CHAPTER FOUR

Women-centric issues and Gender relationship in Hindi Cinema

4.1 Introduction:

The present chapter aims at investigating the burning problems and issues concerning the women protagonists as reflected in the literary text and Hindi films based on it. An analysis of the interface of the text, context and its re-presentation in cinema will help understand the social dynamics that determines the status of women. This chapter also dwells upon the complexities involved in men-women relationship and their changing power equation using ‘patriarchy as a context’ with a special focus on the suppression and oppression of women in family and society.

The chapter undertakes to analyze the social issues that impact women’s lives such as gender oppression, domestic violence, untouchability, rape, abduction, class-conflict, and their depiction in the literary text vis-à-vis cinema. Acknowledging the role of the Panchayats vis-à-vis the issue of gender justice, the depiction of Panchayat’s intervention with regard to women protagonists is also discussed. In the course of the analysis the issue of female bonding, and the juxpositioning of the vision of the author vis-à-vis the filmmaker’s vision, is undertaken. This, it is hoped, will help trace the evolution of ‘women consciousness’ and underscore the significant role of women as an agent of social change.

4.2 Patriarchy as a major concern

To begin with, it will be useful to discuss the complex concept of patriarchy. However, its overwhelming presence seems to be all pervasive and it is experienced
by women all over the world. Since the notion of patriarchy engages actively with the concepts related to gender, power and dominance, conflicting views are inevitable.

Terms such as women, gender, masculine, feminine are being scanned and dispassionately dissected by the feminist scholars.

**4.2.1 Understanding Patriarchy**

It would be a challenging task to arrive at a universal acceptance of the difficult concept of “patriarchy”. The basic question of whether ‘Patriarchy’ as a system has evolved in the course of human history or is it based on gender differences inherent to human society has been often argued and debated. Whether Patriarchy involves oppression of women or does it also involve other hierarchical structures of society which victimizes men as well, is also a moot question.

Hence, an attempt is made to also discuss the notion of patriarchy in relation to the women-centric themes of the select texts and their transmuted version in the films. In decoding the nature, functions, and causes of the emergence of ‘patriarchy’ and its impact, the contribution of Marxist scholarship is seminal.

**4.2.2 Family as the basic unit of Patriarchy**

Both Marx and Weber saw ‘patriarchy’ in its literal meaning of power of the father. Apparently the jurisdiction and extent of such power pervades over the family in including the mother. As such one tends to agree with Marx’s view of: “[T]he relational basis for women’s subordination lies in the family, an institution aptly named from the Latin word for servant, because the family as it exists in complex societies is overwhelmingly a system of dominant and subordinate roles” (See Ritzer, 1988, 300).
Little wonder that reliance on the centrality of the family remains strong within many feminist analyses of patriarchy. In fact, the family is seen as the bastion wherein patriarchy flourishes; nurturing the unequal power relation between the sexes and legitimizing the oppression and subjugation of women by men. As Annette Kuhn puts it:

The family … is constantly referred to, as the crucial site of the subordination of women, and its absence or dissolution, it is implied, would pose a threat to property relations both patriarchal and capitalist and even to the psychic relations through which … social relations are mapped onto relations of subjectivity. In this sense, the family is very often invoked as a final, catch all explanation of the various characteristics of women position in different societies and at different times (See Hearn Jeff, 1987, 38).

Patriarchy helps to define gender relations, power and oppression, beginning from the familial domain. Kate Millett’s focus on “political power as the driving force of patriarchy” and “the family as a microcosm of societal power relations”, help to understand the oppressive nature of family and other social structures of Indian society (Ibid 39).

It is impossible to ignore the historical fact that gender is a social construct. Women’s subordination results not from her biology; but the ‘biological differences’ between the sexes is used as the most convenient and convincing excuse to assign an inferior status to women. Such social conditioning makes men “masculine” and women “feminine”. Further, the long-drawn process dominated by socialization practices determined by patriarchal ideologies demarcates the roles, identities, experiences and most importantly the social status of men and women, privileging in most cases men over women. In fact, the prejudices and biases against women are extremely deep-rooted in traditional societies like India. Hence, the present analysis of the ten selected
literary and cinematic texts is undertaken. It provides a plethora of issues and concerns stemming from the ‘patriarchal’ social milieu, rooted in family, and offers perspectives on the factors that impact the life and predicament of the women.

In the film *Bhumika*, the female protagonist Usha is a victim of patriarchal social order and she suffers all the more because of her rebellious nature. The extreme form of patriarchal figure in the film is Mr. Kale; the Zamindar. He treats Usha as though she is his *property* and she has to abide by all the rules of the household with total submission.

Usha’s husband, Keshav behaves in a selfish, calculated manner when dealing with Usha. He lives off her income and is very manipulative. Trapped in dualism of his role, he wants his wife to continue to earn and also keep a distance from her male colleagues, especially Rajan. Keshav is very suspicious and abusive. There is depiction of domestic violence and abusive behaviour towards Usha. The film *Bhumika* thus raises vital issues related to gender-oppression and inequalities.

It underscores the constant struggle of the protagonist Usha, who is but extremely bold and straight-forward in questioning the gender oppression. The film helps to raise issues related to urban-based, career-oriented working women, who even though they are financially independent and ‘successful’, but are suppressed under the male-dominated patriarchal institution of ‘family’.

Control of reproduction, fertility, practices such as abortions strengthens the patriarchal social order. Thus, Roisin McDonough and Rachel Harrison (1978) see patriarchy in terms of the control of fertility *together* with the sexual division of labour; while Heidi Hartmann (1979) in her classic discussion of ‘The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism …’ highlights male restrictions on female
sexuality and female access to economically productive resources (Ibid, 41).

Thus, earning and becoming financially independent does not necessarily ensure women empowerment; for in many cases they continue to be victims of domestic violence, mental torture, exploitation and apathy.

Interestingly, in contrast to Heidi Hartmann’s observation with regard to the division of labor, *Bhumika* unfolds that Hansa is the bread-winner, crossing the threshold of private sphere and earns name, fame, wealth in the public sphere. Nonetheless she is oppressed by her husband. She is forced to abort her child against her wishes as he suspected her of having an illicit affair. As such, in her case Roisin McDonough and Rechel Harrison’s equation of patriarchy with control of fertility is absolutely relevant although the factor of ‘sexual division of labor’ is not applicable.

The films based on biographies can be used as a significant tool to analyze the genderized nature of oppression. For instance, Phoolan’s parents get her married at a young age of 14 with a much older man. The parents are paid in terms of a bicycle and a cow. The cold aloofness of Phoolan’s father and the manner, in which he takes away a pair of silver earrings from Phoolan during bidai, makes us realize the heartlessness of the patriarchal social order. A girl is a ‘burden’ and a ‘shame’ and family becomes the perpetrator of victimization of the victim because the parents are not able to protect the girls. A society which is polarized by the forces of caste and class cripples not only women but men as well; for the one who assumes the role of the “protector” is unable to protect.

This raises a serious doubt about the criteria for defining ‘patriarchy’. Can the oppression and subjugation of women alone be considered as the sole criteria for defining and analyzing ‘patriarchy’? Can we delineate ‘patriarchy’ from other power
structures?

In the Indian context, we realize acutely that ‘Patriarchy’ is extended to socio-political institutions as well. The oppression of women is legitimized by allowing institutions like village panchayats to exercise their dominance over women in order to maintain a status-quo in society. Glaring evidences of the oppressive nature of panchayats are provided in the films chosen for the study.

4.3 Panchayats: a form of social Patriarchy

Panchayats have been the timeless, male-dominated, social structures with the powerful presence in the overall life of village community. To date the role and authority of the Panchayat with respect to issues of individual as well as societal nature concerning a community is unquestionable.

In the films chosen for study, there are sufficient evidences to prove how the Panchayats act against the interest of the marginalized; especially women.

The role of Panchayats can be analyzed vis-à-vis the attitudes of its members, decision-making process, the nature of verdicts and the power this traditional institution wields on the destiny of women. The Panchayats are thoroughly male-dominated; the elderly members are traditional, orthodox in their attitudes towards women. Their verdict is considered as final. Panchayats are both, feared and revered by the villagers since ancient period.

Films provide an opportunity for critical assessment of the role of Panchayat vis-à-vis the status of women in India. Among the selected works, there are four films which include Village Panchayats in their themes.

The film *Aurat*, (the earlier version of *Mother India*) based on rural agrarian set-up,
highlights many issues concerning Indian society. One of the issues was the exploitation of farmers by Sukhilala, the moneylender. When Sunder Chachi (The mother of Shyamu, the male protagonist) raises the issue of debt, the cunning moneylender calls the meeting of all the villagers and shows the accounts which are fabricated.

In the same film, the Panchayat gives a verdict against Birju (Radha’s son) and the family is banished from the village. The pleas of Radha to forgive her son Birju are ignored. This kind of social ostracization was feared by the villagers, for it led to social isolation of the ‘accused’; a punishment worse than death. Panchayats were means through which the rich and the powerful exercised their authority and crushed the voice of rebels such as Birju that opposed them.

The film *Mother India* too, projects the dominance of the rich and powerful in the Panchayat, symbolized by Sukhilala’s victory in every conspiracy against the villagers, especially Radha’s family. Shyamu (Radha’s husband) does not know to read and the helplessness of the illiterate masses is brought to the surface. Later, history repeats as Radha’s sons also are not able to read the accounts to verify the truth. Probably, *Mother India* was the first film which effectively provided significant evidences of marginalization and its impact, i.e. how the unjust social system based on exploitation of the poor by the rich corrupts the minds of youth like Birju, compelling him to become an outlaw and live on the periphery of the society; both, literally and metaphorically.

In the film *Pinjar*, the Panchayat is dominated by the Hindus. They object to the adoption of a so-called Hindu child by Rashid and Puro. The members forcibly take away the infant from Puro and Rashid. The ideology of fundamentalism is deep-
rooted in the psyche of the egoist, high-caste patriarchs who hold the reins of power at the village level. Not a single woman is shown during the discussion and it seems that women were not a part of decision-making process and only men decided about *nyaya, dharma* and *neeti*. The orthodox behavior of the Panchas is in total contrast with the basic values needed for the development of progressive, humane societies.

In the film, *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, the Panchayat is used by the villagers to solve the crises in Rano’s family occurred due to the sudden demise of the bread-winner of the family. The underlying intent of the Panchayat was to control the robust, lively Rano who is widowed. Another crucial reason used in the text, was to dissuade Mangal, the young wayward brother-in-law of Rano, from getting into an affair with Salamat, a Muslim woman of the Arain community. The Panchayat dominated by the Hindus is unable to accept Mangal’s marriage to a Muslim girl who belonged to a nomadic tribe. The Panchayat’s verdict is based on prejudices against women.

The Panchayat members turn a deaf ear to the resistance of Rano and Mangal and resolve to get them married. Mangal, who runs away is beaten black and blue and hounded by the villagers. The marriage ceremony is performed when Rano and Mangal are in a semi-conscious state. What is right and wrong, just and unjust is decided by the members of the Panchayat with a total disregard to the opinion of the concerned individual.

In *Aurat* and *Mother India*, it is the class-struggle that is highlighted. Whereas, in *Bandit Queen* it is the complex social dynamics comprising of the rigid caste politics, poverty and patriarchy (characterized by gender oppression, violence) which becomes the core of the problem. It is a vicious circle because the nexus between the caste hierarchy, class-conflict and gender oppression seem unbreakable. It makes for a very
dynamic and complex power grid.

In *Bandit Queen*, the Panchayat is dominated by the Upper-Caste Thakurs. Panchayats become a means by which the Upper Caste men inflict shame and humiliation on Phoolan and her family in public. In case of women belonging to the lower caste, the Panchayats behave extremely unjust and oppressive. ‘Blaming the victim’ seems to be their way of dealing with the issues related to women. In the remote villages, Police and Judiciary are less influential, less accessible and many a times conspicuous by their absence. Comparatively, the traditional institution of Panchayats wields tremendous power and hold over the villagers.

In the film, there is an episode wherein the villagers assemble to hear the verdict of the Panchayat in deciding the fate of Phoolan Devi. There is a case against Phoolan. She is accused of misconduct and blamed for alluring young men of the upper caste Thakurs. The decision of the elders of the village is basically the decision of the rich upper-caste Thakurs and the Panchayats are used by the upper caste, influential men to settle scores with their opponents. The stronger the hegemony of patriarchy in the society, the greater is the oppression and the hold of the village Panchayat over the individuals, especially women. It is the collective power of the patriarchs which is exercised to silence the voices of rebels like Phoolan Devi, and cripple their self worth.

In the Indian context, Patriarchal social order is all pervasive and in such situations it is always easy to target the women. Patriarchy does not only victimize women but also men who are of lower social status in terms of Caste, Class or any other power hierarchy. For instance, Vikram (the lover of Phoolan Devi) was a victim of caste-based politics and the Thakurs disliked him. The dacoits who belonged to the higher
caste (the Thakurs) would humiliate Vikram and pass lewd remarks about Phoolan. At times, he was unable to retaliate because he was aware of the power of the Thakurs.

In the text as well as the film Bandit Queen, one could sense the feeling of deep-rooted suspicion and antagonism which prevailed within the superficial calmness and solidarity proclaimed by the gang-members of Vikram Mallah. Therefore, one realizes that Patriarchy is not only oppression of women by men but it also includes oppression of the weaker (both men and women) by the powerful.

An analysis of films like Aakrosh and Nishant makes the audience realize that though the women protagonists in both the films become victims of violence and rape; their men (husband) were unable to protect the dignity of the women because of the power structure determined by the powerful class/caste. The men are relegated to an inferior status and made to feel impotent.

Men and masculinity is not one and the same; nor the idea of ‘men’ and ‘women’ have uniform connotation because of the diversity and dynamic nature of social reality and human relationships. According to most feminists, masculinity is connected with ‘power’ and femininity with the lack of it. But this sort of straight jacket approach may restrict our understanding of power dynamics between the sexes.

The Panchayats is a means through which the mighty assert their power on the weak and the voices of the marginalized are stifled. It is the political agenda of protecting the powerful that guides the decisions, the ideology of the Panchas.

Currently, the Khap Panchayats of the Northern states of India, especially Haryana, wreaked havoc by acting as a dominating, tyrannical village institution encouraging the patriarchs to take law in their own hands and punish the young couples who defy
the tradition and marry within the same gotra. Honour Killings has become a national issue of grave concern in present times.

4.4. Issues and concerns impacting women’s lives

Films could be considered as a powerful social document for they reflect social reality. Films not only entertain but also educate. Several issues and concerns related to women could be studied by a careful observation and analysis of the medium.

4.4.1 Preference for a male child

In the film Aurat, Radha’s husband Shyamu who wishes that his wife Radha should give birth to male child, says bubbling with joy, “Char hatte-katte ladke chahiye”. When Radha questions; “Agar ladki hui to?” He replies angrily, “Ladki hui to gala ghont dunga”. This denotes the gender-bias and preference for a male child. But with the birth of every child (son), the financial crisis deepens and Shyamu becomes more desperate. The news of the birth of third son creates sorrow and bitterness (Effectively depicted in the film Aurat).

Mehboob, the filmmaker has created these situations purposefully in order to sensitize the rural masses about the adverse impact of large families and the need to adopt population control measures. The issue of illiteracy is also highlighted effectively.

In the film Chakra too, the female protagonist, who is a slum dweller and has a son already, still expresses her wish for a baby boy of a ‘fair’ complexion. Preference for a male child is a consequence of the patriarchal mindset, across societal hierarchies.

4.4.2 Untouchability: the worst form of human degradation

Wrath (1931) Dharmatama (1935), Achhut Kanya (1936) created social awareness
about the issue of untouchability during the pre-independence era. In the post-independence era, Bimal Roy pioneered the movement of making realistic cinema that depicted social issues such as untouchability, feudalism, exploitation of workers and so on. His leanings towards the poor and the downtrodden perhaps came from his basic humanism rather than purely leftist ideology.

The issue of untouchability is sensitively projected by Bimal Roy in his film *Sujata*. The female protagonist Sujata, does not fight for her rights by openly challenging her foster parents or society but by her sense of love and duty towards them. Her compassion and selflessness defeats the meanness of the society.

The film deals indirectly with the issue of inter-caste marriage. Jayprakash Kardam opined in his article titled, “Moonh Churata Hai” that generally in the films the women protagonist belongs to the lower caste and the hero belongs to the upper caste. In reality too, it is mostly the upper caste men who marry women from the lower caste. “*Is mein ek or gandhivad ke achhut-uddhar se prerit daliton ke prati karuna ka bhav hai to doosri or shreshta ka dambh bhi*” (See *Cinema Ke Sau Baras*, 2004, 306). (It projects Gandhian ideology of compassion and emancipation of the dalits on one hand and promotes the notion of superiority of the upper caste male on the other).

This one-sided situation could be counter effective since it implies the upliftment of lower caste by the upper caste. This could strengthen the notion of superiority not only of the ‘upper caste’ but ‘upper caste men’ as well.

4.4.3 Class conflict

In the film *Teesri Kasam*, it is clearly seen that the entire social structure is geared to protect the unjust system which reinforces gender oppression and reification of
women. A professional performer is regarded as a “property” by the upper class rich Zamindar, an object of gaze and entertainment for the village-folks and a money-spinning machine by the owners of the Nautanki Company. The modification of the original theme in the literary text and the inclusion of Zamindar in the film, who tries to exploit Heerabai, provide an impetus/ basis for the decision of Heerabai to abandon the mela half way.

In his extensive research titled “Phanishwarnath Renu ke Katha Sahitya ka Samaj Shastriya Adhyayan”, the author Sunita Devi Yadav analyses the theme from the Marxist angle. “Yadi Teesri Kasam kahani ke marm ko samjhein, to ek baat spasht hoti hai vah yeh ki vanijyik vyavastha mein stree-purushon ke apsi sambandhon par bhi kuprabhav pada hai. Aaj aadmi, aadmi na hokar, naukar, shramik, babu pehle hai. Purush shramik ya gulam bante ja rahe hai aur striyan bazar ki vastu” (1996-1997, 158). (Analysis of the core issue of Teesri Kasam reveals the ill – dehumanizing - impact of capitalist society. Today, a man is no longer just a man but a servant, a labourer, a clerk. The male workers are turning into slaves and women into market commodity).

Rudali, the literary text by Mahashweta Devi brings to light the class conflict, the issues related to gender-bias and the deep-rooted feeling of antagonism between the Haves and the Have-nots. The text is replete with powerful use of irony and satire. Rudali depicts the story of a woman who is a victim of poverty, prejudices and personal tragedies such as the sudden death of her husband and the unfortunate separation from her son.

But, the love angle between the low caste Sanichari and the upper caste Kunwar Singh is added in the celluloid version. This changes the content as well as the texture
and mollifies the tone of social strife in the original text. The razor-sharp rationale used by the Rudalis to secure economic benefits from the rich landlords, the craftiness with which Bhikhni and Sanichari exploit the weakness of the rich landlords (who rival to make death and mourning a ‘spectacle’) is well depicted in the literary text. The aspect of class-struggle unfortunately lacks the original sting in its transmuted film version. The filmmaker has overlooked the political agenda of the original work in foregrounding the personal ethos and pathos of a Rudaali.

On the other hand, Mahasweta Devi’s Sanichari combats the power of the rich by transforming into a cunning, calculated professional; one who creates a brigade of rudalis, all women from the red light area. It underscores the seed of rebellion; the cynicism, satire, irony and antagonism aimed at the bourgeoisie. It is the victory of women power (the oppressed class). Thus, the author has effortlessly synthesized Marxist ideology with feminism.

### 4.4.4 Abduction

In *Bandit Queen*, Phoolan is abducted by the dacoits. Circumstances force Phoolan to become a Bandit. Puro is compelled into a marriage with Rashid and to accept a new identity, “Hamida”. Ameeran becomes Umrao, a famous courtesan. These women had to give up all the dreams and hopes of living a normal life. The unjust treatment given to them was because the men treated the women as an object of revenge or lust. In order to punish the parents, the abduction of the helpless teenagers like Puro and Ameeran is done. The women have to carry the burden of family honour which makes them an easy target. In the present times too, girls/women are considered as the most convenient victims of abuse and violence in order to settle family feuds.

Phoolan was abducted because the dacoits had heard stories about how she left her
husband’s home, (rumors about her became rampant mainly because she abandoned her husband and lived with her parents). She retaliates to the abuse by the young thakurs of her village and is punished by the village panchayat for daring to speak the truth. Social stigma is attached to women who either abandon or are abandoned by their husband and therefore she was abducted by a gang of dacoits. Phoolan becomes an easy victim of their lust and violence.

In case of Pinjar, Puro’s abduction and forced marriage to Rashid leads to a feeling of deep-rooted rejection and alienation. The abduction leaves such a deep scar on her psyche that she is concerned about the plight of the women who become the victim of violence. She cannot punish Rashid directly for his behavior but her silent suffering, voluntary starvation creates deep-rooted guilt and sorrow in Rashid’s heart. In the end it appears as though both are victims of hatred and they find solace in the benevolent act of rescuing the victims of violence and hatred; girls like Taro and Lajo.

4.4.5 Partition-related issues

A cataclysmic event which led to the division of the country was depicted sensitively by the author Amrita Pritam and the filmmaker, Chandraprakash Dwivedi. The author’s perspective is influenced by the actual experience of the catastrophe and therefore, the novel provides intense and authentic depiction of the tragedy. Partition of India led to an unprecedented violence and massacre of thousands of people. The worst victims of the communal frenzy were women. According to the report made by Kamlaben Patel in Manushi in 1985, nearly 75,000 women had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border (See South Asian Cinema, 2004, 40).

Millions were compelled to cross the borders when the nation was divided and is known to be the largest exodus in the human history. “What remains astonishing is
that the Indian woman continued to be used as the site for the nation, where not only ideological but physical and legal battles took place. It becomes significant that after 1947 the war continued to be fought over her body or bodies” (Ibid).

The body as a site for defining the unity/division of a nation, or for protecting/violating the honor of a nation, or as a territory to be brought under control or retrieve was symbolically and in reality represented by female body.

An essential aspect of the text and the film Pinjar which needs to be appreciated, is the humanist dimension advocated to solve the problem of violence, hatred and abuse (which mainly affects the women). Through Puro and Rashid, the author brings to the focus the message of love, compassion and peace. This makes the film relevant for all times and for all the people of the world because till date women are the worst victims of communal violence.

The unconditional acceptance of reality and the courageous stance of Puro to continue her life with Rashid convey a very significant message. The vision of the author Amrita Pritam is reflected without any compromise by the filmmaker. When Puro is offered choice to join her family, she says, “Lajo apne ghar lauti hai, samajh lena ki isi mein puro bhi laut aai. Mere liye ab yahi jagah hai” (Pritam, 2003, 118).

Khamosh Pani (2003) directed by Pakistani filmmaker Sabiha Sumar who has also authored the story of the film, addresses the problem of fundamentalism from a contemporary perspective and uses the flashes of memory from the past as a sub-text. The present (rise in Islamic fundamentalism by way of introducing Shariat laws in 1979) revives the buried memories of the past. It makes the viewer realize the perennial nature of the problem and its destructive impact on the psyche of individuals, especially, women. Maithili Rao, a film scholar opines:
Khamosh Pani and Pinjar force you to see, hear and think about these forgotten lives shrouded under the evasive veils of hypocrisy, rigid ideologies and notions of patriarchal honour. Skeletons tumble out of musty closets into the glare of the present (hopefully more liberal) and we are made to confront our inherent prejudice and hatred, after we recover from our collective amnesia” (See South Asian Cinema, 2004, 114-115).

The film analyst Maithili’s hope that ‘people will be more liberal’ way back in the year 2003 still remains a hope in 2013.

4.4.6 Woman: a victim of prejudice and abuse

In Mala Sen’s biography of the Bandit Queen, Phoolan reportedly mentioned about strong prejudice and bias nurtured by the dacoits against women. For instance, the well-known bandit, Baba Mastaqueem, a patriarchal figure revered by all the bandits, warned Vikram Mallah that he should not include a woman in his gang because women brought bad luck and that their presence in a baghi gang symbolized death. After the death of Vikram Mallah and her humiliation at the hands of the thakurs, when Phoolan approached Baba Mastaqueem and expressed her wish to join the gang, he refuses to accept her in his gang because she was a woman. This one rule, he said, he could not bend.

Phoolan was also a victim of political system both at the State and the Central level. Whether to kill her or persuade her for surrender seem to be a game plan, masterminded by the politicians and bureaucracy for political gains. She represented the oppressed caste and was treated like a puppet in the hands of the powerful.

The kind of political negotiations hinted in the film are in sharp contrast with the efforts of great leaders who worked with the evangelical zeal, towards reforming the Indian society (It is important to mention about the genuine efforts by the great
leaders such as Loknayak Jaiprakash Narayan and Acharya Vinoba Bhave who tried to convince the dacoits to surrender).

Vidya Subrahmaniam, a journalist demystifies the ‘image’ of the Bandit Queen:

Phoolan was also a victim of media hype for they used her image to sell their news. Phoolan was romanticised as dasyu sundari, the ravishing bandit. Tales were spun about her daring dacoity and her romance with her paramours. The Phoolan that emerged for the world to see was a waif-like child woman, her large frightened eyes, staring from a poke-marked face, her slight figure drowned in oversized bell-bottoms. The only giveaway was the revolver held high over her head. Phoolan’s inglorious surrender shattered the myth of grandeur built around the way dacoits lived. The mystique gone, Phoolan became an object of scorn (See The Sunday Times of India, July 30, 2001).

There were so many versions of the events related to Phoolan’s life that it has become almost impossible to separate fact from fiction. This was mainly due to media hype. Significant evidence in this regard could be cited. For the incidence of Phoolan’s abduction by the thakurs, the filmmaker Shekhar Kapur prefers to use the episode reported by an American journalist Jon Bradshaw rather than Phoolan’s version (as reported by her to Mala Sen in her jail diaries). The discrepancies in the two versions make the viewers confused about the credibility/truth.

The film created a lot of controversy and strong reactions and counter-reactions from the women activists like Arundhati Roy. The mystery and glamour added to the word ‘rape’ has distorted our view on the subject. Ultimately, one could ask the most poignant question about the film: ‘Was Phoolan Devi meant to be a mere spectacle’?

The crude display of sex, obscenity, violence and crime against women as depicted in media (in general) and Hindi Cinema (in particular) is a serious matter as it corrupts the minds of the audience and makes them insensitive. Women organizations have
linked the media portrayal of women to the rise in crime against women in India.

In a democracy, the media is capable of playing a pro-active role in creating and garnering public opinion such as in the Nirbhaya case (Dec 2012) which shook the national conscience and has raised vital questions about the state of governance, patriarchal mindset of the Indians, the laws regarding safety of women and offense against women. For the first time the voices of anger and resentment, especially, from the youth of India forced the government to re-look into the laws.

4.4.7 Displacement

The film Chakra, raises the social issues of displacement of a young couple from Bijapur to the Dharavi slum in Mumbai. The unexpected events that occur destroy all the hopes of basic happiness of home and hearth of the female protagonist Amma. The film documents with utmost realism the degradation of human living conditions and its impact on the lives of the slum-dwellers. The story has a strong sociological as well as political basis.

The film exposes several layers of class-struggle and the author Jaywant Dalvi uses the male protagonist Looka, as the voice of rebellion. For instance, Looka, an outlaw tells the teenager Benwa with a carefree abundance, “Haq koi nahi deta, haq chhinana padta hai”. When he is sentenced for a crime, Looka retorts arrogantly, “catch those rich blackmarketeers first”. It also highlights the anatomy of crime which breeds in the slums; social problems such as poverty, alcoholism, abuse, prostitution, unemployment.

She suffers from insecurity and is a victim of the violence of the State (police) that killed her husband and later, kills her unborn child. The film based on the novel titled
“Chakra” authored by noted writer Jaywant Dalvi gives an authentic description of Amma, her son Benwa and the kind-hearted goon, Looka. The film depicts the struggles faced by mother and son who strive to live a life of dignity, hard-work and honesty. The social milieu depicts city life which is devoid of sensitivity and reason, wherein several thousand slum-dwellers are forced to suffer silently or retaliate violently. *Chakra* symbolizes the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation. The film reveals stark reality and has been made with an agenda of awakening social consciousness.

### 4.5 Male–female relationship and changing power equations

The films selected for the study provide the viewers an insight into the male-female power dynamics. The woman protagonist of films *Aurat* and *Mother India* despite being traditional, rural, illiterate and poverty-stricken, are neither meek nor weak. Both are victims of poverty and natural calamities like floods or famine and suffer because they are abandoned by their husband. But they are seen as symbols of strength. They create image of the ideal womanhood. The greatest strength these women derive is from the notion of *Pativrata*; the pure and the virtuous one. They epitomize the notion of an ‘Ideal’, deep-rooted in the Indian subconscious and therefore the Western, liberal and modern values based on the principles of equal rights for man and woman would not only be inadequate but also inappropriate in understanding the ideological basis of feminine power as well as men-women relationship in the Indian context.

The film scholar Gayatri Chatterjee, in her extensive research, mentions about the filmmaker Mehboob’s intent regarding the depiction of the woman protagonist. Mehboob wanted the depiction of ‘motherhood’ to be significant in a number of ways,
mostly staying within the traditional ideas, at times going beyond them. In the synopsis sent for the governmental approval, Mehboob states that the film is about the ‘eternal theme of Indian woman’, a mother ‘round whom revolves everything that is sacred and glorious in our culture, tradition and civilization’. (Chatterjee, 2002, 48-49)

The strength of Indian womanhood, epitomized by Radha (Aurat and Mother India) lies in the ideology of duty/service, sacrifice and the fact that they can rise beyond their personal gains. The relationship of man-woman in the Indian context is guided by the traditional code and not the liberal ideas that emerged in the West. Therefore, these films could be considered as a landmark which eventually led to the creation of stereotypical images of womanhood (especially motherhood) in Hindi Cinema.

In Teesri Kasam, the sharp binaries in the characterization of Heeraman and Heerabai create a unique relationship between the two. It is the mystery of their undefined relationship and the abruptness of their meeting and separation that makes the theme of the film so very unique.

The story is based on attraction between Heerabai and Heeraman. The manner in which she manages to cast a hypnotic spell on Heeraman gives the story a folktale like texture. Since ages, whether in mythology or folktales, women are portrayed as man’s temptress.

Heeraman behaves very protective towards Heerabai. Their relationship is neither ‘defined’, nor based on dominance/subjugation or exploitation. It is the oppressive patriarchal set-up of the society which fails to accept the relationship between a professional stage performer and a gadiwan.
In *Bandit Queen*, caste, class and gender form a deadly combination bringing to the surface many layers of oppression when one witnesses Phoolan, the victim of violence and oppression. With the exception of Vikram and her cousin Kailash, no man treated her with compassion. Phoolan mentioned in her diaries that the day Vikram repaid the loan of the *thakurs* (which Phoolan’s father had to take in order to bail out Phoolan), she felt so overwhelmed by his gesture and for the first time she felt as though she was not Vikram’s mistress but his wife.

In *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, Rano brings about a change in her own attitude and perception about her relationship with Mangal, her brother-in-law with whom she is compelled to marry. According to Sudhir Kakar, “[I]n Indian social history, the erotic importance of the brother-in-law – in the sense that he would or could have sexual relations with his elder brother’s widow – was officially recognized in the custom of *niyoga*” (1990, 13).

Kakar uses psychoanalysis to decode the changing dynamics of relationship between Rano and Mangal, which is realistically depicted in the novel:

> He is like the boy who feels he bears the full culpability of being aroused by his mother. Beleaguered by his erotic yearnings for her, he does not truly conceive of hers for him. Rano, in contrast, is relatively more matter-of-fact and accepting of the paradoxes of the sexual realm” (Ibid, 14).

Other than the sexual politics, it is the need for *economic security* the core drive/motive that prompts her to accept Mangal. Her ability to adjust/adapt to the unexpected changes seems to be her forte? Rano’s character affirms that it is an inherent and mostly unseen power of women that helps her to reach beyond the “survival instinct” to achieve subtler meaning and essence of life.
Very often a question arises: Is there a feminine instinct, a distinct way of reasoning, feeling which are essentially feminine? When, we analyze the characterization of the female protagonists in many of the selected works, we are prompted to believe that it is indeed female instinct, female way of reasoning and using experiences of the world which ultimately transforms the situation as in the case of *Ek Chadar Maili Si*. (The principle idea that man-woman are inherently different is advocated by the proponents of theories of “Essentialism”).

The conflicts and contradictions involved in shaping their relationship is the major feature of the text. Triloka, the drunkard husband, Mangal the wayward younger brother of Triloka, the dominant, insensitive Panchayat which is patriarchal to the core, the nagging, abusive mother-in-law seem insignificant and petty in stature when Rano’s assent is sought to forgive the murderer of Triloka. She forgives him and accepts him as her son-in-law. At the end, it is Rano’s will that matters the most. She is the one who is the decision-maker. Such crucial moments though rare are nonetheless significant.

The author, Bedi’s stance on the role of women (personified by Rano) is evident and is strongly highlighted in the text. “It seemed as if the future of the world rested on Rano’s verdict. If she said “yes”, life would begin again. If she said “No”, it would spell doom of the world” (Bedi, 1967, 102).

Rajinder Singh Bedi places Rano, the woman on a high pedestal and makes her a crucial factor in the evolution of humankind and universal values. The author acknowledges the key role played by women as an agent of social transition and as a protector of moral code of the society.

In the film *Rudaali*, the relationship between Sanichari and her husband is not
discussed or described. The film conveniently by-passes Sanichari’s husband and accommodates Kunwar instead. The unexpressed love of Sanichari for Kunwar and her refusal to become his mistress becomes the highlight of the story. The unconventional relationship between Sanichari and Kunwar and the melodious songs create a long-lasting impact in the minds of the audience. The film uses melodrama to bestir emotion of empathy for the female protagonist. M. Madhava Prasad highlights the use of melodrama in Hindi films thus, “[I]t could be said that all popular cinema is tendentially capable of being described as melodramatic” (2011, 57).

The film depicts a complex relationship between Sanichari and Kunwar. This relationship remains unfulfilled not only because Sanichari did not want to cross the maryada of a married woman but perhaps also due to the wide gulf between them with regard to their social status. The relationship is marred by the social dynamics characterized by caste, class and gender. These factors together create a society which nurtures injustice and exploitation of the weak.

The Marxist dimension based on the class conflict was overshadowed by the use of love, romance and melodrama.

4.6 Female Bonding: comraderie in suffering and sublimity

The depiction of female bonding is not very common in Hindi films. There are dozens of examples which depicts male bonding but the issue of female bonding is a rarity in Hindi films. Fortunately, a few of the selected films provide unconventional depiction of female bonding.

The film Rudaali as well as the text includes the relationship between Sanichari and her friend Bhikni which is based on empathy and care.
In the film *Bhumika*, female bonding between Usha (female protagonist) and the wife of Mr. Kale (Usha’s step-wife) is highlighted well. In contrast to the text, Usha shares a very compassionate relationship with Kale’s wife (who is bed-ridden with terminal illness). There seem to be a perfect understanding between the two women as both are a victim of autocratic patriarchal family. When Usha waits for her husband, Keshav, to rescue her from the captivity of Kale, his wife says sympathetically, “*Mera maan. Apni kaid se samjhauta kar le. Kahin bhi jaogi to kya badlega? Sirf bistar badlenge, rasoi ghar badlenge, mard ke mukhaute badlenge; mard nahi*” (“Listen to me. Compromise your captivity. Any where you go, what is going to change? Only bed, kitchen and the masks of the male will change; not the man.”). This statement reflects the viewpoints of women who are oppressed by the patriarchal family system.

The filmmaker was perhaps concerned about the image of the actor (Hansa Wadkar) and tried to break the conventional belief that the step wives cannot get along well with each other.

In the text as well as the film *Sujata*, the bonding between the step-sisters is depicted very well. Although there are sharp binaries in characterization of Sujata and Rama, a wonderful relationship exists between the sisters. Here also, ‘care’ seems to be predominant behavioural trait of Sujata.

In *Mother India* too, the existing cliché or stereotypical depiction of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is not used. In this film, Radha, the daughter-in-law is caring and obedient. So also, the original text *Mother* written by Pearl Buck shows an excellent bonding between the female protagonist Mother and her Mother-in-law.

The finest examples of female bonding could be experienced in the film and the text *Pinjar*. The author uses personal catharsis of Puro as a means of her sublimation of
suffering, but also as a powerful device to develop empathy towards the victims of violence. The manner in which Puro becomes a source of transition wherein she plays a dominant role in rescuing Lajo, who was a victim of communal frenzy, is noteworthy.

It can be concluded that female bonding which is ignored, undermined and generally absent gets noticed to some extent in women-centric films. The area of female bonding needs to be explored and depicted effectively by other filmmakers as well. In fact, more sincere and consistent efforts on the part of the filmmakers are needed to underscore authentically and purposefully, the manifestation of female-bonding which acts as a silent system in ending suffering and as a motivational force in sublimation of suffering into selfless love for others in a parallel predicament.

4.7 Conclusion

The village Panchayats has been depicted as autonomous, tyrannical power institutions that have complete disregard for the female protagonists and are unjust and oppressive towards them. It is also revealed that the Panchayats are used to silence and stifle the voice of the weak and the meek; be it women, minorities or the people of the lower caste, class.

Since the re-presentation of Phoolan Devi’s life is marred by so many contradictions, it is impossible to separate fact from fiction. It is realized that the media hype, the depiction of violence and atrocities committed against her has led to a distorted perception of the women protagonist.

The film Chakra reveals the anatomy of crime which breeds in the slums like Dharavi. The film reveals stark reality and has been made with an agenda of creating
social awakening. It is realized that the film was made keeping in view the zeitgeist of the age.

The notion of feminine identity, status and power is in keeping with the traditional notion of *pativrata* and not according to the Western Liberal ideas.

The man-woman relationship in most cases is guided by the traditional code and is unaffected by the modern ideas. It is indeed female instinct, female way of reasoning and using the experience of the world which helped to transform the situation such as in case of Rano or Puro.

In the case of films like *Sujata, Ek Chadar Maili Si, Pinjar*, the filmmakers have acknowledged and depicted the role of women as an agent of social change. On the whole, they have been faithful to the vision of the author.

The issue of female bonding, which is hitherto neglected, finds prominence. There are examples of unconventional depiction of female bonding based on ethics of care, compassion unlike the much hyped, stereotypical depictions in the mainstream Hindi Cinema.