
Literary Voice: A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies (ISSN 2277-4521) Number 25, Volume 1, September 2025, <https://literaryvoice.in>
 Indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I20R, CiteFactor, InfoBase

Exploring Cultural and Gender Dynamics in *Laapataa Ladies* *

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.40>

Abstract

*Cinema is the visual medium that tells intriguing stories and presents various social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological aspects. Indian cinema is bestowed with diversity and richness in presenting multifaceted expressions of reality. Bollywood, one of the major film industries in India, has captured the attention of a global audience for its depictions of many such issues through multiple genres. There has been a rise in the production of woman-centric films offering minute expressions on the issues of gender and culture. In this context, this paper attempts to explore various socio-cultural issues reflected in the Hindi film, *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), directed by Kiran Rao. As an analytical study, while discussing the plight of Indian rural women, the paper primarily delves into gender and cultural dynamics in the Indian social scenario. Further, it aims to shed light on themes like women's identity assertion, discovery of self, freedom of choice, and expression through feminist lenses. It also critiques the issues of forced arranged marriage, dowry, domestic violence, veiling, and female education to reflect on the predicaments experienced by women living in rural India due to rigid socio-cultural codes and structures.*

Keywords: Bollywood, Socio-Cultural Realities, Patriarchy, Rural India, Gender and Culture, *Laapataa Ladies*

Introduction

Cinema, or film or motion picture, is considered to be one of the most important and myriad forms of art. It is the 'storytelling' art of moving images; a visual medium that tells stories and presents reality. It is "an ideological apparatus by the very nature of its very seamlessness. Mainstream or dominant cinema in Hollywood or elsewhere puts ideology up in the screen. The workings of ideology can be examined in gender, race, class, age, and so on" (Singh 7). Because of the immense role played by the writer and director behind the camera, cinematic representation becomes successful in giving a vibrant visual experience to its audience. Created in the dusk of the nineteenth century, cinema is one of the most powerful social institutions of our time, and the most complex, collaborative, and costly artistic expression. The key to cinema lies in a better understanding of culture and the philosophy of life. Cinema has become an integral part of Indian culture due to the Indian people's engaging interest and great love for cinematic reproductions.

Bollywood, one of the leading film industries in India, is most popularly known for producing commercially successful cinema. However, it has sometimes been criticised for its production of offbeat films as well, and despite this, it continues to win the hearts of people with diversity in genres. It is popular especially for showcasing Indian society, culture, and tradition because "Hindi cinema may well appear like a tree rooted deeply in Indian tradition" (22). Since the heart of Indian life rests in the villages, most of the films, therefore, mesmerizingly visualise Indian rural life, women, their customs, traditions, and culture. However, the representation of women as self-reliant and empowered beings is receiving tremendous popularity in the current

***Article History:** Full Article Received on 31st May 2025. Peer Review completed on 6th August 2025, Article Accepted on 9th Aug. 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

scenario. There has been a rise in the engagement of feminist depictions with the production of critically acclaimed, sensitive drama with strong female characters. It is so because “The question of female spectatorship and the female look circles around the issue of subjectivity and desire. Subjectivity is understood as a constant process of self-production rather than a fixed entity” (Smelik, “Feminist Film Theory” 2). Contemporary female-centric Bollywood films are tremendously advocating for gender equality and female subjectivity.

There is no denying that feminism has left an enduring impact on Bollywood in terms of capturing women’s trajectory and complexities. However, it is to be noted that “Several critical studies suggest that depictions of women in Bollywood films are problematic and mirror cultural expectations pertaining to gender norms held by Indians” (Ghaznavi et al. 24). Due to the intersection of feminist movements and Bollywood movies, the audience today experiences a more realistic and inclusive depictions of Indian women. The rise of the female-centric film in Bollywood places women at the forefront, offering their vibrant portrayals that vehemently challenge patriarchal traditions and societal expectations. Bollywood actresses, producers, and directors, such as Twinkle Khanna, Priyanka Chopra, Kangana Ranaut, and Deepika Padukone, actively advocate for female sensibility, subjectivity, and social change through their movies. Their films, like *PadMan* (2018), *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), *The Sky is Pink* (2019), *Chhapaak* (2020), *The White Tiger* (2021), etc., are centred around women’s lives and their varied experiences. Apart from these, many other Hindi films hold strong social messages on gender sensibilities, female subjectivity, empowerment, and self-discovery. For example, *Kahaani* (2012), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2014), *Mardaani* (2014), *Pink* (2016), *Thappad* (2020), *Mimi* (2021), *Mrs Undercover* (2023), *Jigra* (2024), and the most recent *Mrs.* (2025), reflect gender dynamics, underscoring women’s resilience and a stronger depiction of female agency in Hindi cinema. Films produced in the 2000s operate as a socio-cultural commentary to “understand what are the cultural norms which denigrate woman and do not give woman an identity, a voice of her own and the rightful status of even being a human being with dignity” (Singh 21). Therefore, female-centric movies address multiple societal issues like domestic abuse, exploitation of female rights, gender disparities, and attempt to rescue women from the stereotypical representations through their strong female characters. In other words, such movies today are significantly underscoring a departure from the archetypal portrayal of the Indian woman as *Abla Naari*, or the ‘damsel in distress’, because “Women-centric Hindi Cinema are the movies where the woman is not a decorative object contemplating the Hero, but a protagonist carrying the entire film on her shoulders. It is the cinema with a proceeding change in an oppressive society that attempts to break the stereotyped Heroic Hindi films” (Sail 55-56).

The recent 2024 Hindi film, *Laapataa Ladies* (trans. “Lost Ladies”), directed by Kiran Rao, is also such a visual representation that has become successful due to its treatment of multiple issues concerning women in rural India. Successfully addressing many serious social prejudices with a humorous and optimistic tone, the film significantly explores gender relations within patriarchal settings. Through its thematic depths, narrative structures, and character complexities, it becomes a truthful representation of Indian rural social life as it offers a critical lens on the long tradition, cultural beliefs, and norms that contribute to shaping the lives of women in patriarchal structures. The key concepts reflected in the film are the key features of the contemporary Indian society itself. As such, the film greatly offers a platform for digging into various socio-cultural and gender dynamics taking place in contemporary rural settings of the country.

Theoretical Framework

The paper employs a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the representation of gender and culture in *Laapataa Ladies*. As an interdisciplinary study, the paper intersects film

and gender studies, and it engages with contextual analysis in exploring how cinematic narrative, character portrayals and visual storytelling reflect and critique patriarchal structures in rural India. The analysis engages with both its visual and narrative elements, including the examination of dialogue, setting, character development, themes, and symbolic gestures to investigate the deeper meanings infused in the projection of the women protagonists' lives in the film. Feminist theoretical frameworks, particularly the 'gender performativity' theory propagated by Judith Butler, and Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the constructed femininity, have been employed for the interpretation of the film, interrogating how gender roles are constructed, performed, reinforced and subverted through the lived experiences of the female characters. As the paper primarily intends to substantiate the argument that women's sense of self as female is not a biological aspect, but rather comes through cultural expectations of femininity, therefore, secondary sources, such as academic writings on feminist film theory, Bollywood cinema, and cultural studies, also support the analysis of the paper.

Main Plot of the Film

Laapataa Ladies depicts the story of two young newly married village women, Phool (Nitanshi Goel) and Jaya (Pratibha Ranta), who get swapped and lost during a train journey to their husbands' homes. The title itself reflects the brides' physical departure as well as metaphorical loss of self within the strict codes of patriarchal structures. Directed by Kiran Rao, the film carefully explores the complex intersection of gender, the social institution of marriage, and social expectations within the cultural context of rural India. Set in the fictional Nirmal Pradesh during 2001, it critiques how women are defined by their roles as wives and daughters-in-law with little regard for their individuality or aspirations. Revolving around the narratives of the central female characters, Jaya aka Pushpa Rani, Phool, and Manju Mai (Chhaya Kadam), the film depicts these women's struggles for individuality amidst a background of deep tradition, culture, and customs. Almost all the female characters of the film embody different aspects of traditional femininity. However, their journey symbolically depicts a break from these confining roles and offers a commentary on the need for greater autonomy and self-determination for women.

Cultural and Gender Dynamics in the Film

Laapataa Ladies, as a social critique, encompasses various socio-cultural constructions to present rural Indian women's predicaments in which the institutions of marriage and motherhood have been consciously taken into account. Though the story is set in the advent of the twenty-first century, yet, it essentially captures the relevance of critiquing such institutions as well as various issues arising out of them even today. The societal obsession with the institution of marriage has been insightfully critiqued through its plot development in the film. Highlighting how marriage is viewed as the ultimate goal for women, it poignantly questions the fairness of this expectation and shows how this obsession can lead to a loss of individual identity and self. By focusing on Phool and Jaya's experiences, who become the victims of this institution, the film sharply critiques the transactional nature of arranged marriages and the pressures they place on women. This obsession is beautifully portrayed through Jaya's mother's condition, as she put forward in front of Jaya, either to walk down the aisle or to perform her mother's last rites. Dowry, which is traditionally rooted in arranged marriage in India, receives substantial criticism through the character of Pradeep (Bhaskar Jha), Jaya's husband. To accumulate the wealth required to marry off her daughter and fulfil the demands of the groom's family, Jaya's mother sells their farmland, but is still insulted by the groom for a mere ten thousand rupees missing from their demanded 'cash price.' Another eye-catching scene in which the film highlights the deep-rooted custom of dowry is when Deepak (Sparsh Srivastav) and Phool board the train, and Jaya's mother-in-law compares Deepak's three-piece suit with

her son Pradeep's suit, gifted by their respective in-laws. Moreover, people's discussion on other materialistic things such as motor-cycle, jewellery or mobile phone received by the families of grooms present in the coach and Jaya's mother-in-law's inquiry on whether Deepak has got such things as dowry or not visibly reflect the greed and oppressive mentality of people from grooms' side in the name of custom and culture.

The film depicts Jaya or Pushpa's character loaded with resilience and unshakable determination to defy all odds imposed on women. Jaya wants to bloom through higher education, and therefore, she tries to stand against her wedding. Through her character, Rao has emphasised that education is paramount for women to break the restrictive chains of society. This is further reflected upon by the police inspector, Shyam Manohar (Ravi Kishan) about Jaya at the end of the film as he declares, "This girl will go a long way" (*Laapataa Ladies* 1:51:10). Jaya's zeal towards getting an education on organic farming at a college in Dehradun despite being trapped within oppressive norms reflects her indomitable spirit to prove herself amidst prevailing gender inequality. This is further highlighted through the scene in which she imparts knowledge to Deepak's father and friend on organic farming, considering that pesticides are poisons for crops. Jaya is with the view that crop cultivation must depend on science and not only on hard work and faith, at which Deepak's sister-in-law comments on her, saying, "You have a profound thirst for knowledge" (1:10:43). This is that thirst which compels Jaya to risk her own dignity, life, and family honour. From the beginning, Jaya's inventiveness is evident as she cunningly leverages cultural norms and technology. By being resilient, she navigates her circumstances with instrumentality. While staying at Phool's in-laws' home, she tactfully uses a long veil as a symbol of modesty for misleading others and to protect herself as well as her real identity. As the narrative progresses, Jaya emerges as a catalyst for change with her fierce determination and assertiveness. Despite the intense pressure Jaya receives for her marriage, her act of forging her own path defines her self-worth and independence, reflecting the female subjectivity that is shaped by her individual choice and resilience. Judith Butler's argument of 'gender becoming' resonates with Jaya's subjectivity, which has operated as an ongoing process in navigating patriarchal impositions and individual aspirations. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler states that "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (25). Through Jaya's subversive act of running away from her marriage to pursue her dream and tactfully dealing with cultural expectations, beautifully parallels with Butler's view that there is no fixed gender identity, rather such identities form through one's performative acts.

In any film, character representation becomes essentially instrumental in holding the core essence of the story. There is no doubt that as a female-centric film, *Laapataa Ladies* critically throws light on the challenges women face in their everyday social life through its character portrayals. However, they seem fearful or hesitant to confront those challenges initially. Rao has beautifully employed the dichotomy of tradition and modernity to explore how cultural practices and values evolve, which often clash with individual desires for freedom and self-expression. There are certain scenes where the harsh reality of traditional rural Indian households is explicitly mirrored. Fearing societal judgment or prejudice, female members in many households ignore or sometimes forget their preferences. This is well reflected through the dialogues of Yashoda (Geeta Agarwal Sharma), Phool's mother-in-law, who submissively follows the traditional gender norms and cultural behaviour. Commenting on the food choices of women in their respective in-laws' homes, Yashoda says in a humorous tone, "Since when are women allowed to cook food of their preferences?" (*Laapataa Ladies* 1:21:20). This vividly demonstrates that women's identities are subsumed into traditional gender roles, making them sacrificial models. Because of societal expectations and cultural pressures, women in traditional societies compromise with everything— their individuality, choice, desires and

likings as well. The same thing also happens with Yashoda as she had forgotten herself and let go of things for the sake of others, especially for her husband and sons. When Jaya asks her the reason behind giving up cooking things of her own choice, she replies to her, “The trouble is that now I don’t even remember what I used to like” (1:21:30). But in the last scene we find a smiling Yashoda who gives Jaya a tiffin filled with her favourite dish—lotus stem curry and chapati—when the latter is boarding her bus. Moreover, Yashoda’s elder daughter-in-law, Poonam Kumari (Rachna Gupta), also undergoes trials of victimhood because of gender biases, for which she loses her own identity and real self under the pressures of expected familial responsibilities and loneliness due to her husband’s departure to the town for livelihood. However, it is through Jaya’s friendship and encouragement, she regains her freedom of expression in her talent of sketching pictures of people, which she had earlier considered a worthless activity. Here, it must be pointed out that gender biases and cultural pressures on women find considerable place in the films by contemporary filmmakers. Such films “evoke a deep sympathy with the plight of the female victims” (Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked* 91). It must be reckoned that *Laapataa Ladies* leaves no stone unturned to depict that gender is a cultural construct. This is well reflected through the scene in which Jaya converses with Poonam, which throws direct light on how males are positioned in a superior status by the cultural imposition of discriminatory norms heaped upon women. Jaya’s inquiry into the reason for Poonam’s not taking her husband’s name critiques the gender differences that have been ideologically shaped. The women characters are conditioned in such a way that they aptly prove the French feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir’s statement put forward in *The Second Sex* (1949): “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (273). The projection of the characters in the film rightly showcases how women come to be recognised as ‘the other’ in society. Apart from Poonam, Phool’s character is also loaded with innocence, ignorance, abeyance and submissiveness. Because of her conditioning, Phool takes pride in her upbringing and the traditional feminine qualities she is infused with by her mother. It’s not just Phool’s body that is confined within the barriers of cultural and gender expectations, but her thoughts are also equally confined. This is greatly revealed through the iconic scene in which she seems to be arguing with Manju Maai. Phool is very proud of the teachings she received in her maternal house, claiming that she was raised with good values and, therefore, has a good upbringing. Phool reveals that she does not want to return to her maternal home, fearing *badnaami* (bad reputation), believing that people will assume something is wrong with her, for which her husband abandoned her at the station. At this, lamenting on the condition of women of the country, Maai accuses female conditioning, which shapes women’s dependent identities. According to Maai, “For centuries, women in this country have been duped. The con is known as ‘A respectable girl.’ Your mother didn’t make you smart, she made you a fool.” Moreover, Phool’s denial of Maai’s speculation saying that “I am not a fool. I am good at household chores, Grandma. I can sew, cook, sing, pray...” and Maai’s way of counter-questioning her, saying, “Do you know how to go home?” (*Laapataa Ladies* 00:38:15) reveal the patriarchal mechanisation behind constructing women’s dependent selves limiting them within the four walls only. Phool is such a character in the movie who performs the expected roles unquestionably. However, in Maai’s companionship, she gradually understands the patriarchal politics behind women’s dependent identities, leading her to ponder her understanding of herself. This changing phenomenon of Phool’s character is highlighted towards the end of the movie when she travels to her in-laws’ place all alone in a train without any veil, and she takes her husband, Deepak’s name, aloud at the station. Her small act of rejecting the prescribed cultural norms makes her self-aware and assertive, demonstrating the shifts in her identity, which is shaped by her performance. In this way, Phool also fulfils Butler’s supposition, proving that her gender is not her stable identity with her understanding that this identity can be transformed through repetitive acts irrespective of culturally imposed roles in any society

because “Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (140). It is to be noted that gender cannot be considered as something that one believes it is; rather, it is something one does.

Manju Maai becomes the most important female character in the film, who runs a small tea stall at a train station. She has been presented as a symbol of women’s economic empowerment outside the domestic confines of traditional society. The portrayal of Manju Maai as a long-sufferer because of the traditional thinking and cultural expectations is indeed noteworthy. However, she revolted against all these odds in her own way and proclaimed autonomy in her own life. She was a victim of domestic violence despite being the sole earner in the family. In a casual conversation with Phool at her home, she reveals that she beat her husband one day because of being tired of his act of normalising wife-beating as an act of love and also revelling in her hard-earned money. Thereafter, by attaining the knowledge of self-companionship, she turned her aloneness into solitude. Acknowledging her difficult journey of self-discovery, Maai tells Phool, “Living alone and being happy on your own is the toughest thing, Phool. But once you master it, no one can hurt you ever” (*Laapataa Ladies* 1:01:36). Maai believes that the world is perhaps afraid of women for their inexhaustible capabilities and, therefore, they are confined in the name of culture and tradition. She discards the belief that a woman’s sole purpose is to get married and attain motherhood. Advocating for self-respect in relationships, she is of the view that it is better to walk away from an abusive marriage and lead a single life than to accept humiliating terms for sustaining the marriage. Maai’s keen understanding of female subjugation leads her to break the stable gender identity and to perform subversive acts, which result in her sense of individual self. In such a context, the English art critic and novelist John Berger’s statement is apt when he says in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), “a woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her” (46). Maai’s realistic attitude towards society proves the relevance of Berger’s claim. Because of the horrible past experience in her marriage and the new-found self, Manju Maai could easily “yield insight into the sources of misogyny in masculinist society” and her present condition lead Phool to the “critical understanding of violence against women, women’s resistance to it, and the vicissitudes of female subjectivity” (Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked* 90). In Manju Maai’s company, Phool’s naivety and belief in cultural norms get deconstructed as she embarks on a journey towards self-discovery and self-empowerment, which is visibly noted through her urge to do something of her own to earn money and to help her husband. Moreover, her train journey to her husband’s home alone and taking her husband’s name aloud in public reflect her drastic transformation as a self-aware woman. Again, in the last scene when Jaya is leaving for Dehradun, Phool and Jaya’s conversation about their newfound selves remarkably underscores the main aim of the film. Talking about her physical disappearance from the train Phool says to Jaya, “If it hadn’t been you, I would never have been found”, and Jaya’s response to this as “If it hadn’t been for you, I would have never found myself” (*Laapataa Ladies* 1:56:08) greatly reflects that one has to be lost sometimes in order to find one’s true self. Thus, all the female characters witness a subtle transition in their ideologically imposed roles as daughters, wives and mothers, critiquing the concept of essential femininity. They highlight the gradual empowerment of women with their small attempts to subvert traditional gender roles and dependent identity while making their own choices. In a greater manner, the film presents sisterhood as the core component because it “brings conversations amongst friends and families to platforms about the challenges facing women today. It brings on a discussion of women’s rights, personal autonomy, and a sense of safety within groups of women” (Gandhi & Srinivasan 42). This contributes to the awakening of women’s consciousness of self and to uplifting them from their passive, submissive, dependent status to active and independent social agents.

Conclusion

In summing up, *Laapataa Ladies* is a powerful commentary on socio-cultural aspects of Indian rural life, which becomes apparent through its careful examination of the convergence of tradition, gender and other socio-cultural expectations. Through its simple yet engaging narratives, the film intrinsically inspires its audiences to rethink the gender roles and cultural behaviours that contribute to govern the lives of Indian women. It daringly reflects on gender dynamics while advocating for a society that values individuality and personal freedom over rigid cultural prescriptions. The film traces female subjectivity as “a process of continuous becoming rather than as a state of being” (Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked* 3). Thus, it allows for a thoughtful examination of contemporary gender relations, tracing changes and transformations on the part of female characters, and thereby understanding subjectivity as a dynamic process. However, it must be noted that the film doesn’t focus on showing drastic changes in the characters’ lives. Instead, its ending, with an optimistic atmosphere about the small and gradual progress of each character, serves as an essential document on the engaging issues of female empowerment and their search for individuality.

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