



Performing the Ideal: Heteropatriarchy and Respectability in *Maja Ma*

Jaleena J S

Research Scholar, Government Victoria College, Palakkad, Affiliated to the University of Calicut

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Abstract: *This paper examines Maja Ma as a narrative that reveals how heteropatriarchy operates through the construction and maintenance of the “ideal” Indian woman. Rather than depicting heteropatriarchy as a system enforced only through visible authority, the film reveals how it operates through everyday practices and social expectations. An Indian family is not only just a cultural unit, but also a regulatory institution that organizes sexuality, gender roles and reproductive expectations. This heteropatriarchal nature of Indian families not only restricts women to the rigid and traditional gender roles but also actively regulates the expression of sexuality by upholding heteronormative expectations.*

This paper conceptualizes heteropatriarchy as a system that is imposed and maintained through repetition. The protagonist of Maja Ma, Pallavi, embodies the image of the ideal wife and mother, whose identity is sustained through the performance of domesticity and heterosexual respectability. The disruption caused by the exposure of her homosexuality brings into focus the fragile and conditional nature of this ideal. The paper argues that Maja Ma exposes heteropatriarchy as a performative and unstable system that depends on the continuous production of respectability.

Keywords: *Queer, Heteropatriarchy, Heteronormativity, Indian Family, Sexuality.*

Indian society is largely structured by heteropatriarchal norms, where social norms and institutions are designed to maintain the dominance of heterosexual men. This heteropatriarchal nature of Indian families not only confines women to the traditional gender roles but also forces gay and lesbian individuals to remain in the closet and veil their true selves. In Indian society, homosexuals often face rejection, ostracization, abuse and are forced into heterosexual marriages as they are often seen as a threat to the heteropatriarchal family structure. The dominant power structures, including the state, had made “heteropatriarchal family/households as foundational socioeconomic units: They facilitated the accumulation process and centralized control more generally, while marriage and family law regulated sexual relations” (Peterson, 605). This kind of regulation in the family structure is often detrimental to the marginalized



communities, including women and the queer. Even the legal framework has historically mirrored these societal attitudes.

The Indian family is not merely a private unit, but a deeply structured social institution that regulates gender roles and sexuality in order to maintain the social order. It functions as a space where cultural values, moral expectations, and social norms are reproduced across generations. Gender is not just an identity, but a role that is carefully defined and continuously reinforced through everyday practices. At the center of this structure lies a clear organization of sexuality and gender roles to maintain patriarchy. Men are typically associated with authority, while women are associated with care, domesticity, and maintenance of family order.

Indian families and Indian society at large are characterised by complex power dynamics that reinforce heteronormativity. Robinson argues that “heteronormative standards and discourses that legitimate the discrimination of sexual minorities can be found in most social institutions, including religion, the family, education, the media, the law, and the state” (1). These institutions exert a powerful influence on individual desires and social realities. We live in a society that privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes non- heterosexual identities. Marriage, procreation and continuation of family lineage are considered to be very important in Indian society, which may perpetuate the idea that heterosexuality is the only acceptable form of sexual expression.

Maja Ma, a film directed by Anand Tiwari, is a family drama that engages with complex questions surrounding gender, sexuality and social norms within the Indian family. The central character of the film is Pallavi, a woman who seems to effortlessly inhabit the role of the ideal wife and mother. She is recognized by both her family and community as a figure of warmth, grace, and respectability. Pallavi is not just a character but a representation of a larger social ideal, whose identity is fully aligned with the expectations of family and society. However, the film introduces a rupture in this carefully maintained ideal image when a Pallavi’s sexual relationship with another woman is revealed. This paper argues that *Maja Ma* reveals heteropatriarchy as a performative system that depends on the continuous production of respectability. The protagonist’s identity is not simply given but is maintained through repeated acts of domestic labour, religious participation, and adherence to heterosexual norms.

The film *Maja Ma* revolves around the protagonist Pallavi Patel, a traditional Indian woman, liked and respected by everyone. The opening sequences of *Maja Ma* establish a carefully ordered domestic world in which Pallavi appears as the emotional and functional center of the household. Her day unfolds through a series of repetitive acts like cooking, serving, organizing, and participating in rituals that position her as indispensable to the family’s stability. However, these acts are not merely expressions of care but they are structured performances that align her with the expectations of ideal womanhood. Pallavi’s identity as a “good” woman is not innate but is continuously produced through these everyday actions, which must be consistently enacted in order to sustain her position within the family.

Pallavi is presented as the embodiment of the “ideal woman,” a figure defined through purity and adherence to traditional gender roles in the film. This ideal is not constructed through



explicit declarations but through everyday language and attitudes surrounding her. She is liked by her family and neighbours and is presented as a perfect traditional Indian woman. When her daughter Tara's academic engagement with gender and sexuality is dismissed as "ashleel," (*Maja Ma* 00:15:57- 00:16:01) or morally inappropriate by her husband Manohar, it simultaneously elevates Pallavi as its opposite, as someone who is "pure," untouched by such deviations. Similarly, the praise she receives from Bob Hansraj, as a traditional Indian woman, situates her within a framework where femininity is equated with modesty, obedience, and heteronormative domesticity. In patriarchal Indian society, "it is compulsory for a woman to serve her best in her duty of being a loyal wife and a dedicated mother. Without being loyal and obedient in the eyes of the males of the society, woman is unable to earn respect" (Trivedi and Tiwari 2). Pallavi embodies this condition through her unquestioned commitment to domestic duties. Her subservience constructs an image of Pallavi as naturally aligned with cultural ideals, masking the fact that such an identity is socially produced.

Through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Pallavi's identity can be understood not as an inherent truth but as the result of repeated actions that consolidate the illusion of stability. Judith Butler argues that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (179). Pallavi's role as a devoted wife and mother is sustained through continuous performances like managing the household, cooking for everyone, and participating in rituals. These acts, repeated over time, produce the effect of a coherent and "authentic" femininity. The film suggests that this performance is so effective that it becomes indistinguishable from Pallavi's essence. This blurring of performance and identity is central to the functioning of heteropatriarchy, as it naturalizes what is in fact socially constructed. At the same time, heteropatriarchy ties this performance of ideal womanhood closely to heterosexuality and reproduction. The expectation that Tara should provide grandchildren reflects how motherhood is not simply a personal choice but a social obligation. Her worth as a woman is linked not only to her ability to maintain the household but also to her role in sustaining lineage and family continuity.

Pallavi's sexual identity as a lesbian, marks a rupture in her identity as an ideal Indian woman. When her identity is revealed, it is marked not by immediate rejection but by an initial refusal to even consider the possibility as real. Her son's insistence that "there is no chance she is a lesbian," (*Maja Ma* 00:39:43- 00:39:47), along with the broader family's dismissal of her statement as a misunderstanding or momentary outburst, points to a deeper structural condition that queerness is not simply disapproved of, but rendered unthinkable within the framework of the heteronormative family. This unthinkability emerges from Pallavi's prior positioning as the "ideal woman," a role so firmly anchored in heteronormative expectations that it leaves no conceptual space for alternative sexualities. The issue, therefore, is not just disbelief but the impossibility of reconciling queerness with the identity she has been performing for years.

This condition can be understood through Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality, which operates not only as a social expectation but as a structuring principle that defines what is considered intelligible or acceptable. Rich considers heterosexuality as a



“political institution” (17). Heterosexuality is assumed to be the default orientation of all individuals, particularly women within the family and as a result, Pallavi’s sexuality is not simply questioned, but it is actively denied because it falls outside what can be recognized within heteropatriarchal logic. Her identity as a mother and wife is so tightly bound to heterosexual norms that the possibility of her queerness appears contradictory, even absurd, to those around her.

Heteronormativity is reinforced through everyday discourses that trivialize or delegitimize non-normative sexualities. Jafarova states that “heteronormativity is mobilized and reproduced in everyday life not only through social interactions, but also through patterns of activities in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality constitute each other” (23). The dismissal of Tara’s academic work on gender and sexuality as something transient or inappropriate reflects a broader tendency to treat queerness as either a phase, a trend, or a moral deviation. Such attitudes do not engage with queerness as a legitimate identity but instead reduce it to something superficial or corrupting. In this context, heteropatriarchy functions by limiting not only behaviour but also knowledge by shaping what can be known, spoken, and acknowledged within the family. Queerness is thus excluded not just socially but epistemologically, remaining outside the realm of what is considered possible. The unthinkability of queerness, therefore, is not accidental but necessary for the stability of the heteropatriarchal system, as it prevents any disruption to the normative order that governs gender, sexuality, and family life.

The revelation of Pallavi’s sexuality in *Maja Ma* triggers a series of responses that reveal how tightly female sexuality is regulated within heteropatriarchal structures. Her identity is not treated as something she can define for herself, instead, it becomes an object to be controlled and publicly managed. This is most evident when her son Tejas takes her to a conversion-like religious space. Tejas demand, “I want my mom back” (*Maja Ma*, 01:28:48), articulates a desire for the restoration of a socially acceptable identity. These actions reflect an underlying assumption that female desire must remain within the boundaries of heterosexuality. Valdes states that “desire is socially and legally devalued unless it is the instrument of ideology, a tool to serve specific social goals” (170). Pallavi’s desire is devalued because it does not serve heteropatriarchal goals of marriage. Pallavi’s sexuality disrupts heterosexual repetition, prompting immediate efforts to restore the normative order. The film also presents an interesting tension between repression and forced visibility. While the family initially attempts to suppress and deny Pallavi’s sexuality, her daughter Tara pushes her toward openly acknowledging and claiming it. However, this pressure to come out can also be read as another form of regulation, where visibility becomes a demand rather than a choice. In both cases, Pallavi’s autonomy is limited.

Regulation of female sexuality is closely linked to a parallel crisis in masculinity. Pallavi’s revelation does not remain confined to her identity; it extends to her husband, whose masculinity is immediately called into question by the community. Pallavi’s husband Manohar is labelled as “impotent” which reflects how heteropatriarchy ties male identity to the ability



to maintain heterosexual control within the family. The husband's sense of self is destabilized not because of his own actions, but because his wife's sexuality disrupts the normative framework that defines him. In this sense, masculinity is shown to be relational—it depends on the successful performance of heterosexuality within the household. Thus, heteropatriarchy regulates both women and men, but in interconnected ways. While women's sexuality is controlled to ensure conformity, men's identities are structured around that control. When Pallavi steps outside heteronormative expectations, it exposes the fragility of this system, showing that masculinity itself is dependent on the stability of female roles.

The film *Maja Ma*, shows that respectability emerges as a central mechanism through which heteropatriarchy is sustained and enforced. Pallavi's identity as a "good" woman is not simply based on her private life but on how she is perceived within the community. Her value is tied to her ability to embody an image that aligns with social expectations, that is, of being a devoted wife and a morally upright individual. This image is not self-generated but collectively constructed and maintained through social recognition. Respectability, therefore, functions as a form of social currency, one that grants acceptance and belonging as long as it is upheld. The moment Pallavi's sexuality becomes visible, this carefully built image collapses, revealing how contingent and conditional respectability truly is.

This collapse is made possible through processes of surveillance that operate at multiple levels. The spread of the video of Pallavi's accidental coming out, the circulation of gossip, and the immediate withdrawal of social interaction all demonstrate how the community actively monitors and regulates behavior. Surveillance here is not institutional but deeply social and is enacted through neighbours, relatives, and everyday interactions. In this sense, heteropatriarchy does not require a central authority to enforce norms; it relies on collective participation. Pallavi's exclusion from rituals and social spaces indicates that respectability is not only granted but also revoked through these mechanisms. Her identity becomes a matter of public scrutiny, where deviation from heteronormative expectations invites discipline in the form of ostracism. Pallavi's earlier performances of ideal womanhood were validated because they were legible within heteropatriarchal expectations. However, once her sexuality disrupts this framework, those same performances lose their legitimacy. This shift highlights how norms are sustained through continuous reinforcement by others; they depend on being seen, recognized, and affirmed. When recognition is withdrawn, the identity itself becomes unstable. Respectability, therefore, is not an inherent quality but a socially mediated effect that must be constantly maintained.

Pallavi's son Tejas's concern with managing the situation and restoring the family's reputation reflects an internalization of surveillance. Tejas says "I won't let your reputation be harmed" (*Maja Ma* 00:47:44- 00:47:47). The family begins to monitor itself, attempting to control the narrative and limit the damage to its social standing. This internalization demonstrates the depth of heteropatriarchal influence, where individuals become agents of their own regulation. Ultimately, *Maja Ma* reveals that respectability and surveillance are deeply



intertwined, functioning together to sustain heteropatriarchy by ensuring that gender and sexuality remain within socially acceptable boundaries.

In the climax of *Maja Ma* Pallavi's identity is acknowledged, and her family expresses support. However, this acceptance is neither complete nor transformative, but it is carefully structured to remain within the limits of heteropatriarchal order. Pallavi is accepted, but on the condition that she continues to inhabit her role as a wife and mother within the existing family structure. Her husband, Manohar, asks her not to divorce him and that he will stay as her friend. The suggestion that she remain married and not disrupt the household reflects how acceptance is negotiated in a way that preserves the stability of the system. Rather than dismantling heteropatriarchy, the narrative accommodates queerness only insofar as it does not fundamentally challenge the institution of family.

The family's acceptance does not create space for alternative forms of relationality, instead, it redefines acceptance as coexistence within pre-existing norms. Pallavi is permitted to exist as she is, but only if her identity does not alter the structure that previously constrained her. This resolution reflects the continuing force of compulsory heterosexuality, where even in the moment of acceptance, heterosexual marriage remains the central organizing principle. Pallavi's queerness does not lead to the possibility of a different life outside marriage but is folded back into it, reinforcing the idea that heterosexual structures are ultimately unavoidable. The acceptance offered to her is thus conditional, it acknowledges difference while simultaneously neutralizing its potential to disrupt.

At the end of the film, Pallavi's lesbian love interest Kanchan, asks if Pallavi will choose her in the next birth if she is reborn as a man, to which Pallavi replies that she wants her as a woman even in the next birth (*Maja Ma* 02:10:25- 02:10:37). This scene shows the constraints of the present. Muñoz states that "queerness is an ideality" (1), pointing to the way queer desire is often displaced to the future that may or may not exist. Within the current social framework, Pallavi cannot actualize her desire without destabilizing the structure of heteropatriarchy. The idea of the next birth becomes a symbolic space where desire can exist without consequence. In this way, the film presents a form of inclusion that does not fully challenge the normative framework governing gender and sexuality. This sanitized acceptance underscores the limits of transformation within heteropatriarchal systems, showing that even moments of progress are shaped by the need to preserve social order.

Maja Ma presents heteropatriarchy as a system that is not sustained through overt force alone, but through everyday practices. Through Pallavi's character, the film reveals how the "ideal woman" is continuously produced through acts of domesticity, purity, and heterosexual conformity, and how this identity is both fragile and conditional. While the film gestures toward acceptance, its resolution ultimately underscores the system's persistence, as queerness is accommodated only in ways that do not disrupt existing familial and social frameworks. Thus, *Maja Ma* does not simply depict a personal story of identity, but exposes the mechanisms through which heteropatriarchy is maintained, and subtly reasserted, even in moments that appear to signal change.



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