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## Film Review: What Makes Her a *Maja Ma*?

Reviewed by V.K. Karthika<sup>1</sup>

### Film Information:

Title: *Maja Ma*

Director: Anand Tiwari

Producer: Amritpal Singh Bindra

Distributor: Amazon Prime Video

Release Year: 2022

Length: 134 minutes

Genre: Family Drama

The film *Maja Ma* (2022), directed by Anand Tiwari and released on Amazon Prime as the OTT platform's first India original, portrays a quintessential, middle aged, middle-class homemaker Pallavi Patel (Madhuri Dixit). Her mundane life encounters an unforeseen turmoil owing to a viral video spreading certain rumors about her sexuality in her neighborhood. The film offers a spoof or light comedy when discussing a very serious social theme. Although the film poses certain important questions, the ending's overly happy and tidy climax is more melodramatic than realistic. The film offers a mediocre compromise, failing to fully explore the complex problems it raises about sexuality and arranged marriage.

Pallavi Patel (Madhuri Dixit) is a dutiful wife, mother, homemaker, chef, prayerful devotee, graceful Garba dancer, and a beautiful and calm person who is the backbone of the Patel family that consists of her husband Manohar (Gajraj Rao), son Tejas (Rithwik Bhowmik), and daughter Tara (Shristi Shrivastava). The plot revolves around the betrothal preparations of Tejas and his rich NRI (non-resident Indian) girlfriend Esha Hansraj (Barkha Singh). Tara is a very outspoken LGBTQIA+ activist who believes in claiming one's own identity, and she engages in continuous arguments with her father and especially her brother as she thinks they are narrow-minded and hypocritical. A few days before the engagement eve, one such argument provokes the usually calm Pallavi when she is questioned about her cowardice by Tara. In her frenzied mood, Pallavi states that she is a lesbian and hates to live with men. Although it is not taken seriously, the video of this conversation gets screened in an evening during the Durga Puja (a festival that celebrates the victory of goddess Durga over the demon) and everyone in the neighborhood watches it along with Esha's snobbish parents Bob Hansraj (Rajat Kapur) and Pam Hansraj (Sheeba Chaddha). The video goes viral with embellishments added to it by a group of youngsters who loathe Manohar, and a larger segment of the society begins to ostracize the Patel family. Tejas firmly believes that his mother made the comment at the spur of a moment, but Esha's parents who are extremely conservative despite their decades of living in New York City do not want to pollute the reputation of their clan. An aggrieved Pallavi apologizes to the Hansrajs, but they demand a lie detection test. Esha and Tara are staunchly against this idea, and Tara believes that her mother is a lesbian. Tejas, however, believes that subjecting his mother to a lie detection test would allow her to regain her credibility and integrity in their society. Therefore, he urges her to do it. Now we see a confused Pallavi who despite this odd situation manages the household chores uninterruptedly.

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The truth is that Tara's mother-in-law Kanchan (Simone Singh) who was Pallavi's best friend turns out to be Pallavi's lover, and Tejas finds out the truth. How the family handles this "bitter truth" forms the crux of the story.

### The "Deviant" *Bharat Nari*

The initial scenes of the film show an undoubtedly happy housewife, mother, dancer and culinary expert Pallavi who epitomizes the concept of *Bharat Nari* (the ideal Indian woman). The subsequent frames problematize this idea of ideal Indian womanhood especially when the Hansraj family walks into the plot. Bob and Pam are an ideal Indian couple who despite their non-resident Indian status and the fake US accents situate themselves firmly in the Indian value system. Pam asks the ever-rebellious Tara while she is serving them beverages if she has her period on because Bob does not touch food prepared by menstruating women. The Hansrajs are proud beholders of traditional values of India. Their repeated references to the prestige of their clan and their views about the role of "good women" exemplifies the ideals they carry with them. Similar attitudes are expressed in Pallavi's immediate neighborhood as the children are now not allowed to eat the sweets that she prepares once the story of her lesbianism has spread. The community women do the *arati* (the ritualistic practice that involves lighting of lamps to worship the deity) without their *arati leader* Pallavi. Experiencing ostracism becomes the norm for her and her family.

The film addresses culturally constructed tropes concerning both women and mothers in traditional Indian society. Indian society, structured to think in binaries of masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual, doubly oppresses lesbians who desire women. A society that is driven by what Adrienne Rich (1980) calls "compulsory heterosexuality" imagines that heterosexuality is the norm, and any deviation from the "normal," especially when it happens in the case of a woman, must be ostracized. As Adrienne Rich (1980) points out, "[o]ne of the many means of [heterosexual] enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (620). Tejas's dismissal of the possibility of his mother being a lesbian is a product of this social consciousness that does not imagine the plausibility of a change in heterosexual norms. Culturally fashioned in a compulsorily heterosexual format, Indian society idealizes the perfect *Bharat Nari* concept and finds it impossible to tolerate any deviations to the elements that culturally constitute this ideal woman. In short, deviations from the constructed norms are not tolerated by the society, and any woman with "questionable character" is forced to fight the stigma. The film showcases several such episodes.

### Spoofing the Social System

The movie deals with an unusual theme—a woman suppressing her sexual orientation for 25-plus years and living as a supposedly happily married wife and mother—but at times it treats this serious theme with a tone that is too sarcastic. Intentional or unintentional, the spoofing mars the consistency of the narration and shifts the focus away from the main thread. At the same time, at certain junctures, the satire actually mocks an evil and snobbish social system which does not address any pertinent questions that affect the individual or the social unit called family. This is visible in the sequence with Bob and his snobbish American friends after a confrontation scene between Bob and Pam following Pallavi's lie detection test. The insensitivity or indifference of the snobs and an uncaring society cannot be better showcased.

Like many other films that treat similar subjects, *Maja Ma* depicts the common concerns of a traditional society that does not tolerate deviations from customs and even treats such deviations as psychological illness. The scene in which Pallavi is taken by Tejas to a sorcerer who claims to have all sorts of remedies for illness including "gay ka bimari" (the gay

illness) shows the educated adults falling into the trap of the traditional dictum “what do people say.” In 2014, there was a controversial statement from the former president of the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) about the “unnaturalness” of homosexuality with particular reference to pride parades. Following this, the IPS President and Secretary stated that “Based on existing scientific evidence and good practice guidelines from the field of psychiatry, the Indian Psychiatric Society would like to state that there is no evidence to substantiate the belief that homosexuality is a mental illness or disease” (Iyer, 2014). In the film, Tejas is a highly educated young man who knows that homosexuality is not a clinical condition to be treated with psychotherapy or with medicine. But, the “unbelievability” or the “impossibility” of his mother being a lesbian makes him take her to quack sages for treatment. This segment throws light onto the social stigma and ignorance that Indians subscribe to when it comes to non-normative sexual orientations.

The activist-daughter Tara’s attempts to get her mother to assert her lesbian identity in public is also a questionable act of coercion. Pallavi is shown as a woman who believes in setting her own terms and conditions, since she has chosen silence for 25 years. Tara uses her mother’s sexual orientation to validate her own integrity as an LGBTQIA+ activist, since she herself has a heterosexual identity.

### **Impotence and Arranged Marriage**

The toxic society that ostracizes the Patel family makes use of all possible means to attack the menfolk in the Patel family, by asserting the conventional norm that the unacceptable behaviors of the women in the household bring shame to the menfolk. We see a worried Manohar standing in front of his portrait on which the youngsters in the housing colony had written *namard* (impotent) and an even more concerned and troubled Tejas attempting to wipe it off along with a few other sympathetic elderly men in their society. A woman after the silver jubilee of her wedding declaring her “deviant” sexual orientation is perceived by the society as a consequence of the impotency of her husband. The scenes that depict how Manohar seeks medicine suggested by his friend to regain his potency are tailored to evoke laughter. These humorous segments do not capture the vulnerability of the man who questions his own identity as a husband.

Pallavi’s questions to Manohar about establishing a companionship between a husband and wife are very important, but the sharpness of those questions is lost rather than accentuated in the larger film. Manohar has no answers when Pallavi asks if he had ever sought her consent for the marriage. A woman claiming her lesbian identity is seen as an aberration that is the result of the impotency of the man with whom she lives. It is not seen as the society victimizing the female by preventing her from expressing her consent during marriage. How Pallavi and Kanchan got their respective husbands illustrates the flaws of a system of arranging marriages based on convenience rather than on consent or choice. Although this theme has the potential to raise critical issues regarding arranged marriage, the film moves towards an easy, trite finale without sufficiently exploring these troublesome questions.

### **The Modern-Day Agnipareeksha**

The entire story happens during the Hindu festival *Durga Puja* amidst the colorful Garba dance sequences in which the major attraction is Pallavi’s performance. However, when the rumors about her sexuality spread, she is no longer welcomed in these social circles neither for rituals nor for merriment. It is ironic that the rituals to celebrate the goddess are not inclusive and Pallavi is forced to stay away. The lie detection test which initially represented hope for Tejas now threatens him, as both he and his sister are sure that Pallavi is not going to pass the test. Despite all odds, Pallavi decides to take the test. The scenes that follow are full of idiotically chauvinistic questions that center around the abstract ideals of dignity, chastity,

sexual purity, and the restraint that Indian society expects a woman to adhere to. This modern-day *Agnipareeksha* (trial by fire) is no way lesser than the puranic one that demanded the assertion of Sita's chastity and faithfulness. Pam Hansraj, following her encounter with Kanchan, becomes a changed person, forgets her fake accent and snobbish ways, and yells at her husband in her mother tongue. She no longer hides her vulnerability and dares to express her anguish. To the great surprise of Tejas and Tara, Pallavi passes the lie detection test, the result of which was awaited by the Hansraj family as well as by the members of the Patels' neighborhood. Now, the engagement is on. The secretary position of the housing colony is assured for Manohar. But the Patel men understand their mistakes, abort the engagement, and reject the secretary position respecting Pallavi's choice and identity, assuring their support for her. Kanchan has to face her own doom as she is revealed as a cancer patient. The unrealistic family support offered to Kanchan and Pallavi is an attempt by the filmmaker to evade the difficulties of real life, so he compromises by offering an easy, happy ending.

In short, the ambitious theme that could have shaken the audience to generate some healthy discussion about sexuality and arranged marriage ends up as a mediocre attempt to balance between the progressive outlook of modern society and a conservative value system. The movie lacks precision in plot and direction. Clothed as a social comedy, the film undermines several significant social concerns. The happy ending lacks realism and looks more like an atonement for all the social convictions about "normal" vs. "abnormal" sexual orientation.

The Hansraj family's reference to the culture and religious texts are not elaborated by the filmmaker. Instead, there could have been more references to the Hinduist texts that validate various sexualities and assert the importance of being inclusive. *Rigveda*, one of the four Vedas, stated "*Vikruti evam prakruti*" which means that which deviates from the natural/normal is also natural/normal. Although there is a subtle reference to this in the movie, the filmmaker does not dwell upon it enough.

What we see on screen is a very modest attempt to showcase a very significant issue. When the thread of the movie is interesting and worthy, its treatment is not bold enough to promote any debates. It appears to be an attempt to not risk the wrath of traditionalists and gender-essentialists, and the spoofing is employed to blunt the troubling intensity of its themes. Although the title of the movie presents the mother as a *Maja* Ma, the spectator is still unsure about what that adjective *Maja* denotes or connotes. *Maja* as an adjective could mean joyous, playful, and even funny. One cannot be sure what playfulness or joy a mother may derive from an oppressive social system that does not permit her to reveal her homosexual identity and to choose a life that she wants to live. In this context, when a mother is invested with the responsibility of upholding the clan's prestige and heterosexual norms, how can she ever become a *maja* Ma?

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