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What Would Manu Say? Mothering, Midlife, and Mayhem in Netflix's *Mai*

Nilanjana Bhattacharjya, Barrett, the Honors College, Arizona State University, US, nilanjana@asu.edu

This video essay examines how Netflix's series *Mai* interrogates traditional roles for married, middle-aged women in India. Focusing on the protagonist's specific life challenges, we witness how her departures from her duties as a mother, wife, and nurse coupled with her propensity for violence offer her greater agency.

Creator's Statement

Mai thrilled me the first time I watched it, which worried me. So, I watched it again. I now understand that I relish seeing a mild-mannered middle-aged Indian woman transform into a furious and formidable vigilante pursuing her daughter's killers—probably because I myself am usually a mild-mannered middle-aged Indian woman but like to imagine alternate possibilities. I appreciate that our protagonist, Sheel, lives in an Indian city that I somewhat know, Lucknow, and that she and her husband have financial challenges that require that she work outside the house as a nurse. I appreciate that her grown daughter Supriya, a doctor, does stand-up comedy despite being unable to speak, and that she is fighting corruption in her hospital. I also appreciate that Supriya, from a Hindu family, is secretly dating a Muslim (married) police inspector in a city that has become increasingly hostile to its local Muslim population. And I appreciate that when Sheel discovers Supriya's illicit relationship after Supriya's murder, Sheel never questions her daughter's integrity and morality.

Over the course of the series, Sheel distances herself from the beloved person she is known to be: an ideal wife and mother within the house, and an ideal nurse at the nursing home where she works. She is beloved because she nurtures everybody around her, works hard, and supports whoever needs her. At this stage in her life, historically, most middle-class Indian women would be trying to arrange marriages for their children or exerting their new power and authority as mothers-in-law over their sons' wives within a joint family household. But Sheel lets Supriya live her own life, in her own apartment, because she recognizes Supriya's education, career as a doctor, and independence as what she would have wanted for herself. Sheel spends her days supporting her husband and patients at the nursing home while following orders from her brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and her nursing home supervisor. But after Supriya's murder, Sheel's priorities change as she is determined to find her daughter's killers.

While discussions of women's midlife experiences in American and Western European contexts often focus on women's concerns about their waning fertility and physical attractiveness—or the physical and mental effects of menopause—women at midlife in India historically occupy a different role. That role is defined by the male members of the family who surround her, and women among themselves have not discussed menstruation and menopause until recently. The two-thousand-year-old *Laws of Manu* (*Manusmriti*), a Hindu code of laws, continues to inform how many people in contemporary India define ideal gender roles. The *Laws* do not permit women to define their identities outside of their relationships and obligations to men at various stages of their life:

> A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. A woman should not try to separate herself from her husband, or her sons, for separation from them would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible.[1]

In recent years, courts have increasingly often referred to the *Laws* to justify judiciary actions. In January 2024, the Jharkhand state high court quoted the *Laws of Manu* to reject a woman's claim for alimony and child support: a "woman cannot put pressure on her husband or make any 'unreasonable demand to live separately.'"[2] Obviously, many women today do not conform to the Laws' roles—by not bearing male (if any) children, being queer, and/or being independent, single adults. In this series, Sheel discovers how little people care about her adult, unmarried daughter Supriya, after realizing that the people who orchestrated her daughter's murder are still at large. Nobody wants to look further into her case. The police, the court, and her brother-in-law all accept a hasty and convenient verdict at the cost of justice, and through their complacency, the social infrastructure that should protect the lives of women fails both Supriya and Sheel as middle-class women.

On her own, Sheel starts to take furtive trips at night around Lucknow and finds some unlikely and unsavory allies—two local thugs. She then encounters even more gangsters in Lucknow's underworld while transforming into an increasingly violent vigilante. She visits sordid locations she has so far avoided as a middle-class,

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[1] *The Laws of Manu, with an Introduction and Notes.*, trans. Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith (Penguin Books, 1991), 115.

[2] "'Obligatory for Women to Serve Their Elderly Mother-in-Laws': Jharkhand HC Quotes Manusmriti." *The Economic Times* (Mumbai), January 25, 2024, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/obligatory-for-women-to-serve-their-elderly-mother-in-laws-jharkhand-hc-quotes-manusmriti/articleshow/107132804.cms.

respectable woman. At one point, while rummaging through garbage bags at a medical waste facility to find a CryptoKey, she is horrified to discover the corpse of a female infant. Sheel's first murder is an accident, but after she discovers her ability to kill, she does not restrain herself as she demands answers.

Sheel's name in Sanskrit means modesty, piety, and politeness—propriety, decorum, and submission. At the start of the series, as we watch her perform the duties associated with being a wife, mother, and nurse, she appears to embody what *The Laws of Manu* define as an ideal woman. Things are not all perfect at home, however, even before her daughter is killed. We learn that although she works outside the home as a nurse, she is living in her husband's sister and sister's husband's house, under their rules, because her own husband's health prevents him from earning enough for them to afford to live independently. We also learn that her so-called nephew is not her nephew at all, but her biological son that her in-laws impelled her to renounce. The birthday party she arranges for this child at the series' start coincides with the anniversary of her losing her claim to him. Sheel's husband has little say in their household affairs and cannot financially support her; she cannot recognize her son as her own; and after her only daughter, an unmarried doctor, is killed—we must question whether she remains a wife or mother at all, at least in a conventional sense.

At this stage in her life, outside any situation that the society around her could imagine, Sheel discovers her own power. The series' subtitle, "A Mother's Rage," suggests that her daughter's murder lights the fire of rage within her, but the narrative also draws our attention to how Sheel increasingly refuses to be dismissed as she was before—at work, amid the criminal justice system, but also within her in-laws' home. She refuses to join family members for religious rituals, refuses to confine herself at home, questions the police and her in-laws about how they are handling her daughter's murder case, confronts her boss about his role in killing his daughter, and collaborates and contends with younger men involved in illegal activities, as well as with the Muslim police inspector who was dating her daughter. She kills nearly all her victims outside the home, and at least in the early episodes, she hides her nocturnal activities from her family. However, by the series' conclusion as shown in this essay's final scene, she confronts her transgressions' consequences on her relationships with family members. Sheel's propensity for violence may reflect more than a maternal desire to avenge Supriya's killers—namely, the desire to avenge the countless people who have dismissed and disrespected her daughter and her as middle-class women in contemporary India.

Biography

Nilanjana Bhattacharjya is a Teaching Professor and Honors Faculty Fellow at Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University in Tempe, where she teaches interdisciplinary classes in the humanities. Most of her research has focused on popular music and media in South Asia and in South Asian diasporic communities. Her recent publications include a videographic essay for the *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* special issue on women in global horror and an article co-written with Monika Mehta on *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2022) in *Jump Cut*.

Review by Sarah A. Joshi, University of Pittsburgh

The avenging mother or father is a trope that has been explored in a multitude of Indian films and television series, such as *Halahal* (dir. Jha, 2020), *Mom* (dir. Udyawar, 2017) and *Maatr* (dir. Sayed, 2017), to name but a few. The object of analysis for Bhattacharjya is the Netflix series *Mai: A Mother's Rage* (dir. Lal, 2022), and its central mother figure Sheel, who embarks on a quest to avenge her daughter Supriya's murder. The concept of Manu is explicated early in the video essay, laying out the duty of a Hindu woman to her father, husband and sons … but the duty that is ultimately shown is one to the vengeance of her murdered daughter. Bhattacharjya is interested in how Sheel defies conventions of behaviour as dictated by or filtered through this lens of Manu. The subject position of the Hindu mother is put under interrogation in the video essay in three primary spheres: etymologically, visually, and symbolically. Bhattacharjya scrolls an extensive list of meanings for the name Sheel across the quiet acts of maternal domestic life. It is these denotations of Sheel's name that she once embodied, the codes of behaviour, that are cast aside in the scorched earth vengeance she has wrought in Supriya's name. Visually, Bhattacharjya could have balanced Sheel's repetitious acts of violence with more nuanced clips of her subtle acts of transgression, or defiance of Manu in other ways, to round out the picture of her transformation. Quoting Sara Ahmed, Bhattacharjya suggests that at midlife such "volatility" and "disobedience" is accessible. Although I would challenge Bhattacharjya to evidence the connection between Sheel's violence and agency more explicitly; it is in fact Sheel's search for the truth that forces her to embrace a hitherto untapped agency, thus opening up a path and rationale for her vigilantism. This defiance, righteous as it may be to Sheel, circles back to the dictates of Manu still imposing themselves in the eyes of the wider social-familial structures. This is symbolically evidenced when Sheel's sister-in-law scathingly decries her recent behaviour—perhaps acting as an interlocutor for Manu.

Thus, the essay leaves us to observe the mother judged, and found wanting in the eyes of her extended family, and perhaps society too. The consequences of Sheel's dissent are left lingering in her thousand-mile stare at the video essay's conclusion. The sense is of a wife and mother who now exists outside of any socio-religious paradigm, and instead, oscillating between indifference and rage, is now a law unto herself.

Review by Anupama Prabhala, Loyola Marymount University

Posing the question, "What Would Manu Say?" offers a great framework for Bhattacharjya to understand *Mai* (2022) as a web series that unapologetically makes women the drivers of their lives and the stories they tell. Several scenarios depict the humiliation and abuse that Indian women endure daily. One of the biggest strengths of this video essay is the way in which Bhattacharjya puts Wendy Doniger's translation of *The Laws of Manu* into conversation with Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* to reveal the power of female rage.

The dyad of a mother and her mute adult female child is crucial for elaborating this dynamic. Bhattacharjya works with the traumatic afterlife of a daughter's violent death as Supriya, literally the dear one, is avenged by (if I may add to the author's elaboration of the many meanings of Sheel, the mother's name) the gentle, calm one. Ironically, Sheel is anything but gentle as she acts with equal, if not greater violence to avenge her daughter's brutal murder. While graphic male violence has been a familiar motif in Indian web series (see, for example, *Mirzapur*), female characters in the contemporary moment embody new forms of urban power as bosses in the corporate office (*The Broken News)* or as chiefs in police procedurals such as *Delhi Crime*. Bhattacharjya draws attention to Mai, aka The Mother, as a distinctive *maternal vigilante. Mai* is different because it follows an older traditional woman as a key figure who faithfully performs all the ideal traditional roles assigned to her but gets nothing in return. Older mothers have been sacrosanct in Indian culture, particularly when they bear sons (the most iconic example here is the film *Deewar*). In *Mai,* the mother chooses not to be sacrosanct as she avenges a culturally devalued daughter whose sexuality is called into question because of her muteness. Supriya's culturally prohibited relationship with a Muslim man underlines the many ways in which women question sexual and religious laws and willingly break them through the choices they make. Too, the mute daughter is not even considered for adoption: Sheel is forced to give up her biological son by her in-laws; another injustice she takes action against by giving full expression to her rage.

Bhattacharjya's visuals and text call attention to the sudden eruption of female sexuality in all the "wrong places" through the intensity of violent action. The demure Sheel fits all the classic parameters of a victim. This makes the staging of violence all the more uncharacteristic, all the more shocking, and all the more expressive: as a mother, Sheel never questions her daughter's validity or sexual choices—the mute, sexually unconventional Supriya is as deserving of justice as a beloved son. This video essay puts rage at the center of all the key elements that define Sheel as an agentive mother. Sheel's rage is necessary to shatter Sheel's identity as a victim.