



# Representation of Gender Violence in the Hindi Movie *Darlings*

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**Abstract:** The Hindi film *Darlings* intricately explores the issue of domestic abuse, portraying the cyclical nature of gender violence, the psychological toll on victims, and the societal structures that perpetuate such violence. The film presents a nuanced depiction of a woman's agency in resisting abuse, while simultaneously exploring the complexities of moral ambiguity in the face of trauma. Although the movie has been praised for shedding light on the issue of gender violence, it has also received criticism for its portrayal of retribution as a solution. This paper delves into the movie's representation of gender violence, using it as a lens to critically examine the multifaceted nature of domestic abuse and the importance of offering real support and alternatives for victims. Through instances from the film, the paper discusses the impacts of gender violence and the potential implications for both the victims and the wider community.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Gender Violence, Women's Agency, Domestic Abuse, Psychological impact.

Gender violence, which encompasses various forms of violence, such as physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse, continues to be a pervasive and serious issue globally. In the context of domestic abuse, such violence is not only a personal struggle but is deeply rooted in societal and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. *Darlings*, a Hindi-language film released in 2022, presents a striking narrative of domestic abuse and its consequences. The film revolves around Badru, a young woman trapped in an abusive relationship with her alcoholic husband, Hamza. Throughout the film, the psychological, physical, and emotional aspects of domestic violence are explored, highlighting the complex realities faced by victims. While *Darlings* presents a story of agency and resistance, it also raises questions about the morality of retribution, further complicating the discussion surrounding gender violence.

This paper will examine *Darlings* through the lens of gender violence, focusing on how the film portrays the impact of domestic abuse, the emotional and psychological indictment on the victim, the societal factors that contribute to such violence, and the responses of both the victim and the community. By discussing key moments in the film and relating them to the broader issues of gender violence, the paper will explore how the film reflects the complexities of this societal problem in the light of the feminist theories of gender and subjectivity.

While analyzing the feminist theorist Judith Butler, it can be seen that, gender is a discursive construct that means it is a deliberate construction and not a natural thing (Salih 51). Moving away from Freud's formulation of biology-is-destiny, Butler argues that gender is culturally constructed. Social scientists refer to "gender as a "factor" or a "dimension" of an analysis". But Butler views that gender is "a mark" of biological,

linguistic, and/or cultural difference”. So gender is also identified as a signification of a sexually differentiated body (Butler, *Gender* 12-13).

But the notion of ‘Sex’ denotes language with which we speak and learn our desires. And ‘gender’ denotes the cultural practices through which these desires are played out. Butler elaborates this idea in her *Gender Trouble, Feminism, and the Subversion of Identity* (1990):

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (62)

Apart from the diversity in the perspectives of these theoreticians and the way they approached the concept of gender and its representation, these scholars concede that gender is a culturally attributed one. Gayle Rubin argues that every society has a sex/gender system, i.e., “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (159). Rubin further explains that this domain of social life which Rubin calls as sex/gender system can also be named as “mode of reproduction” and “patriarchy” which forms the place of oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and also represents certain aspects of human personality within individuals (ibid). Therefore, it can be seen that, both sex and gender are related at times and make people contented through this established system of patriarchy.

*Darlings* does not shy away from depicting the harsh realities of domestic violence. The film presents physical abuse in the form of Hamza’s frequent beatings of Badru, including a shocking scene where he violently strikes her after a drunken argument. The visceral portrayal of these moments gives viewers an unfiltered look at the pain and suffering caused by physical violence. However, the film also addresses the emotional and psychological aspects of abuse, particularly the manipulation and gaslighting that often accompany violent relationships. Badru is a sufferer in the institution of marriage.

The institution of marriage has been criticized by feminists since ancient times to the present day under the assumption that it facilitates women’s oppression. Feminists disapprove the received notions of marriage on many grounds. “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” says Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1949). She views that marriage is considered as the standard to judge and define the condition of the celibate woman “whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution” (445). Generally, it is a union of two independent persons with mutual consent. The parts played by man and woman in the institution of marriage are different. Women use their reproductive capacity voluntarily and their economic independence disturbs the institution of marriage. But women do not get an equal dignity with her husband in that union. Simone de Beauvoir further observes, “A man is socially an independent and complete individual; he is regarded first of all as a producer whose existence is justified by the work he does for the group: we have seen why it is that the reproductive and domestic role to which woman is confined has not guaranteed her an equal dignity” (446).

Feminist thinkers like Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer and Adrienne Rich etc. problematize heterosexuality and the traditional roles of women as dutiful wives and reproductive machines. According to them the oppression of women is the most fundamental form of oppression. The feminists declared in 1969 that marriage and the family must be eliminated. Kate Millet in *The Sexual Politics* (1969) views that women will get liberation only when gender discrimination is eliminated. She writes about the general legal assumption of marriage as “an exchange of the female’s domestic service and (sexual) consortium in return for financial support” (35).

For instance, when Hamza apologizes after each violent incident, promising to change, Badru, like many real-life victims, finds herself trapped in a cycle of hope and despair. This cycle of abuse—where periods of violence are interspersed with apologies and promises of reform—traps victims in toxic relationships, making it difficult for them to leave. The film captures this perfectly through Badru's internal conflict, where she vacillates between love, guilt, fear, and hope, making her struggle relatable to anyone who has experienced or witnessed abuse.

The film delves into the psychological toll of abuse on Badru. The constant fear and emotional manipulation take a significant toll on her mental health, leading her to question her worth and her ability to escape the relationship. *Darlings* highlights how the psychological scars of abuse—such as anxiety, self-doubt, and PTSD—can linger long after the physical scars have healed.

In one scene, Badru's sense of self-worth is shattered when Hamza mocks her appearance and belittles her dreams, reflecting the emotional abuse that often accompanies domestic violence. This pattern is a clear representation of how psychological violence operates in abusive relationships, often rendering victims isolated and dependent on their abusers.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), a seminal feminist text in twentieth century feminism, elucidates the very idea that a woman is the absolute other and that femininity is constructed. Drawing upon different areas like existential phenomenology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and Marxist analysis of history, Beauvoir opines that woman is considered as a dependent being and has no autonomous existence. Through her celebrated manifesto 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', Beauvoir means that there is no pre-established female nature or essence. While adopting the notion of existentialism as "existence precedes essence", she argues that gender identity is experienced through various roles assigned by society since the birth of each individual. Therefore, man is raised to the position of a universal subject, whereas woman is positioned as the other. Society is framed in accordance with this to perpetuate patriarchal ideology. In her view, the continuation of patriarchy is perpetuated by both men and women (Tidd 50-51). Here, it is important to mention what actually the term 'patriarchal' refers to; it is the

Power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal discourse the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male. (Weedon 2)

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir adopted Hegel's hypotheses of the master-slave dialectic to equate the relationship between men and women in patriarchal society. She also refutes the idea that there is a permanent gender identity. Her concern was mainly about the questions of power and behavior in gender relations (Tidd 19-53). In the film *Darlings*, Hamza and Badru's relationship is similar to that of a master-slave relationship.

A major concern of feminism is to understand this gendered identity of woman. Similarly, it also analyzes women's lives and the patriarchal system in which these lives are framed.

The film also touches on the cyclical nature of abuse, where abusers often alternate between moments of kindness and aggression, making it difficult for the victim to discern whether the relationship will ever improve. In *Darlings*, the viewers see Badru struggling to break free from this cycle, unable to envision a life without her abuser. This illustrates the complex nature of abusive relationships and the factors that trap victims within them.

Despite the bleakness of her situation, Badru finds ways to resist the abuse. The film shifts its focus to her growing sense of agency, as she eventually takes matters into her own hands. In an intense moment toward the end of the film, Badru decides to take revenge on her abusive husband, trapping him in a situation where he experiences the helplessness and fear he once subjected her to. While her decision is morally ambiguous, it represents the complex emotions and the sense of powerlessness that can arise after prolonged exposure to abuse.

Badru's actions raise important ethical questions about justice and the consequences of retaliatory violence. The film offers no easy answers, instead presenting a morally gray scenario where the line between victim and perpetrator becomes blurred. This complexity reflects the psychological turmoil victims of domestic abuse often face—struggling to reconcile their desire for justice with the fear and trauma inflicted upon them.

One instance that stands out is the portrayal of Badru's mother, who, recognizing her daughter's suffering, though she has internalized these gendered norms and insists that Badru should "not tolerate" the abuse for the sake of her marriage. This reflects how a woman supports other woman.

Furthermore, *Darlings* portrays the limited resources available to victims, including inadequate legal support, lack of awareness about domestic abuse, and the absence of safe spaces for women to seek help. This commentary resonates with real-world situations in many parts of the world, where victims of domestic violence struggle to find the necessary support to leave abusive relationships.

While *Darlings* offers a compelling and realistic portrayal of gender violence, it has been criticized for its focus on retribution as a form of justice. Some argue that the film may inadvertently suggest that violence is an appropriate response to abuse, potentially normalizing violent retaliation instead of highlighting healthier coping mechanisms. By centering the narrative around Badru's revenge, the film raises the moral ambiguity of seeking justice through violence, rather than promoting alternative forms of resolution, such as legal recourse or therapy.

Moreover, the film's conclusion, while empowering for the protagonist, leaves viewers with unresolved ethical dilemmas. By choosing to take matters into her own hands, Badru may have empowered herself, but the potential consequences of her actions are left unexplored, making it unclear whether her decision leads to genuine liberation or further entrapment in a cycle of violence. The Hindi film *Darlings* puts forward an idea of women's liberation at the climax, which is not a good idea that is needed for the upliftment of women but rather Women should use the available legal mechanisms to get out of various issues that occur in marriage, such as domestic violence and abuse.

Analyzing Simone De Beauvoir, *Moi Writes* that a woman means the one who lives within her embodied situation in the world and also makes something from the world that takes advantage of her. This process of making and being made is open-ended and ends only in death (Moi 72).

*Darlings* is a thought-provoking film that effectively addresses the complex issue of gender violence, particularly in the context of domestic abuse. Through its realistic portrayal of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse, the film captures the many facets of an abusive relationship, including the cycle of abuse, the impact on mental health, and the societal factors that allow such violence to persist. While the film explores themes of resistance and empowerment, it also raises important ethical questions about the use of violence as a form of retribution.

The film serves as an important conversation starter about gender violence, its societal implications, and the support systems that are essential for victims. However, it is essential to critically engage with the film's depiction of retribution and to consider the broader societal and systemic changes necessary to address gender violence. Ultimately, *Darlings* invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of abuse, the need for supportive interventions, and the challenges of navigating trauma and resistance in an unequal world.

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