

---

# UNIT 4 THE MATERNAL BODY IN URBAN INDIA

---

Anu Aneja

## Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 The Maternal Body in a Cross-Cultural Context
- 4.4 Motherhood in Urban Indian Contexts
- 4.5 Beauty Myths
- 4.6 Public Spheres, Private Desires
- 4.7 Upper-Class Labouring Mothers
- 4.8 Childcare and Education
- 4.9 Rural Migrant Caregivers as Surrogate Mothers
- 4.10 Familial Bonding and Vertical paradigms Motherhood
- 4.11 Changing Scenarios in Contemporary Urban India
- 4.12 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.13 Unit End Questions
- 4.14 References
- 4.15 Suggested Readings

---

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In recent decades, feminist theorists of motherhood have begun to interrogate and dismantle constructions of maternal metaphors specific to South Asian cultures. In the west, there already exists a considerable discourse on motherhood and its inherent ambivalences, its literary representations, sociological analyses, and its complex psychoanalytical trajectories with and beyond Freudian theories. Some of the questions towards which western theorists of motherhood have turned their attention may also be useful in a critical appraisal of motherhood in urban India. However, specific bearings of culture, class and caste impact women, especially in their 'embodiment' as mothers, in very determined and particular ways. In the last unit of this block, we will examine the situation of urban middle-class Indian women, in their specific situations as mothers, in the light of cross-cultural discourses of motherhood originating in western cultures and more specifically, in urban Indian settings. We will also look at the situations of rural migrant women, hired as domestic help in urban settings, in order to analyze their roles in comparison to that of women from the upper classes.

---

## 4.2 OBJECTIVES

---

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Locate the analysis of motherhood in urban India within cross-cultural theoretical discourses on motherhood;
- Understand and analyze women's roles as mothers in the context of urban India;
- Comprehend the relationship between motherhood and class and caste structures, especially within the middle-class and upper middle-class urban scenario;
- Place motherhood and other roles played by women within the context of patriarchal and capitalist structures in urban India;
- Relate to the relationships between women's bodies as mothers, and as labouring bodies, from the point of view of urban mothers and rural migrant women hired as domestic help; and
- Engage with the changes in women's lives within the context of contemporary transitions in culture and economy.

---

## 4.3 THE MATERNAL BODY IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

---

Before we turn our attention to Indian context, let us begin with a brief analysis of motherhood in one particular western culture, the United States, where a considerable body of knowledge and critical appraisal around related issues has already been generated. This has led to an active feminist scholarly engagement with questions of motherhood in relationship to larger questions about gender identities. As in many other industrialized nations where controlled organizational structures are seen as essential for efficiency in terms of capitalist relations of production, in the US too, motherhood, among other social institutions, ends up being governed by similar disciplinary structures. It becomes incumbent that the mother's body, as well as the child's, be coerced into methodical patterns of behaviour so that they both begin to submit to the larger regulations perceived as the bedrock of cultural and economic prosperity. Intellectual discourses which give their due to individuality and non-conformity, may not necessarily hold true for cultural practices, especially those concerned with women. Hospitalization procedures during childbirth re-enforce the malady of motherhood by privileging medicine and cure over facilitation and care. At the same time, the systematic and almost complete institutionalization of all personal needs in the US (as in hospitals for the sick, therapists for the disturbed, and retirement homes for senior citizens), has led to an increasing dependence

on institutional structures to take care of any unforeseen exigencies in an individual's life. Daycare centres are often projected as the panacea to all the worries and concerns a new parent might have.

Various feminist scholars have observed how 'maternity' has been conceptualized and institutionalized as a 'disease' in western cultures. Some feminists, like **Eva Feder Kittay**, attribute this phenomenon to patriarchal control: "Male control of the process of pregnancy and childbirth in the United States today is exercised by the physician who habitually treats maternity as a 'disease'" (Kittay, 1983, p. 114). It is possible for us, on the one hand, to read the disciplining tendencies of western culture towards maternity and motherhood in the light of motherhood theory to explain it, as in Kittay's conclusion above, as a unilateral function of patriarchal control over women's bodies and reproductive functions. However, another type of reading of this phenomenon is also possible and may be somewhat more instructive.

Taking a cue from the work of **Michel Foucault**, certain Foucauldian feminists have attempted to view the disciplining structures of patriarchy as part of a larger nexus of power structures. Women, along with men and those other genders who get left out of the normative heterosexual network, may be equally caught and confined within such structures. **Jana Sawicki**, for instance, in her discussion of Foucault and the role of "discipline," states that "for a Foucauldian, patriarchy is the name of a global effect of domination made possible by a myriad of power relations at the micro-level of society" (Sawicki, 1991, pp. 59-62). Rather than focusing solely on patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppression, it may be useful for us to take under serious consideration a perspective which locates patriarchy as part of a larger domain of power structures. This would allow us to shift the locus of women's oppression and domination slightly away from the universalized 'other' of motherhood theory, namely, an abstract 'patriarchy', to a nexus of patriarchal and other repressive forces, such as capitalism, racism and casteism. Mothers, along with others, may be equally victimized as well as implicated in such a nexus.

While effects of race, class and caste inequalities may all be examined in relation to patriarchy, such an analysis could help us to view the various unequal power structures not just as effects of a common enemy called patriarchy, but rather as forces which uphold and are supported by patriarchal norms and strictures. For instance, in examining the position of urban domestic maids, who also happen to be mothers, one would have to take into account factors beyond their oppression or exploitation by the rural patriarchal structures to which they belong. These factors may include the role of urban patriarchal households, the unequal distribution of wages for domestic work done by women, the exploitation of lower class and lower caste women by their upper class/caste counterparts in urban domestic

households, and so on. Moreover, each of these relationships would need to be examined not in isolation, but rather as part of a larger nexus of patriarchal, capitalist, and hierarchical social structures which benefit from each other and thus sustain each other. Such an analysis would thus open up spaces within which cross-cultural comparisons of the effects of complex patriarchal social structures in different cultural milieus may become possible and productive.

Keeping the above in view, let us attempt a critical examination of motherhood in urban middle-class Indian society in an attempt to understand and analyze some of the forces which act together to construct specific representations of motherhood which a certain section of Indian women may be subjected to. This limited analysis should not be seen as a generalization of the position of all Indian mothers, but rather used as a comparative/analytical model against which the situations of various categories of women and mothers can be examined. Thus, it would be useful for you, as you read through the following sections, to make your own comparisons and analyses with women of different class, caste or religious backgrounds, in their roles as mothers.

---

#### **4.4 MOTHERHOOD IN URBAN INDIAN CONTEXTS**

---

The patriarchal framework within which motherhood has been conceptualized, framed and imbued with specific codes in Indian history and culture has led to a peculiar manifestation of maternal care amongst the urban middle classes. In the aftermath of the government's policies of economic liberalization, and a booming economy, Indians in every social and economic tier are caught in a web of class hierarchies. Being located in an increasingly capitalist structure can often imply that a great deal of importance is placed on the individual's struggle in climbing to the next rung of the ladder of financial success, and therefore, such a struggles may get projected in the culture as one of life's primary goals.

In urban India, especially, some of the growing effects of this phenomenon can be seen in an increasingly consumerist culture, flagrant appetite for money and its disposable resources, as well as, on the positive side, revolutions in music, art and cinema, greater personal freedoms, and a privileging of individual creativity and inventiveness. A fierce competitiveness and the desire to display symbols of wealth and status may also be found to accompany the heightened trends towards consumerism. In cultures where women's bodies are often projected as sexual objects, and in capitalist cultures with very strong sexist leanings, women, especially from upper classes, come to occupy peculiar positions as they must posture both as possessors of valued commodities as well as commodified bodies owned by wealthy men. In this regard, middle class and upper class urban Indian women occupy positions which are not that different from the trophy wives

of the western elite. Here, it would be significant to note the complex role played by women's 'agency' which implies that women from the upper middle and upper classes are to some extent at least, 'free' to choose such roles. However, an analysis of women's subscription to, or rebellion against, occupying pre-determined class and gendered roles may reveal a good degree of conscious or unconscious internalization of these roles, thus making the issue of 'agency' both debatable and complex. In the section which follows, we will look at some of the specific manifestations of these cultural phenomena in regard to their impact on women's roles as mothers and the maternal body in urban India.

---

## 4.5 BEAUTY MYTHS

---

You may have noticed, through media representations, that an explosion in consumerism, technological revolution, new money and upper class snobbery, all curiously mired in old patriarchal values, are often represented through images of the upper-class hi-tech mother toting the latest cell phone as fashion accessory, and advertising the family's recent foreign vacation, new car, or latest party on social networking sites. While the tools are obviously available only to the very rich, one can see that women, and especially mothers, themselves become tools in the larger programme of projecting the wealth owned by men. Similarly, for young upper-class mothers, body spas, diet clinics and the booming beauty industry all feed the frenzy fanned by the craze to possess the thinnest, fairest, most attractive body splattered in magazines and dailies alike. It is, however, a certain kind of beauty, projected most ostensibly in urban beauty pageants, that is projected as the ideal to be emulated by young urban women. The peculiar features of such representations of beauty are that they work to combine western notions of 'sexiness' (mainly light-skinned, chiseled, skinny, 'artificially enhanced' and sexually exaggerated bodies) along with Indian standards of 'femininity' (mainly projected through ethnic outfits such as the traditionally worn sari, or the docile 'namaskar').

As a result, a westernized 'sexiness' gets transplanted onto the urban female body without essentially disturbing its 'Indianness'. In her discussion of the role of 'beauty queens' and 'beauty pageants' in contemporary Indian culture, **Huma Ahmed-Ghosh** describes the current craze and adulation for "Miss India" who "is simultaneously 'modern' and 'traditional'.... She represents the ultimate modern Indian woman, preserving tradition while heralding modernization" (Ghosh, 2003, p. 223). The Miss India's of today are projected as the future Miss Worlds, Miss Universes or Miss Earths, in an ever-expanding circle of worldliness and universalization to which the modern Indian wishes to lay claim, while still clinging onto a morally superior attitude whose locus is the Indian woman, still in many ways the 'womb' and 'mother' of Indian moral and religious values. In recent years, one can

witness the eponymous presence of similar representations of motherhood which combine modern and traditional values and attributes both in popular commercial cinema and in television serials and programmes, as in the 'Mrs. India' beauty contest. While the female characters portrayed on big and small screens may be stylized in ostensibly western ways, the values of motherhood embodied by them tend not to stray too far from culturally acceptable roles. This ensures that patriarchal and traditional constructions of motherhood remain intact, despite the aspirations towards westernization.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Think of a female character or characters in a television serial who appears to conform to western notions of beauty but embodies traditional Indian values of womanhood and motherhood. Analyze the extent to which the western norms of beauty impact the cultural values upheld by the character and vice versa. What do you think would be the impact of such representations on female viewers in India, who are either mothers or would be mothers? Note down your observations and discuss in your peer group, or on the online discussion forum.*

---

## **4.6 PUBLIC SPACES, PRIVATE DESIRES**

---

As you would have noted in the above section, traditional value systems still upheld in a majority of urban middle-class households ensure that the mother's role continues to be constructed as that of the primary care-giver, while the father is seen as the primary provider. In the middle-classes, where economic necessity forces many women to work outside the home, mothers still have to deal almost single-handedly with the large burden of childcare and housework. In extended families, the burden may be shared by other women living in the household, but the stresses of co-habiting with numerous relatives and in-laws may off-set the help and support on the domestic front. The office space is fast becoming, for such women, not just a space for professional growth and satisfaction, but also a release from an oppressive patriarchal control domestic environments which may offer very limited space for romantic, conjugal relationships. At the same time, the financial contributions made by the middle-class woman are very welcome in most urban households, but it is still largely expected that the man will bring home more than the woman, so that her earnings can be safely labeled a 'side-income' rather than the bread and butter of the family.

The recent tolerance of women's sexual agency outside the four walls of the marital bedroom seem to run counter to the grain of the normative representation of the middle-class Hindu woman as someone devoid of sexual desires. However, it is important to note that this ostensible tolerance does not radically upset the fiercely held-onto notion of the inviolable private sphere within which middle-class women continue to uphold so called 'traditional family values' such as subordination or even subservience to the husband and in-laws, and their primary responsibilities as mother and caregiver of children. Very often, only acceptable public roles of the middle-class woman, such as teacher, assistant, secretary etc, are deemed appropriate within such socially contractual arrangements, while certain other types of jobs may be seen as less responsible.

The contractual arrangements mentioned above rest firmly on an understanding that the private realm and the public sphere are to remain clearly separated. You have already read about the public/private dichotomy in Unit 2, Block 2 of MWG 002. The clear cut divide between private and public spaces is informed by the difference between traditional morality (read, middle-class notions of respectability) and modernization (read, acceptable western liberal values which can be accommodated within, or reconciled with, middle-class Indian notions of respectability, primarily for economic and personal gains). The reconciliation of these contradictory forces does not, however, threaten the core of so-called traditional moralities, but does result in complex representations of women and mothers, aptly described by **Shilpa Phadke** as "modern urban middle-class progressive but respectable" women (Phadke, 2005, p.68). In her incisive analysis of the forces that comprise middle-class female sexuality, Phadke adds, "Middle class sexuality, then, is respectable not only because it operates within socially sanctioned norms but also because it recognizes the need for what is private to remain hidden from the public gaze. For women, being respectable involves understanding this dichotomy and playacting the scripts of sexual femininity in public, while making it clear that private spaces cannot be transgressed" (Phadke, 2005, pp. 74-78). Phadke convincingly argues the need to analyze the roles of consumption and desire in the lives of middle-class heterosexual feminists in India, especially in the context of marriage, since the majority of such women continue to remain impacted by marital codes imposed by a class system which is itself the product of capitalist and patriarchal forces (see Phadke, 2005).

Thus, while patriarchal demands on women's modesty, sexual invisibility, and household responsibilities invoke the image of a woman oppressed within the domestic sphere, capitalist and consumerist demands, with their ever-widening penumbras of desire and greed, create the need for women whose labor can be exchanged for money, and whose bodies can at times be represented in sexually objectifying ways in materialist cultures. The

distinctions between sexual objectification and sexual agency often get confused because of willing or coerced adherence by women to capitalist representations of sexuality. The increasing influence of capitalist values and demands amongst the middle-classes have become largely responsible for opening up spaces where women's sexual agency and desire are beginning to make themselves visible, albeit in performative and largely unstudied ways. It would be important to analyse the impact of such influences on women's roles as mothers in urban India.

---

## 4.7 UPPER-CLASS LABOURING MOTHERS

---

While prevailing notions of morality and respectability are the determining factors of women's public roles among the urban middle-classes, in upper middle-class and upper class families, the 'side-income' of women is equally, if differently, delimited by the kind of work that these women can be involved in. Despite class differences between women's economic roles, the one common factor across the class divide seems to be the representation of women's work as 'non-threatening'. As seen above, just as subordinate work of any kind is viewed as more acceptable for middle-class women, their upper-class counterparts must equally succumb to maintaining gender hierarchies. Preferably, the upper class woman should not be engaged in any activity that may be perceived as 'real work', since this would automatically reflect on the husband's inability to be an adequate provider. It would also imply that the woman is forced to spend time away from home and children, still viewed as her primary responsibilities. It is therefore not uncommon to see a growing number of young, married women in upper class neighborhoods engaged in 'non-threatening' commercial activities, such as supply of baked goods and chocolates, handbags and fashion accessories, decorative items such as gift envelopes, candles, and other products meant for consumption within the domestic sphere. Since these activities can be carried out inside the controlled confines of the upper-middle class home, (or occasionally in upscale locales), they are viewed patronizingly as acceptable distractions for upper-class, wives and mothers.

Moreover, the ostensible aim is not presented as an increase in financial income, but rather as a distraction for upper-class wives and mothers who may otherwise succumb to boredom, given the surfeit of wealth and time at their disposal. In other cases, the desire to 'work' outside the home may also be driven by the perceived competition from the modern, competent working mother whose image is idealized by an increasingly materialistic society. While these women may have a deceptive sense of power and control over their own lives and that of their children, the underlying patriarchal parameters within which they must function ensure that they behave in certain ways and play their pre-determined roles to uphold the old sexist values thinly disguised under the garb of new westernized

materialism. As **Shilpa Phadke** observes, new circumscriptions of modernity “in a Foucaultian sense” are “clearly part of the apparatus of disciplining women’s bodies and rendering them docile” (Phadke, 2005, p. 75). Interestingly, the perspectives of Jana Sawicki and Shilpa Phadke, while separated by cultural boundaries, seem to converge at the point where they both surmise the effects of disciplining pressures on women’s bodies as relationally linked to forces within which patriarchy is but one strand. As you have seen in the above analyses, one cannot extricate patriarchy as the sole factor of women’s oppression; rather, it becomes imperative to follow the various pathways opened up to examination by the specific nexus operating in a particular class and culture.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Does the experience of motherhood differ in relation to caste, class, and culture. Take any one structure to answer this question.*

---

## **4.8 CHILDCARE AND EDUCATION**

---

A further commonality shared by mothers across the urban middle and upper middle-classes is their pre-determined role as the provider of children’s ‘education’ which in traditional Indian culture, encompasses both formal education and the much more nebulous areas of moral, social and religious instruction imparted to children, for which the mother is seen to hold the primary responsibility.

In her study of education and the roles played by middle-class mothers in Kolkata, West Bengal, Henrike Donner concludes that “the discursive construction of a child’s ‘needs’ is linked to the intimate knowledge gained within a relationship only the mother possesses. Even if homework is set by the school in the first place, it is only the mother who can make the child perform” (Donner, 2008, p. 143-144). She goes on to add that “in theory, only the mother and her child are involved in schooling and the mother is free to devote herself fully to school-related activities” (Donner, 2008, pp. 143-144). The insistence on the mother as the ‘natural’ source for the child’s formal as well as informal education once again places the burden of upholding religious and moral values upon the mother, since this holds special significance for the sustenance of the patriarchal family. Furthermore, by turning the mother into the font of such family values, and of collective community history, the patriarchal structure ascertains that women’s sexuality remains subdued since such women draw their sense of identity, and their

limited sense of empowerment, from their primary role as the guardian of privileged moralities played out through maternal roles.

---

## 4.9 RURAL MIGRANT CAREGIVERS AS SURROGATE MOTHERS

---

It is quite commonplace to witness that in many upper middle-class households, the actual care of young children is left to the 'ayah', the much in demand female help who is usually a young, rural migrant woman hired to do light housework and childcare in return for a salary, room and board. In some cases, one can witness the transformation of these 'ayahs' or 'didis' (older sister) from maid to nanny to surrogate mother, as they take on almost all of the childcare duties from changing diapers, bathing, and feeding, to accompanying their wards to parks, playground, birthday parties and excursions. But owing to differences in caste and class, and the fact that the surrogate 'mothering' is based on a financial transaction, emotional bonding between the 'ayah' and the child is severely curtailed. The unspoken but implicit contract between employer and employee recognizes the economic, class and caste differences which obstruct any possible emotional attachment that the 'ayah' may develop towards the child as her position is clearly demarcated by her inferior social status. This, of course, may not be true from the perspective of the child who may naturally experience a closeness to her/his caregiver, and who would have to be 'trained' to understand social hierarchies by family members. As noted by **Maithreyi Krishnaraj**, "When care-givers do mothering, the caretaker gets emotionally attached to the child. Yet, she is not entitled to full ownership because there is a money transaction involved" (Krishnaraj, 2010, p. 23).

On the other hand, 'ayahs' who are also mothers often leave behind their own young children in the villages, to be looked after by older siblings, mothers or mothers-in-law, and are usually able to visit the children only on annual trips home. A deep sense of resignation and fatalism may often become an integral part of their lives, as they force themselves to get habituated to the long separation from their own young children. Ironically, the traditional joint family structure which functions as a rural childcare support system for poor women migrants, and thus makes it possible for them to move to distant urban areas in search of employment, is also often the one that decides if, and when, a young woman must migrate to the big city in search of paid domestic labour. The earnings, or most of them, are usually sent home to feed the family. More often than not, choosing a partner, getting married, bearing children or being later parted from them, are not decisions that the lower class/ lower caste migrant woman makes for herself.

Educational opportunities, marriage and freedom of movement are also often determined by complex caste hierarchies. This may be evident from the recent spate of what are ironically termed ‘honor killings’ being carried out to ‘protest’ against inter-caste marriages in certain villages around Delhi. One of India’s foremost newspapers indeed describes two adjoining neighbourhoods of New Delhi, separated only by a 1 km narrow lane, as “two different Delhis. One has gyms, spas and palatial houses. . . The other has dingy lanes and . . . chaupals where village elders share hookahs and lament declining morality”. The attacks on ‘declining morality’ mostly target young women and men who have dared to marry against caste restrictions forcefully imposed by self-proclaimed guardians of ancient patriarchal and social (mainly caste-based and community-based) laws/norms. By exerting strict control over marital alliances, these laws restrict the mobility of women and their offspring, within or across caste barriers, in order to maintain control over communal property. The female body, especially in its capacity to produce future off springs, remains the site of territorial battle and violence; perhaps not such a shocking contrast to the images of the waif-like and cosmetically enhanced women and mothers pervasive in contemporary Indian and western media. On the one hand, the basic freedoms and rights of the former are circumscribed based on the notion of family and community *izzat* or honour; any threat to *izzat* is a potential invitation to violence against the female body. In the latter case, women of the upper classes may consciously or unconsciously internalize beauty norms made prevalent by media in patriarchal societies, such as that of the thin, anorexic, ‘sexy’ body, where body parts may even be surgically or artificially enhanced to live up to certain standards of prevalent norms, thus inviting a different kind of violence inflicted by women upon their own bodies.

***Check Your Progress:***

*‘Honour Killings’ executed by Khap Panchayat have become a common occurrence as reported by the media. Look at one such case and analyse it in the context of the cultural expectation of the ‘maternal body’.*

---

## 4.10 FAMILIAL “BONDING” AND VERTICAL PARADIGMS OF MOTHERHOOD

---

It would be evident to you from the above that despite obvious class and caste differences and disparities in personal freedoms, the domestic maids who are playing surrogate mothers to hundreds of children from well-to-do families in big cities in India are bonded in an invisible way with the women

who employ them. Both the employer mothers and the employee surrogates play out roles defined for them by their families, which themselves reflect the larger male dominated social and economic structures of which they are a part. The heterosexual family unit, in its nuclear or extended form, idealized throughout history and still often upheld or glorified in many contemporary cultures, may continue to shackle women by offering them prefabricated metaphors of femininity and motherhood, instead of liberating them through shared work, exchangeable roles and responsibilities, and communal relationships. When asked her opinion about “family relations” vis-a-vis women, **Luce Irigaray’s** response was unequivocal, “As far as the family goes, my response will be simple and clear: the family has always been the privileged locus of women’s exploitation”. Regarding the power of mothers within the family, she goes on to add, that “this power exists only ‘within’ a system organized by men. . . historically, within the family, it is the father-man who alienates the bodies, desires and work of woman and children by treating them as his own property” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 142-143).

In contrasting vertical paradigms of motherhood against potential lateral relations between women, Juliet Mitchell observes that “the shift from the importance of giving birth to the importance of caring for offspring” is directly linked to the shift “from kin to class society and an economy of surplus profit in which capital not people increases...” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 176-185). In increasingly capitalist economies such as those of urban India, such a shift is easily perceivable in the increasing dependence of women from the upper middle-classes (especially working women) on their poorer rural sisters, who take on some of the burden of child-care. It is worthwhile to note, however, that irrespective of class differences, it is still primarily women who share childcare responsibilities, thus leaving the gender divide intact. In Joyce Trebilcot’s early pathbreaking anthology on mothering, Rivka Polatnick had argued that “the allocation of childrearing responsibility to women,... is no sacred fiat of nature, but a social policy which supports male domination in society and in the family” (Polatnick, 1983, p. 37). More than three decades after feminists like Polatnick made similar observations about women’s and men’s responsibilities towards childcare, such a conclusion still rings true, cautioning us against any hasty moves towards post-feminist complacencies.

Thus, while women, as mothers, remain trapped in the gender hierarchy of socially and culturally sanctioned maternal identities, both wealthy and poor women continue to perform destined roles prescribed by capitalist driven, caste-based and male-dominated economies. As **Juliett Mitchell** wryly observes, “the economically rich or becoming rapidly rich countries or the economically successful within poorer societies are opting for one-child or child-free status per two adults; the condemned of the earth continue to have children, which means the wealthy can replace their children from elsewhere”. (Mitchell, 2007, p.176-185). You have already

seen how this may be illustrated through cross-cultural surrogacy relationships in the previous unit. The children produced by the poor thus feed into a future labour pool of workers which will continue to sustain capitalist economies, while those from financially secure backgrounds may reap the economic benefits of having smaller families and larger incomes.

---

## 4.11 CHANGING SCENARIOS IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN INDIA

---

The above analysis does not imply a completely bleak picture, or that there are not many women who have charted out their destinies outside of the parameters described in the above sections. In contemporary urban India, at least, the patterns are fast changing, and the number of women resisting and charting out personal freedoms and identities is growing multifold. However, it is worth noting that those who are able to break free are usually those who have managed to seek out for themselves educational and professional opportunities which lead to some level of economic and personal independence. However, they must often deal with the emotional price of re-defining their lives beyond the traditional family structure. For women, personal freedoms are very often won through an acceptance of alienation from the stifling but very tight emotional bonds created by familial and communal relationships within patriarchal societies. Fortunately, for many women in urban India, which is an India clearly in transition, public as well as non-governmental funded programs emphasizing the role of the girl child, growing social acceptance of women's contributions and equality, emergent educational and employment opportunities, as well as an increasing participation by men in childcare and parental responsibilities, are all promising signs for the future.

Such women must constantly re-define newly won 'feminist' rewards in relation to what they perceive as their 'femininity', a 'femininity' beyond the one ascribed by the dominant heteronormative urban Indian culture. These struggles are certainly not new; rather, they are battles contended with by our feminist foremothers for centuries. For instance, in her study of **Simone de Beauvoir's** understanding of femininity and feminism, **Lori Jo Marso** discusses the commonly misunderstood conflictual representations of the above forces in Beauvoir's life and works to conclude that: "Beauvoir demonstrated that for the independent woman in patriarchal society, movement toward a life of transcendence and freedom is experienced in tension with the temptation to simply accept and perpetuate the conventional life that society has chosen as appropriate for women" (Lori Jo Marso, 2006, p. 142). The current status of middle-class and upper middle-class urban women in India is an indicator that the tussle between resignation to socially acceptable but unjust norms on the one hand, and rebellion against these in the search for what Beauvoir and others like her saw as

our collective “transcendence”, is still very much alive. While the former has always been the path of least resistance, it is the difficulties surmounted by the struggles of many women and mothers before us that have shown us the benefits of rewards won out of risk-taking ventures. More recently, contemporary feminists have begun to call for a re-thinking of the subject position of motherhood in ways which allow us to sidestep essentialist and universalist traps, while keeping in view the specific historical and cultural limits within which women and mothers perform gendered roles (see in Patrice Diquinzio, Jana Sawicki, and Shilpa Phadke). Whether women are, or perform as, mothers, their real and staged desires both ultimately impact their lives in very real ways.

---

## 4.12 LET US SUM UP

---

We have looked at representations of the maternal body from the perspective of cultural expectations, beauty myths, the public/private divide, and in terms of urban/rural and class and caste differences. As you have seen in the above discussions, the collective narratives of women and mothers continue to be written at least partially by the structures which dominate and define their lives and from which they can begin to extricate themselves only by continuously examining, analyzing, and developing a joint critical awareness. Such a shared critical awareness has already led feminist theorists around the world to call into question the oppressive familial, racial and class structures within which gender relations are cast. To register protest through critical interrogation, while simultaneously marking our acknowledgement of changing positive trends, may be the initial step in the re-creation of a different set of parameters where women, and women-as-mothers, can begin to envision their lives and define themselves as ‘women’ and as ‘mothers’ in entirely new and liberating ways.

---

## 4.13 UNIT END QUESTIONS

---

- 1) Read the articles by Diquinzio, Kittay and Mitchell. Based on your readings, compare the situations of urban Indian women with their western counterparts, in their roles as mothers.
- 2) Do you agree or disagree with the discussion of public-private dichotomies and the prescribed roles of mothers as described in sections 4.6 and 4.7 above? Discuss and explain.
- 3) What is the impact of placing the burden of childcare and children's education and upbringing almost entirely on mothers in India? Discuss this in the light of the relevant sections that you have read. Then offer an alternative model, which according to you, would be preferable for both women and men in urban society. Explain why you think your model would be better.

- 4) Compare the situation of upper-class and upper-middle class urban women with that of the rural migrant women hired as domestic help to function as 'surrogate mothers'. Discuss some of the disparities (economic, social, etc) in their situations, as well as any commonalities.
- 5) In what ways do you think the urban Indian scenario is being currently transformed and what is the impact of these changes on women and on women as mothers? Is the trend towards a growing capitalist economy helpful or harmful for urban women in India? Explain.

---

## 4.14 REFERENCES

---

Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma (2003). 'Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen's Body: Implications for a Hindu Nation'. *Meridians*, 4(1), 224-227.

Diquinzio, Patrice (1993). 'Exclusion and Essentialism in Feminist Theory: The Problem of Mothering'. *Hypatia*, 8(3), summer, 1-20.

Donner, Henrike (2008). *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-class Identity in Contemporary India*. Ashgate Publishing. 143-44.

Ghosh, Abantika (2010). 'Ashok Vihar and Wazirpur: A Tale of Two Different Delhis'. *The Times of India*, June 24, New Delhi, Capital Edition: 1+.

Irigary, Luce (1985). *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 142-143.

Kittay, Eva Fedder (1983). 'Womb Envy: An Explanatory Concept'. In Joyce Trebilcot. Rowman & Littlefield (Eds.). *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, 114.

Krishnaraj, Maithreyi (2010). (Ed.). *Motherhood in India*. New York: Routledge, 23.

Marso, Lori Jo. (2006). *Feminist Thinkers and the Demands of Femininity*. Routledge.

Mitchell, Juliett (2007). 'Procreative Mothers (sexual difference) and Child-free Sisters(gender)' in Jude Brown (Ed.). *The Future of Gender*. Cambridge University Press, 176-185.

Phadke, Shilpa (2005). 'Some Notes Towards Understanding the Construction of Middle-Class Urban Women's Sexuality in India' in Geetanjali Mishra and Radhika Chandiramani (Eds.), *Sexuality, Gender and Rights*. Sage Publication, 74-78.

Polatnick, M. Rivka (1983). 'Why Men Don't Rear Children: A Power Analysis'. In Joyce Trebilcot. Rowman & Littlefield (Eds.), *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (p.37).

Sawicki, Jana (1991). *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body*. Routledge.

---

## 4.15 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma (2003). 'Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen's Body: Implications for a Hindu Nation'. *Meridians*, 4(1), 224-227.

Diquinzio, Patrice (1993). 'Exclusion and Essentialism in Feminist Theory: The Problem of Mothering'. *Hypatia*, 8(3), summer, 1-20.

Donner, Henrike (2008). *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-class Identity in Contemporary India*. Ashgate Publishing. 143-44.

Kittay, Eva Fedder (1983). 'Womb Envy: An Explanatory Concept'. In Joyce Trebilcot. Rowman & Littlefield (Eds.). *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*.

Krishnaraj, Maithreyi (2010). (Ed.). *Motherhood in India*. New York: Routledge.

Mitchell, Juliett (2007). 'Procreative Mothers (sexual difference) and Child-free Sisters (gender)' in Jude Brown (Ed.). *The Future of Gender*. Cambridge University Press, 176-185.

Phadke, Shilpa (2005). 'Some Notes Towards Understanding the Construction of Middle-class Urban Women's Sexuality in India'. In Geetanjali Mishra and Radhika Chandiramani (Eds.). *Sexuality, Gender and Rights*. Sage Publication, pp. 67-81.

MWG-004 Gendered bodies and Sexualities. Block-3 The M/Other's Body. Please use this identifier to cite or link to this item:  
<http://egyankosh.ac.in/handle/123456789/40707>. Title: Unit-4 The Maternal Body In Urban India. Authors: Aneja, Anu. Appears in  
Collections: Block-3 The M/Other's Body Block-3 The M/Other's Body. Files in This Item