

# Widowed Mothers on Screen: Transcending Narratives in Select Indian Films

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## **Abstract**

Widowhood is a universal phenomenon that traverses time, culture and geography. Over time, notably in India, the concept of widowhood has absorbed the rigid and harmful traditions and cultural subtleties that are distinctive to a particular society, which has hindered the upliftment of widows and has marginalised them. Being a persuasive medium, films project widows with the stereotypical trope of a 'distraught mother' whose son becomes the fulcrum of her existence due to society's disposition toward destructive gender arrangements. She has to endure all the hardships and is condemned for her role as a mother. Such bigoted representation of widows in cinema condense their identity within the collective consciousness. Films like *Karan Arjun* (1995) and *Anari* (1993) play with such recurrent tropes. Also, the agential object in these films compels these widows to become the victims of patriarchal violence, further reinforcing male supremacy. This article traces a trajectory of 'misrepresentation' of widowed mothers subjected to society's violent practices towards a remediated version of widowhood through contemporary narratives like *Doctor G* (2022) and *Once Again* (2018).

**Keywords:** widows, visual anthropology, counter cinema, violence

## **Introduction**

Widowhood in India encompasses stereotypical assemblages that hinder the upliftment of widows from a stratified position. Widows live in a culturally dynamic society that constructs their identity and condemns them to reside in penitence. Subsequently, society enforces rules and patriarchal ascendancies on widows to control their autonomy through the transgression of such ideas within the familial paradigms. Owing to films and their persuasiveness, such characterisation of women, especially widows, has always been a point of contention. Indian cinema, since its inception, has built upon gender biases and has kept women towards the margins, promoting pernicious notions about their gender roles and thereby reducing them to mere objects. As Stuti iterates, "the scripts, predominantly penned by male writers, presented women as either the 'ideal bride' or the 'vamp'. The latter was predominantly evaluated by both the writer and the audience based on her independence or audacious sexual choices."<sup>1</sup> The patriarchal ideology that is persistent in society reverberates in films that have depicted women being obliterated because of hegemonic gendered dichotomies. They are either portrayed as

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<sup>1</sup> "Changing Face of Women's Representation in Hindi Cinema," *Hindu College Gazette*, 6 March (2023). At: <https://www.hinducollegegazette.com/post/changing-face-of-women-s-representation-in-hindi-cinema>. Accessed 18/08/23.

selfless mothers, wives or just a vamp who cause chaos in other's lives. Ruchi Agarwal, while tracing the trajectory of the representation of women in Indian films during the post-liberalization era of Bollywood, says, "...the trend of heroines who would never put their own dreams ahead of the aspirations and desires of their family. The caring homemaker role of the women was back in trend."<sup>2</sup> Such problematic clichés in cinema become further stigmatised in the collective consciousness of society. This elucidates the specific culture that exists within the Indian society that mirrors the fictional plane of films. Levying characters who endure and approve of violence while passively endorsing the cultural gaze justifying the violent practices against women. On the contrary, mainstream Indian films cater to the masses, which stringently abide by the archaic patriarchal notions of a traditional family system. This forces women to surmise chastity and silently embrace motherhood. In the words of film scholar Tejaswini Ganti, "Bollywood has mainly a male-dominated culture, and men characters are offered considerably more significance than women roles."<sup>3</sup> The overutilisation of dogmatic beliefs in the medium of film alters the social representation of women. As Agarwal explains:

Culture is an essential factor in modern society, and cinema, in particular, acts as a mirror of society. It reflects many trends, existing virtues, social struggles, and living patterns. Indian cinema portrays the essence of Indian society. The ethnic and traditional values of Indian society, its cultural diversity and the unity among the varied cultural and religious sects are highlighted by Indian cinema.<sup>4</sup>

The discourses dealt within the mainstream Indian film promoted a lopsided society subsiding widows to the peripheries of societal representations. This evoked heteropatriarchal sensibility that forced them to either live in solitude or rely on their kinship, especially their sons, for their sustenance in society. However, even the slightest digressions from the normative render them as licentious vamps who can disarrange the society.

Thus, the marginality of widows could be amounted to Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection" in her work *Powers of Horror*,<sup>5</sup> which described the "fears and fantasies dominating the cultural imaginary regarding anything which threatens the stability of symbolic order."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this social abjection imbues violent practices to enforce dominance over women. This mistreatment of widows can be seen as a manifestation of this abjection. By isolating and marginalising widows, society seeks to distance itself from the reminders of loss, suffering, and mortality that widowhood represents. As Pushpesh Kumar observes:

The 'abject' does not exist as the subject but as the subject's perpetual other (emphasis is mine); as it threatens symbolic order; it evokes a psychological disgust – a guttural and aversive emotion with a sickening feeling of revulsion, loathing or nausea. For those being reduced to abjection, abjection is not a psychic process but more of a social

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<sup>2</sup> Ruchi Agarwal, "Shifting Roles of Women: Through The Lens of Bollywood," *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2014), pp. 117-132.

<sup>3</sup> Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p.187.

<sup>4</sup> Agarwal, "Shifting Roles of Women: Through The Lens of Bollywood," p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

<sup>6</sup> Pushpesh Kumar, *Sexuality, Abjection and Queer Existence in Contemporary* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 4.

experience; the stigmatizing effects of disgust are directed toward persons or groups perceived as abject.<sup>7</sup>

Corroborating this, widows become abject figures, existing on the fringes of society and symbolising the transgressions of traditional social norms. This causes an inherent fear of social exclusion due to the absence of a husband and leads to an irrational overreliance on their son. The filmmakers exploit such perturbed dynamics of familial relationships and insinuate their slanted biases to fulfil societal expectations that hamper the explicit representation of widows. Therefore, within this patriarchal paradigm, they lie at the intersection of misrepresentation and marginalisation on the grounds of culturally constructed dogmatic ascendancies, disregarding the repercussions this disadvantaged section of society faces. Such bigoted representation is reflected in films like *Karan Arjun*<sup>8</sup> and *Anari*.<sup>9</sup> Although they are cult classics, they are also the coercive patriarchal appendages that have added to the existing pool of stereotypical and monolithic representations of widows through the characters of Durga and Savitri. Both films deal with tropes of selfless, distraught mothers whose fulcrum of existence is their sons. They veil themselves with drabs of white and beige-coloured sarees. Also, their faces look pale and impecunious, signifying them as a visual marker on screen that codifies their identity as ‘widows.’ Furthermore, due to the lack of agency, they become the subject of torture and misery in the society that holds the baton of power and torments them, further stigmatising their representation in the cinema.

In *Karan Arjun*, the plot concerns a widowed mother living with her sons, away from her kin. Her relatives kill her husband for an inheritance, and later, her sons Karan and Arjun were brutally murdered by their uncle for the ancestral property. This causes havoc in her life, and she is presented as a distraught woman yearning for her sons to come back and avenge her misery. She is also portrayed as a hysterical woman who roams around in the village and becomes the subject of pitiful gaze from society. A similar narrative reverberated in the film *Anari*, which explored a widowed mother and her naïve innocent son who worked for the village’s high-class family. Being her only son and the breadwinner, Durga relied on him and was an overprotective mother. In the story, Rajnandini, the only sister of the family, deceptively marries Raja, and due to this, Durga faces her brother’s wrath. In both the narratives, these widows face society’s violence as they are isolated due to their dependence on and overprotectiveness of their sons. Such tropes of distraught mothers in cinema ossified the existing notion of a woman’s devotion to her family. It also synthesised the idea that a woman, especially a widow, is a bracketed entity who is contingent upon her male protectors for the preservation of her societal identity. These stereotyped widowed mother characters get subsumed within the dominant heroic revenge and redemption narrative and that have invincibly existed in Indian cinema, naturalising such representations into the collective psyche. The biased narratives around widowed mothers represent the overarching belief that mothers, especially widows, rely entirely on their sons and kinship, harbouring their social security and helping them maintain their leftover identity. Therefore, this article traces the trajectory of the representation of widows as ‘distraught mothers’ in Indian films, whose over-

<sup>7</sup> Kumar, *Sexuality, Abjection and Queer Existence in Contemporary*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Rakesh Roshan (dir.), *Karan Arjun* (India: Digital Entertainment, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> K. Murali Mohana Rao (dir.), *Anari* (India: Suresh Productions, 1993).

reliance and impotence cause them to endure violence inflicted on them. Also, the role of the ‘agential objects’ signifies the omnipresence of marital emblems prominent in Indian culture that ensnares widows, which culminates in their monolithic representation. Furthermore, to juxtapose the stereotypical portrayals of widows, this article also examines films like *Doctor G*<sup>10</sup> and *Once Again*<sup>11</sup> that have ameliorated and remediated representations of widows in cinema. This has enabled a nuanced understanding of their narratives while acting as ‘counter cinema’ that undercuts archaic portrayals of widows in film.

### Widows as Dependent Mothers

In conventional Indian films, women are often portrayed primarily as the embodiment of an “ideal” mother, with marriage being a quintessential prerequisite for attaining societal respect. Mansi Bhalero notes in her blog post,

the notion of a woman being considered ‘complete’ only after marriage thematically foregrounds various scenes throughout the film. It also indicates to us the unequal gendering and significance attributed to the marital status of women, equating their worth to the heteronormative imperatives of an ‘ideal woman’ in India.<sup>12</sup>

It becomes vital to understand that this assigned position inadvertently glorifies and permeates the distinctive identity confining a widow to the role of a mother after the death of her husband. The depraved depictions of widows are extended in the films that incorporate the recurrent tropes of a mother being ‘selfless’ and ‘sacrificing’ beings who knows no bounds where motherhood is concerned, and are shrouded by the maternal garb forced on them by patriarchy. In cinema, this maternal devotion evokes emotional responses that induce empathy and solidify the stereotypes of helpless widows. As Lalitha Nair contends, “Mothers, especially widow mothers, are represented in the film more often than father figures, which is probably due to the ease in the portrayal of stereotypes.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, a woman’s identity is constructed in the presence of her husband, and his absence wreaks havoc on her life. After her husband, her son becomes the protector of her identity. She finds a refuge and seeks protection from society. Pandita Ramabai, in her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman*,<sup>14</sup> talks about the presence of a son who could spare a widow from the worst mistreatment. This asserts that the widow develops an inherent fear of social atrocities, which leads to her reliance on her sons and extirpates her agency, which disbalances their relationship’s social order. As Zinia Mitra, while quoting Jasodhara Bagchi, mentions the idea of ‘mother’ in cinema and says, the “concept of ‘mother,’ where exhuming its paradox, manifestation, and lived reality within the Indian

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<sup>10</sup> Anubhuti Kashyap (dir.), *Doctor G* (Netflix India: Jungle Pictures, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Kanwal Sethi (dir.), *Once Again* (Netflix India: Jar Pictures, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Mansi Bhalero, “Counterfeit Kunkoo: A Powerful Commentary On Identity, Agency and Rape,” *Feminism In India*, 29 September (2021). At: <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/09/29/counterfeit-kunkoo-a-powerful-commentary-on-identity-agency-and-rape/>. Accessed 29/09/21.

<sup>13</sup> Lalitha Nair, Sundar Ramanathaiyer and Brian Shoemith, “Frail bodies, fighting spirit: Images of the elderly in Malayalam cinema,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 23 (2000), pp. 31-42.

<sup>14</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901).

society. The paradox comprises the powerlessness and glorification of motherhood, which in turn legitimises the oppression that leaches motherhood of its joyful meaning.”<sup>15</sup>

Since cultural meanings of male and female bodies are socially assigned, the category of woman is seen as vulnerable in most socio-cultural and political discourses. This shows how mothers are considered responsible for their child’s shortcomings. When it comes to widows who solely care for their children since birth are entirely blamed for the bad outcomes they face in society. Ann Snitow summarises Dorothy Dinnerstein’s argument and says, “this thought could be drawn with Dorothy Dinnerstein in her essay this asymmetry in sexual roles is being crucially reinforced by the way we continue (though with less and less biological necessity) to maintain infancy as a kingdom ruled only by mother.”<sup>16</sup> In both films, the fathers are absent since the earlier stages; thus, the impeachment for their child’s deeds befell their mothers. The mothers are already incapacitated due to the burden of looking after their family and the lack of economic instability and emotional vulnerability. Due to society’s violent frameworks, it becomes imperative that the widows experience violence and are treated as an abject entity who potentially can disrupt the social fabric. Therefore, she is marginalised and abrogated within the social paradigm, and she has to endure the cultural and systematic violence inflicted on her by society. Furthermore, as mothers are the epitome of purity and love, this causes the naturalisation of stereotypes, which have deeper roots of pre-existing cultural identity, as evidenced by the names of the widow characters. Critics like Umang Gupta and Rakesh Prakash observe:

Kali, Durga, Saraswati, Laxmi all goddess are portrayed alone, these are the goddess who exist in herself by herself. The role of mother in Hindi Cinema is underestimated. The Indian cinema does not place the mother within a realistic setting; instead it strives to contract this sphere into a limited area thereby turning this space into a place of isolation and confinement.<sup>17</sup>

In the select films, Durga and Savitri epitomise the Indian goddesses, which is a trope that is excessively used in the cinema to signify power and strength, and that becomes the derivative of female supremacy these widows entail. Durga symbolises feminine strength, whereas Savitri imbues within herself the power of a married woman. However, both contradict their denotative symbolism, as Durga evokes the goddess to bring back her sons and avenge her miseries. Similarly, Savitri is forced to marry a madman as punishment. This delineates the idea of helplessness and renders their portrayal as powerless, which hinges on the heroic valour of their sons. Although inflicted with violence and torture, these women must face social ostracism despite the latent notions of these widows being the epitome of power and strength, which ensconces the dominant notion of male supremacy in society. According to Jane Kenway and Lindsay Fitzclarence, “violence could occur along a continuum and involve physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuses of power at the individual, group and social structural

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<sup>15</sup> Zinia Mitra (ed.), *The Concept of Motherhood Studies: Myths, Theories and Realities* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Snitow, “Thinking about ‘The Mermaid and the Minotaur’,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1978), pp. 190-198.

<sup>17</sup> Umang Gupta and Rakesh Prakash, “Women in Bollywood,” *Psychology and Education*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2021), pp. 4856-4863.

levels. In the context of social minority groups, one's ingrained beliefs and ideologies dictate one's actions and are used to justify violence on marginalized individuals and communities."<sup>18</sup>

Women are placed in a position and compelled to conform to the image of a selfless mother who will endure all the hardships for her children. Whereby, any detour from the ideal or traditionalist conventions will result in social abjection on the terms of others, not herself. As Kristeva states, "Religions and various fundamentalisms have so brutally assigned women to reproduction alone", and "female liberation movements have so ferociously opposed this 'repression'".<sup>19</sup> In the film, Durga is tortured and beaten in front of the village, which causes her to bleed and become the subject of the social gaze, looking at her with the utmost helplessness and sympathy, presuming her to be hysterical. Similarly, Savitri believes she is an outcast of society, does not participate in any social events, and lives in a sordid state with her son. These scenes powerfully depict how society looks at widows with the gaze of an outcast, with the precondition of her being marginalised and an abject entity whose mistreatment and ostracism seem naturalised and justified. Indian films, for the longest time, presented the conformist idea of a woman being an ideal mother. Sanchari Mukhopadhyay posits in her argument for classical films, "female leads or characters were usually the mother or romantic interest or wife of the male leads, with the objective of supporting them in their life endeavours."<sup>20</sup> The widowed mothers were there to act as supporters of the real-life struggles and difficulties faced by their sons. This trope of a distraught mother enhanced the emotional quotient of the film but also acted as the driving force that enabled the raged son to seek revenge on his mother's wrongdoers, which essentialised the role of a widow in cinema and, to the larger extent the society.

### **Objects as the Agents of Violence**

Violence and atrocities have been actively perpetuated in Indian films, which cater to society's patriarchal voyeuristic gaze, justifying cultural nuances culminating in gendered violence against women. Filmmakers deliberately use cultural objects that are subjective to a particular society to inflict violence that enhances the experiences and relatability of the audience. Visual anthropology delves into the understanding that culture visibly manifests itself through such symbols predominantly present in gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and objects within both natural and man-made settings. The concept of culture becomes imperative as it unfolds within the scripted narratives that involve actors and actresses who enact their roles through dialogue, props, costumes and settings. Constructing one's cultural identity is the culmination of multiple events in which they actively engage. However, it is important to recognise that visual anthropology historically encompasses the pre-existing positivist beliefs which suggest that an objective reality can be justly observed. Moreover, modern cultural theorists emphasize on the significant role of the socially constructed aspect of cultural realities and the inherent ambiguity

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<sup>18</sup> Jane Kenway and Lindsay Fitzclarence, "Masculinity, Violence and Schooling: Challenging 'Poisonous Pedagogies'," *Gender and Education*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2010), pp. 117-134.

<sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Sanchari Mukhopadhyay and Debanjan Banerjee, "Bollywood, Popular Visual Media, and Sexism in India: A Critical Glance Back," *Journal of Psychosexual Health*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2021), pp. 256-261.

in our comprehension of a specific culture. In his essay on visual anthropology, Jay Ruby says, “visual anthropology logically proceeds from the belief that culture is manifested through visible symbols embedded in gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts situated in constructed and natural environments.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the objects within the social domains imbue within themselves the agential authority that aids in constructing individual identity in relation to the broader social paradigm. Especially for a woman in a traditional cultural setting, where she remains in a cohort relationship with these agential objects that render her identity submissive to male supremacy and such power relations are projected in films, establishing subjective notions in society. Jelena Cvetanovska posits that “women’s stories is a classic example of a film, which imparts anthropological knowledge, as does a written text. As different from science, the film does not employ abstract ideas and theories, but using the camera lenses, it paints a clear picture of the multi-sensory experiences of women in traditional culture.”<sup>22</sup> Extending her line of thought into Indian cinema, certain cultural practices, rituals and objects are all embedded within the collective consciousness of people, which assimilates them into society. This feeling of inclusion in people within a community renders their identity. However, it also entails an inherent capacity to push an individual or a group towards the margins.

Women in this paradigm lie at the forefront of inflicted gender disparity. As society implements codes for them to abide by, the physical markers of domination play a significant role in reminding them of their created identity. As Rachel Dwyer mentions:

The married Hindu woman is also expected to wear other emblems of her marital status, forbidden to widows and restricted for women whose husbands are away, which may be some or all of the following: jewellery, gold if possible, traditionally given to her on marriage: *mangalsutra* (wedding necklace) or other necklace, earrings, bangles (often including red or green glass bangles), rings with a precious stone; silver toerings; and *sindoor* (vermilion powder worn in the hair) and the almost mandatory *bindi* (forehead decoration, traditionally of red powder).<sup>23</sup>

This represents how the symbolic remnants of a married woman hold an inevitable coercion that signifies her identity. This thought is extended in the fictional paradigm of films, where such emblems impersonate violent markers that assimilate the pre-existing identity of widows. Especially in India, due to its rich cultural heritage, every religion has subjective practices and ceremonies encompassing spiritual and cultural significance that the people have been following for ages. For instance, marital objects for married women are significant agents that place them on the respectable societal plain and provide them with entitlement and authority. However, once a woman becomes a widow, these agential objects and practices could act as violent markers that affect her identity. These objects act as ‘memory sites’ that define a particular culture within the patriarchal construct, which culminates these objects into films and incorporates such practices that reflect society and cement their importance in a particular

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<sup>21</sup> Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. ix.

<sup>22</sup> Jelena Cvetanovska, “Women in Anthropological Film,” *EthnoAnthropoZoom*, vol. 12 (2015), pp. 73- 93.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Dwyer, “The Erotics of the Wet Sari in Hindi Films,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2000), pp. 143-160.

group. Their usage in films, with their nuanced altercations, fosters fallacious representations and sets an adverse example for future narratives that pre-exists in our collective consciousness.

In *Anari*, towards the climax, Savitri is tied to a tree and forced to marry a madman, which includes throwing colours on her white saree, and they bring red vermilion and *gajra*<sup>24</sup> to put on her forehead.<sup>25</sup> These agential objects are denotative to a married woman and are used to inflict violence on a widow. All being the emblems of a married woman in Indian culture. Similarly, in *Karan Arjun* the repeated usage of ‘bangles’ in the film depicts the marginalised state of Durga, who adheres to the social stigma of not adorning these markers of identity. As she lies to her sons about her widowed state, she rejects the bangles brought by her sons, depicting her forceful acceptance of her widowhood. Later, in a particular scene, she picks up Sonia’s broken bangle, which was forcefully removed during her abduction;<sup>26</sup> this depicts how ‘bangles’ can also become an instrument of ensnarement for women, which binds her to societal expectations and culture. Objects could reiterate themselves within the physical attires adorned by the widows in our society, which symbolise a certain attribute of widowhood. For instance, the sarees worn by Savitri and Durga lie within the tones of pale and white colours with the timely presence of borders on them, enabling the viewers to identify the presence of a widow on screen easily. As Dwyer reiterates, “widows must wear white or pastels without borders.”<sup>27</sup>

This strongly depicts how, culturally, a widow is assumed to have a single identity bounded by the presence of her husband, or else the power lies with the society, which uses this ‘widowed’ social identity to torment her and inflict violence upon her. Indubala Singh argues that films are not created in isolation; instead, they are a form of art that exists within a shared expressive culture, which encompasses tradition, cultural memory, and indigenous methods of symbolic portrayal.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, films have opened new realms of discernment of these tropes that impart archaic portrayals, validating the existing problematic notions surrounding widows. Due to this, the stereotypes of widows act as independent signifiers that keep regurgitating in society. Thus, these films mirror society and provide a fertile ground that fosters such monolithic ideas. From the anthropological perspective, the objects that imbue within themselves the agency are essential and subjective in different cultures. Corroborating this, films play with such sensitive tropes and impart agency to objects, which leads to the naturalisation of such ideas in society, catering to the patriarchal notions surrounding widows. This ensconces dogmatic societal supremacy and places widows within the marginalised position in the anthropological domain.

### **Counter Cinema as Resistance to Stereotypes**

Another facet of the evolution of representational media, especially films, is its capacity to break through the stereotyped narratives around widows. Counter cinema is an essential genre

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<sup>24</sup> A *gajra* is a traditional garland made of jasmine flowers that are worn as a hair accessory by Indian women.

<sup>25</sup> Rao, *Anari*, 2:30:55.

<sup>26</sup> Roshan, *Karan Arjun*, 1:09:27.

<sup>27</sup> Dwyer, “The Erotics of Wet Sari in Hindi Films,” p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> Indubala Singh, *Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 2007).



of exceptional projection of women, negating their stereotypical roles and forging a separate identity. Hasan Gürkan and Rengin Ozan quote Bordwell arguing that “counter cinema is realistic cinema since it is based on reality and authorial expressivity.”<sup>29</sup> Such narratives that pivot around widows include diverse backgrounds, castes, and regions and render them voice and agency in cinema. This shift has allowed for a more realistic and inclusive portrayal of widows, reflecting the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by real-life widows in Indian society. Due to this, smaller, independent films have emerged that focus on social issues and marginalised sections of society, like widows. These nuanced and remediated representations aim to deconstruct the recurring tropes and stereotypes around widows, which highlights their struggles, resilience, and ascendancies. Earlier Indian films often depicted widows as submissive and self-sacrificing mothers whose existence relied on their husbands and, later, their sons. Although primarily such films had depicted women in primary roles, as Lalitha Gopalan asserts a “strong presence on screen”<sup>30</sup> has existed in the previous decades. Similarly, the character of Durga symbolised the eternal power of the goddess Durga, yet she had to rely on her sons to avenge her miseries. This shows how films depleted the roles of such vibrant women characters to mere supporters of heroic masculinity who succumb to the submissive and conforming traditional societal expectations. Moreover, the emergence of such films realistically depicts and defies widows as multidimensional characters who pursue their dreams and aspirations while also asserting their agency.

Thus, these positive portrayals of widows as strong, independent individuals who challenge social norms and strive for personal growth and empowerment whilst supporting their sons debase the existing patriarchal notions. This marked a significant shift in the Indian media towards delineating widows more powerfully and positively. Their images have been remediated over multiple media platforms like films, television shows, and web series that have depicted the widow’s resilience, strength, and agency. Earlier, Bollywood cinema enabled and addressed a particular anomaly that reverberated how a set notion is circulated in media and alters people’s perception of varied media. Claire Johnston argues that feminist films act as counter cinema, which encompasses the noble potential to resist the stereotypical presentations and ideological fabrications of women.<sup>31</sup> By incorporating such social issues into films, Indian media have challenged and addressed widow abuse and its lopsided representation while focussing on issues such as widow remarriage, inheritance rights for widows, and the effects of social prejudices. Films like *Doctor G* and *Once Again* depict a nuanced portrayal of a widow through the character of Shobha and Tara, who challenges the archaic notion of a devoted mother. Both of these widows exercise their passion for cooking. Shobha runs a YouTube channel to display her creativity, and Tara runs her own restaurant as the practice of cooking is conventionally allocated to a woman. However, both widows embrace this societal anomaly and turn it into an economic endeavour depicting how the act of cooking enable these women to reclaim their new identity. Furthermore, they also engage in a romantic relationship

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<sup>29</sup> Hasan Gürkan and Rengin Ozan, “Feminist Cinema as Counter Cinema: Is Feminist Cinema Counter Cinema?,” *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2015), pp. 73-90.

<sup>30</sup> Lalitha Gopalan, “Avenging Women in Indian Cinema,” *Screen*, vol. 38, no.1 (1997), pp. 42-59.

<sup>31</sup> Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” In *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

with a widower. This acts as a staunch resistance to the age-old societal convention of suppressing a widow's desires and sexuality.

As Minakshi Dutta posits "counter cinema, as an important genre of exceptional women projection, negates the stereotypical role of women and depicts women with her separate identity."<sup>32</sup> Another important aspect of both *Shobha* and *Tara* is their relationship with their sons. Both films question the power dynamic of a male protector and a dependent widowed mother. Uday and Dev symbolise the patriarchal social order, where they question their mothers for subverting their assigned societal rules. They dissuade them from pursuing their relationships, primarily due to the inherent fear of banishment from society. However, these widows confront their sons and live on their terms despite their son's dissent against their actions, oddly defying the patriarchal notion of curbing a widow's desire and free will to live and support her family on her own terms. Counter-cinema has enabled us to question such dogmatic practices involved in the creation of conventional cinema. Furthermore, it paints a realistic portrayal of widows and their issues that projects them as individual beings who can overcome hardships and lead fulfilling lives while embracing their widowhood and reclaiming their identity, and at the same time, subverting their marginalised representation in cinema. As Foucault states, "counter investment is another side of power relation."<sup>33</sup> Thus, counter-cinema challenges the power dynamics in society that resist the dominant discourses which aim to condense a widow's identity due to patriarchy and societal ascendancies.

## Conclusion

The essentialised representation of widows in films has evolved. There have been instances of negative and stereotypical portrayals in the past. The oblique characterisation of widows includes the incessant tedious tropes of 'distraught mother', an asexualised hermit, a woman dependent on her kinship for survival, which makes her an easy target for the infliction of violence and annexation of media space that becomes the breeding ground that harbours such stereotypical representation. This patriarchal dependence of these widowed mothers on their sons depicts how society establishes power dynamics within the gender dichotomies. A woman, especially a widow, due to the absence of a male provider, is pushed to the margins to ensconce male supremacy. She is forced to imbue the idea of her being overdependent, whose identity constructs and deconstructs itself due to society's altercations.

However, there have also been unequivocal efforts to challenge these stereotypes and provide a more nuanced representation of a widow, reflecting changing societal attitudes and a growing awareness of the issues faced by widows. The remediated images of widows on different media platforms over the years have enabled a novel understanding of issues around them. This article traces the trajectory of the violence inflicted on widows in cinema that becomes the marker of her social identity. At the same time, it also delves into the familial aspect of widowhood. In films, objects act as contrasting symbols when associated with the identity of a married woman, which purposely creates a visual anomaly that could induce

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<sup>32</sup> Minakshi Dutta, "Bulbul Can Sing (2018), Stories from Edges," *FIPRESCI-India* (2020). At: <http://www.fipresci-india.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/14.-Minakshi-Dutta-Bulbul-Can-Sing.pdf>. Accessed 12/08/23.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 35.

violence. Furthermore, being a widowed mother evokes new realms of discussion, as a woman's identity is created by social conventions and the presence of the husband and later her son, who is projected as a saviour for the distraught mother. This narrative is recurrently monetised in the cinema. This not only problematises the existing notions around widows, who are presumed to be the active vectors and preservers of culture. Also, such images in films and other media render them voiceless. However, within the contemporary scenario, the advent of new technology and the accessibility of media by the masses provides a platform for the ameliorated images of widows. Their realistic narratives deconstruct and delineate an alternate and unfeigned reality that enables them to reclaim their identity and embrace widowhood.