

**FROM NEGATIVE TO GENERATIVE PARADIGM: TRACING THE TRANSITORY EDIFICE  
OF WIDOWHOOD IN HINDI CINEMA****Dr. Simran Preet Kaur***Assistant Professor**Department of English**Shri Siddhivinayak Mahila Mahavidyalay, Karvenagar, Pune-52.**Email Id: [simranpreetsmvdu@gmail.com](mailto:simranpreetsmvdu@gmail.com)***Abstracts**

*Contemplating over the deprived section of the society, the vision that confronts the mental horizon is the picture of an oppressed widow whose image disrupts the picture of glorious womanhood. This side of womankind is seen as lacking autonomy as well as the capacity to make decisions for her. Dwelling into the celluloid portrayals, widowhood marks a transition and is seen as heading towards ‘new’ ideological or visual horizons. The focus is now on “individual women and their personal choices to reinforce those fundamental societal changes” (Genz and Brabon 14).*

*The study hinges upon these neo-liberal values of post-feminist portrayal of female choice and individuality in Hindi Cinema as providing a pathway to understand the emotional complexities of young widows and as a hope for moving the conscience of the new generation of the Indian society. Exploring the celebratory and optimistic portrayal of widows in Hindi movies, the research emphasizes on the shift in the female power that denies victimization and vulnerability suggesting that women have the power for self-definition; they simply need to explore it. Thus, the paper analyses the protagonists in search for wholeness, dignity, and a positive social image. Such a representation can be seen as a strong critique of existing practices before the concept of widowhood is obliterated- almost a declaration that indicts the society oppressing its widows.*

**Key Words:** *Widowhood; Hindi Cinema; Post-feminism; Choice; Individuality.*

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**Introduction**

The notion of gender identity as immutable has prompted a renewed focus on the rethinking issues pertaining to the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Since its inception, Hindi cinema has portrayed women as marginalized identities defined within the domain of patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks, struggling to break free from the shackles of ideological stereotypes which denied their self-hood and identity. Being visualized as ideal mothers, submissive housewives or widows or dependent daughters or as immoral prostitutes, cabaret dancers

and strippers; cinema in its early phase has emphasized upon women as having slightest importance. Within the domain of Hindi cinema, the notions of male gaze and spectatorship have ever since assisted in passive display of female bodies, fetishism, voyeurism, and the successful subordination of the female to the male gaze. Films, ostensibly, celebrate women's eroticism while reducing her to a passive sex-object.

Feminist approach to Hindi cinema began in 1980s with the writings of Maithili Rao, the first film critic in the country who consistently focused upon the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Analysing the portrayal of women in cinema, Rao in "Images of Women" claims that Indian cinema is, "so driven by its phallogocentrism that its heroes inevitably acquire longer than life dimension with the archetypal overtones. The heroine is strait jacketed into a chaste wife, like the mythical Sita-Savitri. Her suffering makes her only more virtuous. She is a nurturing mother either self-effacing or an avenging demon, Durga/Kali or a titillating seductress oozing as a vampish character." ("To be" 241)

The making and presentation of Hindi cinema and the extent to which Hindi filmmakers have been able to stir up the man-woman relationship depends upon the cultural ethos of the Indian society and its myriad manifestations. Even though Hindi cinema has been churning out stereotype image of gender relations and showing mother-in-law or a sister-in-law as a bully, who are all inadvertently perpetrating patriarchy in a way, yet Indian cinema has always emphasized on depicting the evil in darker light. Interestingly, the ethos and tradition of Indian society has always been evolving and so is its portrayal in films. Although, Indian cinema is a rich repertoire of traditional values and keeps reinventing the socio-cultural ambiance of patriarchy in its films but there does exist a transition in the recent decades wherein female performers have been breaking as well as perpetuating the stereotypes of masculine and feminine, making themselves an emblem of both the set of emotions. The recent integrated approaches mark a shift from the focus on equality towards the focus on difference. The focus now is no longer on the "Althusserian Marxism" or the "Lacanian psychoanalysis" origin of feminist film theory but on female individualism, choice and empowerment. Imelda Whelehan in *Modern feminist thought* (1995) vehemently negates the focus on equality when she states that "to be able to include difference in feminism, it is better to work with a removal of oppression instead of trying to create equality" (138).

Nevertheless, contemporary movies reflect the inherent multiplicity within the seemingly homogeneous category of Indian femininity being projected ever since. Diverging from gender tyranny, the present paper traces the shift from negative objectification of females towards generative subjectification which here implies a supplement rather than replacement of the gender norms undertaken during the process of subject formation. This reconceptualization of agency in Hindi cinema has been examined from perspective of Feminist Film Theory affirming that gender identity is not immutable and can be challenged.

The most pronounced effect of reconfiguring gender can be seen through the transformation of women identity because of the restructuring of gender relations that it has arguably initiated. Renewed forms of autonomy and reflexivity as critical awareness of oneself have emerged which no longer take into consideration the dichotomy between male domination and female subordination. This is to say that the contemporary cinema offers an account of rethinking representation in terms of subverting the theories of patriarchy, consequently, proposing an emancipatory reflection of identity devoid of stereotypical impositions. The conception of identity as free from



confinements has been aptly highlighted by Lois McNay in *Gender and Agency* where she avers, “the concept of agency has been through the idea of embodiment which yields a more open conception of gender identity as a lived set of embodied potentialities, rather than as an externally imposed set of constraining norms.” (31)

This idea denotes that body as a transitional entity, is dynamic and mutable threshold where individual’s experiences are realized but its incorporation is not certain. This is because of the divergence between the psychological interior and corporal exterior where each is constitutive but irreducible. The lack of adhesiveness between the two suggests that gender identity is never straightforward rather a dynamic whole. The embodied subject, although, is constituted through dominant norms but is not reducible to them. In the echo of this, Butler’s idea of “performativity” can help understand the delusion of considering gender as a quasi-permanent structure. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests a move beyond the representation of gender as a one-sided phenomenon of imposition and opposes “... those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were ... false or derivative, and others, true and original (viii)”. If gender is “performative”, as argued by Butler, then individuals can perform alternate roles. This is what celluloid females in the recent decades have been doing; performing different roles at different interval of times. Refuting the age old notions of “damsel in distress”, “angel in the house”, etc., the female protagonists have made the choice of how to be rather than what to be. Constituting an ongoing laboratory attack on the gender binaries, they have forged a new way of defining women portrayal as being heroic, thereby, creating a dynamically altered social milieu in which females are exposed to alternative, transgressive and ultimately liberatory ways to perform gender of their own choice.

Highlighting the dynamic representations of self-discovery, celluloid females have created a consistent and coherent identity, contributing in the formation of a more nuanced concept of agency. This change which dominates much thought on identity suggests that all gender performances are equally authentic or inauthentic be it performed by a male or a female. Moreover, this constitutes a move, away from females as victim images towards females as active agents, having individuality of their own, which is the main emphasis of the research conducted.

### **Literature Review**

A Succinct overview of literature survey highlights that studies conducted on Hindi cinema have been on tracing the historical and thematic background, the epic tradition in Indian Cinema, the stereotypical portrayal of women, the Marxist perspective suggesting it to be a site of ideological production, the postcolonial perspective that suggests it to be a subject to the three forms of interruptions- censorship, regulations and intervals in form of song and dance sequences and so on. All these remain a subject of debate amongst the feminist scholars and researchers. However, the portrayal of postfeminist celluloid females as protagonists has not been much debated and researched. So, there is a need for the present study examines female agency as a celebratory projection of autonomy, individuality and choice.

Gaping the hole, the present paper-

- Examines the female agency as emancipatory remodeling of individual identity in the select Hindi movies
- Explores the celebratory projection of autonomy, individuality and choice with specific reference to representation of Widowhood in cinema

### Research Objective

- To understand the concept of agency as a lived set of embodied potentialities rather than an externally imposed set of constraining norms
- To probe into how cinematic representations override the cultural content and constitute an ongoing attack on gender binaries, forging a liberatory way of performance of their own choice.
- To trace the emergence of Celluloid females as active agents, free from the omnipresent, authoritative male presence.
- To challenge the male monopoly of power and aggression and analyze a growing trend that positively asserts female free will as a route towards transition.

### Research Methodology

The present study is theoretical, critical and analytical in its nature. From the theoretical perspective, the study is based on following theoretical assumptions –

a) Feminism and Feminist Film Theory, focusing on the on-screen portrayal of women,

Highlighting the portrayal of females in the movies, Molly Haskell's implication is that movies are an imitation of society, producing the ideological and social construct of woman as a virgin who is revered and as a whore who is reviled. The image is delimited to mother, wife or a whore. Laura Mulvey argues that cinema is one-dimensional and identifies with the male vantage point, denying the female spectator. Voyeurism and fetishism encourage the male gaze, retaining woman to a passive position. This notion of woman as object and a homogenous species is also put forth by Shoma Chatterjee as she highlights that patriarchal culture never exposes the extent of female subjugation.

Claire Johnston asserts that women are treated as 'Signs' that ideologically reflect her identity in relation to men and are portrayed as not man. Likewise, Maithili Rao also avers how myth as a kind of normative paradigm acts as a surface layer beneath which lies the production and circulation of women's image in society. Mary Ann Doane's highlights the root cause behind women's passive role is her association with negative connotations like masochism, paranoia, hysteria and narcissism. These processes give no significance to her individual desire and "the desire to desire seems to be the only option for her". Conversely, she offers a possibility of escaping the textual manifestation of patriarchal power and advocates that female characters can maintain a distance between oneself and the represented self by wearing femininity as a masquerade.

Anneke Smelik traces the notions of difference and individual identity that have become a part of film discourse in the recent years and have altered the traditional customs of visualized portrayals which "reflected the figure of man as twice its natural size", leading to woman's image as deformed and miniature. Further, Indubala Singh impinges upon the need for meaningful cinema that is committed to "progressive social goals and not just conceived for disengaging the spectator from his pre-designated location".

In the spirit of situating female portrayal in Hindi cinema, the study outlines how they have evolved in diversified ways. Subjectification here implies construction of self by "performing gender", as Butler highlights; so that gender can be reconfigured and restructured. Challenging the male monopoly, these representations are a hybrid of masculine and feminine traits, projecting what Judith Halberstam's calls Female Masculinity thereby, creating

an account of generative subjectification that focuses upon the notion of Lois McNay's Agency. Nevertheless, the research also takes into consideration, the notions of Ariel Levy's Female Chauvinist Pigs and Angela McRobbie's Double Entanglement, highlighting that there exists a difference between being liberated and being exploited and argues that sexual freedom in select movies endorses false empowerment.

### **Celluloid Females in Hindi Cinema: Tracing the Transition**

Hindi cinema has ever been embedded with a lot many connotations and denotations, be it the symbols ascribed in image, sign with signifier and signified or portrayals with cultural meanings attached to them. Early phase of Hindi cinema represented women identity in connection to the traditional values and sustained in accordance to what patriarchy demanded. Her stereotypical image has been illustrated by Maithili Rao as she avers, "The Heroine is strait jacketed into a chaste wife, like the mythical Sita-Savitri. Her Suffering makes her more virtuous. She is a nurturing mother either self-effacing or an avenging demon, Durga/Kali or a titillating seductress oozing as a vampish character." Further, cinema did not give much space to its women characters, suggesting their pivotal task in society- sexual subordination and economic dependence. Women did not reflect change in self but the changing times; the traditional roles which were there in the past continued to be prevalent in the present also. Majority of the women characters still abound to the archetypal mother, maiden and mistress.

In each era, women were ascribed vast number of roles, it is impossible to categorize one decade under one theme. Accordingly, there has been four major swings that celluloid women underwent from the emergence of Bollywood till date.

- The shift from ever ideal mothers, submissive housewives or dependent widows towards independent singletons;
- The increasing move from domestic chores towards corporate world;
- The blurring lines between the vamp and the main protagonist;
- The osmosis of female heroines into the action realm;

Delimiting the study to the recent decade, the research analyses the transition in the representation of widows from being submissive, fragile and docile creatures towards the one that projects interconnection between desire, sexuality, freedom and the right to the body. The movies like *Dor*, *Pagglait* reflect how widows in media are presented as active subjects who choose to present themselves the way they desire because it suits their liberated interests to do so. This shift from the external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze generates freedom amongst women and assists in improving the plight of women in Indian society. The representation of women in such films encourages social change in the treatment of women in Indian society, which is very much patriarchal. The selected movies provide and articulate alternatives by focusing on difference, anti-essentialism and hybridism, pleading for female sexual pleasure and choice, re-evaluating the tension that existed between femininity and feminism and rejecting body politics by defining the body as key signifier for women's identities.

### **Breaking the Margins, Shaking the Slumbers: Widows in *Dor* and *Pagglait***

Indian cinema revolves around heroism, desires, aspirations, and conflicts of men relegating women as mere spectacles in the movies. Women exist only in relation to men as their mothers, wives and lovers. Very few movies revolve around a single woman, acting independently, questioning authority, defying societal norms and making

her own decisions. The movie *Dor* (2006) and *Pagglait* (2021) represents such celebratory and optimistic facets of woman's image where she refuses to bow down. These movies represent the transition in the female power that denies victimization and vulnerability suggestion that women have the power for self-definition; they simply need to explore it. The protagonists in both the movies lead their lives in the brave new world not trammled by rigid ideology, thereby, providing a pertinent model of female power for other women, a route to follow which shall lead into a new direction.

The movie *Dor* is about two women whose lives are inextricably woven through circumstances. The protagonist Zeenat and Meera reflect the countering notions of 'power feminism' and 'victim feminism', the terms referred by Naomi Wolf in *Fire with Fire* (1993). Zeenat, an epitome of power feminism is a self-defining and self-assertive character whereas Meera, a widow, as a victim feminist seeks power through an identity of powerlessness. The image of Meera reflects the idea that women need an important obstacle to overcome which is their belief in their own victimization. Her character in the movie stresses upon the evils done to widows in a patriarchal society. With the help of Zeenat, she claims to the equality entitled to her through Zeenat's shared strength rather than her own shared vulnerability and pain. In the climax, power feminism replaces victim feminism.

Likewise, in *Pagglait*, the protagonist Sandhya's life shatters five months after her marriage as her husband dies. Both the families relegate her as a 'pitiable' object of the society since there are complex factors at work- however much one tries to erase the ideology, the notion of widowhood is very much there especially in the social memory. Further, Patriarchal ideology is at its most aggressive pitch when they ask her to remarry merely for their own personal motifs. To quote from the movie, her father-in-law claims, "If Sandhya wants, she can remarry... in that case the money stays within the family" (my own translation). Her inheritance from her husband remains within the family which is common across cultures as it deprives women of their inheritance rights.

As a counter to the image of an unhappy widow, Sandhya is the one claiming her individuality and choice in such a stereotypically laden society. She can be seen as a widow with no signs of bereavement. To quote from the movie, there are several incidents wherein she is seen as deviating from the image of being a widow, for instance, she asks her mother-in-law that she won't have tea but would like to have Pepsi instead. In conversation with her friend, she shares an anecdote of her childhood when her pet died. Conversely, she doesn't feel any tragedy at present as she remarks, "I don't feel like that at all. I don't feel like crying and also I feel hungry all the time" (my own translation). Further, her counterpart, Akanksha, an independent working woman is introduced in the movie not only to set a contrast but to pave a route for Sandhya to break the shackles, transcend the notion of being 'damsel in distress' and assert her own autonomy.

Likewise, Meera in *Dor* is portrayed as a 'victim of tradition' possessing some desires which are being ignored by the society. If a woman loses her husband, she is deprived of her average living conditions and benefits of worldly desired. A widow irrespective of age must follow religious and social sanctions such as to discard colourful clothes, glass bangles, flowers and even good food. As soon as Meera's world crumbles, she is disrobed from the vibrant, exuberant life and is thrust behind the deep blue widow's garb. This establishing scene clearly depicts how widows are alienated and forcibly sent to a place which is restricted from much social contact, privileges and community involvement. Uma Chakravati in "Gender, Caste and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of

Widowhood” remarks, “Widows are symbolically constructed as socially dead” (64).

The social and sexual domination of widows are portrayed through Meera and Sandhya’s social ostracism and alienation. They are imprisoned and their alienated state as well as social marginality makes them socially dead. They are banished to a dark room to moan the death of their husbands and the loss of their freedom. Initially they admit being a cog in the great patriarchal wheel by exhibiting strength and resilience, but their acceptance is short-lived. As soon as the patriarch in both the narratives is tempted to sell his daughter-in-law, they refuse to be helpless creatures and stand up for themselves in an extreme ease. Meera’s bold representation attests to the ability of a widow who transcends her circumstances to change the perception of the world. Thus, the self-determined celluloid characters bestow a new perspective to life of a so called ‘victim of tradition’. In one of the scenes, Meera states, “The quality of life lived is far more important than the number of years one lives”. (my own translation). In the similar vein, Sandhya in one of the scenes asserts, “if I don’t take the charge of my life, others will make decisions on my behalf” (my own translation).

These lines grab the essence and provide a fitting tribute to what a widow craves in her life. Meera’s concealed jiggling in the streets, furtively watching a movie at the theatre, having sweets behind the sweet shop; and Sandhya’s desire to have chips, eat street food, etc. all reveal the ephemeral nature of privileges which both enjoy as well as their subjugation in an oppressive world. But the way they break into a jig, their rendition of the dialogues and their final exodus from the life worse than prison; all reflect their desire as individual identities. Their final deviation from the confinement towards a self-dependent life project that no situation is insurmountable challenge provided one has the courage to fight it.

Further, it is Zeenat in *Dor* who beautifies the empty canvas of Meera’s life. Zeenat’s vision is clearly reflected in her dialogue when she meets Meera for the first time, she says, “Sometimes its our own fear which acts as a barrier... it is greedy to live a life for oneself but to kill our own dreams is the biggest sin... listen to your heart and when you come across an obstacle, close your eyes, have faith and face it boldly” (my own translation). As a spokesman, Zeenat here reassures the entire marginalized widow community to have faith in themselves, to realize their own individuality by striving for what they aspire rather than accepting their fate to be meek victims. Having faith in oneself can help find true path to live a life the way one desires. Likewise, in *Pagglaiti*, Sandhya stands for herself. Taking a strand from postfeminist critical thought, the character of Sandhya is an emblem of transition from being an object towards being a subject who doesn’t seek society’s approval for fulfilling her desires, as she states, “Everybody thought I had gone crazy... when women become wise, the world calls them *pagglait*” (my own translation).

Such an optimistic portrayal to women spectators can have a positive impact on them. Being a widow doesn’t connote termination of desires rather it shows that like other human beings, they too have the right to lead their lives the way they want. But our psyche is constructed in such a way that everything is naturalized and we stop thinking beyond it. The effort should be to reconstruct the image, unless the subject is reconstructed, the subjection of women that it fosters will necessarily continue.

### Major Findings

Highlighting the nuanced understanding of the females in the post-liberalized twenty-first century, the study

discovered the inherent multiplicities within the seemingly homogenous category of Indian femininity. The major findings in the research were:

1. Deviating from the presumed image of celluloid women, an element of surprise has been added to the film, forcing the audience to confront their assumption about women. The recurring representation of women as submissive, fragile or helpless has been converted into female actions that reveal strength and courage to perform.
2. Traditionally, woman who was sensual in her actions was relegated as vamp having a maximum of five minute performance (item dance) in the movie of approximately three hours but in the selected movies, the demarcation between vamp and main protagonist has completely disappeared and more so over, if not in a sensual light, they chose a path of self discovery.
3. Rejecting the direct link between morality of a woman and her fate, these movies break the myth that good things happen only to moral and courageous women and bad things happen to immoral women. Even if the characters are good, bad things still happen to them, thereby, liberating them from blaming themselves when they are victimized.
4. Lack of male intervention assists them in resolving the difficult situations themselves projecting how women achieve their goals not how women react to men. Men in these movies are shown as merely hiccups in their lives.
5. Absence of sexual violence in movies generate a feel good response from the female spectators and if there exists, then it doesn't render women helpless.
6. Detachment from the larger agendas of patriarchal ideology and the traditional values allows them to explore their trajectories freely.

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