

The Revolting Body: Desire and Rebellion in Gauri Shinde's *Dear Zindagi* (2016) and Anurag Kashyap's *Manmarziyaan* (2018)

Bahaar and Nipun Kalia

Abstract

The characterization of women in Hindi cinema has seldom been prominent compared to the hero, who is invariably eulogized and dominates the narrative. The man becomes the center of the narrative while the woman is relegated to a stereotyped identity which functions to provide pleasure to the audience. Films act as a mirror to society, which aims not only to entertain the masses but also to engage the audience with the issues that question and challenge the dominant ideas and discourses. The genre of feminist films tries to provide an agency to women to defy gender norms and sexual repression. The article analyses how Gauri Shinde's *Dear Zindagi* (2016) and Anurag Kashyap's *Manmarziyaan* (2018) attempt to contest the regressive mindset prevalent in the society pertaining to the female desire and sexuality. The films also question the gender roles, male-female relationship, desire, and how the suppression of desires can create havoc in personal lives of the characters. It will also focus on how these films, unlike other mainstream cinema, redefine gender roles. Furthermore, the analysis will delve into how the female lead characters in both films embody a powerful agency for liberation and resistance. Feminist film theory underscores how women persist in playing roles that break free from an enduring patriarchal system. To accomplish this, the study will employ both feminist film theory and the gender theory framework in its examination of the chosen films.

Keywords: gender, desire, patriarchy, Bollywood, sexuality

Introduction

Films are a salient part of society that persuasively describe reality to the audience. Film reflects the cultural attitudes, ideologies and beliefs that exist in society. Films primarily have a constructive role in making people reassess and reconsider issues that might be considered taboo. There could be a concatenation of ideologies in the film that a director tries to build among the audience. While watching a film, the spectator is not only introduced to the convolution of the narrative structure but can postulate against the notions shaped intrinsically within a film. The audience meticulously in films can observe how different aspects of culture and traditions are portrayed and followed with uniformity by the people in society.

Indian cinema has been quintessentially the most appreciated medium of entertainment by the populace.¹ The grandiosity of the heroes while performing the stunt or the enticing dance skills

Bahaar is a Research Scholar at the Department of English, Chandigarh University. Email: english.cu.in@gmail.com. Nipun Kalia is an Associate Professor at the Department of English, Chandigarh University. Email: nipun.uila@cumail.in.

of the heroines are the most enjoyed scenes among viewers. Most of the films concentrate on male narratives. The male characters are watched perpetually with the ideal representation of heroic qualities such as bravery and perseverance among the audiences. They are customarily described with their muscular bodies on screen, trying to captivate the attention of a heroine. But the heroine is relegated to an adjunct to the existence of the hero as the main protagonist.² Moreover, women are devoid of independent choices.

While focusing on the issues of women in society, some filmmakers began depicting female characters in leading and different roles that were accepted by the audiences. The genre of feminist films tries to provide agency³ to women to defy gender norms and sexual repression. For instance, in Leena Yadav's *Parched*, Lajjo (portrayed by Radhika Apte) is ashamed of herself for being infertile, and her friend Bijli (played by Surveen Chawla), a dancer, is mocked for her profession by the villagers.⁴ Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* focuses on concepts related to ageism and sexuality.⁵ Usha Parmar (played by Ratna Pathak Shah) is brutally criticized for the age gap between her and the swimming coach. Despite all hardships, the female characters portrayed in these films courageously fight the prevalent sexism in society. While feminist and women-centric films might seem correlative, they are different in narrating the issues of women. The plot in women-centric films will constitute a strong female protagonist. But these films can establish normalizing gender stereotypes. In a feminist film, the female characters are a central part of the narration, and they fight against the patriarchal norms. The genre of feminist films tries to obliterate the archetypal, orthodox roles typically performed by the heroine. Also, the filmmaker portrays how women in such films grapple with the issues of prejudice and sexism.

Female Desire and Sexuality on Screen

'*Are you a lesbian?*' is a question posed to Kaira (played by Alia Bhatt) by her Uncle and Aunt when they are suspicious of her sexual orientation in *Dear Zindagi*. Kaira is a successful cinematographer and is passionate about directing her films.⁶ She is a young, ambitious, enthusiastic, and financially independent girl who desires to have an ideal man in her life. Kaira's choice not to get married becomes unacceptable to her family. Her lack of interest in marriage causes the family to question her sexuality. Kaira is indignant towards her parents for leaving her alone during her childhood. She becomes distressed when she comes to know about her boyfriend's engagement and decides to seek help from Jehangir, a psychiatrist (played by Shah Rukh Khan), to overcome her depression. During a conversation with him in the therapy sessions, Kaira

¹ Saurabh Samraat, "Bollywood's Toxic Masculinity: The Problematic Portrayal of Men & Women in Popular Hindi Cinema," *International Journal of Law Management and Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 424-431.

² Waseem Ahad and Selma Koç Akgül, "Female Body, Femininity and Authority in Bollywood: The 'New' Woman in *Dangal* and *Queen*," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 26, no.1 (2020), pp. 3-21.

³ In films, this is when the female characters have an active role in terms of decision making and could voice their opinions independently against the issues of women.

⁴ Leena Yadav, *Parched* (Ajay Devgn Films, 2016).

⁵ Alankrita Shrivastava, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (Prakash Jha Productions, 2017).

⁶ Gauri Shinde, *Dear Zindagi* (Red Chillies Entertainment and Dharma Productions, 2016).

discusses her complexities in understanding romantic relationships. She also expresses the suppressed feelings and distress of being neglected by people around her. Kaira is enraged with the societal expectations that every woman has to experience in life. She is unafraid when she reveals the names of her boyfriend to Jehangir. In a pivotal scene through a low-angle shot,⁷ she angrily questions, “You mean ki Mein ek fast Ladki Hoon, Ek Cheap Ladki Hoon” (You mean that I am a fast and a cheap girl), portraying Kaira’s emotional outburst while opposing the slut-shaming of a woman in society. When Kaira says, “Saari duniya toh aise hi sochti hain na” (The world thinks in this way only) this depicts how, for women, speaking about their sexual needs in a relationship is considered to be unacceptable.⁸

The discourse on sex and desire in Indian films has usually been contemplated through discomfort and guilt. For the hero, speaking freely about his sexuality and desires is not considered outlandish. However, the heroine is scrutinized for her behaviour if she expresses her sexual desires, and questions are raised about her character. In Abbas Mustan’s *Aitraaz*, Sonia Kapoor (played by Priyanka Chopra) is criticized for being vocal about her sexual desires.⁹ Her passion for becoming a supermodel instead of choosing to get married is criticized by her boyfriend. Instead, her image in the film becomes stereotyped as an overambitious woman forced to feel ashamed of her dreams. This represents how a woman is judged based on her choices and aspirations. Moreover, a woman who attains power in society is often misjudged by people. Urvashi Butalia argues that, in film narratives, men are not stereotyped as compared to women. The conceptualization of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women as depicted in Hindi films often constructs the stereotypes.¹⁰ The heroine either performs the role of a staunch wife or is identified being a vamp. The female characters in the films represent the ideal notion of womanhood. The heroine is depicted as morally virtuous and in self-denial of her sexual desires. In Sooraj Barjatya’s *Hum Aapke Hain Koun and Hum Saath-Saath Hain*, women are seen to sacrifice their love for the sake of their families. In *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, Nisha (portrayed by Madhuri Dixit) has to make an important decision in her life.¹¹ She sacrifices her personal happiness for the family. Preeti (played by Sonali Bendre), who plays a doctor in *Hum Saath-Saath Hain*, however, is seen most of the time making her fiancé happy.¹² In both these films, the female characters are functioning according to the patriarchal norms.

The term ‘phallocentrism’ was coined by Ernest Jones, and describes how the ‘phallus’ has been regarded as a symbol of male oppression. The phallocentric culture still believes women are inferior to men. Hélène Cixous discusses how, for centuries, women were under a false notion regarding their capabilities and made conscious of their appearance.¹³ Cixous argues that women have been deceived by men into believing they are fragile like flowers, unable to protect

⁷ The camera shot is aimed below the eyeline to make the character appear grand.

⁸ *Dear Zindagi*, 1:22:32-1:22:42.

⁹ Abbas Mustan, *Aitraaz* (Zee Films, 2004).

¹⁰ Urvashi Butalia, “Women in Indian Cinema”, *Feminist Review*, vol.17, no. 1 (1984), pp. 108-110.

¹¹ Sooraj Barjatya, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Rajshri Productions, 1994).

¹² Sooraj Barjatya, *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* (Rajshri Productions and Zee International, 1999).

¹³ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976), pp. 875–893.

themselves. Further, she states how women are persistently stopped from exploring their individuality, which eventually creates a profound impact on their minds. Cixous urges women to appreciate their bodies, which they have earlier been made to hate by men. In Anurag Kashyap's *Manmarziyaan* (2018), when Rumi says '*Sharm ke chakkar mein Zindagi kharab kar loon kya?*' (Should I destroy my life because of shyness?) to her aunt, who tries to make Rumi realize her mistake.¹⁴ Through the close-up shot¹⁵ the camera focuses on Rumi's face while she looks at her grandfather, portraying how she repudiates having validation from the family about her choices.¹⁶ Rumi is a talented hockey player who lives with her grandfather and uncle in Amritsar. The film focuses on the dilemmas which Rumi (played by Taapsee Pannu) has to experience when she decides to marry Robbie (played by Abhishek Bachchan) after her failed relationship with Vicky (played by Vicky Kaushal). Rumi is not the conventional Hindi film heroine; rather, she is portrayed as a woman having an individuality, a mind of her own, and aware of her imperfections and flaws. The film represents the desires of Rumi and how she disentangles the pre-established notion of female bodily desires. Rumi openly describes about her fantasies and sexual desires to Vicky during their relationship. In a male-dominated society, female bodies are subjugated under the oppressive structure of patriarchy.¹⁷ Women have socially internalized to behave according to what is presumed acceptable in society.¹⁸ Rumi's red-coloured hair signifies her attempt to liberate herself from patriarchy, which discriminates against women for vocalizing their opinions.

In *Manmarziyaan*, Rumi does not cater to herself as a sexual commodity to be pursued by men. She does not allow her body to be controlled by others. While Rumi initiates Robbie to have physical intimacy with her, however, Robbie does understand the importance of her consent. Moreover, he refutes himself from viewing Rumi through the predominant male gaze. Hindi films usually overlook the idea of consent through the act of stalking performed by the hero while forcibly trying to make the heroine develop feelings for him.¹⁹ In fact, films like *Dear Zindagi* and *Manmarziyaan* attempt to subvert the male gaze which is often seen in mainstream films. At the beginning of *Dear Zindagi*, through a shoulder-level shot,²⁰ the audience comes to know Kaira's profession as a cinematographer while she explains the scene to the producer. The camera does not focus on objectifying her body, rather subtly depicts her female agency when she decides to reshoot the scene. Kaira constructs her voice throughout the film, whether it is her refusal to accept a film offer in New York or staying away from the work. When Raghuvendra (played by Kunal Kapoor), a film producer says, '*Tum jaisi hot DOP ke saath kaun kaam karna nahi chahega?*' (Who will not desire to work with a hot director like you?). Kaira is displeased by Raghuvendra's opinion

¹⁴ Anurag Kashyap, *Manmarziyaan* (Eros International, 2018).

¹⁵ Camera particularly focused on the face of a person to accentuate their emotions.

¹⁶ *Manmarziyaan*, 0:40:22-0:40:25.

¹⁷ A social structure which considers men being superior to women.

¹⁸ Sabala and Meena Gopal, "Body, Gender and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 45, no. 17 (2010), pp. 43–51.

¹⁹ Bahaar and Nipun Kalia, "Not so Pink Reality: Unravelling Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Pink*," *Literary Voice*, vol. 1, no. 20 (2023), pp. 323-332.

²⁰ Often used in scenes, the position of the camera focuses on the performer's shoulders to create a cinematic effect.

regarding her identity as an attractive director. She questions Raghuvendra for his sexist remark against her.²¹

In the acclaimed essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explains how the male gaze occurs in films when the heroine is objectified through a camera which particularly concentrates on her body as a visual pleasure to be enjoyed by the audience.²² The hero performs a pivotal role in the narrative, while a woman remains inactive throughout the film. Moreover, the identity of the heroine is associated with a damsel in distress waiting for the hero to protect her. In Sandeep Reddy Vanga’s *Kabir Singh* (2019), Kabir (played by Shahid Kapoor) tells everyone to stay away from her girlfriend while addressing her, ‘*Woh Meri Bandi Hai*’ (She is mine).²³ When he looks at Preeti (played by Kiara Advani), the camera surrenders her to the male gaze. Moreover, she is devoid from representing her opinions. In Rajiv Rai’s *Mohra* (1994), during the song ‘*Main Cheez Badi Hoon Mast*’ (I am a wonderful item), the camera focuses on the body of Roma (played by Raveena Tandon) and therefore encourages the female objectification among the audience.²⁴

In *Dear Zindagi*, Kaira is depicted as an educated and carefree girl who lives in an urban neighbourhood. Although she was born into an affluent family, Kaira wishes to celebrate her financial independence. When the landlord asks her to vacate the apartment because he has decided to sell it to a married couple, it depicts how Kaira’s living as an unmarried woman is considered an issue. The film accentuates how stereotypes are constructed for working women, especially in big cities. Moreover, the film also focuses on the significance of having awareness related to mental health. Kaira has to deal with the insensitivity shown by Raghuvendra when he criticizes her for a visit to the psychiatrist. Despite Kaira belonging to an upper-class society, she still has to struggle with her identity as a woman, who has always been made to realize about her failures. The film shows how she revolts against patriarchal norms, which position the image of women as subservient to men. In *Manmarziyaan*, Rumi, a middle-class woman, unhesitatingly speaks about her opinions, which becomes the reason for people to dislike her. When everyone in the family becomes aware of Rumi’s affair, they decide she must be married. It focuses on how patriarchy has forced women to repress their voices. According to patriarchy, men have been holding significant power in their families, where they are devoid of restrictions as compared to women who are usually confined within the four walls. Rumi neither makes herself a damsel in distress nor gives people the right to decide her fate. She tells her family to reconsider their decision to marry her to Vicky instead of Robbie. Therefore, Kaira and Rumi represent quintessential modern Indian women who are questioning patriarchal norms.

These films also attempt to represent how both of these women experience the perpetual existence of patriarchy in different ways that explicitly helps to understand the concept of intersectional feminism. The term ‘intersectionality’ has been introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw. According to this, women are oppressed by rigid societal norms based on their sexual orientation,

²¹ *Dear Zindagi*, 0:05:01 to 0:05:10.

²² Laura Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6-18.

²³ Sandeep Reddy Vanga (dir.), *Kabir Singh* (T-Series and Cine1 Studios, 2019).

²⁴ Rajiv Rai, *Mohra* (Trimurti Films Pvt. Ltd., 1994).

gender, and social background.²⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1984), highlights how women belonging to the Third World are identified as weak and devoid of power,²⁶ whereas Western women are being associated with empowerment and liberation. She argues against the misconception of assuming that women do have a homogeneous identity by Western feminism. Therefore, to believe that the oppression of all women is similar becomes fallacious. Mohanty focuses on how women could be experiencing prejudice and inequality in terms of their ethnicity and race.

Redefined Gender Roles in *Dear Zindagi* and *Manmarziyaan*

Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that gender is an act performed every day by people in society.²⁷ She accentuates the theory of performativity, in which she refutes gender to contemplate as natural and focuses on how it becomes a social construct in society.²⁸ There are multitudinous gender identities that exist in society. But according to the gender binary, people have been identifying themselves within two categories, which include male and female. If people show characteristics that are different from their assigned gender, they are bullied and denigrated for their behaviour. Kaira’s profession as a cinematographer is questioned by her relatives since they consider it male-dominated. This depicts how the notion of performativity is practiced in society. Kaira is expected to perform a certain role that identifies her being a woman. The film subtly highlights the unceasing societal pressure to marry on Kaira by her family, who believe she must focus on getting married and living a stable life. It stresses how women have been accustomed to regard their self-worth with the concept of marriage.²⁹ The family tries to persuade Kaira to reconsider her beliefs about the need for marriage for a woman. While her younger brother receives appreciation for his job at a company, Kaira enjoying her success as a cinematographer at a young age does not seem admirable to the family. In fact, Kaira’s aunt makes a flippant remark, calling her a firecracker when she finds her personality to be masculine. This depicts how the image of women gets constructed if she tries to redefine the expected gender roles.³⁰

During a scene in *Manmarziyaan*, a conversation occurs between Robbie and her mother. His mother suggests that Robbie should not marry Rumi, as she will be unable to take care of their house. According to her beliefs, Rumi is not an archetype of an ideal wife. She has short hair, is fond of driving bikes, and is passionate about hockey, which does not represent her femininity.

²⁵ Arica L. Coleman, “What’s Intersectionality? Let These Scholars Explain the Theory and Its History,” *Time*, 29 March (2019). At <https://time.com/5560575/intersectionality-theory/>. Accessed 09/05/2023.

²⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1984), pp. 333-358.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 13-16.

²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 34.

²⁹ Priyanka Praveen, “What women want: Social pressure forces women to get married,” *Deccan Chronicle*, 14 July (2016). At: <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/lifestyle/viral-and-trending/140716/what-women-want-social-pressure-forces-women-to-get-married.html>. Accessed 10/05/2023.

³⁰ Certain behaviours and attitudes are normalized on the basis of the gender of a person; these are gender roles.

This portrays how Rumi is questioned regarding her appearance and behaviour, that is contrary to her gender. But Robbie does not consider the beliefs of his mother against Rumi. He firmly explains to her mother that she must not judge Rumi through the photo. Robbie is emotional and sensitive about Rumi throughout the film. The camera focuses on the facial expression of Robbie when he speaks to Rumi, which emphasizes how he tries to understand her. Feminist critic bell hooks, argues that men attempt to interrelate patriarchy with the issues of women.³¹ In addition, men have not been able to elucidate the meaning of patriarchy without realizing how it affects them as well. While women have to perform domestic chores, men habitually work outside their house. Thus, both men and women are coerced into following socially constructed gender roles.³²

When the mother-in-law tells Rumi to learn how to make pickles for her son, it depicts how she expects Rumi to occupy herself with household activities. However, Rumi is unfocused and decides to prioritize her training for hockey. She despises patriarchal norms that have stereotyped gender roles. Rumi is fearless about her decisions, and refuses to heed what others think of her, and simultaneously reveals both her feminine and masculine characteristics in the film. Black-coloured and blue-coloured clothes are worn by Rumi to portray her anger. But when she is skeptical about her choices, she wears pink-coloured clothes. In society, the colours according to the gender of a person are stereotyped. The blue colour that symbolizes manhood is often associated with boys. On the other hand, the pink colour becomes stereotyped for girls. The film focuses on the emotions and behavioural attitudes of men and women gendered in society. For instance, men are supposed to prevent themselves from crying, and women must not express anger, which is considered an unfeminine trait.³³ Rumi expresses her aggression when Vicky tries to make her understand that she will regret her marriage to Robbie. Further, she condemns Vicky for his fear of taking responsibility. When Rumi is uncertain about marrying Robbie, she honestly tells him not to marry her and, therefore, tries to cancel their wedding.

Hegemonic Masculinity

In *Dear Zindagi*, when Jehangir listens to Kaira's issues, he tries to understand her with empathy and compassion. Although he helps Kaira heal from her repressed emotions, the character of Jehangir is not intended to appear as the saviour of Kaira. Instead, it depicts how men like him can be emotional and inclined towards sensitivity. Kaira blatantly speaks about the gender bias women experience in their day-to-day lives to Jehangir. He encourages her to believe in self-love and accept imperfections with a positive outlook. Jehangir does not judge Kaira for her multiple affairs with men and refuses to see her through a misogynistic gaze. Vicky is portrayed as the dauntless, muscular man in *Manmarziyaan* who threatens the matchmaker when he finds about Rumi's marriage, but his masculinity is not glorified in the film. Vicky does cry when Rumi makes him

³¹ bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), p. 17.

³² hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, p. 19.

³³ Geraldine Walsh, "Fears for Tears: Why Do we Tell Boys Not to Cry?," *The Irish Times*, 10 September (2019). At: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/fears-for-tears-why-do-we-tell-boys-not-to-cry-1.4006399>. Accessed 3/06/2023.

realize his flaws and his inability to keep his promise to marry her. The film introduces his emotional behaviour through a scene where Vicky is sitting in his Jeep with an overflow of tears in his eyes while remembering Rumi. The characterization of Robbie in *Manmarziyaan* can be observed as differing from the toxic male characters portrayed in Hindi films, who refuse to comprehend the significance of respecting a woman's decision. He neither intimidates Rumi in their relationship nor threatens her forcibly to develop feelings for him. Rumi and Robbie know the significance of having equality as husband and wife. When Robbie watches Rumi with Vicky, he decides to divorce Rumi and tells her, "Tumhare upar kuch nhi ayega" (You are not going to get blamed for this divorce), which focuses on how women are answerable to society if they are unhappy in their marriage.³⁴ Robbie is aware of this harsh reality; he does not want Rumi to experience her character being judged and decides to accept the blame for ending their relationship. The suppressed emotions of Rumi about Vicky do create difficulties in her relationship with Robbie, but he never tries to suspect Rumi of her intentions. Moreover, he respects Rumi's individuality and tells her to choose what her heart desires.

In *Rethinking the Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity*, R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt have explained the idea of hegemonic masculinity. It stresses on how men suppress women through a set of behaviours that is practiced in their daily lives. The male characters portrayed in *Dear Zindagi* and *Manmarziyaan* refute the notion of masculinity and disentangle beliefs about the understanding of masculinity represented through Hindi films. The hero, with his angry young man image, becomes the saviour of the heroine throughout the film. On the other hand, the heroine is idealized for her feminine attributes, which depict her vulnerability and emotional behaviour. The notion of masculinity is constructed in films while portraying toxic characters enacted by the heroes. In Manmohan Desai's *Mard*, the dialogue spoken by Raju (played by Amitabh Bachchan), "Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota" (A man does not feel pain), inordinately causes gender stereotypes.³⁵ The male characters in films define their masculinity by representing traits like dominance, violence, and their outrage towards atrocities, which reinforces the hegemonic masculinity.

Decoding the Motifs

Film-makers are principally considered the 'auteurs' of their films. The auteur theory popularized by the eminent film critic André Bazin focuses on the influence of a director on the film. The audience can identify definite patterns of a style used within a film to represent the motifs of a director. The directors try to reflect their vision through the nuanced showing of the characters in films. Additionally, the directors have authority over the narrative structure, where they can introduce the viewers to their beliefs. The spectator can recognize a repetition of themes portrayed by the directors through different films made by them. According to auteur theory, directors could associate themselves with being the authors of their films. Some critics question the authorship of

³⁴ *Manmarziyaan*, 02:07:06-02:07:10.

³⁵ Manmohan Desai, *Mard* (Kavico Video, 1985).

a film since many people, from the writer to the actor, have a significant involvement during the film process.³⁶ In films like *Dear Zindagi* and *Manmarziyaan*, the directors have represented certain themes and motifs. Gauri Shinde's debut film, *English Vinglish*, portrays Shashi (played by Sridevi), a middle-aged woman who hesitates while speaking in the English language. She is made to feel inferior because of her shortcomings instead of focusing on her capabilities. Eventually, Shashi makes a successful attempt at the language and is appreciated by everyone.³⁷

Shinde's second film, *Dear Zindagi* portrays how the character Kaira likes to imperfectly keep her things in the house, particularly the dark atmosphere in her room and all the windows of the room being closed. Kaira has a dream where she unexpectedly falls from a building into muddy water. She looks flustered when surrounded by the newly married women laughing at her and watches her camera hanging from the wall of a building. Kaira tries to decode the meaning of her nightmare until she has a discussion with Jehangir.

Through this dream motif, the film tries to emphasize on the struggles of Kaira in liberating herself away from how society presumes about her. She has always been questioned about her choices by the people. In the end, Kaira makes a short documentary based on a woman disguising herself as a man whenever she fights a war battle and later reveals her identity to the world. This story parallels the personal experiences of Kaira, which are similar to the woman depicted in her documentary trying to challenge the gender roles. The documentary made by Kaira becomes a significant motif of the film. Both these films represent how Shashi and Kaira make their dreams come true despite facing criticism from society, which has always been biased towards men. Anurag Kashyap's *Manmarziyaan* has the occurrence of the twin girls either seeing or dancing whenever the characters struggle in fraught situations, which is a recurring theme. The morning scene at the beginning of the film depicts how the neighbours are looking at Vicky, who enters through the terrace of Rumi. While Vicky is going to meet Rumi at her house, the camera focuses on the twin girls, which are simultaneously representing the repression and fierceness of Rumi. They appear whenever Rumi is confused regarding Vicky and Robbie. During an emotional scene, when Robbie goes to the bar, the camera focuses on the twin girls looking at him with dejected expressions. The background colour is black and signifies the effect of *mise en scène*³⁸ to convey the ongoing emotions of Robbie.

The twin girls depict concomitantly his dilemmas and uncertainties. Rumi wears black attire whenever she is perplexed about her choice between Robbie and Vicky. During the song '*Dhyaan Kithe Dhyaanchand*' (Where is the focus Dhyaanchand?), Vicky tries to apologize for his mistake from Rumi; every person looking at both of them wears black spectacles, ironically, which depicts their apprehensions about their relationship in the future.³⁹ The colours predominately have a pivotal role in understanding the motifs represented in the film. When Rumi is married to Robbie, she watches a program on television that shows how the animals' mate is a

³⁶ David Tregde, "A Case Study on Film Authorship: Exploring the Theoretical and Practical Sides in Film Production," *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2013), pp. 5 - 15.

³⁷ Gauri Shinde, *English Vinglish* (Eros International, 2012).

³⁸ Refers to the setting, colours, and themes applied according to the particular scene occurring in a film.

³⁹ *Manmarziyaan*, 0:22:57-0:26:36.

recurring theme of the man-woman relationship and focuses on how women have been called the nurturers in society. It indirectly accentuates the relationship between Rumi and Robbie. Moreover, it focuses on how Rumi desires her choices to be respected and to live her life without being judged about her actions.

Conclusion

Films act as a mirror to society, and aim not only to entertain the masses, but also to engage the audience with the issues that question and challenge the dominant ideas and discourses. In Shinde's *Dear Zindagi* and Kashyap's *Manmarziyaan*, both female protagonists Kaira and Rumi are confident, outspoken, and unhesitating in rebelling against the conventional portrayal of women. The female characters courageously discuss their desires and construct a new outlook towards the preconceived notions of female sexuality. It is prominent to observe that women in these films not only personify strength but also create their path to success. The feminist film theory framework provides insight into how these films aim to initiate a meaningful discussion about the notions surrounding female desires, showcasing women's resistance against patriarchal norms. Meanwhile, the gender theory framework centers on how these films reject the stereotypical portrayal of masculinity and femininity by the protagonists in mainstream cinema, striving to dispel misconceptions about the dynamics between men and women as depicted in Bollywood cinema.