# Deconstructing Domestic Violence in Bollywood: Feminist Reflections on *Darlings* (2022)

**Rohini Zakaria Oishee**

*Lecturer, Department of English, East West University, Bangladesh*

rohini.zakaria@ewubd.edu | ORCID: 0009-0002-0395-9543

**Abstract**

Instances of domestic violence against women persist globally, particularly prevalent in various forms across South Asia. It is a topic that has gained attention in various forms of media, including Bollywood movies. One of the recent Bollywood productions, *Darlings* (2022), directed by Jasmeet K. Reen, addresses this issue differently than its predecessors. A grim subject like domestic violence which is rarely material for humor has been presented through a dark comedic lens while bringing back the Muslim social genre. This paper seeks to assert by referring to western and non-western feminist discourse that, despite successfully subverting the popular representation of women in feminist revenge narratives and emphasizing the perpetuating maltreatment of women in South Asian patriarchal households, the film could not liberate itself from the two oppositional representations of women – "angel" and "madwoman" (in case of *Darlings*, it is murderer), popularized by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Concurrently, while correlating Simone de Beauvoir's positioning of women in her influential text, *The Second Sex* with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial alignment in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," the paper will also argue that, in spite of raising awareness about violence against women and deconstructing the stereotypical portrayal of domestic violence in Bollywood, the film inadvertently normalizes intimate partner violence (IPV) and potentially undermines the seriousness of this critical social issue.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, Bollywood, patriarchy, feminist criticism, marginalization

## Introduction

Gendered violence can be theorized through the lenses of physical and sexual abuse, encompassing more subtle forms that can have significant psychological impacts. While discussing the relation between gender and violence in feminist discourse, two terms – violence against women and gender-based violence – are frequently used interchangeably, reflecting the reality that most violence against women stems from gender-based motivations. Violence within the domestic

sphere has historically permeated human societies across diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic landscapes, with patriarchy serving as a pivotal mechanism for asserting male dominance within households. This violence is deeply embedded in traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and is largely a product of hierarchical gender relations that position men as superior and women as inferior. Patriarchy, as a conceptual framework, undeniably precedes and encompasses domestic abuse, embodying a constellation of ideologies and norms that rationalize and uphold male authority over women. This subordination is primarily established and institutionalized within the family through marriage (Dobash and Dobash 33). Within this spectrum, the discourse of film becomes significant because, as Bernard J. Hibbitts in his investigation of performance culture notes, "We are living at a time when writing is rapidly losing its social and ideological hegemony" (887), and audio-visual media are increasingly shaping the meaning-making process.

Director Jasmeet K. Reen's debut film, *Darlings* is a 2022 Netflix original dark comedy. She has also co-written the story with Parveez Sheikh. In collaboration with her co-writer, Reen scrutinizes the dynamics of patriarchy and domestic abuse through her unconventional presentation of a dark comedic tale by bringing "feminist revenge narrative" (Ajgaonkar 210) within the social-psychological backdrop of a lower middle class Muslim family. The film delves into a pervasive issue observed among South Asian families, where women are often mistreated by their husbands and yet the hope and desperation of having completely changed, responsible counterparts do not end. However, the film advocates for women to transcend the cycle of abuse rather than engaging in negotiations with the oppressor. In this article, I contend that while the film underscores the extinguishing hold of the patriarchal structure and experiments with the cinematic techniques and genres to deconstruct the mainstream representation of domestic violence in Bollywood films, it ultimately fails to move beyond the binary depictions of women as either "angels" or "madwomen" (or murderers, in the context of this film), a concept drawn from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Instead of differentiating between western and non-western feminist ideas, I will correlate them to propose that despite the director's innovative approach to raise awareness among audience regarding violence against women, it culminates in normalizing intimate partner violence (IPV), which consequently decreases the gravity of such a pressing social problem.

**Bollywood and Violence against Women**

In the 1970s, feminists highlighted that violence against women serves as a crucial mechanism for patriarchal subjugation (Kozol 651), which is reflected in

cinema as well. In the initial chapter of her work *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*, Anneke Smelik characterizes cinema as a "cultural endeavor wherein narratives pertaining to women, femininity, men, masculinity, and ultimately, narratives concerning sexual differentiation are both formulated and depicted" (7). Certainly, cinema has considerable influence in upholding and perpetuating certain societal ideologies and myths. Smelik's assertion resonates within the realm of Bollywood cinema, which often romanticizes love, objectifies women, and portrays male protagonists as possessing extraordinary valor who rescue and control vulnerable heroines lacking agency in their own defense. Menka Ahlawat, in her analysis of angry young women in 1970s Bollywood films, argues that unlike the "angry young man" whose anger is rooted in societal injustices, the actions and emotions of female protagonists in revenge narratives are delegitimized. Injustices against women are depicted as private issues, personal battles rather than societal problems, isolating them from broader socio-economic contexts (204). Historically, Bollywood has subordinated women's experiences to men; though portrayals began to change from the 1990s, the hierarchical binary between men and women remained largely intact.

During the 1990s, Hindi cinema popularized the family drama genre, which became a significant medium for exploring issues related to the mistreatment of women. Tere, in her examination of gender representations in mainstream Hindi cinema, found that these films often depicted the suffering of women through acts such as sexual harassment, battering, rape, and domestic violence (4). While critiquing domestic violence, they subtly upheld the patriarchal institution of marriage by suggesting that the victimized wife should endure her husband's abuse and only leave the marital home upon her death (Tere 3). Ramasubramanian and Oliver, in their study of sexual violence in Hindi films from 1997 to 1999, found that male aggression towards women was often normalized and legitimized (328). Female characters in these films were typically depicted as powerless, resorting to tears and pleas to seek empathy and respect from their husbands. However, Afreen Khan notes a radical shift in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema during the 1990s, highlighting a departure from traditional roles (51).

Films such as *Yaraana* (Dhawan, 1995), *Daraar* (Abbas and Mastan, 1996), *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* (Gaekwad, 1997), *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* (Lajmi, 2001), *Lajja* (Santoshi, 2001), and *Koi Mere Dil Se Poochhe* (Shukla, 2002), among many, are centered around the pressing issue of domestic violence. These films challenged the traditional portrayal of marriage in Bollywood as a romantic and idealistic institution by depicting the domestic sphere as abusive

and violent. The female protagonists in these narratives were in stark contrast with Bollywood's usual depiction of women as self-sacrificial, passive victims who were domesticated, obedient, and reverent towards their husbands despite abuse (Moini 1453-54). Instead, they were depicted as "avenging women" (Karki 83) who actively seek retribution against their abusive spouses. Most mainstream Indian films of this era either reinforced the stereotype of the Indian woman as a damsel in distress (Sen 203) or presented her as an independent identity who mostly remains subordinate to men as exemplified by Rajiv Rai's 1994 film *Mohra* (Pawn). Through the regressive narration of domestic violence, women have been shown in a melodramatic or sensationalized manner which trivializes the issue and reinforces harmful stereotypes. Such narratives often depict female victims as forgiving their male abusers, which normalizes such behavior and perpetuates detrimental social messages. Moreover, these films tend to treat violence and coercion as individual stories, instead of conceding them as a systematic social crime rooted in patriarchy.

From the last decade onwards, a visible change is noticeable in the depiction of women in Bollywood. Jasmeet K. Reen's film *Darlings* (2022) stands out by minimizing this gap by its nuanced and modernized portrayal of violent women, offering representations that incorporate multiple intersecting aspects of identity, challenging or expanding previous portrayals. Though *Darlings* falls under the same feminist revenge tradition, its presentation of domestic violence against women through dark humor is where it is unique compared to its predecessors. Though the movie initially upholds the common scenario of a patriarchal society where women are viewed in relation to men – she is a wife, mother, or daughter before being an individual – it also attempts to deconstruct the stereotypical view through subversion. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* addresses this notion which is further extended in the postcolonial South Asian context by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and this framework will be used to examine the film.

## The Movie *Darlings*

The narrative of *Darlings* unfolds in Mumbai's Byculla district where two women – mother and daughter – endeavor to extinguish the perpetual maltreatment suffered by the latter, Badrunissa Shaikh, Badru in short, at the hands of her spouse, Hamza. The film chronicles the tumultuous relationship between Badru (Alia Bhatt) and Hamza (Vijay Verma), a lower-middle-class Muslim couple. Hamza, depicted as an alcoholic and abusive partner, consistently inflicts physical and emotional abuse on Badru, manipulating her into forgiveness. Their journey from romance to marriage unfolds over three years – love and romance of courtship to sheer terror of domestic violence. The climax occurs when the

suspicious Hamza brutally assaults Badru, causing a miscarriage. Traumatized, Badru initially contemplates suicide but instead seeks revenge. She incapacitates Hamza by drugging and binding him, then mirrors the violent abuse he inflicted on her. Badru's mother, Shamshu (Shefali Shah), an equally important character, and her business partner Zulfi (Roshan Mathew), who secretly loves Shamshu, become entangled in the plot. Although Badru considers killing Hamza by tying him to the train tracks, she ultimately decides against it, fearing the moral consequences. Hamza, realizing Badru's change of heart, threatens her. But in an ironic twist of fate, he is accidentally killed by a passing train. What distinguishes *Darlings* from other feminist revenge narratives is its innovative use of dark humor to address the grave issue of domestic violence. Additionally, it uniquely foregrounds the experiences of economically disadvantaged women from a religious minority in India, who in mainstream representations remain in the periphery as subaltern and marginalized individuals.

## *Darlings*: A Critique of Patriarchy

In a patriarchal culture, both society and women themselves often position women in a secondary status compared to their male counterparts. Those who try to reclaim their agency often go through a phase of transformation. *Darlings*, akin to the archetypal Indian feminist revenge films, is structured with a distinct division between its first and second halves, mirroring Badru's transformation into a violent woman. One of the reasons why, until the end of the first half of the film, Badru could not look past the physical abuse can be what Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* examines as the condition of women within the existentialist framework, contending that femininity is socially constructed. She explains that society conditions a woman to define her worth based on fulfilling a man's needs; thus, determining her "essence" is determined in relation to a man (26, 506). Beauvoir famously states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (330). Badru's social understanding of her role as a woman leads her to believe that her value lies in fulfilling her duties as a wife, bearing a child to change Hamza's alcoholic nature, and to complete herself. Initially, she embodies this notion by submissively allowing Hamza to vent his frustrations – when stones accidentally get into the rice she has cooked for Hamza, she puts her hand out so that he can spit into it (*Darlings* 4:57-5:55), reflecting the social construct of the "eternal feminine" (Beauvoir 764) that views woman solely as a server to the family. This universality of Beauvoir's positioning surely fits within the South Asian context, but, nonetheless, the approach is extended by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her influential article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Mohanty foregrounds women's position in a given structure, but she also affirms that no attempt has been taken "to trace the effect of the marriage practice in constituting women within an obviously changing

network of power relations. Thus, women are assumed to be sexual-political subjects prior to entry into kinship structure" (341-342), which is marriage. Western radical feminists, such as MacKinnon and Millett's views, align with Mohanty. While MacKinnon has strongly argued that the subordination and control of women within domestic spaces are inherently political, rooted in male supremacy ("Difference and Dominance" 40-41), Millett takes it forward by referring to the social order of patriarchy within the private sphere where males rule females as a birthright, and can be seen as a system of "interior colonization" ("Theory of Sexual Politics" 25).

Patriarchy has been differentiated into two distinct categories: social and familial patriarchy (Smith 257). Social patriarchy concerns the overarching male dominance prevalent throughout society where the subordination of women is continued economically, whereas familial patriarchy specifically addresses male authority within the familial context where women's personal space is controlled (Barrett 17and Millett 33). While the structural influence of familial patriarchy may have gradually waned in recent years, its ideological underpinnings persist (Barrett 17). Despite the scholars' views on the decrease in familial patriarchy, in *Darlings* Badru has been entrapped in her private sphere. At the film's outset, Badru is presented as an outgoing woman, but after three years of marriage, her world has significantly shrunk. The visual representation of the narrow, crowded chawl, a common low-quality housing in Mumbai, symbolizes her confined existence post-marriage. Cinematographer Anil Mehta uses this cramped space to underline Badru's entrapment – she is caged within her own home living under Hamza's strict rules. The film's setting within the four walls of the house and the increased animosity and abuse that follows within, predominantly indicates the restricted private sphere of socio-economically disadvantaged working-class housewives. In the present patriarchal world, it is widely believed that asserting control over a woman is sometimes necessary. Typically, such occasions arise "when a woman challenges a man's authority, fails to fulfill his expectations of service, or neglects to stay in 'her place'" (Dobash and Dobash 93). In one instance, against Hamza's objections, Badru attends a societal meeting regarding the chawl's renovation to improve their lower-middle-class status. This choice precipitates another vicious assault, where Hamza smashes her finger in a game of pinfinger using the red stiletto she bought to seduce him along with a fancy red dress (*Darlings* 28:00-28:42). This scene illustrates how her aspiration for a more economically solvent life with modern facilities not only challenges social patriarchy but also results in violent physical harm. On the surface level, it seems that the film centers on a young woman ensnared in a hopeless marriage. However, the narrative extends beyond the domestic sphere, exposing the grim realities of toxic masculinity, gender inequality embedded within the institution

of marriage, and the challenges faced by lower middle-class women when confronted with societal and economic constraints.

Despite experiencing conflicts, uncertainties, and physical abuse, Badru endures silently due to her personal aspirations reflected in the notes beside her dressing table, her longing for a larger home, financial stability, and dream of motherhood – all of which hold greater significance to her than safeguarding herself from her husband's abuse. Like thousands of South Asian women, Badru is a complacent, devoted wife who continues to dream of a changed and responsible partner despite enduring continuous physical and psychological mistreatment. It is essential to note that Badru did not inherit her belief system from her mother, Shamshu, who consistently opposes her violent marriage. To understand this, Beauvoir's critique of Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage can be applied, which proposes that children develop a sense of selfhood upon recognizing their reflection in a mirror (*The Second Sex* 331). Beauvoir challenges this notion, arguing that female children are conditioned from a young age to conform to societal expectations in their appearance and behavior. When a girl looks in the mirror, she does not perceive her true self but rather a reflection shaped by societal norms and ideals. This includes striving to emulate idealized feminine figures – to "resemble an image" by "compar[ing] herself to princesses and fairies from tales" (340). In the film, Badru grew up without a father and was raised by her mother single-handedly. For her the complete mirror image was what her mother lacked – a marriage with a loving partner which from the Freudian psychoanalytic point of view can be regarded as "female castration complex" (Beauvoir 334). Manipulated by Hamza, Badru refuses to file a complaint against him, despite her mother's objections. Badru firmly utters to her mother, "Hamza and I are not like you and dad. Sorry, mom, but Dad didn't love you! That's why he left. Hamza is not like him, he loves me a lot" (*Darlings* 44:05-44:20). She opted for a love marriage because she knew her mother's arranged marriage did not work. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to "cure" Hamza's alcoholism, which she believes is the sole cause of his abuse, Badru concludes that having a child is the only solution. Therefore, there is always an attempt in Badru to fill the void which, from a Freudian interpretation, can be seen as the innate desire for the phallus, and an attempt to compensate for that loss through a child.

Badru's husband, Hamza, is manipulative, abusive, deeply insecure, sadistic, and embodies the stereotypical patriarch. As an alcoholic, he perceives violence as a normalized aspect of marital cohabitation. In one scene, Hamza seeks reconciliation with Badru by rationalizing his abusive behavior, claiming that quarrels are an integral part of any marriage. Verily, this reflects the societal coercion practiced hegemonically to keep women subordinated – a tactic Hamza

practices skillfully. Hamza manipulates Badru through self-condemnation, tears, and promises of an idealized future, including having children and ceasing his drinking habit (*Darlings* 38:34-40:03). These promises function as hegemonic practices to which Badru voluntarily conforms. In families experiencing domestic violence, such patterns of coercive control are often perceived as normal. This attitude reaffirms Fran Hosken's notion of how physical abuse against women is perpetuated "with an astonishing consensus among men in the world" (Hosken, cited in Mohanty 339). Interestingly, the character of Zulfi is presented as a direct foil to Hamza. As Saibal Chatterjee highlights in his review, Zulfi as a character is "diametrically antithetical" to Hamza. Zulfi is well-liked by those around him, including Shamshu and Badru, and does not exhibit toxic masculinity; he remains composed when challenged and, most importantly, pursues his passions. In contrast, Hamza is portrayed as a powerless figure outside his home. Although by profession he is a railway ticket collector, he starts his day by cleaning his boss's toilet, and others perceive him as merely a drunkard. Hamza's bravado is hollow, and Badru serves as his sole outlet for exerting a sense of superiority. This is evident when he shows no remorse after hitting his mother-in-law, Shamshu, when she calls him impotent for physically torturing Badru (*Darlings* 45:35-45:50). He only apologizes to Shamshu days later at Badru's urging, following the confirmation of her pregnancy. Hamza's apology, arguably, lacks genuine remorse and is instead motivated by his desire to refute Shamshu's accusation of impotence, highlighting his ego-driven need to prove his capability of procreation. Therefore, it is not much of a surprise when the dynamic culminates in the most brutal instance of domestic violence depicted in the film – Badru's miscarriage – triggered when Hamza feels utterly powerless, emasculated, and castrated by Zulfi imagining an illicit relationship between him and Badru. Gheetu T. Mohan, in analyzing the recent representations of domestic violence in Bollywood movies, postulates that in South Asian societies, men are expected to embody strength, masculinity, and lead in procreation. Failing to meet these expectations often results in being labeled as unmasculine or unmanly, considered a profound dishonor. To conceal their perceived inadequacies, they resort to demonstrating their masculinity through acts of violence (51). Hamza follows the same pattern of actions and his understanding of being a superior entity compared to Badru and her mother is predominantly because of the hierarchical structure of a society which puts him in higher position only because he is male.

In the first half of the film, Shamshu, Badru's mother, serves as a direct foil to Badru, much like the way Zulfi contrasts with Hamza. Shamshu embodies resilience, independence, and determination, as evidenced by her efforts to establish a food delivery enterprise with Zulfi's assistance. She supports her

daughter wholeheartedly, even advising her to kill her husband to escape his perpetual abuse. While aware of the harsh realities, Shamshu often focuses on possibilities, despite her advice sometimes evoking laughter and lacking practical reasoning. Utilizing Gilbert and Gubar's insights from their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Badru initially can be seen as the "Angel in the house" whereas through Hamza'a eyes it is evident that Shamshu is the unrestrained seductive body as she undermines the patriarchal norms and regulations. When Badru asks why Hamza says horrible things about her mother, he replies, "At this age, if she [Shamshu] will run around town chasing butterflies, will people stare at the butterflies or your mother?" (*Darlings* 25:50-25:57) The narrative strengthens the system of honorary value, which links family honor with regulating female sexuality and conforming to social and traditional standards (Gill and Brah 73). There are several instances like this where Hamza's perception regarding Shamshu as a "fallen woman" and his "male anxieties about female autonomy" gets reflected (Gilbert and Gubar 28). In an interview with Film Companion, Reen mentions such projection was "an intentional choice" from her side and mostly from those conversations we get to perceive Hamza's adverse opinion about his mother-in-law. Unlike Badru, Shamshu, understanding Hamza's true nature, repeatedly urges her daughter to depart from the abusive marriage. However, Badru remains adamant in her commitment, unwaveringly believing in Hamza's professed "love" while hoping to rectify his behavior without pursuing legal action against him.

While dealing with cases of domestic violence, it is still predominantly seen in various parts of South Asia that despite the provision of legal assistance, women frequently avoid reporting them to the police or any legal authority due to concerns about eventual isolation and potential humiliation. While analyzing the reasons behind, Ahmed-Ghosh has found out that in India, abused women often do not consider seeking divorce, as their primary interest lies in preserving their marriage, which grants them social status and economic security (114). The depiction of marriage in *Darlings* offers an explicit critique of the challenges inherent in escaping this social institution. When the police officer (Vijay Maurya) inquires why Badru is not opting for a divorce, Shamshu responds, "'Divorced' tag is the worst, sir!" Lamenting, she expresses concern that if Badru were to get divorced, there will be no prospect of getting her married again (*Darlings* 40:15-40:22). Victims of domestic violence and their families refrain from filing divorce mostly due to concerns about social stigma and the fear of the victim being left alone for a lifetime. This uncertainty compels them to remain in abusive relationships. Such fears are perpetuated within the broad structure of patriarchy, where women internalize their subordinate status as the Other. As Beauvoir contends the inability of women to organize themselves

as a collective force, she rightly claims that "a woman could not even dream of exterminating males. The tie that binds her to her oppressors is unlike any other" (28). Such perpetuation of solidarity with the oppressor is one of the key reasons why social and familial patriarchy remains dominant in South Asia despite its decline in other parts of the world. In that scene, Shamshu also adds, "The world's changed for people on Twitter, not for the likes of us" (*Darlings* 40:23-40:27). The dialogue, expression, and delivery accentuate laughter, but this scene is poignant as it underscores that, although divorce is often promoted as a solution for women to escape abusive marriages, the screenplay writers minutely shed light not only on the growing disparity in the living condition and ideological differences across socio-economic strata of a highly capitalist society, but also highlights the reality of those who exist in the margin, for whom distancing oneself from an abusive marriage is not even an option, and who are underrepresented in media (lower-middle class Muslims of India) and remain outside of the mainstream narratives. Noteworthily, both Shamshu and Badru dismiss divorce, perceiving the act of murdering the spouse as a more feasible alternative. The rationale is that murder is often committed under cover of night and carries a lower risk of detection unless an official complaint is filed, as was the case with Shamshu. Conversely, divorce remains highly stigmatized in many South Asian societies, where women alone bear the burden of this stigma, which is one of the main causes of their reluctance in not availing the existing legal procedures. In a satirical manner, it subtly critiques the existing patriarchal structure where a divorced woman faces more difficulty and struggle to be socially accepted than a murderer, and hence, becomes a mouthpiece of the South Asian belief system where marriage is regarded not just as a sacred social institution, but as a pure and unbreakable vow.

### *Darlings*: Subversion of the Popular Portrayal of Domestic Violence

Undoubtedly, *Darlings* addresses the problem of female subjugation, but so does its predecessors by following the genre of feminist revenge narrative. The space where it renounces the earlier narration is through subverting the notion of voyeurism and the spectator's scopophilic instinct. These terms have been popularized by British film theorist Laura Mulvey in her widely accepted article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Using a psychoanalytic approach, Mulvey views cinema as an "advanced representation system" that manipulates the human unconscious, shapes "ways of seeing," and exploits "pleasure in looking" (712). Mulvey believes that being unchallenged in the dominant patriarchal discourse, eroticism has been integrated into the language and narrative of the mainstream movies (713). This phenomenon is particularly prominent in Bollywood films, where the female body is typically presented as a means to elicit voyeuristic and scopophilic pleasure, not only for the male

characters within the film but also for the male spectators.

Earlier films featuring narratives of avenging women often depicted violated female bodies on screen subjected to domestic violence for the sake of "voyeuristic fantasy" (Mulvey 714) to satisfy the audience. In Mulvey's words, "In their traditionalist exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (715). Historically, the portrayal of women on screen is dictated by the male gaze, rendering women objects of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (715). Additionally, in Mulvey's theorization, a woman, as the object of both the spectators' and male characters' gaze in film, is shown as "isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized" (718). Reen successfully critiques these stereotypical portrayals that have been prevalent and glorified in Bollywood for decades, by deconstructing the male gaze, subverting sensual pleasure, and disrupting any idealized or cathartic image of the vengeful "good" woman. *Darlings* subtly reverses the male gaze by shifting the focus back to the violence inflicted on the female body, rather than arousing sensuality. For instance, following her transformation in an intense scene while getting prepared to avenge against Hamza, there are close up shots of Badru wearing red lipstick and nail polish, adorning herself with the very same red dress and red high heels with which she was previously abused (*Darlings* 1:17:18-1:17:43). Throughout the film, Badru envisions herself in red, a color symbolizing blood, revenge, and sexuality. Initially, Badru's attire is intended for sexual expression within her conventional heteronormative relationship with Hamza, and for visual and voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. Reen deconstructs Badru's initial embodiment of sexual exhibitionism, by focusing on the clotted blood and bruises of her body through Hamza's gaze (*Darlings* 1:18:09-1:18:16). The camera's attention to these injuries prevents spectators from indulging in erotic pleasure, as the ghastly bruises serve as a stark reminder of Hamza's abuse and the fatal miscarriage it caused. Mulvey also claims that visual media, in the name of pleasure, often perpetuates sexual inequality through the binary opposition of "active/male and passive/female" (715). This dynamic has been reversed in that scene, as the tied up Hamza from his "passive" positioning gazes at the sensually dressed "active" Badru. The camera aligns with Hamza's perspective, making him the "bearer of the look," while it gradually pans over Badru's bare legs, arms, and shoulders, marking her as the "spectacle" (715). Apart from effectively subverting the cinematic representation and traditional heteronormative active/passive binary, Reen plays with the background score too. Instead of featuring romantic or sensual music, the emphasis is placed on the sound of Badru's red stiletto stomping. This auditory focus serves as a reminder to the audience that the scene will reenact violence, subverting the general expectation of sensuality or romance. Hence, unlike mainstream Bollywood films that depict the female

body as an object of desire, manipulating spectators' unconscious perceptions and historically painting women as the Other and men as the One, *Darlings* employs conventional cinematic techniques to offer a new understanding of the female body as more than a mere spectacle.

Alternatively, *Darlings* deviates from previous depictions of violence against women by highlighting its pervasive nature – demonstrating that it is not merely an isolated incident but a widespread societal issue. In his analysis of mainstream American media's portrayals of domestic abuse, Kozol notes that media tends to individualize the societal problem of domestic violence by portraying abusers as exceptional cases of psychopaths, rather than addressing the systemic issues (648). This pattern is evident in Bollywood as well, where feminist revenge narratives often depict abusers as monstrous outliers. In several Indian films, husbands who cause domestic violence are portrayed as either doing it for dowry as seen in the movie *Mehndi* (Khan, 1998) or for having cruel, excessively possessive, and psychopathic traits as portrayed in *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* (Lajmi, 2001), *Agni Sakshi* (Ghosh, 1996), etc. Commonly, therefore, domestic abuse has been depicted in two main ways: either as an issue linked to a psychopathic husband or as a sociological problem associated with the malpractice of dowry. Both views present domestic violence as a private matter, isolated incidents carried out by individuals with psychopathic tendencies, which contradicts the perspective advocated by feminists. Janice Haaken argues that identifying the abuser as a psychopath, or in this case, Hamza, who is also a drunkard, is problematic because it increases the risk for women and vindicates men instead of addressing issues of male power and control ("Too Close for Comfort" 77). Initially in the film, Badru attributes Hamza's abuse solely to his alcoholism. However, the film effectively disentangles alcohol from the root cause of domestic violence, as Hamza's brutal actions occur regardless of his sobriety, resulting in Badru's miscarriage. In addition, though it highlights one single family from a marginalized social milieu, *Darlings* makes a conscious attempt to contradict the representation of violence against women as a private or family matter as it also navigates the cruel existence of such abuse in every sphere of the society. While suggesting to report a complaint against Hamza, it is confirmed as the police officer utters, "We get such cases everyday, but no one takes action" (*Darlings* 37:02-37:05). Also, mentioning the sudden death of Mrs. Ameena, the rich and affluent Mr. Khan's second wife, and juxtaposing the scenes of violence towards Badru while the parlor lady downstairs adorns brides with henna and other accessories, either ignoring Badru's screams or commenting on the vulnerable state of women in marriage, accentuates the massive scale of domestic violence in India. *Darlings*, thus, adeptly elucidates that domestic violence transcends class and caste, equally prevalent in upper-class and economically disadvantaged

households. It challenges the simplistic association between alcohol and domestic violence, subverting the popular portrayal of abuse as isolated, exceptional instances and attesting that such violence is widespread and systemic, not isolated incidents that exempt perpetrators from accountability.

Another way *Darlings* showcases how domestic violence has penetrated every layer of society is by marking a return of the popular Muslim social genre of Hindi cinema of the 1970s-80s. To find the reasons why there is a scarcity of such productions in today's mainstream Bollywood, Lata Jha, in her article "The Rise and Fall of Muslim Social Drama," points out Bollywood's need to cater to the dominant audience preferences to maximize commercial success and therefore, the industry faces limitations in its ability to depict diverse religious or ethnic narratives because of the high influence of the Hindu, particularly Punjabi, cultural framework. Focusing on a specific cultural universe restricts filmmakers from exploring other religious or ethnic identities in their narratives, which, in turn, perpetuates a narrow portrayal of India's diverse cultural landscape. *Darlings* revives the lost tradition of Muslim socials to position pertinent social issues embedded within patriarchy, and the obstacles encountered by lower middle-class women through a marginalized social community in South Asia. Badru represents more than just an individual belonging to a minority religion in a conservative, traditionalist society; as a woman who is financially dependent yet consistently yearning for economic advancement, she personifies the broader struggles faced by her community. This permits the director to showcase the state of double marginalization of the women specifically in India society – first, as Muslim minority and second, as women. Similarly, Hamza, as a Muslim man, is almost unseen within the societal structure. His boss subjects him to demeaning tasks, such as cleaning toilets, although the film does not explicitly address whether this treatment is due to religious discrimination by his Hindu superior. Although this does not excuse Hamza's abuse of Badru, the portrayal of a Muslim man grappling with the challenges of a rapidly changing world is compelling, forcing the audience to engage with the complexities of his experience.

One of the concerns of Muslim social drama is to process weighty subjects like generational trauma and *Darlings* captures it effectively through Badru and Shamshu's stories. While investigating one of the prominent second wave Muslim socials, Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen found that, in such films, women, generationally, "represent the past, the tortured present and perhaps, a still-born future" (286). In the final scenes, the narrative discloses Shamshu's previously concealed history, revealing her own struggles with domestic abuse. Her experience closely parallels Badru's, highlighting a cycle of violence that both

women endured. Badru's still-born child, who dies because of its father's vicious abuse, was also a girl, which reestablishes the prominence of such violence across generations. However, Shamshu's decision to kill her husband and to escape the consequences serves as a reflection of her ultimate refusal to remain a victim. This revelation adds to her existing trauma as she relives it through Badru's journey towards self-empowerment and resistance.

At this point it is important to note that the representation of women who are self-sufficient, independent, who attempt to redefine their position in society and subvert the traditional patriarchy inculcates the age-old narration of the "madwoman." Even women writers of the literary canon, which has invariably been promoted in media too, especially Bollywood, often confine female characters to dichotomous portrayals: either angelic figures like Snow White or madwomen like Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Gilbert and Gubar 28) – in this case rendered as a murderer. Reen too, despite having directorial and co-authorial contributions and narrating the film from the South Asian perspective, could not separate herself from the tradition, presenting women as the "archetypal victims," "objects-who-defend-themselves," and men as "subject-who-perpetuate violence" (Mohanty 339) where "the monster [Badru after her miscarriage] may not only be concealed *behind* the angel [Badru in the first half], she may actually turn out to reside *within* the angel" (Gilbert and Gubar 29). Therefore, despite multiple waves of feminism and debates on postcolonial and intersectional issues, the film ultimately reaffirms archetypal representations through the docile Badru in the first half, and the vengeful Shamshu and her daughter in the second half. Shamshu's act of retribution by killing her abusive husband manifests what has been happening so far in female revenge narratives. This cross-generational abuse and its aftermath somehow promote violence as the only means of liberation for women. This argument can be refuted as in the end, unlike her mother, Badru decides not to take the murderous vengeance into her own hands as murdering Hamza cannot be the solution. In an epiphany, she realizes that her sought-after honor will not be achieved through the repetition of the abuses enacted upon her, and she will ultimately be haunted by her conscience. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that her realization comes only after subjecting Hamza to intense violence which, in a way, normalizes intimate partner violence (IPV).

Reen employs dark comedy to deconstruct the conventional portrayal of domestic violence. There is a paucity of productions within this genre in Bollywood, and *Darlings* effectively fills this void with its comic timing, language usage, and characters who unintentionally speak grammatically incorrect English to assimilate with the "modern" couples. Typically, films addressing domestic

abuse are saturated with graphic depictions of sexual violence that can be deeply disturbing and repulsive for audiences. Reen's innovative approach skillfully balances these violent scenes with humorous dialogues, comic expressions, and puns, providing comic relief akin to that found in a tragedy. Bollywood films often restrict directors from expressing their unique voices, as producers prioritize presenting films that ensure profitability. One of the reasons that enabled Reen to experiment with a sensitive issue like domestic violence within a comedic framework without compromising the fundamental stream of thought was the OTT (Over-The-Top) platform, Netflix, on which it was released. Technological advancements have shifted entertainment towards OTT platforms, which cater to a diverse audience, including urban, educated, and younger viewers who are more receptive to unconventional narratives. In contrast, traditional cinemas often prioritize blockbuster films with mass appeal to maximize ticket sales. This changed space allows filmmakers like Reen to be experimental with their craft, targeting niche audiences interested in social issues. It also provides a space for innovation and experimentation for films like *Darlings*, which, despite its unconventional amalgamation of violence and comedy, has been appreciated by critics and a broad audience. Nevertheless, despite its innovative approach to addressing violence against women, the film arguably glorifies domestic violence by using theatrical appeal. For instance, the initial violent scene involving stones in the rice is dramatized with a chair falling in slow-motion (*Darlings* 6:00:18-6:10). In another scene, Hamza forces Badru to play pinfinger while the background score intensifies with the continuous stomping of the stiletto heel, keeping the audience in suspense at the expense of Badru's suffering (*Darlings* 28:00-28:42). These scenes emphasize dramatic effect over the gravity of the actions, potentially desensitizing viewers to the real-world consequences of violence against women. Noteworthily, it cannot be denied that, due to the reason the film caused a stir, that is, presenting domestic violence as an idiosyncratic comic tale, can also be the reason to raise concerns against it. Sensible viewers may find the use of violence as a comedic device, particularly in Hamza's case, troubling. To this end, I contend that *Darlings* inadvertently endorses violence against men as a solution, thereby normalizing intimate partner violence (IPV).

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is characterized by a repetitive pattern of abusive conduct within a relationship, used by one partner to dominate or retain power and control over the other. While IPV is commonly linked to male perpetrators and female victims, it is crucial to recognize that men can also be victims, often in response to violence inflicted by female partners (Johnson 51, Stark 1021). While the perpetration of IPV by men is documented, there is limited understanding of how men perceive and experience IPV, and the feminization

of intimate partner abuse in societal norms, media portrayals, and political discourse undermines the severity of this issue (Corbally 3). *Darlings* perfectly exemplifies this phenomenon. Throughout the film, Shamshu casually advises her daughter to murder Hamza as the sole solution to the continuous abuse. While the extreme violence against Hamza in the film's second half is arguably justified, it is depicted comically through music and humorous dialogues, diminishing the seriousness of violence against men. This portrayal trivializes the film's objective, reducing the gravity of its primary aim to raise awareness about domestic violence against women. Consequently, the film prompts critical examination of the justification for substituting violence against one gender with violence against the other as the ultimate solution. It eventually fails to acknowledge that if unauthorized abuse against women is condemned, then enacting similar violence against men is equally problematic. While Badru ultimately recognizes the importance of self-respect over forcefully seeking it from her spouse, the film's questionable depiction of IPV without seeking legal recourse remains ambiguous, undermining its intended message.

Additionally, it has been discussed through Gilbert and Gubar's postulation that the characterizations of Badru and Shamshu embody two opposing representations of women. The inter-generational connection between the mother and daughter, which reinforces similar patterns in their unhealthy marriages, further complicates feminist concerns by portraying them as either extremely naïve and docile or harboring murderous vengeance. This conventional portrayal prompts viewers to question the film's area of exploration and grapple with moral dilemmas: must the women adopt the traits of their oppressors to overcome them? Is vengeance the sole means of achieving female redemption? These rhetorical questions, coupled with the comedic portrayal of vengeance against the male partner, add complexity to the film's message. Consequently, through these two female characters, the film suggests the impossibility for a woman to claim her rightful status while being a "good" woman, implying she must engage in criminal activities to achieve her legitimate position in a patriarchal society. Thus, in the final scene depicting Badru as joyous and free outside her restricted private sphere, raises a critical question: is the film promoting leaving or killing the patriarch as the solution to domestic violence? If not, then the film's aim to raise awareness against patriarchy on a mass level through dark comedy remains equivocal.

The film, notwithstanding, does not present all males as villainous. Despite Badru's father and husband being painted in the same light as using violence to maintain their dominance, the film does not force a monolithic view of men as inherently violent, sexist, and abusive in the narrative. This is exemplified through

Zulfi, whose involvement in the story illustrates that not all men are monstrous. Also, the character of the police officer is portrayed as a conscientious individual who earnestly encourages Badru to file a complaint against Hamza, ruing that many women often hesitate to assert their rights. The audience at times may feel sympathy for Hamza, as Reen in her narrative grants some humanizing aspects to a violent abuser like him by subtly bringing forward his invisibility as a minority. However, the film concurrently underscores his atrocious traits and firmly conveys that such abusive behaviors are not to be glorified, in contrast to certain blockbuster productions like *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023) – which require separate examination.

**Conclusion**

As Akhter states, "cinema plays a significant role in … perpetuating some of the flawed ideologies and myths of society" (40). The female revenge narratives of 1990s Bollywood films also showcased prejudiced beliefs by preserving male dominance and patriarchal norms, often depicting women as lacking agency. However, over the last few decades such depictions have substantially evolved. Contemporary portrayals have begun to incorporate emotional and psychological dimensions and emphasize the struggles of women confined within domestic settings. From a feminist perspective, *Darlings* unambiguously addresses these notions, highlighting the concept of toxic masculinity, gender disparities within marital relationships, and the experiences of domestic violence encountered by lower middle-class housewives in South Asian patriarchal societies, by deconstructing the previous representations and adding a touch of humor. This approach permits the film to confront these complex issues in a nuanced manner, prompting the audience to engage more deeply with the subtleties of the narrative. While acknowledging the film's praiseworthy distinction from its predecessors, this analysis highlights the unescapable grip of patriarchy, which perpetuates binary portrayal of women in media even in the 21st century. The film encourages the audience to critically examine the inherent challenges women face in attaining respect and honor in a male-dominated society – whether in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, or simply as individuals – without resorting to violence or revenge. The paper advocates for realistic depictions of women in mainstream cinema – women who are neither angelic nor murderous, yet deserve to hold dignified positions without avenging themselves against men. Despite feminist interventions, the paper stresses not only on the need of protection for women, but for men too. To mitigate violence against women, exterminating men or creating a "Ladyland" is not the solution. Feminism does not advocate for a complete reversal of the existing patriarchal structure but seeks an equitable balance between the genders. In any society, to ensure the rights of women, one needs to be a human before being a feminist.

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