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Gendered Visibility and Everyday Patriarchy in *Laapataa Ladies*: A Textual Analysis of Ghunghat, Agency, and Rural Social Power

Muhammad Usman Rana^{1*}

¹Lecturer, Department of Theatre, Film and TV, School of Media and Mass Communication, BNU.

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Corresponding Author*:

Muhammad Usman Rana

Lecturer, Department of Theatre, Film and TV, School of Media and Mass Communication, BNU

Email: usman.rana@bnu.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how *Laapataa Ladies* constructs gendered visibility, everyday patriarchy, female agency, and social critique through its narrative and dialogue. Although recent Bollywood has produced more women-centered films, questions remain about whether such films genuinely challenge patriarchal structures or simply repackage them in softer forms. Addressing this concern, the study uses qualitative textual analysis to read *Laapataa Ladies* as a cultural text shaped by four related concerns: the social effects of ghunghat on women's identity and visibility, the operation of patriarchy through marriage, dowry, and family control, the contrasting forms of agency embodied by Phool and Jaya, and the role of dialogue in exposing normalized gender injustice in rural society. Guided by feminist film theory and gender performativity, the analysis shows that the film presents ghunghat as more than a marker of tradition. It functions as a structure of erasure that makes women socially legible as brides while obscuring them as individuals. The findings further show that patriarchy in the film operates through ordinary practices rather than isolated acts of violence, especially through dowry exchange, parental authority, moral shame, and institutional indifference. At the same time, the film constructs female agency in differentiated ways. Phool's agency emerges through endurance, adaptation, and relational support, while Jaya's agency appears through strategic refusal, mobility, and educational aspiration. The study also finds that dialogue is central to the film's critique, as routine speech reveals how injustice is normalized and how women's counter-speech interrupts that logic. The study argues that *Laapataa Ladies* is significant not simply as a women-centered film, but as a layered critique of how patriarchal power is reproduced and challenged within everyday rural life.



INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in Hindi cinema remains an important research problem because films not only entertain, but also circulate social meanings about marriage, family, sexuality, duty, and women's place in society. A long line of scholarship has shown that mainstream Hindi cinema has often normalized patriarchal values by marginalizing women, eroticizing control, and presenting male dominance as romance, desire, or social order (Derné, 1999; Derné & Jadwin, 2000; Mulvey, 1975; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). More recent work suggests that although contemporary Bollywood has created more space for apparently assertive female characters, patriarchal anxieties still remain embedded in narrative structures, social expectations, and the framing of women's bodies and choices (Ahad & Koç Akgül, 2020; Chatterjee, 2016; Choudhury & Sharma, 2026). This makes it necessary to study films that seem progressive on the surface but may be doing more complex ideological work underneath. *Laapataa Ladies* is a strong case for such analysis because it places women, rural social codes, veiling, dowry, marriage, and mobility at the center of its story.

Feminist film scholarship has long argued that cinema is a site where gendered power is organized through looking relations, narrative positioning, and symbolic control. Mulvey (1975) showed how mainstream narrative cinema frequently places women within structures of visibility shaped by patriarchal pleasure. In the Indian context, scholars have demonstrated that popular Hindi films have historically linked masculinity with control and female desirability with submission or containment. Derné (1999), for example, showed that force in Hindi films can be represented as an acceptable expression of love. Derné and Jadwin (2000) further argued that male spectatorship around Hindi cinema can reproduce objectifying ways of looking. Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003) found that even moderate sexual violence in popular Hindi films was often framed as fun, romantic, or normal. Together, these studies establish that Hindi cinema has often turned gender inequality into ordinary entertainment rather than visible injustice. Researchers no longer treat all women-centered films as automatically feminist or emancipatory. Chatterjee (2016) argues that the so-called "new woman" in Bollywood may still remain tied to the values of tradition, nation, and family even when she appears independent. Ahad and Koç Akgül (2020) make a similar point by showing that women-centered films can project agency while still remaining caught in a patriarchal web. Choudhury and Sharma (2026) also show that binary female stereotypes continue to shape Bollywood representation and audience perception. This body of work is important because it warns against simplistic reading. Female visibility does not always equal female freedom. A film may foreground women yet still regulate their bodies, speech, movement, and futures through subtle narrative means.

A second area of existing knowledge concerns the cultural politics of the veil and the control of women's public identity in South Asia. Studies on *ghunghat* and veiling have shown that these practices are deeply tied to separation, modesty, social hierarchy, and gender discipline. Emerging scholarship on *Laapataa Ladies* has already begun to examine this issue. Dongre and Alam (2025) argue that the film uses *ghunghat* as a crucial gender performance and analyze it through textual analysis and postcolonial feminist ideas. Their work is valuable because it draws attention to how veiling functions in the film not only as custom but also as a system of visibility and invisibility. Yet the significance of *Laapataa Ladies* is not limited to *ghunghat* alone. The film also brings together dowry logic, coerced marriage, police bureaucracy, domestic violence, women's speech, education, and female solidarity. These linked themes suggest that the film deserves a broader textual reading than one centered only on veiling.

Existing studies and early papers have started discussing the film's feminist dimensions, agency, and cultural critique, and one peer-reviewed study has specifically addressed *ghunghat* as gender performance, but we still lack enough close textual analysis of how the film constructs meaning through its narrative events, character interactions, and repeated social situations. More specifically, there is limited work that studies the film simultaneously through four connected problems: the social effects of *ghunghat* on women's identity and visibility, the everyday operation of patriarchy through marriage and dowry, the contrasting construction of female agency, and the critique of normalized gender injustice through



dialogue and interaction. That gap matters because *Laapataa Ladies* works through ordinary speech, minor rituals, and everyday transactions. Without close textual analysis, the film's social critique can be reduced to a simple "women empowerment" message, which would miss its sharper commentary on how patriarchy survives within routine life.

The present study addresses that gap through textual analysis. Textual analysis is appropriate here because it allows the researcher to examine how meanings are produced within a film through narrative structure, dialogue, characterization, recurring motifs, and social context. As Jürgens et al. (2024) note, textual analysis is a common qualitative method used to explore how texts generate meanings rather than simply reflect reality. In film studies, this approach is especially useful for identifying how cultural values are embedded in scenes, verbal exchanges, and symbolic patterns. Accordingly, this study examines *Laapataa Ladies* as a cultural text and asks four focused research questions: how the film represents the social effects of *ghunghat* on women's identity and visibility; how it portrays patriarchy through marriage, dowry, and family control; how it constructs female agency through the contrasting journeys of Phool and Jaya; and how it uses dialogue and character interaction to critique normalized gender injustice in rural society. These questions are designed to keep the analysis interpretive but precise, and to ensure that each issue is examined on its own terms.

This study contributes in several ways. First, it contributes to feminist film scholarship on Hindi cinema by offering a close reading of a recent and culturally significant film rather than relying only on broad claims about representation. Second, it adds to the growing literature on contemporary Bollywood by showing that agency in women-centered films is not singular. In *Laapataa Ladies*, agency appears in different forms, including endurance, mobility, ethical choice, refusal, and aspiration. Third, it contributes to debates on patriarchy in Indian cinema by showing how control works through ordinary customs rather than only spectacular violence. The film's critique emerges through the *ghunghat*, the dowry conversation, the fear of shame, the denial of education, and the normalization of domestic authority. Fourth, it extends current research on the film by integrating *ghunghat*, gender invisibility, rural social norms, and female selfhood into one interpretive frame. In doing so, the study shows that *Laapataa Ladies* is important not only because it features women prominently, but because it turns everyday gender arrangements into an object of critique.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks: Feminist Film Theory and Performativity

The intersection of feminist film theory and the study of popular Indian cinema offers a rich analytical terrain for examining how visual culture both reproduces and subverts patriarchal structures. Since Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational intervention, feminist film scholarship has interrogated the ways in which cinema constructs gendered subject positions through the apparatus of the male gaze, positioning women as objects of visual pleasure rather than agents of narrative meaning. Mulvey's (1975) argument that "the woman as image" and "the man as bearer of the look" constitute the structural logic of classical Hollywood cinema has proven remarkably generative for analyses of non-Western cinemas as well, even as scholars have cautioned against the uncritical application of Western theoretical frameworks to culturally specific contexts. The concept of the gaze, when extended beyond its psychoanalytic origins, illuminates how visual regimes in cinema encode broader power relations, rendering certain bodies hypervisible while consigning others to invisibility. This theoretical premise acquires particular urgency in the context of Bollywood, where the visual construction of femininity is inextricably bound to negotiations between tradition and modernity, domesticity and desire, visibility and concealment.

Mulvey's account of visual pleasure and the gendered gaze pairs naturally with Butler's argument that gender is not an inner essence but something produced and stabilized through repeated acts that cite prevailing norms (Butler 1990). Read together, these frameworks treat cinema less as a mirror of pre-existing gender identities than as a machinery that helps make gender intelligible in the first place: films



organize who is authorized to look, who is made available to be looked at, and which forms of femininity and masculinity come to feel “natural” through repetition (Mulvey 1975). In Bollywood, that repetition often happens through highly conventionalized forms, song sequences, family rituals, and narrative closures that reward conformity and contain transgression, so gendered hierarchy can be reproduced as pleasurable familiarity rather than declared as ideology. At the same time, because performativity is never simple duplication, those same cinematic conventions can be replayed with a difference: shifts in framing, performance, dialogue, or narrative outcome can expose the constructedness of the gaze and open space for resignifying gendered power rather than merely reproducing it.

Patriarchal Normalization in Hindi Cinema

The application of these theoretical frameworks to Hindi cinema reveals a persistent pattern of patriarchal normalization that has attracted sustained scholarly attention. Steve Derné's (1999) ethnographic study of male filmgoers in India demonstrated that Hindi films function as a vehicle for the eroticization of coercion, constructing romantic narratives in which male persistence in the face of female resistance is valorized as a legitimate expression of love. This construction of love as a force that overrides female objection has profound implications for how audiences interpret consent and agency. Extending this analysis, Derné and Jadwin (2000) examined how male spectatorship in India is shaped by cultural scripts that position women as objects of desire whose resistance is merely performative, a temporary obstacle to be overcome through masculine persistence. These studies reveal that Bollywood does not simply reflect patriarchal values but actively produces them, training audiences in specific modes of gendered interpretation that naturalize male dominance.

The normalization of gendered violence in Hindi cinema has been further documented by Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003), whose content analysis revealed that sexual violence is frequently portrayed as normal, playful, or even romantic in mainstream Bollywood films. Such representations, they argue, contribute to a cultural environment in which violence against women is desensitized and trivialized, rendering it less visible as a social problem. This pattern of normalization has not gone unchallenged in contemporary Bollywood, yet the trajectory of change remains uneven and contested. Chatterjee (2016) argued that the emergence of the "new woman" in post-liberalization Bollywood, a figure who is educated, employed, and sexually assertive, has not dismantled patriarchal structures so much as reconfigured them. The new woman, Chatterjee (2016) contends, remains tethered to traditional values of domesticity, sacrifice, and familial loyalty, her apparent modernity serving as a cosmetic update rather than a structural transformation of gendered norms. This suggests that Bollywood's engagement with feminism is often superficial, incorporating the language of empowerment while preserving the architecture of patriarchal control.

Against this backdrop of normalized patriarchy, recent scholarship has examined more critical feminist interventions in mainstream Hindi cinema. Ahad and Koç Akgül (2020) analyzed films such as *Dangal* (2016) and *Queen* (2014) to argue that female authority in contemporary Bollywood is not presented as an unproblematic triumph but as a negotiated achievement, requiring women to navigate, accommodate, and sometimes strategically deploy patriarchal structures in order to claim agency. This notion of negotiated agency is particularly valuable for analyzing films that do not offer straightforward narratives of feminist liberation but instead depict the constrained and contradictory spaces within which women exercise limited forms of power. Khan and Taylor (2018) extended this analysis by examining how gender policing operates in mainstream Hindi cinema, demonstrating that films frequently punish female characters who transgress normative boundaries, thereby reinforcing the disciplinary function of patriarchal visual culture. Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee (2021) further contributed to this literature by documenting the persistence of sexism in popular visual media, arguing that Bollywood continues to reproduce gendered stereotypes even as it gestures toward progressive narratives. More recently, Choudhury and Sharma (2026) examined how audience perceptions of gendered stereotypes in Bollywood are shaped by the repetition of familiar tropes, suggesting that the industry's commercial logic constrains

its capacity for meaningful feminist critique. Yadav and Jha (2023) offered a countervailing perspective, identifying spaces of resistance within Indian popular cinema and arguing that, even within hegemonic structures, moments of subversion emerge through narrative excess, character ambivalence, and generic hybridity.

Veiling, Visibility, and the Ghunghat

This tension between patriarchal normalization and feminist possibility in Bollywood acquires a distinctive inflection when examined through the lens of veiling practices, particularly the ghunghat, the practice of covering the face and head with the end of the sari, that remains culturally significant in rural North India. The ghunghat operates at the intersection of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, marking a bodily practice through which gendered norms are literally performed. Chowdhry (1993) established the cultural centrality of the ghunghat in North Indian society, arguing that it functions not merely as a sartorial choice but as a symbolic system that encodes hierarchies of gender, caste, and age. The ghunghat, in Chowdhry's (1993) analysis, is a technology of respectability that disciplines women's bodies while simultaneously rendering them culturally legible within a patriarchal social order. Abraham (2010) extended this analysis by examining how veiling practices produce gendered spaces in North India, demonstrating that the ghunghat is spatially variable, worn in certain contexts and relaxed in others, thereby mapping the contours of patriarchal control onto the geography of everyday life.

Devi and Kaur (2019) grounded this theoretical understanding in empirical research, documenting how the practices of purdah and ghunghat function as mechanisms of control in rural Western Uttar Pradesh. Their study revealed that women internalize the ghunghat as a marker of respectability and feminine virtue, even as it materially restricts their mobility, visibility, and access to public spaces. This internalization aligns with Butler's (1990) performative framework: the ghunghat is not imposed upon passive subjects but is actively performed by women who have been interpellated into a gendered regime in which concealment constitutes the very condition of feminine subjectivity. The convergence of feminist film theory, performativity theory, and veiling studies thus opens a productive analytical space for examining how cinema represents the social effects of the ghunghat on women's identity and visibility. How does *Laapataa Ladies* represent the social effects of the ghunghat on women's identity and visibility? This question acquires particular urgency in the context of Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* (2023), a film that takes the accidental exchange of two veiled brides as its narrative premise, using the visual indistinguishability produced by the ghunghat as a device for exploring questions of identity, agency, and recognition.

The Portrayal of Everyday Patriarchy

Dongre and Alam (2025) have initiated this analytical project by examining the ghunghat as a site of gender performance in *Laapataa Ladies*, arguing that the film deploys the veil not as a static symbol of oppression but as a dynamic theatrical prop that enables narrative possibility. Their analysis suggests that the film's treatment of the ghunghat is more nuanced than either uncritical celebration or straightforward condemnation, instead using the practice as a lens through which to examine the contradictions of rural patriarchy. This interpretive frame is valuable, yet it opens onto a broader set of questions about how the film portrays the everyday operations of patriarchal power. Beyond the specific practice of veiling, *Laapataa Ladies* situates its narrative within a dense web of patriarchal institutions, marriage, dowry, and family control, that structure women's lives in rural India. How does *Laapataa Ladies* portray patriarchy through the everyday practices of marriage, dowry, and family control? This question directs attention to the film's representational strategies, asking whether it reproduces the patterns of normalization documented by Derné (1999) and Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003) or whether it offers a more critically engaged depiction of gendered power.

Constructing Female Agency

The question of how patriarchy is represented is inseparable from the question of how female agency is constructed within the narrative. *Laapataa Ladies* features two contrasting female protagonists: Phool, a



conventional bride who embraces her domestic role with earnest devotion, and Jaya, an educated woman who enters marriage under false pretenses to escape her circumstances and pursue her ambitions. These two characters represent different modalities of feminine subjectivity within patriarchal structures, and their contrasting journeys invite analysis through the lens of negotiated agency articulated by Ahad and Koç Akgül (2020). Phool's agency is not expressed through overt resistance but through her capacity to find meaning, dignity, and limited forms of power within the constraints of her domestic role. Jaya, by contrast, exercises a more strategic form of agency, manipulating patriarchal institutions to serve her own ends. How does *Laapataa Ladies* construct female agency through the contrasting journeys of Phool and Jaya? This question probes whether the film presents these two modalities as complementary, contradictory, or hierarchically ordered, and whether it ultimately endorses one model of feminine subjectivity over the other.

Dialogue as Ideological Critique

The construction of agency in *Laapataa Ladies* is mediated not only through narrative structure and visual composition but also through dialogue, which functions as a primary carrier of ideological content in the film. In rural Indian society, as documented by Devi and Kaur (2019), patriarchal norms are often so deeply internalized that they operate below the threshold of conscious critique, appearing not as injustice but as the natural order of things. Cinema that seeks to challenge these norms must therefore find ways to render the invisible visible, to denaturalize what has been taken for granted. Dialogue serves as a crucial instrument in this project, enabling characters to articulate critiques that may be difficult to convey through visual means alone. How does *Laapataa Ladies* use dialogue and character interactions to critique normalized gender injustice in rural society? This question examines the film's discursive strategies, asking how spoken language functions to expose, interrogate, and potentially subvert the ideological assumptions that sustain patriarchal power.

The four research questions, exploring the representation of the *ghunghat*, portrayals of everyday patriarchy, constructions of female agency, and the use of dialogue as critique, are interconnected facets of a single analytical framework rather than separate inquiries. Collectively, they fill a notable gap in existing gender studies within Bollywood cinema. Although scholars have documented the normalization of patriarchy in mainstream Hindi films and begun examining feminist interventions, there remains a need for detailed textual analyses of films set in rural areas and featuring veiling practices as sites for examining gendered power. *Laapataa Ladies* stands out in this context: it is a commercially released Bollywood film directed by a woman, set in rural India, focused on female protagonists, and explicitly engaged with veiling and visibility politics. While preliminary studies like those by Dongre and Alam (2025) have started mapping this terrain, a comprehensive analysis that combines feminist film theory, performativity, and veiling studies into a unified framework has yet to be conducted. This study aims to fill that gap through a close reading of *Laapataa Ladies*, analyzing how the film employs the *ghunghat* as a performative tool, depicts the routine operation of patriarchal power, constructs different models of female agency, and uses dialogue to highlight the gendered injustices faced by rural women in their everyday lives.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis to examine how *Laapataa Ladies* constructs meanings around gender, visibility, patriarchy, agency, and everyday injustice. Textual analysis is appropriate when the aim is not to measure audience effects or count surface features, but to interpret how a cultural text organizes meanings through narrative, dialogue, characterization, and recurring social patterns (Jürgens et al., 2024). In the present study, the film was treated as a cultural text through which rural gender norms, social discipline, and women's responses to those norms could be examined in detail. The method was therefore interpretive rather than positivist. It sought to explain how the film makes gendered power

intelligible within its narrative world, rather than to test causal hypotheses or generate statistical generalizations.

Data source and corpus

The corpus for this study consisted of the user-provided textual material related to *Laapataa Ladies*, with primary emphasis on the transcript-based narrative text that recounts the film's plot, dialogues, actions, and character interactions. The choice of *Laapataa Ladies* was purposive rather than random. The film was selected because it is a recent Hindi film that places gendered customs, such as *ghunghat*, dowry, arranged marriage, family authority, and women's mobility, at the center of its narrative. It also presents multiple female characters whose trajectories allow for a comparative reading of agency, dependence, refusal, and self-determination. These features made the film especially suitable for a textual study grounded in feminist film theory and gender performativity.

The primary unit of analysis was the meaningful textual segment. A segment could consist of a narrated event, a summarized exchange, a recurring motif, a description of a character's action, or a dialogue-centered interaction that carried interpretive weight in relation to the research questions. The study did not treat each sentence as an isolated unit. Instead, it analyzed clusters of meaning within the transcript, especially where the text linked individual acts to broader social structures. For example, descriptions related to brides being veiled in the train compartment were treated as part of the larger issue of identity and visibility. Similarly, references to dowry, marriage arrangements, denial of education, domestic violence, and public blame were read not as separate incidents but as connected expressions of patriarchy within the narrative.

The analysis was informed by two theoretical perspectives already established in the introduction and literature review: feminist film theory and gender performativity. Feminist film theory, particularly Mulvey's (1975) account of visual pleasure and the gendered organization of representation, was used as a sensitizing framework for examining how women are made visible, invisible, or narratively subordinated. It helped illuminate how women in the film are socially recognized through patriarchal roles, such as bride, wife, or daughter, while their individuality is constrained. The second guiding framework was Butler's (1990) concept of performativity. This perspective was particularly relevant for understanding the *ghunghat* not merely as a costume item, but as a repeated social act that produces a culturally recognizable gendered role. Butler's framework also supported a broader reading of how gender norms are enacted through routine bodily and social performances, including veiling, silence, obedience, and marital duty. These theories were not imposed rigidly onto the text. Rather, they were used to guide interpretation while allowing patterns in the transcript to emerge through close reading.

Analytic procedure

The analysis proceeded in five stages. In the first stage, the transcript was read several times in full to establish narrative familiarity and to identify major characters, key events, and recurring social tensions. During this stage, descriptive notes were written about central motifs such as *ghunghat*, mistaken identity, dowry exchange, shame, police mediation, educational aspiration, and women's mobility. This initial reading allowed the researcher to move from plot summary to analytic attention. In the second stage, the transcript was organized according to the four research questions. Relevant sections were grouped under preliminary analytic clusters: identity and visibility, patriarchy in everyday practices, contrasting forms of female agency, and dialogue as critique. At this point, the coding was partly deductive because the research questions already indicated broad interpretive areas. However, the reading also remained open to new meanings that emerged from the text itself. For example, while patriarchy was an expected theme, the importance of moral shame, bureaucratic indifference, and female solidarity gained clearer significance only through repeated engagement with the transcript.

In the third stage, each cluster was examined through close textual reading. This involved interpreting not only what happened in the narrative but how meaning was produced through connections among events, actions, and speech. The analysis asked questions such as: What kind of social order makes this event

possible? How is the woman recognized in this moment, as an individual or as a role? What assumptions about gender and family are embedded in this exchange? Does the interaction reinforce or challenge an existing norm? This stage moved beyond description toward interpretation. In the fourth stage, the initial codes were refined into thematic findings. For Research Question 1, the central issue became the relationship between *ghunghat*, invisibility, and the erasure of individual identity. For Research Question 2, the analysis clarified that patriarchy in the film is reproduced not only through explicit violence but through ordinary practices such as dowry conversation, marriage negotiation, family pressure, and institutional behavior. For Research Question 3, the contrast between Phool and Jaya was refined into two different modes of agency, one gradual and relational, the other strategic and future-oriented. For Research Question 4, the analysis identified dialogue and everyday interaction as major sites through which gender injustice is normalized and, at key moments, publicly challenged.

In the fifth and final stage, the findings were written as an integrated results narrative. The goal was not to produce a list of codes or excerpts in isolation, but to develop an interpretive explanation of how the film's textual world works. The results section was therefore organized question by question and supported by recurring narrative evidence from the transcript.

Trustworthiness and rigor

Because textual analysis is interpretive, rigor depends on transparency, coherence, and close engagement with the text rather than on numerical reliability. Several steps were taken to strengthen trustworthiness. First, the analysis remained tightly connected to the four stated research questions, which helped prevent thematic drift. Second, the transcript was read repeatedly to ensure that interpretations were grounded in recurrent textual patterns rather than in isolated impressions. Third, the study moved back and forth between theory and text, using theory as a guide but not forcing the text into a predetermined conclusion. Fourth, the results were written in a way that made the inferential path visible, showing how broad claims emerged from specific kinds of narrative evidence. The study also maintained analytic restraint.

RESULTS

RQ 1: How does *Laapataa Ladies* represent the social effects of the *ghunghat* on women's identity and visibility?

The textual analysis shows that the *ghunghat* is represented as a cultural practice that does more than mark modesty or marriage. In the narrative, it becomes a structure of erasure. The plot's central confusion begins because newly married women are veiled in the same way, making one woman indistinguishable from another. The text explicitly states that all the brides in the general train compartment had their faces covered, and this uniform concealment makes recognition almost impossible during the rushed station exit. This framing gives the *ghunghat* a strong symbolic function. It removes personal identity and reduces women to interchangeable marital figures.

This loss of visibility has social and practical consequences. Phool's separation does not occur because she is careless or disloyal. It occurs because the social system has normalized a condition in which a bride's face, voice, and location are secondary to ritual appearance. The problem is therefore structural rather than accidental. The text strengthens this point when even the available photograph of Phool is useless for identification because her face is covered in it as well. In other words, the *ghunghat* does not merely hide the body in public. It enters documentation, social recognition, and even the state process of reporting a missing woman. A woman whose face is absent from the visual record becomes difficult to recover socially and legally.

The analysis also shows that invisibility is internalized by the women themselves. Phool refuses to return to her parental home because she fears public blame and family shame. She assumes that society would conclude that there must be some defect in her if she came back without her husband. This moment is important because the effects of invisibility are not only external. They shape self-perception. Phool's immediate concern is not safety, legal complaint, or autonomy. It is reputation. The text thus shows how

patriarchal visibility works selectively. A woman may be physically unseen, yet she remains fully exposed to moral judgment.

The ghunghat also functions as a repeated narrative device to expose the absurdity of the system. Later, when Pushpa or Jaya explains why she was not seen at the temple, she says that her face was covered, so others could not recognize her. This moment repeats the same logic that produced the initial confusion. The practice continues to erase women in everyday settings, not only during marriage rituals. The text itself underlines this irony when the family reacts angrily to the mention of the ghunghat, recognizing that “this whole drama” started because of it. That reaction marks a moment of narrative self-awareness. The custom is no longer treated as sacred or neutral. It is exposed as socially damaging.

RQ 2: How does Laapataa Ladies portray patriarchy through the everyday practices of marriage, dowry, and family control?

The analysis indicates that patriarchy in the film is not represented through abstract slogans. It appears through ordinary speech, family decisions, and accepted marital rituals. One of the clearest patterns is the normalization of dowry discourse. In the train compartment, the other family openly calculates dowry money and discusses the motorcycle received in marriage. They also insult Deepak indirectly when he remains silent about what he received. This exchange shows that the value of marriage is measured in transactional terms. The bride enters the conversation as an object around which negotiation happens, not as an equal participant.

Patriarchy also appears through parental and social control over women’s futures. Jaya later reveals that she performed very well in her studies and wanted to continue education in organic farming, but her mother refused and arranged her marriage instead. This is a crucial textual moment because it frames marriage as a disciplinary mechanism that interrupts female aspiration. The denial of education is not presented as a tragic exception. It is shown as an accepted family decision, backed by emotional pressure and oath-taking. Jaya’s silence is produced not by consent but by obligation.

The narrative further links patriarchy to violence and coercion. Jaya learns that Pradeep’s first wife reportedly died after being burned, and the text leaves open whether that death was accidental or murderous. At the wedding itself, Pradeep abuses Jaya’s mother over a dowry shortfall. This establishes him as a figure of entitlement and threat even before formal married life begins. Later, when he arrives at the police station, he slaps Jaya publicly and attempts to take her away by force. Through these moments, patriarchy is represented as a continuum: dowry demand, verbal abuse, control over mobility, and physical violence are all connected parts of the same gendered order.

The film also shows patriarchy in bureaucratic form. When Deepak goes to register a complaint, the police officer demands money. When Phool’s photo is shown, the officer is amused because her face is covered. These details suggest that institutions do not correct gender injustice automatically. They often mirror the same social logic. A missing woman without visible identity becomes an object of procedural mockery rather than urgent concern. Yet the text also introduces a partial institutional correction later, when the officer stops Pradeep from reclaiming Jaya and frames the slap as a new case of domestic violence. This shift does not erase the earlier corruption, but it complicates the representation of state authority by showing that institutions can also become sites of resistance when gendered violence is named openly.

RQ 3: How does Laapataa Ladies construct female agency through the contrasting journeys of Phool and Jaya?

The results show that the film constructs female agency in two distinct but related modes. Phool’s journey represents slow, situational, and relational agency. Jaya’s journey represents strategic, assertive, and future-oriented agency. The contrast is important because the text does not reduce women’s empowerment to one model only. Instead, it presents different ways of negotiating constraint.

Phool initially appears as vulnerable and dependent. She is lost, afraid, and unable to identify routes or institutions clearly. Yet her actions gradually show resilience. She chooses not to go home because she understands the social cost. She decides to wait, to work, and to survive within an unfamiliar environment.

At the station and later with Manju Mai, she does not collapse into passivity. She adapts. Her agency takes shape through endurance, trust-building, and learning. The importance of Manju Mai in this process is central. Manju Mai's own story of rejecting an abusive husband creates an alternative female voice within the text, and her statement about learning to live happily alone offers Phool a new interpretive framework for womanhood. Through this interaction, agency is presented as something cultivated in female solidarity rather than granted by men. Jaya, by contrast, is written as a more direct challenger of patriarchal control. She uses the mistaken exchange as an opportunity for escape. She burns her SIM card, creates a false identity, sells her jewelry to pay educational fees, and plans a route to Dehradun. Each of these acts is deliberate. Her agency is tactical and mobile. She reads the social system clearly and works around it. Importantly, the text refuses to frame this as mere deception. Once her backstory emerges, her actions gain political meaning. She is fleeing coercive marriage, dowry violence, and the foreclosure of education. What first appears suspicious is later re-signified as resistance.

At the same time, Jaya's characterization is not selfishly individualistic. When she sees Deepak's grief over Phool, she postpones her own departure and begins helping in the search. She gets a sketch made, produces posters, and mobilizes local circulation. This is a major textual detail because it shows that her desire for freedom does not remove her ethical concern for others. The film therefore links agency with intelligence and care. Jaya is not constructed as a rebel detached from community. She becomes a woman who reworks community on more just terms. The ending reinforces the contrast between the two journeys without collapsing them into the same destination. Phool reaches her rightful place after a painful detour, while Jaya leaves to complete her studies in Dehradun. One finds restoration, the other finds departure. This dual ending matters because it broadens the meaning of liberation. For one woman, dignity lies in being found and recognized. For the other, it lies in leaving and choosing her own future.

RQ 4: How does Laapataa Ladies use dialogue and character interactions to critique normalized gender injustice in rural society?

The analysis shows that dialogue is the main vehicle through which the film exposes injustice as ordinary, repeated, and socially accepted. Many of the most revealing moments occur in casual or everyday exchanges. For example, dowry talk on the train is spoken as routine conversation, not as scandal. The insults directed toward Deepak's supposed failure to receive dowry reveal a value system in which extraction from the bride's family is normalized. Because these ideas appear in ordinary speech, the film critiques not only individual cruelty but the cultural common sense that sustains it. Phool's dialogue about not returning to her parents' home is similarly important. No one has yet publicly accused her, but she already knows the script society will use against her. This anticipation reveals how gender injustice operates through internalized discourse. Women learn in advance what can be said about them, and they act under that pressure. The film's critique is sharp here because the fear of blame is shown to be stronger than the promise of protection.

Manju Mai's speech provides a counter-discourse. When she recounts her abusive marriage and rejects the idea that love gives a man the right to beat a woman, the film directly dismantles a normalized patriarchal phrase. Her language reverses the logic of domination. The text therefore uses her character as a corrective voice that redefines dignity, violence, and selfhood. Through her interaction with Phool, the film creates an intergenerational feminist commentary inside a rural setting. Jaya's explanatory dialogue later deepens this critique by naming the mechanisms of injustice. She speaks of academic success, denied education, dowry humiliation, fear of a violent husband, and coerced silence. This speech transforms her from a suspicious figure into a speaking subject. Her voice reorganizes audience judgment. What matters textually is that the truth of oppression emerges when the woman is finally allowed to narrate her own circumstances. The film therefore critiques rural gender injustice not only by showing women's suffering but by showing how long their explanations remain unheard or mistrusted.

Finally, the police station confrontation with Pradeep functions as a public naming of abuse. When the officer says that Pradeep's slap creates a new case and points out that Jaya does not want to go with him,

the film shifts from silent normalization to verbal recognition. This is significant because injustice loses some of its social legitimacy once it is spoken as violence rather than treated as private marital behavior. The dialogue here marks a break in the culture of acceptance. The results suggest that *Laapataa Ladies* uses a seemingly simple mistaken-bride narrative to produce a layered critique of gendered rural life. The text shows that invisibility, dowry, coerced marriage, shame, and domestic violence are interlinked. At the same time, it builds spaces of resistance through women's speech, solidarity, and self-directed action. The film's social critique works most effectively when ordinary dialogue reveals how injustice hides inside everyday customs.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that *Laapataa Ladies* turns a seemingly comic narrative of mistaken bridal exchange into a layered critique of rural patriarchy. Across all four research questions, the analysis suggests that the film does not treat gender injustice as an exceptional event. It presents it as something embedded in ordinary practices, including veiling, dowry talk, marriage arrangements, family authority, and routine speech. In that sense, the film extends what earlier scholarship has identified in Hindi cinema, namely the normalization of patriarchal power through familiar cultural forms rather than through explicit ideological declaration alone (Derné, 1999; Derné & Jadwin, 2000; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). At the same time, the film differs from older patterns by allowing women's experiences, judgments, and choices to reorganize the narrative moral center. This makes the text important not simply as a women-centered film, but as a film that exposes how everyday customs make inequality appear natural while also imagining small but meaningful spaces of resistance (Ahad & Koç Akgül, 2020; Chatterjee, 2016; Dongre & Alam, 2025).

The first finding shows that the *ghunghat* in the film is not merely a symbol of tradition. It functions as a mechanism that erases individuality while preserving patriarchal legibility. The results indicate that the bridal veil makes women socially recognizable as wives and daughters-in-law, but not necessarily as distinct persons. This supports veiling scholarship that treats *ghunghat* as a regulating practice tied to kinship, hierarchy, and gendered spatial control (Abraham, 2010; Devi & Kaur, 2019). The present finding also strengthens Dongre and Alam's (2025) claim that the film uses *ghunghat* as gender performance. However, this study extends that argument by showing that the consequences of veiling are not limited to symbolic concealment. In the results, invisibility affects recognition, mobility, safety, and even the ability of institutions to identify a missing woman. In this sense, the film dramatizes the social cost of a gender system in which a woman is visible as a role but obscured as a subject. This reading also aligns with Mulvey's (1975) wider point that visibility in narrative culture is always structured by power. Here, visibility is selective. The woman is seen enough to be controlled, but not enough to be fully known.

A second important point is that the film shows invisibility as both social and internalized. Phool's fear of returning to her parental home without her husband suggests that patriarchal systems do not simply hide women physically. They also discipline women through anticipated blame. This result is important because it shifts the discussion from costume to consciousness. Veiling does not only structure what others can see. It also shapes how women imagine the consequences of being seen in the wrong way. This is consistent with Butler's (1990) understanding of gender as a repeated social practice that becomes naturalized through performance. In the film, the *ghunghat* becomes one of the practices through which womanhood is performed as modest, compliant, and morally accountable. The finding therefore suggests that the film critiques the *ghunghat* not by rejecting culture in general, but by showing how a normalized custom can detach a woman's identity from her personhood.

The second finding demonstrates that patriarchy in the film is routine rather than spectacular. It appears through everyday transactions, dowry calculation, parental decisions, social shame, and bureaucratic behavior. This strongly supports earlier work showing that Hindi cinema has often normalized gender hierarchy by embedding it within emotionally or socially familiar situations rather than isolating it as

deviant conduct (Derné, 1999; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). In the results, dowry is not presented as a shocking excess. It is discussed casually, which is precisely what gives it ideological force. The film shows that marriage operates as an exchange structure in which the bride is spoken around rather than spoken to. This matters because it reframes patriarchy as a set of ordinary logics that coordinate value, legitimacy, and social belonging. The findings also resonate with Chatterjee's (2016) argument that contemporary Bollywood may appear progressive while still recentering family and respectability. *Laapataa Ladies* critiques patriarchy most sharply when it reveals how ordinary domestic arrangements discipline women before any spectacular act of violence takes place.

The results also show that the film links patriarchy to educational denial, coercive marriage, and institutional complicity. Jaya's interrupted academic aspiration and forced marriage reflect a form of family control that is neither melodramatically exceptional nor ideologically neutral. This supports more recent scholarship arguing that gendered authority in Bollywood is often negotiated within structures that still privilege obedience, domesticity, and moral conformity (Ahad & Koç Akgül, 2020; Chatterjee, 2016). The results further complicate the issue by showing that institutions can mirror the same logic. The police officer's initial corruption and amusement at a face-covered photo suggest that the state does not automatically repair gender injustice. Yet the later naming of domestic violence introduces a limited but meaningful institutional rupture. This complexity is important. The film does not imagine patriarchy as residing only in the home or only in the husband. It shows a wider social field in which family, marriage, dowry, and bureaucracy jointly sustain women's vulnerability.

The third finding is one of the strongest contributions of the study. The results indicate that the film constructs female agency in differentiated rather than uniform terms. Phool's agency emerges slowly through endurance, adaptation, work, and relational trust. Jaya's agency emerges through calculation, concealment, refusal, and educational aspiration. This supports scholarship arguing that women-centered Bollywood films should not be read through a simple empowerment binary, because women's agency is often negotiated, uneven, and embedded in specific social constraints (Ahad & Koç Akgül, 2020; Chatterjee, 2016). The present findings deepen that insight by showing that the film gives equal moral weight to different trajectories of action. Phool is not less agentic because she moves cautiously, and Jaya is not less ethical because she acts strategically. Instead, the film presents agency as contingent on material and social position. This is a useful corrective to readings that equate visible rebellion with the only meaningful form of feminist action.

The findings also suggest that agency in the film is relational, not purely individual. Phool's development is inseparable from the support of Manju Mai. Jaya's self-determination is inseparable from her eventual ethical concern for Phool. This moves the discussion beyond the familiar "strong woman" frame and toward a more grounded model of social agency. Such a model is consistent with Butler's (1990) view that gendered subjectivity is socially produced and therefore potentially reworked within, rather than outside, repeated norms. It also aligns with scholarship that sees popular cinema as a site of contestation where women can challenge restrictive expectations without entirely escaping social structure (Yadav & Jha, 2023). The contrast between Phool and Jaya therefore should not be read as passive versus active. It should be read as two different modes of survival and self-making under patriarchy. One woman learns to inhabit space differently. The other learns to leave it.

The fourth finding shows that dialogue is central to the film's critical force. The results suggest that injustice in *Laapataa Ladies* becomes visible precisely because it is spoken casually. Dowry talk, fear of family shame, assumptions about marital duty, and justifications of male authority all appear in everyday exchanges. This finding extends prior scholarship on Hindi cinema by showing that normalization is not only visual or narrative. It is discursive. Derné (1999) and Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003) showed that violence can be eroticized or trivialized in Bollywood. The present study adds that ordinary talk itself can function as a carrier of patriarchal ideology. The film's critique works because it allows the audience

to hear injustice in forms that are socially familiar. What sounds routine inside the story becomes troubling when placed in narrative context.

The results further show that counter-speech is one of the film's most important feminist strategies. Manju Mai's rejection of the idea that love grants a man the right to beat a woman, and Jaya's later articulation of coerced marriage, denied education, and dowry humiliation, both transform private suffering into public meaning. This is significant because it changes the moral direction of the narrative. The issue is no longer simply that women suffer. It is that their suffering becomes intelligible when they speak it in their own terms. This supports the broader literature on gendered representation by suggesting that subjecthood in cinema is not secured only through screen presence, but also through discursive authority. The film's dialogic structure allows normalized injustice to be named, contested, and reframed. The public rebuke of Pradeep in the police station is especially important because it marks the point at which routine male entitlement is explicitly recoded as violence. The film thus uses interaction not only to depict ideology, but to interrupt it.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to feminist film scholarship by showing that Mulvey's (1975) concern with gendered visibility and Butler's (1990) account of performativity remain highly productive for reading contemporary Hindi cinema, especially when applied to local practices such as *ghunghat*, dowry, and marital respectability. The discussion suggests that visibility in *Laapataa Ladies* is structured through role-based legibility rather than individual recognition, while gender itself is sustained through repeated rural customs that appear ordinary until they are narratively exposed. Practically, the findings matter because they show how film can function as a pedagogic space for public reflection on everyday gender injustice. The film's value lies not only in representation, but in its ability to make routine patriarchal practices visible and debatable. This has implications for media literacy, gender studies teaching, and discussions of popular cinema in South Asian contexts. The film can be used to help students and viewers identify how domination is reproduced through ordinary rituals and speech, and how women's agency can take multiple forms rather than fitting a single empowerment script.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on textual analysis of the film as represented in the available corpus, so its claims are interpretive rather than generalizable. Second, the study focuses on narrative meaning, dialogue, and character relations, but does not systematically examine cinematography, editing, sound, or performance style in scene-level detail. Third, it does not include audience reception or production context, which means it cannot establish how different viewers interpret the film or how the filmmakers themselves frame its feminist politics. Future research should therefore extend this analysis in three directions. One direction would be multimodal film analysis that integrates visual form, sound, and dialogue. A second would be audience research examining how rural and urban viewers, especially women viewers, interpret Phool and Jaya differently. A third would be comparative work that places *Laapataa Ladies* alongside other recent Hindi films about domesticity, veiling, or women's mobility to test whether its critique of everyday patriarchy is distinctive or part of a wider shift in Bollywood. Such work would help deepen our understanding of how contemporary Indian cinema negotiates gender, culture, and social change.

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