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Behind the Veil: Freedom of Choices in ‘Dor’ and ‘Parched’

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how women use their cultural setting and social background to navigate their lives within their oppressive settings, further exploring women's ability to cope with patriarchy, which is either by following or by bending the rules, in the direction of their favour as an attempt to survive patriarchy. Two Hindi movies entitled *Dor* and *Parched* with the similar setting of Rajasthan, India has been used to execute this study. The approach used in this study is the Feminist Postmodern theory and through its perspectives, this study explores women's choices and experiences in surviving the patriarchal ordeal. Both movies depict the life of women who are bound to house chores and are oppressed by their own family members in the name of culture and tradition. Both movies ended with the women going against the tradition in order to end the suffering in their lives. Hence, it is hoped that this study will bring awareness to both males and females who subjugate women. Moreover, it is hoped that readers would see that women can actually have a say and are able to break free from their misery should they have the courage and proper support.

Introduction

The film industry around the world has boomed over the years with story plots inspired by history, daily real life experiences and imaginable folly. In the name of entertainment, we are exposed to differing cultures and languages. Similar to Hollywood, Bollywood in India is a large film industry which cast movies in Hindi language. Bollywood has bred many actors and actresses along with a host of movies, from love fantasy to biographical entries. In films such as these, viewers get to perceive the cultural and religious practices, mesmerising dance and song sequences along with the daily disputes and concerns regarding expectations as well as the reality of myriad situations; although some portrayal of life experiences may be overly exaggerated in order to sensationalise the movies. One issue that Bollywood has never failed to portray is the struggle of a woman within the Indian society. It is widely known that women's subjugation has caused women's self to be marginalized and patriarchal practices have been identified as women's premier source of oppression (Kandiyoti, 2015). In addition, cultural settings and social backgrounds also play an important role in determining

how the women juggle to find ways in overcoming the challenges they face on regular basis in their day to day lives (Fraser & Nicholson, 2013).

The Fusion of Culture and Religion

The cause of women's oppression has been recognized to have originated from dominant patriarchal cultural practices in society and family institutions (Kandiyoti, 2015). Women in general, have always been associated with domesticity. Most parents have always taught their daughters about how to be an obedient daughter, a helpful sister, a devoted wife, a caring mother and a good daughter-in-law, but seldom coached them to stand up for their rights. With such 'mental nourishment', many women grew up allowing themselves to be oppressed, accepting it as the fate of being a female being.

On the other hand, there are actually no clear cuts to distinguish which values belong to culture and which belong to religion for they are entrenched in the cultural system (Scupin, 2012). This is because the combination of both has developed a value system which consists of interconnected rules, norms, traditions as well as restrictions, teaching and philosophy (Scupin, 2012). Interestingly, the community of each society has shaped a society's religious view, in which society's culture has been fitted in to suit the society (Scupin, 2012); these are being put into practice. Patriarchy itself is a culture as it has been passed down through generations (Kandiyoti, 2015).

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions existing in the world and it is unified with the Indian culture (Religions: Hinduism, 2009). It originated around the Indus Valley, India. Hindus believe in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth which is dictated by Karma (Religions: Hinduism, 2009). In the beginning, during the Vedic years, women had equal rights as men (Jayaram, n.d). In fact, many Hindu deities are female, worshiped by all Hindus. Men in Hinduism are expected to care for the women in their life with love and respect, provide them shelter and protect them from any harm (Jayaram, n.d). It also claims that "Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased. Where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards." (The Manu Law in Jayaram, n.d).

However, as time passed by and patriarchy became the norm, women were mistreated. Instead of receiving protection from men, husbands' mostly, would exert oppression on women in the name of religion. Domestic violence and pressure to breed male descendants were the usual practice. Abortion of female fetuses, bride burning and dowry related problems were common (Jayaram, n.d.). As education and globalisation stepped in, both men and women in the Hindu religion have learnt the Vedas and acknowledge the true concept of Hinduism. The Vedas are the Hindu religious scriptures which consist of "a collection of hymns and other ancient religious texts written in India between about 1500 and 1000 BCE" (Voilatti, 2018). These scriptures provide guidelines and inform the religious duties one should perform as a Hindu (Voilatti, 2018). Thus, respect, dignity and space are slowly crawling into the life of literate Hindu women. Nevertheless, on the whole, the community is still upholding the norms which are a mix of religion and culture (Jayaram, n.d.). Cultural practices along with religious teachings play a vital role in shaping women's identities.

Issues of Concern

Women in the past are claimed to have more patience and higher virtues. The divorce rate in the past was also low. The reality of these claims has not been vividly explored. This is because

traditional women's submissive attitudes seem to indicate their adaptation to oppressive situations. The lack of understanding and ignorance on the diversity of women's experiences and women's ways to negotiate patriarchy has led to the formation of misconceptions about the women. Hence, this study will examine the reasons why the female characters stayed in the oppressive situations. It also aims to unfold the life choices the female characters made within the patriarchal surrounding.

Significance of the Study

By analysing the movies through the perspectives of Feminist Postmodern Theory and focusing on women's lives in patriarchal societies in Rajasthan, this study will reveal the reality of womanhood and assist the readers to understand that not all women are subscribed to the stereotypical representation of weak and submissive beings. This study will provide readers an opportunity to see the circumstances that weaken women to endure their fate. It will also expose the breaking point at which the women strategise ways in surviving within the patriarchal framework they are in.

Hence, this study is believed to be significant as it hopes to provide readers an insight into women's self; their cleverness, bravery and desperation in bargaining their destiny and revealing patriarchy's over arching dominance. Besides that, it is hoped that this study will bring awareness to the males who undermine the women in their lives and to women who oppress other women. Moreover, it allows readers to see that women can actually have a say and are able to break free from their misery should they have the courage and support. Hopefully, this study will enforce readers to have a second thought on the standpoint of women in patriarchal settings.

The Movies

The movie *Dor*, directed by Nagesh Kukunoor and was released on 22 September 2006 while *Parched* was directed by Leena Yadav and released on 23 September 2016. These movies have been chosen respectively because the setting of these movies depicts our current century in terms of millennium years. Despite having a gap of a decade, the lives of women in Rajasthan haven't undergone much change. Both movies provide a clear depiction of how women lived their lives, as the portrayal of women's submissiveness in succumbing to societal norms and practices in Rajasthan have been vividly entailed. Bonded to tradition, covered under the veil and enslaved to house chores, the women strive to earn a decent living. In the Deccan Chronicle a local Indian newspaper, Rajasthan was reported as not a safe place for women. In 2017 alone, there were 789 rape cases and 98 incest rape cases which were reported (Bohrra, 2017). Besides that, 56.1% of women there are illiterate and 6.3% are married and pregnant by 19 years of age (Bohrra, 2017). These alarming statistics are exclusive of those unreported cases as not all families would step forward to report a shaming occurrence. Women are still marginalised in education whereas child bearing is still a priority to the masses in Rajasthan.

Dor depicts the life of high status people; people born in higher cast, with better economical state who own lands and properties. Meera, a young lady, lost her husband who was the only son of the family to whom she was recently married to. Life as a widow was a torture as she was subjected to domesticity and accused to have brought bad luck to the family. She fled at the sight of being treated as a commodity by her father in law; her youthful body in exchange of the Havali; the family

mansion which is inherited from one generation to another. A Haveli acclaims the family status within the society (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.).

Parched, on the other hand, illustrates the life of the lower class people in a village. Rani, a widow, marries off her teenage spoilt son, aged 17 years old to Janaki, a 15 year old girl, only to witness the flashback of her own married life on a daily basis, with the beatings and marital rapes. Rani befriends Lajjo, a childless woman who not only suffers an abusive marriage but is also looked down by society and her husband for being infertile. Both Rani and Lajjo have secretly befriended Bijli, a beautiful prostitute who earns a living as a sex worker, at times to serve multiple men in rough sex. All four women take off into new pathways at the point when they realise that their existence will never be appreciated by anyone.

These movies allow readers to visualise the experiences of the women and understand the restrictions which force them to comply to their social cultural practices and also the point which beckons them to make the choice to break away from their present situation.

Feminist Postmodern Theory

To analyse this qualitative research, Feminist Postmodern Theory is employed. This specific theory is selected as it stresses the importance of the reality that women all over the world do not experience identical obstacles even within the same conditions. It supports the notion that different domains evaluate different customs and traditions thus causing hurdles to women in differing circumstances (Fraser & Nicholson, 2013). It further claims that women from similar nations, with equivalent cultures may yet face diverse challenges (Fraser & Nicholson, 2013). This theory is also opted for as it claims that the notion of masculinity and femininity is constructed by society. It advocates the fact that women are not all passive as some are capable of limiting their oppression (Flax, 2013). It further highlights that intelligence is equal in both genders (Flax, 2013). It also privileges that certain positions in certain domains administer them to be in control (Flax, 2013). (*This is theory..can I retain*)

Resemblances and Disparities

The movie tittle *Dor* is a Hindi word which carries the meaning of string, cord or thread (EngHindi.com., n.d) while the movie titled *Parched* is an English word which means dehydrated, burned or dried (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). *Dor* portrays the life of a woman as a widowed daughter in-law while *Parched* portrays the life of women struggling to make ends meet as the bread winners by weaving thick blankets. Both movies have some similarities. Both movies depict the life of women as wives in the desert area of Rajasthan. The women are bound to house chores and are seen to be under the veil almost all the time as that is what the culture requires (Jayaram, n.d). In both movies, the troubled women never mentioned returning to their biological parents to seek help. It is a tradition in India, that once a girl is married; she is not to return to her parents' house as her home is where her husband is (Jayaram, n.d). Both movies ended with the women abandoning their life of suffering; they fled from their husbands' house and village. They went against the tradition to start new lives, but at a new place; for within the same village they would not be able to make any difference.

There are also some differences between the two movies. *Dor* depicts the life of higher class women while *Parched* depicts the life of the lower class women. In *Dor*, Meera's husband was the breadwinner and his death has caused her father-in-law to become the provider again. In *Parched*, the women worked hard to earn their living. Besides taking care of house and bearing children, they needed to work to make ends meet as their husbands would spend their income on liquor and prostitutes. In *Dor*, Meera was loved by her husband. Even her parents-in-law were a loving couple. Shankar, Meera's husband was never abusive towards her, be it in daily or sexual affairs. Meera's parents-in-law too had never hit Meera. However, in *Parched*, husbands hitting their wives was common. Rani, Janaki and Lajjo were always hit by their husbands before being violated for sex. Wife battering was a norm and physical abuse by in-laws was also customary in India. However, people of higher class seemed to treat their women slightly better than the lower class people (Vikalp, n.d).

Upper Class Folly

In *Dor*, Meera was bonded to Shankar her newly wedded husband, who was the sole bread winner of the family. Working in Saudi Arabia, Shankar was affectionate towards Meera, the love of his life. Meera's in-laws were heavily dependent on the money Shankar was earning. Shankar's father was emotionally tied-up to his old Haveli; the symbol of his social status and his family hereditary property, which was the stake of his honour. The old Haveli was under restoration when Shankar died in a quarrel- detaching all the attachment and changing all the ties. The impact of Shankar's death hit the family badly. They lost their sole source of income to complete the restoration of the Haveli. At the same time they were running out of money to buy household necessities and food supply.

Shankar's death had caused Meera to be the victim of oppression. Shankar's parents vented their anger and frustration on Meera by getting her to do all the house chores. She was treated as an unpaid servant; no longer as a daughter-in-law. She was accused of bringing bad luck. Meera, coping with her grief, wept silently within her life of a widow. Despite coming from and living in an honourable family, she lived a demeaning life. A widow is not allowed to be happy as the meaning of her life ended with the death of her husband (Jayaram, n.d). She was trapped in the house and was only allowed to visit the temple in the afternoons for a short period of time. Meera knew she was ill-treated, but she permitted it to happen. Despite being capable of seeing and thinking that injustice was taking place, she silently abided by all instructions given and dutifully did all the chores assigned to her. This was due to the fact that Meera had no means of going anywhere.

The most logical rationale as to why Meera gave in to the subjugation is because she was following the tradition. Growing up within the cultural practises, she was aware of how she should conduct herself. She was conditioned to accept subjugation as part of life (Kandiyoti, 2015). In the Indian culture, a daughter-in-law is expected to obey her parents-in-law. Returning to one's biological parents' house is considered as an act of disgrace. Many biological parents never accept their daughters back, as the action is considered shameful and would tarnish their family name (Vikalp, n.d). The fact that Meera was able to see injustice taking place shows that she is intelligent (Flax, 2013); while allowing herself to be treated unjustly shows that different context and circumstances assess customs and traditions differently, thus causing hurdles to women in differing circumstances (Fraser & Nicholson, 2013).

The peak of the movie shows the bargain between Meera's father in-law and Mr Ravi, the potential buyer of the Haveli. At first, Mr Ravi was showing interest in buying the Haveli but at a low price. After laying his eyes on Meera, a young widow under the veil, he offers money and the Haveli to Meera's father in-law in return for having Meera as his mistress for a few months. Although at first her father in-law was upset with the offer, it did not take him longer than a day to reconsider and accept the offer. Selling the Haveli off was a sign of failure which would have affected his reputation in the society. On the other hand, causing his daughter in-law to lose her honour secretly within the four walls of his house would not tarnish his family honour. Men in patriarchal society are capable of sacrificing any woman within their household to get their means (Kandiyoti, 1995).

The news soon reached Meera and it enraged her to the extent that she decided to run away with her friend -Zeenat. Zeenat is the wife of the man who was accused of killing Shankar in Saudi Arabia. In Zeenat's quest to get Meera's signature to set her husband free from the accusation of killing, Zeenat and Meera became friends, spent time talking at the temple, the only place Meera was permitted to visit. Meera saw how self-empowered Zeenat was with her thoughts, actions and decisions. Friendship with Zeenat has given Meera a new hope, to choose to live and strength to safeguard her self-value. Their friendship had encouraged Meera to break free from all the customs and traditions. Meera's reaction of escaping shows that women are not all passive as some are capable to limit oppression (Flax, 2013). Meera's action also proves that she has the ability to think as intelligence is equivalent in both genders (Flax, 2013). She gave in as a housemaid but her self-dignity never permitted her to be a sex slave.

Lower Class Folly

In *Parched*, Rani, Janaki, and Lajjo, were tired of the struggles in their life. Rani is a widow, who was once battered by her husband. As the sole breadwinner of her family, she weaved think blankets to earn an income. Living in poverty in a small mud hut with her 17 year old son, Gulab and old mother in-law, Rani worked hard to save dowry money to get her son a bride. Her son was a spoilt brat who spent her income wastefully. Rani thought that by being married off to a beautiful girl, Gulab would become a responsible person and would start earning for the family. In the Indian culture, men are believed to become responsible when they are married (Jayaram, n.d). Rani's mind set shows how she was conditioned to think and react as her upbringing and culture had shaped her mind-set. This encapsulates the notion that claims masculinity and femininity are constructed by society (Flax, 2013).

However, things did not turn out as planned. Gulab's wife, Janaki, had her hair cut short before the wedding, causing her to look boyish. As Janaki's veil fell off her head exposing her short hair in the wedding bus, Gulab became embarrassed as his friends laughed joyfully. He hated his newly wedded wife and Rani's plan failed. Enraged, Gulab would hit and rape his wife whenever he came home. Gulab's reaction and behaviour are of typical patriarchal men; asserting power and dominance over women (Kandiyoti, 1995). The sound of the beatings and the pain enduring screams reminded Rani of her own marital rapes. The small partition in the mud hut echoed the abusive noise and in the mornings, Janaki would emerge with bruises and limped as she walks. Rani was emotionally disturbed to see the flashback of her youth; a psychological agony after the physical torture.

Janaki was going to school before walking into the forced marriage which bestowed her parents a substantial dowry for her beauty. Forced marriages in return of hefty dowries have been a part of the Indian culture (Jayaram, n.d& Vikalp, n.d). Many poor parents often resort to marry off their daughters fast in return of dowry- a temporary financial relief. At the same time, they reduce the number of mouths to be fed (Kandiyoti, 2015). The inability of her school lover to pay the high dowry left her with no choice but to cut her lustrous hair short as a means to be rejected by the groom's mother. This brave act of Janaki shows that she was not passive and was intelligent to craft a plan to jeopardize her own wedding (Flax, 2013). Nevertheless, her plan did not work as Rani still took Janaki back as her daughter in-law. Janaki was devastated with her new life as she was constantly hit and raped. She endured the pain silently by herself, yet never mentioned returning to the biological parents. Janaki's reaction of enduring the abuse reflects the submissiveness of a patriarchal woman (Kandiyoti, 1995). Janaki's situation validates how different domains which weigh different customs and traditions cause hurdles to women in differing circumstances (Fraser & Nicholson, 2013).

As a mother in-law, Rani did abuse Janaki verbally and physically. She always blamed Janaki to be the source of the son's anger and even hit her twice. Once, she lost her saving and accused Janaki to be the thief. In a separate occurrence, she saw Janaki picking up books left by her lover and accused her to be an unfaithful wife. Rani's beatings and accusations reflect how certain domains empower women to be in control (Flax, 2013). Rani as the mother in-law, was in a position to assert power over Janaki, as it is a part of the cultural practice. Conversely, besides being young and submissive, Janaki was also honest and brave. Janaki defended herself on both occasions mentioned above. In the first incident, Janaki confronted Gulab, the actual thief, who later battered her badly. In the second incident, Janaki told Rani the truth about her love story which led to her hair cutting incident. Listening to Janaki's story, Rani felt sorry for her young daughter in-law. Janaki's reactions to both occasions dignify her self-esteem. She may submit to abuse as her culture permits such acts to be imposed on her, yet she chose to rebel when alleged with false accusations.

The movie staged Rani to free her daughter in-law Janaki from the marriage by allowing her to flee with her lover. Rani's reaction again signifies that certain domains asserts woman with power (Flax, 2013). Rani's act of going against the culture also proves that Rani wanted to be relieved from the burden of reliving her own misery and allow justice for a young bride.

Lajjo was a friend of Rani's. Married to Manoj, an abusive man, her childless state caused her to feel incomplete. In patriarchal culture, a woman is worthy only when she is fertile; yet, a fertile woman only gains respect if she gives birth to sons. (Kandiyoti, 1995). Lajjo too weaved think blankets to earn her living as her alcoholic husband, was jobless. Almost every night, he would eat his dinner, hit Lajjo for her childless condition then have sex with her. His behaviour is of typical patriarchal men (Kandiyoti, 1995). Similarly, Lajjo surrendered to the oppression despite experiencing the repetitive pattern as her culture chained her to remain in the marriage as a patriarchal woman (Kandiyoti, 1995). Returning to her parents' house was never an option and being childless has conditioned her to accept the oppression as her fate (Jayaram, n.d& Vikalp, n.d).

The peak of the movie shows an abusive commotion between Lajjo and Manoj when she informed him about her pregnancy. Lajjo actually conceived after having a sexual intercourse arranged by her friend Bijli, a prostitute, with one of her former clients. Having doubted her

husband's potency and the strong urge to be a mother, Lajjo agreed to the secret sex arrangement to be a complete woman. Upon receiving the pregnancy news, Manoj stormed in anger and accused her to have committed adultery. Lajjo's denial claiming the child to be Manoj's further enraged him who then revealed that he was actually impotent. During the uproar, Manoj fell near the stove and his clothes caught fire. Lajjo stopped Rani from helping and let Manoj as well as their mud house burn down in ashes.

Lajjo's decisions of her life greatly evolved around her culture. In the Indian culture, a woman is complete when she has a child (Jayaram, n.d). Thus she ventured for an 'outsourced pregnancy'. A woman who has sexual affair with another man is usually abandoned by her husband as she is considered to be immoral (Jayaram, n.d). Hence she denied the allegation of adultery. Rationally, saving her husband from fire would allow him to inform the society of her sinful deeds. Having her husband die in the fire would bury her sinful deeds. Besides, it was an accident which brought sweet revenge for all the emotional and psychological tortures she suffered living as an infertile woman. Therefore, it can be concluded that Lajjo left her husband to perish in the fire to end her misery and at the same time to save the life of her unborn child.

The movie ends with Rani and Lajjo leaving the village with their prostitute friend Bijli, in the hope of a new beginning, breaching the customs. Their departure signifies that women are not all passive as some are capable of limiting oppression (Flax, 2013). They have sacrificed and tolerated so much, yet the men in their lives never appreciated them. Having each other as a support, they are capable of making a choice for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Both movies have depicted how the women are subjugated by their own family members. For Meera, her subjugator was her own father-in-law who wanted to sell her off as a sex slave in return of his precious Haveli. For Lajjo and Janaki, their oppressors were their own husbands who beat and raped them. Rani on the other hand, was physically oppressed by her husband in her youth and mentally tortured by her son in her forties. Yet, despite Rani's own experiences, she abused her daughter-in-law physically and verbally. It is seen that, eventually, whatever the circumstances, the women make a decision to end their misery.

By analysing the movies through the perspectives of the Feminist Postmodern Theory focusing on women's way of surviving patriarchy, the reality of womanhood has been unfolded. Cultural practices and religious teachings have been manoeuvred in the venture to keep the female characters consciously and subconsciously under the control of men. The circumstances, in which the female characters were, have weakened them to endure their surroundings and forced them to embrace oppression as their fate. Conversely, not all women are subscribed to the stereotypical representation of weak and submissive beings. They may go against the tide, should they have some support to be able to escape their misery. Most of the time, the female characters are able to see that they are being oppressed, yet they choose to succumb until being pushed to the edge, before bending the rules or breaking the norms. The movies showed how and when the female characters make choices; whether to endure, to bend or break free from the oppression or oppressors. Hopefully, this study will allow readers to have a second thought on the standpoint of women in the patriarchal setting.

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