



**Unmasking the Lived Experiences of Mothers of Disabled Children and
Critiquing the ‘Maternal Care Politics’: An Analysis of the Bengali Film
Paromitar Ek Din (2000) by Aparna Sen**

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Abstract:

Motherhood is a complicated idea within the Indian patriarchal structure. Motherhood institutions defined by men are oppressive towards women/mothers. When these patriarchal norms regarding motherhood intersect with social stereotypes regarding disabled children, the lived experiences of mothers become far more disturbing and challenging. This paper intends to scrutinise the Bengali film *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000), directed by Aparna Sen, through the theoretical ideas of Andrea O'Reilly to unmask the lived experiences of mothers of disabled children such as Paromita and Shanaka. Furthermore, by incorporating theoretical ideas given by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Tom Shakespeare, the study argues that within Bengali family structure, societal ableism intersects with the patriarchal institution of motherhood and shapes the lived experiences of mothers who are raising disabled children within patriarchal domesticity. This analysis employs “feminist political economy” to question the hidden “maternal care politics” within the patriarchal Sanyal family. This study becomes a vital instrument to suggest that Aparna Sen’s Bengali film offers pathways for rethinking the problematic issues of motherhood and, most importantly, the lived experiences of mothers of disabled children while critiquing the existing “maternal care politics”.

Keywords: Mothering Disabled Child, Intersectionality, Maternal Care Politics, *Paromitar Ek Din*, Matricentric Feminism.

Introduction

Motherhood is a complicated idea, though it is one-dimensionally glorified. This unrealistic idealisation of motherhood is problematic because it neglects other social, cultural, and economic factors that affect mothers' lived experiences. This patriarchal way of homogenising motherhood as satisfying and fulfilling for mothers is questioned by several second-generation feminist scholars such as Simon de Beauvoire, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, etc. For them, motherhood is an institution within the patriarchal mechanism that is used as a tool to repress and subjugate women. Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone argued that motherhood restricts women's subjectivity. They further critiqued it for instilling in the psychology of women that mothering is their sole responsibility and "the fundamental and primary identity" (Krishnaraj 2), as if a woman's body is made only for childbearing. Beauvoir advocated for the "rejection of motherhood" because she thought that this radical measure is necessary to "gain freedom from being the 'other'" (qtd. Krishnaraj 21). This concept regarding patriarchal motherhood institutions is further problematised by scholars of motherhood such as Adriene Rich and Andrea O'Reilly. According to them, motherhood is an institution and an ideology that patriarchy always glorifies and imposes upon mothers; whereas mothering is something that is mother-defined. Adrienne Rich first articulated this difference as she posited that there are "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed upon the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential - and all women - shall remain under male control" (13). Again, the same concepts regarding motherhood and mothering are being uttered by Andrea O'Reilly as she posited that motherhood is male-defined and is oppressive to women. Western feminist interpretations of motherhood have been borrowed by the Indian feminists who assimilated them as befitting the Indian context while also vehemently contesting them on the ground that they clashed with the Indian attitude towards family and society (Sreekumar

330). In the Indian subcontinent, mothers are subjugated under unrealistic idealisation and glorification. In the book *Patriarchy* (2007), the feminist historian V. Geetha argued that patriarchy has frequently exploited women through the means of marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and religion. According to her, throughout the subcontinent, women and, most importantly, mothers are regarded as goddesses (qtd. in Asha 4). This over-idealisation of mother figures is problematic as it negates the subjectivity of women by undermining their fundamental and individual needs and choices. The over-idealisation of motherhood is being questioned by several Indian scholars of motherhood studies. Maithreyi Krishnaraj, in her book *Motherhood in India: Glorification without empowerment?* (2012) defined motherhood in India as “Glorification without Empowerment” (6). In India, patriarchy mandates the duty of reproducing a biological son on a woman, which is reflected in the following words of the *Manusmriti*: “woman was created for the exclusive purpose of giving birth to men for the continuation of the line” (Bhattacharji 57). Moreover, as the child is the representative of the male figures of a family, an extra burden of reproducing a healthy and non-disabled male heir falls upon the mother. A specific Bengali ritual, “sadhbhakshan” [in English, “the rite of baby shower”], is carried out in Bengali households to wish good health to both the mother and the unborn child. Another ritual is performed after welcoming the mother with the newborn into the household, where the mother is asked to repeat the following Bengali words: “mayer kole dudh kheyee chele ache bhalo” [in English translation, “the son is healthy taking mother’s milk”]. These customs emphasise how the patriarchal norms of motherhood essentialise the idea that a healthy, physically fit male heir is solely the responsibility of the mother. If somehow, the mother gives birth to a child with any disability instead of an ‘ideal male heir’, her experiences of mothering become profoundly traumatising. She grapples with overwhelming emotional challenges and uncertainty. This happens because, as observations by Tom Shakespeare point out, in patriarchal ableist society disabled individuals are treated as

“dustbins for disavowal” because non-disabled people discard and project their unwanted psychological characteristics onto disabled people (qtd. in K S and Banerjee 874). Moreover, the stigmas regarding disabilities in children directly affect the lives of mothers who are raising such children. Mothers’ emotional stability during this challenging period often relies heavily upon the support and care they receive from other family members, especially from their husbands. In contrast, mothers go through intense suffering, including alienation, domestic violence, and sometimes divorce. Mothers are solely accused of the disabilities in children. The social stigmas regarding disability intersecting with patriarchal motherhood norms become so problematic that giving birth to a disabled child is equated with a mother’s sin or hidden, transmitted sexual diseases. The gene of the father might cause a child’s impairment; however, the father figure is never held accountable as such, as if disability has nothing to do with masculinity within patriarchal structure. In this way, disability is “maternalised”. The ableist patriarchal society imposes a specific mechanism that culturally equates disability and motherhood to conform to societal expectations and to signal safe or socially acceptable status (K S and Banerjee 874). This intersectional oppression of mothers of disabled children aligns with the theoretical ideas of “intersectionality” as proposed by American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. Moreover, the entire responsibilities of raising disabled children, along with other unpaid domestic labour, are thrust upon mothers only. These patriarchal motherhood norms keep father figures away from the domain of childcare and domestic responsibilities. However, the father gains the utmost value and respect in both the private and public spheres of life; at the same time, mothers’ relentless labour, care, and moral contribution remain invisible under the veil of “mother-love”. This is how patriarchal motherhood norms perpetuate “maternal care politics” within patriarchal domesticity.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Olsson and Hwang argued that mothers of disabled children are likely to bear higher costs regarding health (qtd. in K S and Banerjee 873). Balter et al., in their article “Mothering Disabled Children in Early Childhood: Institutional Reproduction of the Standard North American Family,” provided a comprehensive understanding of how mothers of disabled children are put under greater scrutiny than other mothers. The article also demonstrated how the existing institutional policies and practices in a North American settlement naturalise maternal labour (Balter et al. 1873). They further argued that mothers faced additional challenges due to the fragmented, bureaucratic educational, healthcare, and social service systems. Balter et al. challenged the normative nature of the Standard North American Family, and they exposed its implicit sexist, ableist, racist, and classist ideologies present in what is required of mothers’ work in accessing services for their disabled children (1866). K S and Banerjee, in their article “Unveiling the ‘Maternal Care’ in Cinema: A Critical Analysis of Disability and Gender in *Guzaarish* and *Salaam Venky*,” argued that films perpetuate ableist views regarding disability, questioning the “maternal care politics” within the patriarchal mechanism (870-71). They delved into the dynamics of mothering disabled children, and they underscored how the filmic portrayals of mothers of disabled children often followed the trend of the activist model rather than focusing on the vulnerabilities and the challenges that the mothers face, particularly while living in a patriarchal-ableist society. They emphasised that films like *Guzaarish* and *Salaam Venky* significantly minimised the challenges and vulnerabilities of being a mother to a disabled child (K S and Banerjee 876). The research article “Who May Be Competent? Mothering Young Children of Colo[u]r with Disabilities and the Politics of Care” by Beneke et al. exemplified how mothers of children of colour with disabilities enacted political clarity regarding ableism and racism and challenged dominant notions of competence (Beneke et al. 328-329). Van der Mark et al. in their article “We Create

Our Own Small World’: Daily Realities of Mothers of Disabled Children in a South African Urban Settlement” studied the daily lives of 30 mothers from a South African poor urban area and revealed how mothers were caring for their disabled child on their own, in an isolated manner; which is quite challenging, which often harms mothers’ well-being (96). Masaka, in her dissertation titled “Mothers’ Voices: A Narrative Study of The Experiences and Perspectives of Mothers Raising School Age Children with Disabilities in One of Zimbabwe’s Urban Areas,” revealed the lived experiences of mothers who are raising school-age disabled children in one of Zimbabwe’s urban areas. She conceptualised how their Children’s disabilities, their experiences as mothers of children with disabilities, and their social status, marital status, age, ethnicity, and/or race intersected with their experiences of raising children with disabilities (Masaka vi). Her exploration revealed that some mothers compared their experiences of raising their children with disabilities as “a battle” and “a problem” (Masaka 193). The article “The ‘Disability Commons’: Re-thinking Mothering Through Disability” by Cole and Goodley argued that mothers of disabled children bear the responsibility more than ever for their children’s care, in austere times (Cole and Goodley 231). Novuyo Nkomo, in the article “Experiences of Young Mothers Caring for Children with ASD in Eswatini: Challenges and Coping Strategies,” foregrounded that raising a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents unique challenges, particularly for young mothers who often lack experience, resources, and support systems. He further emphasised how these challenges are compounded by the broader socio-economic context of Eswatini, a developing nation grappling with poverty, limited healthcare resources, and pervasive social stigma surrounding disability (Nkomo 423). Furthermore, the existing literature on *Paromitar Ek Din* reveals that this film has been critically analysed through a variety of lenses that show its critique of women's oppression, patriarchal institutional violence, and the marginalisation of female disabled figures, and women's subjectivity in India. For example, Jannatul Ferdous Asha, in her article

“Female Subjectivity and Society’s Suppression of Women in Aparna Sen’s *Paromitar Ek Din*,” pointed out female suppression within patriarchal society. Simultaneously, she established female subjectivity through Paromita’s resistance and agency, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s ideas regarding female subjectivity (Asha 2). Rimli Bhattacharya, in the article “Women through the Cinematic Lens of Aparna Sen,” highlighted the negative effects of societal expectations on women while advocating for their autonomy, agency, and individuality. She also observed Paromita and Shanaka’s having disabled children as a “tragic story” (qtd. in Asha 2). Sk Abbas Uddin, in the article “Bengali Cinema and the Body Politics of Representation: Locating Agency in Aparna Sen’s Films *Parama* and *Paromitar Ek Din*,” explored that women are exploited across generations while also revealing how women in Bengal’s patriarchal socio-cultural context are gaining agency, autonomy, and freedom (141). He pointed out that the film *Paromitar Ek Din* challenges the traditional notion of motherhood as an inherent source of fulfilment by underscoring motherhood’s complexities and the multifaceted nature of maternal experience. For him, this film questions the unnatural expectations placed upon mothers that affect their relationship with other women (Uddin 149). It is to be noted that Sreerupa Sengupta in the article “Disability, Agency, and Subjectivity in Aparna Sen’s Three Disability Films: *Sati*, *House of Memories*, and *15 Park Avenue*” foregrounded the exploitative and marginalised position of the disabled female characters like Khuku, Mithi, and Uma within ableist patriarchal mechanism while highlighting the marginalisation of mothers of disabled child in a scattered manner (2-6). However, after a thorough literature review, it comes to the focus that there exists no such work that has yet delineated the lived experiences and challenges of mothering disabled children through a critical study of Aparna Sen’s film *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000) by incorporating theoretical ideas of Andrea O’Reilly, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Tom Shakespeare, and “feminist political economy”. Therefore, this article fulfils the existing research gap by putting mothers of disabled children

at the centre of the argument, at the same time emphasising that mothering matters and the needs, experiences, and desires of mothers deserve careful attention. In this regard, Andrea O'Reilly's theoretical ideas of "matricentric feminism" are used because "matricentric feminism" seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment (O'Reilly 14). She emphasised that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman, and that many of the problems mothers face - social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth - are specific to women's roles and identities as mothers (O'Reilly 15). Therefore, mothers need a feminism of their own, which she terms "matricentric feminism". This "matricentric feminism" has the potential to put the subjectivity and perspective of mothers at the centre of the argument. Incorporating the theoretical ideas of Andrea O'Reilly's "matricentric feminism", this article unmasks the long-silenced lived experiences of mothers, specifically the mothers of disabled children, as exemplified in the film *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000) by Aprna Sen. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks of "intersectionality" by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and "social model of disability" by Tom Shakespeare employed in the article, argue that the patriarchal motherhood norms intersect with disability and increase the suffering, and exhaustion of mothers of disabled children. Simultaneously, it questions the hidden "maternal care politics" within the patriarchal mechanism by incorporating the theoretical framework of "feminist political economy".

Situating *Paromitar Ek Din* in the Context of Indian Bengali Film

The critically praised Indian Bengali film *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000) was written and directed by the renowned woman filmmaker, Aparna Sen, who is well-known for making women-centric films. Being the daughter of the legendary film critic, Chidananda Dasgupta, and being a student of internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, Aparna

Sen has been “trained in the art of realistic cinema and performance” (Roy and Sengupta, 54). By virtue of “working closely with prominent Bengali auteurs,” Aparna Sen associates her filmmaking with the “sensibilities of mid to late twentieth-century Bengali auteurship” (qtd. in Sengupta 1). However, she has established her unique space in the world of Indian film by “nuancing the identity of the Indian woman through a pluralistic and polyvocal feminist lens” (Roy and Sengupta 56). Despite being strongly reluctant to identify herself as a feminist, her famous films including- *Paroma* (1984), *Sati* (1989), *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000) *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002), *Antaheen* (2009), *Goynar Bakso* (2013), *Arshinagar* (2015), *Sonata* (2017), frequently featured complex female characters such as Paroma, Shanaka, Meenakshi, Brinda, and Uma along with their suppression and subjectivity within patriarchal mechanism. Sen deserves additional acknowledgment for addressing the less explored terrain of women’s disability in Indian cinema without sentimentalising or unnecessarily glorifying it through films like *Sati* (1984), *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000), and *15 Park Avenue* (2006). It is worth mentioning that, while issues of female oppression and subjectivity have become commonplace in Indian Bengali films, most importantly in films of Aparna Sen, issues regarding the oppression and agency of mothers of disabled children in patriarchy from mothers’ point of view are less prevalent. The silence over mothers’ voices was correctly explained by Marianne Hirsch. In the introduction to *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, she highlighted the daughter-centricity in women’s literature and the need for bringing mothers’ voices to the centre. For Andrea O’Reilly, “matricentric feminism” does not neglect or depart from traditional feminist thoughts; rather, it tries to establish that mothers need a feminism of their own, which is distinct from the woman-focused one. Incorporating the ideas of “matricentric feminism”, *Paromitar Ek Din (House of Memories)*, released on 08 January 2000, is critically scrutinised, and it can be concluded that the film is effectively a “matricentric narrative”. It situates mothers in their simple and mundane activities within a

Bengali family structure without any filter. While focusing on the subtitles, pauses, silences, background sounds, scenes, attires, the film differentiates itself from Bengal's traditional portrayal of motherhood, which often glorifies motherhood as the happiest and most fulfilling phase of women's lives. In contrast, Aparna Sen situates these mothers in their day-to-day, mundane events with unfiltered words and gestures to reveal the actual lived experience of mothers. Feminist film scholar Teresa de Lauretis in "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema," while discussing Chantal Akerman's 1975 film, *Jeanne Dielman*, argued that women-centric films are not about big events but simple day-to-day, insignificant events where resistance is provoked: "[i]t is a woman's actions, gestures, body, and look that define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator. So that narrative suspense is not built on the expectation of a 'significant event,' a socially momentous act" (qtd. in Tarafdar 67-68). In line with Teresa de Lauretis, it could be foregrounded that Aparna Sen's film *Paromitar Ek Din* is more "mother-centric" than "woman-centric". This film's narrative style, mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, sound, and nuanced characterization are handled skilfully to privilege the mothers' subjectivity. The film begins by casting Paromita [Rituparna Sengupta as Paromita], a mother of a disabled son, Bablu, attending the funeral of her ex-mother-in-law, Shanaka [Aparna Sen as Shanaka], another mother with a disabled daughter, Khuku. The entire event of this film is narrated from Paromita's perspective through flashbacks and memories. As a matter of fact, since this film features mothers, specifically mothers of disabled children, at the centre, the lived experiences, worldviews, needs, desires, and coping mechanisms of mothers get immediate focus. In such a way, men and father figures are almost sidelined. They exist in the story but through the perspective of mothers. This shift of focus is important as it allows the dominance of mothers' lived experience over patriarchal expectations. Again, Paromita and Shanaka are cast not as stereotypical mother figures who are satisfied with self-

sacrifice and constant “caregiving”. Rather, they are represented as mothers who have complex emotional and psychological ground, who can boldly express their dissatisfaction towards the exhausting cycle of domestic labour and mother-work. Aparna Sen politicised the domestic space with its closed rooms, corridors, kitchens, utensils, dining tables, and furniture, where mothers are subjugated and simultaneously resist oppression. Aparna Sen also revealed the “maternal care politics” within the domestic space, because the entire responsibility of raising two disabled children, Khuku and Bablu, disproportionately falls upon Shanaka and Paromita.

Unmasking Lived Experiences of Mothers with Disabled Children within the Patriarchal Mechanism

A mother in patriarchal society is oppressed both as a woman and a mother because motherhood is a crucial instrument for patriarchal society to subjugate women. As a result, a mother’s needs, concerns, and perspective, along with her complex social, political, and economic position, are, all in all, different from those of a woman who is not mothering (O’Reilly 15). Moreover, the lived experiences of mothers differ in terms of various factors - mothers’ position in a society, their personality, age, race, ethnicity, religious, cultural, economic, and political status, educational status, marital status, frequency of pregnancy, sources of support, and so on. Even the gender, the order of each birth, physical condition, and behaviour of the child influence how one experiences motherhood. Masaka articulated and conceptualised how mothers’ experiences of raising children with disabilities intersect with their social status, marital status, age, ethnicity, and/or race. The study underscored how some mothers viewed their experiences of raising their children with disabilities as “a battle” and “a problem,” emphasizing how raising children with extra needs could be challenging (Masaka 193). Again, Kohlakali argued that having a child or children with a disability or disabilities in many cases leads to mothers being subjected to compound stressors relating to finances, lack

of support from both the family and society, and limited personal time. This is due to the multiple responsibilities that accompany fulfilling the roles of being a wife or partner, taking care of the child or children with special needs and family, and trying to understand the child's disability. Moreover, she posited that mothers have to confront the stigmatisations, myths, and stereotypes that are associated with their child's disability. In the same vein, the film *Paromita Ek Din* (2000), while examined through the lens of "matricentric feminism" by Andrea O'Reilly, exemplifies that patriarchal motherhood ideals intersecting with the social stigmas regarding children's disabilities negatively affect the lived experiences of mothers like Paromita and Shanaka. The film underscores how these mothers' lives become challenging, pathetic, and almost unbearable after giving birth to disabled children, Bablu and Khuku. What Paromita and Shanaka suffer as wives within a patriarchal Sanyal family is almost less than the suffering they go through as mothers of disabled children. In one of the scenes in Shanaka's bedroom, where Paromita comes and lets Shanaka know that she has decided to get a divorce from Biru, Shanaka explains the actual reality of conjugal life in a patriarchal Bengali family:

"I got no peace for a single day after my marriage...Think about my situation. I never had any real connection with your father-in-law; still, we passed so many years together, brought so many children into the world. And do you think all marriages end up being happy? No, they do not". (Sen *PED*)

Paromita has the same kind of suffocating conjugal life with Biru from the very beginning of their marriage. Her mental and physical desires are neglected, and Paromita is forced to change her very basic human habits such as eating, sleeping, and talking for Biru: "[o]h, God! You have already fallen asleep? Change the habit, I am usually late every day" (Sen *PED*). He only views Paromita as a sexual object and a means to get a male heir through her body: "You are getting cold day by day" (Sen *PED*). Ultimately, he cheats on her. However, the level of suffering and suffocation of Paromita is heightened when she becomes a mother and, most

significantly, a mother of a disabled child. The same situation is for Shanaka, who has also given birth to a schizophrenic daughter, Khuku. The intersection of motherhood norms with ableist patriarchal norms increases their trauma, suffering, and suffocating experience. As has already been pointed out, patriarchal society prioritises a biological son as the representative of the father, the masculine figure. In essence, the mother must give birth to a son who is non-disabled and without any defect or anomaly. If the mother somehow fails to give birth to that kind of ideal non-disabled son, all the blame falls upon the mother only. As is evident in the film, when Paromita gives birth to a son, Bablu (not yet diagnosed with any anomalies), it becomes a source of happiness to the Sanyal family and the father, Biru. They welcome Paromita with Bablu through a joyous ritual for the child's well-being. The joyous children shout in chorus, surrounding Paromita and Bablu on her lap, and repeat the following words: "the child is okay! the child is okay!" (Sen *PED*). Next, Paromita is asked to repeat the following sentence: "The child is okay taking milk of mother" (Sen *PED*). The ritual comes to an end while Shanaka wishes that "the oddities be removed" since it is the "first boy child of the generation" (Sen *PED*). These rituals, languages, and gestures are being used to emphasise that the Sanyal family idealises a non-disabled male heir. However, after a few months, when Bablu is diagnosed with "cerebral palsy", the happiness vanishes from the family and, most importantly, from Biru. The social stigma regarding disability is so strong in this Sanyal family that the children started laughing at Bablu's physical impairment: "[s]pastic! Spastic! Bablu swings. Spastic! Spastic! Bablu swings" (Sen *PED*). Debu, his wife, and his sister too become mournful: "[h]e has got 'cerebral palsy'. He will never be a normal child...He is the only representative of this generation" (Sen *PED*)! Tom Shakespeare's "social model of disability" is pertinent here to explain why Bablu's "cerebral palsy" becomes a reason for the mourning of the Sanyal Family. Shakespeare opined that "disability is a social construct, shaped by the exclusionary practices and attitudes of the society" (54). In line with Tom Shakespeare's

observations regarding disability, it is pertinent to deconstruct the term “cerebral palsy” (CP) and its surrounding myths. “CP” is not a disease but a neurological disorder that affects movement, posture, and muscle coordination. It is one of the most common physical disabilities in children, with a prevalence of approximately 2.1 to 3.6 per 1,000 live births globally (Rosenbaum et al. 8-14). Unfortunately, “cerebral palsy” has been misinterpreted by people for a long time. Individuals ailing with “CP”, therefore, are tabooed, sometimes as untouchables, sometimes as cursed children. An intricate web of factors like social stigmas, religious and superstitious beliefs, taboos, etc. has caused such misinterpretation regarding “cerebral palsy”. The biggest myth regarding “CP” is that it is the result of divine punishment. This misconception suggests that individuals with “CP,” along with their families, are being punished for their sins. The concept of *karma* and reincarnation is linked with it, as if they are suffering as a result of their actions from past lives (Parvin 35-37). Consequently, in the birth of a child with “CP”, the psychological state experienced by the family is one of loss, “of death” - the death of the ideal, desired child (qtd. in K. S. and Banerjee 872). The same kind of attitude towards a disabled child is reflected in the behaviours and words of Biru after he gets to know that his son is diagnosed with “CP”. He becomes almost mad while he thinks of what people would say regarding this tragic incident:

Biru [*furiously*]: “Hell! Hell and Hell. It is really a hell. Hell! Hell and Hell. It is really a hell.”

Paromita [*with sombreness*]: “Why are you behaving madly?”

Biru [*showing disgust and shamefulness*]: “Laughing! Everyone is Laughing...Pointing at him, people might say that he is Biru Sanyal’s son. Handicapped! (Sen *PED*)

These concerns of Biru regarding Bablu’s “CP” point to the social stigmas regarding “CP”, which are present in a patriarchal, ableist social structure. Not only that, Biru goes even further and furiously orders Paromita that “if anyone asks, tell them that the son is dead...In our family

nobody is born any handicapped” (Sen *PED*). Paromita’s father-in-law too regretfully despises the disability in Bablu as he exclaims with disgust: “[w]hat an heir really” (Sen *PED*)! Moreover, these social stigmas regarding disability intersect with the patriarchal motherhood norms, and they are directly channelised from the child to the mother, making her lived experience far more disturbing and pathetic. Many people believe that “CP” is solely the result of a mother’s actions or negligence during pregnancy or childbirth, leading to blame and guilt being unfairly placed on mothers for their child’s condition (qtd. in Parvin 37). This intersectional oppression of mothers is something that aligns with what Kimberlé Crenshaw posited while explaining the intersectional discrimination faced by black women - firstly being a woman and secondly being a black woman. By “intersectionality”, she meant the overlapping and crosscutting nature of discriminations that a person is subject to in daily life (qtd. in Das 152). As underscored in the film, the entire responsibility for the assumed tragic situation regarding a disabled male heir falls upon Paromita only. Paromita is accused of having bad *karma* or a hidden disease for giving birth to Bablu. It is her father-in-law who accuses Shanka with humiliating words and tones for selecting such a daughter-in-law without knowing her family history: “[s]everal times I told you to take information correctly...Now you face! What an heir really” (Sen *PED*)! Moreover, when Biru’s male ego is hurt, he becomes mad and abuses Paromita. He uses all kinds of humiliating words to destroy Paromita’s individuality and sanity to punish her for the mishap:

...What disease is there in one’s family; how can I know? Before marriage, more information should be taken. Bloody. If it happens from the hidden disease of the family...Bloody. The whole family should be taken to the Doctor for a thorough check-up to trace the hidden disease. (Sen *PED*)

Since patriarchy does not equate disability with masculinity, Paromita is incapable of accusing Biru of the disability in Bablu, though his younger sister, Khuku, is already a mentally disabled

child. The patriarchal norms have given Biru the licence to solely blame Paromita by overlooking the history of disabilities within the Sanyal family. At this moment, Shanaka comes forward, stands by Paromita, and consoles her. Shanaka reminds Biru of his own family history of disabilities. She questions Biru with fury whether he will blame his own mother for the disability of Khuku, the way he is blaming his wife:

Shanaka [*with a resisting voice*]: “Listening to you for a long time. Your wife could have pointed towards you long ago. You are lucky she has not done so. Khuku is also born to us. Why has Khuku become so? For whose sin, tell me. For whose sin? Tell, why are you silent now?” (Sen *PED*)

This is how patriarchal motherhood norms, intersecting with social stigmas regarding disability, are silent about the faults of the father and heighten the sufferings of the mothers. Biru gets hurt by Shanaka’s words and asks her to be quiet and not to reveal the truth: “[q]uiet! Keep quiet. Do not say anything more regarding this” (Sen *PED*).

Shanaka undergoes the same suppression along with traumatising suffering as Paromita does. This is because she too has given birth to a schizophrenic daughter, Khuku, twenty years ago. Khuku is obese and awkward in her movements. She is often scolded by the family members due to her ignorance about basic table manners and for wasting food, and sometimes thrashed by her mother, Shanaka, for not combing her hair and taking medicines. The film shows how the family perceives Khuku as an embarrassment (Sengupta 2). It is only after becoming a mother and, most importantly, after giving birth to a disabled daughter, Khuku, that her life struggles doubled. Shanaka herself reflects upon her suffocating circumstances with lament and dissatisfaction. She describes how the responsibility of her disabled daughter becomes a significant barrier to the fulfilment of her individual desires:

Paromita [*to Shanaka, resisting*]: “Have you gone mad?”

Shanaka [*to Khuku, getting hurt and angry*]: “You devil. Cannot you die?”...

Shanaka [*crying with utter dissatisfaction*]: ...How long have you been here in this house? Who gave her medicine so long? Have I got nothing else to do in my life? Just feed this mad girl. Cloth her, comb her hair. I have been doing this for twenty-five long years. Should I have no wish? To go on vacation or to watch movies. Nothing. Only to remain inside the house. God, I cannot bear it anymore.” (Sen *PED*)

This pathetic situation, in which Shanaka almost lost her sanity after Khuku’s birth, is pointed out by Moni Biswas, since he reflects that Shanaka was not this short-tempered before. After giving birth to Khuku, Shanaka’s individuality changed as a result of the degradation of her mental and emotional health. As is evident in this film, Shanaka’s lived experiences become almost unbearable due to carrying heavy responsibilities, lack of real rest and refreshment, and living on repeat often without pause. However, the degree of marginalisation, trauma, and humiliation suffered by Paromita is higher than Shanaka’s. This is because Shanaka, besides giving birth to a mentally-retarded girl, is also a mother of two non-disabled sons and a normal daughter. However, Paromita’s productivity does not have any such favourable proof in the form of non-disabled children (Sengupta 4). This resonates with what Maithreyi Krishnaraj argued about the “social construction of motherhood” in India. She posited that the social construction of motherhood makes women vulnerable due to the way society assigns meaning to motherhood, as well as the specific terms and conditions that dictate how it is permitted to be manifested” (Krishnaraj 7)

Critiquing Care Politics within Patriarchal Mechanism:

Within the patriarchal mechanism, based on gender stereotypes, there exists a division of labour – the “paid labour” and the “unpaid labour”. Patriarchal capitalist social structures treat work as “paid labour” performed outside the home. Moreover, this outside sphere of work, controlled by men, gives them respectful recognition as the family's breadwinner. On the contrary, the

“domestic labour” controlled by women is relegated to the sphere of “non-paid labour,” which remains invisible and unacknowledged under the veil of “love/mother-love” and “care”. Taking care of family members and children by women is naturalised with the notion that women/mother are “natural caregivers”. Ivana Brown pointed out that motherhood and reproduction play a significant role in the definition and naturalisation of gender differences, and justification of gender inequality. For her, “[the] biological essentialism is created by the prominent bodily experience related to childbirth, breastfeeding and early stages of childcare and often a disbelief in men’s ability to care for children equally well as a mother” (Brown 202). Terry Arendell also argued that motherhood is associated with women because universally, it is women who do the work of mothering, and women’s gender identity is reinforced by mothering. She further problematised this process of equating motherhood, mothering, caregiving, and nurturing with women alone. She opined that “[y]et not all women mother, and mothering as nurturing and caring work is not inevitably the exclusive domain of women” (Arendell 1192). The “social reproduction theory” developed by feminist theorists like Silvia Federici, Lise Vogel, and Nancy Fraser foregrounded that the capitalist system is sustained through the unpaid domestic work of women in reproducing the workforce (Kumar 2). Such problematisation regarding “care work” within the patriarchal Sanyal family structure is quite effectively exemplified by Aparna Sen in her film *Paromitar Ek Din*. The film encapsulates how patriarchal motherhood norms give a clean chit to Biru and Biru’s father for paying no attention to domestic responsibility and not even caring for Bablu and Khuku. It is Shanaka and Paromita who perform all the domestic chores such as cooking, washing dishes, and serving food at the dining table. Being mothers of disabled children, the extra burden of responsibility, such as caring for the special needs of Khuku and Bablu, disproportionately and unquestionably falls upon Shanaka and Paromita. Khuku and Bablu’s everyday routines, such as eating, combing, bathing, sleeping, and providing medicine to them, are looked after by

Shanaka and Paromita. They hardly get time for rest and refreshment. Neither do they find time to pay attention to their own individual needs. It is an unstoppable and ever-engaging cycle of unpaid labour cast upon both Shanaka and Paromita in the name of mother-love and care. Aparna Sen utilises the kitchen and dining room as effective props in this film to expose the invisible and unacknowledged labour of women/mothers. In one of the shots, the dining table is occupied by the male members, Khuku and other children, while Paromita and Debu's wife are serving food to them. Paromita's father-in-law troubles his wife and daughters-in-law by criticising the "luchi" ["luchi" is a Bengali dish made of flour, water, and ghee. It is a puffed flatbread that is deeply fried before serving] that is being served and signalling that he wants Shanaka to make freshly fried "luchi" for him. Shanaka is watching a movie, but Biru asks his mother, irritably, to fry fresh "luchi" for his father. Shanaka does the same, serves the "luchi" to her husband, and provides medicine to Khuku. This scene is highly suggestive, because such arrangements in the dining room show that women are expected to become the primary caregiver by sidelining their own health and happiness. The male figure only expects care and labour from wives and mothers without giving back support and acknowledgement to them. They cannot even tolerate it if women take a little time for their hobbies out of the exhausting domestic chores. Shanaka enjoys watching movies, but her husband gets irritated at her hobby and orders Paromita to switch off the T.V.. Paromita unwillingly follows his order as patriarchy extracts obedience from the daughter-in-law. Aparna Sen, with a close shot on Shanaka's face, reveals her pain and disgust towards such behaviour of her husband. Moreover, the movie scene running in the background where a female character cries is skilfully utilised by the filmmaker to highlight the silent crying of Shanaka. Still, if somehow Khuku's madness increases, Shanaka is immediately accused of her failure of duties: "[d]id you give Khuku the medicine today? How long is she without medicine?" (Sen *PED*). There is a shot that casts Biru as someone who blames his own mother for her failure of duty towards Khuku: "[m]other did not

give you medicine today? How can you forget to give her medicine” (Sen *PED*). This criticism of Shanaka by her own son can be aligned with what Donald Winnicott developed on the notion of the “good-enough mother”. Donald Winnicott posited that within the patriarchal mechanism, the “good-enough mother” is someone whose “whole life is bound up with the needs of her child”. In contrast, women who are “masculine” or “preoccupied with themselves” are singled out for criticism (qtd. in Ghosh 19). Moreover, this particular shot in which Shanaka is accused of her irresponsibility by Biru questions the unrealistic idealisation of mothers and motherhood within a Bengali family. Manjima Tarafdar, in her 2024 article “Subverting ‘Divine’ Bengali Motherhood in Rituparno Ghosh’s Film *Titli* (2002)”, gave a comprehensive idea that the term “mother” in the Bengali language holds a larger-than-life value, creating an imposition of divinity and superiority (68). For Tarafdar, the term “ma” in Bengali means “mother,” and its connotative use already attaches itself to a cultural superiority, making it a word that detaches mothers from the world, stripping them of their individuality and showing them as a collective representation. This collective representation of Bengali women as “ma/mother” causes the image of Hindu mothers in Bengal to be superior to the rest, giving them an almost unattainable or unreachable status (Tarafdar 69). In the same vein, historians like Altekar posited that “the apotheosis of the mother has reached a greater height in India than anywhere else” (100). However, in reality, as exemplified in the film, these mothers’ lived experiences are completely contradictory. They do not get any love or respect but only criticism. As underscored by this scene, a mother is not getting any help from her son; rather, she is being criticised by the son. This pathetic condition of Shanaka aligns with what Maithreyi Krishnaraj termed motherhood in India as “Glorification without Empowerment” (Krishnaraj 6). Maithreyi Krishnaraj argued that “...motherhood invites glorification but no empowerment. The real-life conditions of mothering in terms of pre-natal and post-natal care give the lie to the exalted position a mother is supposed to have. Still, reeling under high maternal mortality,

we are far from nurturing the nurturer” (Krishnaraj 6). Next to Shanaka and Paromita, it is Haru’s mother who is there to share the heavy load of responsibilities of raising both Khuku and Bablu: “Bablu, you take food from Haru’s mother. Haru’s mother, I am coming after giving medicine to Khuku” (Sen *PED*). When Shanka is dead, everyone gets concerned about who would take care of Khuku. They say: “[n]ow mother is dead, we will have to do something about Khuku” (Sen *PED*). These words do not imply any care or positive concern for Khuku; they just want to get rid of their responsibilities towards her. As delineated by the film, this is how patriarchal motherhood norms naturalise the unpaid domestic and maternal labour and simultaneously validate the father to be out of the domain of child care and domestic labour. Here, “feminist political economy”, along with what Nel Noddings conceptualised about the “ethical caring relationship,” becomes pertinent to question the “maternal care politics” within patriarchal mechanisms. For Noddings, establishing an ethical caring relationship is a process that must be completed for the ethical caring ideal to be realised (Noddings 4). She further posited that our culture places masculine ethics of justice over the feminine ethics of care (qtd. in Sengupta 873). Consequently, for dedicating themselves to the all-consuming process of taking care of the children and family, these mothers never get positive and respectful recognition either in family or in society; rather, the fathers get the respectful position. Feminist critics have already warned how patriarchy can weaponise “care” against women. Women are expected to care at the expense of autonomy, while men benefit from care without comparable responsibility. “Feminist political economy” expanded this critique of “care” by locating “care” within labour systems. According to “Feminist political economy”, domestic labour and emotional labour sustain capitalism and patriarchy by reproducing daily life without payment. This “unpaid care work” is fundamental to social order and economic productivity. Yet, women remain economically and socially undervalued because their labour is hidden within “love” (Kumar 101), more specifically “mother-love”. However, this film ends on a positive note

where Rajib Srivastav, the would-be father of Paromita's second child, is portrayed as taking care of the mother by asking her to take food and rest; this process of taking care of the mother by Rajib enumerates Nel Noddings' ideas on "ethical caring relationship". According to Noddings, "every caring relationship involves at least two persons- the carer and the person being cared for. In that the one caring and the one being cared for may develop a reciprocal commitment to each other's well-being, such a relationship can be more than dyadic;..." (qtd. in Sengupta 873). And such a caring relationship between Paromita and Rajib Srivastav becomes instrumental in subverting the "maternal care politics" within the patriarchal mechanism.

Conclusion

Evidently, through the above arguments, this article establishes the fact that Aparna Sen's Bengali film *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000) reflects the theoretical ideas of Andrea O'Reilly's "matricentric feminism". It is a matricentric narrative as it enumerates the lived experiences of Paromita and Shanaka within Bengali patriarchal family structure, from their own perspective. With the help of Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" and Tom Shakespeare's "social model of disability," the article dissects the intersectional oppression that mothers of disabled children face daily. Aparna Sen, with her nuanced cinematographic representation, explicitly critiques the patriarchal motherhood norms that intersect with disabilities and heightens the level of suffering of mothers with disabled children. Moreover, it also unravels the hidden and long silence pertaining to "maternal care politics" that exists in the domestic sphere of the Sanyal family. However, Aparna Sen takes the Bengali film as a pathway to provide a positive message to society. Through the nuanced characterisation of Rajib Srivastav, she suggests how to provide "care" for a mother's health and emotions. Moreover, she allows Paromita to ultimately resist the patriarchal motherhood norms by divorcing Biru and getting a new life

with Rajib. Paromita's second child is a symbol of hope and happiness, as here the mother is with her own self and agency. Also, Aparna Sen has created a solidarity between two mothers – Paromita and Shanaka. The patriarchal family model is disrupted by their bond because, despite being daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, they become emotional support for each other. Their shared motherhood experience binds them together with such an unbreakable knot that even after getting divorced from Biru, Paromita nurses Shanaka while she was ill and bedridden.

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