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Courtesy: Jared Lazarus/Duke Photography

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The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth

Interpreting the *Buried Truth*¹

Unravelling the Figure of the “Murdering Mother” on popular OTT platform through a Feminist Motherhood Studies Perspective

Mitali Mishra

Bindu KC

Krishna Menon

Abstract

This paper analyses the 2024 Netflix docu-series *The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth* through the perspective of Motherhood Studies. The term was coined by Andrea O'Reilly in 2006 to encapsulate the theoretical framework of immense scholarship on motherhood, marking it as an autonomous discipline. We analyse the representation of the monster mother figure across time and cultures, in current news, media, Greek and Indian mythologies, 16th century England and 1970s *ribu* culture in Japan to name a few. We contest its simplistic location within the dichotomy of the good mother versus the bad mother. Instead, the paper elaborates on maternal ambivalence to engage with the discursive violence of 'good

motherhood.' The paper provides a historical context of maternal filicide as well as its categorisation within the discipline of psychology. Through a close analysis of the mother-daughter dyad in the docu-series and the portrayal of Indrani as an ambitious woman from a small town who blazes into the limelight, the paper unravels the complex narrative of the documentary that helps us see Indrani through a feminist lens.

Keywords- *Monster Mother, Filicide, Media and Representation, Maternal Ambivalence, Mother-Daughter Dyad.*

I Introduction

The killing of children by their families is a tragic but frequent event seen throughout the world. In India, these murders take various forms including femicide (Menon, 2014), female infanticide, the killing of children with disabilities (Ghai, 2002), “honour” killings and so on. Statistics show that parents are more likely to kill their children than strangers (UNODC, 2019). For instance, a paper published in 2017 based on a study of 44 countries about child homicides found that “children face the highest risk of homicide by parents and someone they know. Increased investment into the compilation of routine data on child homicide, and the perpetrators of these homicides is imperative for understanding and ultimately reducing child homicide mortality worldwide” (Stöckl, H, et al, 2017).

A big challenge though is the limited data available on the issue, especially from the South Asian region. The same study quoted before (Stöckl et al, 2017) very disturbingly found that almost 1005 newborn babies were killed by their parents, with fathers seldom doing so. Thus, neonaticide seems to be committed mostly by mothers. Yet, when mothers kill their children, it arouses dread and disbelief. Recently television news channels in India let their creativity run amuck by describing the thirty-nine-year-old mother from Bangalore

(a technology entrepreneur) who is alleged to have killed her 4-year-old son as a “monster mom”. (Mirror Now, 2024)

In this paper, we closely analyse the representation of yet another instance of maternal filicide, this time, not that of a child but a grown daughter, that rocked Indian society a decade ago. *The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth* (Buried Truth henceforth) a limited-edition Netflix docu-series with four episodes (Bahl and Levy, 2024) was released on 29th February 2024. This also coincided with the release of two other docu-series, one story from India (Tomy, 2023), another from Spain (Martinez, 2024) where murdering women feature centrally. *Buried Truth* was advertised as offering new revelations and details on the alleged murder of Sheena Bora by her mother Indrani Mukherjea.¹ Directed by Uraaz Bahl and Shaana Levy, within a week of release, it found a spot on the most-watched streaming chart for English TV shows. But the critical reading was not a unified voice. Many dismissed it as giving a platform to a criminal and proclaimed Indrani's guilt while criticising Netflix (Roeloffs, 2024). Yet, there were other voices as well. For instance, a review read as follows: “This is a riveting exploration into the depths of familial dysfunction set against the backdrop of Mumbai's high society” (Morgan, 2024). Some pointed at the diverse voices that the documentary seems to have encapsulated and its difficulty. For instance, one reviewer

1. Each time we mention the actual case, or refer to Indrani Mukherjea as the murderer, please read it as “alleged murderer.” Of course, the following analysis should not be read in anyway as a statement on the legal case that is going on or as a support for anyone who kills.

says: "The documentary is surprisingly delicate in handling the different points of the case and does a good job of balancing its different arms" (Sengupta, 2024). Yet, even when the reviews were appreciative of the representation, one could sense the difficulty in taking in the point-of-view of the mother who was also alleged killer, even if for some fleeting moments. Of course, the consumption of the docu-series could very well be as the director Bahl, confessed in an interview, related to the "voyeurism" in the audience who wanted to see how the "mighty have fallen" (Shah, 2024).

There is a difficulty for us, as feminists, to have a conversation about mothers who kill their children, especially their daughters. It is not going to be easy for us to take a stand against the mothers as "criminals." Yet, it is also not easy for us to leave the children who seem to have gone through horrific injustice. The difficulty arises because we are painfully aware of the stark contrast that is drawn in popular media, literature and our socialization between the violent act and the societal expectations of femininity and motherhood. This contrast reduces all complexity to a sharp dichotomy between good versus bad mothers.

We cannot, as feminists, not see the particular patriarchal discursive forces that are evoked when the media catches hold, almost obsessively, of an isolated instance of a mother who kills, from time to time. Precisely because of the feminist lens we share, we feel the necessity to analyse these instances, especially the representation of *Buried Truth*. We argue that the ease with which the monster mother is vilified without engaging with the discursive violence of 'good motherhood' is unacceptable. This produces within us a conceptual dilemma. We wish to stay with this dilemma rather than settle it and take sides immediately.

We feel that the form of the documentary in question, which also does not "settle" the subjectivity of Indrani as a criminal alone, and constantly swings between representation of

her as a "criminal or a victim," [interestingly, the subtitle used in an article (Upadhyay, n.d.) that frontally expresses a discomfort produced by the Netflix documentary as supportive of a criminal] might be analysed. We are analysing the documentary to see if, in its form, can deal with this feminist conceptual ambiguity while dealing with the figure of the mother who purportedly killed her daughter.

We see this essay as an addition to the field of study demarcated by Andrea O'Reilly as "Motherhood Studies" (O'Reilly, 2010). The term encapsulates the theoretical framework of immense scholarship on motherhood, marking it as an autonomous discipline. It is an area of study that uses Adrienne Rich's demarcation between mothering as experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution as a starting block (Rich, 1995). Shari Thurer writes: "The good mother is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology" (Thurer, 2021, p. 190). The media that surrounds us plays a huge part in the creation of our ideas. Monster mothers are a big part of our social discourse, and much work has been done within Motherhood Studies to interrogate constructions of the monstrous mother in popular culture and in visual media specifically (Douglas, 2021).

For this paper, we are also concerned with the question of representation, in this case, of motherhood, since our primary text is *Buried Truth*. Work that explores how textual representations reflect mothering has happened elsewhere as well (Podnieks, 2010). In *Monstrous Mothers Troubling Tropes* (2021), Anitra Goriss-Hunter analysed Shelley Jackson's hypertext fiction *Patchwork Girl*, Susan Harper and Jessica Smartt Gullion examined mothering in a posthuman TV series *Orphan Black*, and Aidan Moir analysed disabled mothering in the hit series *Homeland*. In the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* (2024), Katrina Millan looked at mothering in the post-apocalypse in two films- *A Quiet Place* and *Bird Box* and argues how they "reestablish white, middle-class

heteronormative motherhood" (p.27). Pauline Greenhill analysed Quebec actor-director Micheline Lanctôt's 2003 film *The Issoudun Exit* which reworks Grimm's tale 'The Juniper Tree' and argues that the film redefines the cultural taboo of maternal filicide through a feminist analysis. Björklund has recently worked on the visual representations of the pregnant body through the ages (2024).

Some of the important works on the mother figure in Indian cinema include Sumita Chakravarty's *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987*, Gayatri Chatterjee's *Mother India* (2002), Krishnaraj's *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment* (2009), Vijay Mishra's *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (2002) and Sumaaya et al's *Mother Maiden Mistress: Women in Hindi Cinema*, (2012). The mother figure has also been investigated in recent works on Malayalam Cinema. (Paul, 2024; Jalrajan and Suresh, 2022).

The argument that we seek to make in this paper is that, while the mother might commit the actual act of homicide, the fact is that the mother as a woman has limited elbow room within a largely patriarchal society. The social and familial structures within which women live, love and kill are not of their making. This renders them feeling helpless in many cases. This despair, especially when it results from betrayal from the very same men and institutions that they placed their unwavering faith in, perhaps might lead them even to acts of violence and killing. As feminists, we are not through this paper condoning the acts of violence committed by mothers towards their children. But we argue that motherhood itself is socially determined and weighed down by societal expectations and challenges. We argue that motherhood is not a "naturally" existing condition. It is premised on certain gendered assumptions about women and care work, women's ability to nurture and women's role in providing endless emotional succour while remaining sexually chaste and monogamous. Any departure from these ideals "justifies" the harsh treatment that women receive. We

argue that perhaps, the mothers who kill need to be understood not only as that but as women who are hemmed in by a misogynistic society with harsh and cruel double standards.

We are looking at how this documentary constructs Indrani both as a monstrous mother as well as very subtly and suggestively throwing light on the patriarchal context of violence that might have led to the construction of her subjectivity. This is precisely because the ambiguity that pulls the narrative apart is high. This expresses itself in the pulling apart of the narrative form through its array of diverse voices. But, we argue that the narrative cannot but be ambiguous because it is also being pulled by both the voyeurism of watching a monstrous female mother murderer as well as ambiguously expressed (feminist) concerns that do not allow Indrani to remain totally voiceless. Thus, our contention is that this representation has to necessarily remain ambivalent and thus complex.

Following Adrienne Rich who suggests that the "invisible violence of the institution of motherhood" on mothers results in "patriarchal violence and callousness" that women inflict on children (1976 p.277), we ask what are the various social and cultural factors that feed into the construction of motherhood in the documentary.

Given these challenges, we argue that the documentary has tried the difficult job of getting the voices of many characters, and the narrative holds the ambivalence creatively and responsibly. The complexity of this narrative itself gives a chance to get the voice of the dismissed monstrous mother to sneak into the public consciousness. The series could sit comfortably in the genre of "true crime" genre thereby rendering the portrayal of Indrani as a monster but the complexities in the narration around the lives of an ambitious woman from a small town is the critical edge in the documentary that helps us see Indrani through a feminist lens.

Let us see how this is achieved in the following sections. We now turn to providing

a historical context of maternal filicide to add to our understanding of Indrani's actions.

II

Maternal Filicide: The Partial Uncovering of the Buried Truth

Maternal filicide, or child murder by mothers, has occurred throughout history. Research conducted across the world suggests that when a young child is murdered, the perpetrator is most likely to be the parent or stepparent. Myths and legends from across the world testify to the tragic phenomenon of a distraught mother killing her children. Euripides writes of Medea killing her two sons as revenge against her husband who marries another woman. Some feminist readings have dwelt on her as rendering her a feminist icon. So strong was her appeal that songs and speeches from the Medea were recited at suffragist meetings!

The figure of Medea is however more complex and a feminist reading today would acknowledge that as the tragedy unfolds, Medea is driven to the extreme act of the reversal of her role as a nurturing mother - of killing her children. This was a result of the harsh treatment she received from the men who had power over her- primarily her husband, thus in a way pointing to the need for the men also to shoulder some moral responsibility for the actual murder of the children (Smit, 2002).

In 16th century England for instance, women were rendered their husbands' legal "subjects" upon marriage. This implied that killing her husband meant that a woman was committing a crime against the state punishable by burning. The idea of violent marital insurrection must have filled men with dread. However, equally or perhaps even more terrifying was the figure of the murderous mother. We hear of the anonymous 1616 pamphlet "A Pittlesse Mother that at One Time Murdered Two of Her Own Children at Acton, etc." (Travitsky, 1994) This pamphlet narrates the story of Margaret Vincent, who

strangled and killed her two young children to save them from hell since her husband refused to convert to Catholicism. Many such women are mentally ill as was the case with a woman in Texas who drowned her five children in a bathtub. Separated by centuries, what is common to both murders is the portrayal of these mothers as monsters. This perhaps exposes our most primal fears about the institutions we trust, the people we love. It is easy to portray as monstrous and pathologize mothers who kill their children, as this helps retain the impossible but shared ideals of the maternal role in society. It also signals the fragility of these institutions and the networks of love and affect that hold these together (Conversation 2023).

Maternal filicide is attributed to motivations that are complex and varied. Maternal Filicide is defined as the act of a mother killing her offspring who is at least a year old. It is a rare form of homicide. Phillip Resnick in 1969, proposed a fivefold categorization of filicide based on 'motives' behind the act. Drawing upon sociological, cultural, sexual and emotional reasons, we can categorize the reason broadly as follows:

altruistic-filicide, ranging from intense love (she believes death to be in the child's best interest), and is the commonest

psychotic-filicide- an acute state of disturbance where a parent kills the child under the effect of a severe psychotic experience;

unwanted-child-filicide, where the child is viewed as a hindrance to parents' social benefits;

accidental filicide, where parents neglect and abuse the child for no particular reason;

spouse-revenge- filicide where one parent displaces anger towards the child to ongoing severe marital discord and jealousy.

The 1970s *ribu* movement of Japan for instance, tried to understand this phenomenon of maternal filicide in the context of the changes that the Japanese

society was experiencing, and it interrogated the hegemonic discourses of mothers who kill their children as either 'bad' or 'mad'. The *ribu* movement very self-consciously allied itself with criminalized women. Despite the reforms in post-war Japan, the ideology of "good wife and wise mother" continued to hold traction. In this stifling milieu, *ribu* activists declared their solidarity with criminalized and abject women/ *onna*— such as sex workers, unmarried mothers (*mikon no haha*), mothers who killed their children, and women fugitives— as part of its political strategy. The woman of disrepute – *Onna* carries within her the potential for violence, by making her the protagonist of the feminist movement, the *ribu* movement sent out a very powerful signal. Thus, it is the woman rendered abject by society who engages in illegal activities, including violent crime and the most dreadful of it all – the murder of her children. Thus, the *ribu* movement was able to place maternal filicide within a sociological framework, rather than rendering it a bizarre individual occurrence (Shigematsu, 2012).

III

Reading the Documentary

Let us now engage with the documentary closely to understand the historical, and psychological framework it provides to contextualise Indrani's actions and alleged filicide.

III (a)

The Originary Wound that Produced the "Monster:" Forced Incest in Patriarchy

The 'Sheena factor' was a damning one for Indrani. This is because at some point, Indrani had to publicly accept that she had passed Sheena off as her sister. This story of incest and rape from within the family lies at the heart of understanding Indrani. Sheena is a huge part of that, a past that Indrani might want to erase and forget. Yet, Indrani while claiming that

Sheena was her sister, was not fully "lying" (given the claims of incestual rape by Indrani) – that Sheena was her sister and her daughter at the same time! This unbearably violent fact made Indrani feel alone, as though "there was no one to take care of her," not even her mother who brought the alleged rapist father back into the family. (2, 14:43-14:50) Perhaps this explains why she left her children with her mother and moved to Mumbai to build a new life for herself and her children. (2, 38:02-38:07) The documentary highlights the tensions in Indrani's life by drawing attention to the fact that a young Indrani on the one hand, ran away from a father an alleged rapist but on the one hand she did so to provide a better life for her children thus providing a powerful justification for her seemingly wanton actions.

The documentary reveals this at a dramatic turn in the narrative – of Indrani being a victim of incest and rape by her father, and Sheena being the result of this horrifying incident. It is in *Episode 2*, Indrani claims that Sheena was the result of her father raping her for the second time when she was sixteen. (The first when she was fourteen). The documentary, the lawyers, and most commentators remain silent about investigating the truth of this claim. Her son Mekhail dismisses this as fiction that Indrani concocts to elicit sympathy. He also asks why Indrani would have left her daughter with her "molester." Indrani does not answer this question. We are shown a photo of Indrani smiling with her father. When Mekhail claims that he was tortured by Indrani, she counters the claim by producing photos of them smiling on luxury vacations. The documentary perhaps suggests that abuse and trauma may lie buried between both these photographs.

Yet, these ambivalences are not provided enough space in the documentary. We acknowledge though that the suggestion of ambivalence and complexity that the documentary presents via-a-vis Indrani's chequered past is powerful enough and makes it worth engaging with. In doing so



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the documentary exposes the complicated experiences framed by patriarchal violence in Indrani's life. The shadowy presence of her father (the absent presence that determines the whole structure of the narrative from Indrani's perspective) who never appears on screen, but who is heard shouting out his denial of the allegation against him, represents the difficulty that all of us, including feminists, face while confronting the complex nature of patriarchal violence (in this case rape and incest) and the expectations of silence from women who are subjected to it. The father looks old, battered and failed in comparison to his glittering daughter who managed to enter another world, the world of material success. Yet, his life in the shadows itself draws attention to the humiliation and violence (that he might have been the author of in his daughter's life) from which Indrani emerged as a survivor.

III (b)

The "Saving Grace" of a Daughter: Vidhie's Voice Retrieving the Mother

The mother-daughter dyad has been the subject of many studies (Gilligan, 1982; Chodorow, 1978; Collins, 1987; O'Reilly and

Abbey, 2000). It is precisely in this relationship that this documentary starts. Not the silenced and loudly speaking silence of the murdered woman – but the surviving daughter. It begins with the voice of Vidhie, the daughter of Indrani and her second husband Sanjeev Khanna, adopted later by Indrani's third husband Peter Mukerjea. All three of her parents are co-accused in the murder of Sheena Bora but she doesn't name the fathers in the context of the murder.

Under the circumstances, of being accused of killing a daughter, it is not surprising that only a(n)other daughter can come to the rescue of the "mother-murderer." Yet, she does not begin with being the rescuer of the mother. She starts by labelling her mother as seen as "mean," "scary" and "violent." In stark contrast, Indrani believes she was a good mother who loved all her children. Trauma could explain the maternal ambivalence that we see here. "The psychological scars left by sexual violence profoundly affect maternal feelings, creating a painful dichotomy where the child is both a victim and a reminder of the trauma" (Carpenter p.12).

Yet, this is followed by Vidhie describing Indrani as "the smartest person in the

world that I know" and "an overachiever." The camera cuts to champagne-drinking, diamond-wearing Indrani. (*Episode 1, 1:49*) The first headline we see is that Indrani has been appointed CEO of INX Media. (1,1:54). Vidhie goes on to say, "My mom came to Bombay with nothing and really built her way up." (1, 2:04). There are then aerial shots of the thriving business capital Mumbai with its skyscrapers and lights. This is the city that an outsider like Indrani, with no history or lineage, conquered. Are these two versions of motherhood that are juxtaposed? Or, is it the description of a "bad" mother and the rich, overachiever, clawing her way up? Vidhie's voice, most certainly, (the daughter who actually had more of an appreciative relationship with Indrani than Sheena, and Mekhail perhaps) encapsulates her own confusion and her deep affection for her mother at the same time. Early on in the documentary, Vidhie claims that she was closer to her father Peter Mukerjea, than her mother. She describes Indrani as a violent mother who was strict and slapped her for no reason. This "traumatised" her and left her "emotionally scarred" (3, 29:39). But by the time of the making of this documentary, she had decided to side with her mother, "murderer or not."

The Vidhie-Indrani dyad shows "how mothers and daughters have a bond that may include separation and connection" (Silva, 2020 p.294). The journey of accepting her mother through the villainous representation is clear in Vidhie recounting at one point that she was so distanced from her mother that at the behest of her paternal aunt, she had started calling her mother Lucy, short for Lucifer (*Episode 3, 13:54*).

III (c)

The Dead Daughter: Sheena Bora

Sheena Bora is the "absent-presence" that determines the whole story. She is the murdered daughter. In her portrayal the documentary relies on the loving and

surviving voice of her lover, Rahul Mukherjea. Through his voice, we understand the horror of her absence, the continued justifications and seemingly fabricated excuses that his father gives of Sheena's disappearance, through recorded phone conversations. She comes out in the beauty and natural freshness of her youth (unfortunately and unconsciously contrasted with Indrani's middle aged brilliance aided by sparkling jewellery and clever makeup). Sheena comes across as a proud woman who cannot be "bought" by her mother's offer of money for her education, travel and a luxurious life style. She comes across as a sincere lover whom Rahul misses deeply, through his recorded voice. She comes out as the "good woman," in contrast to her mother, Indrani. And, as good women go, she is nowhere to be seen or heard directly. She is most probably, dead. The perfect female victim is everyone's loved trope -but, the dead female victim, especially if she is killed not by the male partner but by another female, can be mobilised for patriarchal purposes. Sheena Bora's figure, we suspect, might be serving this purpose in the documentary. Her powerful absent-presence is precisely what stops many of us from even listening to a figure like Indrani. The injustice that she might have suffered, and her ultimate sacrifice and victimhood, cannot be ignored by any, especially feminists. Yet, we choose to elide her in our analysis, only to focus for the time being on the mother figure. This is not because Sheena Bora is not a compelling case to follow. This is because, Indrani (when pitted against her dead daughter) might be more complex and demands our attention, precisely because of the violence of this pitting – 'Madonna vs the whore', forcing feminists to take sides.

In studying mother-child narratives, theorists have warned against daughter-centric bias. (Juhász, 2003; Malin 2000) In *Episode 4* Indrani says that on her release from jail, she had created a chat group on WhatsApp called 'Justice for Sheena', and yet later, she felt the need for a group that would champion

'Justice for Indrani' (4, 39:12). The 'Buried Truth' is not just what happened to Sheena but equally what happened to Indrani. Within Motherhood Studies, there is a growing emphasis on recognising and acknowledging the 'maternal ambivalence' not only to resist the dominant motherhood ideology but also to bring to light the structural inequalities and concerns that often cause such intense ambivalence. Andrea O'Reilly argues, "Social, structural, and cultural conditions of mothering [...] affect experiences of maternal ambivalence and need to be considered along with the traditional psychological view of maternal ambivalence" (2010, p.52).

III (d)

Can a Mother be Ambitious?

The documentary interestingly, gives a space to air the complexity of Indrani's personality in its ambivalence. Troublingly, it does contribute to the patriarchal construction of Indrani as a bad mother using camera, symbols, music and juxtaposing fragments in a non-linear narrative. Yet, it does show her ambition as contributing to her bad motherhood, and yet, by suggesting her beginnings in incest and rape by the father, also gives her life a context.

Indrani is shown as unapologetic about being ambitious, wanting to be a "big fish in a big pond" (1, 27:28). Her image as a survivor comes out in her unapologetic embrace of her own ambition. Thus, even though she is branded a 'disgusting human being, psychopath, vamp, villainess *mujrim*, evil murderess' (1, 34:03) she claims that "other people's opinion is not my destiny" (1, 5:59). Her co-accused husband Peter also uses the idea of the "bad" mother to tarnish Indrani when he says that she is a highly ambitious woman who was willing to sacrifice her children to achieve her ambitions (3, 6:15-6:19). So, we see that the evil mother coalesces into her identity of "ambitious, corporate media baroness" (1, 15:41). Soon after Indrani's arrest the media went into

a frenzy – "she was 'The Great Gatsby of Mumbai,'" proclaimed *The Times of India*. She was "India's Gone Girl" or O.J. Simpson in a Sari" (*The Wire*, 2016).

Yet, through the techniques used in the film, we also feel that we cannot understand Indrani and her alleged crime without understanding the pressures brought on by "other people" and their "opinions." "It is easier to blame mothers than to comprehend the entire system that has restricted women. It is true that mothers have interacted most with daughters and, thus, were the most direct agents of an oppressive system. But mothers were themselves victims of the system" (Miller, 1986 p.139).

In the patriarchal model of intensive mothering, the mother is devoted to the care of others; she is self-sacrificing and "not a subject with her own needs and interests" (Bassin et al., 1994, p. 2). Indrani's greatest crime seems not to be the murder of Sheena, but that she dared to live out her life very publicly with huge success as a woman instead of subsuming her identity under a mother's identity. A mother is imagined as a mythical end goal, the point where the mother begins is where all other identities must cease - what Kelsey Henry describes as the "vanishing point of motherhood" (*The Point*, 2015).

In the documentary, there are repeated references to this mythical motherhood. Mekhail Bora- says "*pahla sach*" is that Sheena and I are her children and not siblings (1, 18:10-18:15). That idea of this primary (*pahla*) overarching truth is engrained in our society that reveres the mother forcing her out of any moorings in socio-economic realities. Kaveri Bamzai in the documentary (1, 19:23-19:38) points to the pedestal on which the mother figure is placed in Hinduism and nationalist iconography, and yet there are mothers who do not stick to the script. The story of the river Ganga in the Mahabharata submerging her seven sons is rather puzzling given the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother. However, The Mahabharata attempts to restore our faith in

the institution of motherhood by offering a detailed backstory and explanation to justify this act, with a surprising twist in the tale, as the eighth son is prevented from meeting the same fate by the father, King Shantanu. This boy grows up to become one of the central characters of the epic- Bhishma. Thus, we see that epics mention and recount tales of mothers who kill, this is not as exceptional as it is believed to be. Yet, it is comforting to think that it is exceptional, because it is the mother's undying love and ability to absorb all travails that come her way, for the sake of the children, that is one of the placeholders of patriarchy as we know it.

Indrani is judged for not being able to practice mothering that should have absorbed and transcended her rape, lack of support, economic hardships, and her desires and ambitions. At another point, poignant background music underscores Mekhail saying with welled-up eyes that he and his sister waited all their lives "for that feeling" – being able to claim Indrani as a mother but that she denied them this (3, 12:08-12:31). This is the same son who refuses to even name his father, let alone blame him for vanishing from the lives of his children. It is suggested that Mekhail and Sheena were financially well taken care of by Indrani after her marriage to Peter. She claims to have provided them with a luxurious life- cars, flights, education and international vacations included (3, 8:10-8:14). She also claims to have looked after her parents also financially. But this does not make her a 'good' mother in anyone's eyes.

The documentary slowly builds a certain narrative about Indrani as a mother. Vidhie uses the passive voice to say, "It's almost like a spell was cast over us to forget Sheena" (1, 3:32). The audience can fill in the blanks as to who cast the spell. In case, someone is unable to make the connection, we are told that Sheena calls her mother a "witch" in her diary (1, 18:55). When the story cuts to Goa, an image of ten-headed Ravana fills the screen, followed immediately by a female white mask

with painted red lips. The symbol of the evil woman wearing a mask is literally in our faces.

Serious and engaged research on motherhood in India has established that the difficulties of women's role in our society as mothers are compounded by the difficulties of being in loveless marriages and unending care work, with no hope of ever receiving reciprocal care. The adverse social and psychological circumstances within which women are expected to be close approximations of the idealized image of the mother result in unimaginable tragedies. These are more often than not interpreted as individual instances of mentally disturbed behaviour rather than because of the intersecting nature of sociological and psychological facets. The glorification of motherhood as the inevitable destiny of women pushes many to prioritise motherhood over other pursuits. The assumption of a naturally existing maternal instinct obliterates the labour involved in caring for a child. Women, especially mothers are expected to be stirred to selfless love and sacrifice. This contrasts with the recognition in both psychological and feminist literature which recognizes the difficult process of becoming a mother, one that can often feel disorienting and exhausting. As a specific case, the isolation of Japanese women as mothers because their husbands devoted all their energies to building the corporations that they worked for has come in for much sharp criticism as producing adverse psychological consequences for the conjugal relationships, for the parenting impulse and the children (Womenomics).

A pioneering study from NIMHANS published in 2018 based on a close study of four women who committed acts of homicide against their children concluded that filicide is a multifaceted act that has its roots in socio-psychological factors. Along with psychiatric disorders such as severe depression, the women in the study had acute psychosocial difficulties. Such factors always heighten the risk for violent behaviour. The mothers in this study viewed their acts as protecting their

children from a cruel and unfair world after their deaths. Thus, the sociological dimension of maternal filicide cannot be overlooked (Gowda et al, 2018).

IV

The Ambivalent Mother

Donald Winnicott, the celebrated paediatrician and psychoanalyst made a rather startling observation when he wrote that a mother hates her infant from the word go: after all, the baby treats her as scum, an unpaid servant who is discarded as an orange peel. He introduced the concept of the "good enough mother," which recognised that mothers cannot be perfect and that some frustration and ambivalence are inevitable and even necessary for the child's development. It is rather disturbing to accept the suggestion that mothers might hate their children. This is sometimes described as maternal alienation and ambivalence, which most women have experienced at some point in their lives but might be reluctant to acknowledge it.

Rozsika Parker author of *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, first published in 1995, argues that mothers now feel much "more judged and policed by society." The feeling of not measuring up and being good enough fills women with shame and this results in maternal ambivalence, she argues. Writing as a mother of four children, Adrienne Rich, author of the iconic 1976 feminist text, *Of Woman Born* wrote – "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (p.1). Thus, these perceptive scholars have managed to create space for mothers to experience fatigue and despair in the task of mothering without the self-recrimination and shame that often leads them towards self-condemnation.

That motherhood can be exhilarating and exhausting at the same time is an

awkward little secret that we seldom let slip. In our society most mothers are overworked, underpaid, and burdened by the cult of the sacrificing and loving mother and yet the fact is that our mothers work very hard with sadly very little help from the world around them. The murder of children by their mothers is not only about individual mothers and children but about how our society understands and facilitates mothering and childcare.

Becoming a mother in India is seen as a quick-fix solution to a range of challenges- physiological, psychological and marital. Such an understanding is oblivious to the social circumstances of mothering- financial difficulties, unemployment, violent or unhappy marriage, complete responsibility of childcare in the absence of safe and reliable childcare facilities, poor health care and almost non-existent mental health services (Johri and Menon).

V

Thinking Critically – Feminist Excavation of the Buried Truth

Being ambitious was not the only crime Indrani committed. A section of the media featured in the documentary *Buried Truth* could not accept Indrani's ambition, as well as her refusal to stay within the sanctioned boundaries of sexuality. The Netflix documentary shows on the full screen the screaming headlines from respected newspapers such as *The Telegraph's* 27th August 2015 headline that said "The Shamily" and offered "the essential guide to the head-spinning combinations" (1, 18:32). The documentary lingers on the diagrams that were drawn on national TV to explain the three husbands of Indrani and their children, implying in a way that dangers await those who stray from the path of monogamy and normative motherhood.

Rajdeep Sardesai, one of India's leading journalists is shown to have responded "as a parent" on his television show to Sheena's alleged murder by her mother Indrani with

a rather eloquent "What the fuck?" (1,18:56). This outburst of Sardesai's is used to suggest that the crime (alleged maternal filicide) is itself so heinous that language and professional norms breaks down. Television shows covering the murder often deployed rapid shots highlighting the sense of incomprehensibility of this crime. "Events are so shocking that people don't know what to make of it," and "(t) here can be no lower life state than this" as well as "Indrani as a mother... unbelievably nasty" (1, 19:03- 19:10). The journalist Sahil Joshi is shown summing up the available evidence to judge her as a nasty mother. "How many marriages, how many relationships, who is whose kid?" (1, 20:10). The Mumbai police is shown to be at their wit's end trying to solve this crime of non-normative sexual liaisons and marriages, its complicated nature in no small part attributed to three husbands, who the same journalist points out unironically are "all alive!" (1, 21:45).

The documentary does not overtly question the construction of Indrani as a wayward, sex-crazy woman. Yet, the very fact that they showed the media frenzy around this itself as a collage, shows the distance one can perhaps draw from this construction. It does not frontally question the assumption that women who choose to marry more than once are not necessarily evil and prone to filicide. Yet, by juxtaposing Vidhie's confused voice retrieving the motherhood of the unapologetic Indrani, one can also see that the documentary struggles (perhaps, even against itself) and ends up representing a more complex picture of the killing mother. The arc of joining lust to murdering mother is not new. Mark Jackson argues that the "path of female ruin from lust through to death" was used throughout the eighteenth century in debating newborn child murder (Jackson, 1986 p.111).

The silencing of a woman's truth is represented in a metatextual moment in *Episode 4* of the Netflix documentary, *The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth*. At the start of filming an interview with Indrani's lawyer, there are loud noises of some women

fighting in the background. The lawyer, almost a caricature of misogyny, claims authoritatively that he could try 'his way' of silencing the fight. Later in the documentary, the audience is witness to 'his way' - essentially to shout down the woman's voice. When Indrani insists that Sheena was not her first husband's daughter but was born when she was allegedly raped by her father, the lawyer ignores her, is impatient with her and finally rebukes her for breaking his train of thought, all the while completely ignoring the truth about Sheena's paternity. This is the strategy of a lawyer who claims he has never lost a single case. What is the price that patriarchy extracts from women like Indrani to have 'one' version win every time? This is the buried truth that needs to be excavated. In not doing this, in a way it reinforces the conventional view of women who 'stray', women who marry more than once, women who are ambitious and so on- there is not much of an attempt to help the viewer see Indrani as a woman who was wronged and tried to make a life for herself and her children in the best ways that she could.

Yet, in fragmentary scenes, in the confused voice of another daughter who survived and even retrieved Indrani's motherhood, one gets a glimpse of a struggling woman, ambitious, and hard as steel but also produced by the early wounds of her childhood. In spite of the mandate to play into the voyeurism of consuming a villainous woman's complex life of crime and sex (which is perhaps why we all flocked to watch it on Netflix), the documentary ends up slightly uncovering Indrani's difficult childhood and youth and the scars that she might have carried from her past. Exploring Indrani as the quintessential neo-liberal subject whose success was evident in her power to consume and lead the good life, would offer a more nuanced reading of the woman at the centre of this storm.

Does the documentary fail her (and other women like her, who are trapped by violent families on the one hand, and desire a luxurious life on the other hand)? Could it

have been done differently, given that there might have been an unstated pressure on the documentary filmmakers to portray Indrani as the murdering mom to the patriarchal and sexist society as its (click) bait? Yet, they did surprisingly, also shine a very small light at the larger context that produced a mother (who perhaps murdered?). The documentary did this well by showing her shadowy past through many voices – many judgemental, many confused, and one that of Indrani's – unapologetic? Did the documentary, despite itself, place her in the larger social, cultural and economic context?

The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth, has most certainly started a conversation, however, we argue that much more needs to be done to take this conversation in a feminist direction. The figure of the mother must be removed from the abstract pedestal that it is placed on, the mother should be seen as a multifaceted and complex person with desires, ambitions, aspirations and emotions. She should be seen as a woman who is constructed by the socio-economic and cultural norms of the times, and not as an eternal, ahistorical figure full of love. Seen like this, perhaps we might be able to argue that mothers could also feel intense hate, anger and disappointment. This would help us uncover the layers under which the truth of motherhood is buried in most patriarchies.

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Endnotes

1 *The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth* a limited-edition Netflix docu-series with four episodes, aired in 2024



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