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Entangled in the Web of Bread: Grain, Grief and Survival in *Mother India*

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Abstract: This article offers a food-literary reading of *Mother India* and explores how food shapes relationships, desire, sacrifice, ritual, and resistance in the lives of the characters of the film. It studies food in relation to scarcity, exploitation, and the death of desire, showing how hunger affects not only the body but also human aspirations. By examining the food through Radha's character, where feeding becomes linked with motherhood, sacrifice, and self-respect, it shows the condition of women at that time in the society (*Mother India*). It then focuses on the ritual obligations and evil social practices that leads to the suffering and scarcity of the food in the lives of the poor. It ultimately portrays food as a powerful symbol of love, unity and healing. The article also draws lightly on ideas associated with Raymond Williams, Simone de Beauvoir, and Claude Lévi-Strauss to support the reading, while keeping the focus on the film itself.

Keywords: Food Literature, *Mother India*, Agrarian Life, and Resistance, Indian Cinema.

Introduction

“Jeevan ka geet hai, sur mein na taal mein, uljhi hai saari duniya roti ke jaal mein.” (Life's song has neither rhythm nor harmony; the whole world is entangled in the web of bread.) This powerful line from the song *Na Main Bhagwan Hoon, Na Main Insaan Hoon* in *Mother India* captures the central truth this article explores that food is never merely food. The line suggests a reality that the human race is entangled in the vicious circle of life for 'Roti' as their survival. Directed by Mehboob Khan, *Mother India* (1957) is often read as a story of rural hardship, motherhood, and moral endurance. But the film can also be read through the lens of food. If seen from this perspective it opens many questions, ideas and truths about the human society and the importance of food in their lives. Reading *Mother India* through food does not impose a new meaning on the film instead it reveals what is already present. From fields to kitchens, from hunger to harvest, food quietly shapes the narrative and carries deeper meanings.

Food as Love, Labour, and Agrarian Security

In the opening movement of *Mother India*, food is not marked by scarcity or struggle rather, it appears as a symbol of affection, stability, and shared rural life. Before hunger enters the story, food belongs to a world of love, harmony, and hope. The playful banter between



Shamu and Radha on the topic of salt was the symbol of food being shown as their love language. The moments when they used to go and work together in the fields, it showed their love, unity and desires to be a happy family. This gives meaning to Shamu's wish for many children, born from a world where food seems enough and the future feels secure. Here, food nourishes not only the body, but also continuity and dreams (*Mother India*).

This early agrarian world can be read through Raymond Williams's idea of a structure of feeling, which refers to the lived emotional meanings embedded in everyday social relations (Williams 128). Williams reminds us that rural life should not be reduced to a romantic pastoral image; rather, it contains labour, relationships, shared emotions, and forms of life experienced collectively (Williams 129-30). This is seen in the moments when Shamu and Radha are together. Though they work hard in the fields, there is still happiness, togetherness, and hope. This is important because it helps us understand the later change in the meaning of food. Before food became burden, it was love. Before farming became exploitation, it was hope. The film begins with this so that its later loss feels not only economic, but deeply emotional. When exploitation enters, it destroys not just livelihood, but also this emotional world built around food.

Food, Scarcity, and the Death of Desire

The happy world of Radha and Shamu begins to change the moment the truth about Sukhilala's debt is revealed. Until then, the land had seemed like a source of life, but suddenly it becomes a burden. Shamu and Radha realize that no matter how much they grow, they can never free themselves from debt. A large share of their crop belongs to Sukhilala as interest, and whatever remains is not enough for the family. The tragedy is that they even if they worked hard and endlessly, they still will not be able to repay the debt ever. This pain is beautifully expressed in the song *Umariya Ghatati Jaaye Re*, especially in the line "Humari saari mehnat maya thagwa thag le jaaye." The line carries the sorrow that all their labour is being taken away by a trickster (*Mother India*). Whatever Shamu and Radha produce through sweat and struggle is taken from them before it can nourish their own family. In this moment, food is no longer just grain or harvest. It becomes a symbol of exploitation (Ahmed 29). They grow food, but they remain hungry.

This is where the burden of hunger goes beyond the body. It enters the heart. One of the most painful things is how scarcity destroys Shamu's deepest wish. In the beginning, he



had dreamt of a large family. He had imagined many children and a happy life but now hunger forces him to give up even that dream. And this comes through in the same song when he says “Ab rok janam ki chakki re sansaar chalane waale, Kaal pada hai roti ka aur duniya badhti jaaye.” These lines are heartbreaking because Shamu is not simply talking about poverty. He is pleading with God not to give him more children because he cannot feed those he already has (*Mother India*). Imagine the pain in that. A man who once wanted many children is now begging for no more life to come into his house, only because there is no roti. And this doesn’t limit to only one family but it shows the reality of the world at that time. A world where population is increasing drastically, and there is scarcity of food.

Food, Motherhood, and Gendered Sacrifice

The character of Radha played by Nargis Dutt is one of the most powerful characters both emotionally and mentally, ever written in the history of Indian Cinema. In *Mother India*, Radha’s relationship with food is never only about feeding hunger. It is to suffice the needs for her family’s survival. It is something a woman often secures for others by denying herself. Radha is the last one to eat even after cooking for the whole family. And when she finally tries to eat, even the last that remains is taken by her children, who are hungry and she lets them as well. This is not just a scene of poverty it is a reflection of gendered sacrifice. The mother becomes the one who absorbs hunger so other may live (*Mother India*). That sacrifice deepens in the episode of the utensils. When Shamu’s Mother goes to Sukhilala asking for one man of jowar, she goes out of desperation, because there is no food left. At that crucial moment when she needed some kindness, Sukhilala in return gave her cruelty and humiliation by asking for the brass and copper utensils in their home. This moment reveals food as coercion. To eat, they must give up what allows them to eat. Yet Radha is ready to surrender everything, the utensils, her jewellery, whatever she has, if it means feeding her children.

This becomes even more painful when Shamu, humiliated and angry, refuses to eat the grain gained in exchange for those utensils. In rage, he wants to throw the food away, but Radha stops him, crying, “Mere bachche bhooke hain. Main khana nahin phenkne doongi.” This line says everything. For Radha, food cannot be rejected in the name of pride when children are starving. Even when she is beaten, she endures humiliation, violence, and hunger to keep her children alive (*Mother India*).



After the loss of her husband, and later her mother-in-law, she continues to stand alone with her children. It is in this loneliness that her dignity becomes even more visible. When Sukhilala tries once again to reduce her to a bargain, she answers with one of the strongest lines in the film “Radha ke daam na lagao Lala, woh marte dam tak bhi izzat ka sauda nahin karegi. Radha ke daam uske bachche hain.” This dialogue is powerful because it makes clear that Radha’s worth cannot be priced. Her children are above all, and her self-respect remains central to her identity. Even in poverty, she refuses to let Sukhilala define her value.

Her dignity and power were questioned again in the movie by the evil like Sukhilala. During the hard times of floods, with no food to eat and no roof on the head he came again with a shameful offer in his hands, of marriage and sexual favours in return of food. Radha who at first strongly rejected the offer, when saw the dead body of her youngest son in her arms, was questioning her life and morals. With the death of one child and the unconsciousness of the other, the only last resort left for her was to accept Sukhilala’s offer. With no other option left, she ran to Sukhilala and pleaded, “Mere bachche bhookhe hain Lala, mujhe khana de.” The same woman who warned Lala to never define her value was standing in front on him helplessly. This starkly illustrated the plight of women, as they sacrificed so much in their daily existence for the sake of food and survival of their family (*Mother India*).

In those moments of desperation and helplessness, the only help she saw was another woman, The Goddess, Devi Maa. She questioned her, “Sansaar ka bhaar utha logi Devi, mamta ka bojh na uthaaya jaayega. Ek majboor maa apne bachchon ke liye kahaan tak jaa sakti hai, kis had tak gir sakti hai, tum bhi aaj dekh lo. Devi shakti nahin de sakti to laaj le lo, main apne bachchon ka balidan nahin de sakti.” She accused the creator of world, that you yourself are the mother of the whole world but in this time of hardship even you would have let go of your dignity, see to what lengths a mother can go for the survival of her children. From one woman to the other these lines reveal the depth of her struggle. She is not asking for dignity over children. She is saying that if dignity must be taken for her children to live, then so be it. And her pleads were not in vain, Devi did give her strength and power to fight against Sukhilala. And at that very edge of surrender, she gathers strength and chooses labour over submission. She turns away from Sukhilala and decides she will feed her children through her own effort. She searches through mud, finds a root, cooks it, and gives it to her children. It is a small act, but symbolically enormous. Food here becomes not only sacrifice, but resistance. Her struggle



can be read alongside Simone de Beauvoir's insight that women's sacrifice is often treated as natural duty, when in fact it is socially imposed (Beauvoir 496). But the film goes beyond that. It shows Radha turning that imposed suffering into strength. And the ground on which a woman fights for life itself (Beauvoir 497).

Food as Ritual Obligation and Social Helplessness

One of the most striking things about *Mother India* is that it does not show hunger only as a result of poverty or exploitation. It also shows how social customs and rituals can make suffering even heavier. This is what makes this section so powerful. It is not only about Radha's family. It reflects a larger truth about the world how people are sometimes forced to follow social obligations even when they themselves have nothing left.

This comes after a devastating turn in the story. Shamu, after the accident in the fields in which his arms are badly injured, is unable to bear the humiliation and helplessness that follow. Traumatized and broken, he leaves, and never returns. The film leaves us with the sense that he is gone forever. The shock is so great that Shamu's mother dies on the spot. Radha, already carrying the burden of survival, is now left alone with her children and the responsibilities of death. And yet, even in this condition, she cannot escape ritual duty (*Mother India*).

According to social and religious custom, funeral rites must be performed, and Brahmins must be fed. This is where the scene becomes almost unbearable in its irony. The same family that has been struggling for grain, the same family that had to give up utensils in exchange for food, the same family that does not have enough for its own children, now has to prepare and offer food to others. And not just food but proper meals to a number of Brahmins. This is what makes the scene so hard-hitting. Those who do not have a grain for themselves must still feed others because tradition demands it. Food here is no longer guided by hunger but it is governed by ritual.

This thought is voiced most powerfully through Birju's innocent question "Maa, in logon ko laddoo deti, humko roti bhi nahin deti?" It is the question of a hungry child, but it sounds like a moral accusation. Why do others receive sweets while the living children in the house do not even have Roti? And Radha's answer is even more devastating "Ye to Brahman hain. Murdon ki aatma ko laddoo khilao aur jindon ko bhookho maaro, yahi sansaar ki reeti hai." This is one of the most brutal truths spoken in the film. Feed sweets to the souls of the



dead, and let the living remain hungry such is the custom of the world. This is not just dialogue but a social critique (Mother India). Through this line, the film exposes how ritual can sometimes stand in conflict with human need. It shows that deprivation is not caused only by landlords like Sukhilala, but also by rigid social systems that demand obedience even from the hungry. And there is a quiet critique of caste here as well. Why must those already suffering still prove virtue through feeding others? Why does ritual require food from those who have none? This scene can also be understood through Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea that food is never merely nourishment; it carries symbolic and cultural meaning (Lévi-Strauss 35). Here food functions as ritual offering, as social duty, as a marker of tradition. But the film pushes this further by asking what happens when symbolic meaning comes at the cost of human survival (Lévi-Strauss 36).

Food as Resistance, Hope, and Healing

If in the beginning of Mother India food appears as love, unity, and shared labour, and later becomes marked by scarcity, sacrifice, and helplessness, the final movement of the film transforms its meaning once again. Here, food becomes a symbol of resistance, hope, and healing. After passing through hunger, loss, and humiliation, Radha does not allow food to remain only a sign of suffering. She turns it back into a source of life (*Mother India*).

The floods had destroyed everything. People were leaving the village. There was every reason to give up. But Radha refuses to abandon the land. Instead, she gathers strength and calls people back. In that powerful moment, she reminds them that the earth itself the mother that feeds them is calling them through the lines, "Oo Jane walon jao na ghar apna chodke, Dharti bula rahi hai tumhe haath jod ke". In those moments Radha changed her suffering to healing, she did not just nurture her children but also inspired the whole village. The film then moves forward, and time changes things. The children have grown up while Radha has grown old. The village has regained some stability. Agriculture, once broken by debt and disaster, begins to sustain life again. And significantly, food once again returns to the language of love. There are beautiful moments where people working in the fields feed one another while labouring. Even more touching is the scene where Ramu and Birju prepare food to console their mother. Earlier, Radha had fed everyone, now her sons feed her. The movement is deeply meaningful as the care has come full circle (*Mother India*).

Conclusion



This reading of *Mother India* shows that food in the film is never merely a background detail or a simple necessity. It is one of the central forces through which life itself is understood. Through the lives of Radha, Shamu, Birju, Ramu, and even through the oppressive presence of Sukhilala, the film reveals how deeply human existence can revolve around food with its presence, absence, struggle, and its meaning. The film makes us see that the struggle for food is never only about hunger. It is about what hunger does to people. It shapes desire, tests self-respect, exposes inequality, and forces difficult moral choices. It makes a man give up his deepest wishes. It makes a mother risk everything for her children. It makes the poor feed ritual even when they themselves starve. And still, it also allows people to begin again. That is perhaps the greatest strength of the film it does not present food in a single fixed meaning. It shows how food keeps changing with circumstance. At one point it is affection, at another oppression; at one point deprivation, at another resistance. And perhaps this is where the truth of the film becomes universal. It is not only Radha's world that revolves around roti, it is everyone's. Because food remains at the centre of human life whether as need, struggle, memory, or hope. That is why the line that opened this article also becomes its final truth:

“Jeevan ka geet hai, sur mein na taal mein, uljhi hai saari duniya roti ke jaal mein.”

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