



The Spectators: Mothers, Child Artists and Reality Television

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the parental (mothers) intents behind the child artists participation in reality shows. I argue that the concept of successful mothering is rooted deep into social conditioning to an extent that a child's screen presence is considered rewarding by the mother. This autoethnographic paper is written using Guy Debord's (1967/ 2002) concept of the Spectacle and utilises the Spectacle's unique social function of manufacturing alienation to understand the conscious and unconscious choices the mothers had chosen for their children. This paper intends to illuminate the truth behind the believed concept of mothering by the mothers of the child artist who had participated in various Tamil reality shows. The study is curated with a turn towards the narrative inquiry and also enhances the flow of narration with my personal experiences using mixed methods of self-reflexive writing from personal interviews and memory work.

Keywords: Spectacle, Alienation, Child artists, Reality television, Autoethnography, Mothering.

Introduction

This paper seeks to understand why mothers show keen interest in raising their child as a child artist. By bringing into the discussion, the roles performed by the mothers in the production sets, I intend to analyse the influence of mothers on their children participating in Tamil reality television. It is also essential that I bring to the reader's attention that this paper does not debate the roles and responsibilities carried out by mothers. Neither does it discuss childbearing or the unconditional love of a mother. I seek to theorise the effects of motherhood on the child artists with Debord's notion of the Spectacle. It is not the invincibility that I wanted to bring front. However, the socially constructed and capitalist triggered spectacle of motherhood that has, in turn, manufactured victims in the names of child artists. As I centralised my research interest around the child artist, this paper in specific may suffer impediments inclined to my perspectives on their mothers. Moreover, I clampdown the research by staying away from the feminist approach as it was deviating from my orientation towards the child artists. My central research was done around the lives of 40+ child artists and their parents, whom I had met and worked with since 2011 through various reality shows.

The unsettling child labour issue in today's reality television industry has never been a subject for silent authorship. The havoc creating concern requires a qualitative approach that kindles the consciousness of the reader. Hence, approaching the subject as an autoethnographer allowed me to express the impact my research subjects created on me. Autoethnography humanises the research objective by allowing the researcher to emote. This approach normalises bias. Encourages exhibiting the researcher's feelings and authenticates self-reflection (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). This research process involved more than the few hours of interviews that I conducted with the child artists and their mothers. It required an amalgamation of previous experiences and events that I had personally witnessed during my decade long work as an Assistant and Associate Director in the reality television industry (2011-2020). Therefore, methods of memory work and self-reflection along with in-depth interviews were used as sources of information.

Personal Narrative as a methodological foundation

I intend to lay this research paper out in the form of a short story narration. It is also a fact that story and narration are two terms that suffer negligence in the field of social sciences. However, the truth is that the field of humanities and social sciences, especially the field of communication, has long established itself as a discipline interested in studying meaning in narratives, and autoethnography is a primary means through which human stories are explored (Bochner, 1994; Fisher, 1987). Autoethnographers value narrative truth based on a story of experience – how it is used, understood, and responded to, for and by us and others as writers, participants, audiences, and humans (Bochner, 1994; Denzin, 1997). Personal narratives and storytelling together open a different dimension to knowing and investigating the lived experiences of individuals and of exploring subjectivity. Autoethnographers often write using a first-person voice or point of view, positioning the researcher as the narrator of the story (Buzard, 1999; Bochner, 2012).

My narrative knowledge was created and constructed through the stories of my lived experience and sense-making, the meanings people afford contribute to the dynamic insights into the complexity of child artists and their mother's lives, cultures, and behaviours. By involving one's own life experience and the voice in narrating it, the personal narrative can be called self-narratives and first-person narrations. With self-narratives, I involve looking back at the past through the lens of the present (Bochner, 2000). As a first-person narrator, I invite readers to put themselves inside the action and in the minds, hearts, and bodies of the stories I tell (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015). While the personal narrative and autoethnography go hand-in-hand, Boylorn and Orbe (2014) define autoethnography as cultural analysis through the personal narrative that allows us to capture the rich data within stories, including, for example, giving insight into feelings, beliefs, images and time. "Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative... narrative is international, trans-historical, transcultural: it is simple there, like life itself." (Barthes & Heath, 1977, p.79).

Reality television: Changing landscape in Tamil television

Many reasons are being cited to explain the changing landscape of television industry. The impact of streaming content on audiences is tremendous and is said to be creating unfavourable political conditions and therefore unpleasant tastes among audiences. While at the same time, scholars like Miller (2010), critique the contemporary belief of "outdated television" by calling

those statements thin and sparse. I concur with Miller (2010) and Sun television in Tamilnadu has been leading the race for over two decades now. A report by Kotak Institutional Equities (2018) confirmed that the Sun Network's viewership share has declined in Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam markets. Star Vijay and Zee Tamil are making substantial gains, according to a report in *The Hindu* (Naig, 2018). These channels have claimed that their market share has increased by 10%. The rise of popularity of Star Vijay and Zee Tamil indicates that the market is competitive, further implying that the television industry is doing astoundingly well. The emergence of new players is attributed more than partly to reality shows. Krishnan Kutty, the General Manager of Star Vijay says that the launch of the Bigg Boss has fundamentally changed the channel increasing its market share by 10%. Siju Prabhakar, Cluster Head of Zee Entertainment Enterprises Limited said that Zee Tamil now has seen an increase of 15% in the market share in the last two and a half years and is now at 20% reach. With innovations and new changes to the contemporary genres, both channels are producing reality shows in tight schedules resulting in the rise in TRP.

I worked in the reality television industry for over a decade as an Assistant Director in reality shows that involved children. My production house boss used to say that “children are our best selling products” and “using child artists would carry our show to family audiences”. The constant involvement of children in the spotlight had always been intriguing. Though I have auditioned and worked with many kids, I kept missing to recognize the childhood factor in them. The absence of leisure and the dissolving effect of innocence was an unsettling factor that led me to rethinking about childhood.

Childhood is not universal

Childhood exists as a space in which culture, identity, and significance are repeatedly and overtly stamped onto children in order to recover them from, or to reiterate, their otherness (Woodson, 2004, p. 32).

When there are so many contradictory experiences of child artists from different socio-economic classes of the society, there are a set of judgmental conceptions that I had strongly believed. I have thought more about how the childhood needs to be protected from the exploiters and I always strongly believed in the need to protect child artists from alienation and prohibit child labour engaged by the reality television industry. But I haven't critically understood why children were treated in a specific manner (as an earning member by parents, as a commodity by the entertainment industry, as an entertainment object by the public), which is against their childhood. To analyse the alternative perceptions of childhood and to understand that “childhood is not universal” as Woodson (2004, p. 31) says, the notions of many authors and scholars such as Aries (1962), Winnicott (1964), Stone (1997), Woodson (2004), and Holland (2004) were needed to enlighten the trajectory of the concept of childhood. Understanding the evolution of the concept of childhood in-turn helped me to gain better understanding of the existence of childhood as a specific space in the lives of the child artists.

Childhood, as a concept has been extensively debated. Katz had mentioned childhood “as separate life stage, as itself internally segmented, as a reservoir of memory and fantasy, and as always mobile – ‘becoming’ defines its limits” (2008, p. 7). But, unfortunately the childhood of the child artists had never been efficiently subjected to scrutiny. In the process of understanding the childhood of a child artist, decoding parenting (especially mothering) was an indispensable need. This paper is an outcome of commiserating with the mothers of the child artists.

Alienated Mothers and Victimised Children

Mothers play a central role in the growth trajectory of most child artists in reality television programmes. Every child artist's story (from what I have seen and heard through my experiences and from their interviews) had a solid emotional chapter revolving around their mothers (except for two cases that involved both the parents). Child artists perhaps are not aware of the family's aspirations and expectations that propel it to keep their wards going and performing in reality shows. High expectations from mothers, fulfilling mother's unfulfilled dreams, helping mother gain recognition from the outside world that she is capable of bringing up the most successful child, keeping up the family's status, making the single mother proud, helping to build the broken family, solving debts and poverty, helping the father to construct his long-dreamt house, and helping the elder sister get married - are the main reasons behind their participation in the reality shows. The performance of the child artists is marked by creativity that bleeds into labour, freewill and agency lumped together with imposition. Interest and passion for dance were the most minimal reasons I heard from the kids. I could think of only two children, who genuinely admitted that it was purely their interest in the art form that led them here – but, when I insisted on the reason behind their participation repeatedly, out of the two, one admitted that,

It is true that I love to dance but did not want to compromise on my school and friends. Moreover, I do not like my choreographer and the dance partner I am dancing with now. However, amma (mother) said that if I won this competition, we could move out of the old house we live in and go to a new house. So, I decided to adjust and win this competition for her.

He was naive and adorable as he casually expressed his part of the explanation for staying in this music reality show. I was cautious not to question anything negative about his parents. The boy showed so much love and responsibility toward helping his family (especially the mother) to attain better living standards. For a second, I thought, “how blessed the mother should be to get such a kind-hearted child?” However, my reflexive mind popped up with a few other questions: how cursed is the child to bear the family burden on his shoulders at this age? Isn't this an expression of dark emotions with depression? Can't the mother wait till he completes his education? Isn't the mother, filling in for the family, little unkind in getting her family's life settled through a young child? Is reality television the only way to solve the family's miseries? Even if their house is in the worst condition, can't the mother patiently wait till the kid grows? A house to live in is a basic necessity. However, is being greedy to buy a luxurious house at the cost of a child, right? Is not the mother expecting too much from a hardly grown child?

Many studies (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Bromfield & DeGregoria, 2012) claim that there are multiple entities to be blamed for involving child artists in the reality television industry, including (i) the entertainment industry and (ii) public viewers who contribute toward child participation and (iii) the parents. However, the first entity is predominantly discussed and studied unanimously, with partial attention on the second. Furthermore, scant research has been done on the third entity - parents. The criticism on parents for involving their children in the entertainment industry needs to be focused and engaged with on a broader and deeper perspective. Especially the mother and child relationship needs immense attention to develop a better understanding of what influences the child to transform into a child labour/artist. Winnicott (1964) said:

I once risked the remark that there is no such thing as a baby, meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you describe a baby and someone. A baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship.

A significant number of studies have been done on how high good parenting standards influence women's affective family outcomes and general well-being (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). However, few studies focus on the effects of mothering and the social pressure of a perfect mother on a growing child artist, especially in the Indian context.

Aligning with Riessman's (1993, 2008) comprehension of narrative as stories which are subject-specific, for this study, I employed a narrative framework of storytelling to exhibit the unacknowledged and complex truths. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) say, autoethnographers who use storytelling usually "shows the readers everything and tells them nothing... showing is experience-near, while telling is experience-distant (p. 112). In the following pages, I narrate a few examples (in a mini-story extract format) from my experience and interviews that would help us understand the mothers and their personal experiences regarding their children who are child artists.

Story 1: The Boastful Mother

மங்கலம் என்ப மனைமாட்சி மற்று அதன்

நன்கலம் நன்மக்கட் பேறு" (குறள் எண்: 60).

It was an unexpected quote made by the mother of an eight-year-old boy who was a finalist in the music reality show. She quoted this couplet from Thirukkural which defines that the utmost duty of a woman is to be a dutiful house wife and acquire the best gift of having children. The quote translates as "A woman's housewifely excellence, they say, is a blessing and begetting good children is an embellishment to the excellence" (Couplet 60). The moment I had asked her to begin talking about her son and his career in reality television, she abruptly, in an instance, began reciting the couplet. Without having a choice, I had to control my unsettling feministic voice inside from bursting out loud on the patriarchal conditions that she has been enduring and glamourizing with. Before I could relate the saying to my purpose of the interview, she casually, promptly added to her explanation by saying, "Having a child does not elevate our highness, but having an intellectual and knowledgeable child does". Moreover, as I could gather some words to ask her to be more casual in her vocabulary, she started reciting again:

ஈன்ற பொழுதின் பெரிதுவக்கும் தன்மகனைச்

சான்றோன் எனக்கேட்ட தாய்" (குறள் எண்: 69).

This means, "A mother who hears her son being called the best of intellectuals by others will be happier than when she gave birth to him". Saranya was the proud mother of the music reality show winner Saran (Names changed to protect identity), aged 12 years. She kept mentioning her son as a 'peyar sollum pillai' (referring to the child who keeps his parents proud) over seven times during the whole fifty minutes interview. The clarity in her voice, the confidence she had when she expressed her thoughts, and the quotes she used left me astounded. I kept trying to determine if she had written a script and memorised the dialogues for this interview. Keeping in mind that I had informed Saranya about the interview only by late morning, she hardly had any time to prepare for the interview as she was absorbed in getting her son ready for the shot on the set.

Nevertheless, the mother sounded too artificial in many places (or at least my mind kept telling me so). Yet, I chose to shake myself out of the improbable judgments I was getting into. I knew that interviews need a solid bridge of trust that needs to be a two-way process between the interviewer and the interviewee. IWhen I managed to borrow Saran's mother (in-between) for the interview yanking her away from her son's busy schedule of shoot happening in Prasad

studio, it was almost a quarter past the scheduled interview time. I conducted the interview in the make-up rooms, fortunately, I had access to. I informed the production manager that was occupying one of the rooms and asked the security not to disturb us for an hour. Though I convinced myself to accept her as she is and started understanding her and her prejudice about her son, I could not convince her to lower her voice for my interview. Her pride and confidence in her voice were likely to bring all the securities in the corridor to my make-up room doorstep. With rehearsals happening next door and shooting happening at a 100 m distance, I tried hard to bring the well-educated, city grown, and modern woman's voice to the tolerable decibel level and continued my interview. I understood from her dramatic interview that the child was an invaluable asset to the mother.

Moreover, the mother is a product of society's Spectacle. Despite my repeated questioning, she would only express her perspective of the child's transformation into a child artist and never get to know the child's real plight. Though I felt that these quotes were an outcome of a high-level drama from the proud and prejudiced mother, I realised how much these competitions and winning meant to that mother when I saw her eyes enlarge with honour as she was expressing her son's talent and the way he has made her feel at this young age.

Story 2: The Single Mother and Her Alienation

We live in a society that considers motherhood as the only identity a woman should be bound to. A woman's worth depends upon how successful her marriage is and how accomplished her child is. Living as an Indian woman, I could relate to the myths and beliefs of attaining womanhood and motherhood in the traditional family's societal norms. As a thirty-one-year-old south Indian woman, the stupidest question that I have been bombarded with is: "Don't you think you should at least get married now? How will you give birth after thirty? The optimum function of a woman's body has to be utilised at the right time. You will need your baby to cling to; life gets boring otherwise. You will find the essence of your life when you get to grow a child." Mothering is considered a divine qualification to attain completeness in womanhood, and intensive mothering is a dominant ideology of how to raise a child appropriately (Gordon, 1994; Green, 2009); O'Reilly, 2010). Moreover, I see the production of multiple child artists as one of the effects of these dominant ideologies and an extension of societal impressions on one's womanhood and motherhood.

Kavitha is currently 25 years old and is a popular upcoming (heroine who has done two movies) artist in the Tamil television and film industry. She has 1.8 M followers (as of 28th March 2022) on her Instagram account. She is paid around 30,000 for online promotion of brands and up to 50,000/- for a television shooting per day, and her market value for private events and advertisements is between one to two lakhs (1,00,000/-2,00,000) INR. When I was travelling to meet her, I remembered how she used to request our crew members ten years back for the shooting allowance of two thousand rupees and how she has self-developed herself into an independent star today. I would not do justice to this story without telling how Kavitha got introduced to me. When I first met her in 2011 in the second level of auditions for a famous dance reality show in Chennai, she was a timid little girl with a childish smile and a prominent bindi on her face. I always remembered her as the time-consuming curly-haired girl. She used to take a lot of time to get ready for her performance, and I would literally be pushing her from behind, chasing her out of the make-up room until the last minute of her performance. When other female child participants had their mothers get them dressed, Kavitha would be the only one getting ready all by herself. Those were the times that I was worried, not that she did not

have elders to help her out, but for the fact that she was going to put my situation in danger by not getting ready on time. More than the punctuality, it was the aesthetic sense that she failed at. She was miserable in presenting herself the right way. I remember my director asking me to teach Kavitha and a few other girl participants to dress up for an on-camera appearance.

Coming back to the day of the interview (in 2021), which is after a solid ten years from seeing her, it was a nostalgic experience filled with guilt and amusement with added inquisitiveness. I was glad that the naive girl who participated in my show had made it up to the big screen – at the same time, I was guilty of not helping the same single parent girl back then when she kept nagging me for further chances in television. However, when I met her, she was happy, and she even recollected how she got inspired by my advice on grooming her physical appearance for on-screen performances. She looked the same except for a few extreme changes in her face and body. She has undergone some facial surgeries and has toned up her body to stay sellable in the movie market. However, I could still see a grown-up young beautiful girl sitting in front of me with unhealed bruises from her childhood. Before I started the interview, we had a small chat about each other's professional developments, workplaces and families. But when I asked her about her sick mother, her voice instantly sobered down, just like how it had happened during the shoots back then. We had a 'relationship-round' back then in the reality show Kavitha participated in. Even after making it compulsory for the parents to attend the shoot, it was just Kavitha's mother who could not attend. Instead, she had brought her aunt. I remember seeing the same dull face when asked about her mother's absence. However, she did not want to reveal the reason back then, and today she did. With so much agony and rage, she narrated the story of her journey as a child artist that led her to the current heroine status and the struggles she faced with a dysfunctional family, which gave her sleepless nights and a solid better reason to chase her goals.

Just because she left her husband four months after her wedding, I was born a fatherless girl. Moreover, just because I was a fatherless 'girl' child, I was not allowed to play with toys, run outdoors, deck myself up for weddings, wear new clothes, laugh out loud, to spend on my favourite food.

After discovering that her newly wedded husband is an alcoholic and a violent abuser, her mother left him during her early stage of marriage. That was also the initial stage of her pregnancy. The mother, who had the clarity to leave behind an alcoholic husband, failed to have the confidence to raise this beautiful girl child. She feared society. The mother was mentally and socially devastated after her separation. Kavitha was seen as a burden. The only good thing was that she did not attempt to join Kavitha in an orphanage home because she had a big reputed family backing her up. However, even with all the backup, her mother fell prey to societal alienation. Apart from the fact that the society kept her alienated, the mother built iron walls around her and her daughter, trying to maintain self-alienation. The mother's alienation rule was utterly insane and meaningless to the daughter. The helpless daughter was deprived of many things in her life. However, learning classical dance was a breather in her strenuous childhood days.

I learnt classical dance because it was her childhood dream. I grew my hair long because she could not. I wore the Bharathanatyam³ costume and all those antique pieces of jewellery because it was her fantasy. When I wanted to play games – I was forced to attend dance classes, and finally, when I started dwelling well on the art form, I was asked to quit.

She was asked to quit the classes after attaining puberty. When she resisted her mother's rules, the mother bluntly said, "A fatherless girl who has attended her puberty is not to be allowed for any type of dance classes. Society would talk ill. Un dance paithiyathai mootta katti parana mela podu (meaning it is time to wind up your craze on dance)". Kavitha said:

She did not stop me from my classes; she made sure that I never danced again. She forced me to return all my dance costumes and jewellery to my dance teacher. She ensured to erase my desire to dance.

All these obstacles the mother enforced made the child more adamant and rebellious. She found her way to resume her dancing. However, this time she experimented with folk and western dances.

Her imposition of society on me was the reason behind my adamant nature to pursue dance as my career. The more she wanted to keep me away from dance, the more I got attached to the art. The more she wanted me to abide by her stereotypical societal norms, the more did I break them.

And this led her to attend the reality show auditions without the family's knowledge at the beginning of 2011. Though the kid grew more assertive with her desires, she always kept lamenting for love.

I understood that pampering was forbidden for me, but the painful part was that my mother punished me by abandoning the fundamental love that any child would expect from her mother. Though she was born into a well-to-do family and my uncle (mother's brother) was ready to help her in all ways, she punished herself and me for living without a father.

She also added her reasons for hating men and marriage.

Just because she did not live a happy married life, She keeps telling me that her dream is to see me get married, have children and be a dutiful/respectful housewife living a happy married life with my partner.

Story 3: Being the Mother of a Differently abled Child Artist

This is an extract from the interview of a differently-abled (visually impaired), 13 years old child artist's mother:

My relatives would usually avoid inviting me to their family functions and weddings. Even if we are invited (in rare cases), it would be less than warm hospitality from my husband's side. My son and I were seen as a misfortune to the family. Any gatherings that we attended; we would always be left alone. Occasionally, when other ladies sit together to gossip after lunch or dinner, I would be deliberately ignored among them because my son and I would be the reason behind the buzz. Initially, I used to eavesdrop on their whispers; their heartless talks about my son would leave a stinging pain in me for several days after that. One such incident drove me to decide that we were worth the gossip, but the topic of discussion should be our success story and not my son's disability.

Story 4: An Alienated Daughter Turning into an Alienated Mother

Twelve-year-old Vivek's mother, Mrs. Shanthi, is an entrepreneur who runs her cosmetic business and takes care of her husband's organic provision shop. The entire channel team knew that Vivek's mother was one of the brave, supportive and independent moms who predominantly took a significant role in his success story. Expecting a different story from Mrs Shanthi, I asked her about the reasons behind her spending maximum time with her son in all his possible

endeavours. Moreover, unexpectedly, she replied with her childhood story:

For as much as I could remember, I would say that I was a child who had not been loved. I still assume that my parents expected a boy baby to keep their pride and honour high, but I was born a girl. I had always felt (instead made to feel) unfortunate, unlucky and undeserving for any good things to happen in my life. I had no family relations of love and intimacy. My teenage dream was to get married, move away from my parents, give birth to a child, and nurture him. I wanted to provide him in abundance with everything that I was deprived of. After marriage, when I could not conceive due to health issues, my depression increased. Fear of loneliness took a gigantic space in my life. Vivek was a blessing – he was a boon to all the hardship I faced. The day I gave birth to him, I decided that I would take care of him like a King. Moreover, till today I am keeping up my promise. And will keep it that way even if he gets married.

Story 5: Maladi to Mahalakshmi

He turned my identity from Maladi to Mahalakshmi⁴. He elevated my womanhood. His birth was my breakthrough. He is my second life.

These were the words of the mother of ten-year-old Harish. I maintained silence in order to let her tell her own story uninterrupted. Expressing her vulnerable past and trying to gather her confidence, after a few seconds of silence, wiping her tears, she brought herself to questioning “What else can a mother ask for?” Continuing her narrative, she said:

The word *putra dosham*⁵ is still a disastrous word to hear. It creates a tsunami effect in me. For eight years, I had suffered from *putra dosham*. My husband and I had longed enough to attain the gift of god. We did all kinds of *pariharam*⁶ and stepped inside all the possible temples with prayers for *santhana bhagyam*⁷. After eight years, we had him. Harish is a god gifted child. Harish is a blessing to us.

According to the mother, her child was a product of the divine intervention. He was meant to be extraordinary in all walks of life. She says that he was destined to be world-famous according to his astrological readings and that she already knew the heights of success he would reach even before he entered the journey of the music reality show. For all the curses that she received from society, she sees her child as an answer to that period of struggle. She says, “to all those who gave pain in my life – I reply to them with my son’s achievements – my son is the answer to all those who hurt me”.

Is Mothering a Result of Active Spectatorship?

As Hays (1996, p. 19) mentions, “Images of children, child-rearing, and motherhood do not spring from nature, nor are they random. They are socially constructed”. Moreover, these socially constructed ideas carry a systematic and strategic connection to the culture and the spectators who believe and play a vital role in viewing the images of representation. The spectacle and the dominion of the mass represented reality puts forth a wide spectrum of interpreting the complex yearning and yielding of the mothers for and towards fame, success and power. For Debord (2014/ 1967), the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes image. Here the social production of being a successful mother superimposes itself on the commodity of producing a child prodigy. The mere existence of the mother-child bond had turned into a set of societal representations influenced by the mediated images of motherhood and actively implemented under the pretext of mothering. Debord notes that under these conditions the relations among people are mediated by images so that the material social practices of creative transformation and even being alive become representations, almost inaccessible except through appearances, images, and the construction of events (Katz, 2008, p. 8).

When attaining motherhood is considered the central purpose of feminine identity and is seen as the most significant role played in one's life (Gillespie, 2003; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Middleton, 2006), there is no wonder that the women I met in the production set considered mothering to be their life's ultimate goal (that exclusively fits in the story of Saran's mother). A female's life purpose is often assumed regarding women's identities as mothers due to the solid social expectations surrounding women's maternal responsibility (Arendell 2000; Mcquillan et al., 2008; Palgi-Hecker 2005). Witnessing the kind of oppression that Harish's mother (Story 5) went through and the effect it had on her, it was reiterating that as women in India, we are all still raised with the idea that the very essence of womanhood/motherhood is that we are the most important parent in the child's life and that our role is primarily that of mothering and everything else comes next.

Eventually, the suppressed emotions caused due to the spectacles (like in the case of Vivek's mother) turn into rage and spite about unresolved things in the self, are split off and denied deep inside and are then projected onto others (primarily through their children). This often obscures the plight of alienated mothers and obfuscates the reality of their lived experience. There have been several studies that illustrate the adverse affective reactions experienced by mothers in an attempt to respond to the demands of being a perfect mother that entail increased stress and feelings of guilt (Borelli et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2016; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2009). Moreover, the stress and guilt created by the spectacle, in turn, results in imposing high standards on the child artist affecting their mental and physical health.

These mothers hold themselves to impossible standards of goodness and love resulting in high expectations from their children. Enslaved to the societal demands of being a super mom, the mothers paved the path for their younger ones leading them into the trap of instant stardom, extreme exposure and unstable identities. They also entrust a never-ending productivity quest to their child, leading them into stressful lives and leaving no time for the child's leisure activities. I see this reality show participation as a quick fix and an instant fame solution developed by the capitalist system intended to help the mothers (parents) to escape from the reality that already exists. Milly Williamson (2016) argues that the market logic is so compelling that the focus of reality TV shows and celebrity culture of ordinary people is on capitalist consumption and competition. Ingrained in the market logic are child artists who are being groomed to be competitive and consumable by mothers. While mothers are not on display, the trophies achieved by participating and winning the show are a temporary band-aid for the mothers to heal society's wounds. They are invisible spectacles illuminating their children in limelight.

With the societal pressure (society of spectacle) to prove that they are the ideal wives and super moms, many mothers (keeping in mind the mothers in stories 3 and 4) assume that their primary responsibility is not only to care for their children but to make them stars and achieve multiple things even before they get to terms with reality. Some children are never allowed to lie back and enjoy even when they are toddlers. They lose a great deal and may altogether miss the feeling that they want to live (Winicott, 1964, p. 28). It is also to be noted that child performers coping with pushy parents can suffer several long-term effects, including depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders.

The death of the psychologically healthy child by suffocation with the mother's own unresolved needs is what we often see in child artists. Death of the psychologically healthy child occurs in most cases due to the past or present alienated experiences that the mothers face in different stages of their lives which can be understood better if seen in Debord's perspective of Spectacle. The spectacle here should be understood as the images that drove the mothers towards being

(so-called) successful moms. We can see the perception of i) Kavitha's mother accepting the societal image of a divorcee, ii) Vivek's mother's memory from childhood as an unloved child, iii) Hari's mother responding to the 'maladi' identity that her friends and relatives tagged her with, iv) the societal status of being the mother of a differently-abled child and umpteen other mothers' lives as spectacles. The tangible spectacle is the one that television wants the parents to believe in, whereas the society reflects the intangible through various mediations. One can be seen as an accumulated form of capital that turns into a collective image, and in turn, this image of representation functions as the spectacle. This spectacle keeps the mothers under a successful block of illusions and continues to control them. It is essential here to understand that spectacle and alienation are interconnected.

As Debord rightly describes in his 32nd Thesis, after all, "the spectacle's social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation" (Debord, 2014/ 1967, p.11). Moreover, the primary source of alienation is produced from the thick layer of collective images (spectacle) of motherhood bulleted into the minds of mothers, beneath which is buried the unattainable reality. This is where the mothers turn into a commodity - immaterial labour working towards the invisible capitalist contingencies. A commodity is a dominant product of spectacle. Spectacle produces more commodity by increasing the commodity fetishism among the spectators and favours the capitalists.

I perceive motherhood as the labour and the reality television producers as the capitalist who indirectly exploit the societal pressure of being a perfect mother. She is inserted into a productivity continuum that demands she toiled for the success of her children. In this circuit, reality television shows emerges as a capitalist mode of production that exploits her productivity. The object that labour (motherhood) produces is the bond and love between the mother and child. Unfortunately, this product of labour is commercialised and privately appropriated by the capitalistic media organisations by taking advantage of the existing societal beliefs that the mothers bluntly follow. With the acceptance of what Marx (1932/ 1844) noted, "the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer", I would also add that in many cases of reality television, the object that labour produces and its product is dependent on the producer too. However, as a partial outcome of this collaboration, the non-consensual victims are the child artists left stranded by the exploiters.

The relationship of the mother and child portrayed in reality television is not completely real but is a blend of partial commercialisation and reality. Moreover, the expressed bond I denote with labour is not meant to satisfy just the need of labourers; on a higher proportion, it satisfies the need of those who own, hire, control and buy labour-power to create surplus value. It is essential to understand that the labour here is quite tricky in such a relationship. Labour is not just plain labour that it is portrayed to be, but multi-layered labour coated with commercial intensions from both the media and parent capitalists. In all the above-discussed stories, it is evident that the capitalistic entity has successfully captured and hijacked the consciousness of the parent.

The idea of motherhood operates as a kind of collective projection, an imaginary order that shapes our perspective of the kind of person a mother ought to be. There are different layers of alienation that functions in these specific cases. With the impact of the social world upon them – they struggle to identify themselves – their self-consciousness evaporates in the process of rebuilding themselves. They seem to have eventually lost all of their previous identities and social ties. They have successfully uprooted themselves from the real world that had taunted them earlier and have placed the separated self in the unreal world. Primarily, the

alienation exists in their personal life that has led them to seek fame and instant prosperity in reality television. Secondly reality television here functions as the capital and produces more alienation to keep them under its control.

Finally, it is an alienated product themselves – the mothers contribute towards alienating their children. As a continuing effect, the mothers who are the product of alienation try to alienate other mothers who do not fall into the image they are living with. We should understand that the spectacles work so that the spectators would never pose a challenge to the capital at any cost. Instead, they stay separated and unconsciously contribute towards staying diverted. This is similar to how the status of a celebrity mother is held high and used to isolate and demean the other mothers by branding them as “normal”.

Parting Reflections

Understanding spectacle, particularly in the case of the child artist's mothers, should be considered significant and critical because I see that it plays a significant role in convincing the parent to turn into a spectator herself. Bringing together two different kinds of capital to understand its effects on motherhood, we can see one being the societal images of mothering that is believed to bring wholeness to womanhood and the other capital being that of the reality television that the parents (are compelled to) believe in (which promises to manufacture child prodigies). Moreover, both seem to neglect the child's consent. It is never a matter of concern for the parents who either keep their children in control or know how to convince them. That creates an unequal balance between the child artist and the television programme producers and parents. When the subject is a child, the imbalance is even more significant due to the child's inherent status as subservient to adults. Reality television shows can be both physically and emotionally draining for children as they are expected to exhibit and express their talents, knowledge, behaviour and hard work beyond their actual capacity. There is pressure on child artists to develop resilience or face rejection. They are expected to be adult-like. Defetishisation being the only solution, as Debord (2014/ 1967) says, the child artists and their parents need to understand and be aware that they are only being used for the rating of a television channel and the fame earned through their participation is only temporary and un-guaranteed. It is essential to realise that the stardom of being a celebrity (which is the fictional representation of reality) is just an illusion and makes a severe rupture in the minds of children who do not know how to handle it.

As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain necessary. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep (Debord, 2014/ 1967, p.11).

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

1Thirukkural: is famously called as the General Gospel of Social Truth. Written by Thiruvalluvar, this text is considered the most significant and ancient literature of the South India. The philosopher through his couplets communicates profoundly about values of life, humanity, savings, co-existence in three main categories namely Dharma (Aram), Governance (Porul), and Kama (Inbam).

2 Prasad Studio: L.V. Prasad Studio is one of the popular and oldest studios in Chennai that is busily occupied by shooting through-out the year. The Tamil film and television industry uses their floors for various shooting purposes. There are few floors that are hired on lease basis too.

3Bindhi: An Ornamental dot traditionally worn majorly by Hindu women in the middle of the forehead or between the eyebrows, made of coloured paste or in sticker forms. Bindhi has religious and social significance in different cultures including indicating marital statuses.

4 Maladi to Mahalakshmi: Maladi is a colloquial term used to represent and humiliate a woman who couldn't bear a child. Mahalakshmi is the name of a Hindu Goddess who is believed to be the mother of prosperity. In regional cultures in India, they use this term to denote to the married woman who bring luck, life and charm into the families.

5 Puthra Dosham: is an astrological term that is used to describe a form of sin that is carried forward from the previous lives of the married couple or from their ancestors that reflects in not being able to give birth to a child.

6 Pariharam: is an astrological (Sanskrit) term meaning solution. The astrologers after reading the horoscopes of individuals and after analysing the sins or karmas of which they are experiencing hardships, suggest possible solutions to rectify their wrong doings and by doing it is believed that they clean themselves and reap the fruit that was denied earlier.

7 Santhana Bhagyam: is a term used in astrology denoting the boon of giving birth to a child. Santhanam refers to a new birth that is meant to keep up the legacy of the family. Bhagyam is a word that refers to divine boon.

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