

The Messy *Maa*: Exploring A Different Maternal Archetype in Shuchi Talati's *Girls Will Be Girls*

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Abstract

The maternal figure in Shuchi Talati's *Girls Will Be Girls* is awkward, messy and above all, jealous of her daughter's more liberal coming-of-age. Her portrayal challenges the conventions of motherhood and thereby shows a different aspect of mothering rarely seen on screen. Through a feminist lens, this research closely examines this complex 'maa,' and argues that, though the film's central focus is on the sexual coming of age of its adolescent main character Mira, it is her mother's unhinged jealousy as she vacillates from being an overprotective mother to a genial confidante, who holds the narrative tension of the film. This article argues that this mother's need to share and even usurp the spotlight from her daughter stems from the mother's repression since she grew up and still exists under the vigilance and strictures of a patriarchal society that leaves her no option but to live vicariously through her daughter. This article also examines the mother as a lost girl whose nostalgia for her past and imagined future are reawakened in observing her daughter go through the rigours of first love. It also explores ways in which the mother's jealousy can be understood, considering the sacrifices women make of themselves in their duty of nurturing their household, which often leads to self-neglect and the abandonment of their own dreams.

Keywords : Maternal; Patriarchy; Messiness; Archetype; Mothers

Thoughtful and critical representation of motherhood on screen, as mentioned by E. Ann Kaplan in her book *Motherhood and Representation*, has been underemphasized, such that the image of 'the mother' appears as "...a figure in the design, out-of-focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child (male or female) or in that of an adult (male or female) concerned to attribute all ills to the mother" (14). In past films, such as *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Bambi* (1942), mothers are

viewed as mere accessories to the plot, bound by the duties of their office, ever in service of the other. Bollywood has seen its share of mother-as-primary-caregiver, a figure lacking in agency and subsumed in her role and the confines of a patriarchal environment that disembodied and negated her private experiences. In their reading of the mother figure in multiple Bollywood films, Dey and Tripathi pinpoint, “The Indian cinematic screen has adroitly reflected the prevailing ideologies concerning the experience of motherhood that tends to disregard a woman’s subjective presence and conventionally perceives her as a sacred and desexualized body” (642). This desexualisation of mothers negates and erases their sexual existence and autonomy and pours them into the roles where they are bound to behave soberly.

In *Girls Will Be Girls* (2024), Shuchi Talati takes these concerns and limitations into account and creates a maternal character who defies familiar tropes, thereby presenting a mother who is alive and brimming with individuality, even daring to be messy. ‘Messiness,’ in the context of this article, refers to that singularly, all-encompassing trait of the maternal figure in the film who refuses to stay within the constricted margins of motherhood. This mother sidesteps the lines of maternal propriety, upending the rules and conventions of the world of this story and fills in the much-needed vacuum for a different maternal figure who is not merely a poster for level-headedness and wisdom, but a human being full of complexities that are somewhat unsettling and antithetical to all that has been known for good maternal behavior.

Motherhood as an institution is loaded with an expected code of behaviour which includes self-sacrifice, erasure, hyper-alertness of offspring(s), and propriety. Cinematic representations of motherhood have shaped these expectations, and maternal depictions often fall into the dichotomy of screening mothers through the limited lens of good or bad mothering, especially in cultures where the patriarchal backdrop of society colours female and maternal experiences as well as existence. Hence, in this age of cinema, maternal representation on screen is bound to perform two duties: fight to subvert suppressive societal norms or fall into the trope of representation that perpetuates harmful beliefs about mothers. For decades, films such as *Astitva* (2000) and *Parched* (2015) have become a perfect meeting point for feminist theories and motherhood studies in analyzing these representations, thereby

challenging gender roles, mother-child relations and unrealistic demands on mothers.

In her interview with *Sundance*, in response to the question of her motivation to make *Girls Will Be Girls*, Talati says, “The film was inspired by my girlfriends and their mothers in India. I knew so many fierce and funny women who managed to subvert and circumvent social mores, but I didn’t ever see them on screen” (Talati). As a female director, she reduces the dearth of women in Bollywood, going against the grain. The text she creates, and the maternal archetype in the film supplies Bollywood with a mother whose subversion is subtle yet evocative, especially against the backdrop of a world where shame surrounds the subject of sexuality and the demands of motherhood are high.

It is this unexplored canvas for a fresh representation of motherhood in Bollywood films that Talati creates the character of *maa*, Anila. We are introduced to Anila (Kani Kusruti) in the film through a side angle, only a slice of her back is visible as she occupies offscreen space, handing out treats to students and teachers while they walk past in her daughter’s boarding school. She is the only parent present, jettisoning the rules of this world by wrangling herself into her daughter’s space. Her framing at the edge of the screen highlights her outsider status, her refusal to honour her daughter’s boundaries, which is a trait that persists throughout the duration of the story. Anila’s constant trespassing in seemingly harmless ways, her refusal of propriety, can be best described as messy, and in her messiness, this portrayal of *maa* presents a different maternal archetype in Bollywood, nuanced yet powerful in her portrayal, as she resists the encoded demands of motherhood within a strict patriarchal environment.

Her daughter, Mira (Preeti Panigrahi), the film’s central character, is a high-performing student, recently made the first female Head Prefect; Mira grapples with her sexual awakening when she falls in love with a new boy, Sri (Kesav Binoy Kiron) in the hyper-vigilant environment of this strict boarding school located in the Himalayas where girls are policed and warned off boys. However, Mira’s coming of age faces major stumbling blocks—Anila’s jealousy and her need to share and usurp Mira’s spotlight. The film received high acclaim

and, amongst its numerous accolades, won the World Cinema Dramatic Audience Prize at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival.

Anila's subversion and circumvention can be seen first with her wardrobe. Unlike the other women in the film, Anila mostly wears western outfits just like Mira and the younger characters, signifying her bent towards her youthful side and her reluctance to accept her mother role. Her costumes stand in contrast to those of the other maternal figure in the film, Ms Bansal (Devika Shahani), the head teacher of the boarding school, who shepherds the girls and insists on rules of propriety. In the aforementioned scene, when Anila arrives unannounced at the boarding school, Ms Bansal greets and receives a treat from her. One can see the marked difference in their choice of clothing. While Ms Bansal dons a *sari* that drapes her body from neck to toe, Anila wears a frill blouse with ruffles on the sleeves, hinting towards her inclination towards youthful appearance and her desire to remain in her girlhood.

The film borrows its title from the catchphrase, 'Boys will be boys,' which panders to the societal allowance given to men to run free, to not change, making allowances for behaviour that inherently defines boyhood and manhood. Stephen M. Kaplan notes that the term "encapsulates most of what is wrong with patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, victimisation of females, and the gender binary, all of which play crucial roles in the continued subjugation and oppression of females in our society" (205). Turning this phrase on its head, Talati seems to ask, if boys are allowed to be without consequences, what would it mean for girls to be girls? Girls are stereotypically known to be effusive, vain, enchanted by teenage crushes, but what if they retained their state of girlhood even as they left their youth? When girls become mothers and society presents them a fresh script that demands the abandonment of girlhood and its giddiness, there must still exist for these former-girls an aspect of them that does not entirely shed the skin, attitudes, and longing of their younger selves. This disparity in male/fatherly versus female/maternal expectations is highlighted in the film through the contrast of Mira's father, Hardik (Jatin Gulati), and Anila's character. Hardik embodies the definition of a boy being a boy. He makes a few appearances, rarely presents at home due to business trips and only takes up the financial responsibility of the home. He leaves the emotional

labour of child rearing to Anila. Ironically, Mira adores him and wants to be like him, in contrast to her feelings towards Anila.

In a similar vein, Ramita Jhamtani observes that even though there has been a marked increase in the representations of mothers, yet “regardless of characterization, plot, story or genre, and no matter how rebellious, liberated, or modern they are presented, Bollywood mothers are imbued with patriarchal values that implicitly place unrealistic expectations on motherhood and, consequently on the women in Indian societies” (340). Also, Gangwar and Mishra observed this in their study, “Portrayal of Women in Highest Grossing Indian Films in 2022”:

Though the portrayal of women in the films has changed significantly but not to the point where we may confidently say that it is actually progressive in terms of how women are represented in the movies. The nature of portrayal of women is still extremely regressive in nature. Now it can be debated that since cinema is actually a mirror to the society it is created into, but it still has a responsibility to uplift the culture it is a part of rather than reinforcing the same old objectification and insignificant portrayal of women in films just to woo the audience. (7)

Some critics, such as Benazir Manzar and Aravind Aju, are slightly more optimistic. In “(Re)Thinking Women in Cinema: The Changing Narrative Structure in Bollywood,” they critically examine the evolution of gender portrayal in Bollywood films and how gender intersects with nationality, ethnicity, and caste. They observe that there have been more graphic and sympathetic depictions of premarital sex, adultery, and pregnancy outside of marriage. However, they notice that in films, where mothers are taking ground, even within the demanding margins of their familial roles or the strict expectations of patriarchy, the backdrop of patriarchy looms large. They believe more room exists to create a richer nuance for women in Bollywood films.

Unlike Ms Bansal, who polices the girl's looks, Anila buys short skirts for her daughter. In the scene at the denim shop, Anila stands behind Mira as she checks out a new skirt Anila had picked out for her. Together, they regard

Mira's body in the skirt, and Mira worries that the skirt is too short. But Anila says, "No, it's not." (*Girls* 00:42:48-52). In her approval of this clothing item for her daughter, Anila encourages her daughter to exist outside the line of propriety, handing her a ticket to subversion. Through the buying of the skirt, she thrusts Mira into the world of unrestricted girlhood, endorsing her awakening.

Whereas Ms Bansal, this other mother-figure, is stern in her demands for propriety. In the skirt-measurement scene, Ms Bansal orders an offending student to pull a chair and instructs her to stand on it. She points at the length of the girl's skirt, grazing her knees and revealing her thighs. She says, "This is what it looks like when you climb stairs." In her concern for their sartorial choice, especially in her bid to maintain order and protect the girls from notorious boys who take pictures of girls' underskirts (as it later occurs in the film), Ms Basal presents herself as a mother-figure who upholds patriarchal structures; therefore, becoming a patriarchal mother.

Andrea O'Riley defines patriarchal motherhood as motherhood which "assumes (and expects) that all women want to be mothers (essentialisation), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalisation), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization)" (65). Outwardly, Anila seems trapped in the roles of patriarchal motherhood, but throughout the story, her conduct reveals she is non-patriarchal. As a former student of Mira's boarding school, she, too, must have been drilled to obey the codes of propriety, given that the rules were a lot more strident in her days. Anila is seen mostly at home, and even in the few scenes she appears outside her home, she is running errands in the service of her daughter and the entire household. She waxes Mira's legs, serves her food, and watches over her growing daughter. One would think she exists as an accessory to her daughter, especially when she says: "My daughter is my priority." (*Girls*, 00:21:23) Notwithstanding, her doting attention to Mira is not without a caveat. She hopes that her duties will entice Mira to invite her to have a front seat to witness Mira's girlhood. Though her hands are tied by patriarchy, by offering her daughter a free rein, such as the purchase of the short skirt, she makes ground for her vicarious resistance. But Mira is at that phase of teenagehood where her mother's continual doting is seen as pestilential. She shuts Anila out,

unable to stand her mother. This revulsion Mira feels is seen in the mirror/dance scene; Mira regards her teenage self before a mirror. She lifts her arms and runs her fingers through the hair underneath; she pomades her body and arranges her hair, still regarding herself with deep interest. In this self-adoration, Mira contends with her budding body, wondering at its changes. With silent excitement, she anticipates the power her youthful body holds. A song comes up on the stereo, and Mira begins to dance sensuously to the beat. Anila walks into the room, smiles at her daughter and turns up the stereo. She moves towards Mira, urging her to dance along, an awkward attempt to share in her daughter's girlhood. Mira turns her back at the invitation and stops dancing, leaving Anila embarrassed and frustrated. In her refusal to dance with her mother, Mira shuts her mother out of her joyful girlhood, refusing the older woman a gate pass, as if expressing her belief that this youthful expression of a dancing lithe body belongs only to girls her age and not her mother. It is this isolation that evokes Anila's jealousy. This exiling of a mother from her daughter's coming-of-age stirs jealousy in Anila, and she is bent on reclaiming her girlhood by any means necessary, even if it means crossing the boundary and behaving unseeingly.

Anila often finds it hard to contain her jealousy. In the scene, when Mira returns home wearing the skirt her *maa* bought her, Anila snaps: "Is that the only skirt you have?" (*Girls* 01:05:38). In her oscillation between approval and disapproval, Anila's jealousy bubbles forth, exciting an envy she feels towards her daughter's girlhood. Despite this, she remains persistent in partaking in it. Unlike Ms Bansal, who forbids girls from speaking to boys unnecessarily, Anila does a more unconventional thing by asking Mira to bring her boyfriend home. It is in this scene that Anila's messiness becomes more apparent. When Sri arrives at Anila and Mira's home, Anila approaches the young boy, a quizzical look on her face as if to determine if the young boy represents danger or safety to her daughter. Sri and Anila are framed standing opposite each other as they regard each other. Mira stands offscreen, blurred by the camera as it focuses on the two characters—mother and Sri—in a moment of role reversal when the girl is cast as a mere spectator in this meeting. When Sri flashes a winsome smile and hands Anila a bunch of stunted, sparse flowers, his boyish charms immediately disarm Anila's aloofness, and a slight diffidence creeps into her face. In this meeting, that slight moment when boyish

charm meets elderly diffidence, a window opens for Anila to explore her lost girlhood through Sri.

As Anila's rapport with Sri grows, Mira becomes a third wheel to this burgeoning friendship and is often framed, standing by the margins as her mother and boyfriend get acquainted. In the second dance scene, Mira starts the music on the stereo and moves her body, inviting Sri to join her. In their dance, the teenagers show their unbridled affection for each other, glorying in their young love. Anila walks in and observes them, her face a mix of jealousy and longing, and soon she dances with them. Mira stumbles through her moves as she waltzes with Sri, and Anila ostensibly steps in to correct the dance, and soon, she is waltzing with Sri, while Mira looks on incredulously. By usurping Mira's space on the dance floor, Anila regains her footing and vengeance on Mira, claiming more ground for her own emancipation at the expense of her daughter's joy.

More occasions arise for *maa's* messiness and her usurping of the spotlight, but the key scene that crowns her impropriety is the bedroom scene at Sri's birthday. When she suspects that the teenage lovers want to spend the night alone, Anila's jealousy, disguised as hypervigilance, sets in, and she commands Sri to sleep on the bed with her instead. In the middle of the night, when Mira comes to wake them up, the camera frames Anila's body in the background as she watches Sri's body rise and fall in sleep. Anila's obscured body in bed lies in the background as she runs her hands through Sri's head, a touch at once maternal and sensual. There is a space in the bed between their bodies to show that there is no sexual intimacy between Anila and Sri. Yet, the very act of sharing the bed suggests a weird closeness, a messiness, all in Anila's bid to sustain her upper hand in this silent duel with her daughter. In her unusual rapport with Sri, which culminates in this bedroom scene, Anila fully becomes a girl again and in taking away her daughter's thrill of spending the night with her boyfriend. Anila's youthful awakening reaches a crescendo, reclaiming the days when her own sexual evolution was stifled by the stridency of the world of her girlhood.

This messy *maa* still exists within the strict boundaries of patriarchy, and her resistance is not as loud as one would have expected. But there is power

in the fact that feminism and the portrayal of women are by no means unilateral. The resistance to define “feminism in any unitary sense” is the focus of Sangita Gopal’s argument and research in *Feminism and the Big Picture: Conversations*. She questions the relevance of feminism in offering theoretical viewpoints in analyzing today’s media and what new grounds the past feminist researchers helped in unravelling in today’s media (135). Kaplan also notes that for global films tackling feminist subjects, “multicultural film feminists . . . are developing numerous other approaches, depending on local conditions and needs” (1236).

Girls Will Be Girls as a text offers one more answer to the quest for the expansion of maternal portrayal in Bollywood. The film resists the temptation to present an utterly feminist mother who does not exist against the backdrop of patriarchy. Though such screenings are crucial, Talati gleans from Bollywood feminist films like *Mary Kom* (2014), where a female boxer returns to the ring after marriage and childbirth to claim her championship, which stages their maternal figures against the backdrop of patriarchy. These screenings are more nuanced and relatable to audiences in that they see comparable and recognisable characters who are going through familiar dilemmas. The shift in how Indian women are portrayed in film indicates an evolution in their place in society, and a subtle, nuanced, and multi-dimensional approach to representation remains paramount. Films where maternal characters loudly resist are often far removed from the realities of viewers and merely serve as escapism. Films such as these provide an avenue to resist from the margins. Through her messiness, Anila finds grounds for resistance, thereby presenting the audience a different maternal archetype, a non-patriarchal mother who brings an honest, human and nuanced interpretation of motherhood on screen. Anila’s refusal to stifle her girlish desires and make maternal sacrifices makes her personhood at once messy and feminist. It corrects the impression that motherhood is solely the venue for self-erasure, but is rather a complex role that reveals that even the mother confined by the strictures of patriarchy has within her a desire for girlhood not yet erased by societal expectations. Her messiness is an act of rebellion, a leaning towards self-definition and an abandonment of a worn script that ensures or prescribes order, neatness and

sobriety in the conduct of mothers. Talati, therefore, adds to the numerous filmmakers correcting the scripts that strip mothers in patriarchal societies of personal belongings outside of tending to their families. This different maternal archetype of the messy *maa*, who is familiar but subverts the expectations of her office and many times sabotages boundaries, is an ode to lost girlhood.

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