

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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## The mommy trap



My favourite bookmark is the one I picked up for free, several years ago, at a *hookah* bar in Delhi. It has a picture of Madonna, glowingly sensuous and provocative, accompanied by her quote, "I'm not interested in being wonder woman in the delivery room, give me drugs." It is good to know that the Material Girl, for all her cult following and gravity-defying conical attire, is just one of us, scared and vulnerable, caught up in the primal experience of birthing. But then, Madonna ruled the world much before she rocked the cradle and turned the adage on its head.

So, why this sudden interest in mothers? After all, it is not even Mother's Day. The mind works in strange ways. The only logical (and logic in my life has always been in short supply) explanation could be that it is because I have at last made the lifechanging transition from being just a mother to a fullfledged card-carrying member of the mom-in-law brigade. If the initiation into motherhood is full of imagined and real terrors at the delivery room, entering in-law country is all about delicious food, pretty clothes, laughter and endless photo-ops. No doubt, there is that wee little pang at letting your offspring belong to somebody else but – and I am being very candid here, but it is quite compensated for by the wicked satisfaction in knowing that the aforesaid offspring will now have two women nagging him.

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Mothers are like cats, we have more than one life, and this is so because we have this intuitive and quite uncanny ability to slip into our children's lives. Fathers generally cannot do this the way we can. We mothers, thanks to some kind of built-in radar, are clued into every detail of our children's existence – the names of friends, favourite cafes, the books being read at the moment, campus politics, break-ups and a hundred other details. Many of us also, blatantly violating the trust reposed on us, cultivate underhand methods like calling up friends of an offspring when he/she doesn't answer our calls. Mothers are like courier companies – they reach any place, anywhere, in the snap of your fingers.

Way back into my girlhood, I used to cringe at the persona of the Bollywood mother. Nargis as Mother India was cool, of course – shooting down her wayward son and all that. But most mothers were whining, self-abnegating, drab creatures who were fixated on getting food for their sons and anxiously remarking how thin they had become. Her lacrimal (for the initiated, the tear) glands worked overtime and they were all too often in bed, wheezing in the last stages of consumption. We have come far ahead of all that balderdash. Moms on screen nowadays wear designer threads, go to kitty parties, run a business, enter politics, and don't bat an eyelid when told the son is gay. She has a life that does not revolve only around her children anymore and thus, she doesn't trap her kids with feelings of guilt. Quite refreshing, actually.

That mothers can live a meaningful life through their children was, of course, developed most comprehensively in Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, in which a mother takes to socialism, after being initiated by her son, and makes the supreme sacrifice. James Joyce had proclaimed, "Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world, a mother's love is not." And yet, literature is replete with bad mothers, even psycho-moms. Bad mummies are glaringly evident in the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Clytemnestra murders her husband, ill-treats her daughter and is bumped off by her son. Jocasta unknowingly marries her own son Oedipus. Medea kills her sons to wreak a terrible revenge on her husband. All this is certainly motherhood gone noir. Shiboprasad Mukherjee and Nandita Roy may probably have been inspired by Dr. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*, when they made the movie *lcche*, which I saw recently. It is about a mother's obsessive love for her son, an only child, and her implacable desire to see him rise in the world. Along the way, she ruins his relationship with a young girl and holds him up to scorn and ridicule among his peers. The day he turns twenty-one, Souvik gets married and leaves home, bitterly telling his mother, "You will not touch me again, Ma. I am leaving." The camera then retreats from the illuminated room where the mother is sitting with the paraphernalia of her boy's childhood – a ball, books, birthday cards... Soon, the room is a small golden square framed by the dark brooding spaces of the night. Even as we are relieved that Souvik is free, we cannot help but feel an ache for her predicament.

When we are talking of mommies who are bad news, how can we leave out Norman "Psycho" Bates' mother? The senior Missus Bates is only present on screen as a grinning skeleton in a rocking chair at the very end but she had done enough in her lifetime to create

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a murderer. Even in her death, she is alive in her son's fractured psyche. Harsh and overbearing, she had denied Norman a normal childhood, never letting him indulge in any activity that did not involve her. After he murders her, he preserves her body and enacts her role from time to time, even wearing her clothes.

But these are aberrations. Motherhood remains the most profound and wonderful state of grace a woman can ever experience. Whether she kisses or scolds, a mother is just trying to lead her child along the path of life, enveloped in her love. That is all there is to it, or is there?