Between Violence and Exclusion:
Cinematic Representation of Gender Politics
in Antarmahal and Water

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This article explores representation of gender politics in two films—*Antarmahal* and *Water*—to illuminate the synergy of patriarchy and religion that creates a structure of cultural violence against women. A sense of feminist consciousness pitted against dogmatic social practices drives the narratives of these films. This study employs Julia Kristeva's idea of semanalysis as an analytic framework to consider the signification process as dynamic because it is driven by an interplay of bodily drives and pulsions (genotext) and symbolic structures (phenotext). The cinematic texts under analysis address two aspects of gender relations in Indian Hindu society: conjugality and widowhood. Conjugality is marked by men's sexual gratification and an obsession for an heir, and widowhood effaces women's sexual and social existence. Three themes emerged from the textual analysis: women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability. The film texts reveal a constant struggle between patriarchal subjugation and women's agency. Hindu patriarchy creates unequal power relations that exacerbate the vulnerability of women. However, women often resist such misogynistic practices by circumventing the norms of patriarchy.

Keywords: chora, gender politics, genotext, Julia Kristeva, phenotext, semanalysis, semiotic, symbolic

The pervasive cultural force of Indian cinema shapes social imagery of gender relations and reproduces patriarchal social norms and values. Women in Indian cinema are portrayed mainly in two ways. First, they are shown as self-sacrificing mythological ideals like Sita and Savitri. Second, women are portrayed in a hypersexual manner to feed male fantasy and erotic desires (Agarwal, 2014; Dasgupta, 1996; Dasgupta & Hegde 1988; Nandkumar, 2011; Manohar & Kline, 2014; Sarkar, 2012). Contemporary women-centric cinematic productions aspire to distance themselves from the typical cultural construct of women and to interrogate gender politics perpetuated by the dominant patriarchy. However, we have limited knowledge about women-centric cinema that delves into the realms of conjugality and widowhood to unmask the dogmatic social practices that exclude women's voices. This study fills that gap by interrogating the cinematic texts of *Antarmahal* (2005) and *Water* (2005) that represent women's agency and desire. The directors of *Antarmahal* (Rituparno Ghosh) and *Water* (Deepa Mehta) blend feminist consciousness with an artistic sensibility to produce

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cultural texts that challenge dominant Hindu patriarchy and transgress the cultural imagery of womanhood.

Rituparno Ghosh, a talented and versatile Indian film director, constantly challenged the boundaries of gender identity and gender performativity, and delicately sketched the intricacies of human relationships. He considered himself a womanist, not a feminist, filmmaker as it is difficult to think completely outside of patriarchal practices and value system (Mazumder, 2017). His cinema subtly portrays the desires of women and always contests gender hierarchy. In the same vein, Indo-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta, through her film *Water,* depicts the marginalization of women and problematizes the dominating patriarchal value system in India. The film was nominated for an Academy Award for Foreign Language Film. Deepa Mehta is well-known for her Elements trilogy: *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water*.

Several contemporary women-centric Hindi films deal with the reality of women's lives; however, scholars argue that the representation of women in such films is highly problematic and reflects patriarchal expectations (Rad, 2016; Sarkar, 2012). *Antarmahal* and *Water* critically examine the role of patriarchy and misogyny in social practices that perpetuate cultural violence against women. These films portray women's desire, sexual agency, and subversion in ways that challenge the synergy of patriarchy and religion. *Antarmahal* and *Water* represent exemplary films that rearticulate how the infusion of artistic sensibility and social criticism can promote gender equality in celluloid.

Rationale for the Study

The study examines women-centric films that articulate lived experiences of women in a patriarchal society governed by strict religious values. The rationale for the study is two-fold. First, though Indian women are now playing significant roles in the political, social, and economic development of India (Seema, 2013), cinema narratives are often hesitant to portray their shifting roles in society. Such misogynistic practices perpetuate cultural violence (Galtung, 1990) against women and create tensions in achieving gender equality. However, Indian cinema like *Antarmahal* and *Water* reimagines agentic representation of women, question dominant patriarchal values, and critically examine women's desire and sexuality. Such rearticulation of gender roles creates new cultural spaces for subversive gender roles and renegotiates cultural imagery and expectations regarding gender relations in society. Therefore, such cinematic texts demand scholarly attention.

Second, the reception of *Antarmahal* and *Water* is intriguing for critical cultural scholars because it signals social transgression. Production was suspended on *Water* after the film set was ransacked by Hindu nationalists who identified the film as an anti-Hindu cultural production. The incident delayed production for four years, and Deepa Mehta had to move the set location from India to Sri Lanka (Bumiller, 2006). Similarly, conservative audiences accused Rituparno Ghosh of presenting pornography because they considered *Antarmahal* a depiction of crude sexuality. Conservative audiences mistook the artistic sensibility and the critical rendition of Bengali conjugal life in *Antarmahal* (Rediff, 2005)*.* Such reception indicates the transgressive nature of *Antarmahal* and *Water*, which invites intellectual investigation.

Literature Review

The synergy of patriarchy and religion perpetuates cultural violence against Hindu women. Galtung (1990) defines cultural violence as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of existence—exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics)—that can be used to justify and legitimate direct or structural violence" (p. 291). The ideology of patriarchy and Hindu religious practices legitimize violence against women by shaping moral norms and clouding reality (Galtung, 1990). Such practices render violence against women acceptable to society. Akinyemi (2018) argued that the experience of colonization, patriarchy, and social practices create a sphere of cultural violence against African women. Oyedemi (2016) illustrated how the notion of feminine beauty encapsulates the ethnic and social politics of gender that is directly linked to cultural violence. Standish (2014) revealed the connection between cultural violence, honor killings, and dowry murder. Indian cinema, the symbolic and cultural domains, often works as an ideological vehicle that reproduces the Hindu patriarchal norms to legitimize the marginalization of women in society.

Indian Hindi films, popularly known as Bollywood, are heavily influenced by the Hindu religious belief systems that project women as *Sati*, the mythical self-sacrificing and virtuous women who bear pain and suffering to protect the honor of husbands or fathers. Agarwal (2014) argued that women's roles in Indian cinema mainly center on being the Other of men. Women are housewives, mothers, and objects of male interest in love and erotic attraction, the source of men's sexual gratification and the magnet of the male gaze. Thomas (2005) analyzed the representation of women in Hindi cinema during the late colonial period. She drew a parallel between Indian warrior women of the *virangana* tradition and their portrayal by the actress Nadia, a White woman who played lead roles in Hindi cinema. Gopal (2011) examined how the Bengali film *Chokher Bali,* an adaptation of Tagore's novel, infuses artistic sensibility with Bollywood production techniques to produce new *bhadralok* (gentlemen) cinema that appeals to the global Indian audience.

Scholars have argued that Indian cinema, as a vehicle of male domination, often perpetuates violence and harassment as a control mechanism of women (Dasgupta, 1996; Dasgupta & Hegde 1988; Manohar & Kline, 2014). These studies illuminate how such sexual assault narratives depict women as responsible for the very assault against them. Gopalan's (1997) analysis of rape-revenge narratives of Hindi cinema highlighted how the portrayal of avenging women, whose actions echo the male action genre, often end up reintegrating into law and order of the society.

Indian cinema started to embrace women's shifting role in society and experimented with how women were shown in films. Such representation highlights women's agency and independence; however, the women face severe consequences for exercising that freedom. Rad (2016) examined two Indian films, *Daman* and *Mrityudand*, to understand women's representation and agency, which she argued is highly problematic. Directors, male and female alike, produce a women's gender identity that strongly reflects patriarchal expectations. Sarkar (2012) reported that female directors of Hindi parallel cinema focus on social injustice, with women engaged in subversive role-playing. Male directors of middle cinema, on the other hand, rarely criticize patriarchy, and women are pitied rather than celebrated as social transgressors. Dasgupta (1996) revealed that Hindi cinema presents women in sexual and romantic ways. Very few

cinematic portrayals depict women's agency. Such exercises of women's autonomy and transgression are often engulfed by the dominant patriarchal societal norms (Dasgupta, 1996). Indian cinema hesitates to provide substantial commentary on gender hierarchy in social practices. Scholars have a very limited understanding of Indian cinema, or, more specifically, of women-centric cinema that astutely blends social and religious criticism with an artistic sensibility to represent gender politics and challenge dominant patriarchy.

This study fills that gap by examining two women-centric films that nurture strong feminist consciousness to locate women's desire and sexual agency and to tackle the dehumanizing social practice that perpetuates cultural violence against women.

Research Method

This study sets out to illuminate gender politics in textual structures and, to do so, turns to the work of Julia Kristeva, employing Kristeva's semanalysis to locate textual politics articulated in *Antarmahal* and *Water*. Semanalysis deals with the interplay of bodily drives and symbolic structure and is here compared with Derrida's (1991) framework of deconstruction and Merleau-Ponty's (1970) ideas of body and language. In articulating the idea of deconstruction, Derrida (1991) employed the concept of "différance" in the context of the human psyche. He considered the link between the pleasure principle and the reality principle as only différance as a detour (Derrida, 1991). However, the nonlinguistic elements of language—more specifically, embodiment as a locus of meaning production—were not conceptualized adequately in Derrida's articulation of language and meaning. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (2013) recognized the potentials of the body in the signifying process but failed to shed light on how bodily drives or desires make their presence known in language. Kristeva's semanalysis provides the needed analytic scaffold on which to examine the interconnection of bodily drives and symbols in the meaning-making process.

The method segment is divided into two sections. In the first, I elucidate Kristeva's ideas related to semanalysis: the signifying process and the textual performance. The signifying process comprises three core elements: the semiotic, the symbolic, and *chora*. Kristeva (2002) recognized two modalities of textual performance: genotext and phenotext. The second section provides phenomenological textual analytical procedures: description, reduction, and interpretation (Chang, 1987; Lanigan, 1988; Ricoeur, 1975). The theoretical insights of semanalysis are here studied against a phenomenological textual analytic framework. Kristeva's semanalysis builds a connection between a semiotic explication of texts and a phenomenological or existential dimension of sign production (Smith, 1990). Such association reflects on rhetorical modalities that require examination of semiotic, social-cultural codes, the chain of intertextuality, and self-conscious reflection of the signification process (Smith, 1990).

Semiotic Analytic Framework: Kristeva and Semanalysis

Kristeva (1986) considered the signifying process to be a combination of two elements: the semiotic and the symbolic. She used Lacan's concepts of the "imaginary" and the "symbolic" innovatively. Especially, she employed the distinction between these ideas to identify the difference between the semiotic and the symbolic (Moi, 1986). Kristeva (1986) posited that the continual interaction and, more specifically, the

disruption or tension between the semiotic and the symbolic ensure the signifying process. The semiotic and the symbolic "are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 92). The semiotic belongs to the prelinguistic realm and organizes the drives in language. Kristeva (1993) considered semiotic as "translinguistic" or "nonlinguistic" (pp. 32–33). The semiotic refers to "distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration" (p. 93). It is an essential component of language characterized by rhythms and tones; however, it does not "represent or signify something" (Oliver, 2002, p. xiv). Kristeva identified drives as ambiguous; at the same time, she referred to them as assimilating and destructive. Moreover, through rhythms and tones, drives are discharged in language.

Kristeva incorporated Plato's concept of *chora* to articulate her position on the semiotic. The semiotic *chora* relates to the "emotions, sensations, and other marks and traces of psychical and material experience" (Rickert, 2007, pp. 260–261). Because it is beyond any regulatory process, the *chora* comprises the presymbolic drives repressed in the symbolic realm. It emerges in the symbolic "as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences" (Moi, 1986, p. 13). It resembles the infant's babbling in its drive to acquire language but has no definite meaning in the symbolic realm.

The symbolic is the realm of language and relates to the structure of language that dictates the operation of symbols. Oliver (2002) posited that "the symbolic is the element of signification that sets up the structures by which symbols operate. The symbolic is the structure or grammar that governs the ways in which symbols can refer" (p. xiv). In sum, the symbolic is the formal structure of language that we use to communicate. The dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic drives the signifying process. Oliver (2002) argued that without the symbolic—the rules governing and structuring linguistic elements—we have only an endless flow of pulsions or the prelinguistic drives manifested in meaningless sounds or babble. In the same vein, the semiotic provides motivation to communicate, and its absence marks a void in the signifying process. The continual tension between the semiotic and the symbolic makes the signifying process dynamic.

The signifying process determines the textual representation of reality. The "genotext" and "phenotext" are the two modalities of language that ensure the functioning of text. The genotext is not the linguistic structure, but rather a generative process that relates to the semiotic drives. Its presence can be found in the repetition of phonemes or rhymes and through melodic devices. It articulates the ephemeral and nonsignifying structure. Kristeva (1986) identified phenotext as a structure that follows the rules of communication, irreducible in the semiotic process, and "presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee" (p. 121).

The significance of Kristeva's semanalysis is twofold. First, her linguistic conceptualization situates the speaking body in a signifying process (Oliver, 2002). It also manifests that every signification bears the mark of bodily drives. Second, she formulated the notion of the speaking subject as subject-in-process/on trial (Oliver, 2002). Drawing on Kristeva's theory of semanalysis and informed by the works of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, this study examines the cinematic texts of two films: *Antarmahal* and *Water*. *Antarmahal*

delineates the Bengali upper-class conjugal relations at the end of the 19th century. Deepa Mehta's film *Water* explores the life of widows in Indian society.

The core feature that binds these two films is women's desire and sexual agency. These films interrogate the Hindu patriarchal social structure that exploits and suppresses female sexuality and desire. They articulate women's bodies as sites of patriarchal domination and points of resistance by projecting women's sexual agency. Therefore, the focus of this study is the dominance of Hindu patriarchy in Indian society that mostly influences gender relations. However, people of different religions—Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, and others—live side by side in India. Guided by the intersectionality literature (Collins, 1999a, 1999b; Crenshaw, 1991; Hooks, 1989), this study refrains from generalizing the results in the context of the diverse orientations of religious patriarchies in India.

Schematic for Data Analysis

Description of cinematic texts is the first layer of analysis. It highlights the manifest content of cinematic texts, the way they construct and present different characters, and it identifies the social realm and the use of language. The purpose of such layering is to "keep external presupposition 'outside' the brackets from influencing our description" (Lanigan, 1988, p. 10). In the first layer, the researcher articulates how the cinematic texts represent the lived experiences of the protagonists. The description stage reveals three emerging themes: women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability.

Reduction, the next layer, delves into "the object of consciousness—the thing, person, emotion, and so forth, that constitutes the experience we have" (Lanigan, 1988, p. 10). The researcher employs an imaginative free variation technique to locate the cognitive, affective, and conative meaning of the texts (Chang, 1987; Langdridge, 2007; Lanigan, 1988; Ricoeur, 1975). This technique compares and contrasts different textual elements by "systematically imagining each aspect present or absent within the lived experience" (Orbe, 1998). Different contextual elements and themes are compared, and the analysis then proceeds to "reduce the description to those parts that are essential for the existence of the consciousness of experience" (Lanigan, 1988, p. 10). Such analytical layering examines the contextual elements of women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability. The Hindu patriarchy creates unequal power relations that dictate women to be submissive to social norms that render women vulnerable. However, women often challenge patriarchal norms and exercise their agency to unsettle power relations. After reflecting on the themes and contextual elements of texts, I reduced the themes into a structure–agency relationship that focuses on the constant tension between the Hindu patriarchy and women's agency.

Interpretation, the third layer of analysis, unifies the relationship of description and reduction to examine the conscious experience of the speech act through the use of symbols and signs (Lanigan, 1988). Interpretation focuses on the sociocultural meaning of our lived experiences. Such semiotic examination of *Antarmahal* and *Water* reveals the broader spectrum of the cultural politics of gender in Indian Hindu society. More important, interpretation forges connections between cultural violence, women's desire and agency, and Hindu patriarchy.

Textual Analysis

The textual analysis section is divided into two segments. The first delves into the description, reduction, and interpretation of the cinematic text of *Antarmahal*. The study locates the presence of phenotext and genotext while sketching the contours of description and reduction. The interpretation situates textual analysis in the social spectrum of gender politics in India. The second segment follows a similar procedure to analyze the cinematic text of *Water.*

Description (Antarmahal)

Phenotext

The word *antarmahal* refers to the private space of a house where women carry out their daily routine household activities. The film *Antarmahal* depicts women in that inner space because social norms strictly limit their presence outside. Though women always wish to visit outside their houses, such a desire is rarely fulfilled. *Antarmahal* portrays women as trapped in the inner chamber of a house, and that entrapment resonates with the title of the movie. The film astutely depicts the intricacies of the relationship between four characters: Bhubaneswar Chowdhury (zamindar or squire), Mahamaya (the elder wife), Jashomati (the younger wife), and Brajo (the young sculptor). The narrative revolves around Bhubaneswar's desire for a son and his desperate attempts to outshine his rival Nadubabu (a neighboring landlord, or squire).

The film also depicts the Hindu religious festival *Durga Puja*. The beginning of the film is marked by fast drum beats and high-pitched musical instruments. The colorful religious rituals and statue of the deity *Durga* create a festive mode. The voice-over of an Englishman recalls the date of July 5, 1878, as if he was recollecting an event from his journal. His voice-over also manifests his fantasy toward the wives of the Bhubaneswar. With a derisive tone, he says the Hindu zamindars tried to outshine each other, and last year, the neighboring zamindar, Nadubabu, outshone his patron Bhubaneswar. After that defeat in showmanship, Bhubaneswar is seeking to outshine Nadubabu. To belittle his rival and to demonstrate his loyalty to the British Empire, Bhubaneswar plans to make an effigy of the goddess *Durga* but with Queen Victoria's face. He fires his regular sculptor and hires a young one to materialize his plan.

The film audience hears the rhythmic squeaking of a four-poster bed, revealing Bhubaneswar on top of Jashomati, the younger wife, having sexual intercourse. Jashomati lies passively on the bed, obviously in pain, and trying to avoid eye contact with Bhubaneswar, who is forcing himself into her. Promiscuous Bhubaneswar reveals his nature to Jashomati when she questions him about the fragrance she smells on him. The zamindar laughs and replies, "You go out with one fragrance, and return with the other; then only I will be considered as the man of the Borobari" (Ghosh, 2005). Later in the scene, Mahamaya, the elder wife, hears Jashomati screaming in pain and tells her maid, "What a poor thing. She wants to become the mother of a son. Then she has to tolerate this much pain" (Ghosh, 2005). In a desperate attempt to conceive an heir, Bhubaneswar summons a priest who claims that if Bhubaneswar's wife hears religious chants while having intercourse, she will bear a son. Jashomati repeatedly refuses such an outrageous proposition. She becomes traumatized when Bhubaneswar forces her to have intercourse with him in front of a priest. She attempts suicide after such a disgraceful incident, but Mahamaya rescues her before she can succeed.

Genotext

As noted earlier, the genotext belongs to the presymbolic realm, which generates heterogeneity of meaning. The genotext is anterior to the sign, to signification, while at the same time discharged through the phenotext. In cinematic texts, we can locate the existence of genotext by examining the tones, rhythms, silences, whispers, breaks, recurrences, sudden clashes, and discontinuities in the film (Smith, 1989, 1990). Genotext manifests itself most prominently in *Antarmahal* through the combination of musicality and visual composition. Critically examining the phenotext, especially the musicality and visual composition, one can extrapolate the drives, pulsions, and desires. An analysis of genotext reveals three prominent themes: women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability.

The relationships among Jashomati, Mahamaya, and Brajo reveal women's desire for romantic relationships outside the confined settings of marriage. The cinematic production of Jashomati's first encounter with the young sculptor Brajo flaunts the musicality of text. Brightness or dimness, musical score, background noise, and rhythm of the scene tease the audience about the presence of genotext. A subtle and close examination can unravel the collision of phenotext and genotext in the cinematic text. Such an eruption of genotext is revealed when Jashomati accidentally runs into Brajo. Poignant background music, her longing for the outside, sounds of raindrops, a tamed bird, darkness outside, and Jashomati's innocence and beauty create an emotionally piercing encounter between the two. In another scene, genotext is revealed when Jashomati escapes from her husband and bumps into Brajo, who is building the new *Durga* in the Thakur Ghar, a special place within a house for worship. The playful presence of light and darkness, coupled with the tense background music, sets the tone of the scene.

The text of *Antarmahal* often represents the encounters of Jashomati and Brajo with an artistic sensibility. Jashomati is sitting in front of a flickering fire lamp and trying to dry her wet body part with the edge of her sari. Her face is glowing, and her ravishing beauty shines a light on the whole place. The lyrical background music signals imminent danger of which Jashomati is unaware until that moment. She hears a noise and tries to locate the source. The sound becomes louder when she looks at the corner of the room, then screams in fear. She desperately moves outside and bumps into Brajo. The young sculptor holds her body for several seconds, and they look at each other. She suddenly moves away from him, and the background music resonates with stormy weather. The encounters between Jashomati and Brajo are filled with tension, narrative discontinuities, emotional upheavals, vulnerability, and desolation. Mahamaya's desire for the sculptor is manifested through her peeping looks.

Mahamaya is in a drenched sari when she visits the Thakur Ghar to meet Brajo, and she keeps her shoulders uncovered. Her stunning beauty could mesmerize anyone. The jewelry, vermilion, and the soothing tone of visual composition render the particular scene as a scintillating moment for an emotional encounter. She smiles and gazes at Brajo, and her eyes are full of longing. The background music resembles Sanai, a popular music genre, which expresses emotional longing and upsurge. In short, the sensibility, tones, rhythm, and silence of the cinematic text bear the mark of the presymbolic realm, which had a constant tension with the symbolic function of text. Such struggle makes the signification process dynamic.

Genotext illuminates the power relations in a patriarchal social setting where women's lives are controlled entirely by the males. In *Antarmahal*, women are completely helpless, and their existence depends on the mercy of the men. Women have no freedom to live their lives as they wish. The musicality of *Antarmahal* reveals the unequal power relations between men and women. For example, the poetic revelation of Jashomati's powerless existence is revealed when she attempts to ask the sculptor to send a palki (a sedan chair) so she can go to a fair. The background music, darkness, rain, sudden movement of a bird, and a glimpse of light illuminate the poignancy of reality in Jashomati's life. Religion and patriarchy work side by side to render women powerless. Bhubaneswar beats Jashomati to force her to have intercourse with him in front of a priest. The Hindu priest remains utterly indifferent to such an act of violence. Priests also use religious texts as a pretext to have intercourse with the elder wife of Bhubaneswar. They do not feel any moral qualms about proposing such vicious conditions for performing a religious ritual.

The text of *Antarmahal* reveals the direct and indirect violence that exacerbate women's vulnerability in Hindu social practices. Violence is not limited just to physical assaults but also extends to cultural norms that impose stricter restrictions on those who are vulnerable. The lives of Jashomati and Mahamaya exist within the confines of the inner chamber of the house. They cannot visit outside without their husband's permission. Jashomati's simplest desire to buy clay dolls is not fulfilled because her husband is reluctant to approve such a wish. The well-being of Jashomati and Mahamaya is threatened if they fail to satisfy the needs of their husband. Bhubaneswar even asks Mahamaya to satisfy the outrageous demands of the Hindu priests, and he beats Jashomati to force her into submission. Such practices illuminate the vulnerability of women in patriarchal societies.

Reduction

Phenotext

The film text conjures up the repressive structure of conjugality in Hindu marital relationships. In the economies of conjugality, women are a sexual commodity and rarely find any pleasure or happiness in the relationship. Women in the Borobari, the house of the zamindar, are entirely helpless because their lives depend on the mercy of their husband, Bhubaneswar, who values them solely for sexual pleasure and procreation. On several occasions, he forces himself on his young wife without acknowledging her refusal to engage in sexual intercourse. The elder wife falls out of his grace when she fails to give him a son. He rarely visits her chamber and completely ignores her existence.

There is no romantic relationship, caring, or any sense of partnership between Bhubaneswar and his wives. He keeps a mistress for sexual gratification but wants his wives to be devoted to him to ensure that any children his wives bear are his. Though he has sexual relationships with three women, he fails to sire any offspring. Hindu patriarchy fails to recognize the inability or infertility of the zamindar, but blames his wives for being barren. The wives bear the social stigma.

Hindu priests see opportunity when they learn that the zamindar plans to replace the face of the deity *Durga* with that of Queen Victoria. The village Brahmins threaten Bhubaneswar for having such a plan, and he desperately asks them for a solution to his desire to satisfy the British Empire. The Brahmins mention

the performance of Ashvamedha Yagya, a *Vedic* tradition, as a solution. Ashvamedha Yagya, a bizarre royal ritual performed to display the power of the king, dictates that the queen must copulate with the horse selected for the Yagya (Jamison, 1996; Knipe, 2015). Though the Brahmins argue that the performance of such a ritual may not be possible in the 19th century, the priests can consider the Ashvamedha Yagya completed if the elder wife of the zamindar can sexually satisfy the Brahmins. Such a proposition illuminates the abusive religious practices in Hindu society. On another occasion, a priest advised Bhubaneswar to conduct sexual intercourse in front of a chanting priest. Such vicious roles of the priests unravel the seditious religious practices against women. Bhubaneswar is so desperate that he asks his elder wife to satisfy the priests sexually so he can attain the title of Rai Bahadur, a recognition from the British Empire. Thus, Hindu religion and conjugal structure subjugated women and relegated their lives to the realm of nonexistence.

Antarmahal playfully sketches the niceties of human relationships. The text eloquently reveals the intricate relationship between Mahamaya and Jashomati. Each wife is vying for affection and attention from their husband, but the relationship creates jealousy as well as an emotional bond between them. Mahamaya often taunts Jashomati for having the attention of their spouse, yet is infuriated when she notices Jashomati's desire for Brajo, the young sculptor. However, when their husband repeatedly abuses Jahomoti, Mahamaya provides emotional support for her. The elder wife even encourages Jashomati to have a secret relationship with Brajo to beget a child:

> How long does it take? The husband does not remain in the house in the evening; ask Tarini [maidservant] to bring him through the back door. It will not take much time. Everything will be done in a while. Our husband will not even know. (Ghosh, 2005)

In a nutshell, the relationship between the two wives resonates the tapestry of human relationships—from envy to comfort, from grudge to love, from resentment to solace, and from bitterness to warmth.

Genotext

After reflecting on the three themes discussed in the description stage, I reduce them to a structure–agency relationship. The Hindu patriarchy is identified as one structure, and the women's desire to resist such structure represents their agency. The film text reveals a constant struggle between patriarchal subjugation and women's agency. Hindu patriarchy creates unequal power relations that exacerbate the vulnerability of women. However, women often resist such misogynistic practices by circumventing the norms of patriarchy. Therefore, the themes—women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability—are reduced to a structure–agency relationship to highlight the tension between the Hindu patriarchal structure and women's agency.

The repressive structure of Hindu patriarchy manufactures a sexist discourse that imposes stricter practices to control women's bodies. Women have no control over their lives because patriarchy has reduced the conjugal relationship to a "procreation-only" engagement. Men can easily toss women out if they fail to beget a son. Women also face violence and exclusion for not following the gender norms. Patriarchy and religion work together to create a structure of violence that subjugates women's existence and uses religious norms to justify such actions.

However, women often resist such repressive structure by exercising their agency. They use their sexuality to control men and seek solace outside their marriage. Mahamaya attempts to tease the priest while he is chanting verses from the *Veda*, positioning herself in front of him. A flickering lamp is the only light in the room. As the priest continues his chanting, she gently removes her shawl to ignite a passion for derailing his concentration. She gradually uncovers the left side of her upper body, and the priest gets distracted. A burning desire for Mahamaya disrupts his chanting, and he starts to make lapses, pauses, and even discontinues his chanting. He starts fumbling when Mahamaya reveals her bare leg.

When the priest stops chanting for several seconds, Mahamaya gazes at him with a playful look that ultimately shakes him. Whenever he looks at her, his chanting becomes erratic. In her final move, Mahamaya completely uncovers her upper body, and the priest is beyond his limit. He starts fumbling, recites one line twice, and even stops his recitation. He is in a vortex of burning desire. This particular moment in *Antarmahal* depicts the presence of genotext in a poetic vignette. Furthermore, encounters between Jashomati and Brajo reflect the ingenious presence of genotext. Their encounters are often marked by a stolen gaze, a mix of light and darkness, background music, sudden disruptions, hesitations, desire, a sense of danger, tensions, and an unarticulated attraction. Such depictions signal a forbidden relationship and prepare the audience for the upcoming danger.

Interpretation

The text of *Antarmahal* represents a structure of cultural violence (Galtung, 1990) against women sustained through patriarchy and Hindu religious practices. Cultural violence against women manifests through a repressive conjugal structure that relentlessly subjugates them through patriarchal norms and religious values. Both Mahamaya and Jashomati are trapped in an oppressive relationship in which their lives depend on the mercy of their husband. Jashomati's simple desires—going to a fair and having clay dolls—are never fulfilled because Bhubaneswar, her husband, does not care about her wishes. She is unable to restrain her husband when he forces himself on her. She commits suicide because her sense of vulnerability and lack of recourse leave her with no choice but death. The interpretative framework (Butler, 2009) of Hindu patriarchy—the cultural repertoire that shapes and frames affective responses—feels no moral outrage for Jashomati's death. Such a framework renders women as nonbeings whose experiences are of no consequence. Similarly, Hindu priests invoke religious rituals to normalize violence against women, as when the priest advises Bhubaneswar to have intercourse while listening to religious chants. This completely disregards any sense of respect for women and allows patriarchal subjugation.

However, violence cannot completely suppress women's voices; instead, it opens up new possibilities for resistance. The text of *Antarmahal* portrays resistance by revealing women's sexual agency and desire. The playful presence of Mahamaya represents how women's bodies are the sites of patriarchal violence as well as points of transgression. Mahamaya flaunts her body in front of the priest to unsettle the psychological tension of patriarchal control and male fantasy. Ghosh (2005) depicts Mahamaya in such sensuality to project women's agency that questions patriarchal violence and reveals the masks of religious hypocrisy. The text of *Antarmahal* deftly articulates women's desires in

Jashomati's romantic interest in Brajo. *Antarmahal* creates a stunning contrast between Jashomati's encounters with Bhubaneswar and her sudden meetings with Brajo. The encounters with Bhubaneswar are marred by violence, whereas the meetings with Brajo are marked by sexual tensions. Such portrayal of women's agency and desire indicates the difficulty of articulating women's subjectivity in patriarchal social contexts.

Description (Water)

Phenotext

Deepa Mehta's film *Water* delineates the plight of widows in colonial India, especially in Hindu society. The film starts with three verses from the *Manu*, the sacred Hindu religious text that prescribes a rigorous life for widows, signaling to the audience the probable theme of the movie. The narrative revolves mainly around five characters: Chuyia, a 7-year-old child widow; Kalyani, a young widow; Shakuntala, a middle-aged widow; Madhumati, the manager of an ashram; and Narayan, a young nationalist man who loves Kalyani.

The film presents Chuyia's wish to go back to her home. Her father had married her to an elderly person when she was 6 or 7 years old. When her husband died, her father sent her to an ashram, a Hindu monastery in Baranas. A child, Chuyia does not understand the religious niceties related to widowhood— such as shaving the head, wearing only white saris (unlike married women who wear colorful saris because they have husbands who make their lives colorful), eating only vegetables without onions or any spices, financial hardship like begging, and, ultimately, rendering themselves as undesirable. Chuyia regularly expresses her desire to go back home.

On her first day at the ashram, Chuyia meets Kalyani, a young widow in her small room, which has a balcony. Unlike other widows, who keep their hair short, Kalyani wears her hair long. She has a puppy as her companion. Because Chuyia is eager to go back home, Kalyani tells her to chant the name of God 108 times a day, and God will listen to her prayers. Shakuntala, a middle-aged widow, loves Chuyia like a daughter and takes care of her, sheltering her from the rage of Madhumati, the ashram manager who controls the in-house activities. Madhumati sends young widows like Kalyani out as prostitutes to generate funds for the ashram. He even prostitutes Chuyia to a rich patron. Madhumati is connected to Gulabi, a pimp and hermaphrodite who takes Kalyani to the houses of wealthy patrons.

The film also portrays a romantic relationship between Kalyani and Narayan, an educated nationalist from a wealthy family. He is a liberal-minded young man who questions the hypocrisy of society regarding widows. He has fallen in love with Kalyani and wants to marry her, but his parents object. He is determined and takes the initiative to propose to her. Kalyani declines his proposal when she learns about his father, and she eventually commits suicide. Kalyani's reluctance to marry Narayan implies that his father had an illicit relationship with her. In a nutshell, the film presents the plight of Hindu widows' lives in a subtle way.

Genotext

The cinematic construction of emotional excess in *Water* makes the signification process dynamic as it flaunts the presence of genotext in teasing sensibilities. Three themes emerged from the textual analysis: women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability. The encounter between Kalyani and Narayan in front of her balcony projects the musicality of text. Kalyani and Chuyia are working together to squeeze water from a dress. The water drains from the balcony onto the street and lands on Narayan. The audience can easily feel Kalyani's unspoken desire. It is not enunciated in the text, but the musicality of the scene makes it obvious. The sudden encounter between Kalyani and Narayan leads to a conversation, and the background music creates an aura of longing as the two young people feel a spark of love. The melodious song presents the ecstasy of love with an artistic nicety, presenting their love in a melodramatic way.

In traditional Hindu society, widows are pushed to the margins, where their lives depend entirely on the mercy of the patriarchal system. They live in ashrams with no financial recourse, and they are considered half-dead. Chuyia's arrival at the ashram reveals how patriarchy systematically renders women powerless. Chuyia is crying when she enters the ashram. Madhumati draws her close and explains that half of the widows' existence dies with the death of their husbands, and therefore, they need to live a life devoid of any grace. Madhumati strongly suggests that Chuyia embrace the ashram as her new home. Chuyia tells Madhumati that since she is half-alive, she can feel pain and immediately bites Madhumati's feet. Then she runs away, and other widows run after her to restrain her.

The gender hierarchy in Hindu society exacerbates the vulnerability of women, especially widows. Their vulnerability stems from social norms that consider widows as socially undesirable and a threat to joy and ecstasy of other lives. The text delineates this poignant reality in contrasting images. When Shakuntala goes to the river to fetch water, there is a ritualistic ceremony of marriage. The bride and others are in colorful attire. The music adds a soothing harmony. In contrast, Shakuntala drapes herself in a white sari that has no color. The priest conducting the ritual is enraged to see a widow near the ceremony. His stern voice orders Shakuntala to keep away from the ceremony: "Watch it. Do not let your shadow touch the bride" (Mehta, 2005). In short, the text explores the pain of widows with great skill. The cinematic projection of the plight of a widow's life forces the audience to contemplate the vulnerability of widows in Hindu society.

Reduction

Phenotext

Water depicts the cruel practices of Hindu society related to the sanctions of widows—sanctions that ensure that the lives of widows lack color, passion, exuberance, happiness, and sociality. The widows in the movie have internalized such religious doctrines. Most of them are illiterate, and religion is their only guiding force. The striking element of the text is that widows live within strict religious sanctions and render themselves as undesirable. Their heads are bald, their attire colorless, and their skin wrinkled. They have no jewelry, ornaments, or makeup to bring a softening look to their faces. Therefore, the Hindu widows in the ashram lack any feminine grace. Their dilapidated house echoes their dreary condition. Like their white saris, they have no color in their daily lives. Religious fasting is part of their lives; they are given only small portions of food. They represent a direct contrast to a married woman. Moreover, widows are economically vulnerable. Without begging, they do not have access to any income and live in a condition of penury.

The text of *Water* delineates the constant tension between social control and women's desire and agency. Women's agency and desire manifest in *Water* through the portrayal of Kalyani and Shakuntala. Kalyani transgresses the boundary of social control and falls in love with Narayan. Her desire for a regular life with him reflects how social control often fails to restrain our emotions and forbidden desires. When Madhumati learns that Kalyani plans to marry Narayan, she locks Kalyani in her room. Shakuntala goes against the will of the other widows to help Kalyani plan to marry Narayan. Shakuntala also carries the injured Chuyia to the train station to give her to Gandhi, the national leader in Indian independence, to rescue this child widow from future violence caused by the social conditions that forced her to live within the ashram.

Genotext

The themes of textual analysis—women's desire, patriarchy and power relations, and vulnerability—are reduced to a structure–agency relationship in the reduction stage. The structure of the Hindu patriarchy takes away any joy from the lives of widows. The rituals that mark widowhood—breaking of bangles, wearing borderless white saris, the taking away of ornaments, and shaving the head—remove all grace from a widow's life and relegate her to the existence of a nonbeing. Such practices create a sense of loss in the psyche of the widows that keeps coming back and generates melancholia about their past lived experiences. Like Chuyia, many widows in the ashram lost their husbands when they were 6 or 7 years old. Their melancholic souls keep roaming around the emotional excess that marked their marriage ceremonies—exuberance, celebration, ecstasy, festivity, musicality, food, aroma, dress, and color—creating a sensual uproar for the widows, and, eventually, cultivating a sense of longing for the past. This melancholic urge for the past, as a symptomatic presence of the genotext, discharges through their desire for a graceful life that disrupts the flow of cinematic narratives and drives our attention to such melancholic moments. The sparkle of life touches the souls of the widows in the ashram only when they celebrate Jonmastomi, a religious festival.

Widows often exercise their agency by circumventing the religious sanction against them. They use the Hindu religious festival of Jonmastomi to take back the joy of their lives that had been shackled by religious restrictions. A celebration of Jonmastomi signals disruption, musicality, and emotional excess in the lives of widows and is the only colorful event in the ashram. Chuyia as the center of the festival is dressed like the God *Krishna*, and her face is colorfully painted. She looks cute and full of life. The celebration—performance of ritual, music, laughter, and dance—brings bliss to that sad place. The widows in the ashram chase each other and shower everyone with colored powder. Such festivity brings life back into the ashram. The Jonmastomi celebration is filled with such effervescence that it sprinkles joy, delight, and cheerfulness in the lives of the widows in the ashram.

Interpretation

The text of *Water* reveals how the synergy of religion and patriarchy controls women's bodies by imposing stern sanctions on widows. Such practices reflect cultural violence that renders women helpless. Religion demands that widows refrain from sexual urges, and to ensure such restraint, religion imposes financial hardship on them. Hindu widows have no social or financial capital to survive and so have to beg

for their livelihood. Wealthy patrons take advantage of the dreary conditions of widows and provide financial support in exchange for sexual favors. These patrons have no moral qualms about assaulting 6- or 7-year-old females. Such patriarchal practices illuminate the duplicity in social practices. Religion and patriarchy are in collusion to control women's bodies.

However, social control often creates space for resistance that eventually unsettles dominant practices. Widows like Chuyia, Kalyani, and Shakuntala question the beliefs and practices related to widowhood. For example, Chuyia is a rebel from the beginning, and her innocence and vulnerability create a space where audiences can witness the cruelty in religious practices. Kalyani transgresses social expectations by acting on her desire to establish a romantic relationship with Narayan. Her romantic relationship with him challenges the social construct that renders widows as half-dead and illuminates the presence of women's desire. Shakuntala feels a tension between moral conscience and faith in religion; however, she overcomes the burden of faith in realizing women's place in the world. She goes against the norms by supporting both Kalyani and Chuyia to have better lives in the future. Such subversive actions signal a shift in social practices related to Hindu widows.

Discussion

The textual analysis reveals how the synergy of patriarchy and religion reinforces cultural violence against women by legitimizing the repressive structure of conjugality and widowhood. The Hindu patriarchy creates unequal power relations that marginalize women's lived experiences and exacerbate the vulnerability of women. More important, the textual analysis highlights women's vulnerability because religion and patriarchy are in cahoots to create cultural violence against women. Though Gultang's conceptualization of cultural violence assists the understanding of the cultural norms and social processes of violence, it falls short in articulating resistance and agency that challenge violence. Salazar and Casto (2008) argued that women need to move from being the victims of cultural violence to being survivors in order to resist sexist discourse. Such interrogation of cultural violence ushers in a new way to understand the interconnection of power, resistance, and gender equality.

Though Salazar and Casto (2008) provide a new starting point to understand resistance in the context of cultural violence, scholars need to interrogate how mediated practices rearticulate gender relations and dominance. Media play a crucial role in reimaging gender identity and power relations by unsettling the dominant meaning-making process. *Antarmahal* and *Water* highlight women's agency and resistance that question and challenge patriarchal deceits and religious dogma. By depicting agency and resistance of women, *Antarmahal* and *Water* reimagine gender roles and contest the typical representation of women as Sita and Savitri in popular Bollywood movies. Such mediated representation of women's agency reveals how feminist consciousness promotes gender equality in celluloid.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to locate gender politics in women-centered films in India. It employs Kristeva's semanalysis to understand how the interplay of genotext and phenotext reveals women's desire and sexual agency. Semanalysis provides a vantage point from which to examine social transgressions by

women that question dominant practices of both religion and patriarchy. Furthermore, this study highlights how the synergy of patriarchy and religion perpetuates cultural violence against women. A textual analysis of *Antarmahal* and *Water* illuminates the duplicity of religion and patriarchy and highlights how women's bodies are the sites of social control and points of resistance. However, textual analysis limits the generalizability of the findings to a larger sample of women-centric films in India. Future research needs to investigate how Bollywood cinema embraces the changing roles of women in society and incorporates women's sexual agency.

This study contributed to gender studies, feminist media scholarship, and Asian cinema studies by highlighting how the portrayal of women's desire and sexual agency challenges the synergy of patriarchy and religion that perpetuates cultural violence against women. Furthermore, this study reveals the significance of critical cultural commentary in cinema that creates spaces for social transgression to question patriarchal norms, values, and social practices. Indian cinema influences cultural imagery about gender roles in society. This study highlights how the texts of *Antarmahal* and *Water* challenge the stereotypical representation of women and renegotiates social expectations on gender relations in society. The research reveals how critical and artistic representation of women's lives can unmask dogmatic social practices and open up new avenues for mediated representation of women.

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