



# Adoptive Motherhood in India: An Analysis Through Myths and Critical Theories

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**Abstract**— *Motherhood, biological or otherwise, is exclusively dedicated to the nurturance of children. The experience of motherhood, institutionalized and ghettoized under patriarchy, has often been subjected to the systematic massacring of female potentialities (Rich 13). History has been a witness to the making of biological mothers—sometimes without a choice of their own and the mothering capacities of women are often applauded based on their birthing capacities. What, therefore, becomes unnoticed in the array of societal expectations, is the trials and tribulations of the women in general, to fulfil the normative criteria of biological motherhood. As motherhood becomes a sacred calling for most women, the desire for a genetic child gets strengthened in the maternal psyche. And the (in)capability to further the species through biological reproduction makes the women discover other avenues for fulfilling this prefixed maternal capacity. This paper is an attempt to explore the various mythologies surrounding adoptive motherhood and mothering in India while deciphering the feminist analysis of the practice of adoptive mothering and its importance for maintaining the sanctity of motherhood in general.*



**Keywords**— *Motherhood, Mothering, Family, Adoption.*

## INTRODUCTION

Family is one of the oldest social institutions in the history of mankind and it offers a rich lineage of relationships based on both kinship and birth. Evidences also suggest the continuation of kinship system through the incorporation of the system of adoption (Bajpai 13). Whereas the modern society views the system of adoption as a welfare act in support of the underprivileged, history offers rich the ancestry of adoption as a method of spiritual progression.

The institution of adoption has a universal presence in all the legal systems in the world. This universality of existence can be traced back to the ancient times where adoption was regarded as a sacred act. This sacred act of embracing others' children, though not voluntarily always, offered relief from the burden of childlessness to the childless couples (Manooja 1). It would not be an exaggeration to comment on the greater

prevalence and predominance of the system of adoption in India compared to the other parts of the world.

### Contextualizing Adoptive Mothering in India:

Perhaps our mythology abounds in information regarding the prevalence and practice of adoption in ancient times. The most benevolent portrayal of adoptive mother in Indian scriptures is Yashoda, who adopted baby Krishna after his birth. Bathing in the glory of motherhood, Yashoda as the adoptive mother transcends beyond the limits of mythology and folktales and still influences those thinking of embracing adoptive motherhood. Prabha Krishnan in *In the Idiom of Loss: Ideology of Motherhood in Television Serials* glorifies this portrayal of adoptive motherhood as the epitome of nurturance and selfless motherly love. She notes in her essay:

Yashoda bathes and dresses the child, cooks for him, feeds him, tells him stories, rocks him to sleep, wakes him up the following morning with sweetly smiling mien—all the rituals which can be seen in

any one of the large temples of India, where priests perform exactly the same rituals for the presiding deities... Thus, Yashoda's lap is the *sarovar* (lap) wherein Kaanha blooms as a *kamal* (lotus). Child Krishna describes her feet as *swarga ka chaulkat* (threshold of heaven). When Krishna has to go to Mathura to slay uncle Kamsa, Yashoda, weeping demands to know what right *trilok* (three worlds) has over her child. Husband Nand has to understand the imperatives of the larger world to her. (112)

The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata bear testimony to the adoption practices of the kings and saints who adopted for getting a male offspring. According to Hindu religious tradition, begetting a son is of paramount importance and true salvation of the soul can only occur if the son performs ancestor worship (Vlasoff 15). Therefore, in case of childless couples, it was not uncommon in ancient Hindu tradition to adopt a male heir for attaining salvation. Religion and traditional system played a decisive role behind the adoption practices in the ancient Indian cultural and social system.

Adoption system was strictly structured on patriarchal ideology, where the male child of the closest kin was adopted and was declared as the financial beneficiary. But on the flip side of such adoptive practices, the male child had to sever all the blood ties with his birthing family. The study of Bhaskar et al. on the practices of Indian adoption system of past and present reflects on progressive changes that adoptive practices in India have embraced over the past centuries and decades. The study reveals that "while the objectives of ancient adoption seemed to be focused on performing last rites, kinship, and property interest, India began to consider the Western rationale for adoption from the social perspectives" (Bhaskar, et al. 4).

Adoption as a concept has undergone remarkable changes structurally during its constant overhauling at different time-periods and its implementation in modern India, too, observes intermittent revisions on the basis of socio-cultural demands. Adoption in India is regulated by personal laws of the community and its manifestation for the countrymen is governed by the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956.

The country has also witnessed an increasing demand for inter-country adoptions in the post-independent era. As adoption was legally incorporated with the Indian legislative system, many Indian couples till the 1970s could not rule out the thought of getting stigmatised due to their childless status and they disliked the disclosure of their status as adoptive parents. This foregrounded the foundation of laws during the 1960s permitting cross country adoptions

to take place. The lucrative financial affordability of prospective foreign adoptive parents sped up the formation of numerous adoption agencies throughout India. And the apparent non-adherence to uniform law throughout the country in case of inter country adoption made this system more popular rather than the domestic adoptions in India. The decades of 1960s and 70s experienced the steep rise in international adoptions which were not even properly documented (Hoksbergen 1986).

In the modern times, wherein the hue and cry for the genetic child surpasses all, we still have anecdotes in India which reinstall our belief in the nurturance capacities of women as adoptive mothers. The heterosexual desire to identify maternal instincts as a physical sensation often perplexes the women who prefer to avoid pregnancy and childbirth as a means of attaining motherhood. Tamil fiction writer C.S. Laxmi critiques this essentialist collaboration of female body and maternal instincts in her short story collection *A Purple Sea*. She describes this juxtaposed complexity through one of her stories in the following words, "Vaamu, maternal love isn't like physical sensation. It doesn't come automatically along with a woman's body. With what organ of a man's body do you associate his affection for children?" (Ambai 208).

Amrita Nandy in her book *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childfree Women* describes the insight that she gained while interviewing women, who volunteered to adopt despite being biologically capable of birthing their own offspring. Nandy affirms that such women wield their powerful maternal instincts to forego the biological and value adoption because they find meaning in "kinship with strangers" (247). She notes in this connection, "In a pronatalist society like India's, voluntary adoption remains unconventional and may invite surprise, suspicion, admiration, support and sometimes even criticism" (7).

Amrita Nandy's interviews revealed the motivational factors which drove these biologically capable women to adopt children. One such successful woman was Niyamat, alumna of one of the best Engineering colleges in India, who voluntarily adopted a baby girl despite having a biological daughter of her own. She encountered severe breakdowns while narrating her experiences during the interview. She utters in this regard:

...as long as there is a single child on earth without parents, it is a burden on our conscience (cries). Everything...a great job, money, my greatest passion music...I set it all aside. My kids are my first love. From my terrace I have watched a crow feed a koel's baby every day. Even a crow can feed and raise another's baby. Why can't humans adopt other people's kids? (191)

This emotional identification with a greater cause and the tenacity to reach up to one's full potential as a human being pilots the couple's decision to adopt a child. The book also chronicles the life stories of other married urban fertile couples who avoid the conception of biological child and some even going to the extent of terminating their pregnancies only to swear by adoption as an environmentally and socially responsible path to attain motherhood.

Nandy's book also documents the stories of single mothers who unlike the married couples, gathered motivation from different societal circumstances to embrace the identity of an adoptive mother. Joan, a senior journalist in her 50s narrates her experiences of being a single adoptive mother staying in a live-in relationship. While Joan questions the women's lack of autonomy and pre-destined gendered roles in marriage, she, nonetheless, accepts that being a mother makes her complete, gives her enough power to feel confident in all her efforts in life. She utters, "whatever said and done, you may have a car, a house, boyfriend or a marriage, you can have a great job, you may be travelling a lot but then if you do not have motherhood...the other milestones somehow cannot add up to this one" (202). Dipika, another single adoptive mother, beams with joy and excitement at the thought of her adoptive daughter and she thinks, "adoption stands for a bigger meaning and higher purpose in life" (202).

### CONCLUSION

What these narratives of personal experiences reflect is the progressive mindset of urban Indian married couples who approach adoption from a humanitarian ground. These interviews also narrate the stories of single adoptive mothers who choose an aesthetic, non-biological and value-added means of attaining parenthood and find adoptive motherhood more fulfilling than the promises of matrimonial bliss. But as examples of such kinds are numerous, conversely the anxiety of not attaining biological motherhood bothers some women too. In their overarching interest to evade the binary between biological and non-biological, adoptive maternal bodies often relish the critically earned ambiguity of non-procreative motherly bodies and enjoy the vantage ground of maternal vista, interrogating the traditional linking of sexuality and motherhood (Park 222).

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