


# Women and Film: Portrayal of Domestic Violence in Selected Bollywood Movies

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## Abstract

*The acts of violence against women have been the interest of many researchers for decades. Gendered violence is rooted in the conventional views on masculinity and femininity and the notion of men as superior and women as inferior. Several women are subjected to various kinds of abuse inside and outside their families throughout their lives. This paper explains the role of gender-based violence and to what extent domestic violence, especially intimate partner violence (IPV), afflicted women. Several Bollywood movies portray IPV and the unending helplessness of women in the domestic household. The paper studies three Bollywood movies, 7 Khoon Maaf (2011), Parched (2015) and Darlings (2022), and analyses how domestic violence is performed, affected and tackled.*

**Keywords:** Gendered Violence, Domestic Violence, IPV, Bollywood.

Gender is socially constructed and constantly performed knowingly or unknowingly in daily life. A feminist perspective provides a profound understanding of violence by analysing how it is carefully woven into the patriarchal system. According to Bahun-Radunović and Rajan,

All contemporary approaches to the relationship between gender and violence are grounded in an awareness that the regulation, surveillance, and assumed performance of gender is informed by conventional views of “masculinity” and “femininity” and, further, that those views are premised on historic assumptions of how the gendered production of “male” and “female” bodies have been constructed through the phenomenon of violence.

This designation of societal significations to human experiences and activities as “female” and “male” is associated with various forms of violence that constitute a range of physical, psychological, representational, discursive, and situational violations of human and, particularly, women rights (1).

Violence against women is mainly a part of the hierarchical gender relations, which treat men as superior and women as inferior. In every male-dominated society, women have been told that they are always protected and nurtured by their family, first by their father, then by their husband and finally, by their son, in all tracts of their life. But there are instances where they are subjected to various abuses and violence inside and outside their family. This superiority celebrated

by men gives them the privilege to assault women without fear or remorse. This paper aims to understand how violence against women intersects with patriarchal power structures and gender performance.

According to Margaret Schuler, gender violence is “any act involving the use of force or coercion with an intent of perpetuating promoting hierarchical gender relations”. (APWLD, 1990, Schuler, 1992). She has divided gender violence into four major categories- overt physical abuse, which includes battering and sexual assault at home and in the workplace; psychological abuse, which provides for confinement and forced marriage; deprivation of resources for physical and mental well-being; and commodification of women, which includes trafficking, prostitution, etc.

Among various gender violence, Intimate Partner Violence or Domestic Violence is a typical kind of abuse committed by someone in the victim’s domestic circle; it can be their partners, family members, close relatives or friends. In India, women are subjected to various kinds of domestic abuse, physical, mental and sexual. According to the Domestic Violence Act of 2005, domestic violence shall constitute any activity that harms, injures or endangers the health, safety, life, limb or well-being, whether mental or physical, of the aggrieved person or tends to do so. It includes causing physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal and emotional abuse and economic abuse; or harassing, harming, injuring or endangering the aggrieved person to coerce her or any other person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any dowry or other property or valuable security or otherwise injuring or causing harm, through mental or physical means to the aggrieved person.

Physical abuse includes violent conduct inflicted on the victim, such as slapping, biting, beating, hitting, kicking, etc. Verbal violence includes screaming against victims, swearing, threatening, demeaning, regulating, harassing, stalking, spying, and other actions that can cause fear. Sexual abuse happens when the abuser forcefully tries to make physical contact with the victim without their consent. This behaviour mainly involves marital rape, physical violence followed by sex and attacks on the sexual parts of the body. Emotional abuse implies discrediting or emptying the victim’s sense of self-esteem. It also includes constant humiliation, insults, threats of harm, belittling, and threats to take away children. Economic abuse happens when the abuser makes or attempts to make the victim financially reliant. Technological abuse incorporates the utilisation of technology to hold and control a partner. Looking around, we can witness many women suffering from violence and some struggling to leave abusive relationships.

While examining films featuring gendered violence, we can observe that most movies focus on men’s bravery and heroism. They portray women as weak humans prone to abuse and are often dramatically saved by the heroes. Women are gendered as meek and vulnerable beings who are often destined to be saved by an external agency, especially a hero. Feminists raise their voices against such kinds of portrayals. After several years, films limelight women as strong characters who lash against domestic violence, break off toxic relationships and lead dignified lives. A feminist reading of any literature or film featuring IPV can enlighten women about different modes of domestic violence in their homes and educate them on the remedies to cope with such toxic and dangerous situations.

The paper aims to explore how domestic violence is performed, affected and tackled in three Indian movies - *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011), *Parched* (2015) and *Darlings* (2022). *7 Khoon Maaf* or *Seven Sins Forgiven* (2011) is an adaptation of the short story *Susanna’s Seven Husbands* by Ruskin Bond. The film tells the story of an Anglo-Indian woman, Susanna Anna-Marie Johannes, who causes six deaths in an endless pursuit of love. *Parched* (2015) is an Indian drama film written and directed by Leena Yadav. The film revolves around four women- Janaki, Rani, Lajjo and Bijili living in a desert village in Gujarat, where timeworn traditions, patriarchy, child marriage, dowry, marital rape, and physical and mental abuse exist. *Darlings* (2022) is another Indian dark comedy

film that portrays the life, sufferings and revenge of a Muslim woman named Badrunnissa (Badru), who is married to Hamza Shaikh. Her husband is an alcohol addict who beats her after drinking every night for three years of their love marriage.

Cultural and social elements play a significant role in developing and propagating violence. With different socialisation processes, men take up stereotyped gender roles of domination and control. In contrast, women take up the role of the suppressed and dependent ones who are merely helpless in all stages of their lives. In his book *The Violences of Men*, Hearn says, "... it is men who dominate the business of violence and specialise in violence. And while women, as the receivers of violence, in some ways know more about the direct effects and experiences of violence than men, men remain the experts in how to do violence and in the doing of violence" (36).

The female characters in the film *Parched* are victims of domestic violence in one way or another. Janaki is an innocent fifteen-year-old girl who was married off for four lakh rupees without her consent. She was in love with a boy in her town and even dared to trim her hair to stop the marriage, but her father hid this fact and cheated the bridegroom's mother for money. From there, her misery starts. Her mother-in-law (Rani) verbally abuses her for cheating, and she even beats the innocent Janaki, accusing her of stealing Rani's savings. When her husband, Gulaab, realises that his newly wedded wife is bald, he abuses her verbally, physically and sexually. He even asks his mother to send the girl back and get a refund. Janaki is treated as a commodity and is voiceless and helpless in her new home.

There is another character named Chumpa in the film *Parched*. She returned to her parents after suffering so much abuse from her in-laws. But her parents and other elders in the village forced her to go back, saying that once a girl is married off, her home is her husband's home. She publicly revealed to her mother that her husband is staying with his mistress, and everyone in that house never misses a chance to abuse her sexually. She begged them not to send her, but everything was in vain. There is a remark about another girl named Chitra who was compelled to return to her in-laws despite the domestic abuse she endured and ultimately committed suicide within a few days. Despite such instances, Chumpa was forced to go back. Being an uneducated, jobless girl of fifteen or sixteen, she is helpless. Her family and society can't support her and give her the strength to walk away from abusive marriage.

The patriarchal society in *Parched* believed in the dictum that "Girls who read make bad wives". They propagate this dictum from generation to generation and ensure that no women get the education and job so that these helpless beings can be caged and abused inside the four walls of the house. In the movie *Parched*, this dictum is repeated at every point. The society mold women to believe in this myth.

Feminist theories ground on the idea that all kinds of violence against women, especially rape, are rooted in patriarchy and misogyny. According to feminist theorists like Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, "rape and rapability are central to the construction of gender identity and ... our subjectivity and sense of ourselves as sexual beings are inextricably enmeshed in representations" (3). Before the 1950s, most representations of abuse, especially rape, were focused on the thoughts and motivation of the abuser and often concluded the abused women as morally lacking. This notion was later widely criticised by feminists. Rape or any kind of physical violation of a female body remains as an unhealed wound in their life. Most female characters in *Parched* are forcefully dragged into sex by men. While Janaki, Lajjo and Rani are sexually abused by their husbands, Champa is prey to her father-in-law and brother-in-law. Though Bijili is a prostitute who sells her body with her consent, men torture her so brutally. Mohammed Wasiullah Khan, Susanna's third husband in *7 Khoon Maaf*, violently rapes her every time, leaving bruises and bite marks all over her body.

Female bodies are treated as a commodity for maintaining the purity and dignity of a family; therefore, sexual violence is also viewed as a private matter or a taboo that is not supposed to be discussed in public. Violence against women at home is often seen as a private matter in families, especially in a country like India. If anyone dares to reveal it to the public, they are accused of being arrogant and non-adjustable women who were not brought up properly by their parents. In fear of such humiliation, most of the women succumb to their fate and live an unhappy life. Apart from that, the most feeble and helpless ones will commit suicide.

Feminist theorists admit that the most tragic fact among the victims is that some fail to realise they are being abused in an intimate relationship. According to Kelly and Westmarland,

What women describe is an ongoing, 'everyday' reality in which much of their behavior is 'micro-managed' by their abuser: this includes what they wear, where they go and whom they see, household management and childcare. None of these are 'incidents', nor would they be considered crimes, and Stark (2007) has argued that we should conceptualize intimate partner violence as a pattern of coercive control, a concept that is included in, but is not the overriding framework of, the cross-government definition cited above (114)

In the film *Darlings*, a visible change is noticeable in the costume of Badru. Before marriage, Badru was a bubbly girl who flutters happily wearing jeans, a short top and lipstick. After marriage, she can be seen only in salwar and dupatta outside the house. She even refuses to tie her hair a ponytail because her husband doesn't like it. He also makes it clear that he hates her talking with the neighbours, especially men, thereby controlling her mobility and freedom. Throughout the novel, this cohesive control pattern is considered normal in family life.

Men trivialise many cases of abuse and present them as their mode of affection. In a scene in *Darlings*, Hamza comes for reconciliation with Badru; he justifies his act by saying that every husband and wife quarrel is ubiquitous in a marital relationship. He reduces his abuses to silly disagreements between a husband and wife and confesses that he is so sad about what he had done on the previous day. This incident melts the heart of Badru, and her anger evaporates. Men manipulate their wives with sugar-coated words, and the poor wives often fall into such traps. When Hamza was arrested for domestic violence, he tried to convince Badru to stop filing the complaint. He asks why he would abuse her if he doesn't love her and why she takes it if she doesn't love him. Hamza adds that he wants to quit drinking because he will hit her only when drunk, and after that, he feels remorseful for inflicting so much pain on her. He promises to quit drinking and begs for forgiveness. These words melt Badru's heart, and she steps back from filing a complaint. This happens in most marriages: women fall prey to the sweet tongues of their abusive husbands, hoping they would change.

Badru comforts herself and her mother, saying her husband will change his monstrous attitude. She tries everything to change her husband; she cooks his favourite food, attempts to seduce him, and tries to calm him when he is angry; she thinks a baby can heal him. He slaps her, beats her, kicks her belly and pushes her down the staircase, claiming that the child is not his. She had a miscarriage because of the fall, and this incident made her take vengeance. She inflicts him all the pain he had given her and makes him suffer till his death.

Much legal help is offered to the victims, but women refuse to go for it for fear of being left alone or humiliated. When the police officer asks Shamshu, Badru's mother, why Badru is not going for a divorce, she laments that if they get divorced, no one will come to re-marry Badru, and she also adds that the world has changed only for Twitter and not for the people like them. This fear is usually perpetrated in the minds of most of the abused victims and their families. They are afraid of the humiliation and the fear that the victim will be all alone for her entire life. This insecurity makes them stay in unhealthy marriages.

The husband of Lajjo in the film *Parched* abuses her physically and sexually calling her barren. Throughout the film, we can see her with bruises on her face. Her close friend Bijili, a company dancer, asks her whether she or her husband is infertile; then only Lajjo comes to know that men can also be barren and sterile. Bijili takes Ljjo to a man in a cave to get impregnated, and she experiences pleasurable sex first in her lifetime. When she gets pregnant and shares this news with her husband, he kicks her, calling her a whore. He hides the fact that he is the one who is impotent and abuses her like an animal to conceal his impotence and declare his supremacy.

In our society men are expected to be strong, masculine and forerunners of the procreation process. The ones who fail to meet any of these criteria are tagged as unmasculine or unmanly, which is regarded as the biggest dishonour a man can ever get. To hide their inability, they show their masculine attribute by perpetrating violence. In *7 Khoon Maaf*, Susanna's first husband, Major Edwin Rodriques, embodies an inferiority complex because he has an amputated leg. This deep-rooted complex develops toxic masculinity, making him suspect his beautiful, elegant wife. He tries to control her actions, behaviours and even mobility. He reminds her that she is married to him, so she should stop fluttering around. He reminds her that she will learn wifely duties once she bears a child. He later asks about her test reports from the doctor; she replies that all the test reports are fine and she has no problem. He suddenly gets enraged and asks her whether he is disabled in bed, too. Major Rodriques is an embodiment of pride, and he abuses her verbally and emotionally very often. Susanna tolerates all his verbal and physical abuse for a long time, and finally, she reaches a limit and kills him. A man who cannot beget a child is considered a weakness in society. To hide their inability, they become violent and abusive towards their partner.

Susanna is a perfect example of a woman who refuses to forsake her quest for pure love. When Susanna discovers that her second husband, Jimmy, is a drug addict who steals songs and dalliances with other women, she initially tries to bring him back to life. This is what most Indian wives do. They spend their whole life and energy holding onto their marriage. But despite all her love and care, he secretly outwits her by using drugs. Susanna couldn't withstand that, and she killed him by overdosing on heroin.

Susanna's third husband was a Muslim poet named Mohammed Wasiullah Khan. She even converted to Islam for him. But he was a sexual abuser who beat, bit, slapped and strangled her during sexual intercourse. He uses torture for sadistic pleasure and for him physically hurting each other is an intense expression of love. The saddest part of her married life is displayed in a scene where she tries to hide her bruises using makeup. She tries prayers, offerings and sacrifices, and nothing helps her. We can see her mental health deteriorating; she slaps herself, laugh and cry at herself in front of the mirror. Susanna hoped for eternal love from her fourth husband Nikolai Vronsky, a Russian spy and she ended his life when the news about his other wife and children got exposed. In her entire life, Susanna has been searching for everlasting and true love, but unfortunately, she came across only insincere and abusive ones.

It is the patriarchal power structures that promote and support gendered violence. Women have been subjected to various kinds of domestic abuse for ages. In all the three movies discussed in this paper, we can see women walking off from their abusive and unhealthy relationships rather than sticking to them and satisfying the needs of a patriarchal society. Susanna takes revenge by killing all her husbands. Lajjo, Rani and Bijili break off all their familial bonds and are set free as empowered women. Badru gets rid of her toxic husband and lives a dignified life.

Thus, the paper claims that there is a need for responsible depiction of domestic violence in literature and movies so that the readers/viewers will understand the real issues associated all kinds of gendered violence, especially domestic violence or intimate partner crimes. It must show light into the realities behind all sorts of gendered violence and teach society the need to respect women.

Films that are brimmed with gruesome displays of sexual violence are highly shocking and, in turn, upset the viewers. But we should resume watching such movies to understand the sufferings of the victims and see how they exercise multiple forms of resistance against the perpetrators.

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