

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

Spring / Fall 2025

Vol. 16



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Not All Mothers Are Saints: Exploring Maternal Ambivalence in Indian Narratives

Motherhood in contemporary urban India is a deeply emotional and socially charged experience, often idealized in public discourse but rarely explored through the lens of maternal ambivalence. This article examines the lived experiences of twenty participants, including biological, adoptive, and single mothers living in Kolkata, ranging in age from twenty-eight to forty-six years, who reveal the complex interplay between personal emotions and societal expectations. Using in-depth semistructured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025, the article highlights how mothers grapple with feelings of guilt, exhaustion, and contradiction—emotions often silenced in mainstream narratives of mothering. Despite having supportive families and spouses, participants reported experiencing immense social pressure to conform to traditional ideals of the perfect mother. The research draws from psychoanalytic theories, feminist thought, and sociological frameworks to contextualize these findings. Theories by Dennis Winnicott and Julia Kristeva help illuminate the psychological toll of mothering, while feminist scholars such as Nancy Chodorow, Arlie Russell Hochschild, and Kimberlé Crenshaw offer insight into the gendered emotional labour and intersecting identities shaping motherhood. The article also considers the influence of different regional Indian cinemas, as well as regional literature in reinforcing or challenging cultural myths of maternal perfection. The article argues that maternal ambivalence is not a weakness but a valid, even necessary, part of the mothering experience. It calls for a shift in public and academic discourse to acknowledge and honour these complex emotional realities, paving the way for a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of motherhood.

Introduction

Motherhood occupies a sanctified space in the Indian imagination. From myths to modern discourse, the mother is constructed as the epitome of selflessness, emotional abundance, and moral purity. Motherhood, while often romanticized as a universally fulfilling and instinctive role, is a profoundly complex psychological experience. Within Indian culture, this complexity is routinely masked by idealized narratives equating motherhood with moral virtue, emotional self-sacrifice, and divine femininity. The Indian mother—whether in mythology, cinema, or sociopolitical discourse—is imagined as an all-giving, all-forgiving entity whose identity is subsumed entirely into that of a caregiver. The image of the Indian mother has long been idealized, deified, and, in many ways, imprisoned by cultural expectations. While motherhood is undoubtedly a profound and intimate experience, this elevation of the maternal role leaves little room for mothers to express—or even experience—negative or conflicting emotions. It is in this space of emotional complexity that the concept of maternal ambivalence becomes necessary and radical.

From ancient mythology to contemporary media, the mother is cast as the epitome of selflessness, emotional abundance, and moral purity. While celebrated as a universally fulfilling and instinctive role, motherhood is, in reality, a deeply complex psychological experience. In Indian culture, this complexity is often obscured by idealized narratives equating mothering with moral virtue, emotional self-sacrifice, and divine femininity. Whether in myth, cinema, or sociopolitical discourse, the Indian mother is imagined as an all-giving and all-forgiving figure whose personal identity is subsumed entirely into caregiving. This cultural elevation, while reverent, also imprisons mothers within rigid moral expectations, leaving little space to articulate—or even acknowledge—negative or ambivalent feelings. This article argues that maternal ambivalence, far from being a sign of deficiency, is a natural and socially mediated aspect of motherhood, challenging the myth of the perfect mother. Drawing on qualitative interviews with mothers in Kolkata, it examines how women navigate this ambivalence through three interconnected domains: the changing role of familial support, the burden of social expectations and emotional guilt, and the tensions of intergenerational relationships. In doing so, it positions maternal ambivalence as not only psychologically valid but also culturally radical in the Indian context.

Maternal Ambivalence as Psychological Reality

From a psychological perspective, maternal ambivalence refers to the coexistence of love and resentment, affection and frustration, fulfilment and loss—emotions that are not only natural but inevitable in the experience of caregiving.

Object relations theory, particularly the work of Donald Winnicott, further nuances this understanding. Winnicott introduced the concept of the “good enough mother,” arguing that perfection in caregiving is neither attainable nor desirable. A mother’s occasional failures help a child’s psychological development, as well as their individuation, resilience and independence. The psychoanalytic tradition, from Winnicott’s “good enough mother” to Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic writings on abjection, describes the maternal body as both familiar and threatening, suggesting that the process of mothering involves a confrontation with boundary dissolution and identity fragmentation. From the standpoint of developmental psychology, becoming a mother involves a radical reorganization of identity.

Sudhir Kakar observes that Indian motherhood is shaped more by notions of duty and sacrifice than by emotional authenticity or self-reflection. The absence of legitimizing discourse around maternal mental health contributes to the silencing of ambivalence, guilt, and even distress in the maternal psyche. As theorists like Daniel Stern have proposed in *The Motherhood Constellation*, the transition to motherhood is not merely biological but deeply psychological, involving an internal restructuring of the self around the child’s needs. This reorientation is often accompanied by conflicting emotions—what psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker describes as “maternal ambivalence,” a psychological state where affection and frustration coexist. These emotional contradictions are not pathological; they are constitutive of maternal subjectivity. Recent studies have emphasized that such emotional contradictions are common among both biological and adoptive mothers, and acknowledging them can contribute to psychological resilience and healthier caregiving relationships (Chapman and Gubi; Raneberg and Maccallum). Rather than being pathologized, ambivalence can be seen as a reflection of the depth and complexity of maternal subjectivity. However, when societies deny women the right to acknowledge these feelings, they risk pushing mothers into cycles of guilt, shame, and emotional repression. In India, these psychological realities are often overlooked in favour of prescriptive cultural roles.

Feminist and Sociological Perspectives on Motherhood

Feminist theory provides a critical lens to examine how motherhood is constructed, institutionalized, and controlled. In her seminal work *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the institution of motherhood—a patriarchal tool—and the experience of mothering, which is emotionally rich but socially constrained. This distinction is crucial in understanding how women’s maternal identities are shaped not by desire alone but by historically entrenched power structures. Feminist psychoanalysts, such as Kakar, explore the emotional enmeshment within Indian mother-child relationships,

particularly the idealization of the mother-son bond. These dynamics complicate the psychological autonomy of women and often silence expressions of emotional fatigue or dissent. In the Indian sociocultural matrix, motherhood is not simply personal; it is also political. Uma Chakravarti and Nivedita Menon have shown how nationalist narratives instrumentalize the maternal figure as Bharat Mata, the sacred motherland, thus linking the female body with territory, purity, and moral rectitude. The mother, in such constructions, is expected to uphold cultural values, often at the cost of her desires, identity, or dissent. Sociological theories, such as Talcott Parsons's functionalist view of the family, place the mother at the centre of emotional and moral socialization, reinforcing her role as caregiver and emotional anchor. However, Marxist feminist critiques (Engels; Federici) argue that such roles sustain capitalist and patriarchal labour systems by rendering unpaid reproductive labour invisible. In India, the intersection of caste, religion, and gender further complicates maternal roles. Lower-caste and tribal mothers, for example, are rarely depicted in dominant narratives except as objects of suffering or sacrifice. Their ambivalence, fatigue, or rebellion is often erased. Dalit feminist scholars, such as Sharmila Rege and Baby Kamble, have foregrounded this erasure, insisting that maternal experience is not universal but deeply stratified.

Sociopolitical Constructions of Motherhood in India

In the Indian sociopolitical context, motherhood becomes more than an emotional role; it becomes a tool of ideological discipline. It has been systematically weaponized as a symbol of purity, sacrifice, national virtue, as a moral measuring stick, and as a convenient site of control over women's bodies and desires. Political narratives often invoke the maternal figure to galvanize emotions, justify protective patriarchy, or discipline dissent. Chakravarti notes how this image emerged during the colonial freedom struggle and continues to shape ideas of womanhood, linking female honour to national pride. Postindependence, state policies have further regulated motherhood through family planning, maternal health schemes, and population control campaigns—often coercively targeted at marginalized communities (Hodges). Motherhood is thus tied not only to personal identity but to national productivity and moral legitimacy. In the Indian context, particularly among mothers in Kolkata, such emotional tensions are further influenced by cultural expectations, family pressure, and changing roles (Chowdhury Lahiri), making ambivalence a deeply embedded and normalized emotional dynamic in the caregiving journey. Women who resist or complicate the image of the self-sacrificing mother—whether through abortion, ambivalence, career prioritization, or just not wanting to be a mother—are often judged as deviant. The burden of ideal motherhood, thus, extends beyond the domestic space and into the realm of the nation-state.

Indian Literature and Cinema: Shifting the Gaze

Literature and cinema offer crucial spaces to trace continuity and rupture in the representation of mothers. Traditional texts, such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, portray archetypal mothers—Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Gandhari—each marked by duty, grief, or manipulation. In contrast, modern Indian literature (in Bengali as well as in other Indian languages), such as Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver (Stanadayini)*, interrogates exploitative maternal labour and critiques how female bodies are used for both reproduction and ideological reproduction. Ismat Chughtai's *Mother of a Corpse* reveals the psychological detachment of a mother numbed by grief and societal neglect. In their novels, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai offer portrayals of mothers who are absent, distant, or emotionally conflicted, raising fundamental questions about whether motherhood must necessarily equate to nurturing or fulfilment. These literary explorations parallel clinical understandings of maternal ambivalence and affirm that such complexity is not pathological but deeply human. They also underscore that the emotional terrain of motherhood is shaped as much by internal psychology as by cultural, political, and social expectations. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande portrays a mother who oscillates between guilt and resentment, illustrating how internalized societal expectations can erode selfhood. Similarly, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* introduces an emotionally absent mother whose silence leaves lasting psychological scars on her children. In her poetry and autobiography *My Story*, Kamala Das deconstructs the idea of maternal fulfilment, foregrounding ambivalence, bodily discomfort, and unmet emotional needs.

Contemporary Indian cinema (in Bengali and other Indian languages) has begun to feature mothers who deviate from the ideal characters in many films, as they struggle with identity, ambivalence, and resistance. These narratives allow for a more nuanced understanding of motherhood as emotionally rich and politically fraught. Cinema, as a reflection of popular culture, has reinforced these constructions. The iconic 1957 film *Mother India* depicts the mother as a moral epicentre, upholding justice even at the cost of maternal instinct. While emotionally powerful, such portrayals homogenize motherhood and exclude narratives of ambivalence, rage, or resistance. In *Astitva*, the protagonist's affair and concealed maternity complicate notions of purity and maternal legitimacy. *English Vinglish* subtly explores emotional neglect and maternal invisibility, while *Monsoon Wedding* critiques maternal silence in the face of abuse. *Thappad* presents generational maternal disillusionment, questioning the societal valorization of maternal endurance. *Kapoor & Sons* portrays a mother grappling with favouritism and emotional tension, offering a realistic depiction of everyday maternal struggles. Modern Indian cinematic portrayals of motherhood are deeply rooted in introspection, sociopolitical

critique, and psychological realism. Bengali cinema, in particular, has long offered a more nuanced and layered portrayal of motherhood. For example, Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* shows a woman stepping into the workforce, thereby destabilizing traditional expectations of maternal roles. Subsequently, in Rituparno Ghosh's *Unishe April*, a daughter confronts her mother's emotional absence and professional ambitions, revealing the ambivalence, guilt, and generational tension embedded in Bengali reconstructions of motherhood (Majumdar). These films not only reflect Bengali cultural specificities but also foreground motherhood as a site of negotiation between care and selfhood.

Bengali narratives—shaped by the bhadramahila tradition, Renaissance humanism, and postcolonial reimaginings—portray motherhood not merely as a biological destiny but a psychological and social journey. This dynamic stands in contrast to broader Indian cinematic tropes where the mother's agency is often subsumed under her role as a caregiver (Chakrabarti; Chatterjee).

This article seeks to explore the emotional and psychological landscapes of maternal ambivalence as represented in Indian narratives. Drawing upon key psychological frameworks—including attachment theory, psychodynamic formulations of self and identity, and feminist critiques of motherhood—it argues that portrayals of conflicted or imperfect mothers challenge the hegemony of the saintly maternal ideal and offer a more authentic rendering of motherhood as a lived psychological process.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, focussing on how mothers in Kolkata make sense of their lived experiences of motherhood. The aim is to explore the emotional complexities, particularly maternal ambivalence, and understand how sociocultural, familial, and intergenerational contexts shape these experiences.

Semistructured, in-depth personal interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2025, allowing for flexible and context-sensitive discussions in Kolkata, India. Twenty mothers (both biological and adoptive) participated in this study after providing informed consent. As per the principles of qualitative research, diversity in the sample in terms of sociodemographic characteristics allows for richer data and broader and comprehensive insights (Allmark). Hence, the sample ensured diversity in sociodemographic profiles, including age (twenty-eight to forty-six years old), educational qualification (e.g., graduate and postgraduate), profession (e.g., homemaker, lawyer, school teacher, professor, bank employee, IT professional, and self-employed), duration of motherhood experience (i.e., two years and seven months to thirteen years), family type (e.g., nuclear, joint, and extended). However, the

diversification of the sample in terms of certain sociopsychological parameters, such as caste and economic status, was not done.

The present study employed the snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. As participants tend to refer individuals within their own socio-economic, cultural, and caste networks, this method often results in a degree of homogeneity (Atkinson and Flint). Consequently, the study was unable to reach participants from Dalit communities. Each interview lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes and was conducted in Bengali.

Interviews were conducted in person, depending on convenience and safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview included open-ended questions focussed on emotional experiences and internal conflicts associated with motherhood, feelings of guilt, anger, joy, detachment, or resentment, the role of the spouse and extended family in caregiving, and cultural and social expectations surrounding mothering and intergenerational perspectives on childcare. Participants were encouraged to narrate freely, and probing questions were used to deepen the understanding of emotionally nuanced responses. All interviews were audiorecorded with the participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The data were then thematically analyzed, using Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's thematic analysis method.

All participants received written and verbal information about the study. Consent was documented. Pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and research documentation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Since the topic involves emotional vulnerability, participants were cared for during or after the interview.

This article explores how they navigate their motherhood journey along with the feelings of maternal ambivalence. From the semistructured interviews, some significant narratives came out. The themes emerging from the observation reveal a rich tapestry of emotional complexity and sociocultural negotiation in the lived experiences of mothers in contemporary Kolkata, India. In this article, our discussion aims to situate these findings within broader psychological, feminist, and sociopolitical frameworks. By linking individual narratives with theoretical constructs, we tried to explore how maternal ambivalence is shaped, suppressed, or normalized within contemporary Indian society. This transition from descriptive to interpretative inquiry allows for a deeper engagement with existing literature, illuminating not just what mothers feel but why these feelings matter in the wider discourse on their identity.

Results and Discussion

Negotiating Maternal Ambivalence

The experience of maternal ambivalence highlights the emotional contradictions embedded in mothering. The interviews suggest that maternal ambivalence is not an anomaly but a common, though often unspoken, aspect of motherhood. Winnicott, a psychoanalytic theorist, asserts that ambivalence is an inherent part of maternal love, where the mother must hold conflicting feelings—such as affection, irritation, protectiveness, and resentment—without being overwhelmed by them. This study supports such a view. However, in the Indian context, mothers, especially Bengali ones, are socialized to conform to the ideal of the ever-giving, patient, and self-sacrificing mother. The internalization of this ideal generates significant emotional strain for contemporary mothers in urban areas of Kolkata.

Participants expressed a complex spectrum of emotions regarding motherhood. Some described overwhelming love and joy, while others were candid about feelings of exhaustion, irritability, and identity loss during the process of mothering. Several mothers described ambivalence not as a binary state but as a fluid experience, with love and resentment often occurring simultaneously. For instance, one working mother, aged thirty-four, stated: “Sometimes I just want to run away for a day. I love my child, but I don’t want to be around anyone. It’s confusing, and I feel guilty even thinking this.” Another participant, a forty-four-year-old adoptive mother, reported: “Sometimes I feel exhausted and long for a break from the daily responsibilities of childcare. But then I remind myself that I chose to adopt my child, fully aware of the challenges involved, and I end up dismissing my feelings and turning that frustration inwards, becoming angry at myself.”

Many participants, mainly working mothers, reported that they experience difficulty in their work-life balance, which is followed by negative emotions. A forty-year-old working mother expressed tension between professional identity and maternal duties: “I love my child, but I also love my job. Sometimes, I feel like I’m failing at both.” Such expressions resonate with Parker’s assertion that ambivalence is not a deviation but a central aspect of maternal subjectivity. Mothers who acknowledged these feelings also reported psychological distress when they failed to live up to societal or internalized ideals of perfect motherhood. These findings also resonate with feminist theories challenging the essentialist portrayal of motherhood. Rich distinguishes between the experience and the institution of motherhood, arguing that women’s lived realities are often in conflict with patriarchal representations. Similarly, poststructural feminists, like Kristeva, argue that maternal ambivalence is not pathological but a sign of subjectivity in flux—a psychic negotiation of the self concerning the other (e.g., the child, family, and society).

However, other participants, especially those with greater emotional literacy or supportive networks, expressed self-awareness and actively coped with these feelings. A thirty-nine-year-old participant remarked: “I know I do wrong sometimes, feel angry sometimes. But I don’t regret that. It’s part of the tough job of mothering.” These accounts illustrate varying levels of emotional integration and psychological adaptation, supporting Winnicott’s notion of the “good enough mother,” who accepts her limitations without collapsing under the pressure of perfection.

An important yet understated finding of this study is how mothers resist and redefine motherhood on their terms. Some consciously rejected the perfect mother image, acknowledging their struggles and setting boundaries. Others found empowerment in sharing their experiences with peer groups or through journaling.

Changing Role of Familial Support

A striking finding of this study was the universality of familial support. The evolving findings indicate that several participants reported positive emotional experiences about the support provided by their families. They are not criticized or judged for their actions. Rather cohesiveness, communication style, emotional connection, expressed emotion, and the overall family dynamics help the mothers of Kolkata to accept their maternal ambivalence and cope positively with the emotional turmoil.

Sociologically, the study reflects Parsons’s view of the family as a site of socialization and emotional regulation. While Parsons emphasized the mother’s expressive role, today’s mothers seem to be negotiating multiple expressive and instrumental roles, sometimes without institutional support. As a result, maternal ambivalence becomes a site of emotional labour, silently endured but rarely legitimized.

Some of the participants reported that their husbands shared parenting responsibilities along with their professional hazards. This finding challenges traditional notions of Indian patriarchal society, where caregiving is primarily the mother’s burden, even in a city like Kolkata. However, this support did not necessarily protect mothers from internal guilt or societal judgment. One adoptive mother of thirty-seven years said, “My husband does everything—from feeding to changing diapers—but people still look at me if something goes wrong. They never blame the father.” Another thirty-seven-year-old participant said, “Even when my husband helps, the judgment comes to me. If my child is sick, they ask what I did wrong.” This sentiment reflects Kristen Howerton’s sociological concept of the “default parent,” a gendered expectation deeply entrenched in patriarchal family systems. Even in households with equitable distribution of labour, the emotional and moral burden of parenting was disproportionately carried by mothers. The dynamic illustrates the

emotional labour disproportionately borne by mothers, despite help. Emotional buffering from partners did ease some psychological stress, but it did not completely negate societal pressure or pressures coming from the extended family, which underscores the gendered nature of accountability in parenting. Even in supportive households, societal expectations remain disproportionately skewed. This observation aligns with Rich's idea of the institution of motherhood as separate from the experience of mothering, where external systems continue to define normative behaviour, even when internal family dynamics evolve.

In Indian culture, family dynamics are shaped not only by visible markers, such as caste, religion, and regional culture, but also by deeply embedded sociocultural norms that govern interpersonal relationships, gender roles, and caregiving responsibilities. Although the structure may vary, from joint families to nuclear households, there remains a set of implicit and explicit rules dictating behaviour, decision-making, and the division of responsibilities within the household. These rules often stem from a collectivist ethos, where family unity, obligation, and interdependence are prioritized over individual autonomy (Chadda and Deb). This situation creates a distinctive familial framework that differs from many Western contexts, where family roles tend to be more egalitarian and individualistic in orientation (Verma and Saraswathi). Importantly, even when socioeconomic status, education, or urbanization reduces traditional differences, Indian families often maintain culturally specific patterns of authority, caregiving expectations, and conflict resolution strategies, reflecting their unique sociohistorical evolution (Seymour). In collectivist societies, such as India, kinship networks extend beyond the nuclear family to include relatives and neighbours, who often take on quasifamilial roles. These extended networks provide emotional, practical, and even financial support during significant life events. In such cultural contexts, the boundaries between family and community are fluid, and neighbours may participate in childrearing, share household responsibilities, or act as confidants in times of stress. (Triandis; Sinha and Verma). In India, including Kolkata, the social expectation that caregiving is a collective duty often reduces the mother's isolation but can also lead to heightened scrutiny and reinforcement of traditional gender norms. Thus, extended family and community involvement provide crucial support while regulating maternal roles.

While family support (especially from spouses) was a protective factor, it did not shield mothers from the broader societal scrutiny. Participants highlighted how social media, neighbourhood gossip, and even casual comments from relatives could amplify feelings of inadequacy. This aligns with Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels's critique of the "new momism," which portrays ideal motherhood as an all-consuming and joyful task, leaving little

room for doubt, fatigue, or failure. At the same time, some mothers expressed gratitude and pride in their roles, embracing ambivalence as part of a fuller, more authentic experience. This attitude reflects a shift from idealized to individualized motherhood—a shift that is emerging slowly in urban India.

Social Expectations and Emotional Guilt

Most participants expressed a profound sense of social surveillance. Some of them feared being perceived as cold or negligent for expressing exhaustion or frustration, reflecting the enduring myth of the selfless, ever-giving mother. Some of them experienced guilt regarding their ambivalence. Even when mothers intellectually accepted their negative feelings, they struggled with the emotional turmoil of societal disapproval. Cultural narratives equating motherhood with divine selflessness amplify these feelings of inadequacy. Several mothers recalled unsolicited advice from neighbours, relatives, and even coworkers about how to “balance everything with a smile.” One working mother, aged thirty, said: “Many people from my surroundings said, ‘Oh, you’re so lucky. You have helping hands. Why are you tired?’—as if I don’t have a right to feel anything but happiness.” Another twenty-eight-year-old participant said, “If I say I’m tired, people say I’m complaining. If I say I miss my old life, they say I’m selfish.” These comments reflect internalized social norms, echoing Rich’s differentiation between motherhood as experience and as an institution. Even the progressive mothers of Kolkata felt bound by cultural expectations of perfection. This emotional pressure was compounded by the ideal of the Indian mother as all-sacrificing, which is still dominant in public imagination and cinematic portrayals. Even progressive films, while offering nuanced representations (e.g., *English Vinglish* and *Mom*), often circle back to morally redemptive resolutions, reinforcing that ambivalence must be transformed into selfless action.

Psychologically, this dynamic creates a splitting of the self—a refusal of anger, fatigue, or personal need, leading to chronic stress or depressive symptoms (Kristeva). Her conceptualization of motherhood as a space of identity dissolution and regeneration is particularly relevant. Many participants described motherhood as both a transformative and destabilizing experience. The psychological demand of constantly being “on call,” emotionally and physically, can exhaust the mother’s sense of autonomy and self. Several participants also noted how social media amplifies these pressures. The curated portrayals of happy mothers and perfect families further alienate those who struggle. Some mothers withdrew from these platforms as an act of resistance. In this regard, ambivalence becomes not only an emotional phenomenon but also a sociopolitical effect, regulated through patriarchal morality.

Feminist scholars, such as Arlie Hochschild, have emphasized the concept of emotional labour: the management of one’s emotions to meet societal

expectations. Mothers, especially those engaged in paid work, perform dual emotional labour in their profession and home. This dual role becomes even more complex in Indian families, where caregiving is still seen as primarily a maternal duty.

Nancy Chodorow's influential theory of the reproduction of mothering suggests that maternal roles are not only inherited through early relational experiences but are also culturally reinforced and perpetuated across generations. However, modern mothers, particularly those in urban settings with access to education and resources, are beginning to break this cycle by asserting new norms. By voicing their ambivalence, participants challenged the stigma associated with it. Their narratives serve as acts of resistance—against idealization, against silence, and against the moral policing that defines traditional motherhood.

This study reinforces how motherhood intersects with the mothers' sociocultural background, family structure, and employment status. Working mothers faced distinct challenges, including feeling guilty over spending a limited time with their children and societal judgment. Nonworking mothers, meanwhile, struggled with identity erosion and invisibility. In both cases, emotional labour was central to their daily lives. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw) also helps us understand how multiple axes of identity (e.g., gender, sociocultural background, marital status, and employment) interact to shape maternal experiences.

Intergenerational Conflict

A particularly salient theme was intergenerational conflict, reported by nearly all participants. Participants frequently spoke of disagreements with their parents or parents-in-law over parenting styles, dietary choices, discipline, and screen time. The older generation often disapproved of modern parenting methods, creating tension. A forty-one-year-old participant, an adoptee mother, shared: "My mother thinks I should quit my job and be with my child full-time. She did that. But I can't. I love my work." Such tensions reflect a clash of values between traditional and contemporary models of motherhood. One of the participants reported: "My mother thinks I spoil my child because I don't scold him. She says, 'In our time, we feared our parents.'" Another participant expressed that her parents would become furious if their granddaughter were scolded. For the older generation, maternal identity is deeply embedded in sacrifice and domestic centrality. These intergenerational conflicts highlight evolving definitions of parenting. Younger mothers often emphasized emotional attunement, consent, and positive reinforcement, whereas the older generation upheld discipline and obedience as central to parenting. This theme also points to a broader shift, with the younger generations negotiating autonomy within traditional structures. The friction

between progressive and traditional ideologies reflects not only differing parenting styles but also broader sociocultural transitions in contemporary society. Today's mothers often strive to balance career, autonomy, and caregiving—a dynamic frequently misunderstood or dismissed by elders. Such conflicts highlight a generational divide in values and emotional literacy. Participants navigated this by selectively asserting autonomy while maintaining familial harmony. This theme reflects broader societal shifts in parenting ideologies and the negotiation of traditional authority structures. This intergenerational dissonance leads to emotional strain, especially when mothers feel they must constantly defend their parenting choices, even within the family. The conflict also reinforces internal ambivalence, trying to be a modern, empowered mother while carrying the emotional residue of traditional expectations. From a psychological lens, these intergenerational conflicts point to unresolved intergenerational transmission of maternal ideals, wherein women are both inheritors and challengers of the maternal scripts they were raised with (Stern).

Intergenerational tensions over parenting practices were a recurring theme in this study. These conflicts often centred on discipline, emotional expression, and the balance of authority. Hochschild and historian Stephanie Coontz have both written about how parenting norms are historically and culturally constructed. As parenting practices evolve in response to psychological insights and child development research, older family members may feel displaced or undermined, leading to friction. The findings suggest that these intergenerational dynamics are not merely personal disagreements but reflect broader shifts in family ideology and generational identity. Mothers often find themselves mediating between these competing paradigms, adding another layer to their emotional burden.

This study's findings suggest that maternal ambivalence in contemporary Kolkata is not only a psychological state but a socially mediated experience, shaped by cultural scripts, gendered expectations, as well as familial structures, gender expectations, intergenerational values, and institutional norms. Mothers oscillate between emotional authenticity and normative compliance.

Conclusion

This study explores maternal ambivalence in the context of urban motherhood (i.e., educated and upper-caste mothers with a middle socioeconomic status), shedding light on the psychological, social, and cultural complexities of being a mother in a rapidly changing society. Through in-depth interviews with twenty mothers in Kolkata, this research offers an intimate and multifaceted view of how maternal identity is negotiated, contested, and lived.

Key findings include the normalization of ambivalent emotions, the role of

spouses and families, the burden of social expectations, and the friction caused by intergenerational parenting ideologies. These findings support the assertion that maternal ambivalence is not a sign of dysfunction but a natural response to the conflicting demands of motherhood.

From a psychological standpoint, the study reaffirms that acknowledging ambivalence is crucial for maternal mental health. Denying or suppressing these feelings leads to internalized guilt, self-criticism, and emotional exhaustion. Creating spaces for mothers to share and validate their feelings—whether through therapy, community forums, or popular media—is essential.

Feminist and sociological perspectives further emphasize the structural and cultural dimensions of motherhood. The enduring myth of the saintly mother, reinforced by traditional values and modern media, continues to shape women's experiences in profound ways. However, the study also finds signs of transformation, with mothers actively negotiating their roles and seeking to redefine what it means to be a good mother.

This research's implications are both academic and practical. For psychologists and mental health professionals, these implications call for more culturally nuanced approaches to maternal care. Interventions must move away from pathologizing ambivalent feelings and instead validate them as part of the normal spectrum of maternal experience—particularly within the Indian cultural context, where expressions of dissatisfaction, fatigue, or resentment may be silenced by the pressure to embody the selfless mother ideal.

For policymakers, the research underscores the urgency of developing family-friendly policies that actively integrate maternal mental health as a core component of child and family welfare programs. This may include the creation of accessible mental health support systems at the community level, parental leave policies that consider the needs of both mothers and fathers, and public health campaigns that challenge gendered assumptions about caregiving.

Importantly, educational programs should address rigid gender role expectations in parenting, empowering fathers to participate as equal caregivers and thereby easing the emotional and practical load traditionally placed on mothers. In doing so, the broader sociocultural environment can transform into a supportive one.

Future work should expand this inquiry to rural and marginalized (Dalit) communities, where the intersection of caste, class, and access to care might reveal different dimensions of ambivalence. Moreover, there is a need for public mental health frameworks that allow mothers to voice contradictory feelings without fear of moral judgment.

In closing, this study honours the voices of mothers who, despite facing immense pressures, choose to speak their truths. Their narratives reflect not

weakness but the strength to hold love and frustration in the same breath and the courage to question inherited ideals. In doing so, these mothers not only reclaim their emotional authenticity but also pave the way for a more inclusive, compassionate, and realistic understanding of motherhood in India.

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