

BLOOMING OF PHOOL AND PUSHA RANI/JAYA: SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN *Laapataa Ladies*

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ABSTRACT

Bollywood occasionally touches on the themes of feminism and women empowerment. But when it does, the film's societal commentary and compelling plot makes it an absolute gem. *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), directed by Kiran Rao, though not a blockbuster in theatres, received accolades from critics and audience with its OTT release. The swapped identities of two newly wedded brides and the ensuing chaos deftly weave the plot of the story, navigating the complexities of gender roles and social conformations. The epiphany of the female characters to flee from the labyrinth of patriarchal paradox can be interpreted through the lens of Self-Actualization Theory propounded by Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist. This Humanist Theory, explores the five different steps involved on realising one's complete potential to actualise themselves for the personal growth. The female protagonists and their self-realisation in *Laapataa Ladies* unwind the societal and cultural pressure to fit in.

Keywords: Laapata Ladies, Gender roles, Humanist Psychology, Abraham Maslow, Self-Actualisation Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Laapataa Ladies, an adaptation of Biplab Goswami's story 'Two Brides', is directed by Kiran Rao under Aamir Khan Productions. It deviates itself from the conventional mainstream

Bollywood flicks with its gripping story line and exemplary casting. Set in the rural village of Soorajmukhi, the movie revolves around two female characters, Phool and Jay/Pushpa Rani who have been mistakenly swapped places by their husbands on a local train. The patriarchal prohibition to unveil bride's face and calling out husband's name exacerbate the scene. Phool is lost in a station where she befriends Manju Ma who provides her shelter and food. Jay deliberately masks her identity under the name of Pusha Rani with a wrong residential address. Her existence at Phool's husband Pankaj's home is shrouded in mystery until it is discovered that she conceals her identity in order to pursue her goal of becoming an expert in organic farming. Though the ladies are missing (*Laapataa*), the voyage aids them to recognise their potential for personal growth. Abraham Maslow's Theory of Self Actualization can be applied to explore the psyche of the female characters to substantiate the way in which they assert themselves. Abraham Maslow, the American Psychologist, in *A Theory of Human Motivation* postulates five conditions for a person to grow and actualize themselves. Arranged in a hierarchical pyramid, these conditions include physiological need, safety needs, the love needs, the esteem needs and the need for self-actualisation. The characters delve into each hierarchical need to reach the pinnacle of their self-discovery.

OBJECTIVES

- * To analyse the role of patriarchal ideologies in putting women in a tug-of-war between conformity and self-autonomy.
- * To inquire the cultural pressure in inculcating gender biases.
- * To explore the psyche of female characters evolving and developing in each step of Abraham Maslow's Self-Actualization Theory so as to demonstrate the women empowerment through the lens of Humanist Psychology.
- * To assert the importance of film as a cultural medium to question the patriarchal practices, the emblematic obstructions to the betterment of female existence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Laapataa Ladies movie review by Baradwaj Rangan in the channel Galatta Plus, delves deep into the technical and thematic discussion on the film. The video appreciates the adept and subtle portrayal of the sensitive themes of Indian womanhood, the perfect cast and excellent cinematography.

B. Geetha's article, *(Un)concealing the Comedy: The Cinematic Aesthetics of Veiling in Laapataa Ladies*, explores the satirical undertones of portraying gendered proscriptions, patriarchal rigidity and identity politics. She inquires the symbolism of veiling and unveiling, the dynamics of truth and deception. The veil, whether red or black, moves beyond the mere symbolism of oppression. *A Theory of Human Motivation*, published by Abraham Maslow, explicates the five level needs required for the

personal growth of human beings. Starting from the basic physiological needs, humans climb the further levels of emotional needs and safety needs to achieve the apex of self-actualization. This school of psychology believes in the goodness of human beings and their inmost ability to reach the self-accomplishment.

Psychological Bases of Education by Dr. N. K. Arjun is a comprehensive book on Educational Psychology. Under the umbrella term of motivation, the author discusses the Hierarchy of Motives discussed by Maslow in a lucid way. The graphical representation of the motive ladder in the book provides a coherent understanding of the Self-Actualization Theory of Abraham Maslow.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed paper has been proceeded with an analytical inquiry to explore the tenets of Maslow's Self Actualization Theory in the movie *Laapataa Ladies*. The odyssey of the female protagonists through each stratum of self-fulfilment is scrutinised through the theoretical lens of the Hierarchy of Motives. Phool and Pushpa Rani/Jaya achieve the zenith of self-actualization by

gradually proceeding from the basics of physiological needs. Besides the textual analysis of the primary text, i.e., *Laapataa Ladies*, supplementary information are procured from the secondary resources of articles and YouTube videos.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Phool and Jaya masked under the name Pushpa Rani, traverse through the rungs of hierarchy of needs propounded by Abraham Maslow. Both have realised their true potential only after their basic needs have been met. The actualized self of the protagonists in the climax can be

interpreted in the light of Maslow's theory.

1. Physiological Needs

As Dr. A. K. Arjunan puts, physiological needs include need for oxygen, water, food, sleep rest and sex

(464). Here in case of Phool, she is left alone in an unknown station at night as her identity has been swapped by Jaya cladded in same red saree and face veil. She spends the night at the ladies' toilet without food and water even after a long exhausting train journey. When she is provided with a bread pakoda, she eats it ravenously to mitigate her physiological hunger drive (*Laapataa Ladies* 00:35:39-00:35:49). She is also provided shelter to repose by Chotu, later by Manju Mai. The perplexity of being caught in such a chaos is slowly relieved by meeting the basic physiological need of Phool. Though being a stranger to the Deepak family, Jaya is also given food and board, alleviating the initial bafflement.

2. Safety Needs

According to Maslow, If the physiological needs are relatively well gratified, there then emerges a new set of needs, which we may categorize roughly as the safety needs (376). The absence of danger is quintessential need to move further towards the personal growth. Phool begins to experience a safety environment at Manju Mai's residence, as Jaya safely finds her shelter in Deepak's home from her callous husband.

3. Belongingness and Love Need

This includes needs to have friends, to loved and accepted by other people, need for affiliation and to belong to a network of social relation (Arjunan 464). Phool makes her bond strong with Manju Mai, Chotu and Abdul. She feels to

be loved and stars to belong. While, Jaya also begins to be accepted by Deepak family when she befriends his mother, Babhi Poonam and his friend Gunjan. Jaya's sister solidarity with Poonam and blossomed silent romance with Gunjan gratify the third need proposed by Maslow.

4. The Esteem Needs

By firmly based self-esteem, we mean the which is soundly based upon real capacity achievement and respect from others (Maslow 381). It includes attention, recognition and appreciation from others. Phool receives accolades from Manju Mai for preparing the sweet *Kalakand* and making it a big hit in the stall. Even the customers eulogise the sweet first class (*Laapataa Ladies* 1:03:32). Manju Mai even rewards her with some amount saying mehnat ka paisa he (it's the money for your hardwork (*Laapataa Ladies*, my trans. 1:28:40). Phool's need for high self esteem is gratified while Jaya receives acknowledgement from Poonam and Gunjan for her profound expertise in organic farming. Though she does not want to unveil her identity as Pushpa Rani, the appreciations could have re-kindled the desire within her to pursue her studies.

5. The Need for Self-Actualization

Here, the individuals actualize themselves and recognise their true potential for personal growth. What a man can be, he must be (382), says Maslow. Phool's assertion to find a work in her conjugal life, her removal of face veil and calling her husband by name contrary to the traditional patriarchal strictures account for her self-actualization. Though knuckles under the authority of fate in-between, Jaya finds the conducive soil for the gratification of self

actualization and boards tarin to Dehradun to continue her studies.

CONCLUSION

Self-Actualization is an unveiling process of hidden potentials buried deep within the innermost recesses of human psyche. By dismantling the traditional custom of unveiling the face before public, the female protagonists of the movie, *Laapataa Ladies*, uncover their hidden potentials and reaches the apex of self-actualization. Their journeys run in a parallel track, showcasing the myriad steps involved in reaching the pinnacle of self- discovery. Abraham Maslow's theory of Self-Actualization substantiates their reel- life story, making the movie an ever-best portrayal of empowered womanhood.

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