

VICTIM OR FIGHTER; A DIVE INTO REPRESENTATION OF GENDERED VIOLENCE IN INDIAN MOVIES.

Anaan Fathima E S

II year Double Main English and History Student, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda.

Corresponding author: anaanfathimaes@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Cinematic representation of gendered violence has been a vast area of interest for many scholars. Gender violence, understood as harmful acts directed at individuals on the basis of gender, functions as a mechanism of power and control that systematically denies victims their fundamental rights. In a patriarchal power structure, women are most vulnerable to such forms of violence. In the Indian context, domestic violence emerges as the most pervasive form of gendered violence. Studies underscore how women, by virtue of their gender, are subjected to violence that manifests both physically and psychologically. In representations of gendered violence, women are depicted as objects upon whom anger, aggression and frustration are enacted. This paper intends to explore the nature of such representations of gendered violence in Indian cinema to understand how films participate in normalizing, critiquing, or resisting gendered violence within society.

In this paper, reviewing two Indian movies *Darlings* (2022) and *Parched* (2015), I intend to question the various ways in which violence against women is portrayed and question its authenticity and the nature of its representation. Jasmeet K. Reen's *Darlings*, portrays the emotional nuances of domestic violence. Badru, the protagonist, is subjected to physical, and psychological violence. Her husband serves as a symbol of patriarchy, not just attacking Badru, but imposing his power and control over other women as well through manipulation or aggression. In *Parched*, four women in rural Rajasthan are shown to go through different yet similar forms of violence. Lajjo, Rani, Janaki and Bijli signify how women endure and resist the every-day forms of violence directed at them. This paper enquires how the representation of gender violence normalises, critiques or subverts such forms of violence. The paper also intends to argue that such portrayals not only foregrounds women's sufferings but also explores their modes of resistance in order to counter-narrative to gendered violence.

Keywords: *Gendered Violence, Power, Control, Patriarchy.*

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

INTRODUCTION

Gender is a social construct defined as the roles, behaviors, norms, and expectations associated with being a man, woman, or other gender are created and reinforced by society, rather than being solely determined by biology. Various Feminist and Queer Scholars emphasize that gender is not a fixed biological attribute. One's gender shapes identity, structuring relationships, inequalities and institutions. Gender, in its positive sense, displays an absolute sense of self-identity. But there are two sides to a coin. This one concept of gender can bring out all sorts of actions and reactions from

people in communities. Those may be shrunk into reactions like judgement and authority, but could be stretched as far as to straight up violence.

This is where the Term “Gendered Violence”’s cue to arrive is. According to *UNICEF*, “gender-based violence (GBV) is used to describe any harmful act perpetrated against a person based on socially ascribed/gender differences between males and females. It includes acts of causing physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, or threats of such acts, and other deprivations of liberty”. In kindergarten terms, violence caused against a particular gender be it mental or physical. It is often articulated in the sense that mental harm is dismissed off as not being a nature of gendered violence.

Another concept that must be delved into is the most common form of violence seen everywhere. The sole 'act' of being a woman gets you not so far, sometimes. Being a woman is faced with horrors and despicable acts of different forms of violence degreeding from tolerable to intolerable. But the meaning of 'tolerating' in this sense, is hard to define as nobody on this earth was thrown in to tolerate anything due to their gender. The reason why women suffer the most from this sort of violence is rooted in many of the historical, social, cultural, and structural power imbalances.

Patriarchy is one of the utmost causes for this. In families and homes, men usually hold power and authority over women due to the imbalance in their gender, seeing women as “lesser” or “dependent” which in turn makes them very much vulnerable to abuse and violence. The desire to control and hold power is also another reason. Some ideologies are rooted in history as well, shaping later thinking about women and the violence against them. Like *Aristotle* spoke “The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled” giving out the assumption that women are always to be ruled, dominated and to never let astray with power. And that this power must always be within the reach of men. These root causes gradually wind down into the rabbit hole of normalizing such mindsets and acts as a license to violate women.

Different theories tell specific tales of this concept of gender violence. Feminists argue that this form of violence is completely rooted in concepts like patriarchy and unequal distributions of power. And these acts are shown through the usage of violence to maintain a certain control over women. Sociologists examine how social institutions such as religion or family often normalise and let this behaviour be tolerated. It is also seen how religion and culture intersect with gender to create more violence. Looking into the behaviour of the attackers or perpetrators, some may find psychological reasons why a person would use violence against a woman. It may be of mental, or personality related causes. Certain cases may show causes like trauma or even mental conditions. This can also be connected to observance of character from family members or communities, seeing it as accepted behaviour. These actions may be normalized into what shapes the next generation. As mentioned earlier, gender violence cannot just be explained by gender alone—intersecting it with caste, religion, race and culture makes it even more harsh. A lot of postcolonial and historical concepts also shaped gender violence. Such as traditions and globalizations— they influence forms of brutality.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate how gendered violence is portrayed in Indian cinema, this study uses a qualitative research methodology based on textual and thematic analysis. The study focuses on two chosen films, *Parched* (2015), directed by Leena Yadav, and *Darlings* (2022), directed by Jasmeet K. Reen. These films are examined as cultural texts that represent social realities and power dynamics.

These films were chosen because they directly address issues of female agency, patriarchy, domestic abuse, and resistance in starkly different urban and rural settings. The representation of gendered violence in India's various sociocultural contexts can be examined thanks to this comparative method.

Feminist theory, in particular viewpoints that see gendered violence as a result of patriarchal power dynamics and social normalisation, informs the analysis. Characterisation, narrative structure, visual imagery, and dialogue are all interpreted analytically using concepts like power, control, objectification, and resistance. In order to analyse how violence against women is depicted, justified, contested, or subverted in the films, close reading of significant scenes, character arcs, and narrative developments is used. Studies on gender-based violence and feminist scholarship are examples of secondary sources that are used to contextualise the analysis and bolster critical interpretations.

The study aims to comprehend how Indian cinema contributes to the reinforcement or resistance of prevailing narratives about gendered violence and women's agency through the use of this qualitative and comparative framework.

ANALYSIS

Movies are a reflection of what usually happens in real life. Representation of societal issues on screen is an excellent way to start shaming and denormalizing such behaviours. Likewise, films have been portraying these brutalities consistently and controversially during the rise of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. Even though not explicit, Indian movies like *Mother India* (1957) have similar themes like exploitation and suffering. Another important fact to notice is the way these victims are shown to counter the attacks. Many early victims are shown to endure and suffer in silence, while others accept it as "fate". Dependence on a male character to "save" them and end them of their suffering displayed the assumption that the woman's role was to be saved, casually undermining empowerment. Previous movies signified these women to be "naive" and "innocent" characters, opposing the idea of strong bold characters. Even if these unafraid characters were to be shown, they would eventually end up being "punished" by the society. Later on, there has been a drastic change in these displays. Issues have been shown more explicitly, contradicting the actions of the attackers. Moreover, mental harm has also been portrayed in the way it needs to be portrayed. Most times, mentally attacking a woman was seen as comic relief or the "life after marriage". Women in these cases are shown to be manipulated and gaslighted by their partners, dismissing the actions in the name of love and care. Like it is said in the study, *Bollywood as a Site of Resistance: Women and Agency in Indian Popular Culture* (2023) By Sheetal Yadav and Smita Jha, "In recent years, there has been a growing trend of Bollywood films depicting women claiming their sexuality in a transformed and empowered way", women are shown to proudly step out of the closed shutters, embracing their sexuality as women rather than enduring brutalities. Popular films

like *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) further explain this change in track.

The major turning point of women understanding their capacity and value are also shown quite frequently in Indian cinemas. Certain incidents provoke these women to fight for justice against the assaults aimed at them. These acts of defense are usually repelled by societal customs.

In this paper, I analyze two films *Darlings* (2022) and *Parched* (2015) to explore the varied forms of gender-based violence inflicted on women and the ways in which they assert resistance.

Darlings is a 2022 Hindi comedy thriller movie directed by Jasmeet K. Reen.

The movie stars Alia Bhatt, Shefali Shah, Vijay Varma, and Roshan Mathew as the prominent characters. The story revolves around a woman, Badru, who is trapped in a marriage with her abusive husband, Hamza. Following many incidents, the main plot is the plans of Badru and her mother to take revenge on her manipulative husband.

Alia Bhatt's character portrays a trapped woman enduring abuse in the name of love or fear. The movie plays an important visual for topics like patriarchy, domestic violence, and resistance. The recurring cycle of hope is shown in the movie as well. Hamza shows so much love to Badru every morning, just to switch every time he's drunk or angry. This cycle gives Badru a hope that her husband might change, like in a scene where she files a complaint against him just to deny it later on. Vijay Varma plays a character that embodies toxic masculinity, control, and entitlement, which is clearly shown in scenes where he comes home and attacks Badru for reasons that don't fall on her head. Another significant fact shown is the mother daughter bond to plot on the husband. Their bond shows inter-generational resilience, to which we later find out that Shefali Shah's character had also been abused by her husband, when Badru was just an infant. Most importantly the movie shows a transition from victim to fighter as Badru realises that whatever she has gone through is affecting not just her, but her miscarried child.

Parched is a 2015 Hindi drama movie directed by Leena Yadav.

The main cast includes Radhika Apte, Tannishtha Chatterjee, Surveen Chawla, and Adil Hussain. The film is set in a rural village in Rajasthan and follows the intertwined lives of four women suffering from different types of oppression and violence.

Parched is deeply symbolic, and like *Darlings*, it's about gendered oppression—but in a more rural setting where gender roles are rigid and violence is ignored. Characters like Bijli, Lajjo, Rani and Janaki represent the different forms of gendered violence women go through. Bijli, portrayed as a sex worker/ dancer is loved by all the men of the village. Yet, she is constantly judged by the community, but is very unapologetic about her choices. Bijli, is a prime example of objectification of women. In various scenes, she is only seen as eye candy invalidating her feelings and rights as a person. But she also seems to symbolize freedom, which is exclusive to the 'respectable' abused women in the movie. Lajjo, a woman being constantly accused of being infertile by her husband, suffers from both mental and physical abuse. In the movie, she is shown to still explore her sexuality as a woman, perhaps being attracted to females, but not confirmed at all. She lives her life trying to figure out her wrongs which caused her 'infertility'. Bijli, being the educated among the 4 soul sisters, sparks a question about the infertility coming from Lajjo's husband rather than herself. Rani,

the woman playing the widow character is shown to have been abused by her husband. The film also shows her being invisibly harassed and objectified by an anonymous caller. She was only trying to find a bride for her aggressive son, Gulab. The youngest and most vulnerable of the 4 women is Janaki, a 15 year old girl forcibly married to Gulab who is 17 years old. She already had a first love back in her village, but as women didn't have the freedom to have choices, that was out of the question. Janaki suffers through marital rape by her husband. The film in general shows a variety of societal issues women undergo such as child marriage, abuse, marital rape etc. As cited in Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist*, "In the patriarchal perspective, rape is a fate worse than death; there is no normal life possible for the raped woman; the way to avoid rape is to lock women up at home, within the family, under patriarchal controls", but there is a big speck of problem when women are not even safe at home either due to non consensual sexual practices or abuse.

Common themes in both the films are abuse and sexual assault due to the characters' gender. Being a woman in the two visuals, they suffer violations from men to which no one bats an eye to. Implying that the concept of men being dominant and having complete control and power over women is normal.

Resistance in both movies comes in various forms. Some reactions are similar; Badru and Lajjo are where they reach this breaking point in their suffering. Both of their protests come from the motherly instinct or in better words, fertility. Badru, gets enlightened when she has a miscarriage after Hamza pushes her down the stairs. Likewise, Lajjo counters her husband for abusing her even after she gets pregnant. These two women signify a turning point in the lives urging them to fight back.

Another parallel to be found in these movies is the concept of womanhood. Badru is helped by her own mother to fight back and finally call out freedom from her husband's reign of terror while the 4 women set out to find true happiness in themselves by assisting each other. The women's journey from enduring such sufferings to escaping signifies resilience and liberation from everything, claiming the right to live on their own terms. Their laughter, chats and secrets signify hope.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the representation of gendered violence in *Darlings* (2022) and *Parched* (2015) goes beyond the mere showcasing of women's suffering to a more complex meaning with power, resistance, and agency. While *Darlings* emphasizes the psychological and emotional parts of domestic violence within an urban context, *Parched* sets gendered oppression within rural traditions. Together, these films reveal how Indian cinema can both reproduce and challenge patriarchal ideologies. By critically examining the intersections of vulnerability and resilience, the movies resist the normalization of violence against women and stress counter-narratives that emphasize individuality and independence. The analysis highlights the potential of cinema not only as a cultural text reflecting deep rooted gender divisions but also as a metamorphic way that questions, critiques, and reimagines social realities.

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