



Hyperreal Motherhood and Emotional Turmoil in Contemporary Society: An Image-driven Culture

➤ Pooja¹

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the impact of celebrity or image-driven culture on the people and how it makes them stay away from reality. It also tried to show how often they admire celebrities and their lives and compare them with our lives. “*Aishwarya Rai*,” a short story written by *Sanjana Thakur*, reveals how a 23-year-old girl is not accepting her real mother just because she does not look like *Aishwarya Rai* and is not as beautiful and that she created so many problems because of hyper-real expectations; consequently, she repeatedly adopts different women as her mother from the shelter home. The hyperreality of celebrity lifestyle impacts the concept of motherhood. This is how the modern world has a different perspective for her mother and reimagines the mother as a commodity that can be selected, rejected, or changed. It challenges the mother-and-child, the mother-and-daughter relationship, which is stable and natural. In the last paper, it also tries to show that after all the attempts to get the new mother, Avni finds emotional satisfaction from her real mother only, which shows that the mother is irreplaceable, unchangeable, and natural, and the emotional bond that the real mother can create is not possible by the simulated motherhood.

Key words: Hyperreality, Aishwarya Rai, adopt, commodity, simulated motherhood.

1. Introduction

The contemporary world is a world of the digital era. The world is influenced by modern image culture, celebrities, and their beauty

standards. This image-driven culture creates an unrealistic standard of beauty, identity, and perception. These fake identities or fake beauty standards are internalized by the living people of

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Arya Kanya Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

the society and create fake expectations about physical appearance to become or look like celebrities. This fake or hyperrealistic culture hinders and narrates the unrealistic standard of beauty and denies the acceptance of reality. The image-driven culture promotes hyperreality, which reshapes the concept of identity and relationships. For example, very often people see and admire celebrities and their beauty. They are so influenced by them that they try to imitate them and their lifestyle along with trying to look just like them. Now people are getting more beauty surgeries and trying to reshape their bodies like celebrities—big eyes, full lips, small waist, sharp jawline, and whatnot. This competition to look like a celebrity results in forming hyperreal expectations of appearance and also judging others on the basis of the same criteria of beauty standard and lifestyle, which is far away from reality. This weakens the personal and social relationships. It also narrowed the standard of beauty that leads to neglecting variations in it. Literature has the potential to show this struggle of humans to accept life and real experience. Visual culture beauty standards or image-driven culture are used in literature in the form of hyperreality to show the world how real and simulated perception are so subtle that they are unable to distinguish them. It promotes personal struggle and conflicts.

A Commonwealth Short Story Prize winner in 2024 is “*Aishwarya Rai*,” a short story written by *Sanjana Thakur*. This story shows the concept of adoption of a mother figure, which is quite opposite of the general concept of adoption, to

satisfy the needs of a 23-year-old girl. Generally, in shelter homes parents visit to adopt a child, but in this story a daughter is going to a shelter home to adopt a mother, or we can say maternal figure. This story also highlights the importance of family relationships, loneliness, emotional turmoil, and the obsession with beauty. The author has used the title *Aishwarya Rai* because she is considered the epitome of beauty along with being famous for her mother nature.

2. Theoretical framework

For the accomplishment of the research paper, the theoretical framework is hyperreality, which is given by *Jean Baudrillard*. He was a famous French sociologist and philosopher. Hyperreality means, in the modern context, the situation where it becomes difficult to differentiate reality and simulation. It describes the condition where it erases the gap between reality and imagination or simulation.

The hyperreality framework provides an insight for analyzing text to show the supremacy of visual image and simulation and its impact. *Jean Baudrillard* has discussed that simulation is reshaping contemporary society and its perception. Simulation, which is far away from reality. This simulation seems so real that one can misunderstand the copy or image, which has no originality, as real. More than the real experience, humans often interact with the symbols, images, and ideals, which makes them live in illusion. The media and popular culture are responsible for these narratives. Furthermore, it molds the concept of the success,

beauty, lifestyles, social roles, and identity of the people collectively.

Therefore, the situation where reality and its representation become so identical that it becomes difficult to distinguish them.

The perception has been changed according to the ideal image rather than the life experience, which is authentic. Media images are shaping the perception and social expectations regarding beauty standards and lifestyle in such a way that people try to copy and try to emulate them. It also creates certain pressure on an individual.

Therefore, implications of this framework for literary text help to examine how the story reveals the effect of media culture on people and their mindset. In the story under discussion, which highlights the constant comparison of mothers on the basis of beauty and replacing them. It also suggested that in this modern world, family relationships are regulated by the socially constructed images and media culture rather than emotional bonding and attachments.

By applying a hyperreality theoretical framework, the paper seeks to interpret how the simulation creates image-driven perception of a protagonist of the story along with commodification of relationships in the modern period. It also focuses on emotional detachment.

3. Mother as a social construct

The main and central theme of the short story “*Aishwarya Rai*” by *Sanjana Thakur* is motherhood constructed by society, and it is not fixed and natural. The modern image-driven culture reshapes the people's perspective on motherhood and emotional relationships. In this

narrative, Avni constantly adopts, replaces, and rejects the motherly figures, who are the symbol of motherhood. This also emphasizes that motherhood is replaceable and can be chosen and evaluated as per personal expectations.

These narrative challenges the traditional perception of motherhood and the maternal figure of pure, stable, and natural bond. It also challenges the unconditional love and permanent bond between the child and mother.

Here, shelter homes play a crucial role, as they are places that promote the adoption of mothers. This shelter home symbolizes the society and image-dominated culture. It also highlighted that a maternal figure or motherly figure is replaceable, chosen, and rejected as per one's own desire. Furthermore, it highlights modern culture and society wherein people are considering relationships as a commodity, and these relationships are shaped by individual choice influenced by visual image rather than long-term commitment and loyalty.

The present five mother figures in the story are symbolized as unnecessary emphases on image or celebrity culture, which are reshaping relationships and emotional bonding in modern contemporary society. It highlights that physical appearance, beauty standards, and performance of femininity are the bases to judge someone and neglects the importance of emotional depth in relationships.

4. Performance of femininity

The other focus is the performance of femininity, which talks about a set of norms and rules for females given by society. In the theory

“Gender Performativity,” given by *Judith Butler*, the performance of femininity is discussed. It states that the very quality of femininity is not biological and natural; rather, it is a learned process and behavior that we perform every day as per the rules of the society. In the context of the story *“Aishwarya Rai,”* written by *Sanjana Thakur*, it was revealed that all the motherly figures used in this narrative are the product of the society, as they tried to be too perfect for the real nature of motherhood. In the story they are messy, overweight, and not looking beautiful physically, but they are caring, nurturing a child, and building a strong emotional bond. The first maternal figure was “too clean,” only wearing white cloth at all times. She tied a feather to her wrist, which shows her daily routine of cleaning and dusting, which is a role decided by the society for women. Her obsession to just look like the *Aishwarya Rai* show, when she asks Avni,

“Don't I look just like Aishwarya Rai?”

This shows that this mother is more inclined towards physical beauty, which is the product of visual image culture along with the mentality of the society. Avni didn't like the first mother figure and took her straight back to the shelter home. The second mother figure is also infatuated by beauty and prefers a “thin and sad” child over a “happy but fat ” one. This shows that motherhood is a performance of femininity and not a genuine figure. This clearly highlights that in the contemporary period, motherhood is becoming a performance that is influenced by societal expectations and celebrity culture and

not considering genuine and natural motherhood. As a result, motherhood became a part of showing off their beauty and role fashioned by external expectations.

Through this narrative, the author criticized the visual culture and hyper reality of motherhood, which create hurdles in the personal relationship. It also highlights how society judges people on the basis of appearance, beauty, and perfection. Another aspect of this narrative that really connects is the commercialization of human emotions by using shelters as commercial places where one can buy and adopt. Here, *Sanjana Thakur* has used the shelter, a place that symbolizes a medium to adopt and replace as per the desirable look and their features. The words used by the shelter people, like “multiple placement,” “desirable look,” and “find another home quickly,” suggest that the mother figure is a product, and such language is being used in the consumer market, where one can buy, check, and, if not found worthy, replace on the basis of one's own desire. In the story, motherhood is treated as a product that is replaceable when there is no suitable mother. When Avni did not find a suitable mother figure, she replaced them straight to the shelter home. This emphasizes that contemporary society is devaluing the relationship and making it a commercial commodity. It highlights the human psychology that is influenced by commercialization, where they are applying commodification rules to build an emotional connection in the relationship. Hence, showing that current society is trying to

consume and profit from it. It highlights that relationships nowadays are materialistic and everything is dependent on cause and profit.

5. Caring mother figure and Avni's emotional instability

Nazneen, the third mother, is quite different from the two earlier mother figures. She is caring and takes all the responsibility of the house. It seems that she is authentic and natural, as she used to do all the work that a mother has to do, such as cooking, preparing tea, packing food and sending it to Avni's office, and other house chores. It shows through this she tries to form an emotional bond with Avni. She is different from other earlier mother figures, who just perform the femininity role and try to look beautiful only.

Despite this, the story highlights that even this kind of care is not sufficient to resolve the emotional instability of Avni. This shows that living in a hyperreal life, which is highly influenced by image or virtual culture, makes life complicated, as people are unaware of or barely find any differences between real and reel life. Even though the third mother figure is caring, she is still not the real mother of Avni. This artificial relationship is not genuine and is difficult to sustain.

Avni has an issue with panic attacks, and on Saturday night, he has the panic attack-her body is restless - wanted to talk to her real biological mother, who is alive but, due to a poor relationship with Avni, not living with each other. But Avni is not able to make a call due to emotional conflict.

The third mother was sent back to the shelter home because Avni found a lack of emotions and connections. Although the third mother was very caring, this carefulness seems scripted and artificial to Anvi. Next, the fourth mother figure is Nazneen. The writer has given a name to the fourth mother figure because it shows the unnamed mother figures as a product to satisfy the need of Avni. But the fourth mother is way different from them, as she genuinely cares for Avni. Nazneen, indirectly, is the one who makes Avani realize that motherhood is something that is natural and cannot be replaced or adopted. She teaches her how to cook. Nazneen breaks the notion of Avni to find out the perfect motherly figure. When she told Avni to send her back to the shelter home.

“I would like you to take me back to the shelter,”

Nazneen realizes that what Avni is searching for in the mother figure is artificial and just perfect, as shown in Bollywood. Another thing is that she feels that she is not able to satisfy Avani's needs of motherhood.

“But I don't think you will find what you are looking for in a new mother,”

The above dialogue clearly shows that Avni disillusioned herself by trying to get a new mother. A mother who is beautiful and too clean. It shows the consequences of hyperreality, where there is no gap or difference between reality and simulation. The third mother figure was replaced by the fourth mother figure, Nazneen. Nazneen, a caring mother figure like a third mother figure, but the difference was she used to teach her how

to cook food and all the other work. Commodification of relationships and hyperreality figures is artificial and cannot take the place of originality and naturalness. The fourth mother does not snore like the third mother figure, due to which Avni feels more alone. Nazneen, the fourth mother figure, provides practical care and teaching to Avni, but at the end, Nazneen is sent back to the shelter home.

In the story, it is clearly shown that after many attempts to get a mother figure, Avni is not satisfied. There is something that all the mother figures are lacking. Avni does not feel connected to the adopted mother. She almost feels nothing about the first mother- to clean, and the second mother- just like Aishwarya Rai. Although the third adopted mother is caring, still Avni feels some emotional gap and is not able to connect herself emotionally.

In the narrative, it is highlighted that Avni's bond with her real biological mother is not so good.

They have some issues with each other and live under the same roof.

Avni has some emotional issues, and sometimes she gets panic attacks even in the presence of maternal figures. She feels loneliness and finds difficulty while sleeping. This shows that artificiality and image-driven culture can never take the place of natural and genuine motherhood. When the fourth mother figure, Nazneen, was sent back to the shelter home, Avni came back to her home. She is upset, and without eating anything, she tries to attempt

to sleep but fails in doing so. She is not fine and is having lots of turmoil of emotions, anxiety, and distress. It shows the crisis of emotions and the modern lifestyle. She wanted to call and talk to her real mother. The moment she called her real mother and talked to her, she apologized and felt quite good and lighthearted. Their conversation shows that they both need each other. This genuine mother-daughter bond shows that no matter how bad the day is, in every situation, a mother has the power to heal one. Avni's real mother knows everything about her.

"I know why you called, " Mother says. I can always tell."

She always supported her. It was her superficial expectations of Avni that led them into such situations. The conversation where Mother is asking to sing for Avni,

"Do you want me to sing for you?" Avni said, "Yes, please."

This shows how mothers can freshen the mood of their child while just having positive communication. Just after the conversation between Avni and her real self, all the panic attacks, uneasiness, and anxiety of Avni have gone. This shows the real power of emotional bonds, which are so positive that they heal you even in your worst period.

This shows that Avni finds peace and calmness when she talks to her mother. It highlights that no matter how many problems and hurdles there are, Mother is the one who can heal and provide peace and comfort. In the whole story, Avni adopts many mother figures. She thought mother and motherhood are replaceable

and focused on searching for a perfect mother figure, which is influenced by visual image culture. But in the end, she realizes that mother and motherhood are irreplaceable. When Avni felt emotionally weak, it was her mother who calmed her emotional turmoil. The real mother challenges the idea of performative motherhood and emphasizes the importance of genuine emotional bonds in relationships in society.

6. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the hyperreality of motherhood prevails nowadays and changes its nature of stability and natural and emotional bonding into image culture dominations. Through the mother figure, it criticizes and challenges the modern nature of motherhood, which is influenced by image-driven culture that can be replaced, adopted, and evaluated on the basis of simulation. It highlights the domination of celebrity culture and its impact on human relationships and reshapes identity and relationships on the basis of visual image culture.

Furthermore, it shows that even though there is hyperreality where people are unable to distinguish between reality and imagination, further it highlights the importance of real connection and emotions.

It also challenges the commodification of relationships, where every relationship is judged on the basis of the consumer market, where relationships are made on the basis of profit and gain. It is important to understand the real nature of motherhood, and there is variation in its nature.

References

1. Thakur, S. (2024). Aishwarya Rai. Granta. <https://granta.com/aishwarya-rai/>
2. Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble. Routledge.
3. Debord, G. (2014). *The society of the spectacle* (K. Knabb, Trans.). Bureau of Public Secrets. (Original work published 1967). <https://files.libcom.org/files/The%20Society%20of%20the%20Spectacle%20Annotated%20Edition.pdf>
4. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Consumer culture.
5. Hyperreality. (n.d.). Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperreality>
6. Hyperreality and social media: A content analysis of Instagram reels. (n.d.). [https:// www.multisubjectjournal .com/article/527/6-12-7-909.pdf](https://www.multisubjectjournal.com/article/527/6-12-7-909.pdf)
7. Kellner, D. (2003). Media culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern. Routledge.
8. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2021). Commodification.