CHAPTER ONE
MOTHERHOOD – BIOLOGICALLY DETERMINED
OR CULTURALLY CONSTRUCTED?

This chapter attempts to examine how motherhood, which has commonly been perceived as being a biologically determined role for women, can be interpreted as being culturally constructed. It argues, to borrow Simone de Beauvoir’s statement, that one is not ‘born’ a mother, possessing an innate maternal instinct, but rather ‘becomes’ a mother – that is, the ideology of motherhood is imposed upon women by patriarchal society which projects motherhood as a woman’s primary function in life. It glorifies and exalts motherhood by placing the mother on a pedestal, and thereby justifies the greater emphasis on the woman’s role in nurturing the child as compared to the inputs given by the father.

The denotative meaning of the word ‘mother’ as offered by the Webster’s Student Dictionary (2001) is “a woman who has borne a child”, and that of a ‘father’ is “a man who has begotten a child”. The connotative meaning of both words however clearly implies a distinct difference between the role of mother and father in the upbringing of a child. As Adrienne Rich suggests in Of Woman Born (1977), to father a child implies merely to provide the sperm, which fertilizes the ovum. However to ‘mother’ a child “implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years” (12). Motherhood thus includes and yet goes beyond the stage of conception. It implies in addition the duty of child bearing as well as child rearing, which, in the human species, is an extremely long period. It further implies that there is a considerable social and cultural distinction between the role of ‘mothering’ and ‘fathering’.

Moreover, a woman who is infertile and unable to fulfill the role of mothering prescribed for her is regarded as an incomplete woman, and is subject to tremendous social ostracism and pressurized to seek different treatments in order to produce children. Similarly, a woman who chooses to remain childless attracts social
disapproval and condemnation. In many cases, the reproductive rights of a woman are controlled by patriarchal society which decides who can and cannot be a mother; and further when, and to which children a woman may give birth. The qualities that a mother must possess are also defined for her, and any attempt to deviate from the norm is criticized in patriarchal society.

At the outset, it would be pertinent to define patriarchy which is a complex term that is often used indiscriminately. Undoubtedly, the term has been defined differently depending on the epoch and location in which it has been used, and cannot be perceived as a universal phenomenon. Kumkum Sangari in *Politics of the Possible* (1999) uses the word in the plural and defines patriarchies as “systems of subordinating women” which supposedly “function simultaneously through coercion or the threat and the practice of violence, through making a wide social consensus drawn from and dispersed over many areas of social life and through obtaining in various ways, different degrees of consent from women” (371). Adrienne Rich (1977) argues that “Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (57).

An attempt to define patriarchy has also been made by Jasbir Jain in *Women in Patriarchy – Cross Cultural Readings* (2005). Jain claims that patriarchy stands for power and authority. She states that it oppresses not only women, but all marginalized groups, irrespective of their gender – and extends to all fields of life, be it philosophy, law, government, society, and also significantly, the family. “The roots of patriarchy lie in the myths of creation and the religious worlds based on them. The initial relationship between the creator and the created world has located itself in the power of man and the subordination of woman. This intent has been camouflaged by other myths – myths of protection, of punishment for transgression, of the power of women, their indispensability and the glory of motherhood” (13). As Jain rightly
points out, “Degrees of oppression may differ, kinds may also differ subject to the difference in other factors: but gender discrimination persists in almost all societies” (15). Kate Millett also agrees with the contention that patriarchy is a universal “mode of power relationships” and domination, and claims that it is pervasive and “penetrates class divisions, different societies and different historical epochs”. (Cited in Bhagwat 2004 182).

For the purpose of this work, patriarchy may be defined as a form of male domination through a systematic means of control, which is accepted by women and thus rendered invisible; and has therefore resulted in the oppression of women over centuries in different parts of the world. This brings us to another complex problem – the assumption of the homogeneity of women which has often been a matter of debate and has come under severe criticism, especially by Black feminists, post colonial critics and lesbians. White heterosexual feminists have been attacked for assuming that women across the globe share the same problems as they do, irrespective of race, class, religion, nationality and sexual preference. While it is true that the nature of oppression of women differs based on the factors mentioned above, the fact remains – to go back to Jasbir Jain’s quote once again – that gender discrimination remains a universal fact across cultures. Hence, while this work acknowledges that historical specificity plays an important role in determining the oppression of women, it categorises women as a ‘group’ based on their shared subordinate status in patriarchy, and examines how the experience of motherhood plays an important role in establishing their subordinate status.

This chapter will look at the different ways in which various theorists construct motherhood, or examine the way motherhood has been constructed. The first section is entitled Approaches to Motherhood (1.1). It comprises of four sub-sections, each dealing with a different approach to motherhood. The first will examine The Theory of Bio-determinism (1.1.1), the second will analyse the Anthropological Approach (1.1.2), the third will investigate the Marxist Approach (1.1.3), while section four will probe the Socio-Psychological Approach (1.1.4). The second section presents
the central argument of this thesis, and will study the **Cultural Construction of Motherhood (1.2)**. This section is further subdivided into three sections: **Culture and Ideology (1.2.1)** examines various definitions of culture, and elicits how culture is inextricably linked to ideology; **The Role of Media (1.2.2)** focuses on how mass media is instrumental in imposing the dominant ideology on the masses; and **The Ideology of Motherhood (1.2.3)** discusses how the ideology of motherhood is constructed by patriarchal society, and the different ways in which the feminist movement has perceived this ideology.

### 1.1 Approaches to Motherhood

Motherhood can be considered from interdisciplinary perspectives since it has been approached theoretically from various disciplines. Numerous theorists have attempted to understand the concept of motherhood since it is an integral function in every society. While certain theories overlap, others contradict each other. Some theories are based on research and observation, and others on experimental data. This section will examine four major approaches to motherhood – the theory of Bio-determinism, the Anthropological approach, the Marxist approach and the Socio-Psychological approach.

#### 1.1.1 The Theory of Bio-determinism

The theory of bio-determinism purports that biological structures such as genes, hormones, arrangements of brain cells, structures of the genitals indicate the existence of traits which predispose individuals to behave in a predictable manner. This theory is associated with the idea that in the case of women, 'anatomy is destiny’. It proposes that women are ‘natural’ mothers. They are said to possess an inert ‘maternal instinct’, which Paula Nicolson attempts to define in “Motherhood and Women’s Lives” (1997). Firstly, all women appear to have a biological drive for bearing children – that is, all women want to become mothers. They also appear to have an innate desire to nurture and take care of those children. Finally, the skills required for nurturing the children seem to surface immediately after child-birth,
without the mother requiring any training, which justifies the position that maternal instinct is innate (383). Various theorists from different fields have attempted to prove that a woman’s biology is responsible for her ‘natural inclination’ towards the mothering role. Although these theories have existed over a period of time and seem to be more prevalent and popular in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century has also witnessed an enthusiastic support for the theory of bio-determinism.

The belief that men constitute the superior sex, and are more capable of work requiring mental and physical skills has been inculcated in societies all over the world for centuries. The supposition of women’s intellectual inferiority to men was strengthened by the work of French physician, anatomist and anthropologist Paul Pierre Broca. In 1861, Broca attempted to study gender differences in the brain. He took the measurement of 432 human brains, and found that while the average weight of the male brain was 1325 grams, that of the female brain was 1144 grams (Cited in Smith). The difference between the weight of the male and female brain was perceived as evidence for the gender difference in intelligence, and the incapacity of the women to perform tasks requiring intellectual input.

These theories paved the way for other ideas which strengthened the argument that women’s biology rendered them more suitable for motherhood than for any other tasks related to the public world. Noted German writer Stahl (1863), whose ideas greatly influenced the European medical world in eighteenth century and were taught in the Medical School in Montpellier, suggested that the ultimate purpose of the soul was to preserve the body in order to achieve its own goal of mental activity. However, he claimed that in the case of women, the ultimate goal was to seek the continuation of the species through motherhood. Stahl argued that there were three fundamental ‘affections’ that governed women and corresponded to this ultimate purpose. The first affection, pleasure, corresponded to her need to be impregnated, the second, fear, ensured care for the embryo, and the third inconstancy, since she needed to be capable of sharing her affection between all the children she gave birth to. Stahl further stated that a woman unconsciously and instinctively chooses to lead
a quiet and protective life that is appropriate for the ultimate purpose of procreation (Cited in Bloch and Bloch 32-33).

British naturalist Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man (1871)* also acknowledged the presence of the maternal instinct in the female species. He claimed that man had some instincts in common with the lower animals, and one of these happened to be the love of a mother towards her new-born offspring. In some cases, Darwin perceives a conflict between two enduring instincts (for instance the migratory versus maternal instinct), with one instinct being more powerful than another in certain circumstances. He cites an example of the swallow in whose case the maternal instinct would be more powerful than the migratory when she is feeding or brooding over her nestlings. However, when the young ones are not in sight, the migratory instinct would take over, and she would desert her offspring and take flight. Yet, according to Darwin, at the end of her journey, having reached her destination and satisfied her migratory instinct, she would not be able to escape pangs of remorse for having deserted her young ones, pointing to the existence of a maternal instinct.

The concept of the presence of an 'instinct' which endows women with a better capacity for mothering than men is reiterated by evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer (1873). Spencer asserted that the very fact that women seem to respond to "infantine helplessness" is evidence of their possession of a specialized "parental instinct" which entails "special aptitudes for dealing with infantine life" (Cited in Sayers 149). He acceded to the possibility that under special discipline, women could perform better than men, but also pointed to the futility of this contribution if it results in decreased fulfillsments of the maternal function, which should be given more importance.

Another interesting theory that became increasingly popular around the same time was the principle of conservation of energy to the issue of equal education for boys and girls propounded by Harvard Professor Edward Clarke (1873). Since girls need to devote more energy than boys to the development of their reproductive organs
during puberty, Clarke claimed that utilizing that energy for academic study would hamper the reproductive development of a girl. He perceived puberty as a critical period in the development of reproductive organs, and stated that if menstruation was not regularly established at the time of puberty, the problems that it would lead to could not be rectified later. Since educational quality could only be achieved at great cost to women's reproductive health, Clarke felt, it ought not to be encouraged. Clarke therefore justified the denial of education to women which would enable them to pursue roles other than mothering on health grounds.

So powerful were Clarke's statements that in 1877 the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin opposed equal grounds for both sexes stating, that "Education is greatly to be desired, but it is better that the future matrons of the state should be without a University training than that it should be produced at the fearful expense of ruined health; better that the future mothers of the state should be robust, hearty, healthy women, than that, by over study, they entail upon their descendants the germs of disease" (Cited in Sayers 11-12).

Clarke’s views were corroborated by Maudsley (1874) who agreed that brain work necessarily detracted from the store of energy available for the development of the reproductive system. He asserted that "When Nature spends in one direction, she must economize in another direction" (Cited in Sayers 12). He therefore concluded that in choosing careers over motherhood, women would not only endanger their own health through study, but would also injure the health of their offspring. Such a choice, warned Maudsley would "avenge itself upon them and upon their children if they should every have any" (Cited in Sayers 18). Moreover, Maudsley refused to accept the choice of women to remain childless: "Whatever aspirations of an intellectual kind they [women] might have, they cannot be relieved from the performance of these offices [of motherhood] so long as it is thought necessary that mankind should continue on earth" (Cited in Sayers 18).
Apart from the fact that bio-determinist theories dissuaded women from entering the work force, they also suggested that differences in parenting styles of men and women could be traced to the very constitution of their bodies. According to Allan (1869), women possess maternal instincts which are located in the cerebral organs of sense, while Van de Warker (1875) argues that they are located in the uterus (Cited in Sayers 150-151). Nobel Laureate Dr. Alexis Carrel (1935) states that the differences between men and women are “caused by the very structure of tissues and impregnation of the organism with specific chemical substances secreted by the ovary”. He further claims that each cell of the woman’s body “bears the mark of her sex. The same is true of her organs and, above all, of her nervous system” (Cited in Khan 35).

Similar theories exist as late as in the 1970s. Trivers (1972) attributed the existing division of childcare to the differences in the food reserves of the female and male sex cells. Since the initial investment of food reserves seems to be greater in the female eggs, it explains her greater investment in offspring once they are born (Cited in Sayers 63). Sociobiologist Dawkins (1976) perceives the roots of male-female relationships lying in the arrangements of the eggs and sperm cells. The male and his sperm are both expendable and promiscuous. The male sperm searches for, competes for and attacks the egg. The egg, by comparison, like the woman, is valuable and stays at home. It accepts only one sperm (signifying the desire for monogamy) and then begins to nurture it (Cited in Women’s Studies Collective 95).

Steven Goldberg in “The Inevitability of Patriarchy” (1977) asserts that the male fetus is exposed to higher levels of testosterone during brain development than the female fetus. This apparently explains the greater levels of aggressiveness in males as compared to females, which automatically prepares the male and makes him suitable for high-status roles in society. By default, the low-status roles such as nurturing children are taken over by women, who are consequently socialized into taking up such roles by their parental expectations.
Yet another interesting theory was propounded by Professor H. J. Eysenck, the inventor of Intelligence Quotient tests (1978) who argues that that the femininity of women can be traced to their genes, and more precisely, the pelvis. Even within the womb, claims Eysenck, the female develops a broader pelvis than the male. The broader the pelvis of an individual, the more feminine the person is likely to be. Eysenck observes that males with broader pelvises tend to possess feminine characteristics of passivity and may even be homosexual, while females with narrow pelvises tend to be masculine, aggressive, and even lesbian (Cited in Khan 36).

‘Evidence’ of the existence of a maternal instinct, and consequently a justification of the division of labour is also found in the theory of American sociologist Alice Rossi (1977), who advocates that instead of seeking equality by demanding public day care, women should get society to recognize their talents for childrearing. Rossi argues that infant crying stimulates the secretion of oxytocin in the mother. This triggers uterine contraction and nipple erection, which is preparation for nursing, and seems to be an unlearned, biologically determined response. Moreover, according to Rossi, the presence of this hormone is felt not only during infant crying but also during sexual intercourse and the contractions of childbirth. This seems to indicate that women are biologically more programmed to respond to the child as compared to men (Cited in Sayers 152). Rossi also asserts that the presence of unlearned responses can be found in mother-infant interactions such as cradling the infant on the left which soothes the infant by the “maternal heartbeat familiar in uterine life” (Cited in Lindsey 26).

Various experiments have been conducted in order to prove the theory of bio-determinism. Studies conducted in America show that 80% mothers cradle their infants on the left. This is explained by the fact that the sound of the heart beat, which had become imprinted on the embryo inside the mother’s womb, serves to placate and soothe a baby. While the fact that most women are right-handed is also one explanation, the former explanation tends to dominate. According to Desmond Morris, author of The Illustrated Naked Ape (1986), “[…] the discovery of this
familiar sound after birth might have a calming effect on the infant, especially as it has just been thrust into a strange and frighteningly new world outside. If this is so then the mother, either instinctively or by an unconscious series of trials and errors, would soon arrive at the discovery that her baby is more at peace if held on the left, against her heart, than on the right” (77). The implication is clearly that it is the physical fact of the child having been in the mother’s womb that enables a mother to pacify a child.

This argument was further strengthened by tests conducted on groups of new born babies who were exposed to the sounds of heart beats. It was found that one or more of the babies cried 60% of the time when the sound was not switched on, and the figure reduced considerably to 38% when the sound was switched on again. Moreover, there was evidence of greater weight gain in the heart-beat groups as compared to the other groups, despite the fact that their food intake was identical. The groups that were not exposed to the heart beat burnt more energy crying. Hence, the sound of the heart beat seems to be a powerfully calming stimulus for an infant. This explanation seems to be further supported by the observation that mothers rock their babies to lull them to sleep. To quote Morris, “The rocking motion is carried on at about the same speed as the heart beat, and once again it probably ‘reminds’ the infants of the rhythmic sensations they become so familiar with inside the womb, as the great heart of the mother pumped and thumped away above them” (78).

Moreover, theorists observe that a child begins laughing only in the third or fourth month, and this event coincides with parental recognition. Morris states, “It may be a wise child that knows its own father, but it is a laughing child that knows its own mother” (83). When the child learns to recognize its own mother as a result of becoming imprinted on her, the infant then seeks security from the mother. It becomes afraid of other strange adults and perceives its mother as a ‘protector’. Her behaviour then determines the response of the child towards other stimulus. If she becomes agitated and anxious, the child responds by crying. On the other hand, a calm and serene mother would evoke a sense of security in the child. According to
Morris, “By the age of seven months, the infant is completely imprinted on its mother. Whatever she does now, she will retain her mother-image for her offspring for the rest of its life” (87).

Such theories take for granted that it is the mother who takes care of the infant, and it is the mother’s response which determines the upbringing of the child. The father is rendered redundant, and the mother’s role becomes that of the supreme caretaker – a role that can be traced back to biology and the period of pregnancy which entails carrying the child in the womb. However, this theory fails to explain the attachment between a child and its adoptive mother, who by virtue of not having given birth to the child, would by this logic, be unable to provide the stimulus of the heart beat supposedly required to soothe a child.

Various other theories also attempt to prove the significance of the mother’s role in the responses of the child which seem to establish a significant mother-child bond. Shiela Kitzinger (1978) cites an experiment conducted by Aidan Macfarlane with pads soaked in breast milk. Macfarlane found that by the time a baby was five days old, he preferred a pad soaked in his mother’s milk to a clean pad. Moreover, by six days, the baby would turn its head more towards a pad soaked with its own mother’s milk rather than the milk of another mother. This seems to point to the mother-child bonding, which exists in the child in its early stages of infancy (Cited in Kitzinger 138). Kitzinger quotes another study which was conducted in Stockholm by J. Lind, V. Vuroenkoski and O. Wasz-Hockirt. This study shows that the mother responds not only mentally, but also physically to the cry of her baby. According to the study, the temperature of the mother’s breast increases upon hearing the cry of her baby on the third post-partum day, and this is followed by a heavy dripping of milk (Cited in Kitzinger 139-140). Hence, the mother’s response appears to be instinctive and instant.

While the above experiments were conducted on human beings, there have been cases of experiments conducted on animals – and the responses of the animals are applied
to human beings in order to prove the theory of bio-determinism. For instance, it has been found that male chimpanzees when placed alone with infants do not display maternal protectiveness towards them. This has led researchers to conclude that in the case of human beings, females are necessary for the growth of human infants. Naomi Weissten (1971) critiques such research on the ground that “humans are not non-humans” (226), and that such research exhibits an ideological bias. She elaborates, “Invariably, only those primates have been cited which exhibit exactly the kind of behaviour that the proponents of the biological basis of human female behaviour wish were true for humans. Thus, baboons and rhesus monkeys are generally cited: males in these groups exhibit some of the most irritable and aggressive behaviour found in primates, and if one wishes to argue that females are naturally passive and submissive, these groups provide vivid examples” (227). She quotes a study conducted by G.D. Mitchell (1969) on marmosets, wherein it is the male who carries the infant at all times, except when the infant is feeding (Cited in Wiessten 227).

In fact, such theories cannot be proven even in the case of baboons and rhesus monkeys. Lab experiments were conducted with female rhesus monkeys by Liebowitz (1978) which show that when the female monkeys are reared in isolation and have no opportunity to observe maternal behaviour, they do not display maternal behaviour instinctively towards their young ones. Moreover, normally reared male rhesus monkeys tend to display maternal behaviour when placed with rhesus infants in the absence of mature females. These studies tend to suggest that maternal behaviour is not instinctive, but rather learned, and depends upon experience and social conditions for both males and females (Cited in Women’s Studies Collective 283).

The theories of bio-determinism have been attacked by feminists who hold these theories responsible for the oppression of women, and for their present subordinate status in societies all over the world. “In any social formation in which inequality is structurally and systematically created, it is likely that both the science and the
ideology of that society will generate theories that accentuate the apparent differences between different social strata. It is also likely that the causes of these differences in behaviour traits, habits and customs of various groups will be attributed to some type of immutable ‘human nature,’” says Carmen Schifellite in “Beyond Tarzan and Jane Genes : Towards a Critique of Bio-Determinism” (1987 46).

This is precisely what has happened in the case of gender, wherein the biological function and capacity of mothering has been regarded as inherent in women, and women have therefore conveniently been relegated to the private domain. Helen Deutsh (1945) points out that the maternal instinct is not a product of women’s biology. Some women appear to possess this instinct even without having gone through pregnancy. On the other hand, other women who despite being biological mothers are not motherly, especially in cases where the pregnancy was unwanted, and where the foetus is perceived as a parasite (Cited in Sayers 164). Ann Oakley (1974) also refutes the theory of a biological drive for maternity, and states emphatically, “There is no such thing as maternal instinct. There is no biologically based drive which propels women into childbearing or forces them to become child-rearers once the children are born” (Cited in Dally 182). However, despite the objections raised to the theory of bio-determinism, it remains an extremely powerful theory which has been internalized by women over centuries.

1.1.2 Anthropological Approach

A number of anthropologists have attempted to examine the role of women in society, and relate it to the change in social structure and occupations, in order to explain why women are the primary caretakers of children in most societies. The evolution of civilization from the primitive state to the present capitalist society was a gradual one, and witnessed numerous changes over the years. Anthropologists suggest that each stage of this evolution only served to strengthen the division of sex roles.

In the primitive stage, that of tribal society, human beings lived by hunting and gathering, directly appropriating their subsistence from nature. In this stage, some
anthropologists believe that men and women shared a relatively equal role. The second phase of evolution was influenced by the Neolithic Revolution. This revolution witnessed the establishment of agriculture, and a change in the mode of production from direct appropriation from nature to improvement of land and domestication of animals. This resulted in the need for labour power and economic organization, which ensured that while men continued to travel widely, women became socially isolated and home bound. There was a clear segregation of tasks not only between men and women, but also between boys and girls. The boys helped their fathers while the girls helped the mothers with household work. This segregation continued in the third stage - that of early agrarian states, and the division of labour became more pronounced and socially accepted as the ideal way of life. According to Richard Lee and Richard Daly in “Man's Domination and Woman's Oppression – The Question of Origins” (1987), “patriarchy can best be understood as the reproduction of state hierarchy within the family”. The family structure which represents the private world was duplicated in the larger social structure or the private world, thus paving way for the rule of the father.

The theories of anthropologists, however, have been contradictory and often conflict with one another. For instance, the theory of the relative equality of men and women during the primitive stage has been challenged by some anthropologists who believe that the foundations of the division of labour were laid at this stage, and not in the later stages. Sherwood Washburn and C. Lancaster claim that while man was delegated the role of the hunter, the woman was the gatherer. Men would go out for hunting, develop new hunting techniques and bring meat for the women and children, while women had to stay at home, take care of the infants, and gather food (Cited in Kelkar 5).

Ethology, which is concerned with the study of unlearned species, suggests that the role of the hunting has been replaced by working in modern societies, but has retained many of its basic characteristics. Like hunting, working is primarily a male pursuit and involves making trips from the home base to the work place. Looking after the
home is thus a logical natural activity for the woman. Another theory propounded by ethologists suggests that man began as a tree-dwelling ape, and required adaptive capacities for his descent to the ground. These capacities, anthropologists suggest, were acquired by males and females respectively. To quote Vidyut Bhagwat in “The Sexual Division of Labour”, “For the pre-homonid male, home is a place to come back with the spoils, where the females and young will be waiting” (3).

Ann Oakley (1980) has critiqued ethology, pointing out three fallacies in this theory. To begin with, she states that it assumes our definite knowledge of evolution – that it was primarily a unilinear process. Moreover, she accuses the theorists of making generalizations from humans to animals and vice versa without acknowledging the differences between the two. Finally, she asserts that the human capacity to invent, perpetuate and change culture has been ignored. Oakley claims that such arguments are based on the self-interest of patriarchy, and are hence faulty.

Anthropologists have also often stressed the differences between the physical strength of males and females, which seems to justify the division of labour. Man apparently possesses superior physical strength, agility, speed and aggressiveness which make it natural for them to hunt, while woman is handicapped because of the burden of pregnancy and nurturing. Child-bearing and rearing requires a woman to be close to her children, restricts the woman’s activity, preventing her from performing any extra-domestic activities. This results in men performing more strenuous tasks while the lighter tasks within the house are performed by women. Bhagwat summarises the arguments of anthropologist G.P. Murdock, who observes that “trade is a typically masculine task since men not ‘handicapped’ by their reproductive roles are able to range further field than women” (Cited in Bhagwat 4). Oakley again critiques these ideas by pointing out that women undertake heavy tasks in different cultures. Moreover, the restriction of activity during pregnancy and lactation is not a biological need, but rather a cultural custom. She asserts, “For every task that the anthropological myth claims as universally feminine or masculine, many contrasting examples can be cited” (Cited in Bhagwat 4).
Another debate in anthropology that has been a source of immense conflict is the nature-culture issue which has been directly correlated with the female-male relationship. The distinction between nature and culture was conceived by noted structural anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss (1969), who claimed that humans differ from animals because of their capacity for culture. This capacity included the ability to make discriminations like avoidance of taboos like incest (Cited in MacCormack 1). Levi-Strauss attributes the domination of men to the exchange of women between men, wherein women were regarded as precious possessions and were equated with other objects that would be exchanged by men. This exchange of women was apparently based on the fact that there could be no mating within the same family, and that relationships had to be established with people other than their own kin. Carol MacCormack in “Nature, Culture and Gender – A Critique” (1980) explains the basic premise of Strauss’s model of human society: “[...] it is the men who own and the women who are owned... wives who are acquired and sisters and daughters who are given away” (11). The domination of men over women thus symbolizes the dominance of culture over nature.

Women’s equation with nature seems to be a natural result of her reproductive capacities. Since the movement of women was restricted during menstruation and pregnancy, they became confined to the home and could not follow the men when they left the private domain to hunt. Moreover, child-care became an extension of childbirth and the responsibility of rearing the children became naturally that of the mother. This gave men the freedom to move around and develop new hunting techniques, as well as new organizational skills, which enabled human beings to transcend from the animal-like world of nature into the presumably superior world of culture. Meena A. Kelkar in Subordination of Women (1995) critiques Strauss’s theories claiming that there is no evidence to prove his hypothesis: “It seems that Levi-Strauss assumes that all societies were patriarchal but does not provide an evidence for his assumption. He does not consider the question as to why men are defined as superior beings and given a superior status in society. He also does not
state as to what makes woman an exchangeable commodity” (15). Nevertheless, Strauss’s ideas were extremely influential and gave rise to other discussions along the same lines.

Amongst those who elaborated on Strauss’s theory was Sherry Ortner. In a paper entitled “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture” (1974), Ortner reiterates the idea that women, because of their biological functions of reproduction, are identified with nature, whereas men are associated with culture. Culture is perceived as being superior to the natural world and seeks to ‘socialize’ nature in order to regulate the relationship between society and environment. Similarly, women, who represent nature are devalued and regarded as inferior, confined to the domestic sphere and are sought to be ‘controlled’ by men, who symbolize culture and operate from the public domain.

Ortner states, “Woman creates naturally from within her own being, whereas man is free to, or forced to, create artificially, that is through cultural means, and in such a way as to sustain culture” (Cited in Moore 15). She claims that while men create transcendental and eternally lasting objects, women create perishable human beings. She adds, “Since the mother’s body goes through its lactation processes in direct relation to a pregnancy with a particular child, the relationship of nursing between mother and child is seen as a natural bond [...] mothers and their children, according to cultural reasoning, belong together [...] Mother is the obvious person for this task of caring for ‘children beyond infancy’ as an extension of her natural nursing bond with children” (Cited in Sayers 109). According to Ortner, the supposed distinction between nature and culture is itself a product of culture, which delegates women to an inferior position and confines her to the home on the basis of her biology.

Ortner’s theory has been challenged by MacCormack (1980) who claims that it is incorrect to say that women produce only perishables. MacCormack quotes studies conducted by anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss on totemic and other societies which have lineage systems that exist in perpetuity. “Each human who is born fits
into a great chain of being, ensuring the immortality of both self and group. Houses rot, villages are moved, empires fall, but the great faith is that the lineage, including the ‘real’ company of ancestors will endure forever” (16). It is significant that the studies all refer to the system of male lineage.

Studies conducted by noted anthropologist Margaret Mead in New Guinea in 1930s on various tribes corroborate Ortner’s view that sex roles are the result of social conditioning, and that there is no real correlation between women and nature, or men and culture as it is made out to be. In the Arapesh tribe, both men and women displayed nurturing qualities and shared the responsibilities of child-care equally. These qualities are traditionally associated with women alone, so in the case of men, they would be perceived as ‘unnatural’. The Mundugumor tribe exhibited ‘masculine’ characteristics like competitiveness and violence. The indifference to children was common to both men and women, a trait which was ‘unnatural’ for women by societal standards and norms. In the Tchumbuli tribe there appeared to be a reversal of the roles traditionally assigned to men and women. While the men remained close to the village practicing dancing and art, the women were the economic providers in the family. Mead’s studies seem to suggest that there is no such thing as a ‘maternal instinct’ in women which enables them to nurture children. These attributes do not exist in all societies, and are thus a result of social conditioning and environment, rather than a biological drive (Cited in Lindsey 21).

Studies conducted by Richard Lee and Richard Daly between 1963 and 1986 on the !Kung San tribe of Boswana also seem to point to the existence of gender equality, and suggest that the difference between the sexes is not a biological fact but based on the evolution of society. The !Kung tribe was at an evolutionary rather than primitive stage when the studies were conducted. Lee and Daly found that over 90% of the work involved in child rearing was performed by the !Kung mother who received support from other women. Although the fathers were not directly involved in child rearing, they displayed affection towards their children, and spent a considerable amount of their leisure time playing with the children.
The ! Kung women not only take responsibility of the children, but also exercise their right over the child. They give birth alone in a bush, and exclude men from childbirth. They examine the newborn infants for defects, and if they find any, they spontaneously commit infanticide, and report that the child was born dead. This claim cannot be refuted by anyone since no one has any access to knowledge regarding the birth of the child. However, if the child is healthy, they willingly accept responsibility for rearing it. Moreover, their support system which includes other mothers in the camp ensures that there is no need for a mother to separate her productive work and child care. She can perform both roles with ease. Besides, although men do not participate equally in childcare, they perform 20-40% of the work in the house which means that the women do not face the problem of double-burden unlike the modern urban woman in Western society. Hence, the ! Kung women do not find childbirth or childrearing an oppressive task (Cited in Lee and Daly 35).

Lee and Daly offer conclusions based on their studies: “It is our contention that male domination arose, not from human biology, but with the evolution of human society, together with institutional inequalities and hierarchies. It gains its full force with the development of state power and the socially sanctioned alienation of women from access to resources and direct production. The question of male dominance is a sociological and cultural question, a product not of animal instincts, but rather, of human history” (42).

Anthropological studies conducted in India have attempted to study specifically within the Indian context the reasons for the decline in status of women. The status of women changed in India, and matriarchal societies were transformed into patriarchal ones with the spread of the concept of seed (beeja) and field (kshetra). Reference to this concept can be found in ancient Indian texts like Aitereya Upanishad, Sushruta and Charaka Samhita, and the Manusmriti. According to this concept, just as the field nourishes the seed, so also the mother nourishes the embryo.
by supplying blood. The male was perceived as being the giver of the seed, while the female was the carrier and nourisher of the seed.

Ancient law-giver Manu claimed that the beeja was superior to the field, and the theory when applied to human beings, implied male superiority and justified male-dominance. Manu’s justification of the concept was that a field without a seed being sown into it was simply a barren land which produced nothing. However, the influence of good seeds led to the birth of renowned sages even from animal wombs. Giving life was therefore seen as being more important than nourishing life. The role of the mother – the nourisher who supplied the baby with blood in the womb, fed the child with her milk and took care of the child - was only secondary, and was a supplementary role. The role of the male thus became more important and also endorsed man’s rights over his wife and children.

Hence, there seem to be many contradictory views amongst anthropologists. Each study illustrates a different finding, and attempts to show how societies have evolved over a period of time. The basic problem with anthropological theories remains lack of evidence. Many studies are based on observations by individual anthropologists and their observations cannot be generalized and applied universally to all societies all over the world. However, it would be safe to conclude that women’s biology and the perception of the biological role in relation to the social role has played a major role in the oppression of women, and the delegation of women to the responsibility within the house. As societies have evolved, so also have these roles evolved and been strengthened over a period of time.

1.1.3 Marxist Approach

Marxist theory perceives the oppression of women to be historically related to the development of class society. Frederic Engels (1976) asserts that the three chief forms of marriage that evolved over a period of time conform to the three main stages of human development. In the first stage, savagery, the concept of group marriage was popular, while in the second stage of barbarism, there was the system of pairing
marriage. In the third stage, civilization, the marriage system switched to monogamy, supplemented by adultery and prostitution.

During the system of group marriage, Engels claims, the uncertainty about the identity of the father and the certainty of the mother resulted in the recognition of the female lineage, supremacy of the woman in the house, and the mother right. “Women occupied not only a free but also a highly respected position among all savages and all barbarians of the lower and middle stages and partly even of the upper stage” (Cited in Bhagwat 18). When the system changed from group family to pairing family, the natural father was placed along with the natural mother, but the children did not inherit from the father.

In primitive society, the work of both men and women had the same social value, and wealth was shared by the entire community. However, people acquired more wealth with the increase in the number of cattle, and this gave rise to the concept of private ownership, wherein men played a more important role than women. This consequently led to the control of power by men, and male lineage and the right of inheritance from the father was instituted. The inheritance of wealth by the children relegated women to an inferior status. While Karl Marx perceives this as a natural and inevitable transition, Engels claims that, “The overthrow of mother-right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children” (Cited in Bhagwat 19).

This was the birth of patriarchy, which has been compared to the birth of capitalism with the man representing the bourgeois and the woman, the proletariat. Work was now divided into two types of production, namely production for use and production for exchange. According to Engels in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, the word ‘production’ has two distinct implications: “... on the one side, production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings
themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production; by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of family on the other” (Cited in Sen 71-72). Women therefore had a dual role – whatever they produced was consumed in the home, and did not create any surplus. They also produced children, who were required for the propagation of the species. Men, on the other hand, produced for exchange. This enabled them to accumulate surplus wealth, which in turn was the means to acquire more social power.

The division of labour which confined women to the private domain of the house was therefore seen as being natural. The man’s superior position was automatically translated into a superior position within the household as well. Since women’s contribution did not create any visible wealth or surplus, and the reproductive function was not included in the definition of ‘production’, women’s contribution to the household was regarded as secondary, and seemed to be negligible. According to Engels, the wife “became the first domestic service pushed out of participation in social production” (Cited in Bhagwat 21). Engles asserted that “the emancipation of women will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time” (cited in Sayers 184).

The theories of Marx and Engels have been critiqued by various theorists from different fields. P. Aaby in Engels and Women (1977) cites anthropologist studies which claim that the first division of labour in hunting and gathering societies did not distinguish between men’s work of procurement and production of raw materials and women’s work of manufacturing these materials. On the contrary, women seemed to have been responsible for the largest share of production. Similarly, in horticultural societies also, where men hunted and women cultivated, the work performed by women was equally important as that of the men. Hence, Aaby suggests “if we use Engels’s logic … women should have obtained ownership of agricultural production. The female sex should never have been defeated because women as the direct
producers within agriculture should have owned the means of production and, consequently, should have controlled part of the strategic social resources” (Cited in Sen 73).

A socialist feminist critique of the views of Marx has been offered by Zillah Eisenstein in Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism (1978). Eisenstein claims that Marx categorizes women in the same genre as the proletariat without considering the uniqueness of their situation: “Woman is perceived (by Marx) as just another victim, undistinguished from the proletariat in general, of the pernicious class division of labour. He had little or no sense of woman’s biological reproduction or maternal functions as critical in creating a division of labour within the family. As a result, Marx perceived the exploitation of men and women as deriving from the same source and assumed that their oppression could be understood in the same structural terms [...] Marx did not understand that the sexual division of labour in society organizes non-creative and isolating work particularly for women” (Cited in Bhagwat 22-23).

She also critiques Engels, asserting that by categorizing men and women as classes, “the relations of reproduction are subsumed under the relations of production” (Cited in Bhagwat 23). She objects to the fact that although Engels acknowledges the problem of women’s existence within the domestic sphere, this problem seems to be a reflection of the relations of production which has its roots in private property. “Women’s activity in reproduction (which limits her activity in production) is not seen as problematic” (Cited in Bhagwat 23).

Eisenstein problematizes women’s activity in reproduction, and asserts that even when women enter the paid economy, the sexual division of labour remains intact since these women are referred to as ‘working mothers’ and perform two tasks (that of production and reproduction) for less than the cost of one. Women, claims Eisenstein, play a crucial role in perpetuating patriarchal structures. They stabilize patriarchal families by playing the roles of housewives and mothers. They reproduce
new workers for paid and unpaid labour force. Most men belong to the former category, and women to the latter. Moreover, women take care of men and children in the society they inhabit, work in the labour force for less wages, and finally stabilize the economy through their role as consumers. Eizenstien perceives the need to view the sexual division of labour as based not on biology but on the usage of a woman’s body as an instrument for reproduction: “It is not reproduction itself that is the problem but the relations which define and reinforce it” (Cited in Bhagwat 31).

Perceiving shortcomings in the theories of Marx and Engels, several social feminists have attempted to deal specifically with the concept of female oppression, which is related to, and yet not exclusively determined by the relations of production in a capitalist society. Nancy Hartsock in “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism” (1983) reflects on the situation in contemporary Western society where women are not only engaged in reproductive labour, but also in productive labour after having entered the workforce. Although Hartsock discusses the issue from a Western perspective, the theory is applicable in the Indian context as well, where numerous women are subject to the double burden of undertaking both productive and reproductive labour. Hartsock claims that while there exist certain similarities between women and men who engage in production for wages and produce both commodities and surplus values, there is a basic difference. Women, in addition, produce use-values in the home, and unlike men, their “lives are institutionally defined by their production of use values in the home” (154).

One of the basic differences between men and women, Hartsock suggests, seems to be that women as a group work more than men, and moreover, a larger proportion of their time is devoted to the production of use-values as compared to men. She further notes the monotony of the mundane chores that women engage in: “[…] women’s production is structured by repetition in a different way than men’s. While repetition for both the woman and the male worker may take the form of production of the same
object, over and over – whether apple pies or brake linings – women’s work in housekeeping involves repetitious cleaning” (155).

Women’s labour, according to Hartsock, also includes the production and reproduction of human beings, which seems to expose the inadequacy of production as a description of women’s activity. Motherhood as an institution seems to acquire a significance which has often been neglected by Marxist theorists:

One does not (cannot) produce another human being in anything like the way one produces an object such as a chair. Much more is involved, activity which cannot easily be dichotomized into play or work. Helping another to develop, the gradual relinquishing of control, the experience of the human limits of one’s action – all these are important features of women’s activity as mothers. (155)

She points to the need to recognize this activity of nurturing others as a complex activity that cannot be placed in the same category as other forms of production. It is this activity which distinguishes men and women, and it is here that “the opposition between feminist and masculinist experience and outlook is rooted, and it is here that features of the proletarian vision are enhanced and modified for the woman and diluted for the man” (155). She adds, “The female experience in reproduction represents a unity with nature which goes beyond the proletarian experience of interchange with nature” (155). This also entails a significant shift in the relationship with others, which is again markedly different from the cooperative relationship expected of an individual in an organization where the individual is producing goods for exchange value.

The solution to the existing problem seems to be very complex, and the first step according to Hartsock is the definition of society as a “propertyless producer both of use-values and of human beings” (160). This can only be achieved through major changes in the social structure including “the abolition of private property, the seizure of state power, and lengthy post-revolutionary class struggle” (160). This change would also require abolition of the existing sexual division of labour, and would
involve participation of both men and women in the process of childrearing. This, however, is a complicated process again since it entails “the transformation both of every human relation and of human relations to the natural world” (160). Hartsock thus seems to suggest the need to relocate the problem of women in a capitalist society as a gender-specific oppression which finds its roots in the woman’s reproductive function, and must therefore be tackled accordingly.

Other feminists have also pointed to the limitation in Marxist theory which supposedly fails to take into account the woman’s perspective. For instance, Marx had coined the terms ‘externalization’ and ‘alienation’ in order to explain how in the capitalist system, the labour process alienates the worker from the product of his labour. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in “Feminism and Critical Theory” (1996) perceives this theory as being inadequate since it does not consider the fact of the woman’s womb as workshop. Spivak had taken up Marx’s use of the terms ‘use-value, exchange-value and ‘surplus value’ and applied these terms to the woman’s situation. Spivak asserts that “the woman in the traditional situation produces more than she is getting in terms of her subsistence, and therefore is a continual source of the production of surpluses, for the man who owns her, or by the man for the capitalist who owns his labor-power” (56).

By asking for financial compensation for housework, the contemporary woman seems to be seeking “the abstraction of use-value into exchange value” (56). However, the problem arises because in the case of domesticity, there is no “pure exchange” (56). Spivak perceives the need to ask questions about the extent of use-value for the family, and the entry of women into the capitalist economy by inserting a wage-structure for women. The very idea of wages being the only bench-mark for value-producing work seems to be problematic.

Spivak then moves on to Marx’s concept of externalization and alienation, and questions the basic ethics of Marx’s argument which claims that the human being is
alienated from himself and his work but which does not consider the concept of reproduction and childbirth. She comments:

I would argue that, in terms of the physical, emotional, legal, custodial, and sentimental situation of the woman's product, the child, this picture of the human relationship to production, labour, and property is incomplete. The possession of a tangible place of production, the womb, situates women as agents in any theory of production. Marx's dialectics of externalization-alienation followed by fetish formation are inadequate because he has not taken into account one fundamental human relationship to a product and labor. (56)

In most societies, the man has the legal right over the child, who is "an alienable fact of the property right of the man who 'produces' the child" (57). Thus, the man maintains legal rights "over the product of the woman's body", the child. While Marx had claimed that alienation of labor must stop since it undermines the agency of the subject in his work and property, Spivak suggests that the very nature of alienation, labor and the production of property need to be reexamined in terms of women's work and childbirth. Since the woman's work is unpaid, it is devalued, and this leads to another form of alienation which Marxist theory had failed to consider.

Juliet Mitchell also examines the oppression of women from a Marxist perspective. While she does not contradict Marxist theories, she expands upon the ideas of Marx and Engles, and takes them a step further. She sees the key structures of woman's situation as production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children (Cited in Dally 171). A modification in any one of these structures affects or reinforces another structure. For instance, the freedom from production leads to an emphasis on reproduction. When women were not a part of the work force, they concentrated on producing children. However, as the number of children produced by a woman decreased, the emphasis shifted from reproduction to the socialization of children. In each of these structures, the woman was trapped.

According to Mitchell, the role of women in reproduction combined with their assumed physical weakness has resulted in their absence from the sector of
production. Besides, the father has legal as well as economic power over the woman. "The social cult of maternity is matched by the real socio-economic powerlessness of the mother" (Cited in Dally 172). Mitchell believes that there is a contradiction between the woman's role in production and her role in the labour force: "... the one denies the other..." (Cited in Dally 172). She questions the need for a full-time mother given the fact that children now mature early. The denial of economic independence as well as day care facilities to women supposedly leave them with no option but to become full-time mothers. Moreover, this condition is inevitable so long as men derive psychological and practical benefits from this division of labour. While maternity becomes a substitute for action and creativity, and the home represents a place for relaxation for men, women will continue to remain confined to the role of mothering.

Thus, Marxist perspectives suggest that the subordinate position of women is inextricably linked to a class-based capitalist system, and the family structure within that system. Only if the capitalist economic system is changed, can the exploitation of women (and labourers) end. Marxist Feminists seem to perceive the need to relocate women as a separate category, and lay special emphasis on reproduction as a means by which patriarchy oppresses women. Some Marxists believe that a socialist revolution is needed to change the situation and that women must become economically independent if they are to escape from the subordination. It is interesting to note that when the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union brought about the desired changes, women expressed a desire to revert back to status quo and preferred to maintain the sexual division of labour instead of entering the workforce. Moreover, appropriating women into the labour force has also entailed an increase in their workload since the task of childrearing continues to be performed by women, and the paid labour poses an additional burden upon them.

1.1.4 Socio-Psychological Approach
Numerous theories from the field of psychology and sociology have attempted to explain how gender roles are learned and followed, and how socialization takes place.
Laura Kramer in *The Sociology of Gender – A Brief Introduction* (2004) defines socialization as “the process of learning the rules of the social group or culture to which we belong or hope to belong, and learning to define ourselves and others within that setting” (6). This theory proposes that gender is socially constructed and stems from the social contexts of an individual’s past experiences and current situations, and is not determined by biological sex differences.

There are three prominent theories of socialization, namely the Social Learning Theory, the Cognitive Development Theory and the Gender Schema Theory. The Social Learning Theory associates the development of gender roles with external reinforcements such as rewards and punishments. It suggests that ‘male’ and ‘female’ behaviour is learned by imitating and observing significant others. Mischel (1970) asserts that the behaviour is further reinforced and continued if it is rewarded. For instance, when a girl is appreciated for her feminine behaviour, she is likely to appropriate the behaviour into her own personality. On the other hand, if she is punished for her ‘unfeminine’ or ‘masculine’ behaviour and is reprimanded for behaving in a particular manner that contradicts her own gender role expectations, she will reject that behaviour. While behaviour that is in conformity with the accepted gender roles is rewarded, any deviance from the role results in punishment. According to *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices* (1983), “This theory maintains that females and males act in gender-stereotyped ways because these roles have been rewarded in the past and cross-gender roles have been punished” (151). This is corroborated by the research of social learning theorist and experimental psychologist Albert Bandura (1965).

The process whereby gender roles are learned is referred to by Michele A. Paludi in *The Psychology of Women* (2002) as ‘gender role identity’. This includes four components: ‘gender role preference’, which refers to the individual’s desire to adopt the behaviour associated with either women or men (106); ‘gender role identification’, which entails the incorporation of a feminine or masculine role (107); knowledge of sex-determined role standards or an espousal of gender-role stereotypes
of femininity and masculinity (108); gender role adoption or the individual’s overt behaviour that is characteristic of a given sex (109); and finally gender-role orientation where an individual defines the self as either masculine or feminine (110).

Various factors and individuals play an important role in socialization of the individual and the development of a gender role identity. The primary agents of socialization seem to be the family, peers, television and media, school, language and religion (Cited in Lindsey 61). Kramer (2004) argues that ‘significant others’ strongly influence the gender development of children. “As people the child admires and probably loves, these significant figures are models of behaviour that the child will want to emulate. This imitation or modeling appears to be intrinsically rewarding for the child. Perceiving oneself as being like an admired person is a desired end in itself” (64). The ‘significant others’ may include family members, teachers as well as peers.

Another crucial agent is the toys that children are given to play with. While boys are traditionally given building blocks, cars, engines and guns which encourage constructive, assertive and aggressive behaviour, girls are given dolls, tea-sets and kitchen sets that reiterate the notion of domesticity. A great deal of research has been conducted on the concept of doll play and the encouragement and reinforcement that girls receive during doll play seems to be a crucial socializing factor. Studies conducted by Lott and Maluso (1993), Lytton and Romney (1991) reveal that there is a significant tendency amongst parents in encouraging gender specific activities. To quote Paludi (2002), “Doll play is believed to be an important way for little girls to learn nurturant behaviours that will transfer, in later years, to their caring for children” (115). Rossi (1964) and Sharpe (1976) had suggested that children’s books present doll play as an activity that is restricted to girls, which seems to reinforce doll play as a feminine activity (Cited in Sayers 168).

Another socializing theory, known as the Cognitive Development Theory, suggests that children learn gender roles according to their level of cognitive development and
the degree of understanding of the world. Developed and expanded by Lawrence Kohlberg (1974), this theory suggests that children progress through fixed stages of conceptual development, which does not necessarily depend upon the age of the child. A child processes the knowledge gained from the environment, using his own conceptual capacities and thus develops his understanding of gender. According to Kohlberg, young children do not believe in fixed gender roles, and believe that girls can become boys by cutting their hair or wearing boys’ clothes. However, by the age of six or seven, children develop 'gender constancy' and begin to recognize that boys remain boys and girls remain girls irrespective of what they wear and look like. Having achieved gender constancy, children then learn to identify with and imitate their own gender (Cited in Macdonald 18).

The Gender Schema Theory expands upon the Cognitive Development Theory and argues that once the child learns the cultural definitions of gender, it organizes all other information accordingly. A proponent of this theory, Bem (1981) defines schema as a cognitive structure which helps to interpret perceptions of the world, and proposes that gender role acquisition in children derives from gender-schematic processing and also willingness of the children to encode information from a variety of socializing agents. The theory assumes that since gender roles are learned, they can also be modified.

Papalia and Olds (1990) suggest that gender stereotypes can be eliminated if children discard all cultural schemata, and distinguish sexes only on the basis of their biological and reproductive differences. Further, they could learn the individual differences schema by recognizing the variations within groups, and understand that people belonging to different cultures during different historical periods have their own definitions of appropriate behaviour for males and females. Children could also perceive the sexism in schema, and comprehend that “gender role stereotypes are not only different but also wrong, no matter how different they are” (Cited in Paludi 239).
Perhaps the most influential and controversial psychological theory on gender roles is the psychoanalytic theory propounded by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud (1931), all human beings have a bisexual disposition and combine masculine and feminine characteristics in themselves. Both boys and girls initially exhibit both masculine and feminine behaviour in infancy. However, these traits become predominant as the child grows older depending on the way that the child interprets biological sex differences. The girl child may be frightened by her comparison with boys, and give up her sexuality. She may alternately develop a masculinity complex, hoping to get a penis. The third possibility is that she may come to terms with the fact that she lacks a penis, and may then develop an attachment for her father, adopting him as a primary love-object which was referred to by Freud as the Electra complex. Freud coined the term Oedipus complex to define the boy’s fascination for his mother.

Freud maintained that at some point, the girl discovers that the lack of penis is a universal fact for all women, leading to a change in her attitude towards her mother, who now suffers “great depreciation” (Cited in Sayers 128). The attachment to the mother reduces and the daughter now turns towards her father, giving up the wish for a penis, and developing instead the wish for a child. For that purpose, the father becomes a love-object. According to Sayers, “In sum, penis envy and its resolution are responsible in Freud’s view for launching the girl on the path towards her feminine destiny” (128).

 Needless to say, Freud’s theories have been attacked by numerous feminists. Kate Millett (1970) views the concept of penis envy as an instance of male egocentrism. “Freudian logic has succeeded in converting childbirth, an impressive female accomplishment … into nothing more than a hunt for a male organ” (Cited in Paludi 118). Various theorists replace the concept of penis envy with that of womb-envy, thereby reversing the gender role relationships and rendering the female superior to the male. The founder of American Institute of Psychoanalysis, Karen Horney (1973) believes that penis envy has been over-emphasized. On the contrary, she asserts men
envy the reproductive role of women and cannot come to terms with the fact that women are biologically superior to them. Hence, this envy of the woman’s reproductive powers is transformed into a belief in the inferiority of women (Cited in Das and Dash 30).

Horney’s views are reiterated by several other theorists. For instance, Montagu (1974) also suggests that men suffer from a biological inferiority complex because they cannot conceive. This ‘womb envy’ is compensated by the desire to ‘produce’ in other areas. Montagu points out that a man uses the phrase ‘that’s my baby’ to indicate his pride in something – in an idea he conceives and gives birth to (Cited in Lindsey 51). Mary Daily’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) asserts that men envy not only the woman’s womb, but also her creative energy. “Their envy gives rise to an identification with the foetus for, like the foetus, they draw on female energy to fuel projects of pseudocreative technology” (Cited in Hamilton and Barret 419).

The Freudian concept of penis envy and the Oedipus complex was also critiqued by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1979). She holds the political structure of society, specifically the biological family, responsible for the Oedipus complex. Regarding Freud’s notion of penis envy, Firestone argues, “Penis envy must be taken as a metaphor rather than a description of sexual reality. Exposed to the values of the patriarchal nuclear family, the girl realizes that when she does the same thing as her brother, his behaviour is approved, but hers is not. Her complexes like penis envy and castration complex must be traced to the political structure of the family and not to some immutable biological system” (Cited in Bhagwat 2004 229).

A new dimension to psychoanalysis regarding the theory of why girls mother was added by Nancy Chodorow in the object-relation theory that she developed. She refutes the contention that mothering is a product of biology, or that of role training. She asserts strongly that there is no substantial evidence to prove that female hormones or chromosomes are responsible for a maternal instinct in women, and suggests that non-biological mothers, children and men can exhibit nurturing
capacities just as well as mothers can. She points to the limitations of psychoanalytic theories which fail to explain adequately why women (and not men) mother.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Chodorow comments that the early relation to a primary caretaker allows both boys and girls the capacity to ‘parent’ a child. She proceeds to explain why despite the presence of these capacities in both sexes, it is women who mother:

Women’s mothering reproduces itself through differing object-relational experiences and differing psychic outcomes in women and men. As a result of having been parented by a woman, women are more likely than men to seek to be mothers, that is, to relocate themselves in a primary mother-child relationship, to get gratification from the mothering relationship, and to have psychological and relational capacities for mothering. (206)

These capacities are built into the mother daughter relationship, and girls tend to have a greater sense of identification and mergence with the mother, who is not only their earliest caretaker, but who happens to be of the same sex as the daughter. This sex-role difference is established in infancy, and continues through the oedipal stage and adolescence, leading the girl to arrive at adulthood with a need to recreate this early childhood identification experience. Nurturant capacities thus appear to be appropriate and natural for women, who develop a desire to produce children, and also to take care of them.

However, this desire is curtailed in men, who are encouraged by their mothers to become independent and individualistic. Boys acquire masculine gender identity; and since they are told not to be like women, they automatically tend to seek masculine role models outside the house. Moreover, they devalue women for their mothering role, perceiving them as powerless: “By contrast, women as mothers (and men as not-mothers) produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. This prepares men for their less affective later family role, and for primary participation in the impersonal extra-familial world of work and public life” (7). Men find themselves incapable of relating to children.
“because the relational basis for mothering is [...] inhibited in men who experience themselves as more separate and distinct from others” (207). Therein lies the justification and perpetration of the sexual division of labour.

The belief is passed on to other family members with the result that families reproduce themselves in a society which therefore continues to remain male-dominated. This can prove to be extremely dangerous to the social position of women since it ensures their subordination, and also necessarily delegates the task of mothering to the mother since mothering reproduces itself generation after generation. As Chodorow states, “[...] historically and cross-culturally we cannot separate the sexual division of labour from sexual inequality. The sexual division of labour and women’s responsibility for child care are linked to and generate male dominance” (214). In order to overcome the sexual division of labour in which women mother, Chodorow points to the need for “a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women” (215).

Thus, different disciplines have approached the concept of motherhood through their own perspectives, and motherhood has either been seen as a biologically determined role, a role that has developed according to the anthropological or class-related changes in society, a role that is acquired through psychological developments in the individual; or finally as a socially constructed role. Each perspective has its own limitations and contradictions, leaving unanswered gaps in the explanations. The next section will examine the gaps by illustrating how motherhood seems to be culturally constructed.

1.2 The Cultural Construction of Motherhood

Having examined the various approaches to the question of whether motherhood is biologically determined, or socially constructed, this section goes on to argue that patriarchal ideology constructs the concept of motherhood according to its own definition. 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. The two forms of culture that this thesis will examine are literature and cinema. Cinema is an integral form of popular culture, and within the Indian context, is one of the most effective media of communication. Through the medium of cinema and literature, patriarchy defines motherhood for the Indian woman. The messages are internalized by women, who relate to and identify with the characters in the books and films they are exposed to, and treat them as their role models.

1.2.1 Culture and Ideology

The term culture is an extremely complex one, and various critics have interpreted the term differently. These definitions have varied over a period of time depending upon the socio-cultural context in which they were derived, but yet there seem to be certain elements that are common regardless of the background of the writer. Noted poet and literary critic T.S. Eliot in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* defines culture as “the way of life of a particular people living within one place”. He adds that “culture is made visible in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion” (Cited in Milner and Browitt 29). His definition clearly implies the variations that must exist in cultures across the world. He stresses on the factors that influence this culture, and the manifestations of culture in the day-to-day lives of people.

An interesting view on culture was taken by Matthew Arnold (1869). Arnold perceived culture as a social force which was in opposition to material civilization, more specifically to anarchy. In his famous work *Culture and Anarchy*, he discusses the significance of the role played by culture in shaping society. According to Arnold, culture “has a very important function to fulfill for mankind. And this function is particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilization is … mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become more so” (Cited in Milner and Browitt 27). Like other Modernist writers in England, Arnold was disturbed by the state of affairs of society and skeptical about its seemingly
degenerate future. Culture seemed to be a saving force that could alter the otherwise anarchic society.

While Arnold seemed to concentrate more on the social function of culture, the definition of culture was given a more elaborate extension by Left Culturalist Raymond Williams. In *Culture and Society*, Williams defines culture as “an individual habit of mind; the state of intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole way of life of a group or people” (Cited in Milner and Browitt 2). Culture seems to be related to three crucial elements in civilization – the individual, the society and the arts. All three are obviously inter-related and inter-dependent. The individual is a member of a group or society, and a creator of the arts which shape the lives of the rest of the group.

Extensive work on the notion of culture has been done by critic Tony Bennett. According to Bennett, culture refers to “the customs and rituals that govern or regulate our social relationships on a day to day basis as well as those texts – literary, musical, tele-visual and filmic – through which the social and natural world is represented or signified – made meaning of – in particular ways in accordance with particular conventions” (Cited in Tester 13). Once again there seems to be inter-dependence between the two parts of Bennett’s definition. The texts that ‘re-present’ or signify the ‘social and natural world’ are created by individuals whose ‘representation’ is based on their own perception of reality, and has a specific purpose. That purpose may be to create the customs and social relationships in accordance with their own perceptions and ideological perspectives.

Bennett attempts to study specifically the concept of popular culture – a term which has of late become extremely controversial because the definition of the word ‘popular’ itself tends to vary depending on the context and historical period in which it is used. ‘Popular culture’ has also been contrasted with the classical and timeless works of art which constitute the cannon. Classical literature has always been privileged over popular literature, but its superiority is now being questioned. For the
purpose of this work, popular culture will be used to refer to texts, both cinematic and literary, that have mass appeal, and are appreciated by the general public, and not restricted merely to an elite and erudite group of people.

An interesting approach to culture was taken by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", an essay that was published in the 1940s and is an attack on the contemporary 'culture industry', which seems to have resulted in great stylistic deterioration from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance period. This is attributed to the shift in cultural production from an artisanal stage (based completely on the efforts of an individual without need for any financial investment) to an industrial stage, where technology seems to have taken over.

Adorno and Horkheimer claim that different forms of media such as films, radio and magazines have become virtually indistinguishable from each other since they all seem to produce standardized products with few variations: “Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through” (30). They refute the justification that the products of culture that are made are based on the demands of the millions of consumers, who supposedly have identical needs. This seems to them, merely an excuse for replacing individuality with a standardized product which involves “obedience to the social hierarchy” (38) and actually caters to the demands of a capitalist economy.

These ‘forms of culture’ are no longer ‘art’ according to the traditional definition of the term. According to the writers, “The truth that they are business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce” (31). Referring specifically to the sound film, they insist that it “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story” (34), thereby forcing the audience to equate the film with reality.
In fact, they claim that “real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies” (34). The producers represent the average life but package it deliberately in a seductive manner, purely for the purpose of entertainment. The writers find this situation problematic because it involves a certain amount of hypocrisy: “The deception is not that the culture industry supplies amusement but that it ruins the fun by allowing business considerations to involve it in the ideological clichés of a culture in the process of self-liquidation [...] The culture industry is corrupt not because it is a sinful Babylon but because it is a cathedral dedicated to elevated pleasure” (41).

This brings us to the relationship between culture and ideology which has been explicated by Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid in *Women and Culture (1985)*. They view culture as “a living process emanating form a complex interaction of historical, material and ideological factors” (21). This definition differs from the other definitions discussed previously because it brings in the element of ideology, which is inextricably linked to culture. The writers suggest that ideology has a strong impact on culture, specifically in relation to women, which happens to be their area of study.

Before entering into a discussion on the relationship between culture and ideology, it would be pertinent to define the term ‘ideology’ which originated in the eighteenth century and was used by French philosophers to designate the study of the way that concepts develop from sense perceptions. It was incorporated and popularized by Karl Marx who represented ideology as a ‘superstructure’ of which the socioeconomic system is the ‘base’. According to Karl Marx and Frederich Engels in *The German Ideology*, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Cited in Milner and Browitt 60).

The concept was later developed by other Marxists who elaborated on Marx’s definition. Terry Eagleton, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism (1976)* defines ideology as “that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the
situation in which one class has social power over others is seen by most members of the society as ‘natural’ or not seen at all” (6). He further adds that ideology is not a set of doctrines, but rather, “signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole” (16-17).

Louis Althusser assimilated the theory of structuralism into his interpretation of ‘ideology’. He claims that ideology transforms individuals into subjects through the process of interpellation and represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. He explains in “Ideology and the State” (1992), “The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject – that is, in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (62). He coined the term ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ to refer to religious, legal, political and cultural institutions, whose central social function seemed to be to reproduce structured social inequality through the process of interpellation or hailing of the individual.

This concept seems to be very similar to the concept of ‘hegemony’, propounded by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci in Selections from Prison Notebooks (1971) perceived hegemony as the spontaneous and voluntary consent of the general masses to the values and beliefs offered by the dominant class. In hegemony, ideology is naturalized and appears to the masses to be ‘common sense’. However, what seems spontaneous, is actually “a product of careful and complex political and cultural relationships” (Cited in Tester 18). According to Gramsci, ‘state’ was equal to ‘political society plus civil society’, which means, in effect, that hegemony was protected by “the armour of coercion” (Cited in Milner and Browitt 70). Just as Althusser had defined ideological state apparatuses, so also does Gramsci identify ideological institutions and intermediaries such as the priest and the intellectual who supposedly communicate the ideas of the dominant class to the subordinate class.
These concepts can now be reapplied to culture, since it is an important ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ which is often effectively manipulated by the dominant group to impose its own ideology on the subordinate group in any society. It is also a primary method by which voluntary consent of the masses and their acceptance of its own value system are achieved. To go back to Bennet’s theory of popular culture, Bennet had claimed that the dominant class remains dominant and retains dominance precisely because “it is able to convince other social groups that what is best for it, is, in fact, best for everyone else as well. That is, the ruling class is dominant precisely to the extent that it is able to make itself speak ‘for the people’” (Cited in Tester 15).

However, Bennet also adds that the ruling group must construct its dominance repeatedly on a regular basis in order to remain effective – it cannot afford to rest since culture is a site for struggle and resistance. While by definition hegemony is always dominant, it is important to note that it is never either total or elusive. At any given period, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture have always existed, and form significant elements in society. Culture studies critic John Fiske states that “Everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterized by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing finally to submit to that power” (Cited in Tester 15). The next sub-section will examine the role played by media (a significant element of culture) in imparting ideas of the dominant ruling class to the masses.

1.2.2 The Role of Media

Popular culture plays a major role in influencing the masses for whom it is intended. In order to study the effect of popular culture, one may take up some of the basic theories of communication that have been developed by prominent theorists, and apply them to literature and cinema, with which this work will be dealing. It is important to note that while literature entails the work of one individual – the author (and of course the publisher), cinema is based on team work. A popular model of communication was offered by Harold D. Lasswell (1948), and has been frequently applied to mass communication. The model simply asks – Who says What to Whom
in Which Channel and With What Effect? ‘Who’ refers to the sender of the message, ‘what’ to the message itself, ‘channel’ to the medium chosen for communication, and ‘effect’ to the response of the audience.

Lasswell claimed that the sender of the message is extremely important and it is necessary to determine the level of control that the sender holds in the existing social system in order to determine the effect of the message. Referring to written media such as newspapers and magazines, Lasswell stressed the need for considering the right of control over the owner of a specific publication, his or her objectives, political alliances, and legal constraints etc. In the case of literature, the sender simply refers to the writer, who plays the most important role in communicating, with a secondary role being played by the publisher.

In the case of cinema, on the other hand, there are multiple senders. Cinema is the end-product of the perspectives of various team members – the producer, director, script-writer, cameraman, editor, cinematographer, actor etc., each of whom plays a vital role in shaping the film. One may consider the reputation of the producer/director, and the star cast who play a significant role in establishing pre-conceived notions about the film even before it has been released. This will be examined in later chapters where it is interesting to note the producer’s choice of star cast based on their personal and professional image. Moreover, it is also essential to consider the role of the censor board which plays an instrumental role in deciding whether or not the film is appropriate for a specific audience, since the board may effectively prevent a film from being released unless the film makers make the required amendments recommended by the board.

The importance of the sender was undermined by Roland Barthes in his famous essay “The Death of the Author” (1968). Barthes rendered the source and sender completely redundant by declaring that the writer is not an originator, but a scriptor whose writings are based on “his immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halts”. He argues that the text “is a tissue of quotations drawn from
the innumerable centers of culture”. Barthes claims that giving a text an author limits
the potential of its interpretation for it furnishes the text with a “final signified”. He
focuses instead on the reader, or the recipient of the message. This work disagrees
with Barthes' devaluation of the sender or the supreme emphasis on the text and
recipient, and argues that all three elements are equally important and play an
important role in the ultimate understanding of the message. The sender’s
interpretation of the message may bias the recipient and urge him to accept the
sender’s point of view. What the sender is trying to say is extremely significant
because the sender is communicating with a specific objective — and that objective
may be to convince the receiver to accept his perspective.

Moving from the sender, one must then discuss the importance of the message itself —
the 'what' in Lasswell’s model. The message would undoubtedly be influenced by
the sender’s socio-cultural and educational background, and his own ideology. In the
case of cinema, infrastructural facilities and technical expertise available to produce
the film, as well as the financial support would determine the manner in which the
message is communicated.

Lasswell perceives the need for content research in media, which deals with
representation of reality in media. It is essential to analyze, Lasswell suggests, how
certain groups (racial groups, gender, class etc.) are represented in media, how much
importance is given to these groups, and the frequency of such representations.
Media often presents stereotyped characters in shades of black and white, rather than
offering realistic portrayals of shades of grey. Myra Macdonald in Representing
Women – Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media (1995) discusses the importance
of the concept of the stereotype: “The concept of the stereotype is used to criticize the
reduction of the three-dimensional quality of the real to a one-dimensional distorted
form. Particularly when the group being stereotyped is already in a disadvantaged
position, the stereotype intensifies the offence. She adds, “Like ideology, the
stereotype works by being plausible and by masking its own value system” (13). In
the case of women, it has often been observed that media depicts contrasting
stereotyped images of the ideal woman (an epitome of self-sacrifice and selflessness), who is juxtaposed with the evil woman (a selfish and cruel woman who is responsible for the destruction of human values).

With reference to motherhood, one may consider the stereotyped manner in which mothers are depicted not only in cinema but also in advertisements. In most advertisements, with the exception of a few rare cases, it is the mother who is portrayed as taking care of the needs of her child – and not the father. It is the mother who feeds the child, washes the children’s clothes, expresses concern over the child’s hygiene and health, and plays with the child. In fact, it is interesting to observe the brand names of products related to children – Mother Care, Mum’s Choice etc., where the focus is entirely on the mother, thereby implying her role in child care. The father, significantly, is completely neglected.

Even if one scrutinizes books on bringing up children, one may remark that the books are targeted towards mothers, taking for granted that it is the mother who is the primary caretaker of the child. The books address the mothers teaching them how to ‘mother’ a child, and also advise them on how to seek help from their husbands, who are perceived as playing secondary roles in the upbringing of children. The ‘fathering’ role is negligible and merely supportive in comparison with the role of the mother. The message sent across through representation therefore clearly states that the mother plays a more crucial role than the father.

The same is the case with cinema. Feminist film critic Shoma Chatterjee had suggested in *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman – A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema (1998)* the need for feminist film theory to examine ‘presences’ or the ways in which women are portrayed in films, the kinds of images they are invested with and the kind of characters constructed in the film; as well as the ‘absences’ or the ways in which women characters do not appear at all in films. In the case of motherhood, Indian cinema often portrays the self-sacrificing mother, and
contrasts her with the evil step-mother, leaving out shades of grey and the ambivalent feelings that mothers often experience towards their children.

Cinema as a channel for sending messages becomes a significant decision for the sender since it is an audio-visual medium which is powerful because of its reach and mass appeal. Lasswell stresses the concept of channel or medium used to communicate. Media analysis, according to Lasswell is critical before communicating to an audience since it helps the sender to decide whether or not the channel he is planning to use is appropriate for the kind of audience he wishes to address. He needs to determine the accessibility, affordability, effectiveness and propriety of the channel for his audience.

Since the media available today are numerous and vary in their target audience, the choice of cinema becomes extremely significant precisely because of the reach of cinema and the heterogeneous nature of audience which varies in age, gender, class and socio-economic background. For ‘whom’ the message is intended thus becomes a very vital issue that needs to be considered, and therein lies the need for audience analysis. In the case of cinema, it has often been suggested that films offer the audience what they want to watch. A film which does not adhere to the value system of the intended audience often fails at the box office simply because the audience refuses to accept the filmmaker’s point of view if it does not corroborate with its own.

The impact that media has on the audience was studied in the last component of Lasswell’s model, which he referred to as the ‘effect’. As far as Lasswell was concerned, media could either simply provide information, persuade the audience to accept its message or bring about a change in the attitude of the audience. For instance, in the case of motherhood, media may consciously work towards stressing the need for mothers to stay at home and look after their children instead of taking up paid jobs. It may do so by providing information about the importance of breastfeeding, and pointing towards the difference between the children who are brought up by their mothers and children who are taken care of by domestic help or day care
centers. Children whose mothers do not work outside the house may be portrayed as being better adjusted, more intelligent and sociable than children of working mothers. Hence, through these images, media may persuade women who may have intended to work after having children to change their decisions.

There has been tremendous research on the impact of media on audiences and the importance of media in the day-to-day lives of people. Van Zoonen (1994) claims that “mass media produce and reproduce collective memories, desires, hopes and fears, and thus perform a similar function as myths in earlier centuries” (37). She adds, “[...] media production is not simply a matter of reflection but entails a complex process of negotiation, processing and reconstruction; media audiences do not simply take in or reject media messages, but use and interpret them according to the logic of their own social, cultural and individual circumstances” (40).

This point was elaborated by Douglas Kellner in “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture” (1995). He takes Zoonen’s argument a step further: “Products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood, our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (5). Kellner seems to attribute our very value system to media, which thus becomes an extremely powerful and instrumental tool in shaping the personalities of individuals living in a society.

While mass media is a term with wide scope, it would be interesting to look specifically at the views of critics on cinema, since this thesis focuses specifically on cinema as a form of mass media. Anu Celly discusses the Indian film in “The Mythical Text of Woman’s Re-presentation in Cinema: The Image Icon Interface in Devi” (2002). She perceives cinema as a “mediator of social realities and personal dreams, collective concerns and individual aspirations” and feels that cinema has “the potential to redirect the cultural and material fabric of our everyday lives” (215).
While on the one hand, popular cinema is a “vibrant and dynamic medium for effectuating social change, a catalyst of public and private manifestations of human conduct, a signpost of cultural values and a receptacle of dominant ideologies”, it can also be a “reflector of confirmatory and resistant positions” (214).

The belief that media images are products of dominant ideologies and are manipulated is reiterated by Vimal Balasubramanyan in *Mirror Image – The Media and the Women’s Question* (1988). Balasubramanyan points out that although media is supposed to hold up a mirror to society, the mirror image “is not ‘real’, but is virtual and laterally inverted” (17). Kamala Bhasin adds that media acts as a conservative force in society and attempts to maintain status quo. In *Women and Media – Analysis Alternatives and Action* (1984), she states, “Media has a two-way relationship with social reality. By being selective in what it shows and how it shows it, it interprets and creates its own reality” (9).

The effect of mass media may be observed through audience feedback. While in many forms of media, it may be difficult to gauge the reaction of the audience, in the case of cinema, it can be analysed by the commercial success or failure of the film at the box office. Films that appeal to the masses generally do well at the box office, while those that the audience does not accept are doomed and fail miserably. Certain films tend to do better business in urban or rural areas, or often the overseas market, thus exhibiting their appeal to a certain section of the population and rejection by another section. These analyses can be found in trade guides which gauge the audience response to a film.

The actual impact of mass media also needs to be considered. Ila Joshi in *Women Dimension on Television (Policy, Personnel and Programme)* (1991) argues that “Social attitudes and behaviour are adopted through a complex process of imitation and comparison with the attitudes and behaviour presented by mass media” (17). When media presents distorted versions of reality, it becomes problematic. The sex role stereotypes which are repeatedly projected and emphasized in media are
internalized and deeply embedded into the consciousness of the viewers. Bhasin applies this concept to women and states, “Media does not only influence the social image of women but also their self image. Most women are themselves uncritical consumers of anti-woman media” (14).

Kellner (1995) proposes that there are two kinds of audience responses to a text, and defines them as ‘dominant’ and ‘oppositional’ readings. “Dominant readings are those in which audiences appropriate texts in line with the interests of the dominant culture and ideological intentions of a text. An oppositional reading, by contrast, celebrates the resistance to this reading in audience appropriation of a text” (8).

A similar proposition had been given by Stuart Hall, whose theories will also be discussed in Chapter Five. Hall’s ‘Encoding and Decoding’ analyses the process of converting a message into symbols, and reconverting those symbols into understandable meaning. He suggested that the elements in both processes were the same – that is, the production and reproduction of meaning go through the same stages in order to be encoded and decoded. The stages, according to Hall are technical infrastructure, relations of production, frameworks of knowledge. On the basis of these stages, encoding takes place, and the TV programme is made. The programme then goes through the same stages when it is decoded. Hall argues that the moment of the message, wherein he perceives as the TV programme as meaningful discourse (which may even be applied to a film or novel) “needs to be dismantled into its constituents on both sides of its exchange” (Cited in Inglis 168). Since our meaning structures are based on our education, experience and personalities, there is an ideological struggle in society over meanings.

Liesbet Van Zoonen (1994) comments on Hall’s discussion and suggests that as a result of the tensions in the ‘encoding’ process, media texts “do not constitute a closed ideological system, but ‘reflect’ the contradictions of production” (41). Since media texts carry multiple meanings and can be interpreted or decoded differently, they may be termed ‘polysemic’. The process of decoding may contradict the
intentions of encoding. She quotes Hall (1980): “Encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” (Cited in Zoonen 42). She then offers her own interpretation of his theory: “Thus most texts do offer a ‘preferred reading or meaning’ which, given the economic and ideological location of most media will tend to reconstruct dominant values”. Needless to say, it is the dominant readings which prevail since they have a strong impact over the audience.

Having discussed two models of communication, it would be interesting to apply the theoretical models to the concept of motherhood which has been the central theme of many films and novels. Various film-makers and authors have attempted to communicate their definition of motherhood to a varied audience. The film-makers (which, as discussed before, comprises an entire team of professionals) or writers define motherhood according to their own understanding of what the role entails, and encode the message accordingly. They often glorify motherhood, thereby creating a desire in women to experience the ‘joys’ that the experience seems to bring with it. The audience is exposed to the qualities of an ideal mother who is the embodiment of self-sacrifice and unconditional love. This message is corroborated by the mythological figures of mothers that are stored in the ‘collective unconscious’ (to borrow a term coined by Carl Jung) of the recipients of the message. The recipients who comprise a heterogeneous group often internalize the message communicated to them, treat the characters in the films and books as their role models, and accordingly imbibe the definitions given to them by the senders. The popularity of the films and books is evidence of the positive feedback received from the recipients. Thus, media plays an important role in communicating the dominant ideology to the masses.

1.2.3 The Ideology of Motherhood
This section explores the contradictory approaches towards motherhood in an attempt to analyse how the ideology of motherhood is imposed upon women, and also the contradictory nature of the responses within the feminist movement to the concept of motherhood. On the one hand, patriarchy glorifies motherhood, offering reverence to
the mother figure, and equating her with God for her ability to give birth. On the other hand, the same society devalues motherhood, perceiving the mother (by virtue of her inability to produce exchange goods) as inferior to the father (whose paid labour seems to enhance his contribution not only to the family but also to society). Placing the mother on a pedestal is thus merely a guise of keeping her under control and binding her to the home where her efforts are rendered insignificant in comparison with the efforts of the father.

Motherhood plays an important role in establishing women as a subordinate group in society. The glorification of the ‘mother’ figure becomes a powerful weapon which is used for the oppression of women. In the Indian context, especially, the exaltation of the mother figure is extremely significant. Hindu philosophy views the woman’s life as passing through three stages – the daughter of her parents, the wife of her husband (and daughter-in-law of his parents), and the mother of her children. The third stage appears to be an extremely crucial one in her life – it is the stage which confirms her completeness as a woman, and the fulfillment of her function in society.

As Sudhir Kakar states in *The Inner World – A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India (1981)*, “[...] Motherhood confers upon her [the Indian woman] a purpose and identity that nothing else can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is a son is both a certificate and a redemption” (56). According to Kakkar, motherhood elevates the status of a woman to the renewer of the race and showers her with respect which was not accorded to her even as a wife. Woman’s identity is defined by and limited to motherhood. To quote ancient law-giver Manu, “Woman was created for the express purpose of giving birth, hence they are worthy of worship, the light of the house” (Cited in Bhattacharji 53).

The same glorification is accorded to the mother in Islam. According to Maulana Wahiduddin Khan in *Woman Between Islam and Western Society (1996)*, Islam regards men and women not as duplicates of one another, but as complements. Their biological differences accord them different occupations. While women with their
passive qualities are more suited for domesticity, men, being more active, are better qualified to shoulder responsibilities outside the home. Although Khan asserts emphatically that the work performed by the woman in the house is of prime importance and equal to the work performed by a man, his approach to women is condescending and patronizing. Khan interprets the Islamic law which is apparently “designed to steer women away from the ordeals of the crassly competitive and brazenly immoral world in which only men can successfully make their way” (86). Women are therefore regarded as being incapable of entering the ‘immoral world’ inhabited by men.

Khan further states:

The projection of woman as the most honorable human being in the form of a mother makes it quite clear what sort of society Islam wants to create. It is one in which a woman is accorded the maximum honor and respect. A member of such a society, who shows full respect to a woman as a mother will, of necessity, become more caring in regard to other women. With the creation of such a mentality, women in general will share the status accorded to a mother at home. (142)

Women are thus coaxed into accepting the division of labour as it exists, and are advised not to deviate from the ‘natural’ sphere to which they have been assigned. So long as they remain within their natural sphere, they will be accorded respect – but if they transgress, they have only themselves to blame for the consequences that will ensue.

Motherhood is thus not only deemed socially compulsory but also becomes a natural step for women to climb the ladder of status and respect, which would otherwise be denied to them. Maithreyi Krishnaraj in “Motherhood – Power and Powerlessness” (1995) suggests, “The conceptualization of motherhood is the way in which the biological capacity of women to become mothers is used to build up an ideal, based on which society can dictate what they ought to do and what they ought to be. Motherhood is one of the key institutions through which women are discriminated against.” She elaborates, “As an ideology, it is generalized into an acceptable,
The glorification of motherhood extends to Western society as well. Ann Woolett discusses the importance of motherhood in women’s lives in “Having Children: Accounts of Childless Women and Women with Reproductive Problems” (1991). She argues that motherhood bestows positive identity on women and can be seen as the key to adulthood. Besides it confirms “women’s female identity and is in this respect central to their sense of themselves. It demonstrates women’s physical and psychological adequacy, and as the producers of the next generation, gives them identifiable social functions” (53).

Significantly, while on the one hand motherhood is exalted, it is also devalued simultaneously. In comparison with the work performed by her male counterpart, the work of the woman is rendered inferior. Women internalize the belief that their role is secondary to that of the bread-earning husband, and therefore begin to devalue their own efforts in the upbringing of children. As bell hooks points out in *Feminist Theory – From Margin to Center* (2000), “Sexism leads women to devalue parenting work while inflating the value of jobs and careers. Acceptance of sexist ideology is indicated when women teach children that there are only two possible behavior patterns: the role of the dominant or submissive being” (48). Ann Oakley also agrees that at one level women experience pleasure in their reproductive capacities, and welcome the responsibility which elevates their social status. However, at another level “they are aware that they carry out their responsibilities in a social, material and cultural environment which does not privilege children and mothers, and in a world centered around production, not reproduction” (Cited in Gordon 106).

Noted feminist Germaine Greer, who was severely attacked for her seemingly outrageous statements against motherhood had unveiled the hypocrisy of Western society in her essay “Abortion ii” (1986): “Those people who in their raging letters to me most extol the joys of motherhood are the same who glare at the women on the
tube because she cannot keep her child quiet and still. A society which pretends to honor motherhood while it forces lactating women to hunt for hiding places where they may give their infants the breast is utterly hypocritical” (115). In *Sex and Destiny (1984)*, Greer asserts that at every level and in every sphere, the mother is devalued: “The woman who becomes a mother suffers a crushing loss of status; as a ‘patient’ she was at the bottom end of the health professional’s social hierarchy. At home she is a solitary menial” (15). Referring specifically to the mother in a nuclear family in Western society, Greer strongly asserts that the woman receives no support from her family members. While this attack may not be applicable in the Indian context, where women still receive support from their family members irrespective of whether they live in joint or nuclear families, the support is indeed diminishing with the gradual disintegration of the joint family system which is giving way to more and more nuclear families today.

While social support is a crucial factor that determines the way motherhood is perceived by women, there has always existed a dichotomy in the responses towards motherhood within the ‘feminist movement’, which itself is a complicated term. While some feminists have suggested that the role of the mother should be celebrated, appreciated and recognized as an important social function, others have severely criticized the role and demanded alternate solutions. As Sheila Kitzinger effectively puts it in *Women as Mothers (1978)*, “In the women’s movement there is ambiguity in the approach to motherhood. It represents for some a biological trap associated with the outmoded stereotype of woman as breeder and a method of ensuring her servitude in the home, and for others an opportunity for achieving something which a man manifestly cannot do, however hard he tries. There are on the one hand those who actually enjoy birth, breast-feeding and other aspects of biological motherhood, and on the other those who see them as traitors to the whole movement” (32).

One of the early feminist writers Charlotte Perkins Gilman envisaged a utopian world where women were equal to men, and looked forward to a transformation in society because of the change in the status of women. According to Gilman in “Our
Androcentric Culture or the Man-made World” (1911), this change would have a positive impact on the woman as mother and would serve to enhance her mothering qualities which would be celebrated for their uniqueness: “The woman, free at last, intelligent, recognizing her real place and responsibility in life as a human being, will be not less, but more efficient as a mother. She will understand that, in the line of physical evolution, motherhood is the highest process; and that her work, as a contribution to an improved race, must always involve this great function”.

She critiques the existing social structure where women and motherhood are devalued, and imagines a situation where women will no longer be subservient to men, but will have the power to choose men who will father their children:

A new sense of power and pride of womanhood will waken; a womanhood no longer sunk in helpless dependence upon men; no longer limited to mere unpaid house-service; no longer blinded by the false morality which subjects even motherhood to man’s dominance; but a womanhood which will recognize its pre-eminent responsibility to the human race, and live up to it. Then, with all normal and right competition among men for the favor of women, those best fitted for fatherhood will be chosen. Those who are not chosen will live single - perforce.

This change would be passed on to future generations, and the sons of women would also be reared differently, and would learn to appreciate women for what they are.

While Gilman offered an idealistic view of a future society that she hoped would emerge from the existing movement, noted feminist Betty Friedan also stressed on the need to appreciate motherhood envisaging an equal relationship between the sexes. Her book *The Feminine Mystique (1963)* explored the American middle class woman’s ‘problem with no name’ -- referring to a sense of emptiness, frustration and dissatisfaction that the average American woman seemed to experience with her life and role as mother and wife. According to Friedan, the ‘feminine mystique’ had been embedded into the mind of the American woman. She had been told that motherhood was a full time job in itself, and that she was fortunate to be in the position that she occupied: “The problem was dismissed by telling the housewife she doesn’t realize
how lucky she is – her own boss, no time clock, no junior executive gunning for her job. What if she isn’t happy – does she think men are happy in this world? Does she really, secretly, still want to be a man? Doesn’t she know yet how lucky she is to be a woman?” (59)

Although women were told that this problem had no solution, Friedan refused to be convinced. “The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill” (61). She insisted that the problem needed to be addressed, and that a woman need not choose between a marriage and career. She asked women to shed the housewife image, and try to balance marriage, motherhood and career, ending her book with a hopeful note: “When men and women will share not only children, home and garden, but the responsibilities and passions of work, a new human future will take place” (Cited in Bhagwat 2004 153).

Friedan was disappointed with the feminist movement and elaborated on the reasons for the failure of the movement in her next book The Second Stage (1981). One of the major reasons for the failure of the movement seemed to be that it overlooked the right of the woman to choose to have children. The need for families, nurture and love seemed to be a basic need, and Friedan suggested that instead of denying these needs, society had to create new kinds of family forms that could accommodate the demands of women. She perceived radical feminists as inverted female chauvinists, and refused to see the woman’s biology as the ultimate source of her oppression.

She does acknowledge that motherhood was certainly used as an excuse to deny her education and career opportunities, but does not see motherhood as inherently oppressive. She insists that motherhood is not merely a mystique, but a “profound human impulse to have children” (73). She states: “To deny the part of one’s being as woman that has, through the ages, been expressed in motherhood – nurturing, loving, softness and tiger strength – is to deny part of one’s personhood as a woman. I am not saying that everyone has to be a mother to fulfill herself as a woman” (86).
The use of the words ‘impulse’, and the association of women with being ‘nurturing’ and ‘loving’ seem to reiterate the bio-determinist view of motherhood as a natural instinct in women, and while Friedan makes an attempt to qualify her statements later, she does seem to be a victim of conditioning that the desire to have children is innate in women. She elaborates on the right of the woman to choose to have or not to have a child with control over her reproductive capacities and social support: “The change in woman’s historical, political reality is that motherhood – which was once her necessity and passive destiny, and which confined, defined, used up her whole life - is now no longer a necessity but choice and even when chosen, no longer can define or even use up most of her life” (90).

She stresses on the economic necessity for women to work, and urges women to resolve the dilemma between the woman’s search for her own individuality and passion for work, and family values which should be embraced anew. She also emphasizes the role of the men in ensuring that child rearing and caring is shared, and the role of companies and the state in offering flexible, part-time jobs for both sexes in order to ameliorate the current situation. Friedan affirms maternity as a powerful value in life, and implies that it can be rewarding and meaningful if it is chosen willingly, and if the mother receives ample support from her surroundings.

Friedan’s views have been corroborated by other feminists as well. For instance, Kitzinger (1978) speaks not only of the beauty of motherhood, but also emphasizes the fact that women in Western society have begun to devalue their own efforts because they consider their role secondary to that of their husbands. Their loss of self-esteem seems to be a result of the depreciation of the mother figure in Western society in general:

Being a mother is an exciting occupation which demands all one’s intelligence, all one’s emotional resources and all one’s capacity for speedy adjustment to new challenges. There is no reason why a woman should not want to have another career as well, but it is a pity that she should feel she ought to because she is ‘only a mother’. Mothers have underestimated themselves for far too long and too often have been crowded out by the
professionals who give advice, tell them how children ought to be brought up and criticize them when things go wrong. (230)

Similarly, Ann Dally in *Inventing Motherhood – The Consequences of an Ideal (1982)* also agrees that motherhood has been trivialized not only by patriarchy, but also by the feminist movement which has denigrated it by urging women to stop rocking the cradle and start rocking the boat. Dally comments, “Yet one of the most vital human roles is to rock the cradle. We might go further and serve future generations better if we regarded rocking the cradle as a privilege which should be done and shared only by those men and women who are wise enough and developed enough and sane enough to be responsible for it” (184).

A number of Black feminists also critiqued the feminist movement for advocating social changes which demanded the right of women to work. In fact, in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983)*, Alice Walker coined the term ‘womanist’ which was differentiated from the term ‘feminist’. Walker defines ‘womanism’ as “a commitment towards the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female” (Cited in Pandurang 118) The ‘womanist’ movement did not merely seek equality for women alone as did the feminist movement, but sought to change an entire system which was repressive and exploitative for men and women both.

Motherhood is acceptable to womanists, but it would have to be on their own terms. Moreover, womanists, unlike feminists, did not necessarily demand the right to work. They pointed out that African women for instance had always worked along with the men. Most of them worked not out of choice or the need for personal fulfillment, but rather out of compulsion. Hence, African women did not seek the right to have careers, and nor did they perceive motherhood as an obstacle to their career growth. The same could be applicable to the rural Indian woman as well, who bears the double burden of the laborious work in the fields as well as the responsibilities at home.
While a number of critics lauded motherhood, there were others that critiqued it, perceiving the woman's anatomy and her biological capacity to bear children as oppressive. Noted French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her masterpiece *The Second Sex (1949)* claimed that while man defined himself as subject, the woman was automatically defined as the 'other'. Women, according to Beauvoir became dependent on men and were delegated this position of outsider because of their anatomy and physiology and the values attributed to their biology; and not because of any historical event. Men have always controlled women, by determining the role they will play, not on the basis of the interests of women, but in accordance with their own requirements.

Beauvoir asserts that male domination is expressed in the very posture of copulation where the male is on the female, and he introduces an alien element into her body through fertilization. Thus, while the male finds self-fulfillment in the activity, the woman's body becomes a resistance to be broken through. The next step seems even more crucial as the sperm separates from the body of the male, enabling him to regain his individuality. The egg, on the other hand:

begins to separate from the female body (which is the foetus) and batters up her substance throughout the period of pregnancy. First violated, the woman is then alienated, she becomes in part other than herself [...] Thus, she has to renounce her individuality for the benefit of the species which demands this abdication. The male on the other hand, retains his individuality and freedom, in his transcendence towards the next generation. In short, the male is free while the female is wrapped up in the species. (Cited in Reprint 1981 57)

The idea of an innate 'maternal instinct' is refuted, and de Beauvoir claims that "the mother's attitude depends on the total situation and her reaction to it" (Cited in Reprint 1981 526), which is highly variable. She also defamiliarises the notion of pregnancy as a beautiful experience: "Pregnancy is above all a drama that is acted out within the woman herself. She feels it is at once an enrichment and an injury; the foetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on her body [...] Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an
incubator, an egg; fertile organisms, like fowls with high egg production” (Cited in Reprint 1981 521). While motherhood is portrayed to women as a means of joy and liberation, in reality “maternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle daydreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism” (Cited in Reprint 1981 532).

Marriage seems to hold different values and meanings for men and women. While a man’s existence is justified by his work, in the case of a woman, marriage becomes the core of her life as it entails sexual satisfaction for her partner, as well as the propagation of the species. Moreover, de Beauvoir argues that man, being unrestrained by the painful ordeal of childbirth is able to transcend his animal nature by devising projects which enable him to create history. Woman, on the other hand, becomes restricted because of her biology. The solution seems to lie in artificial insemination which “completes the evolutionary advance that will enable humanity to master the reproductive function […] Now protected in large part fi-rom the slavery of reproduction, woman is in a position to assume the economic role that is offered her and will assure her of complete independence” (Cited in Reprint 1981, 152).

The problem with marriage as an institution (which inevitably led to motherhood), an abolition of that institution, and the need for artificial insemination was perceived by later feminists such as Shulamith Firestone as well. Firestone asserted in *The Dialectic of Sex - The Case for Feminist Revolution (1979)* that throughout history, women’s lives had revolved around and been determined by their biology. Whether it was menstruation, menopause, childbirth or the nurture of children, these biological changes in her body made a woman dependent on males for physical survival, be it males within or outside the family. Another important fact to be taken into consideration was that human infants, unlike animals, are to a great extent dependent upon adults for their basic survival for a long period of time. Moreover, she pointed out, “a basic mother/child interdependency has existed in some form in every society past or present, and thus has shaped the psychology of every mature female and every infant” (17).
Based on all these factors, specifically the reproductive differences between the sexes, the first division of labour emerged at the origins of class and caste. The cultural history of our civilization has apparently divided achievement itself into male and female modes. Men have become masters of what Firestone describes as the ‘technological mode’, representing science and technology, objectivity, logic, rationality and realism. Women, on the contrary, are associated with the ‘aesthetic’ mode, which connotes subjectivity, intuition, fantasy, and even hysteria. While men are concerned with the conscious mind (ego), women are concerned with the subconscious (id). It is men who dictate what is appropriate in the aesthetic mode.

Firestone nonchalantly holds motherhood responsible for the predicament of women: “The heart of a woman’s oppression is her childbearing and child rearing role. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determine the society they will ultimately build” (73). This seems to a vicious cycle from which it becomes difficult to entangle oneself:

Nature produced the fundamental inequality – half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them – which later consolidated, institutionalized, in the interests of men. Reproduction of the species cost women dearly, not only emotionally, psychologically, culturally but even in strictly material (physical) terms: before recent methods of contraception, continuous childbirth led to constant ‘female trouble’, early ageing and death. (192)

Since the reproductive capacities of women were instrumental in their subordinate status in society, equality could only be achieved by alleviating them of the complete responsibility for reproduction. “The first demand for any alternative system must be: The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women” (193). She suggests that child-bearing could be taken over by technology. However, if society is unable to come to terms with this seemingly extremist stance,
she advocates that women should be offered some form of rewards, incentives or compensation (and not merely the supposed satisfaction of giving birth to a child) for their special contribution to society.

Child-rearing, which has to do with the “maintaining of power relations, forced internalization of family values, and many other ego concerns that war with the happiness of the individual child” (221) should be taken over by society as a whole, and divided between men, women and other children. Firestone demands political autonomy based on the economic independence of both women and children and a new social order which she refers to as ‘cybernetic communism’. This will supposedly create a new form of corporate life and abolish the division of labour as it exists. In this social order, individuals could choose to either live alone and pursue professions, or live together in non-legal arrangements based on mutual consent without dependency on one another; or alternately in households. Households would consist of groups of people of both sexes who agree to live together and share their lives for a specific period of time without any pre-defined relationships between the individuals. Natural child birth methods would no longer be used, and children would have the right to choose to transfer from one household to another.

Firestone’s radical ideas came under severe criticism, but also received support and were echoed by other feminists, who also made similar demands for changes in the social structure. Kate Millet, for instance, termed the existing ideology of male supremacy as ‘sexual politics’. In her book by the same name (1980), Millet defined politics as “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (Cited in Bhagwat 2004 180). In such a scenario, certain groups have no recognition in political structures and are unable to organize themselves in opposition to the dominant group. While groups who rule by birthright seem to be disappearing fast, “there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another – the scheme that prevails in the area of sex” (Cited in Bhagwat 2004 181). Throughout history, the relationship between the
sexes has apparently been one of dominance and subordination, and provides the most fundamental concept of power in our culture.

Both sexes are socialized into accepting patriarchal ideology, wherein the human personality is perceived in a stereotypical manner. The qualities of aggression and force are ascribed to the male, while those of passivity and docility to the female. Each sex has a pre-defined role in society, and the woman is assigned a domestic role whereas the ambitious and achievement-oriented role of the leader is accorded to the man. The man’s role is obviously privileged over that of the female, and his contribution is deemed greater than that of the woman. Institutions like religion, family, and marriage serve to impose the rule of the male over the female.

Having defined the problem of sexual politics which subordinates women, Millet goes on to propose the need for a sexual revolution. This revolution would entail the end of patriarchy, sexual repression, stereotyped personalities; and a redefinition of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as well as the end of sex roles and the status accorded to these roles. It would also end all sexual inhibitions and taboos such as homosexuality, illegitimacy, pre and extra-marital sexuality, all of which threaten the institution of marriage. This would give way to a more permissive society, where freedom of sexuality would have no negative connotations.

The very concept of a family stresses upon the need for legitimacy in order to meet its crucial functions of reproduction and socialization of the young. By propagating the need for a biological father, and contending that no child should be brought into the world without a man, patriarchy makes the woman and child dependent upon the man. The family would be replaced by the professional care of children, which would become a public responsibility, since the role of primary caretaker of children seemed to Millet to be the primary obstacle in preventing woman from being a human being.

Having examined the various theories mentioned above, certain observations seem to emerge clearly. Firstly, patriarchy manipulates its stance on motherhood,
contradicting itself in the process. Ostensibly, it seems to glorify motherhood by placing mothers on a pedestal, according them the status of goddesses, and projecting them as being worthy of worship. However, this exaltation is merely a weapon for keeping the women under control and justifying the division of labour as it exists in society. The general accepted contention that the efforts put in by the male which require more physical and mental energy than that put in by the female, serves to assert the superiority of the male. The glorified mother becomes a decorative object with no real powers within the household which is supposedly her domain. The decisions are ultimately taken by the male, and the woman has no right even over the children she produces, as will be evident in texts discussed in later chapters. Hence, the woman is lured into accepting, believing and internalizing false notions of her own exaltation. However, she is no more than a victim who is deprived of control and power by the very patriarchy that supposedly holds her in high esteem.

The responses of the feminist critics are also interesting. Those critics who celebrate and propagate motherhood often tend to run into the danger of echoing the very views of patriarchy they aim to decry. The glorification of motherhood by patriarchy takes on a different form in the theories of feminist critics who describe motherhood as a uniquely ‘feminine’ experience, and often as an instinctive desire that women seem to possess. This is reminiscent of the theory of bio-determinism, which perceives the maternal instinct as innate to all women.

On the other hand, radical feminists tend to take on an extremist position, perceiving motherhood as the root of all women’s problems. The solutions they offer are often extremely impractical and irrational. Moreover, it is interesting to note that artificial insemination, which is seen by some of these radical feminists as a solution to the current problem facing women, has today become a means of controlling women’s reproductive capacities. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, The Curse of Infertility, which focuses on assisted reproductive technologies and their effects on women.
Perhaps the most balanced approach is that of bell hooks (2000). Hooks states:

Female parenting is significant and valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists. It should receive deserving recognition, praise, and celebration within a feminist context where there is renewed effort to rethink the nature of motherhood; to make motherhood neither a compulsory experience for women nor an exploitative or oppressive one; to make female parenting good, effective parenting, whether it is done exclusively by women or in conjunction with men. (136)

What seems dangerous is the ideology of motherhood which uses powerful cultural tools like cinema and literature to impress upon women that motherhood is a natural feminine desire, and a woman’s primary function in society - the basic reason for her existence. What is even more dangerous is the denial of choices to a woman in performing this function, and the ostracism of a woman who refuses to or is unable to perform this function. Ascribing and defining qualities that a mother is expected to exhibit and possess, and forcing her to suppress her real feelings lead the woman to experience suffocation in the role that she may otherwise enjoy.

This thesis suggests that motherhood is culturally constructed, and is imposed upon women through a projection of role models in various cultural narratives; and that women internalize these role models and accept the ideology that is handed down to them by patriarchy. While there are passive consumers of patriarchal ideology, there are also women who question such ideas. However, the dominant ideology is what pervades, and takes precedence over the subordinate ideology. The problem arises because motherhood is portrayed in cultural narratives as being necessarily instinctively desirable and rewarding. The woman is not allowed to choose or discover for herself the joys and pains of motherhood, and is not allowed to express any feelings of ambivalence towards her children if they exist. The subsequent chapters explore how the construction of the ideology of motherhood is reflected in various literary and cinematic texts.