

Unearthing Toxic Masculinity: A Female Gaze Analysis of Male Characters in

Parched and Darlings

Project Report

Submitted by

Nishta.N.Sharma (Reg No. SB21CE022)

Under the guidance of

Ms. Nikitha Shaji Thomas

In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree

Of Bachelor of Arts

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for

Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++'

Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

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Declaration

I do affirm that the project “Unearthing Toxic Masculinity: A Female Gaze Analysis of Male Characters in *Parched* and *Darlings*” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Nishta.N.Sharma

22/03/2024

SB21CE022

B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

St. Teresa’s College (Autonomous)

Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Unearthing Toxic Masculinity: A Female Gaze Analysis of Male Characters in *Parched* and *Darlings*" by Nishta.N.Sharma is a record of bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam

22/03/2024



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nikitha", with a horizontal line underneath.

Ms. Nikitha Shaji Thomas

Department of Communicative English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

Acknowledgement

I take this opportunity to offer my humble prayers and thanks to God Almighty for his mercy and blessings for the completion of this project.

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Nishta.N.Sharma

Abstract

The Bollywood film industry has traditionally been characterised by male dominance, with male directors, scriptwriters, and producers shaping narratives that predominantly catered to a male audience. These films have often glorified toxic masculinity, domestic violence and abuse. They also portray female characters as objects of the male desire or male gaze and are characterised as people who have no autonomy or control over their lives. However, as time progressed, a shift in the narrative structure of the films occurred with the emergence of female directors, scriptwriters, and producers. These women have taken the reins, creating films in which female characters assume the role of protagonists and actively work to challenge existing stereotypes. In the contemporary era, society is scrutinising traditional norms and customs, prompting the exploration of feminist lenses such as the female gaze, which helps to see the world through female experiences and understand their perspective of the world.

This project seeks to analyse male characters in the female-centric hindi films *Parched*, directed by Leena Yadav, and *Darlings* directed by Jasmeet K. Reen, to prove how a male character's portrayal can be seen and interpreted through the perspective of a female character, utilising the framework of the female gaze, to deconstruct the idea of toxic masculinity and shed light on the prevailing societal standards. The findings of the analysis conducted indicate that not only female gaze has the potential to unearth the dominant male attitudes but it also has the power to break the traditional narrative of film structure by putting forward female perspectives.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to Oxford Languages, a film is “a story or event recorded by a camera as a set of moving images shown in a cinema or on television.” It is a means of mass communication used by people to present their thoughts, feelings, emotions and points of view of the world. India being a vast country filled with rich culture and heritage, uses this form of medium to represent, entertain and rewrite the stories of the Indian audience on a national and global stage. The Indian film industry dates back to 1913, starting with the Silent Era. Its first full-length feature film *Raja Harishchandra* directed by Dadasaheb Phalke, is one of the examples of early developments. The first talkie film *Alam Ara* was screened in 1931, by which time India was producing more than 100 films. Then came the Golden Age after gaining independence from Britain followed by the formation of the term Bollywood in the 1970s. A lot of genres arose as the film industry began to grow, for example Masala films and violent crime films. A new wave of Indian cinema started to emerge in the late 1960s called Parallel cinema which was very different in terms of structure, themes and narratives from the mainstream films, which were considered escapist entertainment meant for mass audiences. They discussed the themes of casteism, class struggle, position of women, subjugation and objectification of men or by the patriarchal structure of society. Earliest parallel films emerged in Bengal with Satyajith Ray being one of the well known pioneers of this new film movement.

Film is a reflection of reality which is tweaked a little to suit the taste of the audience. In a country where patriarchy is deeply rooted, the mainstream Indian film industry has and continues to be predominantly male dominant across all spheres, from the director to the audience. Consequently, male characters have traditionally been given more substantial

screen time, dialogues, and action sequences. They are represented as characters who wield absolute power, who rescues the damsel in distress and who resorts to anger and violence to an extreme extent in the pursuit of their heroic goals. Toxic masculinity is one such characteristic given to a male character in most of the Bollywood films. According to the Cambridge dictionary, toxic masculinity means an idea which equates manly behaviour with violence and sexism. These portrayals have been normalised and perpetuated on screen. “The universalisation of these representations has made the definition of manhood rigid and immutable through the passage of time” (Choudhary).

On the other hand, Indian directors have represented female characters as eye candy to satisfy the male gaze. This is a term coined by feminist critic Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema* which refers to the “projection of heterosexual male fantasy onto the female figure” (Mulvey). She states that “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey). In Indian films, female characters historically lacked agency and were often depicted as being entirely dependent on their male counterparts. They were either shown as the Madonna or the Vamp or were frequently portrayed as selfless lovers willing to endure abuse and domestic violence. Anneke Smelik in her paper on Feminist film theory states that “Desire in narrative is intimately bound up with violence against women and the techniques of cinematic narration both reflect and sustain social forms of oppression of women.”

Alternatively, *Charulata*, directed by Satyajith Ray, can be considered as one of the few earliest examples of female centric films which arose as a part of Indian New Wave films where the emergence of female gaze can be seen. The term, female gaze, is part of the feminist film theory that was put together by feminists as a response to the term male gaze formulated by Mulvey. Feminist film theory started to emerge during the second wave of

Feminist movement in America from the late 1960s. Issues of representation, relations of the look, the ideological implications of narrative forms and spectatorship are central to this theory. There existed a constant debate between positive or negative, realistic or distorted representations of women in films. According to John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing*:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision - a sight (47).

Alison Butler quotes his work in her book *Women's Cinema: The contested screen* to state that "Feminist film theory was founded on the proposition that looking and being looked at are charged with sexual and social power relations." Thus feminist films came to be termed as Counter films that went against the mainstream narrative. But De Laurentis in her work *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, states that:

The present task of women's cinema may not be the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure, but rather the construction of another frame of reference, one in which the measure of desire is no longer just the male subject. For what is at stake is not so much how to 'make visible the invisible' as how to produce the conditions of representability for a different social subject (8-9).

Thereby indicating that female gaze is not the inverse of male gaze. Oxford reference mentions female gaze as "the ways in which women and girls look at other females, at males, and at things in the world. This concerns the kinds of looks involved, and how these may be related to identification, objectification, subjectivity, and the performance and construction of gender" (Chandler and Munday). This term aims to provide a unique field of vision for

viewers, enabling them to perceive and challenge themes such as toxic masculinity, patriarchy, and gender stereotypes embedded in both films and broader societal norms. “Rather than objectifying men instead of women or placing women in stereotypical male roles, the female gaze depicts women in a more realistic or complex light. In other words, it is more about feeling the character than seeing them” (Schneider).

Fathima Begum being the first female director to direct a female centric hindi film named *Bulbul-e- Paristan*, paved the way for women to take up the reins in the Indian film industry. In the recent past, with more female directors, script writers and producers surfacing up to dominant male driven industry, films with female protagonists that narrate their experiences are rising up in number. Gauri Shinde, Zoya Akhtar, Rima Das etc are some of the well known directors in the Indian film industry. In their films, female characters are represented as women of agency where they are able to express their emotions, thoughts and needs as they are able to capture it authentically. Their cinematic works are not only characterised as a source of representation and entertainment but also as a vehicle for social commentary and cultural reflection. Alison Butler in her book *Women's Cinema: The contested screen*, defines that:

Women's cinema' is a complex critical, theoretical and institutional construction, brought into existence by audiences, film-makers, journalists, curators and academics and maintained only by their continuing interest: a hybrid concept, arising from a number of overlapping practices and discourses, and subject to a baffling variety of definitions (14).

When a women centric film is directed by a female director, a sense of shared identity is felt by the female audiences. They feel as if their lives, struggles and triumphs are for once narrated and portrayed on the big screen by someone who has experienced them. But at the same time, women centric films directed by male directors can be explored at large as well.

Therefore, this research only tends to prove whether female characters in female centric hindi films, directed by female directors, have the power and authority to point out the regressive male traits and oppressive male behaviour, which has been normalised on silver screen in the mainstream films, on females using female gaze. The research methodology used in the project is textual analysis which comes under qualitative research. A case study on female centric hindi films *Parched*, directed by Leena Yadav and *Darlings*, directed by Jasmeet K. Reen is chosen to prove the above research question. The case study seeks to analyse the male characters using the gaze of the female characters from the selected films to form in-depth insights. The secondary data collected for this project are from books, online journals, articles, research papers etc, to support the statements made.

Chapter 2

Unveiling Perspectives: The Concept of Gaze in Cinema

“Gaze refers to the exchange of looks that takes place in cinema” (Heyward 149). The term arose with the introduction of Feminist film theory where feminists, critics and essayists used psychoanalysis and semiotics to understand the power of patriarchal imagery in Hollywood films. According to them, cinematic identifications were structured along the lines of binary sexual differences. The term Male gaze came to be used and popularised by the Feminist Film Critic, Laura Mulvey in her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, where she points out the way of seeing women and the world through male perspective. She writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (19)

According to Mulvey, the psychoanalytic theory has been politicised to project the unconscious desires of patriarchal society where it is assumed that a man is the spectator, the dominant character and the operator of the camera of a film. Thus, the classic film narrative has been consistently influenced by male point of view. “It’s a way to explain a limited male view, where the rest of the characters exist mainly to serve him, his interests, and his storyline” (Froster). Anneke Smelik, in her article Feminist Film Theory, quotes the notion that the male gaze, in analysing cinema, involves structures such as voyeurism, narcissism and fetishism shown towards the female characters projecting a heterosexual relationship

between the characters. The female characters are given roles to fit according to the taste of dominant patriarchal order, making their presence insignificant. Kaja Silverman, in her book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, states that the passive role given to women gives their voice hardly any signifying position in language, meaning or power and hence it is all too reduced to scream, babble or silence in dominant cinema. Female audiences are thus left to identify with the characters on the screen using male perspective or they choose to see themselves through the objectified female characters. A number of early essayists as well as feminist film critics of the 1980s have tried to counter the male gaze by coming up with the notion of female spectatorship. Mulvey suggests that the female audience is likely to identify and enjoy the passive femininity that has been portrayed in the cinema throughout the years. On the other hand, quoting Anna Kaplan, Anneke Smelik makes a point that “female characters can possess the look and even make the male character the object of her gaze, but, being a woman, her desire has no power.” As Anna Kaplan says in her book *Women and Film*, “to own and activate the gaze is to be in the ‘masculine’ position, that is to be dominant.” Thus, switching roles does not mean real change as the same binary opposition is still in place. Feminist film theory therefore tries to reject the normalising or naturalisation process of patriarchal socialisation and tries to achieve a middle ground where all genders, race, caste etc are equally represented (Heyward 152). Thus feminist films have also been termed as counter films which portray themes that go against the grain.

Presently, there have been discussions in defining the term female gaze with a fresh perspective. Jill Soloway, the director of the Amazon Prime television show *Transparent*, affirms that “the female gaze is really about using the presence of a female perspective on screen to emphasise the story’s emotions and characters”.

This means that when a story is told from a woman character's point of view, the audience simply takes on that perspective as well. Hyma Balakrishnan "The Politics of (Fe)Male Gaze in Hindi Cinema" in her journal article states that:

Female gaze validates people and their emotions. For Soloway (2016) the 'female gaze' is a way of *feeling* and *seeing* and is a direct response to Mulvey's male gaze theory: 1) "the feeling camera" (prioritising emotions over actions), 2) the "gazed gaze" (how it feels to be an object of the gaze), and 3) the "returning gaze" (or "I see you seeing me"). (134)

When looking at the female gaze, the female is the subject and not the object. "There is no singular female gaze that represents all women just as there is no singular female experience. Diversity, inclusiveness and intersectionality are a part of the nebulous definition of the female gaze" (Gaze). Female gaze does not completely deny the objectification of male figures but according to theorists like Joe Soloway, this aspect is not included in defining it. "They reject the attempts by the early 70s feminists to create a female gaze through male centrefolds, or subsequent visual explorations of sexually appealing content for women" (Gaze). Stefani Forster quotes Soloway in an online article by stating that "If the male gaze is all about what men see, then the female gaze is about making the audience feel what *women* see and experience". For example, the rape scene from the movie *Bulbul*, directed by Anvita Dutt, inevitably shows the brutality and the horror of the act. The audience is made to feel the pain and fear of Bulbul through audio-visual elements in such a manner that it is not sexualised or normalised.

Thus, Forster, in her article, was right in saying that violence against women, which is a contemporary issue, when presented through female gaze, is becoming more diverse and nuanced than ever before. These western concepts help to show how mainstream cinema is

tailor-made for male desire as they are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures. Indian cinema can be analysed using these concepts as the visual and narrative patterns are, to some extent, similar.

Amidst the emergence of women directors, scriptwriters, cinematographers and other technicians in the male dominated film industry, there has been a drastic shift in the narrative structure of the films. Earlier, India did see New Wave cinema or Parallel cinema that went against the language and structure of dominant cinema but these kinds of films never really carried the mass appeal. But as of late, Female centric movies with more than two female characters as the protagonists are increasing in number and popularity. These characters are fully rounded and have an equal amount of dialogues compared to male counterparts. They have autonomy and control in shaping their destiny. At the same time, male characters are also represented realistically in these films. The importance given to the performance of characters, regardless of which gender they belong to, get balanced out. When the director of the film *Darlings*, Jasmeet K. Reen was asked in an interview on who she is looking at while directing the film she says that the focus is on the whole scene because according to her if anyone stands out it does not do justice to the film as the characters would not be in sync.

The films, *Parched*, directed by Leena Yadav and *Darlings*, directed by Jasmeet K. Reen are the two female centric hindi films, which share similar themes of domestic violence, sexual abuse, marriage, traditions etc. Therefore these two films are used in this project to analyse the male characters using the female character's perspective or the female gaze to prove whether the female gaze is able to understand and unearth toxic masculinity and societal expectations exerted by a male towards the female characters in the film.

Chapter 3

Application of Female Gaze: A Case Study on *Parched* & *Darlings*

Case Study - *Parched*

The female centric hindi film *Parched* by Leena Yadav, who has also directed the well known Netflix documentary series *House of Secrets: The Burari Deaths*, has won several national and international awards for Best Feature Film, Best Director, Best Actor etc. It was first screened at Toronto International Film Festival, 2015 and was released a year later in India. The film is set in a desert village of Gujarat, India, and highlights the lives of four women who are battling with the existing rules, myths and customs imposed on them by the village elders who follow patriarchal traditions and practices. Themes of domestic violence, physical and mental abuse, prostitution, child marriage, dowry and marital rapes are visually depicted at its most authentic form. The film is taken according to the perspectives of four female protagonists named Rani, Lajjo, Bijli and Janki, all possessing different traits and problems but at the same time representing the plight of most women especially in rural India.

Rani, played by Tannishtha Chatterjee, is a widowed woman who lives with her mother-in-law and her son Gulab. In the beginning of the film she is looking for a perfect girl to marry her son while trying to gather the high amount of money asked by the marriage broker. She seems like a woman who accepts all the hardships imposed on her by life and the stringent patriarchal laws but, deep down she wants to attain freedom from all of her miseries. Lajjo, played by Radhika Apte, is a fun, loving, bright woman who loves to chatter but, she is labelled as a barren woman as she is not able to produce a child after years of marriage with her husband, Manoj. She is also a skilled weaver and makes money by making handicrafts for Kishan's business. Bijli, Surveen Chawala, is a clever and confident woman

who is looked down upon by the society as she earns her wages by dancing in front of men at the fair in such a manner that it satisfies the male gaze, and through prostitution. She is seen to be a woman who would never abandon her friends, Rani and Lajjo, as she supports and guides them when they are at fault or stuck in life. Janki, played by Lehar Khan, is a fifteen year old girl who becomes the daughter-in-law of Rani and is seen to be a girl who is not afraid to take action against the unfair customs and practices imposed on her.

The characters chosen from this film to analyse include Gulab; Rani's only son, Manoj; Lajjo's husband, Raju; Bijli's dancing partner and Kishan; owner of the handicrafts business of their village.

Character Analysis

Gulab

Through the perspective of Rani, Gulab being her only son, she looks at him with hope and admiration. She dreams of her son to have a better married life than her but when he points out that she is also trapping him by making him enter marital relation at a young age, in the scene from 0:15:44 till 0:15:48, she doesn't realise it and brushes his tantrums away by saying "*Amma..Chora ab bada ho gaya hai.*" ("Mother..Our boy is becoming a man.") in the scene, 0:16:20, to her mother-in-law. In the later scene when Gulab says to his mother "*Pathi ka rasam nibhake aaya su.*" ("I have performed my husbandly duties."), at 0:41:07, she realises that it was her fault in marrying Gulab before he matured as two major events take place right after his marriage which makes him take reckless decisions. But Rani was not ready to accept his behaviour even when Naobi had complained about him regarding the ruined handicrafts. She was still defending her son when Bijli had also pointed out his impulsive need to become a man by drinking alcohol and sleeping with prostitutes. It dawns

on Rani in the later scenes when he talks ill about Bijli, beats his child wife, Janki and shouts at his mother “*Muje dekhna hai ki bina marad ke kaise chalta se ye ghar!*” (“I want to see how you survive without a man!”) at 1:39:06, as she throws him out of the house because she had said to him before “*Marad banna chod. Pehle insaan banna sikh le.*” (“Don’t hurry to be a man. Learn to be human first.”) in the scene starting from 1:06:23 till 1:06:27.

In the eyes of Bijli, Gulab is like her own son. She was genuinely happy for him when his marriage was fixed. But then she was shocked and saddened to see Gulab standing in front of her tent with money a few days after it. In the scene 1:03:58, she says to Lajjo on how she slapped his face to bring him back to his senses as she knew him since his birth. Janki had understood how Gulab was, even if they had not spent enough time together, as she was right when she asked him regarding the missing money which is seen in the scene from 1:37:13- 1:37:46. In her eyes, he too was rushing to be the man of the house because instead of accepting his mistakes he was running away from it. Thus he can be analysed as a character who was forced to become an adult before he reached his maturity.

Manoj

Through the lens of Lajjo, Manoj is her husband who is seen to brutally beat her every night, drunk. Since their marriage, they never had children. So he puts all the blame on her for being barren and beats her to take out his frustration instead of opting for a solution. In the scene 0:29:04 Lajjo says “*Ghar atha se tho bhooth savar hoi jaye na se.*” (“He is so sweet in public, such a monster at home.”) when he acts well in front of people by talking to them politely or by helping them but is a completely different person at home. She longs for him to show the same affection to her as he has never spoken to her like a loving husband. When asked by Bijli in the scene from 0:58:51 if Manoj has ever tested himself, Lajjo and Rani are in disbelief that even a man could be sterile. But his beatings increase day by day, she finds a

solution to get herself pregnant from another man to please her husband saying that it's their child. When she conveys this, he abuses her three folds as he reveals that the child cannot be his. Lajjo tries to convince him to accept this child as his but he profusely beats her again so in rage she finally tells him at 1:48:19 to go and tell the village elders regarding how she got pregnant as he was not able to do it and shouts out loud “*Kyunki assal me na thun baanj se!*” (“Because you are the barren one!”). Lajjo wanted to find a solution and she presented it to him, but instead of accepting it and being grateful, he is embarrassed about his inability and lets out all of his frustration on Lajjo through domestic violence.

In the last scene where his arm catches fire, Lajjo prevents Rani from saving him as she believes that he would never be able to accept his faults and be a good person. Therefore, Manoj can be analysed as a character who was ashamed of his inability because of the social standards set by the dominant patriarchal society, where a man is never allowed to be vulnerable or express his true emotions and feelings. He also feels jealous of Lajjo when she talks about getting a fixed salary because at 1:28:33 he shouts “*Nikkama banade poore gaanv ke samne mene.*” (“Make me look like a good for nothing.”)

Raju

Raju is Bijli's dance partner at the dance company. From her viewpoint he is shown as a man who madly admires her beauty, skill and boldness as he never denies her wishes which is evident from the dialogue “*Thare ko koi rok sake, Bijli?*” (“Can anyone stop you, Bijli?”) at 0:56:19. He always checks on her, takes care of her and compliments her beauty at every chance he gets. For example, at 1:15:32 he is seen to be waiting outside her tent as she had not come back the night before. At 1:06:49, he even apologises to her when he sees her dressing up for the show. It can be interpreted as a sign of respecting her privacy when people

have never shown an ounce of it to her as she is a prostitute. She is also bewildered because no one has ever looked above her chest when he begins to describe her traits by saying “*Teri aankhe bahut khoobsurat hai.*” (“Your eyes are beautiful.”) at 1:20:28 and ending at 1:21:24 with “*Apni kadar karna sikhle.*” (“You should value yourself.”) Her eyes, filled with tears, lingers as he leaves the tent.

This scene shows that his words had a positive impact on Bijli regarding her self esteem. Through Bijli’s eyes she wanted Raju to runaway, find a respectable job and a girl to love her like crazy as she couldn't do any of this. But he stays with her and does not leave her side. She thought he understood her pain and difficulties and would finally help her run away from this job but in the end her hope shatters when Raju pays her indirectly to make her run away with him to start another dance company and work for him as a prostitute. He can be analysed as a man who had a liking for her but never understood her deep rooted wants and desires.

Kishan

From the viewpoint of Lajjo, Kishan seems to be a loving husband who takes good care of his wife, encourages her to complete her education, and takes her ideas into consideration to improve his business. In the scene, 0:16:52- 0:16:59, he proudly states all of her achievements to Lajjo and Rani when they come to visit his new bride. They look at her admiringly as they have never heard a man speak highly of a woman. Deep inside they also wish to be as her, free from all of the social standards and expectations that ties them down. At 0:17:19, Lajjo’s eyes linger at Kishan for a second as she yearns for a husband who possesses qualities like him. Dealing with an abusive husband everyday made her think what her life would be like if she had a husband like him, since he also encourages working for him and praises her and Rani's skill at 0:16:48 when introducing them to Naobi.

At 0:10:34 Rani and Lajjo glance at him with concern when he defends Champa in front of the village elders as no one in the village summons up courage to question them outrightly. Rani, on the other hand, thinks of Kishan as a loyal friend as he helps her when Gulab was in debt. He had extended a helping hand when no one else was willing to. Thus, it can be said that he was the only man in the village who genuinely cared about the women as he wanted them to be free from the clutches of stringent social constructs. He desired for them to receive adequate education and earn opportunities to showcase their capabilities.

Case Study- *Darlings*

The next female centric film chosen for character analysis is *Darlings*, written and directed by Jasmeet K. Reen. She is a budding director and a script writer who has won Best Story (Original) in the IIFA awards 2023 and Best Debut Director in Zee Cine Awards 2023 for her film *Darlings*. Themes of this movie include domestic violence and addiction. According to Film critics, this film falls under the genre of dark comedy and thriller as it follows the story of Shamshunnisa and Badrunissa, a mother-daughter duo trying to find love, courage and justice from the abusive relationships they have been in. The film is set in the Byculla city of Mumbai mostly showing the *chawl* (tenement), the place where they live, where the neighbours are well informed about each other's lives as the walls are thin. Both the characters are diverse and authentic, which can be understood from the way they think, talk, look and act.

Shamshunnisa (called as Shamshu from here on) is a woman who became fearless because of an incident that took place in the early years of her marriage. She is someone who

never hesitates to speak her mind even when they are in a public space. She is strict when needed but also a loving mother who raised her daughter by herself. Therefore it can be interpreted that Badrunissa (called as Badru from here on), her daughter, would also have similar traits; rather she is the opposite. She is seen to be a kind, naive, loving and caring young lady who is ready to adjust and solve problems under any circumstances. She is willing to sacrifice her well being and comfort for her loved ones. She is also seen to be a highly optimistic, patient young woman because till the end of the film she believes that Hamza would treat her well. The two characters chosen from this film include Hamza, husband of Badru and Zulfi, who as he does odd jobs around the *chawl* and becomes a part of Shamshu and Badru's life as the story progresses.

Character Analysis

Hamza

Through the eyes of Badru, Hamza is seen to be this man who would do anything for her even if he mistreats her. With only love and affection in her eyes, she sees him as someone who is needed in her life to fulfil her wishes of having a house, a family etc. So accordingly she adjusts and accepts his abuses. After the first incident that takes place in the film he apologises when he sees her bruise and says "*Mere andar ke jallad ko uttale, mere maula.*" ("Lord, slay this demon inside me") at 0:09:29, which suggests that he is aware of his brutality and wants to change this behaviour. The emotion in her eyes quickly changes when he says this dialogue. It makes Badru hopeful that he would try his best to redeem himself and put an end to his addiction to alcohol consumption.

But in the later half of the film he tries to reason his abuse by saying "*Pyaar nahi karta toh martha kyun?*" ("Why would I abuse you if I don't love you.") at 0:38:30 when a

police complaint gets charged under his name for abusing her again. This shows that violence against his wife was a normal act of showing his affection and love towards her to make her realise her mistakes. She is seen to be not ready to accept the repeated warnings given by her mother and Zulfi about his continual toxic behaviour. Instead she pities and forgives every time he apologises for his actions.

Nevertheless, after a major and intense incident, Badru finally understands what her mother had said at 0:43:48 “*Kuch mardlog bichhoo hote hain beta, kabhi nahi badlenge*” (“Some men are scorpions, dear. They never change.”) which makes her want to take control of her life. Her perspective on Hamza completely changes. She starts to see him as a nuisance to her peace and takes sweet revenge on him for torturing her mentally and physically, though she never has any murderous intentions. All the fondness and patience towards Hamza disappears completely as it is evident from the look she gives at Hamza and says “*Chup.*” (“Shut up.”) at 1:51:33 when he tries to apologise and give baseless excuses for his actions again. The speech written by Badru highlights the fact that his behaviour was not caused by alcohol but because of his inherent intentions. It explains what kind of a man and husband he was towards her, her mother and to the society.

Though, on the other hand, it is evident from the conversation between the mother-daughter duo that Shamshu was ready to murder him for his toxic and persistent behaviour. In the scene, at 0:45:03, the rage of Shamshu can be seen through her eyes, glaring at Hamza holding Badru’s hand after he had successfully convinced her to not file the police complaint against him. Even when he comes to apologise for punching her nose at her home after a month, she never shows a sign of forgiveness which is evident from her expression at 0:54:35.

Zulfi

From the perspective of Shamshu, Zulfi is seen as a man who could be easily convinced or manipulated in the simplest ways which is evident from the scene where she uses him to gain products for cheap rates. He knows this fact but never complains. Instead he helps Shamshu set up her catering business and acts as her delivery boy. Badru's interaction with Zulfi seemed to be like that of siblings who knew each other well as he is seen to help Badru when she is trying to fix her relationship with Hamza, knowing that Hamza was an abusive person who was not going to change his behaviour under any circumstance. He thought by making an official police complaint, Badru would understand and break her relationship but it was not enough to convince her. By the end of the film, both Badru and Shamshu notices Hamza giving out tea for the guests, Badru says to her mom “ *Abbu aur Hamza ditto nikle. Ye wala alag hai.*” (“Dad and Hamza turned out just the same. This one is different.”) at 2:06:54.

From this scene it can be said that Zulfi's attitude and gestures towards the mother and daughter made them feel comfortable and at ease. They felt that they could trust him and count on him in future as he stood with them when they needed someone the most. He is also seen to openly admit the fact that he is in love with Shamshu, who is much older than him in age. His openness also gives Shamshu the courage to reciprocate her affection for him. Thus, for both of the women in the film, Zulfi was a character that made them feel at ease amidst the violent and toxic behaviour of Hamza.

Chapter 4

Insights on the Case study

From the analysis made in the previous chapter, the influence of societal expectations is seen highly on both, male and female characters. Its impact is seen in the way in which a female character views a male character as well as how a male character behaves towards a female character through their interactions along with the camera movements. The evaluation of each male character through the female lens pointed out the existing toxic masculinity and sadism present in each individual. To illustrate, Lajjo eventually understands why Manoj considered it acceptable to not just blame but also abuse his wife due to his sterility which is stigmatised in the eyes of society. She discerned that a man's action or opinion always has more power and meaning though, this does not stop her from taking control of her life. The point of view shots aided in assessing Lajjo's emotions towards Manoj and to herself. Even if we take the analysis of Gulab, a young adult like him is also expected to behave according to social constructs and because of this, his character also finds it permissible to abuse his child wife. His mother starts recognising his narcissistic behaviour after her conversation with Bijli.

Another example which can be quoted from the evaluation is the behaviour of Hamza towards Badru. The film is structured as such that it makes the spectators uncomfortable as they are made to observe the unjust and brutal treatment. The whole society knows that Badru is experiencing domestic violence frequently but none of them, except Zulfi and her mother, tries to take proper action against it. Quoting from the previous chapter, Hamza even tries to justify his abuse in the name of love which seems unreasonable. His sadistic behaviour is also seen to be fueled by the divided social expectations set upon individuals that arises after

marriage, which is an institutionalised act. This indirectly makes his actions tolerable as perceived by the society.

The application of female gaze to assess the selected movies has been effective in proving the research statement since it can be evidently seen in the scenes where all the female characters are seen to voice out their rage, anger and frustration towards the unjust treatment they receive from the men as well as from the society at large. Even though there is a stark difference in the experiences shared by each character, they are each able to perceive, understand and relate their hardships and struggles. To cite an example, the scene where Lajjo talks about her difficulties, Rani and Bijli encourage and try to find a solution for her problems. Similarly, Shamshu understands the traumatic impact of domestic violence and advises Badru to leave Hamza or to take some action to stop his abusive and toxic behaviour.

The plight of each woman is depicted on screen realistically with no hint of romanticisation or normalisation of domestic violence and abuse in both of the selected films chosen for research. From the case study conducted, it can be said that the inherent toxic masculinity, which is a trait seen to be accepted as a conventional or heroic behaviour used to control or subdue a woman, is seen as an attribute fueled by the patriarchal society. It is dependent on individuals as a whole to either refute or accept these norms. In *Parched* Manoj could have opened up to Lajjo about his insecurity which would have made it easier for him to accept his impotence and agree to the solution put forward by her. But he chooses not to because of shame and embarrassment and blames his wife even more. His ego is also seen to be hurt when Lajjo brings him the news that she was appreciated for her work done for Kishan's business. Instead of being happy for her, he is seen to demotivate her and abuse her even more. In *Darlings* Hamza's case is also similar yet different. He knew that his actions towards his wife were wrong but he kept on repeating it. Even till the end of the film he was

seen to take control of Badru's life and tried to influence every decision she made, which shows that he had never truly respected her judgements and desires.

The study not only helped to unearth the toxic masculinity present in the society which is reflected on screen but it also helped to recognise the fact that this trait is not present in every character analysed. Kishan from the film *Parched* and Zulfi from the film *Darlings* are the two characters that break away from the constraints set by the society. Both of these characters were gentle and understanding towards the female characters even in a setting where patriarchy is at its height. Kishan waged for the upliftment of the village women and Zulfi wanted to see Badru and Shamu happy. They treated them with respect and dignity. They extended a helping hand whenever they needed and never laid hands at them. The female characters also felt safe and secure around them. With the help of female gaze it was evident that they were worthy enough to gain their trust, when compared to the looks given to the other male characters which were analysed in the previous chapter. It is not the grand gestures, flowers or gifts but the bare minimum of treating them fairly, with respect and dignity is what they desire. At the same time, their desires are not solely focused on men but in the duration of the film they are seen to be characters who dream high about their freedom and interests. For example, Janki, in the film *Parched*, is a young girl who never gives up on her dream of attaining education even after becoming a victim of child marriage.

Thus, it can also be stated that films like these help to understand the fact that male characters need not purposefully exert toxic traits just to fit into the image created by society. But if we take the example of Hamza, he is seen to be a character who is abusive in nature, where it is difficult for others to influence or change his behaviour. It is also difficult to say if Hamza would change himself to be a better person as he was given a lot of chances to redeem himself. By the end of the film Badru is seen leaving Hamza on the railway tracks.

She is seen to plan her life according to her will which is evident from the last montage sequence where she visits a cinema theatre by herself. This indicates that she does not need another person for her happiness.

The analysis also helped to unearth the fact that female protagonists need not take the masculine role to exercise power. There exists a dominant energy within their femininity which may have been suppressed by the influence of societal roles and customs. Female centric films directed by women directors like the films chosen for this study help to bring them out to the audience. Hence, by using the female gaze, formed from the feminist film theory, their looks can be affirmed to have potency and significance in their own essence. They are seen as characters who make the audience feel their side of the story. In a country where male dominance is inherently present, female centric films thus provide space for women to express their emotions, feelings and experiences. Such portrayals aid the maker of the movie, the characters in action as well as audience, to break away from the traditional narrative and offer a realistic yet intriguing storyline which has a positive impact on the society. The breakdown of each male character highlights the fact that the experience and the trauma faced by each woman is different from one another making it holistic and relatable to the audience at large. This does not mean the universalisation of these expressions but it helps us to understand the nuances of the feminine lens. “More recently, there has been a move away from a binary understanding of sexual difference to multiple perspectives, identities and possible spectatorships” (Smelik). In a later interview Mulvey speaks out about the diverse ways in which a spectator can view a film:

I think that we would have felt that the onus was on the aesthetic experimental strategy of the film to create a certain kind of spectatorship. But now that people watch films in so many different ways, I feel as though it's turned upside down and,

now, the onus is on the spectator to be an active spectator and to engage imaginatively and poetically with any kind of film (Gaze).

Therefore, even the spectators, who were once fed only a particular set of ideologies which shaped their opinions, are now able to form interpretations of their own. This breaks down all the existing conventions and narratives, helping to form a new perspective. From the study, it is also evident that the themes of domestic violence, abuse, marital rape etc are not to be seen as an idealisation that women are immune to the violence of the world as pointed out by Anneke Smelik in her article on Feminist Film Theory. Though they are confronted by this harsh reality, through films like these the audience is able to make out the fact that women together find the strength to survive and fight against the injustice taking place in their day to day lives.

Hence, it can be proved that the gaze of women holds power and meaning to point out the regressive male traits and oppressive male behaviour. The gaze helps the spectators to understand the brutal reality of such socially constructed behaviour which is romanticised or given the tag of heroism or machismo which helps to justify or normalise it on the silver screen and the society at large.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Female perspective or female gaze is a term that has recently emerged in popular culture where a woman's frame of mind is highlighted especially with the rise of female centric films. Using this perspective, the research analysis of male characters from the films *Parched* and *Darlings* helped to unearth the toxic masculinity present in the society. In the present world where traditional gender norms are getting rewritten, female gaze acts as a catalyst to voice out the diverse experiences of the unheard or misrepresented. The films chosen for the research offered a social commentary on relevant themes such as gender inequality, patriarchy, domestic violence etc. Thus, such kinds of films encourage the audience to be informed on social issues as well as see the film through a diversified lens paving the way for inclusivity and equitable representation in media and beyond. In the near future, movies with a focus on female perspectives may become integrated into mainstream films. Building on the findings of this research report, further studies can be conducted to elaborate on various branches of this topic which have never been explored. To conclude, this research helped to establish that the female gaze helped to unearth the presence of toxic masculinity present in the female centric hindi films *Parched* and *Darlings* by analysing its the male characters.

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