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# Motherhood to Motherhoods

## Ideologies of the “Feminine”

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## Subverting “Divine” Bengali Motherhood in Rituparno Ghosh’s Film *Titli* (2002)

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*Rituparno Ghosh is one of the most prolific filmmakers from Bengal, whose narrative depiction gained global critical acclaim in a short career span (1992–2003). Ghosh’s work focuses on human interaction and relationships through the women characters and their identity formation in Bengali society. His 2002 film Titli offers a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted experiences of a mother–daughter relationship, subverting the social representation of motherhood in Bengal. This paper investigates the various dimensions of motherhood, womanhood, and identity formation depicted in the film and interprets how Ghosh’s narrative sheds light on the social, emotional, and cultural aspects of this complex role—a role where mothers are not limited to caregivers and caretakers of domestic life without any identity of their own other than that of a mother, a wife, or a daughter. By analyzing the cultural symbols, dialogue, and visual motifs employed in the film, the paper explores how motherhood is constructed and perceived within the film’s cultural milieu. Reading the film through motherhood and feminist scholarship helps understand the representation of the “sexual mother,” juxtaposing it with the image of an ideal “goddess mother” in Bengal, India, and challenging patriarchal norms imposed on women. It explores the themes of sacrifice, self-identity, and personal agency about motherhood. Examining the conflicts and dilemmas faced by Titli’s mother, Urmila, this paper unravels the complex interplay between the expectations imposed by society and individual desires and aspirations of women, both as mothers and within the dynamics of mother–daughter duos.*

In “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women’s Cinema,” feminist film scholar Teresa de Lauretis, while discussing Chantal Akerman’s 1975 film, *Jeanne Dielman*, foregrounds how women-centric films are not about big events but small day-to-day, mundane events because it is in these moments, that resistance is provoked: “It is a woman’s actions, gestures, body, and look

that define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator. So that narrative suspense is not built on the expectation of a ‘significant event,’ a socially momentous act” (159). In his 2002 film *Titli*, Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh employs such a narrative device.

*Titli* centres on a mother-daughter relationship, and Ghosh strategically casts a real-life mother-daughter duo. Titli (played by Konkona Sen Sharma), a teenage girl, is infatuated with a famous (fictional) film star Rohit Roy (played by Mithun Chakraborty). She tells her mother, Urmila (played by Aparna Sen), how much she would like to marry him. As the plot progresses, the audience learns that Urmila, before her marriage, had a romantic relationship with Rohit—a part of her life she had kept hidden from everyone. It surfaces, however, when Rohit comes to Darjeeling for a movie shoot, and the two accidentally meet. Ghosh explores this aspect of lovers’ reunion through glances and silences, as words cannot express the relationship, pain, and love that Urmila and Rohit once had.

Focusing on the subtleties, the unspoken, and the omissions, the film diverges from Bengal’s traditional portrayal of motherhood, which is often idealized as *devi*, the image of the Shakti goddess, the universal force, a goddess who can do no wrong. The idea of the Shakti goddess emerged in the nineteenth century during the colonial era as a revolt against British ideals. It was later moulded into a trope used in Indian cinema to portray a just, all-knowing and selfless mother. Through national aspiration, the image of the mother, or *devi*, and the ideology of motherhood became enormously important in the cultural life of Bengal. However, as feminist and motherhood scholar Jasodhara Bagchi asks, “Was the choice of the mother merely an accidental one? Or was there something about the culture of the Bengalis that created the requisite precondition for such a choice?” (1). In his film, Ghosh shows that a mother is not just a nurturer but a woman as well. She cannot be assigned a single role just because she has birthed a child; every other aspect of her cannot be removed because society can only categorize women under a single role at a time, such as caregiver and mother. Ghosh also significantly omits Amar (played by Deepankar Dee), Urmila’s husband and Titli’s father, from the screenplay for the most part and focuses on the two female characters: the mother and daughter. This is rare from a narrative perspective, especially given that Amar is the patriarchal head of the family. Ghosh highlights that the film is about the mother and the daughter and their life and relationship.

The term “mother” in the Bengali language also holds a larger-than-life value, creating an imposition of divinity and superiority that makes it restrictive even in utterance. In “Forms of Address and Terms of Reference in Bengali,” linguist Sisir Kumar Das explains that in Bengali, the way to address a person is complicated, not only because of the lexical context of the language

but also because of the religious, social, and economic status of the person being addressed, especially when it comes to addressing a woman (as an unknown man or a stranger is not supposed to talk to a woman, given their domestic confinement and anonymity). The address depends on the interpersonal relationship they share, as in the socioreligious sphere, women (who are older and are mothers or have a form of a maternal relationship) hold a higher position in the Bengali Hindu community. Most women have the word “ma” added to their form of address, such as “masi-ma” for the mother’s sister, “thakuma” for the father’s mother, “ma Durga” for the Shakti goddess, meaning mother Durga, and so on (Das 25). The term “ma” in Bengali means “mother,” and its connotative use already attaches itself with a cultural superiority, making it a word that detaches mothers from the world, stripping them of their individuality and showing them as a collective representation, causing the image of Hindu mothers in Bengal to be superior to the rest, giving them an almost unattainable or unreachable status.

Urmila, the mother in *Titli*, from the very first scene, is shown to follow the rituals of devi: worshiping, applying vermilion on her forehead and her shakha pola (red and white bangles, worn by Bengali women, mainly women of the higher caste, on the day of their marriage. Not wearing these bangles symbolizes the death of the husband or the end of the marriage, and wearing them signifies being a prosperous married woman). Following the steps of a Brahmin married woman, Ghosh situates Urmila in the trope of a Goddess mother. The film begins as the mother and daughter go to the airport to pick up Titli’s father. During the journey, a car ahead breaks down, and, by pure luck, the passenger is Rohit Roy, who accepts a ride with Urmila and Titli to the airport. Titli is ecstatic as she has finally met her long-time celebrity crush, but her fantasy is soon shattered, as it becomes clear that Urmila and Rohit have a secret past. When they make a pit stop in a village, and Titli goes to buy supplies for the journey, the past relationship between Urmila and Rohit is revealed as they take a walk and reminisce.

The scenes with Rohit depict that Urmila’s transgression has begun, as in most of the scenes with Rohit, Urmila is alone with him, talking or singing, or even reciting poems, for instance, in a scene, when Rohit and Urmila are alone, walking in the streets, their conversation indicates their relationship:

Rohit: What does your husband call you? Urmi?

Urmila: The way he always calls me, “Do you hear me?”

Or while they are in the pine forest of Darjeeling, Urmila starts singing a song, when Titli eavesdrops on their conversation:

Rohit: Why don’t you sing?

Urmila: When shall I sing?

Rohit: What do you do throughout the day?

Urmila: Take care of the family. Morning. Afternoon. Evening. Daily, three

shifts, for the past twenty years.

The scene cuts to Titli's shocked face as the realization of her mother's past dawns upon her; Tagore's iconic song (*O' Chand*, which translates to *The Moon*) plays in the background, and we see Urmila singing it, a love song, about lovers reuniting (Tagore). The lyrics show how there is sorrow in the reunion, as in the end they would have to part ways, and only in these moments they could be free. Urmila, as we learn, has never done anything for herself. Before her marriage, she lived for her mother and father, followed their instructions, and even left the man she loved, not on her terms, but because it was what this society (her family and even the man she loved) wanted her to do. After her marriage, she moved from one city to another because of her husband's work transfer. She lived alone in the gloomy hill station, even though she did not like spending time alone and was scared, and after she had her daughter, she only lived for her husband and her daughter.

Urmila's spending time with a man (Rohit) portrays her to be a fallen woman, a sinner in the eyes of her daughter and the audience, in society. The film shows that Urmila is educated, and her husband is a liberal man, who reads *Harry Potter* and Khushwant Singh joke books. He is not a conservative orthodox patriarch, but even in such a liberal family, Urmila did not live on her terms but for the others in her life. Urmila lost her identity in her motherhood and marriage. She cannot do anything that she likes; she is denied access to the world and confined to the home, a paradox created by the ideological glorification of motherhood because all that she loves is taboo: singing, using her name, and even having a daughter have already added to her list of sins. Even the initial ritual now looks like a forced effort to establish her in the politics of identity, where she had to put the "sindoor" (vermilion) on her forehead and on the "shakha pola" to be accepted by the society, to distinguish her from an unmarried woman. Since Urmila is a Brahmin woman, her motherhood brought a change in her sexual status. She had to be asexual, given her higher status in the social class and caste strata. Scholar Ujjayini Ray deciphers the phenomenon found in 500 BCE and is still used as an imposition to keep women within the bounds of patriarchy in the name of religion and tradition (Ray).

The distinct transition of Urmila, from wearing the adorning red to putting white flowers in her hair, marks the shift. In Hindu rituals and customs, married mothers avoid white, as it is a sign of "asubho" or unholy. It was customary that married women wear red and bright colours, and only women who were widows wore white. White is also the colour of mourning in the Hindu religion, and it is only after Rohit's entrance into her life, even if that is for a day, that she wears white, marking a subtle death of societal expectations of an ideal mother.

After Rohit's leave and their father's return, the relations between Titli and

Urmila are strained. Titli accuses Urmila of betraying her husband and of wronging him. Urmila, at first, is baffled at the accusation but understands that Titli is hurt and explains to Titli that Rohit was a part of her life, much as everything is. She is an individual who has her own story, something that may not relate to her husband or daughter. But the tension does not end in estrangement, and we see the mother and daughter working through the new uneasy territory in their relationship because both mother and daughter love the same man.

What is significant about *Titli* is that it subtly proposes the concept of the sexual mother, a stark opposition to the image of an ideal mother in Bengal, a goddess. Social conventions and representations concerning the female ideal have separated procreative sex and dharma, associated with marriage and motherhood, from individual sexual passion and lust. Society and its traditional norms, which, in most cases, benefit the patriarchy, bind women, especially mothers, within the four walls of their houses. These social conventions remove the sexual identity of a mother, showing her in the light of divinity. In *Titli*, Ghosh integrates these themes as we see the two lives of Urmila, her domestic life and role as mother and wife juxtaposed against her flirtation and carefreeness with Rohit. With him, she sings love songs and recites poetry, associated with the courting of a betrothed young couple. One fleeting moment at the scene’s climax further confirms this conception.

Urmila, Titli, and Amar have returned home, and Rohit has left. Urmila comes out on the balcony when she sees that the light in Titli’s room is on. She hears muffled cries and rushes to her daughter. Titli finally breaks down and accuses her of cheating on her husband. Urmila tries to explain, but Titli continues crying. As a thunderstorm rages outside, Urmila, deep in conversation with Titli, looks out the window with her shawl covering her shoulders. When her shawl slips to reveal a silk night dress cut away close to the breast, the camera moves to rest on Titli’s shocked face at this exposure of her mother’s sexualized body. Urmila quickly covers herself. At this moment, the two seemingly irreconcilable facets of female sexuality are united. The mother, who was established as a *devi*, has transitioned into a sexual being, but how could a goddess and sexual being reside within a single body? By mobilizing sexually connotative meanings associated with the silk night dress, Ghosh strategically uses Urmila’s bodywork to unite sexual desire and motherhood, which serves to demythologize the idealized chaste virginal body of the all-giving mother, the body of mother India, *devi Durga*, and its concomitant ideal values and norms.

In the film’s final sequence, we see the house help taking mail from the postman and Urmila applying vermilion on her forehead and *shakha pola*, as she had done earlier, but of habit. She sees the mail and asks her maid to leave each letter either in Titli’s room or on her husband’s table. The scene shifts,

however, as she reaches the last letter. Urmila is taken aback and slightly surprised to receive a letter addressed to her, as it might be a while since she has received a letter in her name, drawing a parallel and contrasting it to the film's initial scene when the letters arrived in her husband's and daughter's name. Even her mother had sent a letter addressed to the husband, as in Bengali society, it is through the patriarch (the eldest man of the family) that the family is known. In this later scene, Urmila receives a letter from Rohit, sharing that he is marrying a journalist. At the same time, Titli receives a magazine with a picture of Rohit on the front cover, with the caption "Bangali Babur Biye" (i.e., "The Marriage of the Bengali Gentleman"). After Titli reads the caption, she goes to her mother. Without exchanging words of comfort, they exchange the letter and the magazine, coming to terms with their own and the emotions of the other in silence. Although Urmila is wearing the same clothes and dressed in the same manner as we were first introduced to her, she now looks alive and buoyant. She no longer fits the trope of an ideal Bengali mother defined by societal laws and expectations; she has changed. In "Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal," Samita Sen describes this ideal mother as an "ethnicised image of the pure Hindu woman, the sati-lakshmi, embodying the virtues of chastity, nurture, and prosperity, became the symbol of the health of the community and the nation" (232). She continues: "From serving as metaphors of actual social evil, women came to signify social and national superiority" (Sen 232). Urmila's image of a pure Hindu woman is shattered. She is more than what the scriptures want her to be. She is not just a Brahmin mother; she is a human with desires, needs, and aspirations removed from what society assigns her to be.

*Titli* provokes through its mundane elements—it took just a day to shift the age-old beliefs and norms. Titli is not a unique name, nor is Urmila; they are perhaps two of the most common names in a Bengali household. It is not a coincidence that Ghosh uses these names for his main characters, as through them, Ghosh represents and signifies the families of Bengal and the women who are at the centre of the family structure. Most of them have ordinary stories, much like Titli and Urmila of Ghosh's narrative, but their voices need to be heard, as they cannot be oppressed based on patriarchal tradition. The film is not just about the daughter and her coming to terms with her adolescence or even her first heartbreak. *Titli*, which translates to "butterfly" in English, is about the transformation of a mother and her relationship with her daughter. Ghosh dismantles the hegemonic mother-daughter dyad (Dey and Das 66). By the film's end, the mother can no longer be worshiped, even her draping of red clothes can no longer be seen as that of a pure deity. It is stained. To society, she might seem like a fallen woman, but Ghosh shows her as a woman, a woman who cannot be fixed on a pedestal. She is no longer in the superior hierarchical ground; she is now in the same position as her daughter. They

exchange their loss, pain, and understanding of a modern mother-daughter relationship—an understanding of womanhood.

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