



# Subverting Traditional Gender Norms And Patriarchy: A Feminist Analysis Of The Film *Laapataa Ladies* (2024)

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## Abstract

Films are a mirror of society. Society has expected women to conform to traditional norms, and so has the film portrayed women in the same way. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women have focused on subverting traditional gender roles and patriarchy. They are on a path of self-discovery and have struggled to become their true selves. Films of recent times have begun portraying complex, multifaceted female characters who defy conventional expectations. This study explores the film *Laapataa Ladies* for feminist themes and examines the story of female characters who subvert patriarchy and the traditional gender norms of society. This research uses feminist film theories emphasizing on Laura Mulvey's concept to analyse this female-centric film, focusing on how the film challenges conventional gender norms and provides fresh insights into women's experiences.

Keywords: women, traditional gender norms, patriarchy, self-discovery, feminist films

## INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is a concept that allows men to wield power while largely excluding women from it. It leads to the perception that women are inferior and denies them equal opportunities. Certain works are reserved for males and women are not allowed to take part in them, which included education, earning for the family, and other societal activities where males take the lead. Women are expected to adhere to traditional gender norms like cooking and adhering to household chores. For women to gain power, society must evolve, and women need to confront patriarchy and step forward in life.

Previously, Bollywood films featured only male characters and the plot revolved around male interests whereas contemporary films aim to portray societal realities and show how women can confront society and pursue careers. There is a growing interest in the audience in watching such films where women challenge the society. It supports women, as well as spreads awareness and gives inspirational message to the women in society. The film *Laapataa Ladies* is one such film in which women are the central characters. Kiran Rao, the director of the film asserts in an interview in Variety, 'The script talks about women and opportunities and ideas that I'm very attracted to, especially freedoms for women', which illustrated the film's plot centred around two brides with entirely different perspectives who ultimately experience a shift towards freedom and independence in their own realms. The film was first screened at the 48<sup>th</sup> Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, with the title *Lost Ladies* and was theatrically released in India with Hindi title *Laapataa Ladies* on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024. The original story of the film was written by Biplab Goswami, who is one of the winners at the Cinestaan India Storytellers Contest, where Aamir Khan, the Bollywood superstar

and one of the producers of the film was on the judging panel. The script was later improvised by Sneha Desai and additional dialogues were written by Divyanidhi Sharma.

*Laapataa Ladies* is a film that is focused on women and tells the story of two newlywed brides who have contrasting personalities. One represents the traditional woman who has a definite understanding of what it means to be a good wife, daughter, and a respectable woman. The other bride intends to confront societal norms who has worldly wisdom and inspires to expand her knowledge through education. They get exchanged into each other's family while travelling through train as they have veils on their head and are not able to see anything, and every other bride on the train looked the same with the veil. Their physical journey of getting lost and reuniting with their family also highlights the mentality shaped by society towards women and how they change the traditional way and create a new one.

## Objectives

The paper aims to explore how women are portrayed in the film *Laapataa Ladies* (2024) through the lens of feminist film theories in a qualitative approach. The study mainly focuses on how women in the film unravel patriarchy and become independent. This research examines the social functioning of gender as portrayed in popular culture by applying Mulvian feminist theory, and challenges the Male gaze that cinemas usually prioritizes. This paper analyses the feminist aspects of the film and the subversion of patriarchy.

## Literature Review

Multiple Bollywood films are being analysed through Mulvian feminist film theory. The article by Rane and Chowdhary (2023) 'Unveiling the Male Gaze in Bollywood Movies: Deconstructing Objectification and Stereotyping in Hindi Cinema', discusses the distortion of representation of women and reinforcing traditional power dynamics. The paper summarizes the complex interaction between the male gaze, objectification, and gender stereotyping in Bollywood films and literature. This study uncovers the complexities of the male gaze and fosters a more inclusive and thoughtful cinematic experience. Since there has not been any previous research on the film *Laapataa Ladies* using Mulvian feminist film theory, this paper represents the first critical attempt.

## Conceptual framework

The female centric film focus on female characters, about how these characters are present in the beginning and how they develop themselves by the end of the film. These films challenge the concept of 'Male Gaze', which was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay *visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), where she critiqued the way cinemas reflects and reinforces the patriarchal structures of society and how women are presented as images to be looked at, while men are the active agent who look, make decisions and control the narrative. Films depict, 'The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation' (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' offers an analytical framework for analysing a film. The theory noted that films often portray female characters as visual objects targeted at male viewers, a concept clear in the film's design and plot. This paper examines the female characters and their narrative portrayals in the film through Mulvey's lens, investigating the feminist aspects of the film and illustrating how the female characters confront conventional gender roles.

## Analysis and Discussion

The film is based on two characters Jaya aka Phusparani (Pratibha Ranta) and Phool (Nitanshi Goel), who get married and their story begins in a train. At the beginning of the film, the scene shows newlywed couple Deepak (Sparsh Shrivastava) and Phool participating in few rituals before their departure as a married couple to Deepak's home. Before they step out on the journey Phool is made to take the long hanging veil that covers her face. As she trips along the way, her mother says, 'Once you have worn the veil, make it a habit to look down and not ahead' (00:03:29), it is unfortunate that how women need to conceal their faces after their marriage. The system of veil is much prevalent in the film where women are seen in veil and it is important for a married woman to have veil on themselves when they go out or even if they are at home. But the character of Phuspa is seen defying this system. To save herself and make her way closer to her dreams she takes the help of the veil. There are few instances, when she goes to the temple but does not return for a long time and Deepak's father (Pankaj Sharma) goes in to check, he could not find her. Upon her return, she claims she was

wearing a veil, so how could he recognize her. Additionally, being new to the village, she thought it would be appropriate. However, the truth is she went to look for a new SIM for her cellphone to reach her sister regarding her college admission in Dehradun. Another instance is when she goes to the market to purchase items she will need for her escape to Dehradun; while shopping, she encounters Deepak and covers herself with a veil to hide. These moments in the film illustrate how women are forced to wear veils to adhere to societal norms, yet Phuspa still finds ways to empower herself. The character of Phuspa demonstrates strength and courage in tackling challenges in a hard way.

When Deepak brings Phuspa aka Jaya believing he has Phool with him, they arrive at Murti station to board a bus to their village. The bus in which they travel is named 'Phuspa travels' (00:09:25) which the camera focuses, it is important because later Jaya lies that her name is Phuspa. It is also worth noting how Jaya strategizes everything with a second that she has to herself before she joins Deepak after getting off the train. When Deepak and the new bride reach home and her mother asks her to open the veil, she hesitates and later when she does, everyone is shocked to see a new person and not Phool. At that moment Deepak realises that he has brought a different person to accompany him from the train. Deepak's father reprimands him, leading Deepak to claim that it was all due to the veil and Phuspa agrees with him saying, 'He is correct' (00:14:33), shocking everyone as they cannot believe a woman would speak up for a man, leaving them all in stunned silence. She states, 'On this tent-like veil, neither the face of the ladies can be seen, nor can the ladies see anything other than the man's shoes' (00:14:46). She is aware of the village name, and everything else and even she could say the name of her husband which signifies that she is modern and an understanding woman, though everything she tells them turns to be fake. Whereas in case of Phool, she refuses to mention even her husband's name to the station master (Vivek Sawrikar) when he inquires to help her find her home, instead, she displays Deepak's name written with henna on her hand, embodying a completely traditional woman who cannot say the name of her husband (00:24:52).

Another strong and independent women character in the film is Manju Mai (Chhaya Kadam), who stays alone and owns a tea stall at Pateela railway station where Phool is stuck. She imparts knowledge to Phool about how women should be, she should be alert and should keep few important information for her own care and safety. Girls are solely taught household works while other crucial skills are excluded from their life which are essential in order to look after themselves once they move out of the house. When Manju Mai tells Phool that she should go to her parent's home even if not her husband's home, Phool replies, 'Girls of respectable home do not return without their husbands' (00:37:23). Manju Mai says that 'For centuries, women in this country have been duped...this con is also known as 'respectable girls'' (00:37:50), indicating to traditional women who do not question the traditional norms are considered respectable girls.

Following Manju Mai asks Phool what is the address of her husband's village, she is not able to tell to which she says, 'You don't even remember the address of the house where you have to live your whole life. Your mother has not made you good she has made you a fool' (00:38:15), to which Phool aggressively disagrees saying she knows to do every household work, then Manju Mai asks, 'Do you know how to reach home', to which Phool does not reply. Manju Mai states, 'There is nothing shameful in being a fool. But feeling proud of being a fool is shameful' (00:38:45). She meant to say that it is not wrong in not knowing something but it is shameful if you are proud that you don't know that thing. It is necessary to learn things for survival. Phool with Manju Mai goes through serious transformation, by the time she finds out where her husband's home is, she is able to travel alone by train to Murti station and when the station master suggests to send Chotu (Satendra Soni) along with her so that she would not get lost again, Manju Mai gestures there is no need for that, she believed that Phool is now strong and smart enough to travel alone. Manju Mai is happy that she could help Phool, she was naïve and now at least she can do something with her life apart from being a traditional housewife. Upon arriving at Murti station, Phool yells Deepak's name when she sees him rushing outside the station, marking another transformation which takes place, from previously not mentioning her husband's name to screaming and calling him by his name.

While Manju Mai has influenced Phool, Phuspa Rani becomes a lighthouse for other characters in the film. She has knowledge about farming and agriculture. She wants to study organic farming in agricultural science. Phuspa discovers that Poonam (Rachna Gupta), Deepak's sister-in-law is an excellent sketch artist and has created a sketch of her husband, Shravan Kumar. Phuspa inquires about what other sketches Poonam made. To which she replies nothing else, there is no time for such wasteful works. Phuspa asks her 'Is art useless' (01:16:22), this shows how women neglect their own talent and leave it saying it's useless and rather give their full potential in household works and family. 'The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her work' (Friedan; ch.14), the film beautifully portrays how the art which Poonam thought was useless plays an important role in finding Phool. Phuspa asks Poonam to sketch a picture of Phool as she has seen her and with the help of Gunjan (Daood Hussain),

Deepak's friend, she makes poster of missing Phool with her phone number printed on it and asks him to distribute it and as a result Phool safely reaches home.

Phuspa encourages Deepak's mother (Geeta Agrawal Sharma) to prepare dishes of her choices, as she tends to overlook cooking meals that she enjoys but are not liked at all by her husband and Deepak. She asks, 'Now, will the food prepared be of women's choice?' (01:21:23) and laughs it off. It highlights how women forget about their choices once they get married and have a family, they only care about their husband and children and other members of the house but forget their own happiness. While observing Poonam smile and enjoy her time with Phuspa, Deepak's mother and grandmother wonder if they could become friends instead of just being in-laws. It offers a viewpoint that women in a household need not be solely in-laws but they can also be friends and provide mutual support in various ways.

Another important factor that the film highlights is the importance of education and the challenges women face in that aspect of life too. Jaya wants to get education and establish her own identity as Mary Wollstonecraft presents the importance of self identity in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1996), 'I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves' (Wollstonecraft; ch. 4), yet her mother does not support her in this pursuit. She excels in her studies and wanted to pursue organic farming in agricultural science so that she could help people who do farming, including her family but rather her mother prefers to sell the farmland for dowry instead of investing the money in her education.

By the end of the film we can see how every woman gets empowered, Jaya gets to continue her studies and decides to go to Dehradun even Deepak's father appreciates her effort and says 'We will remember you when the crops grow in the fields' (01:55:10), as she helped them to protect the crops from insects without using pesticides but with new organic and innovative ways. Poonam finds a friend to herself and starts following her passion, she sketches a picture of Jaya and gifts it to her at the end when she is leaving for Dehradun. Phool has found home for herself and by the end the two women are seen not taking the veil on their head, which is one way of subverting the traditional norm.

## Conclusion

The title of the film translates literally to lost ladies which refers to two brides who are swapped and lost while travelling with their husbands after their wedding. The connotative meaning of the title is evident on how women become disoriented after marriage, relinquishing their identity and everything else. This research deals with the point of differential feminist representation that *Laapataa Ladies* claims to represent. As Rao in her interview mentions that this film is about 'Patriarchy, talking it apart without a war, taking it apart still on your own terms, was the idea. And really trying very much to bring people into the fold to show how, within very conventional family setups, we could still spaces that women can occupy and break out of and make their way without necessarily tearing the fabric of society apart' (Ramachandran). The research indicates that the film encourages diversity and equality in gender roles. It can be seen how the film seeks to change the conventional male gaze through its narrative structures and deep female character development. The female lead, possessing a complex background and motivations, contests conventional expectations of female characters. Their depiction transcends simple exhibitions of physical strength, exploring emotional and mental depth, thereby reshaping audience perception of female roles in Bollywood films. Additionally, Mulvey's feminist theory examines how the media creates and maintains gender differences. The female director, a woman crew and a film targeted at a female audience. This film challenges the established patriarchal stereotypes that are present in society.

The film evidently centres its narrative on Jaya and Phool. The camera is observing them, along with the film's other characters and the audience. In every instance, the gaze is non-erotic. They are not hypersexualised and shown wearing simple sarees without any make-up. Their body language is traditional and their demeanour reflects the conservative values from which they originate. Mulvey suggests that women in film are frequently depicted as passive objects for the gaze, whereas male viewers are provided with active and dominant viewpoints. This research shows that *Laapataa Ladies* deviates from these conventional gender roles stereotypes and viewpoints.

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