workers) and also a good producer (working outside the home as an ideal neoliberal worker herself). Such mothers are expected to be "neoliberal self-optimizing economic agents in the 'public' realm and maternalist self-sacrificing mothers in the 'private' realm" (Giles, 2014, p.4). This has led to the merging of the *stay-at-home mother* and the *working-mother* constructs into the ideal neoliberal mother-worker, the *supermom* who effortlessly balances work and home, even in extraordinary times like the coronavirus pandemic and the consequent lockdown. In Indian religio-cultural contexts, the *supermom* is conveniently visualized and idealized through the image of the multiple-handed mother goddesses like Durga. The media-disseminated focus on the 'ease' with which the metaphorical supermom 'juggles' work and home again negates and invisibilizes the effort and exhaustion of mothers; silences any resistant or non-normative voice; intensifies maternal guilt and self-blaming; and shames and labels mothers who fall short of the ideal supermom standards as 'bad' or 'failed' mothers.

4. Mothers internalizing motherhood constructs

The cross-disciplinary tracing of motherhood stereotypes in the Amul-mother text revealed the imbricated motherhood constructs and the cultural expectations that mothers encounter. Now, to explain why and how these constructs and expectations operate, I will look at two of the responses my friends gave when the Amul-mother advertisement was being debated in our WhatsApp groups. One mother/friend commented, "This is such a nice way of appreciating what we mothers do! It is like a special Mother's Day ad!" Another friend responded, "At least they are realizing how much work we have to handle. We all know that the fathers will never have the time or inclination to do so much anyway!"

Altekar writes, "The apotheosis of the mother has reached a greater height in India than anywhere else" (1959, p.100). The glorification of motherhood in India coexists with the subjugation of mothers (all women, in fact) across caste-class-locational intersections, leading to what feminist theoreticians call "glorification without empowerment." To maintain this status quo, patriarchal society requires the obedience of the mothers who are being subjugated. For that, it is important to manufacture the consent of a majority of the mothers.

This consent is manufactured through several patriarchal strategies, one of them being consolation. Feminist scholar V. Geetha argues that women's consent "was obtained through an elaboration of virtues that she was enjoined to make her own" (p.106). Motherhood has repeatedly been projected as the only and ultimate purpose of a woman's life. The *Manusmriti* categorically states that "woman was created for the exclusive purpose of giving birth, to men for the continuation of the line" (Bhattacharji, 2010, p. 57). To reward mothers for their capacity for motherhood is a consolatory strategy that conceals the gendered inequities of motherwork. As historian Sukumari Bhattacharji notes, "motherhood came to be increasingly glorified; it is an emotional and ideational compensation for the reality which in most cases is imposed upon her" (p.58). Over the centuries, the nature of this reward has changed to adapt to changing social

realities. The *Manusmriti* teaches its followers to revere mothers above all others: Verse 2.145 says, “The teacher is ten times greater than the tutor; the father is a hundred times greater than the teacher; but the mother is a thousand times greater than the father” (Olivelle, 2004, p.34).

The Amul advertisement praises the mother as the “favourite all-rounder,” elevating the mother for her ‘supermom’ capacity of effortlessly and efficiently performing both domestic and professional work at the same time. Significantly, the metaphor in the Amul advertisement is extracted from the world of cricket: in contemporary Indian popular culture, it is often sporting—specifically cricketing—heroes who are deified. Metaphorizing the mother as an “all-rounder’ raises her culturally to the status of cricketing idols who can both bat and bowl with ease and success. Such glorification needs to be located in the context of maternal subjugation of those times. For instance, during the period of the *Manusmriti*, mothers did not have any active role in the various *samskaras* or rituals that were performed during the child’s life: “Vedic texts give us the rites during gestation, parturition and some post-parturition rites—all discharged by the father” (Bhattacharjee, 2010, p.47). In twenty-first century India, statistics from a 2018 International Labour Organization report reveal that in urban homes, men do an average of 29 minutes of routine unpaid housework per day as compared to 312 minutes for women, one of the most imbalanced gender ratio in the world (Pandey, 2020).

During the pandemic-imposed lockdown, Indian men did more work at home, two reasons being that several men were laid off from their jobs and were forced to stay at home, and also, during the lockdown housemaids were barred from entering residential buildings, so the family members had to do all the housework. Significantly, although men stuck in their homes during lockdown did an average of one hour extra work in the home, there is still a visible gap in the male-to-female ratio, with mothers still working more than fathers, although both fathers and mothers in urban India are apparently working from home and working for home. Gender scholars are, however, sceptical whether this current improvement in Indian gender disparity heralds any permanent or long-term change in gender relations within the household (Pandey, 2020). The Amul advertisement completely erases the existing history of gender disparity and injustice, and also omits the new shifts in the gender equation during the pandemic lockdown, through its clever strategy of consolatory praise. By focusing and heroizing only the mother’s role in the household, the Amul text fixes the existing gender inequality and consequent maternal heroization as the dominant and desirable state of affairs.

The intermeshed effect of manufacturing consent and offering compensation is that most mothers internalize and obey the ideology of motherhood, and they also socialize their daughters into this patriarchal ideology. If a majority of mothers are internalizing and perpetuating the normative ideology of motherhood, it automatically marginalizes the resisting, dissenting, non-normative mothers (and non-mothers, for instance, child-free women).

5. Maternal resistances

To change the condition of mothers, or, to even identify the need for change, we have to look at the possibilities of resistance to motherhood stereotypes. Here, I will use the critical distinction between motherhood-as-ideology and mothering-as-agency to understand the range of maternal resistances. According to Motherhood Studies theorists, motherhood is the institution and ideology that patriarchy glorifies and imposes upon mothers; whereas mothering is the lived experience of mothers. Adrienne Rich first articulated this difference when she wrote that there are “two meaning of meanings of motherhood, one superimposed upon the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential—and all women—shall remain under male control”

(1986, p.13). Andrea O'Reilly distinguished, "[t]he term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women" (2008, p.3).

Thus, to challenge and resist the institution of motherhood, there needs to be more visibility and more voices of mothering experiences speaking up. Resistances to motherhood can germinate in everyday acts of interrogation and assertion, such as some of the responses I received to the Amul-mother advertisement. One of my friends said, "Why is the father absent in the ad? Why isn't he at least there helping with the work at home?" Another friend said, "Always showing how mothers can easily do this work for home and work from home makes us feel so pressured, especially if we are struggling to cope with this same situation of work-from-home and work-for-home." Both these are resistant responses raising crucial questions: on the lopsided gender distribution of care work at home (signified in the figure of the absent father); and on the impossibility of the cultural expectations that ideal constructs like the supermom create.

Broader resistances to these stereotypes may germinate in feminist, or posthuman, or matricentric approaches to motherhood. Feminist movements have focused on legal enactments that improve mothers' conditions, such as increasing maternity leave periods, providing childcare facilities in workplaces, introducing paternity leave so that fathers get involved with care work. Posthumanism can be resistant through the concept of surrogacy: surrogacy fractures the patriarchal prioritizing of biological motherhood by splitting the maternal body into two or more bodies: that of the genetic mother, the commissioning mother, and the surrogate mother. Besides, commercial surrogacy subverts the essentializing idea that motherhood is unpaid, selfless service. Motherhood Studies scholars suggest matricentric approaches of resistance, where mothers come forward to speak, write, express their own authentic lived experiences of mothering, for example, in memoirs and mom-blogs, and other media, which challenge the homogenized monolithic representations of motherhood like that we see in the Amul advertisement.

To be truly authentic and pluralized, Motherhood Studies valorizes diverse mothering experiences, some of which may be compliant to Motherhood ideology while some may be resistant. By documenting a diverse range of responses to the Amul-mother text—collected from WhatsApp discussions with my friends' groups and used here with permission—I have attempted to indicate the multiplicity of maternal experiences and opinions churning in Indian society.

6. Motherhood Studies

In conclusion, I will briefly look at the emerging field of Motherhood Studies, a term coined by Andrea O'Reilly. She writes, "In 2006, I coined the term 'motherhood studies' to acknowledge and demarcate this new scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate and autonomous discipline" (O'Reilly, 2016, loc. 313). The emerging domain of Motherhood Studies is inherently transcultural and inter-disciplinary, deploying concepts from a wide range of academic disciplines like history, literature, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, media studies and gender studies, as it studies maternal constructs and practices from multiple cultures and historical periods. As it has evolved, Motherhood Studies has also developed a distinctive theoretical scaffolding and terminology. Scholars of Motherhood Studies use these theories and terminology to identify and deconstruct the pervasive patriarchal strategies and representations of motherhood that subjugate women, and to encourage mothers to express and share their experiences of mothering.

This paper has been written with the intention of demonstrating how a Motherhood Studies analysis of the Amul-mother advertisement utilises interdisciplinary approaches to engage

with, and critique, motherhood representations in the dominant culture as well as to validate the mothering responses and resistances to this dominant motherhood ideology. The new discourse of Motherhood Studies—which transgresses the interdisciplinary domains of humanities and social sciences—has the potential to dislodge old, gendered, oppressive meanings of motherhood and to create and circulate new, freely-chosen meanings and experiences of feminist or empowered mothering.

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