

# Deconstructing the Complexities of Domestic Violence: A Case Study of Darlings and Ammu Movies

**Mousumi Biswal**

Junior Research Fellow, Dept. of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

## **Abstract**

Domestic violence is defined as violence or fighting in domestic settings such as marriages, cohabitation or intimate relationships. This article evaluates the representation of domestic violence by Bollywood films as a major influence in its global audiences. This study explores how Indian cinema has portrayed the concept of patriarchy which has many layers of violence. The article closely examines the textual and conceptual features of current women-focused movies like *Darlings*(2022) and *Ammu* (2022). It analyses the structural pattern of domestic violence in the lives of Badru and Ammu and shows their resistance to it evidently.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Bollywood Films, Resistance

## **Introduction**

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon in human society regardless of race, culture and ethnicity where patriarchy is the prime factor to establish the male's control over women in the households. The concept of patriarchy refers to a set of ideas and beliefs that justify male control over women (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Patriarchal beliefs function by granting men the authority to exercise power within their families, thereby perpetuating and strengthening the unequal distribution of power between males and females. This system is further reinforced by social structures that bestow additional privileges upon men. Domestic violence includes a broad spectrum of violent and abusive behaviours committed by a family member against another (Shipway, 2004). This form of violence encompasses various types of violence, including child abuse, elder abuse, domestic abuse, and intimate partner violence.

Over the course of few decades, Bollywood has portrayed women's lives and experiences which shows the subordination in their everyday life. And films represent the most highly influential medium of entertainment for the majority of the Indian population (Srinivas, 2002). This is called "Cinema Effect" i.e. reinforcement through popular culture by Ashish Rajadhyaksha which refers to the vast influence and exposure of the cinema and cultural industry that influences, defines, and redefines many facets of life. George Gerbner (1976) suggests that media consumption plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes and beliefs regarding social issues, such as gender roles and expectations (p. 174). Consequently, movies have emerged as a vital platform for conveying social insights and portraying various situations, all the while remaining a significant source of entertainment for the general public.

Considering the above lines, a detailed analysis is necessary to understand the representation of dark realities of domestic violence in Bollywood Cinemas. To accomplish this, I choose three women centric films, *Ammu* (2022) and *Darlings* (2022) for a textual and discursive analysis. Each of these films represent strong women who are the victims of domestic violence and their struggle and success in this distressing journey. Employing the concepts and theorists of cinema and culture, this article examine the deep rooted psychosocial structure of patriarchy among the Indian families.

### **Understanding the concept of Patriarchy in Violence**

Patriarchy is a many headed hydra of structures which oppresses women where patriarchal power, patriarchal practices, structural gender inequality are conflated. The concept of patriarchy is defined with two main components: the structural aspect, which involves the perception of men holding more power and privilege than women, and an accompanying ideology that legitimises this notion (Smith, 1990). Some scholars have further distinguished patriarchy into two forms: 'social' and 'familial' patriarchy (Smith, 1990: 257). Social patriarchy pertains to male dominance throughout society, whereas familial patriarchy focuses on male dominance within the family unit (e.g., Barrett, 1980; Millett, 1969).

Though the structural influence of familial patriarchy may have gradually diminished in recent decades, its ideological presence continues to persist (Ahmad et al., 2004; Barrett, 1980). The concept of familial patriarchy implies that instances of spousal abuse may be justified if the wife fails to conform to culturally accepted behavioural norms (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kandiyoti, 1988; Kim et al., 2007).

Gender and feminist theorists emphasise that throughout history and in predominantly male-dominated societies, women have been treated as subordinates to men and have been exposed to male violence (Kennedy and Dutton, 1989; Strauss and Gelles, 1986). Hunnicutt (2009) explores how violence against women is often associated with gender roles, and the context in which such victimisation occurs differs between males and females. For instance, women are more vulnerable to being killed by an intimate partner compared to men.

### **Defining Domestic Violence**

According to the feminist perspective, domestic violence in heterosexual relationships stems from patriarchy, an entrenched social system where men hold dominance over women, subjecting them to oppression and exploitation (Dobash and Dobash, 2017). The root cause of this violence lies in men's pursuit of power and control over their female partners, a behaviour that is sanctioned and rationalised within the patriarchal framework (Quek, 2019). Moreover, the pervasive patriarchal structures and institutions perpetuate unequal power dynamics between men and women by reinforcing traditional gender roles linked to domestic violence.

In patriarchal societies, the exertion of control often relies on the use of violence. According to Johnson (1997), patriarchy operates through a dynamic interplay between control and fear (p. 26). This system expects men to maintain dominance, particularly over women, and violence becomes a tool to achieve and uphold that control. Domestic violence is not an individual issue rather it's a public health issue. Domestic violence is a recurring pattern of abusive conduct within an intimate relationship, where one partner seeks to assert and uphold power and control over the other. It takes various forms, such as physical, sexual,

emotional, economic, psychological, or technological actions, along with threats and coercive behaviours aimed at manipulating the other person. Such behaviours include intimidation, manipulation, humiliation, isolation, fear, terror, coercion, blame, harm, injury, and infliction of wounds upon the victim.

### **Darlings**

*Darlings*, Jasmeet K. Reen's first directed film, revolves around three main characters. There's an abusive husband, a wife who holds onto hope despite the mistreatment, and the wife's less forgiving mother. The husband, who tends to resort to violence, fails to acknowledge the gravity of his actions and believes they can be forgiven. The wife, who suffers from domestic violence, appears to have accepted her situation. However, the mother, being experienced in such harmful relationships, strongly believes that the husband must be taught a lesson. The clashes between the mother and daughter's viewpoints create a subtle drama. When they plan and carry out revenge, it's done in an unconventional way.

The Netflix movie, set in a lower middle-class Muslim neighbourhood in Mumbai, aims to break stereotypes, and this is evident in the opening love song called "Pleaj" (with lyrics by Gulzar). The song perfectly captures the essence and emotions of the story.

*Darlings*, a film co-produced by Alia Bhatt's Eternal Sunshine Productions and Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment, delves into a deeply emotional story. The film revolves around a young woman named Badrunnissa Shaikh, who finds herself trapped in a marriage with no prospects for the future.

However, the movie goes beyond the boundaries of one household and explores broader themes. It sheds light on toxic masculinity, gender inequality within marriage, and the domestic violence faced by middle-class housewives.

The main character, Badrunnissa Shaikh, clings to her fading dreams and endures the abuse from her violent, alcoholic husband, Hamza (played by Vijay Varma). Alia Bhatt portrays this character convincingly, showing the conflicts and uncertainties she experiences. She suffers in silence because her personal dreams, evident from the notes next to her dressing table and her desire for a bigger house, mean more to her than protecting herself from her husband's beatings.

In a tumultuous love marriage, Hamza Shaikh struggles with alcoholism and abused his wife, Badrunnissa "Badru" Shaikh, for three agonising years. Despite enduring nightly violence, Badru desperately seeks ways to make him quit drinking. One idea is to insist on starting a family, hoping it may bring positive change to their relationship. Simultaneously, Hamza finds himself at odds with other members of the community regarding the renovation of the chawl they live in.

One day, against Hamza's wishes, Badru attends a crucial meeting concerning the chawl's renovation. Her decision to go results in yet another brutal beating. A concerned friend, Zulfi, who witnesses Badru's suffering, takes action and reports Hamza's physical abuse to the authorities. Hamza is arrested but manages to convince Badru that he will change his ways after his release, especially if they will have a child together.

Once released, Hamza pretends to quit drinking, but the truth is that he has stopped due to severe cirrhosis of the liver. Despite this, Badru discovers she is pregnant with their child, which adds another layer of complexity to their already troubled relationship. Hamza remains fixated on discovering who has reported him to the police and eventually learns it was Zulfi, a frequent visitor to Badru and her mother, Shamshunissa "Shamshu" Ansari.

Driven by suspicion and jealousy, Hamza continues to abuse Badru, even going so far as to accuse her of having an affair with Zulfi and questioning the paternity of the child. His paranoia and cruelty escalates to a devastating point where he violently attacks Badru, leading to her miscarriage after he pushes her down a flight of stairs. It becomes evident that Hamza's abusive nature has transcended his alcohol addiction, revealing a true demon within him.

After the heartbreaking loss of her child and hospitalization, Badru vows to retaliate and treat Hamza the same way he has treated her. The cycle of abuse has to be broken, and Badru determined to find her strength and reclaim her life from the clutches of this abusive relationship.

Upon returning home, she administers sleeping pills to him, securing his hands and feet before subjecting him to the same torment he once inflicted on her. Meanwhile, at Hamza's workplace, his boss shows concern and decides to visit his home to check on him. In an attempt to cover for his absence, Badru and Shamshu fabricate a story about Hamza going to the village due to his father's passing. However, their deception unravels when they fail to convincingly maintain the facade and instead claim that Hamza is unwell.

Taking advantage of the situation, Badru begins administering injections to Hamza, supplied by her mother with Kasim's assistance. During this ordeal, Hamza seizes an opportunity to deceive Zulfi while the women are out shopping, enabling his escape. Upon returning home, Badru and Shamshu are astonished to find him gone.

As events unfold, the police arrive to investigate Hamza's disappearance, considering his status as a government employee. They harbour suspicions of an affair between Zulfi and Badru, leading to potential arrest threats. However, Zulfi surprises everyone by declaring his love for Shamshu instead. This revelation leaves the police puzzled, prompting them to summon all parties involved to the police station. At the station, Shamshu confirms her affection for Zulfi through a kiss, solidifying her desire. It's at this moment that Hamza arrives to reveal the truth to the police - that Badru and her mother have been subjecting him to torture.

The police don't believe his story since he looks drunk. Badru, Shamshu, and Zulfi arrive at the police station to bring him back home. Shamshu and Zulfi suggest they tie Hamza to a railway track to kill him. Badru records a video of Hamza where he mentions he is running away (to indicate he has committed suicide). They tie him to the railway track when Badru realises that she is turning out to be just like Hamza and unties him just before a train passes by. Hamza now released vows to take revenge on Badru, when he is run over by a train. On the way back home, Shamshu comes clean to Badru that her father also brutally abused the former, even after Badru was born. Shamshu one day too killed Badru's father and

took Kasim's help in disposing of the body. She then filed a missing complaint about her husband but the police could never find him. Shamshu assures Badru that she took the correct decision of leaving him for good before he died. Badru also believes that this is the consequence of Hamza's actions. A few days later, they hold a funeral for Hamza. Badru smiles, roams around the city independently happy that she is free now, hoping for a better future.

*Darlings* is a dark comedy portraying the cruelties of domestic violence where the heroine finally makes her way to freedom after struggling and deconstructing the ideas of being subtle, forgiving nature of a Indian women. This movie confirms that there is no right time to resist or raise your voice against the violence where you have been traumatised everyday because of the man's toxic behaviours in any relationships.

### **Ammu**

*Ammu* begins with the classic song, Aha Naa Pellanta from Mayabazar (1957). The track highlights the titular character's desire to settle down with her "prince charming". An Indian Telugu-language drama thriller film written and directed by Charukesh Sekar and produced by Stone Bench Films opens with a conversation between a young girl and Ammu, who is about to marry her neighbour Ravi (Naveen Chandra), who works as a police inspector. The little girl asks Ammu if she really likes Ravi, and if she's ready for marriage. Ammu says she thinks she knows him and goes on to ask the girl why she would ask such a question. Ammu's world starts to crumble when she learns about Ravi's abusive and authoritative behaviour. In their first meeting, the electricity at the house is tripped, the candles are out and the faces are barely visible. This is the first sign of the dark world she is entering into with a shady sort.

Amudha, also known as Ammu (portrayed by Aishwarya Lekshmi), entered into matrimony with her neighbor Ravindranath, or Ravi (played by Naveen Chandra), who works as a police inspector. The couple relocated to Maharanipalli, where Ravi serves as the Circle Inspector of Police at the local station. At the beginning of their marriage, they appeared to have a promising future, as their love and support for each other were evident. However, the situation takes a dark turn as Ravi gradually changes into a harsh, passive-aggressive, manipulative, and cruel person towards Ammu. He starts berating her in front of his colleagues and occasionally shouts at her, subjecting her to embarrassment.

The situation worsens when Ravi crosses a line and slaps Ammu during an argument, while her parents were visiting them in Maharanipalli. Although Ravi apologises and tries to pacify Ammu, it becomes evident that he doesn't truly regret his actions but only wishes to keep the incident hidden from her parents. Feeling distressed and seeking guidance, Ammu confides in her mother Kalpana (played by Parvathi T.) about the abusive incident. Kalpana, understanding the seriousness of the matter, advises Ammu to follow her heart and do what she believes is right.

Despite being fed up with the abusive treatment from Ravi and desiring to end the relationship, Ammu finds herself trapped by fear and embarrassment. She hopes that her love and patience will change Ravi and put an end to the torment she experiences at home.



In this difficult and complex situation, Ammu grapples with her emotions and must find the strength to confront her challenges, seeking a path towards a healthier and happier life. Ravi desperately wants Ammu to conceive because he saw his colleague's happiness when his wife got pregnant, and he desires the same recognition and congratulations. However, Ammu knows that bringing a child into their abusive home would be detrimental, so she takes contraceptive pills to prevent pregnancy. Unfortunately, Ammu finds herself pregnant, suspecting that Ravi might have tampered with her pills secretly. This situation leaves Ammu emotionally devastated.

Feeling trapped and scared, Ammu confides in Ravi's colleagues, Satya (Satya Krishnan) and Iqbal (Prem Sagar), as well as her neighbor Linny (Anjali Ameer), seeking their support. Together, they accompany her to the office of DIG Reddy (Sanjay Swaroop), Ravi's superior officer, with the intention of filing a complaint against Ravi for his domestic violence. However, Ravi notices Ammu's move and manipulates her into admitting, in front of Satya, that he never laid a hand on her. This leaves Satya, Iqbal, and Linny feeling helpless, as they genuinely want to assist Ammu but cannot proceed without her direct complaint.

Despite this setback, Ammu remains resilient. She assures her friends that she has not given up hope and will bide her time for the right opportunity to seek justice. Her plan is to make Ravi confess his abusive behaviour before everyone, so she can finally walk away from him with her head held high, no longer burdened by the toxic relationship. In this difficult and complex situation, Ammu's determination to reclaim her dignity and pride becomes the focal point of her journey. With the support of her friends, she resolves to face the truth about her abusive marriage and strive for a brighter future where she can finally be free from the clutches of Ravi's violence.

In the midst of her quest for a solution, Ammu encounters Prabhu Das (played by Bobby Simha) at the Maharaniipalli police station. He has been granted parole to attend his sister Geetha's (Anusha Prabhu) wedding, but Geetha holds a grudge against him for killing two men in the past and refuses to forgive him. Meanwhile, Ravi, a troublesome officer at the police station, subjects Prabhu to unnecessary chores, causing tension between them. Prabhu eventually rebels, resulting in the cancellation of his parole.

Ammu discovers that Ravi will face serious consequences if Prabhu misses any of his required meetings at the station. Feeling sympathetic towards Prabhu, Ammu, along with Sathya, Linny, and Iqbal (Prem Sagar), secretly hides him in her home to protect him from Ravi's wrath. This decision wreaks havoc on the police station and Ravi's life, as many people, including Geetha and her fiancé (Sai Badram Dinesh), protest for Prabhu's release. As a consequence of the situation, Ravi gets suspended from his duties.

Simultaneously, Ammu decides to take action against Ravi for his domestic abuse. She bravely approaches Reddy, reporting the abusive behaviour and providing a voice recording as evidence. In the recording, Ravi is heard threatening Ammu and admitting to his habitual mistreatment. This leads to Ravi's arrest and the possibility of him losing his job. During this tumultuous period, Linny accompanies Prabhu back to the police station, where he finally receives forgiveness from his sister before being taken back to prison. Ammu and Prabhu share a farewell moment, wishing each other well as they part ways.

After the incident, Ammu and Linny have a peaceful evening, enjoying tea and discussing their future. Linny assures Ammu that she is not a bad person, even if she decides to make a difficult choice concerning the child conceived through marital rape by Ravi. Ammu acknowledges Linny's understanding and support in this matter. Ultimately, Ammu's courage in standing up against abuse and her compassion towards Prabhu demonstrate her strength of character, leaving a positive impact on the lives of those involved.

The fate of the baby remains a mystery, concealed from the audience as the movie concludes with Ammu journeying towards her own home. At the Maharanipalli bus station, she finds solace in the company of a beggar named Raghu Babu, whom she had confided in about her struggles earlier. As they happily share a biryani together, Ammu candidly questions why the beggar never warned her against returning to Ravi, knowing that it might have been a wrong choice.

In response, the beggar imparts a profound lesson, expressing that he refrained from interfering because he believed that regardless of the decision being right or wrong, it had to be Ammu's own choice to make. The film culminates on a note of hope, leaving the audience with a sense of optimism for Ammu's future. It is clear that only the victim can change the situation if she is prisoner into that. Stated by Paulo that the oppressor is incapable of bringing about a change in the condition of the oppressed. This can only be achieved by the oppressed when the oppressed understand their oppression and discovers their oppressors. It's Ammu who finally stands for herself and free herself from that abusive marriage.

## Conclusion

Over the years, Indian cinema has undergone significant changes in its portrayal of male dominance and patriarchy. In the past, such depictions were mainly focused on the physical aspect, showcasing violence and presenting women as powerless, confined to traditional roles of wives and mothers. However, in modern times, this portrayal has evolved to include the emotional and mental aspects, often giving more importance about the struggle of domestically confined women with abusive partners. While cinema is the reflection of society, it also acts a catalyst for enforcing the prevalent ideologies surrounding gender stereotypes. However, Indian cinema has taken a conscious step towards breaking the glass ceiling and is finally portraying the dark realities of the lives and experiences of women.

## References

1. Barrett M. (1980). *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*. Thetford: Thetford Press.
2. Dobash R.E., Dobash R. (1979). *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy*. New York: The Free Press.
3. Dobash R.E., Dobash R.P. (2017). 'When Women Are Murdered'. *Handbook on Homicide*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford:pp. 131–148.
4. Freire, Paulo. (2017). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin Classics.
5. Gerbner, G. (1976). *Living with television: The violence profile*. *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 173-199.
6. Hunnicutt G. (2009). 'Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence Against Women: Resurrecting "Patriarchy" as a Theoretical Tool', *Violence Against Women* 15(5): 553–73.

7. Johnson, A. (1997). *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our patriarchal legacy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
8. Kandiyoti D. (1988). 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2(3): 274–90.
9. Kennedy L.W., Dutton D.G. (1989). 'The Incidence of Wife Assault in Alberta', *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 21: 40–54.
10. Kim J.J., Lau A.S., Chang D.F. (2007). 'Family Violence among Asian Americans', in Leong F., Inman A.G., Ebero A., Yang L., Kinoshita L.M., Fu M. (eds) *Handbook of Asian American Psychology*, pp. 363–78. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
11. Millett K. (1969). *Sexual Politics*. New York: Avon.
12. Rajadhyaksha, A. (2009). *Indian cinema in the time of celluloid: from Bollywood to the emergency*. Indiana University Press.
13. Reen, Jagmeet, K. (2022). *Darlings*. [Film]. Red Chillies Entertainment.
14. Sekar, Charukesh. (2022). *Ammu*. [Film]. Stone Bench Films.
15. Shipway L. (2004) *Domestic Violence: A Handbook for Health Professionals*. London: Routledge.
16. Smith M.D. (1990). 'Patriarchal Ideology and Wife Beatings: A Test of a Feminist Hypothesis', *Violence and Victims* 5(4): 257–73.
17. Srinivas, L. (2002). *The active audience: spectatorship, social relations and the experience of cinema in India*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 155-173.
18. Strauss A.L., Gelles R.J. (1986). 'Societal Change and Change in Family Violence Rates from 1975 to 1985 as Revealed by Two National Surveys', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48: 465–79.
19. Quek K. (2019). *Handbook on Gender and Violence*. Edward Elgar Publishing. Patriarchy.