INTRODUCTION

Motherhood has often been perceived as a biological instinctive desire in women to give birth to, and nurture children. This dissertation proposes that motherhood is not instinctive, but rather constructed and ideologically imposed upon women by patriarchal society. One of the primary and most influential means of this construction is through the use of culture, which plays a significant role in shaping the personalities of individuals by offering role models.

As the title suggests, the objective of this work is to ‘deconstruct’ the ideology of motherhood in the Indian context. At the outset, it would be pertinent to define the term ‘deconstruction’ as it has been used in this work since the term has been interpreted differently by various critics. As mentioned earlier, this work argues that motherhood has been deliberately projected and ‘constructed’ as being inherently desirable to women. This ‘construction’ takes place when cultural narratives provide not only a plethora of role models who embody the qualities that a woman ought and ought not to possess; but also an entire value system which urges women to embark upon motherhood as their primary function in society. Through an analysis of cultural narratives, this work attempts to explain how this ‘construction’ has taken place. In so doing, it becomes necessary to ‘break down’ a text to ascertain the message being communicated to the consumer of the cultural text. This act of deciphering the message (which is sometimes direct, but more often subtle and hidden), has been referred to as ‘deconstruction’ in the context of this work.

This work undertakes an analysis of the cultural ‘narratives’ and therefore concentrates on the ‘content’ of the narratives rather than the ‘style’. Hence, while examining films, the thrust is not on cinematic technique or film theory. This work focuses more on ‘what’ is being said rather than ‘how’ it is being said.

The first chapter explores how motherhood has been approached from various theoretical perspectives such as the theory of Bio-determinism, the Anthropological, Marxist and Socio-psychological perspectives. It then illustrates how motherhood is
not biologically determined. Instead, cultural narratives are used by patriarchy to propagate and impose its ideology upon women through the glorification of the role of motherhood. It scrutinizes the significant role played by media in shaping the personalities of women who internalize the sex-role stereotypes reflected in media.

Chapter Two suggests that although motherhood is designated as a woman’s primary function and is glorified by patriarchal society, it is a function that is not chosen by her, but rather imposed upon her. She has limited choice in accepting this function, for if she deviates from the role assigned to her, she will be deprived of social acceptance. It deals with issues like voluntary childlessness, the right to birth control and abortion. It further examines the problems of unwanted children who are born out of the wedlock, and also dwells upon certain groups of women who are denied the right to give birth because of their sexual preferences, physical disabilities or their chosen professions.

The third chapter investigates what happens to women when the ‘choice’ to become mothers is denied to them biologically, and they are unable to conceive. The chapter argues that the concept of infertility as a curse is a deliberate ideological socio-cultural construction. It explores the various physical, social, psychological and cultural consequences that infertility entails through an analysis of literary and cinematic texts. Moreover, it also looks at the various options that infertile couples exercise in order to have a child, as depicted in literature and cinema.

Chapter Four examines the concept of the ideal mother who supposedly embodies the qualities of selflessness and unconditional love towards her children. Contrasted with the ideal mother is the ‘working mother’ who deviates from the notion of the perfect mother by virtue of aspiring towards a career which supposedly leads her to ‘neglect’ her children. The ideal mother is also juxtaposed with the ‘unmotherly mother’ who exhibits qualities that are far removed from the maternal values expected of a mother. Possessing shades of grey is the mother who experiences ambivalent feelings towards
her children. This leads to feelings of guilt since she cannot live up to the image of the idealized mother whom she is expected to emulate.

The last chapter analyses texts which subvert the patriarchal image of the ideal mother hitherto discussed. Some of these texts question and challenge the patriarchal system. Others empower women characters with the right to make their own choices that would otherwise be denied to them by patriarchy. This includes the right to abortion, the right to embrace motherhood within or outside the wedlock, and also the right to reject motherhood. The last section in this chapter offers alternate family systems where the responsibility of the child is not necessarily imposed on women alone, but is undertaken by significant others such as the father and adoptive parent.

The work finally considers that if motherhood has been socially ‘constructed’ as the ultimate function of women, how can it be ‘reconstructed’ by society so as to ensure that it becomes a free choice and not a social obligation; and examines the role can literature and media play in making this metamorphosis possible.