

From Mockery to Recognition: Child Psychology and Maternal Empowerment in the Movie *English Vinglish*

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ABSTRACT

Commercial Hindi cinema, over the decades, has frequently depicted mothers as one-dimensional being who have a major role of sacrifice and mostly presented as a homemaker, taking care of the extended family and the children, but the characters seldom address their choices, inner life, and dreams. Nevertheless, changing attitude of people and the sensibility of the audience has led to a more nuanced portrayal of maternal identities. This transformation is discussed in this paper based on thematic analysis of Shashi Godbole, the character of Sridevi in *English Vinglish*, the Bollywood movie directed by Gauri Shinde. The movie follows the progression of Shashi as a homemaker and the subtle domestic ridicule she endures especially by her teenage daughter as she moves towards becoming a woman who gains the ability to be dignified, confident and in control through self-education. The key aspect of this work is a psychological relationship between a child and mother. The embarrassment and dismissive attitude of the daughter become the focus of the discussion of the aspect of child psychology, especially in terms of peer pressure, language hierarchies, identity development, and the internalised concept of social prestige in terms of English fluency. Placing the personal development of Shashi as well as the gradual change of her daughter from mocking her mother to recognizing her efforts and respecting her, the paper dwells upon the transformation of maternal empowerment that not only changes the personal self-esteem, but also reorganizes the family perception and emotional sensitivity. It is within this twofold prism of child psychology and maternal empowerment that the paper argues that *English Vinglish* is an unconventional film that defies deeply rooted gender expectations as well as providing a nuanced insight into the generational learning, respect, and identity within the modern Indian middle-class family. There is a significance of intricate maternal representation in reforming cultural stories about motherhood, power, and selfhood in the popular Hindi cinema.

Keywords: Thematic Analysis, Maternal Empowerment, Child Psychology, Gender Dynamics, Character Development.

Introduction

The representation of motherhood in Indian cinema has historically been marked by idealization and simplification. Mothers have often been depicted as symbols of sacrifice, unconditional love, and moral authority, embodying virtues such as patience, endurance, and selflessness. While these portrayals have contributed to the cultural reverence of motherhood, they have also limited the depiction of mothers as individuals with agency, aspirations, and personal struggles.

Scholars of film and gender studies have frequently observed that the mother figure in mainstream Hindi cinema functions as a narrative anchor rather than an evolving character (Kumar,

2010). Traditionally, she exists primarily to support the development of other characters—particularly male protagonists—rather than undergoing personal transformation herself. In such narratives, the emotional labor performed by mothers remains largely invisible and unacknowledged.

However, the landscape of Indian cinema has gradually shifted in the twenty-first century. Changing social dynamics, increased participation of women in public spaces, and the emergence of female filmmakers have contributed to more layered portrayals of women and mothers. Contemporary films increasingly explore themes such as self-identity, autonomy, and personal growth within domestic contexts.

One such significant film is *English Vinglish* (2012), directed by Gauri Shinde. The film centers on Shashi Godbole, a middle-class Indian homemaker who struggles with low self-esteem due to her inability to speak English. Her lack of fluency becomes a source of embarrassment for her family members, particularly her teenage daughter Sapna. The film chronicles Shashi's journey of self-discovery as she enrolls in an English-speaking course during a trip to New York.

While the film is widely celebrated as a narrative of female empowerment, it also presents a subtle yet powerful exploration of intergenerational dynamics, particularly between mother and child. The daughter's attitude toward her mother reflects broader psychological processes such as peer influence, identity formation, and the internalization of societal hierarchies associated with language and class.

This paper examines *English Vinglish* through two interconnected frameworks: maternal empowerment and child psychology. By analyzing the evolving relationship between Shashi and her daughter, the study highlights how personal transformation can influence family perceptions and emotional relationships.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on motherhood in cinema have highlighted how film narratives often reinforce traditional gender roles. According to Chatterjee (2014), the mother figure in Indian films has historically been associated with moral purity and sacrifice, reinforcing patriarchal ideals of womanhood. Such portrayals often erase the complexity of women's identities beyond domestic responsibilities.

Kaplan (1992) argues that cinematic representations of motherhood frequently serve ideological functions by naturalizing women's role as caregivers. Within this framework, motherhood becomes a symbol of virtue rather than a lived experience characterized by emotional and psychological complexities.

Recent scholarship, however, suggests that contemporary cinema is beginning to challenge these traditional depictions. Gopal (2011) notes that modern films increasingly explore the subjectivity of female characters, allowing audiences to engage with their personal journeys and internal conflicts. Such narratives open new possibilities for understanding motherhood beyond self-sacrifice.

Language also plays an important role in shaping identity and social hierarchies in postcolonial societies. Scholars have argued that English in India functions as a marker of social mobility and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Vaish, 2008). The ability to speak English is often associated with education, sophistication, and global belonging, while those who lack fluency may experience social marginalization.

Within family contexts, children and adolescents frequently internalize these hierarchies through peer influence and social comparison. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development highlights adolescence as a crucial stage in identity formation, where individuals seek social validation and belonging (Erikson, 1968). During this phase, adolescents may distance themselves from family members who appear socially inferior in order to align with peer expectations.

In the context of *English Vinglish*, the daughter's embarrassment about her mother's inability to speak English can therefore be understood as a manifestation of broader social pressures and identity struggles.

Furthermore, feminist film scholars emphasize that narratives of female empowerment often involve reclaiming self-respect and agency within domestic spaces (Butler, 2004). Rather than rejecting family roles, such narratives reconfigure them in ways that affirm women's dignity and individuality.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative thematic analysis to examine the narrative structure and character development in *English Vinglish*. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for exploring patterns of meaning within cultural texts such as films (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis focuses on three primary themes:

- Representation of maternal identity and domestic invisibility
- Child psychology and adolescent perception of parental identity
- Transformation through self-learning and empowerment

Key scenes from the film are analyzed to identify how dialogue, character interactions, and narrative progression contribute to the portrayal of maternal empowerment and changing family dynamics.

Analysis

To examine the evolving dynamics between maternal identity and child psychology, key scenes from English Vinglish were analysed thematically. The following table identifies significant narrative moments and interprets them in relation to psychological and socio-cultural frameworks.

Scene / Narrative Moment	Description of the Scene	Psychological / Social Theme	Analytical Interpretation
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Breakfast Table Scene (Early in the Film)	Shashi prepares breakfast for the family. Her husband and daughter casually mock her inability to speak English. Sapna expresses embarrassment about her mother.	Domestic invisibility; language hierarchy; adolescent peer pressure.	The scene establishes the emotional environment of the household where Shashi's domestic labour is normalized but not valued. English operates as a symbolic marker of intelligence and social prestige. Sapna's embarrassment reflects adolescent identity formation where social validation becomes more important than familial empathy.
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Restaurant Scene	Shashi visits a café alone and struggles to order food due to her inability to communicate in English. She feels humiliated when the cashier becomes impatient.	Linguistic insecurity; self-esteem; public embarrassment.	This moment marks Shashi's internal realization of her perceived inadequacy. The public setting amplifies the psychological impact of linguistic marginalization. The scene demonstrates how language functions as social power and how exclusion from dominant language structures affects self-worth.
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Decision to Join English Class	During her stay in New York, Shashi secretly enrolls in a spoken English course.	Self-efficacy; personal agency	This decision signifies the beginning of Shashi's empowerment. Rather than confronting her family directly, she initiates self-improvement. According to Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, this moment reflects the belief that personal effort can lead to change.
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English Class Interaction	Shashi meets classmates from diverse countries who are also struggling with English. They support and encourage one another.	Social learning; community support; intercultural solidarity.	The classroom functions as a democratic learning space where linguistic mistakes are normalized. Unlike her family environment, this space affirms Shashi's dignity and allows her identity to develop beyond the domestic role of "mother."
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Conversation with Laurent	Laurent appreciates Shashi's cooking and respects her personality. His admiration contrasts sharply with the lack of appreciation she receives at home.	Recognition and emotional validation.	This interaction emphasizes how validation can reshape self-perception. Laurent's respect allows Shashi to see her own worth beyond linguistic competence, reinforcing the theme that identity is multifaceted.
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Sapna's Continued Embarrassment	Even after Shashi begins improving herself, Sapna continues to treat her dismissively.	Adolescent social anxiety; identity formation	Sapna's behaviour illustrates how adolescents internalize social hierarchies. Her reaction reflects Erikson's stage of identity vs. role confusion, where teenagers prioritize peer acceptance over familial bonds.
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Wedding Speech Scene	Shashi delivers a speech in English at the wedding, emphasizing the importance of love and mutual respect in relationships.	Maternal empowerment; emotional articulation.	The speech represents the culmination of Shashi's personal transformation. Rather than confronting her family with resentment, she communicates dignity and emotional wisdom. The scene symbolically reverses the earlier power dynamics related to language.
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Sapna's Emotional Realization	Sapna becomes visibly moved and begins to see her mother with admiration and respect.	Cognitive maturity; generational learning.	The daughter's transformation
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highlights how children often reinterpret parental identity as they gain emotional maturity. Recognition replaces embarrassment, demonstrating the impact of visible self-growth on familial perception.

The scene-based analysis reveals a clear narrative trajectory—from domestic marginalization to recognition and respect. Through these carefully structured moments, the film constructs empowerment not as confrontation but as self-realization, thereby redefining maternal identity within contemporary Indian cinema

Maternal Identity and Domestic Invisibility

At the beginning of the film, Shashi is portrayed as a devoted homemaker whose life revolves around caring for her family. She prepares meals, manages household responsibilities, and runs a small home-based business making laddoos. Despite her dedication, her work receives little recognition from her family members.

Her husband Satish often dismisses her concerns with casual sarcasm, while her daughter Sapna openly expresses embarrassment about her mother's inability to speak English. These interactions reflect what sociologists describe as the "invisible labor" of domestic work (Hochschild, 1989). Although Shashi's contributions sustain the family's daily life, they are undervalued because they occur within the private sphere.

The film subtly exposes how language becomes a tool of hierarchy within the household. English functions not merely as a communication skill but as a symbol of modernity and intellectual competence. Shashi's inability to speak English therefore becomes equated with incompetence, despite her entrepreneurial abilities and emotional intelligence.

This dynamic illustrates how cultural perceptions of language can reinforce gender inequalities. Women who remain confined to domestic spaces often lack access to educational opportunities, which further entrenches their marginalization within family structures.

Child Psychology and the Daughter's Perspective

One of the most compelling aspects of the film is its portrayal of the psychological relationship between Shashi and her daughter Sapna. Sapna's dismissive attitude toward her mother initially appears cruel; however, when examined through the lens of adolescent psychology, her behavior reflects deeper social influences.

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation and social status (Steinberg, 2014). During this period, teenagers often seek to align themselves with socially valued traits in order to gain acceptance within peer groups.

In Sapna's case, English fluency represents cultural capital and social prestige. Her embarrassment about her mother's inability to speak English stems from the fear of being judged by her peers. This reflects the internalization of societal hierarchies that equate English proficiency with intelligence and sophistication.

The film portrays several scenes in which Sapna distances herself from her mother in public settings. These moments highlight the tension between familial affection and social conformity. Sapna does not inherently dislike her mother; rather, she struggles to reconcile her love for her mother with the expectations imposed by her social environment.

This dynamic illustrates how children's attitudes toward parents can be shaped by broader cultural values. The daughter's mockery is not merely personal but reflective of a society that equates language with worth.

The Journey of Self-Transformation

The turning point in the film occurs when Shashi travels to New York for her niece's wedding and secretly enrolls in an English-speaking course. This decision marks the beginning of her journey toward self-discovery and empowerment.

The classroom becomes a transformative space where Shashi encounters individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who share similar struggles with language and identity. Unlike her family environment, the classroom provides a supportive community where mistakes are accepted and growth is encouraged.

Through this experience, Shashi gradually gains confidence in her abilities. More importantly, she begins to recognize her own worth independent of external validation. Her transformation demonstrates that empowerment often begins with self-recognition rather than social approval.

From a psychological perspective, this process aligns with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). As Shashi successfully navigates new linguistic and social challenges, her sense of self-efficacy increases.

Transformation in Family Perception

Shashi's personal growth eventually leads to a shift in how her family perceives her. The most significant moment occurs during the wedding speech, where Shashi speaks in English and articulates the importance of mutual respect within relationships.

The speech is not merely a demonstration of linguistic competence but a declaration of self-worth. Shashi emphasizes that love and respect are essential for any relationship to flourish. This message resonates deeply with her family members, particularly Sapna.

The daughter's reaction marks the culmination of the psychological transformation explored throughout the film. Sapna begins to see her mother not as an embarrassment but as a person deserving admiration and respect.

This shift reflects a process of generational learning. As children mature, they often develop a deeper understanding of their parents' sacrifices and strengths. In English Vinglish, this realization is triggered by Shashi's visible self-transformation.

Maternal Empowerment in Contemporary Cinema

The narrative of English Vinglish represents a significant departure from traditional portrayals of motherhood in Hindi cinema. Rather than presenting the mother as a static figure of sacrifice, the film portrays her as an evolving individual capable of personal growth.

Importantly, Shashi's empowerment does not involve rejecting her family or abandoning her domestic role. Instead, it involves redefining her identity within those roles. She remains a mother and homemaker, but she also becomes a confident individual who commands respect.

This portrayal challenges the assumption that empowerment must necessarily involve rejecting traditional roles. Instead, the film suggests that dignity and self-respect can coexist with familial responsibilities.

Such representations are crucial in reshaping cultural narratives about motherhood. By portraying mothers as individuals with aspirations and agency, cinema can contribute to broader societal recognition of women's contributions and identities.

Conclusion

English Vinglish offers a nuanced exploration of maternal empowerment and child psychology within the context of a modern Indian middle-class family. Through the character of Shashi Godbole, the film highlights the emotional and psychological consequences of undervaluing domestic labor and linguistic ability.

The daughter's transformation from mockery to recognition illustrates how adolescent attitudes toward parents are shaped by social pressures and cultural hierarchies. At the same time, the film demonstrates that personal growth and self-confidence can challenge these perceptions and foster deeper familial respect.

By combining themes of language, identity, and empowerment, English Vinglish redefines cinematic representations of motherhood. The film ultimately suggests that dignity and self-worth are not determined by societal standards but by the courage to recognize one's own value.

Such narratives play an important role in expanding the cultural imagination surrounding motherhood, encouraging audiences to view mothers not merely as caregivers but as individuals with evolving identities and aspirations.

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