Chapter Two

Theorizing the Umbilical Cord

The umbilical cord is the most distinctive symbol of the bond between the mother and the child. It is a flexible cord like structure containing blood vessels, attaching a foetus to the placenta during gestation, and acting as a source of essential supplies. But more essentially it is what inseparably links two individuals together. Many have studied and theoretized this bond. Implicitly, in the OED and all subsequent formal definitions one finds that, mother in the primary sense of the word is someone, who gives birth to a child or seeks protection and control of a child or is affectionately revered and looked up to by a child. According to Sara Ruddick, an innovative and influential feminist philosopher who has to her credit many articles and book-length studies on the concept of motherhood, "to be a 'mother' is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life." She also points out that "the concept of 'mother' depends on that of 'child'” (Maternal Thinking 17). Both mother and child are problematic terms to conceptualize, and the major reason for the problem is that they are relational words, marking partial, quasi-temporary identities.

Once upon a time, maternity seemed to be a biological fact fixed both literally and symbolically within the private, affective sphere. Today we debate the meaning and practice of motherhood and mothering in many
public spaces. “Motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all, a mould that is all-encompassing and means the same thing to all people” (Bombeck 2). Motherhood had meant many different things in the past, just as it means different things in different cultures and subcultures today and will no doubt continue to mean in the future.

A search for the lexical root of the word “mother” partially reveals some of the complexities within the bond. Around 1908, the OED under the editorship of Henry Bradley tried to bring out the many nuances of the word “mother.” The first sense of mother (sb. 1) grounds the concept in what until recently could hardly be seen as anything but its natural meaning, denoting a gendered, bodily, and relational identity, "a female parent, a woman who has given birth to a child." The second sense expands the referential field to “things more or less personified . . . with reference either to a metaphorical giving birth, to the protecting care exercised by a mother, or to the affectionate reverence due to a mother." This second definition reminds us that long before surrogacy as we know it, the word mother was frequently extended from its essential link with childbearing women. But this metaphorical usage is still grounded either in the process of giving birth, or in mothers' presumed function (protecting) and status (reverence due). The third sense reconnects mother to a gendered identity, "a woman who exercises control like that of a mother, or who is looked up to as a mother." Like the second sense, this one disengages the word from any necessary connection to actual childbirth but
firmly reattaches it to femaleness and again confirms that motherhood is a matter of a particular, clearly understood function—‘control’ over whatever is mothered—and high status. In contrast to the insistence on the defining obviousness of the elevated position of the mother in senses two and three, a fourth and last sense indicates that mother can be "a term of address for an elderly woman of the lower class." The citations that support this sense reveal that from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries in England, mother sometimes connoted the opposite of what it was normally supposed to mean, not high status, but a devaluation in two critical measures of a woman's worth—age and class.

Bradley and his staff also found an even more devalued sense of the word mother, which they classified as another lexical item altogether: mother (sb. 2) meaning "dregs, scum." According to the OED, this mother was associated with alchemy and used especially in the sixteenth century to refer to the scum of oils and subsequently to the dregs of fermenting liquids. An extensive note preceding the definition explains that etymologists have long puzzled over this usage. Some have argued that the term is actually derived from Dutch ‘modder,’ meaning mud or mire; the OED editor insists that there is no evidence for this view, however, and that mother sb.2 is really an application of sb.1 The editor concludes his lengthy discussion by noting that "the transition of sense is difficult to explain."
Today we might be less surprised by this semantic phenomenon. In the wake of extensive late-twentieth-century feminist debates about the nature, function, and status of women, it is no longer hard to offer reasons why the concept of mother, so idealized by the dominant middle-class rhetoric, can also carry this barely concealed trace of derogation, disgust, and dirtiness. If there is consensus to be found in these debates, it is that conventional sentiments about motherhood inadequately describe and only serve to mystify the actual circumstances of most mothers. It is commonly recognized, in some circles, that the position of the mother in our culture and our language is riddled with its history of psychic and social contradictions. Motherhood is for women at the same time, a site of power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement.

The most prominent and perhaps the base of the concept of motherhood however is generally considered to be the mother archetype, a prototype or primordial image of the mother that is pre-existent and supraordinate to all phenomena in which the ‘maternal,’ in the broadest sense of the term is manifest. Like any other archetype, the mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects in C. J. Jung’s *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1968) where he classifies the mother archetype into basically three types. In his own words:

First in importance are the personal mother and grandmother, stepmother and mother-in-law; then any woman with whom a relationship exists—for example, a nurse, a governess or perhaps a
remote ancestress. Then there are, what might be termed mothers in a figurative sense. To this category belong the goddess, and especially the Mother of God . . . (81)

Thus it is not only the biological mother who is seen to be the mother but all who can be seen to be in a position to play the role designated by the society for mothers. Other than these human figures, mothers, motherhood and mother-figures find symbolic representation in many other forms according to these psychologists. Taking inspiration from the writings of the famous precursor to archetypal criticism, J.G. Frazer, C. J. Jung lists out the mother symbols which according to him appear in things representing the goal of our longing for redemption, such as the Church, university, city or country, heaven, earth, the woods, the sea or any still waters, and for that matter even the underworld and the moon can be mother-symbols. The archetype, according to C. J. Jung is often associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness for example a ploughed field or a garden. It can be attached to a rock, a cave, a tree, a spring, a deep well, or to various vessels such as the baptismal font, or to vessel-shaped flowers like the rose or the lotus. Hollow objects such as ovens and cooking vessels, the uterus, yoni, and anything of a like shape too are associated with the mother archetype. Added to this list there are many animals, such as the cow, hare, and helpful animals in general. C. J. Jung specifies that all these symbols can have a positive, favourable meaning or a negative, evil meaning. In his *Symbols of Transformation*
(1977) he formulates the ambivalence of these attributes into the by now famous phrase “the loving and the terrible mother” (307).

Ambivalence is the characteristic feature of not only the mother image but the image of women in all literature. Ania Loomba in her book Race, Gender, Renaissance Drama (1989) quotes Rowbotham to argue that the European feudal society treated women as a curious mixture of “Saints in the Church, Angels in the streets, Devils in the kitchen and Apes in bed” (73). Jayita Sengupta calls it the splitting of feminine identity into patriarchal stereotypes. For example, Gilbert and Gubar in The Mad Woman in the Attic (1979) talk of the constant tension between the idealized image of a lady who was in some sense sick, fragile, pale, and ethereal and the prostitute. While the whore was desirable, the lady was respectable. Betty Frieden in The Feminine Mystique talks about the homemaker and the career woman as being considered by the society as two opposites. Kate Millet combines them to show how patriarchy uses this so-called ambivalence to set one group against another:

Patriarchy . . . set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife. One envies the other her ‘security’ and prestige, while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be the other’s freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world. (38)
Evidence from anthropology, religious and literary myth all attests to the politically expedient character of patriarchal convictions about women. In Genesis, Eve, the mother of all mankind, is the seductress who brought sin and resultant death to humanity. But the Virgin Mary, who was passively acted on by the Holy Ghost is the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of God and through Him, of us all. Eve is tolerated as a necessary evil; Mary is worshipped as a model for all womankind. Eve is the perpetrator of sin and Mary, mother of the redeemer of that sin. In Greek mythology, Pandora, sent to earth by the gods to marry and establish the human race, brings with her a magic box, the opening of which releases not only all evil but the greatest gift humankind can have–hope. All these patriarchal myths tell us that except for the action of women, humans would have been living in Paradise leading a godlike life. Because of women we are condemned to be mortal; we must die. Yet all of us in our early years see our mothers as bringers of life, nurturers, sources of pleasure and comfort. Mary Anne Ferguson in her *Images of Women in Literature* (1981) suggests that though in the early years we see mothers as the givers of life, nurturers and the main source of comfort and joy as we grow up we realize that she also takes away pleasure; she says no, and we blame her for it. The role of the mother thus becomes ambiguous. According to her “myths about women’s dual nature are attempts to explain primordial reactions to her double role as the giver of life and death, of pleasure and pain” (7).
Ambivalence is an ever-present undeniable part of the concept of woman and motherhood. To take a closer look at the inherent contradictions, one has to start with the basic universal concept of motherhood—that of a happy all-caring, all-sacrificing woman whose only thought in life is the children she has brought into the world. In fact the mother being the natural primary care-giver, the mother and child is seen to be an indivisible unit. J. Bowlby gives a scientific and practical explanation for the phenomenon. According to him all primates are born with an innate bias to become attached to their mother or to another primary attachment figure to whom the infant could stay close, in particular in dangerous territories or stressful circumstances. On the basis of Darwinist theory, Bowlby saw this bias emerging from “millions of years of variation and selection of behavioural systems in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness: proximity to a protective caregiver results in an increase in the chances of survival” (Moghaddam 167).

This concept of motherhood is seen symbolically represented in the eulogizing of the figure of Madonna with her child as the perfect ideal of a woman who gives her whole love and life for her child who she knows is destined for great things and can never return any of her love in the form of worldly pleasures. She is the facilitator, provider, primary care-giver who expects or demands nothing in return. It is this figure which finds representation in Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) as a mother, wearing a fixed mask of ‘dolore,’ that is, pain and
sorrow, with waxen tears fixed in the hollow of her eye-sockets and along her cheeks. Pirandello was much praised for his insight into the stifling dynamic of the traditional family. Myths, legends, folklore and literature appear to perpetuate this myth of a mother’s love, pride and sacrifice for her children. Motherhood is often presented as the role for which each woman was born. It is her calling in life. In Simone de Beauvoir’s words, “Through the child she [mother] is supposed to find self-realisation sexually and socially” (501). The maternal instinct as it is called says that all women have a biological drive towards conceiving and bearing children which is a precursor to the drive to nurture them, and the skills required to care for infants and later children emerge or evolve immediately after the birth of a child to her without any need for training. Nancy Friday in her *My Mother/My Self* (1997) a meticulous study of mother-daughter bonds attempts to describe the complex nature of the term “maternal instinct:”

I propose to use ‘maternal instinct’ as it is emotionally experienced by most women. For us it does not necessarily have the same meaning as it does for biologists, ethnologists, or sociologists. The concept has as many meanings as there are scientists, and many will tell you the maternal instinct doesn’t exist at all. Whether you call it ‘instinct’ or not, most women enjoy having children, want to, and do. For this majority, the trouble begins not with being mothers, but with the emotional propositions contained in the notion of maternal instinct—that being a good mother is as natural and undifferentiated
to humans as it is to a she-wolf with her cubs . . . Nor does mother
love in humans spontaneously well up the moment a child is born.

(41)
In fact the truth is that it is not having the baby that makes the relationship,
it is the day-to-day living and caring for the infant that makes the
relationship. As Friday declares, “you can’t love your baby twenty-four
hours a day, seven days a week” (42). The work of the primary care giver,
during the first few months can be hard and at times irksome and boring.

Diane Richardson in her work *Women, Motherhood and Childbearing* (1993) notes “the mythological, mysterious and powerful
status of motherhood” under patriarchy adding that, “only women are
granted this status, and it is one to which all women have been expected to
aspire. The reality of mother’s lives, however, often fails to match these
aspirations. Motherhood is a challenge; although potentially enjoyable, it is
also hard work and routinely stressful” (59). The rewards begin to come
only after the mother and the infant have lived through a period of
acclimatization and responsiveness to each other’s needs. But the woman
who has read all the poetry in the magazines and read all the clichés in
articles expects ‘instant motherhood,’ and thinks there is something wrong
with her if she does not respond at first sight to her new baby in picture-
book fashion. Her thoughts begin to run wild. Maybe she doesn’t deserve
to be a mother. How can she have even a fleeting negative emotion? Her
society won’t allow her to articulate this—so according to psychoanalysts
there is a good deal of lying that goes on subconsciously when you ask a new mother about her feelings of fulfilment. They often say what they themselves want to believe. Friday observes, “Mother feels the mixture of love and resentment, affection and anger she has for her child, but she cannot afford to know it. The split between what mother says, the way she behaves with her baby—and what she unconsciously feels on the deepest level—leaves her unsure of herself” (42).

Thus it turns out that though the society and the new-mother expect instant motherhood with the delivery of the child it often does not happen that way. In fact the new-mother has to find an intermediate mean between the society’s expectations and her own reality. This confusion can be seen to colour all aspects of motherhood. Though the universal concept of loving mother has very clear-cut characteristics, in real life we often find these compromised. This leads to at least some myths, legends, folklore, and literature presenting different types and versions of mothers and motherhood. Over time, philosophers, historians, literary critics, anthropologists, sociologists and psychiatrists have closely observed and theoretized the phenomenon.

From Rene Descartes’ ‘I think therefore I am,’ philosophy has in the twentieth century moved to ‘I am not what I think I am / I am not what you think I am / I am what I think you think I am.’ Better known as ‘the social mirror effect’ philosophers and psychologists today identify personality as a sum total of our perceptions of what others perceive us to be. With the
universal acknowledgement of this fact psychological studies underwent a volte-face from studying the individual to studying the society around the individual in order to understand the individual. The first among these would certainly be the primary care-giver which is usually the mother.

Thus began an onslaught of studies on motherhood and the effects of mothering on children. A number of ways were suggested in which maternal behaviour could have potentially dire consequences for children, not only in their infancy and pre-school years, but also through adolescence and into adulthood. John Bowlby in the first volume of his *Attachment and Loss* (1969) asserts that mother love in infancy, is as important for mental health as vitamins and proteins are for physical health. He claimed that above all children need mothers and that mothers have to love them. This love by implication needs to be ever-available and offered without qualification, regardless of the mother’s own needs and circumstances. The consequent development of the ‘maternal deprivation thesis’ redefined the responsibilities of women towards their children, although the implications on women’s lives were largely ignored. The emphasis was on the dependency needs of infants while mothers’ needs remained invisible.

The argument by Bowlby and his followers not only informed popular ideas about childcare, but also set the parameters for subsequent psychological research on infant/child development, adopting the notion of the ‘secure base’ as an ideal context for human development. This
paradigm emerged as a moral as well as psychological prescription for mental health. But what is concerning is that the burden for providing the secure base fell upon mothers, regardless of circumstances and abilities. Not much thought or consideration was given before zeroing down on the mothers, though this brought about an absolute and complete change in the lives of women forever.

This has made motherhood a prominent concern of feminists. Ann Snitow in her much thumped article titled, “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading” asks why feminists have not provided much argument against pronatalism allowing it to flourish even in the twentieth century. In search of an answer to the question she constructs a time line of feminist attitude to motherhood over the years. She identifies three periods: 1963–1974, 1975–1979 and 1980–1990. The first according to her is the period of the ‘demon texts’ for which feminists have been in an apologizing mode ever since. The Feminine Mystique (1963) by Betty Frieden and The Dialectic of Sex (1970) by Firestone appear to repudiate motherhood but were basically about the need for women to have some stake in the world beyond their homes, which cannot be considered inconsequential. However even Frieden herself in her later book The Second Stage (1981) blamed her first book for having been anti-family. The second period from 1975 to 1979 is for Snitow the great age of groundbreaking feminist work on motherhood. This was a period when feminists tried to take the issue of motherhood seriously, to criticize the
institution, to explore the actual experience, theorize the social and psychological implications. 1976 alone saw the publication of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, Dorothy Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, Jane Lazarre’s *The Mother Knot*, and Linda Gordon’s *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right. The Reproduction of Mothering* by Nancy Chodorow in 1978 and publishing of articles by the French critics Cixous and Kristeva brought not only the attention of the public but also fructifying debate on the topic. All aspects of motherhood were included in the discussions with descriptions of the fascination and joy of mothering along with the pain, isolation, boredom and murderousness. The third period, starting about 1980 with the threshold work of Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, is one of reaction and failure to advance the original critique of pronatalism. In this last, comparatively long period, Snitow finds chiefly disarray and division, and she decries the "flaccidity" of the feminist critique. Feminism started out hoping to demolish both pronatalism and its dark underside, maternal devaluation. However, divided and conquered by the backlash of the eighties, the movement has been less able to achieve the former goal. Thus feminist position on motherhood reached an impasse. Barbara Ehrenriech describes the situation in these words, “. . . the word ‘family’ [became] a grave in which the more autonomous word ‘women’ got buried” (qtd. in Snitow, 40).

The traditional view of mothers as being sublime and influential and the romanticisation and idealization of the mothering role were
reconsidered by the feminists in the context of women’s everyday experiences. Paula Nicolson identifies the problem as the incongruity of the fact that though motherhood as an institution includes many responsibilities and duties, women’s power and influence remain limited (376). Women’s power in both the public and the private spheres is subject to the dictates of men, both as individuals and as represented by patriarchy. Legally and traditionally men have always held absolute power over women and children. Kate Millet quotes Sir Henry Maine, “In the archaic patriarchal family the group consists of animate and inanimate property, of wife, children, slaves, land and goods, all held together by subjection to the despotic authority of the eldest male” (34). She adds that traditionally, patriarchy granted the father near total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale. Classically, as head of the family the father is both the begetter and owner in a system where kinship is property. Women might have responsibilities but not the accompanying right to choose how they mother or even whether to mother at all. In modern times too, the father continues to be considered the head of the family, with religion and the State actively continuing to support the status. Passports and all manner of business and legal forms still continue to ask for the father’s name. The repercussions of this have had a powerful psychological effect on relationships between mothers and daughters, and affect expectations of mothering from generation to generation.
It is through the everyday experience of the mother-daughter relationship that the contradictions in the myth become clear, “Belief in the all powerful mother spawns a recurrent tendency to blame the mother on the one hand and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other” (Chodorow and Contratto 55). The standards set for a mother is so high that unless the mothers are constantly on guard their children will find them disappointing. Germaine Greer refers to the fact when she writes, “The only good mother was a mother who died young, leaving a shining after-image against which all mother figures could be measured and found wanting” (*The Whole Woman* 196). In Paula Nicolson’s words:

> The romanticized and idealized woman, full of love, forgiveness and selflessness, does not and cannot exist, so that all mothers are destined to disappoint their children and themselves. Mother-blaming occurs on a number of levels, from individual attributions to mothers as the cause of psychological insecurities, to the portrayal of the cold, rejecting, neurotic or inadequate mother in popular culture. The patriarchal myth of maternal power renders women culpable, and thus in reality deprives them of effective social influence. Women are consequently perceived as imperfect in their central role. (377)

In the individual psyche the concept of motherhood has many aspects. One’s image of one’s mother is usually kaleidoscopic, a blending of the memories of the past and the reality of the present. Some see their mothers
primarily as she used to be, obscuring the present because the changes in her remind them of their own mortality. A deep need to think well of one’s mother in order to bolster one’s own self-esteem may transmute the image of an actually cold, selfish woman into a warm, loving one. Conversely, a need to avoid facing one’s own faults may reverse the process and turn the image of an ordinary, well-meaning person into a monster of greed and selfishness. One’s vision of mother is shaped by one’s own self-image and by one’s dreams for the future. It is moreover coloured by the many stories we have heard and impressions we have received which is definitely unique for each individual. Our images of others may be to a good deal more subjective than objective. Our pictures of the external world must fit our own unique pattern of memory, desire and dream.

In other words the nature of the bond between a mother and her child is not simple and does not depend on the mother alone but on how the mother acts, and on how the child perceives her acts. These further depend on many factors. Firstly the sex of the child, secondly the mother’s attitude to the child and life in general but even more important is often the third (independent of the first two) where the child is seen projecting on to the mother its own idiosyncratic version of what it has understood from the society, of the mother archetype. This leads to a lot of irony as even if the mother’s attitude is positive the child might give a contradictory reading to the incident and vice versa.
Even Freud knew of this ambiguity and ambivalence of emotions in the mother-child bond especially the mother-daughter relationship, but he caught hold of only one end of the equation. Even for him it was evident that the females carry the mother in them throughout their lives in one form or another. She remains their point of departure, as a bedrock of sorts, of their being. Their own trajectory of becoming both shapes her and at the same time distances them away from her.

One has to agree that just as ‘mothers’ are different, bonds between mothers and daughters too tend to differ. C. J. Jung has dealt with the different types of bonds between mothers and children in his works. He feels that the mother plays a larger than life role in the life of a child. He borrows the term ‘mother-complex’ from psycho-pathology but clarifies that though the idea immediately brings to our mind a notion of injury and illness, what he intends is a much wider concept which includes the positive effects as well. The effects of the mother-complex differ, in the son and the daughter, in his view. Typical effects on the son are homosexuality and Don Juanism. In homosexuality, the son’s entire sexuality is tied to the mother in an unconscious form; in Don Juanism, he unconsciously seeks his mother in every woman he meets. In the same pages he goes on to talk about the mother-complex in daughters as being ‘clear’ and ‘uncomplicated’ in comparison to that in the son. He writes:

Only in the daughter is the mother-complex clear and uncomplicated. Here we have to do either with an overdevelopment
of feminine instincts indirectly caused by the mother, or with a weakening of them to the point of complete extinction. In the first case, the preponderance of instinct makes the daughter unconscious of her own personality; in the latter, the instincts are projected upon the mother . . . [In other words] in the daughter a mother-complex either unduly stimulates or else inhibits the feminine instinct . . .

(\textit{The Archetypes} 86)

The first is the ‘all-mother’ type where the woman thinks and acts only in terms of being a mother so much so that she becomes unconscious of ever having been otherwise. The latter is one where the daughter thinks that only her mother is the perfect mother and no one; especially she can be as good. Thus all aspects of motherhood gets wiped out from her understanding of her personality.

It has been noted that in the daughter the mother-complex leads either to a hypertrophy of the feminine side or to its atrophy. These binary segments are further divided into four. In the first type the exaggeration of the feminine side means an intensification of all female instincts, above all the maternal instinct. However it has a negative aspect in that the woman’s only goal becomes childbirth. Her husband becomes first and foremost the instrument of procreation, and she regards him as an object to be looked after, along with children, poor relations, cats, dogs, and household furniture. Even her own personality takes second place and she is almost always entirely unconscious of it. She begins to live her life in and through
others, in more or less complete empathy with all the objects under her care. First, she gives birth to children and then on she clings to them, for without them she has no existence whatsoever. In Freudian terms her Eros develops exclusively as a maternal relationship while remaining unconscious as a personal one. C. J. Jung writes of such exaggerated maternal instincts:

> An unconscious Eros always expresses itself as will to power. Women of this type though continually ‘living for others,’ are as a matter of fact, unable to make any real sacrifice. Driven by ruthless will to power and a fanatical insistence on their own maternal rights they often succeed in annihilating not only their own personality but also the personal lives of their children. The less conscious such a mother is of her own personality, the greater and the more violent is her unconscious will to power. (*The Archetypes* 88)

The second type of mother-complex is the exact opposite where we find the maternal instinct doing a vanishing act and being replaced by an overdeveloped Eros making the daughter think of herself only in terms of her femininity. This often leads to an unconscious incestuous relationship with the father. All women are seen as possible competitors for male attention. Jealousy of mother and the desire to do better than her become the leitmotifs of the daughter’s subsequent actions.
If a mother-complex in a woman does not produce an overdeveloped Eros, it leads to identification with the mother and to paralysis of the daughter’s feminine initiative:

A complete projection of her personality on to the mother then takes place, owing to the fact that she is unconscious both of her maternal instinct and of her Eros. Everything which reminds her of motherhood, responsibility, personal relationships, and erotic demands arouses feelings of inferiority and compels her to run away—to her mother, naturally, who lives to perfection everything that seems unattainable to her daughter. As a sort of superwoman admired involuntarily by the daughter, the mother lives out for her beforehand all that the girl might have lived for herself. She is content to cling to her mother in selfless devotion, while at the same time unconsciously striving, almost against her will to tyrannize over her, naturally under the mask of complete loyalty and devotion. The daughter leads a shadow existence, often visibly sucked dry by her mother, and she prolongs her mother’s life by a sort of continuous blood transfusion. (Jung, C. J. The Archetypes 89)

Such daughters are wrought with confusion, perpetually trying to run away from everything that the mother stands for and at the same time unable to separate from the mother even for a moment.

The fourth major type is one where there is an overwhelming resistance to maternal supremacy by the daughter, often to the exclusion of
all else. It is the supreme example of the negative mother-complex, “the motto of this type is: Anything, so [sic] long as it is not like Mother!” (Jung, C. J. *The Archetypes* 90). Though such daughters are in thrall of their mothers, they never reach the point of identification with their mothers. At the same time, there is an intensification of Eros which exhausts itself in jealous resistance. This kind of daughter is very clear about what she does not want, but is usually completely at a loss to understand what she does want. All her instincts are focused on the mother in the negative form of resistance and are therefore of no use to her in creating a life for herself. And when she does marry, the marriage will be paradoxically used solely for the purpose of escaping from her mother. According to C. J. Jung, in such women:

All instinctive processes meet with unexpected difficulties; either sexuality does not function properly, or the children are unwanted, or maternal duties seem unbearable, or the demands of marital life are responded to with impatience and irritation. This is quite natural, since none of it has anything to do with the realities of life when stubborn resistance to the power of the mother in every form has come to be life’s dominating aim. In such cases one can often see the attributes of the mother archetype demonstrated in detail. For example, the mother as representative of the family (or clan) causes either violent resistances or complete indifference to anything that comes under the head of family, community, society, convention,
and the like. Resistance to the mother as uterus often manifests itself in menstrual disturbances, failure of conception, abhorrence of pregnancy, hemorrhages and excessive vomiting during pregnancy, miscarriages, and so on. (The Archetypes 91)

Such daughters consciously or unconsciously develop many methods to differentiate themselves from their mothers in their eyes. Turning their attention to studies is cited by C. J. Jung as one of the examples, the main purpose of which is to create a sphere of interest in which the mother has no place. It springs from the daughter’s need to break the mother’s power by pointing out her own superiority over the mother’s educational shortcomings (The Archetypes 91). Such intellectual development is often accompanied by the sprouting of traits of dominance like opting for a career, wanting her opinion to be given importance and leading her life as per her choice. C. J. Jung while identifying these four extreme types admits to the possible presence of many intermediate stages.

Though Freud’s and C. J. Jung’s theories cannot be ignored, feminists begged to differ in many aspects. Their main point of difference was in holding mothers totally responsible for the formation of the personality of their children. According to them, all the characteristic traits and peculiarities in individual behaviour were being attributed to the mother alone by these psychologists, ignoring the reality of the social structure around them. All that happens in a child’s life, especially the daughter’s, had come to be attributed to the way in which her mother had
brought her up. Just as Simone de Beauvoir had earlier begun discussions on the role of women as being a social construct, Paula Nicolson pointed out that the role of the mother had not evolved in a natural way, and neither was it outside culture and free from ideology:

It has been socially constructed within patriarchy through a complex set of power relations which ensure that women become mothers, and practice motherhood, in narrowly-defined ways. This is achieved in part through the mechanism of ‘science’, which bolsters existing power relations. Contemporary motherhood is the product of nineteenth and twentieth century medical/ biological/ and psychological/ social sciences, and this can be seen in a number of ways. (378)

In her opinion social prescriptions for contemporary motherhood are constantly offered, reinforced and embellished by experts with recourse to science, and their versions of what constitutes good mothering practice becomes the socially received “wisdom” (378). She quotes from Foucault to show that certain kinds of claims to knowledge are given priority over others, and it is those which serve the needs of the socially-powerful that pass into popular discourse and come out to represent our everyday understanding of what we all take for granted as ‘truth’ or ‘facts.’ In the case of motherhood too, though there are numerous aspects, only a few like breast-feeding and post-natal depression have been studied in detail. Even in these, normal behaviour associated with mothering is often
prescribed, based on knowledge-claims of scientists which suit the needs of patriarchy. These knowledge-claims inform the ideology of the mainstream social and psychological science, and even the everyday understanding of women themselves, leaving them to consider the stresses of motherhood as their own inadequacies.

It was the German born American psychoanalyst, Karen Horney who provided the first intellectual challenge to Freudian principles. Working within the Freudian framework of the libido theory, she constructed ingenious counter-arguments from the perspective of German feminism with its belief and pride in woman's essentially maternal nature. She too, in her discussions refers to the importance of the bonding between mother and child, yet her theories involve both the parents and also give due attention to the role of the rest of the society in the case of an individual’s development. Horney tried to highlight that the key to understanding the parent-child bond is the child's perception, rather than the parent's especially the mother’s intentions. Using her wide experience in studying individual psyche, Horney named ten particular patterns of needs—the need for affection and approval, the need for a partner, the need to restrict one’s life into narrow borders, the need for power, the need to exploit others, the need for social recognition, the need for personal admiration, the need for personal achievement, the need for self-sufficiency, the need for perfection and unassailability.
As she investigated them further, she found that a child whose needs are not met coped with the situation through three different types of strategies, moving toward people (here, a person will put themselves down and make light of their accomplishments so that others will find them acceptable); moving against people (here, a person will not trust others and will try to dominate other people); or moving away from people (here a person deals with anxiety by abandoning relationships and being self-focused and socially isolated. Such a person is not interested in forming relationships and is indifferent to what is happening). While it is human for everyone to have these needs to some extent, the neurotic's need is much more intense, based on which Horney formulated her theories on neurosis. She also considers that both the parents have a role in creating a particular personality type, which was later accepted and promoted by many other feminist psychologists. One cannot relegate to secondary importance the initial years of a child and the way in which his/her needs are met or not met which leads to the child developing the ‘moving towards,’ ‘moving against’ or ‘moving away from’ forms of bonds to people. However, as has been suggested initially by Horney one has to keep in mind the role played by a child’s perceptions in this process.

Many practical studies have been conducted on this hypothesis. To start with, Mary Ainsworth in her extensive study conducted in Uganda suggested, “Parental sensitivity may be considered the crucial factor in the development of secure or insecure attachments. As an alternative infant
temperament had been advanced, as linked to the quality of attachment. Infant temperament may affect interaction and is a plausible co-determinant of the formation of attachment security” (198). The study proves with statistics that the nature of a child’s initial bond with the primary caregiver plays a major role in her attachments in the future but at the same time the adult alone cannot be held responsible for the formation of the personality as infant temperament too is a very important co-determinant of the formation of the attachment. Otherwise parents would have responded to all their children in the same manner. Modern psychologist Jean Baker Miller provides another angle to the argument in her *Psychoanalysis and Women* (1986). She propounds what she calls the conflict theory. She identifies that conflict begins at the moment of birth:

The infant, and then the child, immediately and continually initiates conflict around its desire. The older participant in this interaction approaches the infant bringing along her/his state of psychological organization, filled with a history of conceptions about what she/he wants to do, and she/he should do, what the result should be, and so on. As these two people, with two very different states of psychological organization and desires, interact, the outcome will be the creation of a new state in each person. The result will also be somewhat different from what either of them ‘intended’ (Of course, the infant doesn’t consciously ‘intend,’ but she/he has real and important purposes that she/he is pursuing). As a result of the
interaction, both parties will change, but each in a different way and
at a different rate. Out of a myriad of such interactions—conflicts
get repeated over and over and in slightly different ways—each
person develops a new conception of what she/he is. This
continually new conception in turn forms a subsequent new desire;
new action will flow from the new desire. This is conflict as the term
is used here. Both parties approach the interaction with different
intents and goals, and each will be forced to change her/his intent
and goals as a result of the interaction—that is, as a result of the
conflict. (128-129)

She also identifies two types of conflicts. Productive conflict can include a
feeling of change, expansion, joy. It may at times have to involve anguish
and pain, too; but even these are different from the feelings involved in
destructive or blocked conflict. Destructive conflict calls forth the
conviction that one cannot possibly win or more accurately, that nothing
can really change or enlarge. It often involves a feeling that one must move
away from one’s deeply felt motives, that one is losing the connection with
one’s most importantly held desires and needs. However, what is to be
noted is that these conflicts whether productive or destructive change both
the participants, almost equally. These early conflicts definitely affect the
child’s development and future course of life and the personality of the
adult with whom the child interacts and comes into conflict most will place
the child in a particular orbit along which the child will continue to move.
But at the same time the changes are not one-sided and the adult too is seen undergoing changes, growing and developing in response to the child.

Though there are many more studies on the psychological stage models of human development like that based on psychosexual development by Sigmund Freud, cognitive development by Jean Piaget, and moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg, perhaps the most influential model of life-span development is that of the psychologist Erik Erikson. He proposed eight distinct life stages, characterized by particular struggles that must reach a successful conclusion for an individual to grow into a healthy adult. These struggles affect the personality and are not just internal to the individual, but involve relationships with others. The most important characteristic of this model however, is that in this model like that in Horney, the primary care-giver alone is not held responsible for the formation of the personality and temperament of the child. Contrarily as in Lacan’s Mirror stage, the child is seen struggling to separate itself from the mother, in its attempt to become an individual.

The first stage of infancy, according to Erikson is characterized by a struggle for trust. Based on the support of its social environment infants learn to trust or mistrust others. During stage two (ages two and three), the main struggle is between autonomy and doubt; infants desire independence but find that the help of others is in practice indispensable. If infants fail to gain confidence to do things by themselves, they may be crippled by self-doubts. Stage three (ages three to six), is characterized by the struggle
between initiative versus guilt; children who are not allowed to follow their own initiative experience guilt for their attempts to gain independence. The struggle between industry and inferiority characterizes ages seven through puberty. Children tackle activities valued by adults, and if they consistently fail they feel inferior. During adolescence the main struggle is between identity and role confusion; success comes with developing a positive identity as a part of a group, and failure is associated with confusion about self identity and life goals. Stage six is young adulthood, when individuals struggle between intimacy and isolation, searching for a partner who will help them feel fulfilled. During adult years, people struggle between generativity and stagnation, striving to be productive at work and to build a family at home, or risk stagnation. Finally the senior years see a struggle between integrity and despair; coming to see their past life as meaningful or feeling it was in vain.

The difference in Erikson’s model lies in the fact that it covers the entire life-span rather than being focused on the early part of life. The first four stages clearly require proper guidance and the primary caregiver in the form of the mother definitely becomes a very important component of the social environment. But the later stages according to Erikson depend more on the peers of the child. Though the first few years influence the character formation of a child, no one can with authority state that the character of a person becomes fixed by the age of six. Life and the process of living involve a continuous assimilation of what goes on around us and though
there are strong influences, nothing is constant. This is all the more so in the case of the mother-daughter bonds. Daughters remain life-long in a complex formative relationship with their mothers, and also with themselves as actual and potential mothers of daughters.

The relevance of this contention is immense. And feminists have been the first to acknowledge this. Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* (1981) writes:

Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost — isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life. (251)

Allen is clearly saying that without the connection provided by the umbilical cord the child would definitely find itself at sea. But at the same time it is of greater importance to note that the mother alone will not be able to provide a strong bond. A daughter who fails to recognize the value of the umbilical cord is the one who fails in life.

II

Now that we have discussed the complexities within the bond of the mother with the daughter and even more importantly, accepted that the role of the mother is a social construct and that the nature of the bond depends equally on the daughter as on the mother, let us try to describe it in the
Indian context. How do Indians view their mothers? What does the notion of motherhood entail in India? What is the role played by Indian mothers especially in the lives of their daughters?

“Support and esteem for mothers and mothering varies across societies, cultures and over history” (Krishnaraj “Mothers, Motherhood, Mothering” 1). With its rootedness in tradition as the informing force in social practice, motherhood in India has long been a category which is emphasized, a role which the girl-child is conditioned to accept as the end she has been created for. In the words of Vrinda Nabar, “In India a man marries to beget sons, a purpose which single-mindedly determines a woman’s status as wife and mother” (Caste as Woman 178). Fertility is prized beyond all else. Anees Jung in her journeys through India found that, if a woman is found to be barren she is “worse than mud.” “When she fails in her most integral function she finds herself ostracized, often abandoned” (Unveiling India 72). Exploring the daily world of the Hindu family, the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar emphasizes the significance of motherhood in an Indian woman’s life, “It is not only the personal fulfilment of an old wish and the biological consummation of a life-long promise but an event in which the culture confirms her status as a renewer of the race and extends to her a respect and a consideration which were not accorded to her as a mere wife. Even the unborn child while still in the womb,” writes Kakar, “wins for its mother the love, respect and acceptance of the community. Each child born and safely brought to flower
becomes for her a certification, and, a redemption” (“Feminine Identity” 69). Motherhood in India is charged with divinity. It is an attribute possessed by the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon who have traditionally played mothers to worshippers. Elisabeth Bumiller records the statement of Shabana Azmi a well-known actress, feminist and social activist in India, “I want to have a baby immediately, but I want to get this film over with first. I don’t feel like an incomplete woman because I haven’t had a child, but everybody keeps pushing it into my head” (199). Even women of the calibre of Shabana Azmi who is known as a thinking-actress and is expected to be beyond the usual norms of the society admits that she feels pressurized, to the extent of giving in. So is it a wonder that the ordinary women of India do not even recognize that the prevailing definition of motherhood has been defined by the patriarchal society? Bumiller also quotes another woman known as an independent actress Smita Patil, “For centuries we have been told that to be a good woman you must be a good mother” (199).

Another weighty fact which accompanies the importance given to motherhood in India is that like in most other patriarchal parts of the world in India too; being the mother of a male child is considered to be more important. According to the great Indian law-giver Manu, “A man conquers the world by the birth of a son; he enjoys eternity by that of a grandson; and the great grandfather enjoys eternal happiness by the birth of a grandson’s son.” Such beliefs have led to a preference for boys as against
girls, “She is a true wife who has borne a son,” says Manu again, in one of his categorical laws (qtd. in Jung, A. *Unveiling India* 69). Anees Jung notes how:

Vedic verses sing for sons to be followed by more sons, never by daughters. A prayer in Atharva Veda says: ‘The birth of a girl grant elsewhere, here grant a son.’ In the Rig Veda that for millenniums has determined the rhythms of Indian social and religious life, daughters are conspicuous by their absence. (*Unveiling India* 70)

The Indologist A. A. MacDonnel too attests to the fact, “We meet in hymns with prayers for sons and grandsons, male offspring, male descendants and male issue and occasionally for wives but never for daughters. Even forgiveness is asked for ourselves and grandsons, but no blessing is ever prayed for a daughter” (qtd. in Kakar, *The Indians* 44).

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, one of the first Indian English woman writers in her *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1886) notes the dilemma of the pregnant women in nineteenth century India in these words:

In no other country is the mother so laden with care and anxiety on the approach of childbirth as in India. In most cases her hope of winning her husband to herself hangs solely on her bearing sons . . . [to ensure this] women pray with herbs and roots . . . and son-giving gods are devoutly worshipped . . . There is even a curious ceremony which is administered to the mother for converting the embryo [of a pregnant woman] into a boy. (14)
The existence of hymns which pray for descendants accompanied by ancient rites designed to elicit the birth of a male baby and magically change the sex of the unborn child, practiced in some of the traditional Hindu households reveal the extent of the preference for male children. Economically a daughter is looked upon as an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who, upon marriage, will take away a considerable part of her family’s fortune as her dowry. In a country where after-life is as important as life on earth, the son who performs the last rites of the parents is considered a saviour. It is he who carries on the family line, and hence is indispensable ritualistically and economically.

The preference for sons is as old as Indian society itself. In Bengal and in Assam they blow conch shells and in Maharashtra they beat drums when a son is born. In Rajasthan, if a girl is born, the women withdraw behind their veils and wail. *Pedas* are distributed if it is a boy and *barfi* if it is a girl. Both are sweets meant for celebration; the first though, is more expensive than the second. Female infanticide too appears to be quite common. Pandita Ramabai during her travels through Rajasthan describes how the villagers found different ways to get over the British laws prohibiting female infanticide:

After considering how many girls could safely be allowed to live, the father took good care to defend himself from caste and clan tyranny by killing the extra girls at birth which was as easily
accomplished as destroying a mosquito or any other annoying insect. Who can save a baby if the parents are determined to slay her, and eagerly watch for a suitable opportunity? There are several . . . nameless methods that may be employed . . . There are not a few child thieves who generally steal girls; even the wild animals are so intelligent and of such refined taste that they mock the British law, and almost always steal girls to satisfy their hunger . . . The census of 1870 revealed the curious fact that 300 children were stolen in one year by wolves from within the city of Umritzar, all the children being girls. (25-26)

In the modern era too the injustice to girls continues. However people no longer wait for the child to be born. Anees Jung quotes a Bombay Gynecologist on the subject of foeticide, “Out of the 8000 abortions that were carried out after pre-natal sex determination, it was found that 7999 were female fetuses,” (Unveiling India 72) clearly revealing that Indians are still partial to boys. Though the statistics appear shocking, in a country like India these do not create a storm. This is not just the case of Rajasthan or Mumbai, nor of just a particular class. Meenakshi Gupta in her “The Girl Child: A Psychological Perspective” talks of how she conducted an interview among the lower and the upper middle class families in another metropolis in India and presents the major results thus:

Interviews with parents of the upper middle class did not provide sex preference for a male child when the first child was
expected. However, if the first child was a girl, they did prefer to have a boy as a second child. If the first was a son, there was no sex preference for the second child as ‘a second son does not matter.’ ‘What is more important is that I should have at least one son,’ was voiced by many. Mothers felt that the sons would give them, ‘security in old age,’ ‘carry on the family name,’ and ‘give them status in the society.’ Some mothers also indicated that there was pressure on them to produce sons.

Families belonging to the less privileged economic class had larger family size and they showed a stronger preference for male children. In some families it was observed that the eldest being a daughter had to give up her education and earn a livelihood so that younger children could be educated. On probing, the parents stated that they ‘were not sure’ or ‘hadn’t thought of,’ how they would have managed their financial crisis if their eldest child was a male. Though they strongly denied that they were discriminating between the sexes, there seemed to be an underlying belief in it from their actions. (48)

Gender-based differences seem to be of monstrous proportions in India. The most heart-wrenching illustration can be seen in Satyajit Ray’s classic film *Pather Panchali* (1955) where “Apu the protagonist of the film is considered the legitimate claimant of the scant resources of a very poor family” and Durga the elder girl dies because of insufficient nutrition and
lack of timely medical help. “Durga is a victim, not of parental cruelty, for there is sufficient indication of their affection and concern, but of the social system that considers her needs to be second in importance to her brother’s” (qtd. in Bagchi, Guha and Sengupta 24). “May you have seven sons!” says the mother-in-law when the new bride enters her husband’s home, a blessing which the wife of an American diplomat Elisabeth Bumiller came across so many times during her stay in India that she was inspired to write a book titled *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (1990) on the condition of women in India. Vrinda Nabar in her article, “What Little Girls Are Made Into: Socialisation of the Girl Child” talks of a similar situation from her own life, “When I was pregnant, a woman begging for alms approached me and began to shower on me what she obviously considered her choicest blessing: Daan do, tumhe beta ho jaayega. However, when I incurred her anger by not coughing up the desired money, her chant became a venomous Beti ho Jaayegi” (54-55). “Give me alms and you will have a son” is changed to what the woman believes is a curse, “You will have a daughter.”

Thus the notion of motherhood in India can be seen to contain within it a contradiction. A woman gains the respect of the whole society when she becomes a mother (proves her feminity) but even when she becomes a mother she is considered significant only if she can give birth to a male child. Thus at the same time, on the one hand, feminity is being prized, while on the other it is being devalued. This contradiction inherent
within the concept of Indian motherhood can be seen in many other related spheres too.

A mother especially one with a son does get at least lip-service in the society. Manu’s dictums seem to rule the average Indian mind in this. Manu has said that while the teacher was more important than ten instructors, the father more important than a hundred teachers, the mother was more important than a thousand fathers (65). The mother was likened to the physical form of one’s own self: by loving and serving her, the householder could win this world (65). But in spite of these exhortations Vrinda Nabar writes that the typical Indian mother is “imprinted on the children’s self-consciousness as sublime sufferer, selfless slave, tireless worker for her family’s comfort and happiness” (Caste as Woman 185-6). On the one hand a mother is supposed to be honoured and served while on the other she is the always-taken-for-granted doormat figure who exists only to see to the needs of the family.

One of the finest contemporary depictions of Indian motherhood analogous to this is the one found by Nabar in a poem, “Of Mothers, Among Other Things,” by the Indian English poet A.K Ramanujan. With a total absence of sentimentality, Ramanujan in this poem constructs a characteristic, easily recognizable image of an Indian woman whose life has been given to drudgery and self-negation. Her hands wrinkled with housework, are like “a wet eagle’s/ two black pink-crinkled feet.” Her saris “do not cling: they hang, loose feather of a one-time wing” (Caste as
Woman 180). The contrast between the beautiful, happy mothers in the paintings of Ravi Varma or the various paintings depicting the Indian ideal of motherhood—Krishna’s Yashodha, and the real life image as contributed by Ramanujan shows the difference between the idealistic and the realistic. In the typical Indian home, children are seen as the mother’s responsibility. The father does his bit by working to support the family. The official emphasis on family planning has had a partial impact on the number of children a woman is compelled to bear. Even so, the rigours of running the home in the absence of an appropriate infrastructure sap the woman of a great deal of her vitality. Nabar shows how the mother in the Ramanujan poem referred to earlier:

... is not the goddess of Hindu culture but a tired, shabby woman rushed off her feet by the demands of domesticity. The compassion in Ramanujan’s description does not soften the unattractive reality of this woman with her shapeless saris and work-roughened fingers, so unlike the Sitases and Draupadis of our television screen or the bahus and mas of our celluloid world. Yet, she is more typically ‘mata.’ Shorn of all the rhetoric, she is what the system has made her: she represents security, selflessness, oppression and, above all silence. (Caste as Woman 182)

The mother has clearly become a doormat in most homes. Her natural affection and desire to nurture and protect her brood is transformed in the Indian minds into an exaggerated image of subservience and martyrdom.
Moving from the world of poetry to the more popular forms like television and films in India, we find this contradiction in the image of Indian motherhood being fortified time and again. Nabar observes:

She is the type glorified in a hundred different ways on the big screen and the small one. She is wonder woman of the new commercials. She is Lalitaji; determined to stretch the budget and use money judiciously by opting for surf from among all the detergents available; she smilingly washes her daughter’s grubby dress in a Videocon washing-machine and waves her off to a party; she uses her skill as a Bharatha Natyam dancer to demonstrate the virtues of a new washing-machine; she smears Vicks Vaporub on her child’s nose and chest; she calls her family in to breakfast/lunch/dinner and surprises them with the magic of Dalda/Amul Ghee/ a new dairy milk whitener . . . (Caste as Woman 182-183)

She is presented as a person who makes intelligent choices but at the same time all her choices remain relegated to the space within the four walls of the house. These images continue to attack Indian families each day through their living rooms, and Indian women have no escape from them. According to the National Institute of Mental Health Report of 1971, Government inquiries have forced the conclusion that, “TV has become a major socializing agent of children” (qtd. in Rushton 389). Indian girls grow up in their midst absorbing the various images and modelling
themselves after the mothers they see on the screen. Bala Kothandaraman in her insightful article “The Child is Mother of the Woman: Girl Child in TV Ads” talks about the situation at length and remarks, “Why can’t they have innovative ads which do not reinforce unpalatable gender stereotypes beneath the veneer of a sophisticated modern mode?” (42)

Service-sector ads which promote objectives such as family planning, rural health care, national integration and the like, using the older meaning of ‘to advertise’ as ‘to inform’, has been telecasting spots condemning dowry, early marriage, frequent pregnancies, and propaganda to place the girl child in a more positive place especially through educating them. Though these have influenced the social attitudes towards the girl child in ads positively, that of the mother has not seen much change. It has also to be noted that such service sector ads are mainly seen only in the government-controlled medium, Doordarshan; and even there they form only about one-tenth of the total number displayed; and never provide the hi-tech and glitz and glamour of the other commercials. The condition of the mother in modern-day ads is all the more filled with the aforementioned contradiction in attitudes. She is visualized as a superwoman, managing a career excellently but at the same time not setting aside a single job that the mothers of the olden era used to do for their homes. A typical example would be the ad where the woman is seen feeding everyone a grand breakfast, seeing to the needs of the older in-laws, bidding goodbye at the doorstep lovingly to the husband who is
going off to work, packing lunch for the kids who are healthy and happy to
be going to school, telling us that the secret to all this happiness is that all
of them use a particular brand of soap which keeps them healthy. She is
presented as smiling, with not a single pleat in her sari or strand of hair out
of place throughout the above said activities and then shown picking up a
doctor’s coat to go off to work. Other ads show mothers doing all the
housework and yet having the stamina in the end of the day to join in a
game of football with their kids . . . thanks to . . . the said products. One
common factor to all these ads is that these mothers are always slim, trim
and more than merely pretty, never appear shabby, and even while,
cooking, cleaning, shopping for vegetables, or visiting doctors are always
presented in full make-up wearing the choicest dresses. These superwomen
are what form the stereotype of modern motherhood in the eyes of the
Indian public, and what they do is seen as the acts of typical mothering
roles especially by the girl-child. The young girls never realize that they
are being fed the idealized version and lap it all up expecting that their
lives will also be the same. They never look around to see the harsh
realities of the lives of their mothers or the ones around them. Mothers in
Indian films are no better-off. The image of the mother promoted through
films, leaves much to be desired. Vrinda Nabar observes:

She is also Ma found in innumerable regional films. She may
be widowed young. She then endures all manner of hardships, puts
up with varying forms of humiliation, and perseveres in her attempt
to rear her children with dignity and a sound code of moral values. She may be exploited in various other ways. She may have a drunken husband who beats her with sickening regularity, or a lecherous employer who tries to molest her, but her message is clear.

She represents Indian womanhood. In other words, exploitation, suffering, sacrifice, all these are her lot. She bears them with fortitude and will on no account permit her children to seek revenge . . . She is the oasis that never dries up in a world of arid deprivation and want. (*Caste as Woman* 183)

In fact the best example of the many contradictions inherent in the concept of Indian motherhood is the role played by Nargis Dutt in the film *Mother India* (1957). The mother who is a destitute widow brings up her two sons with dignity bearing all the strokes of fate courageously only to take up arms to kill her favourite son for the sake of the society. A mother in India is typically projected as resigned to her fate, submissive to the rules of the world around her, working hard to give her sons a life, but never compromising her dignity even in the face of the many threats and temptations by the local landlords. Whatever happens she never gives in to anger or rebellion. But when her son turns a villain of the society she takes it on herself to act and shoots him down. She thus becomes the mother not just of her sons but of all the sons in the greater nation. This is the typical notion of motherhood in India. Like the most popular Indian goddess
Bhadrakali she is at the same time a refuge for the righteous and for the villainous their nemesis.

However this role of the mother remains behind the curtains in actual life though it subtly plays a prominent part in the mindset. Shobhaa De one of the voluble women in India who is known for her strong stands in support of many issues of feminist concern, in a recently published article in her weekly column in *The Week* reveals how even for a woman of her scholarship and worldly-wiseness, an Indian woman is basically defined in terms of motherhood and cannot be anything more:

But seriously, there are times when I ask myself whether women’s lives today are being rewritten and redefined in ways that are both in the overall interest of humanity at large. Perhaps, we are being forced to play or adopt fierce, aggressive roles that are reshaping our essential selves. I look around me, and see so many female gladiators in the corporate space clawing their way to the top. I read reports about women in their thirties dealing with premature menopause, or even younger women in their twenties who are finding it hard to conceive because their hormonal levels have gone berserk. Sure, some of them are super successful and leading lives their grandmoms could not have dreamt of. But they are also dealing with biological issues that did not touch their grandmoms’ wombs. (57)
The role specified for Indian women thus remains that of mothers and even as a mother she often finds herself confined to the role of a socializing agent. Motherhood in India is further merged with a multi-layered pattern of societal relationships to which a woman is expected to conform. The discrimination, at the time of birth stretches into the way in which the girl child is brought up. While, bringing up a daughter the Indian parents (especially the mother) are made to give emphasis to close supervision and protection. Basically a woman is answerable to a series of relationships on her husband’s side, especially in matters like bringing up children. Decisions are usually collective, and it is assumed that this is for the good of all those involved. The family web is usually binding and inescapable. The ties between one generation and the next are still very powerful, whether for emotional or other socially imposed reason. Manisha Roy writes:

The emotional intensity that binds a mother and her daughter is not only a bond between two blood relatives but also between a growing woman and her culture, her tradition and customs. An Indian mother is usually a fairly stable custodian of her social, cultural and moral traditions by the time her daughter is of marriageable age. Whatever conflicts the mother herself may have felt when she was younger, these would have been pushed aside and repressed and compromised by this time. Now, she must help her daughter to make these compromises, so that the family and the society can count on her. It
is also her duty to offer this security to her daughter who, as a woman, will have enough to suffer from life anyway. (qtd. in Karen Payne 344)

While bringing up the girl child under the watchful eyes of the prescriptive family; mothers pressurize girls into becoming nurturing, obedient and responsible. The qualities instilled and lauded in a girl child are those of interpersonal orientation and compromise. Little pleasure is shown at the achievements of a daughter. The girl child picks up these cultural and parental values and incorporates them into her personality.

Meenakshi Gupta makes an attempt to understand how the processes that go into the internalizing of social norms and values work in the case of an Indian girl. She writes, “Social learning theorists do not view gender identity as an innate, biologically determined development, but as a product of various forms of learning. The girl child learns her role in the Indian society directly through differential treatment, rewards, and punishments, and indirectly through observational learning and modelling” (46). By observing the differential behaviours and treatment of boys and girls in their culture children learn the specific content of the sex roles.

In the case of an Indian girl the socialization process which includes processes of oppression and gender differentiation at work in the family and in the male centered Indian society is not as subtle as in the West. And the Indian mother plays a greater role than her western counterpart in the daughter’s life. In the words of Anees Jung, “As a girl grows to be a
woman, the mother lives again. Like the coming of a new season. ‘A woman should be a lump of clay’ goes one proverb. Like clay she should be moulded in the form of an ideal woman—pretty, dutiful, flexible, fit to be a perfect housekeeper” (Unveiling India 72). The many factors which shape the growth of a girl like myths and legends, rituals and ceremonies as well as social and psychological factors such as the family structure, the woman’s position in it, her schooling, the ‘hidden messages’ from the media, female sexuality and the traumas of menstruation, abortion and childbirth, all filter into her through her mother, who acts as a funnel which provides the raw material through which the daughter’s orientation towards romantic love, marriage, motherhood and sexuality are structured. Just as the cone of the funnel narrows down the flow oozing it down into a bottle, the mother influences every single perception of the world that a girl receives. In the Indian “Man(u)-centered society” (Chacko 29) the mother naturally becomes a truly narrow funnel for her daughter.

As for the bond between mothers and daughters in India, one may note certain possibilities. Firstly, the condition of women being that of the subjugated group there could be a tendency among mothers and daughters to cling to each other to gain as much strength from each other as possible, to fight a hostile world. Another probability is that the daughter might develop contempt for the mother seeing her helpless and inferior status in comparison to the male world. Again, a feature which could affect the mother-daughter bond in India would be the effect of the excessive love
and care given to the son by the mother often at the expense of the daughter. Though these mothers are acting so under the misconception that they are following ‘matradharma’ by giving more importance to the son, the daughters never realize this, leading to screwed equations from the start. Coupled with the inferior position of the mother in the society, and the frustrations that any girl meets with while trying to live out her dreams, it could lead to a bond characterized by hatred between the mothers and daughters.

As in the other patriarchal societies, one would expect the preference for sons over daughters and the cultural devaluation of girls, to leave the mind of the girl child deeply lacerated. Theoretically, there could be two possible consequences . . . first a heightened female hostility and envy towards the male, and a resultant antagonism between the sexes or second a dramatic turn of the aggression against themselves and transformation of the cultural devaluation into feelings of worthlessness and inferiority, and a resultant lack of esteem for all womankind. According to Sudhir Kakar, the second seems to be more probable as, “aggression occurring between members of the same sex is significantly greater than between members of opposite sex in India . . . given the evidence of songs, tales and other kinds of folklore” (“Feminine Identity in India” 48). But, in making such comments Kakar makes it clear that in talking about girls who have internalized a low self esteem he is presupposing that “girls and women have no sphere of their own, no
independent livelihood and activity, no area of family and community responsibility and dominance, no living space apart from that of the men, within which to create and manifest those aspects of feminine identity that derive from intimacy and collaboration with other women” (48). And in fact these two circumstances often exist in many different parts of India, as acknowledged by Kakar himself, to mitigate the discriminations and inequities of patriarchal institutions.
Chapter Three

The Shield of Mother’s Love

The complexities and intricacies in the nature of the bonds between mothers and daughters is indeed immense, but for the purpose of analysis one can visualize mother-daughter bonds as a broad spectrum with three major brands—love, hatred and indifference—though one has to admit to the existence of whole worlds in between. The protagonist in each of the novels included in this study has been placed, according to the nature of the bond she shares with her mother, into one of these three broad categories. This chapter will deal with those works in which the bonds between mothers and daughters is characterized by love and understanding.

Daughters growing up in a country where women are discriminated against, naturally ought to develop hatred for the society and sometimes even disgust of the self but in India as observed by Kakar, one often observes the existence of a particular deep “intimacy and collaboration with other women” (“Feminine Identity in India” 48) which helps to mitigate the discriminations and inequities of patriarchal institutions. Discussing in detail what she terms the “Mere paas Ma hai–complex” of the average Indian, Shobhaa De observes that unlike the son:

A daughter never ‘possesses’ her mother, because a daughter is considered to be ‘in transit’—like she is in a railway station’s