

Tracing (Fe)male's Body as the Site of Violence: Remapping Women's Space and Identity through the Bollywood Movie *Provoked*

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Abstract. Women have often been a trouble-free target in a male-chauvinistic world over many centuries. They found themselves to be victims to injustice, viciousness and inhumanity throughout human history whenever there were local or global conflicts and wars. With respect to the notion of 'violence and abusive relationship', occurrences taking place within the four walls of the house and emerging as a global subject to manifest through text or media narratives across the world today. Furthermore, with the rise of feminist scholars in this field had extensively contributed to tackle the issue with more clarity. Besides, filmmakers aptly modelled their narrative through the patriarchal and toxic masculine perspectives where women have often been presented as silent sufferers over the mould. Simultaneously, some movie makers came up with the scenario of overthrowing the same institutions and belief-systems which are the gateway to atrocities in women's world. In addition, the recent twenty first century film narratives like *Daman* (2001), *Lajja* (2001), *Provoked* (2006), *Videsh* (2008), *Parched* (2015), *Pink* (2016), *Lipstick under my Burkha* (2016), *Secret Superstar* (2017), and *Thappad* (2020) are the best model to voice and to rebel against the abusive relationships, societal outrage, and multifarious brutal violence coming out of the old age traditions and customs. Thereupon, the present paper traces the abusive relationship and outrageous domestic assault in the women's life and its prevention through the Hindi Film narrative, *Provoked* (2006), directed by Jag Mundhra. It investigates how the protagonist, Kiran suffers within the institutions of marriage at the hands of her patriarchal husband and in the process how she breaks her silence, unintentionally killing her husband after going through ten years of mental, physical, emotional and brutal sexual abuse. Moreover, the paper aims at reading through the lens of Feminism as well, redefining Kiran's space and identity in the same patriarchal domain.

Keywords : Abusive relationship; domestic violence; Bollywood; women's identity.

In present scenario, violence has taken a broader multifarious form inclusive of emotional, physical, psychological or mental, reproductive or sexual abuse, economic and religious etc. In addition, violence has become a big societal, economic and political challenge to safeguard human life and dignity for the entire society. The concept of violence is yet complex to understand as there is not one definite definition to it. Though, the term "violence" came from Anglo French and Old French in late 13th century, implying "physical force used to inflict injury or damage." Moreover, multiple interpretations have been given by different entities witnessing

violence in context of their own cultures, nations and belief-systems, while, National Domestic Violence Hotline interpreted “domestic violence” as:

Behaviours that physically harm, provoke fear, prevent a person from doing what they want and force them to do things that they don’t want to do. Emotional abuse, sexual violence and threats all fall under the umbrella of domestic violence. On the contrary, sometimes women too, are victims of systematic violence and abuse, as well as victimizers of other women (Internet).

Likewise, according to the senior author, Claudia Garcia-Moreno’s observation (WHO); “Intimate partner violence affects the lives of millions of women, children, families and societies worldwide” (Andrew, 2022). Furthermore, the Health editor, Gregory Andrew says in *The Guardian* pertaining to violence against women that one in four women, experiencing violence worldwide before the age of fifty:

Analysis of 366 studies involving more than 2 million women reached an estimate that 27% of women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a male partner in their lifetime. One in seven women (13%) – almost 500 million globally – had experienced domestic violence within the last year of the research being conducted. The findings were published in the *Lancet* (Gregory, 2022).

Bollywood being one of the biggest film industries has produced a great number of women-centric films projecting the societal issues mainly pertaining to women’s day-to-day life in a contemporary Indian society. The films like- Deepa Mehta’s *Videsh* (2008), originally titled as *Heaven on Earth*, voices against atrocities faced by the woman protagonist, Vibrant Chand, which had been a common issues for Indian bride marrying and moving outside the country, but she ultimately resists to coming back to her home land; Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Saat khoon maaf* (2011) narrates Susana’s abusive married life and later her step taken against the same; and Leena Yadav’s *Parched* (2005) voices against women’s issues from child marriage to marital rape wherein four women from Rajasthan rebel being united against the so-called patriarchal mindset. Thus, there had been a great number of Bollywood narratives touching upon such issues but the present paper will be focusing at Jag Mundhra’s *Provoked* (2006).

In Jag Mundhra’s *Provoked* (2006), Kiran is the youngest and the most loved of nine children from the village ChakKalla in Punjab. Her father died when she was only a few months old and her mother, too, died of cancer when she was sixteen. Kiran wanted to be a lawyer and it was her mother’s dream as well. But she

couldn't fulfil it as her family asked her to forget her dream and advised her to get married, be a proper Indian wife and have children in life. Without knowing her future husband's mindset, she gets married, which is still a common phenomenon of a traditional society where a woman's fate is decided without her opinion. Kiran moves to Southwall, UK and soon after, she gets aware of his segregated and indecent lifestyles and hereto, the problems begin in their married life. Not only this, she starts going through various afflictions and agonies as he mistreats and abuses her physically, mentally and sexually in an extreme manner. One day, at night, Kiran unintentionally kills her husband setting fire to his feet while he was asleep after going through ten years of mental, physical, emotional and brutal sexual abuse. Here, Kiran's step taken against her suffering as what Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat writes regarding:

Women victims of domestic violence come from all racial, ethnic, religious, age, and socioeconomic groups. The question most often asked is: "Why do they stay in violent homes?" Some of the explanations have been compiled by psychologists into a pattern known as the "battered woman syndrome. (Brussat, Spirituality and Practice)

Kiran suffers from Battered Women's syndrome as the ill treatment by her husband affected her personality that leads her to a state of learnt helplessness. Kiran felt betrayed by the dream in the world of marriage which she was shown and promised by the family before her wedding. Moreover, one member of her family convinces, "He is my brother-in-law's friend in London. He will take good care of you. On this Kiran enquires, But sister, what about my education? Who's stopping you? He doesn't mind" (*Provoked*, 39:38-39:54). Nevertheless, she feels betrayed for not being loved and honoured in her marriage and she suffered by the system of justice as well. Her husband tortures and berates her on spending money in households as well and a situation comes where he questions her existence labeling it meaningless which can be located in the following from Deepak's utterances, "You are a woman. You are nothing... You are a fool less than nothing." (1:36:57-1:37:5) The chapter "EVE AND ADAM, OR WHAT IS FEMINISM ANYWAY?" of *the Brief History of Feminism* (2017) translated by Sophie Lewis manifests regarding the prevailing ideology where Kiran too, experiences her limitation to access the resources comparatively a male counterpart:

Women may have, for example, fewer rights, less money, minimal experience of public life, and limited access to positions of power. Or—in emancipated societies—if they are considered to be "equals," they are still measured against a male norm. (Patu, v)

Historically, women have been treated inferior and less honoured in a family compared to their male counterparts despite their equal contribution to the domestic affairs and Kiran is a perfect model, being subjected to in a male-dominated society where Kiran's contribution is ignored and Deepak's celebrated. This patriarchal ideology still exists in many variants:

Its core hierarchy structures almost every other form of power, not just the relationship between the genders: the head of the household over his children, maids, and servants; the free man over slaves; "natives" over immigrants; the "better off" over the "lower classes," and so on. (v)

Kiran is sent into jail for being charged with her husband's murder. Though Kiran doesn't mourn over her step taken against her suffering, rather she feels like entering a kind of world- embedded with peace and freedom. As she exposes, "For 10 years I lived a life of beating and degradation and no one noticed. I came out of my husband's jail and entered the jail of the law. It is here. At last, I have found a kind of freedom". (*Provoked*, 1:24:19-1:24:39) Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* rightly says regarding women's bodies and its relationship with patriarchy that, "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected". (Linda, 2009) Besides, when Radha Dalal, a social worker enquires for the kind of treatment Kiran is being given here, she is astonished to know her statement when she stresses, "I feel free". (*Provoked*, 37:04-37:9)

Kiran experiences what occurs in both the modern and traditional societies, when a woman is victimized. Hereto, Kiran being a sufferer at the hands of mother-in-law as well, as she denies whatever she herself witnesses when Kiran was being abused. Instead of supporting her cause, she insists, "No, I see nothing" (42:49). Not only that, she also labels her as demanding and arrogant. Likewise, she makes allegations against Kiran that "she treated Deepak like a servant". (43:11). But the advocate reads a copy of letter 'exhibitc' written by Kiran to her husband when he had left that past March "Deepak, if you come back, I promise you, I will do whatever you say. I won't drink black coffee, I won't watch T.V. The children need you. Please come home" (43:44-43:55). On the one hand, Kiran was ready to negotiate her life with Deepak sacrificing her own dream and passion but the problem lies in his patriarchal thought, despite Kiran being so obedient to him, he savagely mistreats her. This is evident from Deepak's words while abusing her physically for making a call to him:

Called me at work and embarrassed me. You embarrass yourself. Shut up! (42:18-42:25).

Kiran is an oppressed and a sufferer within this institution of marriage and this is what Olympe de Gouges too, believes marriage as the process of women's

enslavement and their continuous oppression; marriage as a tool of oppression and drafted a new 'social contract between man and woman', "based on equality in every sphere including parenthood". (Osborne, 38)

Radha Dalal too, convinces her to make the world hear the story in her own words, but she feels hesitant to bring her story out of the four walls of the house as it's difficult for any woman to speak out about her domestic worldly affairs dwelling in such a patriarchal society. Kiran says:

I can't. It's a household matter and I feel ashamed.
I cannot be so naked before the world (*Provoked*,
1:22:08-1:22:24).

Finally, she agrees to write her story in her own words and in her own Punjabi language considering her liberated life and future of her children. Even Bell Hooks in her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* imparts, "To be oppressed means to be deprived of your ability to choose". (Handwiki) Thus, Kiran doesn't Choose to be oppressed ahead in life, rather than to voice against the hollow and so-called prestige of the society. Radha Dalal reads her story before the world translating herself into English. She reads:

My culture is like my blood flowing through every vein of my body. It is a culture in which I was born which sees the woman as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false honour, "Modesty", she is stopped to endeavour many kinds of oppression and pain, in silence. A woman is a toy, a plaything broken at will, stuck together at will. (*Provoked*, 2:23:28-2:24:18)

Radha interrogates the law when she is asked to prove Kiran Crazy mentioning endogenous depression for ensuring justice to her despite having the reason of being abused physically, mentally and sexually for ten years. She disagrees, saying, "What kind of a world is this? Where a woman has to lose her marble to get justice and man just to lose his temper" (1:28:56-1:29:2). Nevertheless, the case is with a new trial and the advocate appeals reasonably:

To a woman who suffered violence and abuse, and humiliation of the highest order for 10 years, who feared not only for her life, but for the lives of little children! I myself wouldn't presume to know what reasonable would be for such a woman!
(1:41:49-1:42:07).

To conclude with Kiran's words from Jag Mundhra's film, *Provoked* (2006) coming out from her experience to enlighten the public domain, and making them aware of the occurrences taking place within the domestic sphere- wherein her

body becomes a site of violence for her husband and he constantly afflicts her till he is alive. Kiran highlights, “In life there is no honour in silent suffering. There is no affection, no comfort to be found in love that is abused. It is our responsibility as mothers to raise our sons to treat women with love and respect, not with violence and anger. Only then the suffering will end. My story is part of the picture. I may not be important, but this issue is. Please don’t forget that there are many women who need help from you” (1:48:53-1:49:38). Thus, this is how, Kiran makes her own place redefining her identity from a simple domestic woman to being an advocate in the same society- that sees her as a culprit in the image of bad woman. Susan Moller Okin is of the view, “Since many of women’s rights violations occur in the private sphere of family life, and are justified by appeals to cultural or religious norms, both families and cultures” (Okin, 32). If we look upon the present context regarding the situation of women around the world, to quote from Ambika Pandit from her article entitled “Domestic Violence Complaints to NCW rose 26% last Year”, “Amid a raging pandemic, the number of women reaching out to the National Commission for Women to report violence and harassment within their homes has shown a significant rise in 2021 when compared to 2020” (Pandit, 2022). Moreover, to refer from Kanchan Mathur’s published in Review of *Women’s Studies* entitled “Body as Space, Body as Site: Bodily Integrity and Women’s Empowerment in India”:

The fact that the female body is constantly under pressure to conform and mould into prescribed social and cultural roles brings into question the spaces that need to be protected as well rights that need to be claimed so that women’s bodily integrity is respected. This paper highlights the struggles and spaces that Indian women have negotiated in their quest for empowerment. (Mathur, 2008)

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