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Revisiting Marriage and Motherhood: Celebrating Choices in *Tribhanga*

Reviewed by Meenakshi Jha¹ and Katyayani²

Film Information:

Title: *Tribhanga: Tedhi Medhi Crazy*

Director: Renuka Sahane

Producer: Ajay Devgn and others

Distributor: Netflix

Year: 2021

Length: 95 mins

Genre: Family Drama

Introduction

Tribhanga: Tedhi Medhi Crazy (2021) is a tale of rebellion and its repercussions. It is a conscious and careful weaving together of three generations of women's lives, their choices, lived experiences, and foreseen and unforeseen consequences. The film thus has a captivating, paired opening and closing frame—that of the three women Nayanara (Tanvi Azmi), Anuradha (Kajol), and Masha (Mithila Palkar) pursuing their creative instincts. Nayan in the center is engrossed in reading while Anu on her right dons her *ghunghroos*³ and Masha on her left randomly plays with plastic cups. All are simultaneously posing for a candid shot upon being called. In the opening scene, the camera's gaze is on the Windows background on the computer screen, whereas the closing scene depicts the iconic book cover for “*Tribhanga*,” which is Nayan's autobiography written by Milan (Kunal Roy Kapur). The film traverses through striking incidents from their individual yet intertwined stories which collectively complete the overall narrative of the book as well as the film. The idea of a frame, or a story within a story as the entire film follows the progress of Nayan's autobiography, is visually conveyed via the picture within a picture sequence that concludes the film, depicting that despite their divergent personal choices, Nayan, Anu, and Masha are inseparable.

Celebrating Choices

The issue of choice forms the core of contemporary “Choice Feminism” (Pant, 2019; Ferguson, 2010) and is central to all female protagonists in the film. Anu assertively remarks before Masha, “*lekin vo sab hamare choices the, kisi ne hum par apne choices nahi thope*” which translates to “Your grandmother and I we made up some fucked-up choices, but they were all our choices. Nobody imposed their choices on us.” The director Renuka Sahane here makes a brave attempt at thoroughly incorporating and critically analyzing the possible trajectories of choosing to survive within or work against the prescribed patriarchal system through the course of her

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³ A musical anklet of bells worn by classical Indian dancers.

characters' lives. Nayan suffers backlash at the hands of her mother-in-law (Rajani Welankar) for her relentless writing at the cost of her conventional duties of a wife, a daughter-in-law and a good mother. Her mother-in-law says to Vinayak, Nayan's loving yet helpless husband (played by Piyysh Ranade), "*Geli teen taas lihitiye ti. Mi marat asle na tari mhanel, thodya velani mara aai, majha yevdha lihun hou de,*" which can be translated as "She's been writing for hours. Even if I were to die, she'd say don't die now, let me write first." Later, after Nayan secures her first medal for writing, her mother-in-law taunts her in front of Vinayak in the kitchen, "*Are tujha ya bayko cha baher udo udo challay, aani gharaat than thanaat. Tujhi bayko gharat swayampak karat nahi, ghara kade laksha det nahi, kaa bara hicha koutuk karava? Fakta likhaan. Hicha mul marat asel na, tari hicha likhaan thambnar nahi,*" which can be translated as "Your wife is celebrated by outsiders, but her house is a mess. Your wife can't cook, she doesn't do anything in the house. Why should I praise her? All she does is write. Even if one of her children were dying, she'd still not stop writing." Eventually, she walks out on her husband along with her kids, prioritizing herself and her passion for writing which causes a disruption in the traditional marriage system and uproots her children from the safe, secure environment they have grown up in.

Questioning the Made in Heaven Syndrome

As a social institution, marriage is put under scrutiny and its value in a woman's life is questioned via Nayan's and Anu's radical choices. Feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and Simon de Beauvoir have long criticized marriage on the basis of feminist concerns about gender equality, individual freedom, and sexual division of labor among others. The latter in her seminal work *The Second Sex* went as far as calling it glorified slavery (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011). Sahane therefore makes it a point to engage in this controversial institution in *Tribhanga*. Nayantara marries twice, first to Vinayak and later to Vikramaditya (Nishank Verma), both times out of love. Later, she engages in an "open relationship" with Raina and rejects the possibility of marriage altogether by embracing a live-in relationship with Dimitri (Richard John Lovatt) and thereafter having multiple boyfriends. She outwardly censures marriage: "Marriage is some sort of societal terrorism," and "Monogamy is injurious to health." Further, Nayantara belittles the paramount significance associated with the man of the house in a typical patriarchal household: "*Hamare ghar mein kisi mard ki zarurat nahi hai*/Our home doesn't need a man. Men are like tissues." However, Masha, who belongs to the seemingly modern generation, opts for a conventional, conservative joint family for marriage, noting before Milan, "*Hamare Parivaar mein auratein ghonghat leti hain*/Women cover their heads in my family," and veiling her own head while videoconferencing with her mother-in-law. Her choice stems from her aspiration for a stable, normal family for her child which she was denied access to all through her childhood.

Re-thinking the Model Mother

This brings us to yet another feminist issue the film engages with, that of motherhood. Second wave feminists like Shulamith Firestone (1970), Betty Friedan (1997), and Kate Millett (2016) were explicitly critical of motherhood and highlighted a close linkage between women's oppression and women's naturalized position as mothers where the womb became a site of patriarchal capture and control. As Adrienne Rich notes in her much celebrated *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (p. 55). On the other hand, Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Carol Gilligan (1982), both psychoanalytic feminists, glorified women's productive capabilities in terms of motherhood and

caretaking in their respective works entitled *The Reproduction of Mothering* and *In a Different Voice*. They regarded motherhood and caring as positive values, as sources of knowledge and empowerment for women.

The film re-visits and reinterprets the cause of motherhood through Nayan, Anu, and Masha from three different generations who exercise active participation over passive reception when it comes to decision making for their children. Nayan seems to be both reckless and revolutionary in her handling of the lives of her children Anu and Robindro. On the one hand, she abandons Vinayak, takes them both and introduces Vikramaditya into their lives as a stepfather. She also fails to identify Vinayak as Anu's abuser even though Anu attempts to take her own life to end her suffering, and she later laments before Milan: "*Mujhe Vikram pe itna bharosa tha ki mai kabhi sapne mein bhi nahi soch sakti thi ki vo Anu ko molest kar raha hoga. Ghin aati hai mujhe apne aap se mai itni andhi kaise ho sakti thi!*" which is translated as "I really trusted Vikram and I couldn't ever imagine that he would sexually harass Anu. I feel disgusted with myself, how could I be so blind!" On the other hand, she is a visionary who changes her children's surname from their fathers to her own (Apte). She fights a ten-year long case against patriarchal society, and later supports Anu to rent an apartment with her Russian live-in partner Dimitri. This proves her commitment to stand by her children even when they tread against socially prescribed, predictable paths. She backs Anu's love for dancing and respects Robindro's devotion and dedication to a saintly life.

Anuradha is depicted to be empowered by motherhood. Masha exclaims how "*Aai becomes a tigress when it comes to me,*" and the very next scene shows Anu fighting Dimitri in a full rage screaming, "How dare you hit my baby?" after which she kicks him out of her house and her life. Masha, still pregnant, confesses to having undergone a gender determination test solely for the sake of her family members who are desperate to have a son and "didn't want to take a risk" that the baby might be a girl. She considers herself "lucky" that she didn't have to go through the entire painstaking process of convincing her in-laws because she's about to give birth to a son and regrets how, "sometimes in families you don't have a choice." This comes as a warning as Anu tells Masha, "*Maine tumhare ye normal family jaise sau families dekhe hain. Yahan pe bithayenge tumhe aur apni giri huyi regressive mentality thopte rahenge tum par*" which translates to "I have seen hundreds of so-called normal families like yours. They will put you on a pedestal, and keep imposing their appalling, regressive mentality on you."

One key observation that shapes the course of mothering of both Anu and Masha is their underlying fear of making the same devastating blunders that their respective mothers made. Nayan was negligent and failed to discern Anu's misery while she was being harassed by her second husband in private, and teachers and fellow students in public, on account of being a divorcee's daughter. Anu failed to empathize with Masha when she was labeled *najayaz* (illegitimate) in school. Anu for the most part is emphatic that Nayan failed as a mother, blaming her throughout. In speaking with Vimal, she accuses her mother: "She's not my mother! Is this how a mother is supposed to be? Like her? You ruined my life, you ruined Robindro's life, you ruined Baba's life." From thereon, Nayan confesses how for Anu, "*Aai se mai Nayan ho gayi/ I became Nayan from mother.*" On the contrary, Masha doesn't censure her mother openly and maintains a loving bond with her. It is only towards the end that she complains about her own trauma in school on account of her pregnancy outside marriage and Anu's several lovers: "*Mujhe sabse zyada nafrat PTM se hoti thi kyuki tum vahan apne latest boyfriend ke saath aa jati thi,*" and, "*Ek din meri class teacher ne mujhe sabke samne pucha. 'How much does your mother charge?'*" which can be translated as "I hated PTM the most because you would come there with

your latest boyfriend every time,” and “One day, my class teacher asked me in front of everyone, ‘How much does your mother charge?’”

Deconstructing the Good Woman of Patriarchy

Nayan says, “*Apni sachchai janne ke liye apno ka drishtikon janna bohot zaroori hota hai*” which can be translated as “To find the truth about oneself, it’s important to know the viewpoint of one’s significant other.” The film pushes us to ponder if it is indeed possible to establish an alternate yet socially acceptable mode of motherhood outside of marriage and the ideal model of a good mother, where the child does not bear the burden of the mother’s personal choices. This ideal of the good mother further extends to the picture of the good woman of patriarchy which both Nayan and Anu refuse to fit into. As Susan Moller Okin (1979) discusses in her article regarding Rousseau, Nayan repudiates Rousseau’s claim that “Women, in general, are not attracted to art at all, nor knowledge and not at all to genius” (cited in Okin, p. 397). Nayan nurtures a passionate love for writing, thinking creatively about her characters to the extent that she juxtaposes her children and her characters: “*Kabhi kabhi sochti hoon kaash ye (Anu and Robindro) mere kirdaar hote fir mai unhe apni manchahi disha mein le jati fir vo mujhe pyar karte,*” which can be translated as “Sometimes, I think, I wish they were characters I’d written. I would have molded them in any way I wished.” Anu sums up her mother well when she remarks “*Ajib hai par genius hai toh thodi ajeeb toh hogi hi/ Slightly weird. She’s a genius, so she has to be weird.*” Masha is considerate, tolerant, and inclusive which is reflected in her religious identity as a Bahai: “Bahai respect all religions in the world. For them humanity is the biggest religion in the world.” Anu is a survivor of both sexual harassment and domestic violence, and her perpetrators are intentionally depicted a certain way. The filmmaker portrays how even a successful photographer like Vikramaditya can stoop so low in private while a white man like Dimitri commonly associated with the modern and developed Western world can still reveal himself to be an abuser. These are not phenomena of the poor and the underprivileged but cut across boundaries of race and class as gender-based crimes. Despite such struggles, she emerges as confident, fearless, and independent in her speech and her choices. It is thus that every third word that she utters is a foul word, a tendency also stemming from her roots in the film world of glamour.

On the surface, the three women are nothing alike in choices as basic as outfits. While Nayan is forever dressed in a saree, Anu prefers long colorful shrugs and pendants, and Masha embraces traditional *anarkali* suits. Sahane celebrates individual identities of women who cannot be collectively clustered under the umbrella term of “woman.” She glorifies freedom of choice. Like Anu classifies in conversation with Milan, “*Mujhe lagta hai Nayan sochti hai par kisi ke bare mein nahi sochti; apne kirdaron ke bare mein zaroor sochti hai.* She is very cerebral. She is *Abhangha*” which can be translated as “Nayan thinks about nothing but her characters. She is very cerebral. She is *Abhangha*.” Anu also says, “*Aur meri Masha, Sambhangha completely balanced,*” and “*Aur mai, tedhi medhi, crazy but sexy Tribhangha,*” which can be translated as “And my Masha is Samabhangha, completely balanced. And I’m weird, skewed, crazy but sexy Tribhangha.”

Conclusion

Tribhangha is way ahead of its time as it foreshadows changes that have crept into the frame and fabric of Indian society. However, the film also emphasizes how there is still a long way to go. By rejecting both marriage and family as restrictive social units, it envisions a society that embraces rebellious women and their unorthodox choices, praises their professional achievements in public as well as private, and celebrates their individual identities outside of social institutions. The fact that it is entitled *Tribhangha* makes Anuradha the protagonist, whom Sahane presents as a

lone yet determined warrior in society. She rejoices in the spirit of confidence that comes with being “*tedhi, medhi*, crazy but sexy.”

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