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Research paper

Shifting Narratives: Globalisation, Women's Rights, and Domestic Violence in Select Hindi Films Between 1996-2001

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, India underwent significant changes with the implementation of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation policies, following the Balance of Payment crisis in 1991. This shift coincided with the ratification of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights treaty in the Indian Parliament alongside intensive global and Indian campaigns advocating for women's rights and against violence. These shifts deeply influenced both the legal and cinematic landscapes, altering cultural narratives surrounding heterosexual marriage, family dynamics, and heterosexuality. Films such as *Agni Sakshi* (With Fire as Witness) (1996), *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* (The King's Entourage Will Arrive) (1997), *Mehendi* (Henna) (1998), *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* (2001), and *Lajja* (Shame) (2001) depicted domestic spaces and marital relationships as abusive and violent, marking a departure from the traditional portrayal of marriage as a sacred institution. The arrival of universal human rights discourse provided a new framework for understanding marital unions and women's rights within the household, challenging traditional norms and advocating for greater equality and justice. Utilising the frameworks of 'contact zone' by Pratt and 'sentimentalization of marriage' by Harrison, the article is a narrative analysis of the aforementioned films. It examines these films as examples of India's cultural response to western feminist theories on domestic and gender-based violence within the universal human rights framework.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, the 1990s, domestic violence, globalization, cultural mixture

In the 1990s, India experienced extensive economic, political, and cultural shifts with the introduction of liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG)[1] policies in response to the foreign exchange crisis in 1991 (Rao & Dutt, 2006). While the economic changes are well-documented, the cultural narratives surrounding women's rights and legal discourses during this period have not been adequately linked to these significant transformations. For example, this policy initiative (LPG) coincided with the ratification of the United Nations

[1] The term refers to the 1991 economic reforms in India introduced as part of the *New Economic Policy* by the Congress-led government under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. These terms describe the broad approach of the reforms – liberalising the economy by reducing government control, encouraging privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and integrating India into the global economy. The acronym 'LPG' has since become shorthand for this transformative policy shift.

Declaration of Human Rights by the Indian Parliament and was accompanied by vigorous global and Indian campaigns advocating for women's rights and tackling violence against women at home. These developments triggered a narrative shift and a transformation in the underlying philosophy, reshaping the understanding of marriage, family, and women's rights (Sharma &Tripathi, 2023a). A significant transformation in the philosophical understanding of domestic violence in India has been the adoption of the doctrine of equality and the right to security of life for women in both public and private spheres. This shift gradually replaces the moralistic perspective traditionally used to judge crimes against women and moves away from prioritizing the collective interest of the community over the individual rights of women (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023a). The legal developments during this period were notable for their focus on recognizing women's individual status under international human rights conventions. The globalization of women's rights movements underscored the challenge of recognizing women as full citizens and the government's responsibility within the depoliticized and often inaccessible private sphere of Indian society, the family and home, where rights were frequently violated without legal repercussions for the perpetrators.

In the late 20th century, globalization, largely driven by the United States and western Europe, spurred a cultural migration that impacted the entire world, prompting diverse responses from developing nations like India to this wave of modernity (Chowdhury, 2021; Sarkar, 2025). A key component of this modernity agenda was gender equality and the protection of women's rights, including the fight against domestic violence. This movement, which began in western nations like the UK and the USA, was later adopted by the UN and introduced to developing countries like India through the 'discourse of developmentalism' (Ching, 2010). In the 1970s, women in the USA began organising against domestic violence, coining the phrase 'We will not be beaten' to advocate for homes free of abuse (Domestic Violence Timeline, 2022). By 1975, most USA states allowed wives to file criminal charges against their abusive husbands. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, women rallied under slogans like 'the personal is political' and movements such as 'Take Back the Night,' bringing the issue of domestic violence into the public discourse in the USA. By the 1990s, nearly all US states had criminalised marital rape (Domestic Violence Timeline, 2022). These movements were subtly reflected in American films, raising awareness about domestic violence and exposing the dangers lurking in the private sphere.

International legal activism began to influence India as the liberal democratic governance model gained prominence in Third World countries, particularly in India, during the post-liberalisation era (Rampal, 2005). In the 1990s, a global consensus emerged recognising domestic violence as a human rights issue. *The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* (1993) and the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995) were pivotal in addressing domestic abuse as a human rights violation (Das, 2019). *The Vienna Declaration* explicitly recognised violence against women, including domestic violence, as a significant human rights issue, leading to the creation of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. The *Beijing Declaration* further emphasised the need to eliminate all forms of violence against women, urging governments to enact laws, policies, and institutional reforms to combat domestic abuse and protect victims. These outcomes marked significant progress in the global recognition and response to domestic violence, ensuring it was addressed within the broader framework of human rights (Das, 2019). India was a signatory to both the *Vienna Declaration* and the *Beijing Declaration*. These international agreements committed India to upholding and advancing human rights, including the protection of women from gender-based violence, within its legal and policy frameworks. In 1993, India passed the *Protection of Human Rights Act* and ratified the *United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (UN CEDAW), the first international treaty dedicated exclusively to women's rights (Chowdhury, 2022).

Although discussions on domestic violence in India began in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that significant reforms were implemented to prevent and address the issue. Initially, Indian law did not recognise domestic violence as a specific crime until the *Domestic Violence Act* was enacted in 2005 (Patherya, 2017). Before this, the term 'cruelty' was used to describe instances of domestic violence. The *Hindu Marriage Act 1955* allowed judicial separation on the grounds of 'cruelty' but did not permit divorce. It was only in 1976, through the *Marriage Laws (Amendment) Act*, that divorce on grounds of cruelty became possible (Save Indian Family Foundation, 2022). During the 1980s, the issue of violence against women was intensely debated in the Indian parliament, leading to a series of legal reforms. In 1983, domestic violence was criminalised for the first time with the introduction of section 498A in the *Indian Penal Code* (IPC, 1860). Dowry-related violence was identified as a major cause of domestic violence in Indian households, which led to the *Prohibition of Dowry Amendment Act 1986* defining 'dowry death' and recommending stricter punishments. As many developing countries, including India, are deeply rooted in tradition and have patriarchal social structures (Tripathi et al., 2022), these reforms were primarily designed to safeguard the institution of marriage from certain patriarchal social issues such as sodomy, cruelty, adultery, and dowry (Patherya, 2017), rather than focusing on ensuring women's rights against violence. These shifts in global and national narratives on domestic violence deeply influenced the plot structure, storytelling and representations surrounding marriage, family dynamics, and sexuality in Hindi cinema.

The article examines the evolution of the depiction of domestic violence in Hindi films throughout the 1990s, linking these changing depictions with a transformation in social and legal perspectives regarding violence against women within familial contexts (Khan, 2016; Agarwal, 2014). In the 1970s, the issue of violence against women gained significant attention in India, sparking a socio-legal debate on domestic violence (Derné, 1999). This period initiated a wider discussion on women's rights and the urgent need to address violence within the home. However, the idea of recognising domestic violence as a punishable legal crime faced significant resistance. It had been argued that such measures would expose marital conflicts to public scrutiny, involving legal institutions like courts and police in what was traditionally seen as a personal and family matter. This hesitation to treat spousal violence as a public or political issue extended to Hindi cinema of that era. Film makers were often reluctant to depict domestic violence in a way that challenged societal norms or prompted public discourse.

In his reading of Hindi films, Derné argued that force and physical aggression were regarded as appropriate ways of expressing romantic love in Hindi cinema during the 1980s and 1990s (1999). As a result, violence in romantic and conjugal relationships was shown to be not only 'natural,' but also 'expected' (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). By overlooking the element of violence prevalent within marriage, the majority of Hindi films presented marital relationships as harmonious and romantic. In the 1990s, however, a slew of Hindi films such as *Agni Sakshi* (With Fire as Witness) (Ghosh, 1996), *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* (The King's Entourage Will Arrive) (Gaekwad, 1997), *Mehendi* (Henna) (Khan, 1998), *Daman*: *A Victim of Marital Violence* (Lajmi, 2001), and *Lajja* (Shame) (Santoshi, 2001), began depicting Hindu marriages as disharmonious and unromantic. This novel plot structure in Hindi cinema acknowledged the physical, sexual, verbal, economic, and emotional abuse of Indian women in the home, and portrayed the domestic sphere and marital relationship as abusive and violent.

Two contrasting explanations arise for this shift in the representation of domestic violence in Hindi cinema. On one hand, this change could be seen as a reflection of Hindi films aligning with liberal and radical feminist perspectives, advocating for women's rights, and embracing international conventions aimed at preventing violence against women. These films may have sought to bring attention to gender inequality and domestic abuse, supporting global efforts to empower women and protect their rights. On the other hand, this shift could also be interpreted as a response to the growing influence of western modernity, which challenges traditional Indian norms surrounding marriage and family. Rather than advocating for women's rights, these films may have engaged with the topic to resist western ideals and reinforce traditional values.

While investigating the above hypotheses it has been observed that the narrative set by these films rejected the problem of domestic violence as systemic and structural and instead linked it with scattered cases of dowry, alcoholism, mental illness, interpersonal incompatibility, and so on. It has been depicted as a normal and private matter in the movies for a long time. However, these films depict marital relationships as harsh and aggressive, in contrast to the prevalent perception of marriage as romantic, idealistic, and sacred. In all of these films, the wives either escape to break free from their abusive and cruel husbands or opt to confront them but in their personal capacity. They are not depicted as the 'epitome of virtue and values' (Shendurnikar, 2012) who in some senses 'worship' (Moini, 2011) their husbands. Such depiction often presents women as idealised figures who embody moral perfection, self-sacrifice, patience, and unwavering loyalty, especially in their roles as wives and mothers. Husbands are frequently given the status of a lord, expected to be treated by their wives with reverence and subservience, where their needs and desires are prioritised over those of the wives. Though the wives are stereotyped, the inequality in the husband-wife relationship is emphasised. This new incarnation of Indian women as nonconformists who are also reactive and loud in the face of marital violence marks a paradigm shift.

Hindi films have been selected as primary texts because they significantly impact India's social, cultural, and political values, particularly in the context of structural changes that affect women's relationships with their families, society, and the State (Shendurnikar, 2012). Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2003) refers to Bollywood (Hindi Cinema) as India's cultural industry because of its huge appeal to the country's common people. The 1990s added to its popularity and reach and were notable in the context of this study for several reasons. The 1990s can be viewed as a transitional phase, bridging the era where domestic violence was often depicted without recognition of its criminal or legal ramifications, to the present-day portrayal seen in films like *Thappad* (The Slap) (Sinha, 2020), where even the act of slapping a spouse is considered a punishable offence and may be cited as grounds for divorce (Sharma and Tripathi, 2023a). Hindi cinema emerged as a key instrument for the cultural transfer associated with globalisation, with Hindi filmmakers acting as cultural intermediaries between India and the West in the 1990s (Ganti, 2002). Hindi cinema frequently adapted Hollywood films and produced remakes as a safer strategy, leveraging plots that had already achieved success to minimise financial risk (Ganti, 2002). This trend saw a notable increase following India's adoption of the LPG policies in 1991, which opened the doors to global influences and greater integration with international markets. According to Rampal (2005), the influx of western cultural products, facilitated by the LPG reforms, encouraged filmmakers to increasingly draw from Hollywood narratives. This was not only a commercial decision but also a reflection of India's growing

engagement with global cinema, reshaping its storytelling approaches while adapting them to local sensibilities and preferences.

Movies have been instrumental in globalising social movements from the West to India. The 'Personal is political' movement, originating in America during the 1970s and reaching its peak in the 1990s (Domestic Violence Timeline, 2022) is a notable example of this phenomenon. This struggle to claim private space as political is also mirrored in Hindi cinema, notably through the portrayal of intimate marital issues like domestic violence and marital rape in popular films. In the 1990s, Bollywood presented a dual narrative when it came to family values and marital relations. On one side, films like *Swarg* (Heaven) (Dhawan, 1990), *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Who am I to You) (Barjatya, 1994), and *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (We are Together) (Barjatya, 1999) celebrated and idealised the institutions of family and marriage, portraying them as harmonious and virtuous. In contrast, a few films from the same period, including *Agni Sakshi*, *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat*, *Mehendi*, *Daman*, and *Lajja*, offered rare depictions of domestic violence, exposing the darker, abusive aspects of familial relationships that were often hidden behind the idealised portrayals in mainstream cinema. This unusual occurrence heralds the entry of the global feminist jurisprudential movements into India's cinematic canon, which prominently featured marriage as a site of women's oppression.

These films not only reflected global views on domestic violence but also assimilated and adjusted them to align with local and national perspectives. A key reason for the resistance to treating domestic violence as a criminal offence, as John suggested, was the perception that legal remedies like divorce and the criminalisation of spousal abuse were western constructs, seen as incompatible with India's cultural and social norms (John, 1998). The evolving portrayal of domestic violence in the 1990s films reflects the ongoing social and legal discussions surrounding this issue within the Indian judiciary, legislative bodies, academia, and society at large. The debate began in India in the 1970s, but the 1990s are particularly significant. In the beginning, there was no legal existence of crime called 'domestic violence' in the Indian statute books until the *Domestic Violence Act* was passed in 2005 (Patherya, 2017). However, the term 'cruelty' was in use to connote instances of domestic violence. The *Hindu Marriage Act* of 1955 offered judicial separation on grounds of 'cruelty' but no divorce. Later, in 1976, through the *Marriage Laws (Amendment) Act*, divorce was granted on grounds of cruelty (Save Indian Family Foundation, 2022). In the 1980s, violence against women was extensively debated in the Indian parliament. A series of reforms took place due to this engagement. In 1983, for the first time, India criminalised domestic violence through the addition of section 498A in the Indian Penal Code (IPC, 1860). During the extensive parliamentary debates between 1982 and 1986, the Indian legislature identified dowry-related violence as the major reason for domestic violence in Indian households (Gangoli, 2016). Therefore, in 1986, the *Prohibition of Dowry Amendment Act* defined 'dowry death' and recommended stricter punishments. Patherya (2017) and Gangoli and Rew (2011) argued that all these reforms were aimed at saving the institution of marriage and family structure. These measures were not primarily aimed at securing women's rights against violence (Patherya, 2017; Gangoli & Rew, 2011).

The evolution of Hindi films post-liberalisation introduced several innovative elements in the depiction of brides as non-conformist and dissenting. For instance, in the film *Mehndi*, Pooja (Rani Mukerji) kills her husband, and in *Daman*, Durga (Raveena Tandon) does the same. Characters like Mala (Rani Mukherji) in *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* and Vaidehi (Manisha Koirala) in *Lajja*, take a stand against the patriarchal atrocities against them in their matrimonial home while simultaneously performing their roles as brides with the utmost obedience and devotion, demonstrate innovation in portrayal of family and marriage. Families were portrayed as discordant, while marriages were depicted as abusive and violent (Sharma and Tripathi, 2023b). The male leads of these films like Vishwanath (Nana Patekar) in *Agni Sakshi*, Raj in Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat, Niranjan (Faraaz Khan) in *Mehndi*, Raghu (Jackie Shroff) in Lajja and Sanjoy (Sayaji Shinde) in *Daman* are all presented as aggressive and violent. Their marital relationships with their wives are portrayed as abusive and fraught with conflict (Sharma and Tripathi, 2023b). This representation can be better understood in the context of changes regarding domestic violence occurring along three trajectories concerning domestic violence: in the western world (Europe and America), on the international stage through United Nations conventions and treaties, and within the national arena encompassing judiciary and legislative reforms. Article 51 of the Indian Constitution mandates that the State should strive, among other things, to promote respect for international law and fulfil treaty obligations in its relations with other organised societies (Sanajaoba, 1998). Therefore, as a constitutionally committed member of the United Nations General Assembly, India embraced and adjusted to internationally accepted norms, including those concerning marriage and laws addressing domestic violence. During this period (1970s-1990s) Hindi films, as Desai claimed, underwent a 'revisualization of India' and a 'de-territorialization of the nation' to acknowledge the arrival of the new globalised world (Schaefer and Karan, 2011). The revisualisation in the films incorporates both the western epistemologies on domestic violence and the national legal interpretations of it.

The article is a narrative analysis of five films *Agni Sakshi, Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat, Mehndi, Daman*, and *Lajja* to explore them as 'contact zones' (Pratt, 2012) where narratives from the West and international laws and

conventions on domestic violence intersect with and are interpreted for the Indian audience. These films closely examine the relationship between political modernity and failed marriage plots in Hindi cinema. As Prasad highlights, although many of these films may not achieve commercial success, they collectively signify a historically significant phenomenon (2013). It is crucial to assess the portrayal of marriage and family as cultural institutions in these films not in isolation, but in their entirety, considering the historical shifts in the nation's political economy during the 1990s. The analysis focuses solely on plot structure, core story, and storytelling techniques to assess the postcolonial dilemma of embracing or rejecting modernity, which is often tied to western values portrayed as universal. Concurrently, it addresses the uncertainty surrounding the continuation or rejection of traditional values that are exploitative, patriarchal, and oppressive to women.

HINDI CINEMA AS THE 'CONTACT ZONE'

Following the fall of the USSR and the approval of the LPG policy in 1991, India also entered a period of West-led globalisation. These socio-cultural trends and reforms also impacted how Hindi cinema imagined marriage and spousal relationships. With the newfound diversity in cultural spaces, where dominant frameworks (global framework of women's rights) are both reinforced and subverted simultaneously, Hindi films in the 1990s navigated a path between adopting international liberal views on spousal violence and maintaining the sanctity of Indian cultural institutions like marriage and family. The plot of the classic American film on domestic violence, *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Ruben, 1991) inspired a number of Hindi cinema on the topic. Three back-to-back remakes[2] of *Sleeping with the Enemy* in Hindi were released: *Yaraana* (Friendship) (Dhawan, 1995), *Agni Sakshi* (1996), and *Daraar* (Rift) (Abbas and Mustan, 1996) (Siddiqui, 2013).

Despite being remakes of the American film, these films did not entirely reject local culture. The remakes carefully translated Hollywood's conceptualisation of spousal violence into Indian contexts. In the film *Agni Sakshi*, Suraj (Jackie Shroff), Ravi's (Ravi Behl) older brother, is still single, making it impossible for Ravi and his beloved Divya (Divya Dutta) to be married. This type of cultural coding, which mandates the marriage of older siblings before the younger ones get engaged, cannot be found in any 'original' American movie (Manas, 2022: 1). However, the response cannot be considered a manifestation of 'cultural insiderism' (Gilroy, 2003) which constructs the nation as an ethnically homogeneous entity, reinforcing notions of ethnic purity and distinctiveness. These films navigate a space between cultural insiderism and cultural fusion, capturing the tension between the pursuit of modernity and the pride in national and ethnic heritage.

The institution of heterosexual marriage, which in India has been accorded the status of a sacrament[3] was shown in these films with great care. The abusive and violent men are not killed by their wives in any of the three Hindi remakes, unlike in the American version, where Laura (Julia Roberts) shoots her husband (Martin) three times and kills him at the end of the film. In *Yaraana*, however, Lalita (Madhuri Dixit), stabs JB (Raj Babbar) to kill him, but Raj (Rishi Kapoor) ultimately ends up killing him. In the remaining two films, the psychopathic husbands take their own lives. The narrative of these films deviates from the cultural coding of the original film in that a wife killing her husband cannot be presented in the Indian context because it directly undermines the institution of marriage. Ganti argues that the process of 'Indianization' was, in her view, a way of creating a distinction between India and the West (2002). However, the death of the abusive husbands in these films serves the political and cultural purpose of the film by not offending the sacramental view of marriage in India. If the story had concluded with the husband being divorced or held criminally liable, it would have violated the belief that marriage is indissoluble and the spousal relationship is sacred and divine.

The portrayal of family, marriage, and spousal relationships in these films is neither purely Indian nor entirely global; it represents a hybrid conceptualisation where global and local elements intersect. This raises a significant question: how should these films be interpreted as texts that integrate narratives from both international (Particularly the West) and national contexts? Mary Louise Pratt coined the term 'contact zone' to describe social spaces where cultures intersect, often in contexts marked by unequal power dynamics such as colonialism or slavery, and their contemporary legacies worldwide. Drawing on Guaman Poma's artwork, Pratt suggests that contact zones typically arise as marginalised groups adopt and adapt materials from dominant cultures. Pratt uses Guaman Poma's artwork in her concept of the contact zone because it exemplifies the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters and power imbalances. Guaman Poma de Ayala was a 17th-century Indigenous Andean chronicler who addressed his '*Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*' to King Philip III of Spain. In his illustrations, Poma combines

[2] Film database websites like IMDb and Wikipedia confirm that *Agni Sakshi*, *Yaarana*, and *Daraar* are remakes of the Hollywood movie *Sleeping with the Enemy*.

[3] A sacramental marriage is considered a sacred and divine covenant that goes beyond a legal contract. In Hinduism, marriage is seen as a holy union ordained by God. This view emphasises the spiritual and eternal aspects of the marital relationship, often regarding it as indissoluble and inviolable.

European and Andean artistic traditions, creating a hybrid form of communication that reflects the tension and exchange between colonists and the colonised (Fraser, 1996).

In the context of Indian cinema, exposure to global competition, particularly from Hollywood, led to a tendency to emulate dominant discourses from the West and reinterpret them for Indian audiences. This complex portrayal of domestic violence reflects a 'double consciousness' (Gilroy, 2003): one of being global citizens under international legal frameworks and the other of being Indian and Hindu. The double consciousness that Paul Gilroy attributes to Black people living in Europe, particularly in Britain, is arguably a broader condition. It is characteristic not only of people of African descent but also of numerous other groups displaced and/or marginalised as a result of European colonialism (Roy, 2023), and of course, India is a part of this group. Scholars like Fernando Ortiz have used the term 'transculturation' to depict processes in which members of marginalised groups select and innovate from cultural materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture (Pratt, 2012). Subordinate populations typically lack control over what originates from the 'dominant' (Pratt, 2012) culture; they do exert varying degrees of influence over what elements are assimilated into their own culture and how they are utilised. Transculturation, akin to autoethnography, is a phenomenon observed within contact zones (Pratt, 2012). Hence, the remakes of these films can be analysed as contact zones where American cinematic views on justice against domestic violence intersect with Indian conditions and cultural appropriations of these views.

There are films that, while not direct remakes of *Sleeping with the Enemy*, explore a similar theme of a psychopathic husband inflicting cruelty upon his wife and killing the husband as a form of justice. These films take greater liberties in adapting the theme of a cruel husband as the cause of domestic violence, incorporating more local cultural contexts. In the film, *Daman*, Kalpana Lajmi depicts spousal violence between Sanjoy and Durga. Durga, a young woman from an impoverished family, marries Sanjoy Saikia, a rich landowner. Forced marriage and mental illness of Sanjoy appear to be the main causes of Durga's suffering in the marriage, which includes beatings, marital rape, and psychological torture. Sanjoy, who is depicted as a psychopath, rejects Durga as his wife and abuses her verbally and physically. Similar to the film *Sleeping with the Enemy*, Durga manages to flee her psychopathic husband's relentless pursuit in this film. However, Sanjoy finds Durga in the action's conclusion and tries to kill his daughter, Deepa, and Durga has to kill him to rescue Deepa. As the problem is hardly depicted as a patriarchal and political problem; the involvement of the Police or court in the protagonists' personal lives is minimised and marginalised in the film. In the Indian remakes despite experiencing physical and psychological abuse at home, the wife hardly ever calls the police. When the Police attempt to assist Durga, she rejects their assistance and also refuses to grant Sanjoy a divorce.

Similarly, the plot of the 1998 film *Mehndi* scarcely challenges the prevailing norms of male dominance and aggression against women, instead attributing the spousal violence to the custom of dowry. The film examines the debates surrounding how the 'unlawful demand for any property or valuable security,' commonly known as dowry, contributes to domestic violence (Sharma and Tripathi, 2023b). The story revolves around Pooja, a young woman from a middle-class background, and Niranjan, a wealthy engineer. When Pooja's father fails to provide an adequate dowry, Niranjan's family begins to torment Pooja both physically and psychologically, pressuring her to end the marriage so that Niranjan can remarry and secure another dowry. Pooja represents millions of young Hindu brides who are often deemed insignificant within their marital households unless they bring a dowry (Gangoli & Rew, 2011). The verbal abuse and mental torture she endures due to the unfulfilled dowry demands highlight the prevalent issue of bride harassment, torture, and even murder, driven by the groom's family's intent to secure financial benefits through a subsequent marriage (Shaha and Mohanthy, 2006). From a feminist perspective, the view of dowry as a form of assurance to avoid abuse within a marriage illustrates a severe case of women being treated as commodities and deprived of their rights to equality, autonomy, and agency (Bradley and Pallikadavath, 2013).

However, legislative discussions in India often focus on preserving 'Indian' culture and perpetuate the notion that 'women are women's worst enemies' (Gangoli, 2016; Gangoli and Rew, 2011; Lundberg, 2012), thus trivialising violence against women. The debates on the amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1986, for instance, included stereotypes of the 'villainous' mother-in-law who tortures her daughter-in-law, sometimes to death (Gangoli & Rew, 2011; Lundberg, 2012). This discourse largely overlooked violence against single women, as it primarily concentrated on dowry-related violence (Gangoli, 2016). In the film Mehndi, the police are depicted as corrupt and ineffective, consistently siding with the perpetrators in exchange for bribes. When the family cannot force Pooja out, they resort to the legal system to pursue a divorce. In a courtroom confrontation, Pooja's father defends her honour against character assassination by Niranjan's relatives. He implores the court judge to halt the divorce proceedings, fearing it will tarnish his daughter's and family's honour. He suggests that they not only want to divorce Pooja but also to humiliate her in a court of law and deprive her of the right to live by disgracing her honour. He asserts that he will never allow them to do so. He promises to persuade Pooja to sign the divorce papers without contesting them legally, accepting all the pain and suffering as their fate. The

altercation in the court turns violent, leading to Pooja's father's death. Driven by grief and a desire for retribution, Pooja ultimately kills Niranjan, not solely in response to the domestic abuse she has endured, but as vengeance for her father's murder and the cumulative injustices inflicted upon her.

Throughout the film, Pooja is portrayed as a traditional Indian wife and daughter, striving to preserve her marriage despite the abuse. Her climactic act of rebellion, killing Niranjan, signifies her rejection of the typical Indian 'wife' role. Instead, she embraces her identity as a daughter who avenges her father's death by killing him. However, this transformation occurs only after she is compelled to choose between loyalty to her abusive husband and devotion to her loving father. In both the situations her identity remains subsumed under her roles and responsibilities as a wife and daughter, highlighting the tension between personal agency (modern universal value) and societal expectations (conventional cultural responsibilities).

POLITICAL MODERNITY AND THE FAILED MARRIAGE PLOTS VIS À VIS HINDI CINEMA

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) opines that the concept of 'political modernity,' characterised by governance through modern institutions like the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprises, cannot be understood globally without referencing certain categories and concepts deeply rooted in European intellectual and theological traditions. Ideas such as citizenship, the state, civil society, the public sphere, human rights, legal equality, individuality, public-private distinctions, the notion of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, and scientific rationality are all heavily influenced by European history and thought (Chakrabarty, 2000). In simple terms, one could argue that historicism was a key ideology representing progress or 'development' from the nineteenth century onwards. It portrayed modernity or capitalism as not just a global phenomenon but as developments that started in one place (Europe) and gradually spread worldwide. This 'first in Europe, then elsewhere' framework of global historical time is historicist. Various non-western nationalisms later created local versions of this narrative, substituting 'Europe' with a locally defined centre (Chakrabarty, 2000). This modernisation drive can be linked with the introduction of 'failed marriage plots' in Hindi cinema of the 1990s.

In the late 20th century, globalisation, led by America and western Europe, spurred cultural migration worldwide. Developing countries like India responded in diverse ways to this globalised modernity (Chowdhury, 2021). A key aspect of this modernity agenda is gender equality and the protection of women's rights, including combating domestic violence. Originating in western nations like the UK and the USA, movements against domestic violence were later adopted by the UN and introduced to developing nations like India through the 'discourse of developmentalism' (Ching, 2010). This may be confirmed by temporal analysis of social and political developments in the West. Women in the USA organised against domestic violence in the 1970s. 'We will not be beaten' became a well-known catchphrase of the movement aimed at creating homes free of abuse for women (Domestic Violence Timeline, 2022). The majority of US states permitted wives to file criminal charges against their violent husbands in 1975. During the 1970s and 1980s, women were mobilised by the 'personal is political' slogan and the 'Take Back the Night' organisation to speak out against the domestic violence issue in the USA. By the 1990s, almost all the states in the US had criminalized marital rape (Domestic Violence Timeline, 2022). These movements were also subtly incorporated into American movies to raise awareness of domestic violence and shed light on the perilous and shadowy world of the private sphere. Hindi cinema of the 1990s took up the issue of domestic violence debated across the world, placed it in national contexts and rejected the idea that personal is political by suggesting that domestic violence is only and always private and personal.

The cinematic imagination of the 'failed marriage plots' (Harrison, 2014) is also rooted in the colonial history of India. Owing to the intervention of the British colonial administration the sacramental union of Hindu marriage gradually evolved into a blend of social and legal union. Harrison notes that despite politically charged claims about the sanctity and timelessness of marriage, the modern western concept of marriage is relatively recent (2014). Historically, marriage primarily served to create alliances between families rather than to express romantic love between individuals. A key development in this evolution has been the 'sentimentalization' of marriage; the idea that love and emotional intimacy, chosen freely by both spouses, should be its foundation (Harrison, 2014). This framework can be utilised to analyse the depiction of the Hindu marriage system in films to determine whether it underwent similar changes, given that both Britain and India experienced the historical process of sentimentalising marriage during the 19th century when India was under British colonial rule. Building on the conceptual frameworks of historicism and sentimentalisation of marriage, the article examines how the narrative of domestic violence emerged in the West (Europe and America) and how these narratives on family, marriage and violence have been adopted, adapted, and challenged within Indian cultural spaces, especially in Hindi cinema.

The film Lajja (2001) presents various marriage plots that explore different issues leading to failed marriages, such as dowry, infidelity, and violence. However, the central plot focuses on the marriage between an Indian woman and an Indian-American man, where spousal violence is attributed to cross-cultural incompatibility. The

protagonist of the story, Vaidehi, is married to Raghu, a wealthy Indian-American businessman. After their marriage, she moves to America, but to her disappointment, she discovers that Raghu does not embody her ideal of a loyal and devoted Indian husband. The cultural mismatch and the clash between Indian traditions and American modernity become the primary sources of conflict between Vaidehi and Raghu. Raghu describes himself as a modern American-Indian man who does not think it is inappropriate to touch and kiss another woman despite the fact that he is married. Raghu's defence of American modern culture is rejected by Vaidehi, who embodies the Indian perspective that views this form of modernity as undermining the sanctity of Hindu marriage. This disagreement between the couple frequently escalates into violent confrontations, during which Raghu physically assaults and psychologically torments her through slapping, beating, and torture.

In response, Vaidehi decides to break free from the role of a submissive wife and returns to India, leaving her husband behind (Devi, 2018). Her act is a deviance from what is expected from a married woman in Hindu society. Consequently, upon her return, she faces rejection from her family, as they view the return of a married woman to her parental home as a stigma and shameful for the family. The very Indian culture that she defends in America fails to support her when she chooses to leave her abusive marriage. In Hindu marriage, the family holds a significant role, adhering to the framework of the kinship alliance model. This model encourages the formation of extended family networks, placing upon the married couple the duty of continuing and preserving the alliance (Harrison, 2014). Consequently, spouses often find themselves compelled to prioritise family and community welfare over their personal conflicts, fostering compromise and cooperation. These networks facilitate the sharing of resources, labour, and social support, as well as the exchange of economic gifts associated with marriage, such as bride wealth or dowry (Harrison, 2014; Riazi, 2025).

In Hindu families, one of the primary objectives of heterosexual marriage is to have a child, particularly a male heir, as it is seen as crucial for the family's salvation and continuity. A woman's status is tied to her procreative role, bringing her respect and affection from her in-laws (Mehta & Kapadia, 2008). When Raghu and his father learn that Vaidehi is pregnant and unfortunately Raghu has become impotent after an accident, they try to convince her to return. Vaidehi refuses to return after learning that her husband's changed behaviour is part of a conspiracy to keep her until she gives birth to an heir, only to abandon her afterwards. By defying social conventions and refusing to go back, she finds no support from her parents or the police. Society expects her to serve her husband and uphold the marriage, rather than recognizing her as an individual deserving of justice and respect (Qamar, 2015). While addressing the contemporary issue of domestic violence, Lajja reflects a tendency toward double consciousness. On one hand, in line with modern individualism, the narrative empowers Vaidehi to prioritise her own safety and self-respect over kinship responsibilities by leaving Raghu. On the other hand, it criticises modernity as a factor that undermines the sanctity of Hindu marriage traditions and culture.

The film Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat (RKAB) also addresses the issue of domestic violence, treating it as a private and personal matter. At a time when domestic violence (Meler & Marnin-Distelfeld, 2023) and the institution of marriage are under social and legal scrutiny, the film highlights this issue on screen. However, it attributes the violence to capitalist inequality, portraying it as the exploitation of a poor woman, Mala, by a wealthy man (Raj). Raj (Shadaab Khan) is the son of Rai Bahadur (Saeed Jaffrey), a wealthy businessman. Raj, blinded by the intoxication of wealth, disregards social and cultural morals. His character embodies the rich philanderers of modern urban India who fail to respect family values. He is equally disliked by his family members and his acquaintances for his lascivious nature. When Raj persuades Mala to get into his car and gives her a ride home, Mala's foster father, Daad Ji (Gulshan Grover), becomes angry. He remarks that wealthy, lascivious men like Raj do not help poor men in need, but rather, they assist young women from whom they hope to gain sexual favours. Even Mala consistently rejects Raj's flirtations and proposals. At a friend's wedding, during a heated exchange, Mala publicly slaps Raj, deeply wounding his pride. In a vengeful act, Raj rapes her to avenge this humiliation. Raj's character as a lascivious philanderer is firmly established before this rape episode, which is politically significant as the film portrays him as the type of man who becomes a bad husband and contributes to social issues like domestic violence. Thus, the film follows the same strategy as Yaraana, Daraar, Agni Sakshi, and Daman, attributing the prevalence of domestic violence in India to an individual trait such as psychopathy and lasciviousness rather than blaming the institution of marriage as unequal and oppressive. In the film RKAB, the blame falls on a morally bankrupt, wealthy, arrogant philanderer, Raj.

When Mala approaches the court for justice against the rape, the court orders Raj to marry Mala as atonement for his crime (Hasan, 2021). Rape is portrayed as a betrayal of Mala's family's honour, and the only harm that results from the crime is assumed to be that Mala will be unable to get married because her honour (virginity) has been compromised. Hence, if Raj marries Mala, the family's loss of social standing and Mala's marriage-related insecurity can be compensated. The individual loss or damage to Mala's psyche and her body because of the rape is concealed and marginalised. At the cost of Mala's individuality and sexual agency, the family's honour is prioritised in the court's verdict. Similarly, when Mala faces domestic abuse and life threats from Raj and his family, as it was an imposed marriage on him, Mala's response to the abuse is stereotypical as she attempts to

save her marriage at any cost. The abuse is shown to some extent as an essential part of the process of adjustment and readjustment for the new bride in the new home. The several attempts made by Raj's family to murder Mala are evocative of the bride-burning or dowry death occurrences that frequently took the form of accidents in the police records (Patherya, 2017). Eventually, Mala succeeds in gaining her husband's affection and devotion by risking her own life to protect him from the poison of the cobra (Khan, 2016). She also gains the family's trust by defending them from the police who arrive to investigate Mala's injuries. The movie depicts domestic violence in India in light of the political and legal debates of the time. However, the societal narratives that dominate Indian society's views on marriage and spousal are continually reinforced (Sen, 2019).

POSTCOLONIAL CONFUSION AND THE MIXED CONSCIOUSNESS

Leo Ching (2010) articulates the ambiguous attitude of the Third World nations over issues concerning rights, justice, and equality by saying that the West generates 'theory' while the non-West supplies 'facts' to the nation-specific concern to re-conceptualise existing or new social problems (Ching, 2010). Rao reasserts the question '[h]ow does globalisation force us to rethink culture in new ways and through new problematics?' (2007) posed by Shome and Hegde (2002) to understand this west versus non-west contest in the globalisation era. She traces a 'tension between modernity and tradition, westernisation and indigeneity, evolved in the cinematic imagination' (Rao, 2007). The transnational circulation of ideologies in post-1990s India Through both legal changes and cultural representations such as film has influenced Indian cultural values but could not alter them completely (Schaefer & Karan, 2011). As a result, both the Hindi films and the laws on domestic violence create a poor replica of modernity or hang as 'incomplete modernity' (Rao, 2007). Therefore, these films cannot be categorised as only global or local, but they can better be called 'glocal' (Matusitz & Payano, 2011), which comprises both universal and local.

The depiction of domestic violence in the films takes inspiration from both Indian Socio-legal conceptions and international legal and feminist movements. The act of not being obedient, steadfast, and submissive in the face of abuse itself reflects the radical feminist ideas that made women aware of the flaws in these idealised traits of fidelity, endurance, and subordination. The wife figures in these films similarly reject the godlike status of their respective spouses. In addition to this, the movies also acknowledge the India-specific cultural rationales behind domestic abuse in India. These accept psychopathic disorder, status incompatibility and dowry as major reasons for violence. Portraying domestic violence as sporadic, isolated incidents caused by specific reasons shifts the focus from the debate on individual rights to the issue of social evil (Sharma and Tripathi, 2023b).

In the films, Agni Sakshi, Daman, and Mehendi, the murder of the abusive husband, is projected as justice and the only way to freedom from violence. However, in films like RKAB and Lajja, the wives succeed in earning back their husbands' care and support through their unshakable belief in their wifely merits and devotion and adherence to the fundamental values of Indian womanhood. The films, therefore, reflect and refract the global discourse on domestic violence as well as Indian beliefs about it. Western theories on patriarchy and the notion of women's victimisation through the institution of marriage are accepted. However, traditional beliefs are not explicitly challenged.

CONCLUSION

Although the portrayal of domestic or gender-based violence in films *Agni Sakshi*, *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat*, *Mehendi*, *Daman*, and *Lajja* includes certain stereotypes, they also highlight the inherent inequality in the husband-wife relationship, presenting a new image of Indian women as reactive and assertive in the face of marital violence. This marks a significant departure from traditional depictions of women who used to be subservient and silent in the face of domestic abuse. The narratives of these failed marriage plots reflect a complex consciousness that intertwines political modernity with tradition. This mixed consciousness emerges from the postcolonial struggle to balance the adoption of modern values often seen as western and universal with the retention of traditional, patriarchal norms. Mixed consciousness arises at the intersection of global human rights narratives and local socio-cultural and legal contexts, resulting in a hybrid awareness that navigates the challenges of modernity while grappling with deeply entrenched traditional values. This complex awareness is emblematic of the ongoing negotiation between modernity and tradition in postcolonial societies, particularly in the representation of domestic violence in Hindi cinema.

This narrative analysis reveals that the international campaigns against domestic violence during the 1990s have significantly influenced both legal and cinematic discourses. The global movement addressed domestic violence in different ways, leading to varying interpretations, but these interpretations were interconnected. Changes in legal frameworks in the USA and UK, along with international conventions, contributed to a growing awareness of domestic violence, which in turn influenced its portrayal in cinema. In Hindi cinema, films addressing domestic violence were often inspired by Hollywood's approach and international and national legal

definitions of cruelty. However, these films tended to present cruelty as an isolated issue, often connected to specific social problems like dowry, modern decadent morality and medical issues such as psychopathy, thereby fragmenting the portrayal of domestic violence and failing to challenge the inequality and coercion prevalent in cultural institution of marriage and family. The global influence on the discourse around domestic violence compelled Hindi cinema to engage with the issue, positioning it as a key cultural instrument for shaping public consciousness. All the films discussed in this chapter reflect a broader trend in popular Hindi cinema, where domestic or gender-based violence is depicted as a series of isolated incidents, rather than as a systemic and structural form of violence against women.

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