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PORTRAYAL OF TRAUMA IN HINDI OTT FILMS (2019-2022)

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Abstract: With the rise of digital streaming platforms, the contemporary cinema has transformed, providing the filmmakers with the narrative freedom to explore complex, psychological, and social themes. In this study, it has exploration of the portrayal of Trauma in some Hindi OTT films released between 2019 and 2022. Chhichhore (2019), Chhapaak (2020), The Girl on the Train (2021), Qala (2022), A Thursday (2022), and Darlings (2022) are the selected films which are used to investigate this issue. In the context of this study, Trauma refers to the conceptualization of deeply distressing experiences that causes the disruption of emotional stability and shape identity while encompassing academic pressure, abuse, loss, violence, and relational conflict. By making the use of qualitative content and thematic analysis, this research aims to investigate the causes, psychological symptoms, behavioural responses, narrative, representation, social reactions, and diagnosis/resolution of Trauma experienced by the protagonist in the film. The findings of the study reveal that Trauma is a central narrative driver, which influences character development, decision-making, and interpersonal dynamics. The selected films make use of diverse cinematic strategies, including flashbacks, symbolic imagery, fragmented timelines, and silence to convey subjective experiences and internalised distress of the character. The responses from the family, society and institution are also mentioned to either mitigate or exacerbate suffering, whereas the narrative outcomes are meant to range from partial recovery and resilience to unresolved or tragic consequences. This study demonstrates that Trauma is foregrounded within the contemporary Hindi OTT cinema as both a psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon which is offering nuanced insights into vulnerability, endurance, and identity formation. These films contribute to a deeper understanding of mental health, empathy, and resilience in Indian society by highlighting the interpersonal and societal factors which positions OTT platforms as a critical space for complex storytelling in the exploration of Trauma.

Keywords- Trauma, Hindi OTT films, psychological themes, Narrative analysis, Mental health, Socio-cultural representation.

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of visual media, visual Trauma studies has emerged as a significant field of cultural and media studies, following the rise of Indian digitised streaming platforms at a fast pace. OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon prime video, and ZEE5, have revolutionized the Hindi film narrative by providing a space for more experimental and psychological complex stories, compared to the traditional cinema. This is an important change when a major public concern is mental health and mental health awareness within a country.

The share of OTT platforms and content in India grew significantly between 2019 and 2022 reporting a paid subscriber growth of 30% from one million to 29 million in 2020 and a total users growth from 225.8 million to 423.8 million in 2022. The average viewing time increased by 200% to grow from 0-2 hours per day to 2-5 hours per day, whereas approximately 65% of the usage during the peak time during lockdown was recorded in rural India, which is a result of lockdown, COVID-19 and Digital accessibility. (Madnani, Fernandes, & Madnani, 2020)

The report of World Health Organisation (WHO) for 2018, showed that India accounts for nearly 1/3 of suicidal trend in the world, with Indian suicidal incidence of nearly 21.1 per one lakh people. Moreover, as per the National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-16) there is an active mental health problem requiring intervention, ranging from 70 percent to 92 percent, among Indian adults. This reflects the prevalent psychological distress and Trauma that continues to be under-addressed.

Yet, previous research and studies generally focus on the mainstream Bollywood cinema or a general presentation on mental health, with somewhat limited attention in the construction of Trauma in the context of OTT.

To fill this lacuna, this study aims to systematically review the depiction of Trauma in Hindi OTT films from 2019 to 2022. The primary objective of the study is to examine the etiology, manifestations, behaviour patterns, representation of Trauma in selected films, and the outcomes of Trauma which the protagonist encounters in both films.

This analysis becomes significant as it takes it a step further to media studies scholarship. Through the study, it makes it evident that Trauma is a narrative and a cultural construct and expression in present day Hindi OTT films. It also remembers the social anxiety that permeates and surrounds other events in the movie such as failure, violence, relationship, and who will the protagonist be in a fast changing society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theories of Trauma are used conceptually to recognise psychological pain in film narratives. Freud (1917/1957) differentiates between mourning and melancholia, suggesting that when this grieving loses expression and becomes internalized, it can cause prolonged psychological suffering. Caruth (1996) also describes Trauma as an experience "not fully realised in the event but re-experienced in the aftermath by the reappearance of portions of it through memory. Media and Social Meanings (Hall 1997) explains that media do not simply mirror but constituting social meanings, and Mulvey (1975) illustrates the way in which mainstream cinema often represents females from the "male gaze," thereby forming the interpretation of female Trauma.

When we look into Hindi films' portrayal of mental illness, we can see the change over time. According to Bhugra (2005), earlier Hindi films typically portrayed mental illness stereotypically, for example, associating mental illness with violence, irrational thinking, and comic relief. As in the case of studies conducted by Pathak and Biswal (2021), mental diseases also often were depicted in an exaggerated manner, not in a clinically accurate light. Bhatia, Patel and Paladiya (2023) conducted a content analysis of Bollywood films in the last 20 years and found psychiatric conditions like depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder were still more commonly visible in the movies but now have been exaggerated and misrepresented. Ahmed (2024) also observed that in the Hindi-Urdu cinema of the times, the actors tackle mental health with sensitivity and other clichés for dramatic effect.

Trauma has been explored in relation to individual films in recent scholarships. Based on the model of biopsychosocial approach, Bashir and Mishra (2023) state that the narrative of Qala portrays Trauma as a product of family's interpersonal dynamics, social norms, and psychological susceptibility. Using a psychoanalytical perspective, Bhattacharyya (2024) shows how the protagonist's Trauma has stemmed from three major sources: patriarchal motherhood, conditional affection and emotional neglect in Qala. Gakkhar & Kulkarni (2024) view the characters of Darlings as a critique on normalisation of domestic violence and its psychological effects. This analysis of Chhapaak, by Pal and Karmakar, builds on the concept of epistemic injustice, revealing that Trauma can be social, as well as physical, and that it involves the reconstruction of identity. Karmakar (2023) also claims a link between childhood sexual Trauma and institutional failings and suggests that there are doubts over the effectiveness of revenge-based narratives to represent psychological Trauma.

The concept of Trauma has similarly been affected by the rise of OTT platforms. Streaming platforms have allowed filmmakers greater creative freedom, with stereotypical portrayals still existing alongside realistic ones, yet highlighting the contrasting perspectives of the industry, Singh and Mujral (2024) claim that they have allowed for more nuanced storytelling. Poonia and Sangwan (2024) also point out that movies like Dear Zandagi

and Chhichhore help make people aware of mental health issues by fostering empathy, easing the stigma, and spreading positive attitudes towards treatment and wellness.

RESEARCH GAP

While the previous studies on Indian Hindi cinema have examined representation of mental illness and psychological distress, most focus on mainstream theatrical films or specific disorders rather than Trauma as a broad, social and narrative phenomenon, whereas, the contemporary Hindi films increasingly center on Traumatic experiences, such as abuse, loss, domestic violence, and relational conflict with the rise of OTT platforms. However, systematic scholarly analysis of Trauma portrayal across Hindi OTT films remains limited. Existing research does not also really provides a comparative structure that examines the causes, symptoms, representation, social responses, and resolution of Trauma within these narratives. This study addresses this gap by analyzing selected films that were released between 2019 to 2022, which focused on how Trauma shapes, collective development and storytelling within the contemporary Digital cinema.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework for content analysis of Trauma portrayals in selected Hindi films, focusing on seven variables: type of Trauma, causes (triggers), symptoms, mode of representation, protagonist's behavioral response, social/secondary responses, and diagnosis/resolution.

Trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) examines narrative discontinuities, flashbacks, and repetitive motifs to reveal unassimilated Trauma. Psychoanalytic theory, informed by Freudian and Lacanian traditions, decodes symbolic imagery and unconscious manifestations of guilt and repression. Feminist/gender theory (Mulvey, 1975) analyses patriarchal power dynamics, gendered victimhood, and female agency in Trauma experiences. Cultural Trauma and representation theory (Alexander, 2004; Hall, 1997) situates individual Trauma within collective memory, social myths, and cultural signifying practices. Media effects and narrative theory assesses how genre conventions, cinematography, and sound design shape emotional framing and viewer perceptions of Trauma.

This integrated approach enables systematic coding and interpretation of Trauma elements across the films while addressing their psychological, symbolic, gendered, cultural, and cinematic dimensions.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The study aims to examine the portrayal of Trauma experienced by the protagonist in selected Hindi OTT films in the specified timeline. It aspires to identify the types of Trauma depicted and their underlying causes, including Personal, and social factors, the study further analyses the psychological symptoms and behavioural responses demonstrated by the Traumatized characters as well as the reaction of family members, social institutions, and society towards their suffering. Additionally, the research evaluates the way Trauma is narrative resolved within these films and assesses the broader messages conveyed in relation to recovery, resilience, survival, or continued distress in contemporary social cultural contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is Trauma portrayed in selected Hindi OTT films released between 2019 and 2022?
2. What types of Trauma are experienced by the protagonists, and what factors contribute to their development?
3. What psychological symptoms and behavioral patterns are depicted in Traumatized characters?
4. How do family members, institutions, and society respond to the protagonist's Trauma?
5. Do these films present Trauma as recoverable, unresolved, or leading to tragic outcomes?

HYPOTHESES

H1: Trauma experienced by protagonists in selected films serves as the primary driver of narrative development and character transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted a qualitative approach to explore Trauma portrayal in films. It focuses on textual and thematic analysis of narrative, content, behaviour of characters, dialogues, visual imagery, and cinematic techniques. The study interprets the way, Trauma shapes protagonist experiences, and drives plot development by treating films as cultural texts that reflect social and psychological realities.

UNIT OF VARIABLES

The analysis is structured around specific variables across each film to capture the multidimensional nature of Trauma.

Table 1 outlines the operational definitions of variables employed in this study to analyze the portrayal of Trauma across the selected films.

Table 1

VARIABLE	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION
Theme	Central Traumatic experience explored in the film.
Causes	Personal, familial, social, or institutional factors contributing to Trauma.
Symptoms	Psychological and emotional manifestations (anxiety, guilt, withdrawal, aggression, etc.).
Mode of Representation	Narrative and cinematic techniques used to depict Trauma (flashbacks, silence, symbolic imagery, etc.).
Behavioral Response of Protagonist	Actions, coping strategies, and reactions to Traumatic experiences.
Behaviour of Family/Society	Reactions of family, social institutions, and society toward the protagonist's Trauma.
Diagnosis and Resolution	How Trauma is addressed or resolved within the narrative, including recovery, resistance, or unresolved outcomes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Using the qualitative research design, the study analyzes the textual details of films and narrative structure within a larger narrative framework. It has to explore and interpret how Trauma functions as a central narrative element in some of the selected Hindi OTT films.

RESEARCH AND DATA TYPE

This study provides descriptive and analytical descriptions of Trauma that examine its causes as well as its representation in stories. Qualitative data derived from film texts, including narrative content, character behavior, dialogues, visual imagery, and cinematic techniques.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND AREA

Qualitative research designs that are interpretive are used to assess meanings, representations and character experiences instead of statistical variables.

This study resides in interdisciplinarity with respect to media studies, film studies and communication studies, with a specific focus on contemporary Hindi OTT cinema and psychological representation in media.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE AND FRAME

Purposive sampling is used to select films that prominently depict Trauma experienced by protagonists and were released on OTT platforms between 2019 and 2022.

The sample consists of six Hindi films:

- (a) Chhichhore (2019)
- (b) Chhapaak (2020)
- (c) The Girl on the Train (2021)
- (d) Qala (2022)
- (e) A Thursday (2022)
- (f) Darlings (2022)

These films were selected because Trauma serves as a major element influencing character development and plot progression.

Table 2 lists the selected films for analysis, detailing the type of Trauma portrayed, genre, and release date, offering a clear view of the sample used in this study.

Table 2

NAME OF THE FILM	RELEASE DATE	TYPE OF TRAUMA	GENRE
Chhichhore	September 2019	Academic failure, fear of failure / suicidal crisis	Comedy / Drama / Romance
Chhapaak	January 2020	Acid Attack, Violence	Biographical Drama
The Girl on the Train	February 2021	Loss, grief, memory Trauma	Crime / Mystery / Thriller
A Thursday	February 2022	Childhood sexual abuse / Trauma response	Psychological Thriller
Darlings	August 2022	Domestic violence	Black Comedy / Drama
Qala	December 2022	Emotional abuse, guilt, parental pressure	Psychological Drama

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Approaches for the study, Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis is used. Each film is screened multiple times to recognize scenes that represent significant Traumatic events, distress, changes in behavior, and narrative events. Themes related to causes, symptoms, representation, social response, and resolution of Trauma are coded and interpreted in order to determine how Trauma is at the center of the story and impacts the protagonist's trajectory.

ANALYSIS

(a) Chhichhore (2019): An IIT aspirant, Raghav, is plagued with academic failure Trauma and a suicidal crisis, due to the negative labels placed on him as a “loser” in society because of his failure to make it to the institution. He exhibits symptoms of depression, negative self-perception, feeling hopeless, feeling worthless, and making suicide attempts. This coming-of-age drama puckers the nostalgia with humorous flashbacks of his family member, Anirudh, at college while interlaced with the bleakness of the hospital; the light hearted colourful scenes and the awesome lullaby music score interweave an image that failure need not be fatal. With the pressure from his family and the society, Raghav gets emotional support and encouragement from his parents and father's friends called “losers” who lay stress on unity. Encouraged by the stories, he brings back his sense of hope, makes it out and a year later is a college student and decides to pursue all of life outside of the rankings which leads to a family realignment of values.

(b) Chhapaak (2020): The film portrays melancholy forms of violence inflicted upon a woman, Malti, as a result of an acid attack by a jealous acquaintance, who is motivated by misogyny that is entrenched in the patriarchy. The violence is physical and emotional, causing Malti's face to become disfigured and her one eye to become blind. She demonstrates immediate shock and pain, and long-term PTSD responses to depression, hypervigilance, social anxiety, and self-image distress. It's a cinematic treatment that takes a raw and realistic look with close ups of scars, the patient clamour of wards, and muted hospital sounds that all range from tragedy to action, informing viewers of her journey from heartbreak to a burst of activism. Trauma energy seeks legal action and survivor assistance, taking control of their lives and as family and NGOs aid due to initial institutional neglect. The story follows the narrative that resolves in landmark conviction, acid-sale law reforms, and her ongoing advocacy, later, eventually progressing to complete healing and making changes to society, highlighting the nature of Post-Traumatic Growth and societal change rather than total healing.

(c) The Girl on the Train (2021): For reasons such as marital betrayal, domestic violence, and grief, the movie's heroine Mira suffers from complex Trauma, along with alcoholism and amnesia brought on by the lack of support or presence of her ex-husband Shekhar, as well as his physical abuse and subsequent assault and head injury. She has disorientation, panic, paranoid ideation, memory gaps, and self-medicates with drinking. The film portrays her obsessive pursuit and fight-or-flight reactions through the noir style with the unreliable narration, darkness of the cinematography, and the disjointed flashbacks. Hypervigilance and living in a state of suspicion within a police society that gaslights her, Mira devotes herself to the quest to find out what's truly happening. Like Complex Traumatic experience and Dissociative Amnesia, and Alcohol Use Disorder, the narrative concludes in legal vindication and self-defence killings and in commitment to sobriety and prospects for some personal recovery and growth toward a new life.

(d) A Thursday (2022): Naina suffers from lifelong Trauma after being sexually assaulted on her school bus when she was 16, just after a rape and before it has been resolved, leaving her forever fearful and distrustful. Chronic avoidance during her birthdays, hypervigilance around the opposite sex, anxiety, flinching/feeling uncomfortable with physical interaction and workaholic tendencies are shown as coping. The film is narrated in a realistic hostage thriller model with frame breaks and tight-conception of the scenes and reveals information throughout the film, and how she ends up in a calculated hostage takeover to seek justice. Socially, authorities start ignoring her case, the event puts her on the media, police and political agenda only to lead to promises of officials to improve women's safety. A chronic condition leaves her in constant discomfort, Naina fights the status quo with strategic activism, losing her own freedom but also winning moral victory and a focus for her teaching incarceration through the prism of Trauma. Trauma haunts her, and society calls for change, as Naina fights the status quo, becoming the victim and "brain amplified", while sacrificing her own freedom and winning both moral hold and continued purposeful teaching within the prison and beyond.

(e) Darlings (2022): Badru experiences chronic domestic violence Trauma after witnessing repeated physical, emotional and sexual abuse from her husband, Hamza, an alcoholic believed to have a right to rule over her; resulting in a miscarriage due to the beating. Through submissive forgiveness, she displays flinching fear, hypervigilance, and learned helplessness, as well as Trauma bonding. The film is dark comedy thriller with abrupt lighting, sharp sound effects, and humorous character with revealing insight into her former tolerance and new violent convergent will. With her mother's help, Badru poisons, beats and eventually leads to the death of Hamza on train tracks, in a society where they are ignored and police are silent. She retaliates in her turn, and celebrates the liberation, achieving hopeful independence – not to be a victim, but to be self-respecting.

(f) Qala (2022): The protagonist suffers from Traumatic familial and existential loss, patriarchal pressure, chronic emotional abuse by her mother (Urmila) and the death of her twin brother as the mother scorns her singing gift to favour her brother. Qala is plagued by hallucinations of Jagan's voice and presence, her sense of guilt, lack of sleep, feeling of despair, and the desire for success. The film is an expressionist film using psychological drama in a non-linear way which takes surreal hallucinations, distorted sounds and retro haunted imagery to represent her ever-addictive quest for approval spiraling downhill until it ultimately takes a turn that leads to the poisoning of her adopted brother, Jagan, due to jealousy and desperacy for mother's approval. After his death, Qala gets immense fame and awards. However, consumed by guilt, she responds ardently by committing suicide. The story ends here, leaving her mother with a deeper sense of remorse and highlighting the irreversible effects of emotional neglect.

Screen analysis of specific selected films from 2019-2022 shows that the Trauma mode of the protagonist is being used as the primary plot driver that frames the trajectory of the protagonist's character development, motive and socio-emotional stigma, pertaining to their younger and older personalities, respectively (Chhichhore, 2019). Also, in *The Girl on the Train* (2021), Trauma from loss, betrayal, and memory gap and confusion are all factors in susceptibility to obsessions. Maternal pressure, emotional neglect, guilt is exhibited in the memory of Trauma resulting from a more internal and enigmatic location and that which manifests as an inner story of anxiety, hallucination and self-destructive behaviours is presented in *Qala* (2022). Similarly, a female character's past-heavy sexual abuse is fetishized as the "motivation" behind her radical act of violence in *A Thursday* (2022) as a way of self-confirmation and legitimization. Chhapaak (2020) illustrates Trauma following an acid attack, and the long lasting emotional, physical, social, fear, and, stigmatic consequences and identity struggles that come with them. Domestic violence is the primary source of Trauma in *Darlings* (2022), with continued abuse resulting in fear, learned helplessness and resistance.

Almost all the protagonists present psychological symptoms including anxiety, guilt, aggression and emotional volatility, social withdrawal, and even some instances of aggression. In general, Trauma is not portrayed as short-term Trauma and is expected to be ongoing. Trauma demonstrated to profoundly impact on moral dilemmas and interpersonal relationships. These films are approaching their deaths with family/societal responses being pivotal – relieving the suffering or exacerbating it. Stigma, disbelief, lack of support, and particularly failures of the social system, exacerbate the Trauma while acknowledgement and solidarity are certain to provide some measure of empowerment.

Handling Trauma in both experimental and commercial cinema has multiple narrative and cinematic strategies, including but not limited to, flashbacks, non-linear and fragmented timelines, silence, and psychological mirroring in constricted space, symbolic images and silence. Significant depictions of gender, in which females typically appear in roles of Trauma caused by inequalities in gender in domestic and interpersonal settings, as well as in societies.

The resolution seems to supply various options. At least some of the protagonists are found to survive, to keep resisting, or to heal to a certain degree, others to become immobilized in a series of losses or guilt. Full closure is suggested to be a rare possibility, leaving the films focused on psychological endurance, confrontation, and transformation in response to Trauma.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In answering the first research question, the researcher studied Trauma in some Hindi OTT films from 2019 to 2022. The sample showed Trauma being central to the emotional and psychological make-up of the leading characters. In Chhichhore, fear of failure and academic, emotional and performance related social Trauma, in *The Girl on the Train*, memory loss relational betrayal and other sources of persistent and unspeakable distress. In *Qala*, Trauma is psychological and narrative, with the use of fragmented timelines, hallucinations, and strong visual symbols to represent internalized guilt and repression.

Films show different types and causes of Trauma. For personal, familial, and social reasons, characters have Trauma from parental pressure (*Qala*), abuse and neglect (*Darlings*), loss and betrayal (*The Girl on the Train*), violence and social stigma (*Chhapaak*), and systemic or institutional failures (*A Thursday*, 2022). Anxiety, withdrawal, self-destructive behavior, emotional instability, aggression, secrecy, and hyper vigilance are examples of psychological symptoms and of the behavior of protagonists, which are determined by personality, gender and social support. All this shows Trauma is the consequence of more than one external or internal factor, and it is certainly not the result of one or more isolated occurrences.

The family, the social structure, and part of the family system can either exacerbate or mitigate Trauma. In *Darlings*, familial neglect extends suffering, until the protagonist is empowered by intervention; in Chhichhore, it is the parental expectations that increase the emotional burden. Chhapaak illustrates how, in addition to the survivor's distress, societal stigma and institutional counterforces increase the survivor's distress. Some films like Chhichhore and *Darlings*, portray partial recovery through survival, and resilience and defiance. In contrast, films such as *Qala*, *A Thursday* and *Chhapaak*, portray unresolved, or tragic outcomes, thereby depicting the enduring impacts of Trauma. The analysis reveals that contemporary Hindi OTT films depict Trauma as complex, deeply social, and human. Transgressing across recovery, endurance, and the Trauma of emotions, Hindi OTT films also depict Trauma as socially embedded. Overall, the findings appear to confirm the initial hypothesis regarding Trauma as the dominant narrative engine in the contemporary Hindi OTT cinema, mirroring the social undercurrents of pressure, violence, relations, and identity.

CONCLUSION

The films demonstrate that Trauma emerges as a primary narrative agent in current Hindi OTT films from 2019 to 2022, thus supporting the research hypothesis. Film analysis, such as that of *Chhichhore* shows how Trauma not only shapes character development, moves the story forward, but also influences interaction with family, social institutions, and other people. Trauma is portrayed when multidimensional in its form and is the result of interpersonal, family, social and cultural factors. The symptoms include emotional anguish, such as sadness and sadness-in-action or psychological tension.

The findings also indicates that these films' representations of Trauma are multifaceted: we can see how both internally felt psychological troubles and pressure from the wider world factors, and also how individuals feel about them internally. Meanwhile, the family and society respond either by adding to the protagonist's anxiety, pain, guilt, isolation, and violence or through self-destructive practices. Use of flashback, symbolic imagery, silence, and disjointed narrative structures are found to be effective mechanisms in explaining a subject's emotional experience. The movies' resolutions are mixed; some are based on survival and resilience, in part recovering and some underscore unresolved Trauma or tragic event; these echoes indicate how persistent psychological suffering is.

As a broader perspective, this research highlights the importance of Hindi OTT cinema as a space to probe Trauma in depth, beyond traditional cinematic stereotypes. By not only capturing the emotional and behavioral ramifications of Trauma, we can address wider-ranging social concepts, like gender dynamics, the demands of family life and societal expectations, with these films. In a spotlight on Trauma as the dominant narrative impulse, contemporary OTT films present a more reflective and realistic lens on psychological stress within Indian society, showing in part resilience, survival and routes to recovery.

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