



Exploring and Accepting Gender Biases in the Movie Maja Ma by Anand Tiwari

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ABSTRACT:

The paper explores gender biases as the dominant area in the movie Maja Ma by Anand Tiwari (2022). It explores how the plot of this movie is modelled on the life of a typical millennial; it seeks to trace the indispensable crossroads in Pallavi's life and dig deep to decode the embedded techniques in the story which can galvanise the viewers, thereby it take hold of their life and start orienting towards their true gender acceptance. By showing a domestic oriented lady who revealed her gender identity in an argument with her daughter. This revelation was presented in a wrong way to the Vrindavan society. However, this led to the complete shift in the narrative. The movie has a family saga genre which deals with the gender crisis, domestic setting, diverse culture, notion of perfect presentation of humans, etc. The movie is critically analysed under the lens of gender by applying Judith Butler's Heterosexual Matrix concept and Hellen Cixous's The Laugh of the Medusa and the theory of Social Learning by Albert Bandura. Throughout the film, we are going to analyse and understand the gender biases from its roots. However, the surface of the film deals with the entire aspect of gender biases, family support and to give up on the area of always having perfect human beings. The movie is critiqued as a visually played out story to analyse it from such a revolutionary point of view and recognize the underlying messages and to acknowledge the choices and unacceptable behaviours of people in the fast-changing cultural scenarios around us.

Keywords: Gender, Acknowledgement, Acceptance, LGBTQIA+, Performance, Perfection.

Introduction:

The movie starts on a conversation between Madhuri Dixit as Pallavi Patel (Mother) and Ritwik Bhowmik as Tejas Patel (son) where they discussed about Tejas's relationship and his further plans of getting married to Barkha Singh as Esha Hansraj the daughter of a Manhattan NRI couple in the movie. To take his relationship ahead, Tejas went to meet Esha's parents. Due to their earlier experience and also their habit of doubting Indians made them do a lie detection test on Tejas. By the means of this test, Esha's parents i.e: Sheeba Chaddha as Pam Hansraj and Rajit Kapoor as Bob Hansraj will get a confirmation about Tejas's character and intention. Since the beginning of the movie we see the reflection of Indian culture versus Americanization. The same representation of the culture would lead to a different tangent. We also witness certain instances where we see how Pam tries to adopt American culture by presenting herself as 'Cool' or by embracing the American accent. After the verification, the movie plots move towards the setting to India. Here, we get to introduce different characters like Gajraj Rao as Manohar Patel, father of Tejas. Janak as society's friend, Viral and two of his friends. These characters are the contributive characters in the main plot of the story. We also understand Pallavi plays the role of constant supporter to her family and an influencing lady in the society. Followingly, we get to know about Tara Patel (daughter) who is an aspiring PhD student in Gender Studies. We observe her constant struggle in explaining, asking and claiming for the LGBTQIA+ justice and rights. This is evident by the different scenes, for instance an argument with the media group and also with his family. Subtly, we get to know about the ignorance regarding gender issues which exist within the Patel family. The prominent point in the movie became a condescending aspect where Pallavi happened to subtly confess about his identity of being a Lesbian in one of the arguments with Tara. This confession was publicly displayed on the first day of Navratri Day celebration. We also observe the changed expression and body language of Pallavi whenever there is a discussion regarding LGBTQIA+. Nevertheless, we constantly see the Hansraj family's obsession with Indian culture. After the meeting of both the families, they exchange thoughts on Indian culture, politics, etc. After the revelation of Pallavi's sexual identity; Hansraj family seems to feel betrayed and disappointed. Hence, they cancelled the engagement. During the rising action of the movie, we get to introduce other characters like Kanchan Adhia and Moolchand Adhi who are going to be contributing characters in the story further.

There is an investigation of the stereotype, where the video clip went viral on the internet. Pallavi being a very unproblematic lady of the Vrindavan society faced exclusion. On one hand we see, Tara was trying to talk to her mother about her sexual identity, Manohar was constantly giving justification to the Vrindavan society's members, Tejas was struggling to manage the situation with his in-laws. On the other hand, we observe that Pallavi was into her silent struggle and till date trying to manage her family's reputation. She also had a flashback regarding her adulthood. She hoped to relive those moments again. These flashbacks of Pallavi were the confirmation for the spectators about the gender struggle presented in the movie. However, spectators and the characters within the movie lived two different lives with different perspectives. The climax and the falling action of the movie represented certain significant scenes like, Tara took Pallavi to the LGBTQ centre to Tejas taking Pallavi to a Baba. Almost all the characters in the movie tried giving solutions to Pallavi regarding her Identity. Pallavi was constantly seen as some sinner. From giving a lie detection test to prove right sexual identity to

just silently taking all the accusations from family and exclusion from the society. Pallavi is one of the realistic characters portrayed by the director, Anand Tiwari.

Literature Review:

Maja Ma movie has received a lot of critical attention. Reviewer's attention has been on the movie representation on the typical Gujarati family, Dhak Dhak girl dance, queen of kitchen, and Indian culture. The ideological representation in the movie which talks about the perfect female who lives in a modern plus orthodox family. Another reviewer from the Indian Express said Madhuri spoke about her character Pallavi and her journey in Maja Ma. "Maja Ma proves that the era of boxing people and characters is over. Pallavi's sexual orientation is just one of the many facets of her identity. She is much more than that – a brilliant dancer, a doting mother, a friend and above all, a human being who can inspire others around her," she said. The Hindu review shares that the movie touches on the aspect of LGBTQIA+. Firstpost shares that Maja Ma is an iconic movie which highlights the current gender struggles. It also shares Madhuri Dixit's decision on taking the movie as a medium of gender sensitization. The Outlook India site discusses the story, cinematography, music, and dance of the movie. WION News reviewed the movie under the lens of the casting and how there are many loopholes which kept the film incomplete in many ways. The reviewer also shares how the director targeted a middle aged woman to express the issue of LGBTQ. Telangana Today newspaper site shared on how the director played safe in presenting the gender issues. He received feedback that the writer could have found another way to introduce the 'coming out' part to her family. Another critic said that Maja Ma is a mediocre narration to highlight a sensitive issue, however the climax scene looks very artificial and shows how the main characters like Kanchan didn't get much time on screen. MansworldIndia site discussed the story of the film and the cultural clashes. After a closer look at these sites, there is no discussion regarding this movie under the area of gender performance and self acceptance. The paper argues that the movie reflects on the areas of gender stereotype, gender performance, social presentation, and perfectionism. This will be deeply investigated by the character of Pallavi in the movie.

Area of Investigation:

The paper is going to deal with the existing gender biases in the society. We live in a developing society and still find it difficult to show acceptance towards genders. The movie is revolutionary in itself, where the director conveyed stigmatised gender issues by targeting an aged lady. The paper also investigates how there is a gap in understanding the genders and the lack of acknowledgment. We also try to understand the reason behind why the diverse genders are not accepted and how women are culturally conditioned.

Scope of Study:

Now that there is an increasing awareness about gender studies, rewriting this paper from a gendered perspective is not only to empower gender but also to represent a different side of the spectrum. Gender awareness can help us in acceptance, which will ease many things. Writing papers on gender and its acceptance gives us the opportunity to produce knowledge and create new power relations. Rewriting aspects on gendered perspective tries to repair the misrepresentation and shows how it is excluded from the dominant canon. It not only includes the dominant knowledge canons but also empowers them in a social setting and gives the readers a different perspective of the world. This research will not only look at gender theory but also the film as a text in evaluating Pallavi as a source of awareness. The research is entirely based on the common arguments.

Hypothesis: Understanding gender biases in Maja Ma by applying Butler's Heterosexual Matrix and Hellen Cuxious's The Laugh of the Medusa.

1. Forceful Hetrosexuality

Observing Pallavi's role in the film, we constantly see how she is a perfect woman as per the society. She performs all the duties which a woman is supposed to do. In fact, she has quit her personal wishes, choices and behaves in such a way which would not affect others. Though Pallavi is the active woman and a backbone for her family, yet her action signifies women as passive gender. She was forced to behave and perform in a normal way. All the perfectionism attached to Pallavi came to an end. It was the video which was displayed in the Navratri function. The video not only unfolds Pallavi's sexual identity but also clearly displays society's stigmatised mentality. After the revelation we witness certain scenes in the movie which represent sexual biasness. To observe certain conversations closely, for example when Tejas said "*maine toh aap mein bhagwan dhoondne nikla tha, aapne mujhse meri astha cheen li*", this scene has many connotations. When Tejas came to know about her mother's sexual identity, it made him furious. We not only observe his personal motive regarding marriage but also see his unwillingness to accept his mother. She wasn't even forced to be a good mother, in fact a perfect human too. The constant obsession with perfectionism and gender performance was forced on her. It is important to question the whole angle on how a mother ought to do everything, how parents have to be perfect, how parents don't have their own personal life. The director remarkably uses the mother figure as a revolutionary character to break the canon. It challenges the basic idea about the whole role of a Mother. Nevertheless, to examine Pallavi's sexual role in the movie on the subject of gender performance. We can refer to Judith Butler's description of the Hetrosexual Matrix in which

"proper men" and "proper women" are identified as heterosexual. Butler shows that the essential unity between biological sex, gender identification, and heterosexuality is not dictated by nature; indeed, this unity is an illusion mediated through cultural systems of meaning that underlie our understanding of material, anatomical differences. According to her, heterosexual normativity "ought not to order gender" The subversion of gender performances

indicates nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. "Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all". (Sage 374)

The movie highlights the area of submissive mothers. Since the beginning of the movie we observe how she did everything for her children. She being a middle class mother-woman managed to send Tejas aboard for career purposes and supported Tara in her change of academic plans from pursuing CA to PhD. She was quite famous in the Vrindavan society for her cooking, dance and leadership skills. Pallavi is represented as a role model and caretaker for many people until the climax. The drastic shift shown in the movie from being a perfect mother to not so acceptable Lesbian was a shock, especially for Tejas and Tara. This cultural shock is examined by the obvious conditioning. It's difficult for the people to acknowledge the fact that the binaries are functioning in reverse. Thus, this also leads to Tejas taking his mother (Pallavi) to a Baba without her consent. He holds a superstitious belief, worries about his reputation in society and thinks about his in-laws. The fear of rejection due to his mother's sexual identity was constantly keeping Tejas under fear and pressure. To contemplate on the idea of perfectionism attached to Pallavi and society's expectation from everyone to be normal. This is examined through gender discrimination.

"Butler points out that discrimination against gays is a function not of their sexuality, but rather of their failure to perform heterosexual gender norms. Heterosexuality is based on a binary difference between male and female, there is a socially constructed gender in which heterosexuality is central, which informs our understanding of biology". (Sage 374)

The transition of Pallavi's role was generating constant angst in the Patel family. The fear of constant exclusion of society on the basis of sexuality is clearly presented in the movie. It is a revolutionary point to observe how the director targeted an aged house woman to convey this significant message. The director is not only challenging the society to rethink all these biases but also challenges the cinema by giving a unique presentation.

2. Gender and Acceptance

We have observed Pallavi as a supportive mother. However, it is important to analyse Tara and Pallavi's relationship. To investigate Tara's choice on leaving Character Accountant as a career and choose to pursue PhD in gender studies. This instance itself deals with the entire mother-daughter relation. To evaluate their relation under the lens of the Social Learning theory by Albert Bandura This theory talks about how a kid imitates her/his mother as a child. A kid is completely influenced by the mother.

"Children's imitation is motivated partly by the power of authority figures, so they are especially likely to imitate parents, other adults, or older peers. With regard to gender typing, the theory assumes that children tend to imitate models of a similar gender more than they imitate models of a different gender. Therefore, the little girl imitates her mother and other women more than she does men. This mechanism of imitation helps to explain the acquisition of the complex and subtle aspects of gender roles that probably have not been the object of reinforcements. Children may learn behaviours but not perform them. A behaviour may become part of the child's repertoire through observational learning. Such information may be stored up for use perhaps years later, when a situation in adolescence or adulthood calls for knowledge of gender-appropriate behaviour". (Sage 32)

To add the narrative critically as a viewer, the attachment between Tara and Pallavi. As a kid, Tara might have observed certain actions and behaviours of her mother. She may not remember as an adult. However, it has certainly impacted her choices in the long run. Be it in her career choice or reflective in her behaviour. Here, we also see how Tara wants to model her observation, learning, imitation and experience unconsciously. This expression of Tara eventually did not support Pallavi. We witness Pallavi's double struggle. Firstly it's her personal crisis of showing and hiding the gender and secondly the family's constant pressure.

Significantly, Tara is another notable character in context with analysing the role of women as per the Hellen Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa*. She talks about accepting, supporting the women's bodies and gender as a whole.

"Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement". (Cixous 1)

As all the characters in the film were trying to seek Pallavi in reference to 'coming out', this specification is worth noting from Tara's side. She, being a queer activist, failed to understand the entire fact that no one can force an individual to 'come out' as she did with her mother. She forced her multiple times to share out loud in respect to her gender identity. To analyse Tara's action by seeing this film as a text. We observe that Tara tries to be a platform for Pallavi so that she can share her sexual identity confidently. Tara played the exact role of a woman, which Hellen has asked in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Tara tries to write Pallavi in the film. "The future must no longer be determined", (Cixous 1) is the belief that Tara holds. She is not only seeking freedom for her mother but also seeks for the whole community. This is also reflected by the revelation she made at the Ashram where she works. Nevertheless, she always explained to Pallavi to break free from all the past haunted barriers and ask to sense the freedom of life. Though Tara frequently breaks the code of ethics, her actions are yet justifiable in reference to gender and sexuality liberation. However, Pallavi's action to defend her family, to save the dignity and respect of the family is clearly rejected by Hellen in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. She states

"I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative". (Cixous 1)

Pallavi constantly tries to protect the family. As per the cultural conditioning, she thinks that her gender identity would lead to the worst devastation for her family. We can also say that even she is conditioned to the entire aspect of perfectionism. However, Hellen talks about breaking free from all these

binaries. Hellen asks us to see the third side of the story. She empathises with humans and hence asks us to outgrow the past. This outgrowth will help us in acknowledgment, liberation, and acceptance. It also challenges Pallavi's submissive characteristics. To critically see Pallavi's constant action of giving out to family and by not thinking for herself. She sacrificed her love life, desires, choices, wishes, etc. This is seen by either giving the lie detection test, by quitting her love life or by maintaining the Patel family's dignity. This is definitely a cultural conditioning. Evaluating under the aspect said by Hellen "logic of antilove". (Cixous 878) Here, we see how women are forced to not love themselves. Same thing is reflected in Pallavi's case where she forgets to love herself. However, Manohar did support his wife for her sexual identity and the movie ended on an optimistic note.

Conclusion

Society has stereotyped genders and sexuality and it is also seen as a personal target to people. The same thing is shown in the film, where the sexual identity of Pallavi is a matter of Patel family's dignity. The several existing myths on gender and sexuality in society are part of cultural memory which needs attention. The prevailing stigmatised ideologies in people's mind need a platform to understand it. Movies like 'Maja Ma' which addresses issues on the significance of gender studies are a ready-made stage for us to understand and realise the need for it. This research aims to analyse the movie as a text under the terms of gender, sexuality and Pallavi's quest for self. It also examines gender under different points of view by showing a presentation of an aged lady. However, it changes our spectacle to see and accept a movie on a social topic rather than a basic narrative. The research has attempted to highlight how sexual identity can turn the game completely. Further researchers can discuss more on whether Pallavi is a Lesbian or a Bisexual. The motherly behaviour was maintained by Pallavi till the end of the movie which makes us think on the entire concept of Lesbians' mother figure. However, the lie detector machine actually works as a contactory to the existing advanced science. On one hand we have advanced research on LGBTQIA+ and on other hand there is a usage of lie detector test which does not support liberal gender studies. However, the lie detector machine was manipulated linguistically by Pallavi. This aspect requires a critique by other critics. The different colours in the backdrop in the falling action of the movie are actually the representation of gender acceptance. The developing narrative of the movie also leaves us with a question on why the director didn't show Kanchan on screen more frequently. Kanchan's presence would have definitely added more critical analysis in respect to gender studies. It is also important to evaluate Hansraj family's behaviours towards such concerns. By bringing this into study, it will make us understand more about gender studies through various theoretical perspectives.

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