

REDEFINING THE IDEAL: PATRIARCHY AND THE WORKING-CLASS HINDU FEMININITY IN KIRAN RAO'S LAAPATAA LADIES

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Abstract

Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* (2024) presents an intimate and authentic portrayal of womanhood. The characters' portray an agrarian lifestyle along with working-class rural landscapes of North India during the early 2000s.

Based on a story about two veiled brides accidentally getting swapped in a train, this film follows the lives of Phool Kumari and Jaya- who is traveling under the alias Pushpa Rani. The story unfolds as they navigate the expectations placed upon a rural Hindu wife.

This research paper argues that the film should not be viewed as a generic narrative of "tradition versus modernity," but rather as a profound exploration of the working-class Hindu woman. The ideals of these women are shaped amidst the realities of hard labor, financial hardship, dowry transactions, and restrictions on their mobility.

Drawing upon feminist cultural theories (Butler, Mulvey, Hall) and, specifically, studies concerning Hindu women such as the ideal of the pativrata (devoted wife), the norms of Stridharma, and the contrasting concept of Shakti (female power) this analysis demonstrates how the film both portrays and subverts the conventional image of the ideal Hindu woman.

Using analytical tables, we examine five distinct female archetypes (a devoted daughter-in-law, an educated agricultural reformer, a self-reliant shopkeeper, a self-identifying homemaker, and a matriarch who upholds tradition). This study shows how *Laapataa Ladies* transforms the attributes of women- shifting them from a state of quietly erasing or forgetting themselves- into a capacity defined by competence, hard work, and knowledge. This paper posits that the film's most significant and revolutionary move is to accord respect to the everyday labor and practical knowledge of working-class women- such as their expertise regarding seeds, soil, cooking, and their trades. The film presents this as the true foundation of the ideal Hindu woman in contemporary times. In doing so, *Laapataa Ladies* serves as a cultural work that reflects the evolving norms surrounding women, while also validating the indomitable spirit and strength of the rural working woman.

Keywords: working class femininity, Hindu womanhood, pativrata, shakti, Stridharma, gender norms, Indian cinema, rural India, female agency, Laapataa Ladies

1. Introduction

Womanhood is not just a biological fact but a socio-cultural construct that varies according to history, region, caste, and class (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1997). In the Indian context, the question of what constitutes an "ideal woman" has been intertwined with religiously sanctioned ideals- that of a devoted wife, domestic care, and self-restraint. These ideals reinforce their hold through repeated narratives in religious texts, customs, family practices, and increasingly popular media (Leslie, 1989; Wadley, 1977). Cinema being a very powerful medium does not just reflect these ideals; rather, it dramatizes, disseminates, challenges, and even transforms them (Mankekar, 1999; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Kiran Rao's film *Laapataa Ladies* (2024) examine how ideals of womanhood are negotiated among India's rural working class. Set in the year 2001 against the backdrop of "Nirmal Pradesh"- a fictional

state in North India, the film is based on an incident which appears ordinary at first. Amidst the heavy rush of a night train two newlywed brides, concealed beneath the tradition of heavy veils, get swapped as the grooms mistakenly take the wrong woman along with them. The story evolves from this point. Phool Kumari is a shy and deeply devoted bride who gets left behind and stranded at a remote railway station. Jaya, on the other hand, is an educated young woman traveling under the name "Pushpa Rani"; in reality, she is fleeing a marriage forced upon her due to dowry demands. These two women present starkly contrasting perspectives on the role of a rural Hindu wife. Yet most importantly both are women from ordinary, hardworking backgrounds, and are part of an agrarian economy where marriage, dowry, and domestic labor define a woman's prospects and the horizons of her possibilities.

This paper examines *Laapataa Ladies* by focusing on the working-class Hindu woman. While most reviews of the film remain confined to an abstract binary of "submissive" versus "empowered" womanhood, I argue that the film's deeper achievement lies in grounding feminine virtue within the material conditions and daily labor of rural working-class life. These activities include cultivating crops, running roadside stalls, preparing food, managing limited household resources, and the practical knowledge that sustains a farming family. The film simultaneously presents the traditional, inherited religious ideal of the Pativrata wife whose duty lies in total devotion to her husband. This is gradually displaced by the definition of the new ideal rooted in shakti (power), a Hindu concept that views woman as an active, generative force.

First, how does *Laapataa Ladies* construct and differentiate the ideals of womanhood for women whose lives are defined by labor and economic precarity rather than elite leisure?

Secondly, to what extent do these portrayals reiterate or modify the normative Hindu ideal of a devoted and self-effacing wife?

By considering class alongside gender, and Hindu cultural and religious beliefs alongside general feminist theory, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the film's portrayal of the rural woman is neither a nostalgic celebration of tradition nor a simplistic modern critique. Instead, it is an effort to carefully reground feminine worth in competence, knowledge, mutual cooperation, and labor.

2. Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on two complementary bodies of thought, first, feminist cultural theory, which explains how gender is performed and represented in the media; and second, academic studies of Hindu beliefs and constructs of womanhood, it provides a culturally specific vocabulary such as Pativrata, Stridharma, and Shakti that is essential for accurately interpreting the ideals of womanhood present in the film. Both these perspectives maintain a consistent emphasis on class.

2.1 Gender as Performance and Representation

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity posits that gender is not an innate essence or natural quality, but rather a sedimented effect of repeatedly enacted and socially scripted behaviors. This theoretical framework is essential for a deep understanding of characters like Phool. Initially, Phool's demeanor- downcast eyes, a face veiled by a ghoonghat, and respectful silence appears to be an almost ritualistic performance of wifely modesty. Subsequently, however, her self-assertion registers as a gradual rescripting of that very performance. Laura Mulvey's (1975) analysis of the 'male gaze'- wherein classical cinema positions women as passive objects of the male view, provides a critical benchmark against which *Laapataa Ladies* can be evaluated: the film explicitly avoids presenting women through an eroticizing gaze, portraying them instead as individuals who engage in labor and exercise agency. Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation completes this theoretical triangle, viewing cultural texts as media where meaning is encoded by producers and decoded by audiences- often in ways that run counter to the producers' original intent. From this perspective, the film is not merely a transparent mirror of rural life but an active intervention in the cultural construction of the 'ideal woman'.

2.2 Hindu Conceptions of Womanhood: Pativrata, Stridharma, and Shakti

To understand the specific Hindu dimensions of the ideals of womanhood portrayed in the film, this analysis draws upon a study of the normative codes that guide women's lives. The classical ideal of the

pativrata- literally, a woman whose vow (vrata) is centered on her husband (pati), prescribes devotion, chastity, service, and the subordination of personal desires to the wellbeing of the husband and the marital household (Leslie, 1989).

This is codified within the ideal of Stridharma (the code of duties prescribed for women). Julia Leslie (1989) has analyzed this in her study of the eighteenth-century manual Stridharma-paddhati, which instructs the orthodox wife in the nuances of obedience and self-denial. Mythic exemplars of this ideal such as Sita and Savitri serve as enduring cultural templates against which real life women are measured (Kishwar, 1997).

However, the most significant point is that an extremely powerful countercurrent also exists within Hindu thought. Susan Wadley (1977) demonstrates that the Hindu woman is envisioned simultaneously as pativrata (devoted, controlled, and auspicious) and as Shakti- that active and energetic force of the universe which manifests in the form of the Goddess. In this context, womanhood is not merely a passive virtue but a generative force. The internal tension between the woman as a self-effacing servant and the woman as a potent agent is the central theme that Laapataa Ladies dramatizes, ultimately resolving it in favor of empowerment.

2.3 Caste, Class, and the Limits of a Universal "Hindu Woman"

The normative ideals described above were historically constructed and regulated within the system that Uma Chakravarti (1993) terms "Brahmanical patriarchy"- a system in which the control over women's sexuality and labor is deeply intertwined with the maintenance of caste purity and property. However, the lived experience of these ideals varies significantly based on class. As Prem Chowdhry (1994) demonstrates in her study of rural North India, working-class and laboring women have never been able to fully adopt the life of leisured seclusion envisioned by the elite ideal of the chaste, devoted wife. Their labor in fields, homes, and markets is economically indispensable, even as patriarchal ideology persistently demands their modesty and subordination.

Dalit and working-class feminist academic discourse (Rege, 1998) further emphasizes that the image of the "ideal Hindu woman" is stratified along caste and class lines, and that the standpoint of a working-class woman cannot be subsumed within the standpoint of an upper caste (Savarna) wife.

This class sensitive lens is absolutely essential for the present analysis. Phool, Jaya, Manju Mai, and the women of Deepak's family are not bourgeois or upper-middle class heroines; they are hardworking women rooted in the agrarian sector, whose ideals of womanhood are negotiated amidst conditions of scarcity, labor, and dependency. The significance of this film lies in the fact that it reimagines the 'ideal woman' from within this very working-class horizon.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods like textual and thematic analysis, combined with a comparative film studies approach. Laapataa Ladies serves as the primary text, subjected to a close reading across three levels:

- (1) Character analysis, which outlines the construction and transformation of each major female character.
- (2) Cinematic technique analysis, focusing on framing, mise-en-scène, costumes (particularly the veil), and dialogue decoding gendered meaning. and
- (3) Sociocultural context analysis, which examines onscreen representations of the characters and the narrative within the context of the religion and economic structures of rural Hindu society.

This film has been selected due to its thematic focus on rural, working-class women and as it explicitly engages with the institutions such as marriage, dowry, the veil system, and the joint family dynamic that govern and determine women's conduct in that setting. For the comparative study, other films were selected based on two criteria:

1. Thematic relevance, Films that prominently highlight the tension between prescribed gender roles and women's aspirations, particularly within working class Hindu women within the Rural settings.

2. Representational depth, Films that present multidimensional female protagonists whose labor, knowledge, or resistance reconfigures or redefines the ideal of womanhood.

Based on this, the comparative corpus includes films such as *Water* (2005), *Mirch Masala* (1987), *Astitva* (2000), *Lajja* (2001), *Dor* (2006), and *Parched* (2015). The objective is not to conduct an exhaustive survey, but rather to highlight a shared cultural pattern that talks about the negotiation of the ideals within the discourse of Hindu womanhood within the limited economic means. To enhance analytical clarity and make the films' archetypal structure easily legible, the research findings have been organized into four tables:

1. Classification of feminine archetypes (Table 1)
2. Depiction of character transformation arcs (Table 2)
3. Analysis of cinematic techniques (Table 3)
4. Comparative matrix of the films (Table 4)

4. The Rural and Working World of 'Laapataa Ladies'

Before discussing the individual characters, it is essential to understand the film's setting and the world it inhabits. This is because the ideals regarding women portrayed in the film cannot be viewed in isolation from the local economic conditions and customs.

The story of 'Laapataa Ladies' is set in the year 2001. It was a time when literacy campaigns, women's self-help groups, and new aspirations were gradually taking root in rural India. The characters hail from families of small farmers and small-scale traders. For these families, a wedding is not merely an emotional occasion but also a significant financial transaction.

Although the giving and taking of dowry is illegal, it is still common to see the bride's family providing goods and cash to the groom's family at weddings. In fact, this lies at the root of the central injustice depicted in the film. The reason Jaya ran away was also one such marriage, where she was valued solely as a 'dowry bringer'.

Three features of this world bear directly on the construction of feminine ideals:

1. The ghoonghat as a means of obscuring identity: The accidental swapping of brides becomes possible only because the ghoonghat completely conceals the women's identities (their faces remain unseen). She becomes merely an object or a pawn handed over from one family to another- someone easily replaceable. Thus, in the film, the ghoonghat (veil) serves not only to advance the narrative but also acts as a profound symbol of the working-class wife's anonymity and the suppression of her own identity and existence.
2. Work (labor) as a vital part of women's lives, in stark contrast to the mindset of the upper strata- where a wife who remains within the confines of the home and performs no manual labor is considered the ideal woman. In the film's setting the women are confined to work like cooking, farming, fetching water, and engaging in various small scale economic activities. In reality, their importance to the family is defined by this very labor even though societal norms dictate that their true virtue lies merely in submissiveness and obedience.
3. Viewing venturing out alone as an act of rule breaking (or rebellion), For a woman, simply visiting public spaces such as railway platforms, markets, or police stations on her own is considered a significant step that invites scrutiny. The story of the "missing" women in the film is, in essence, the story of women embarking on a journey unlike any they are accustomed to. And this act of stepping out of the home ultimately becomes a means for self-discovery.

5. Archetypes of Working-Class Hindu Women

The ensemble of characters in the film can be viewed as a carefully considered typology of the possibilities available to rural working-class women. Before discussing each character in detail, a summary of these archetypes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Character Archetypes

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Character Name	Societal Ideal	Background and Work	Personality Traits	Cultural Symbolism	Thematic Stance
Phool Kumari	Devoted Daughter in law (Daughter-in-law of the House / Virtuous Wife)	A newlywed bride in a small farming family; unpaid work in the home and on the farm.	Cultured, dutiful, resourceful, and skilled in cooking and farming.	Pativrata; devotion like Sita	Initially, she adheres to the rules; later, she redefines her commitment as a partnership based on self-respect.
Jaya, (Pushpa Rani)	Educated agricultural reformer (one who brings about improvements in farming)	A female student aspiring to study agriculture; hailing from an ordinary family, she is running away from a marriage involving a dowry.	Sensible, strategic, principled, and forward-thinking.	Power manifested through knowledge (Shakti)	She openly opposes the status quo; she breaks off the dowry and the marriage deal.
Manju Maai	Self-reliant, working woman	Independent owner of a tea and snack stall at the railway station.	Practical, outspoken (straight-talking), independent, and caring.	Shakti as Economic Self-reliance	She remains beyond her husband's control; she sets an example of women's freedom.
Deepak's sister-in-law	An awakened (self-aware) housewife	Married woman in a joint farming family; unpaid domestic work.	Quiet by nature, creative (in cooking or art), and someone who suppresses her desires.	An obedient daughter-in-law who is rediscovering her own identity.	Outwardly, she adheres to the rules; but later, she recognizes her own hidden potential (inner voice).
Phool's Mother-in-law (The Matriarch)	Guardian of traditions	The eldest (elderly) woman of the house; the woman who manages the household.	A woman who commands authority in the household and upholds customs and traditions.	Elderly, devoted wife who has now become an enforcer of rules.	She upholds the rules yet possesses the capacity to show empathy and change herself.

5.1 Phool Kumari: A Fresh Look at the Ideal of the Pativrata

At the beginning of the film, Phool is portrayed as a living embodiment of the pativrata (devoted wife) ideal. A woman who keeps her face veiled, speaks softly, and has been conditioned to always defer to

others, Phool derives her sense of self-worth almost entirely from the extent to which she can serve her husband and his family.

Her initial helplessness being left alone at an unfamiliar station and unable to even name the village where she was married vividly illustrates the profound dependency stemming from traditional norms and ideals: the plight of a woman whose identity is so inextricably linked to her relationship with her husband that, upon being separated from him, she is at a complete loss as to what to do (Leslie, 1989). Yet, the film refuses to view Phool merely as a helpless victim of archaic, regressive thinking. When she finds refuge at Manju Mai's shop, a new and different side of her emerges- a highly capable and sensible woman when it comes to real life tasks. Phool possesses extensive knowledge about cooking. She enhances the taste of the food served at the shop, works incredibly hard, and proves herself to be a capable and knowledgeable worker. This represents a reimagining and an improvement of the ideal woman from the perspective of the working class.

Phool's true merit is no longer found merely in silent service or self-effacement, but in working with skill and diligence; it transforms from a devoted wife who erases her own identity into a working woman who possesses her own capability and strength.

Her story (journey) demonstrates that commitment does not equate to dependency. By the film's conclusion, Phool does not return to her married life as an anonymous bride, but rather as a self-assured partner who has recognized her own strength and capabilities. Ultimately, the ideal she embraces is a commitment chosen of her own volition by a woman who understands her own worth- representing a significant and crucial shift from the traditional societal model (Wadley, 1977; Kandiyohi, 1988).

5.2 Jaya (Pushpa Rani): An educated agricultural reformer

Jaya is the most prominent (and vocal) agent of change in the film, but her significance becomes even deeper when viewed through the lens of class (the rich-poor divide). She is not an urban, English-speaking feminist; rather, she is a young woman from an ordinary family who dreams of studying agriculture, specifically, learning to farm using organic and scientific methods. Therefore, her dream is rooted in the rural working world she inhabits, rather than being a rejection of it. She seeks to transform village life and employment from within, drawing upon her knowledge of the land and crops.

Jaya's resistance is not only an act of rebellion or stubbornness; rather, it is a well-considered strategy. She had been married off to a man (Pradeep) who chose her primarily for the sake of her dowry. Consequently, she plans her escape, assumes a new identity and, exercising prudence and self-restraint, waits for the right moment. Within Deepak's household, she quietly becomes a catalyst for change, encouraging the women around her to recognize their own capabilities.

Her ability to make her own decisions is an example of power exercised through education: knowledge is the weapon that enables a working woman to refuse to be viewed merely as an object of exchange (or use) (Chakravarti, 1993). While Phool's transformation marks the journey from dependency to self-reliance, Jaya's story illustrates how education and the aspiration for progress can liberate a rural woman- a narrative that aligns perfectly with longstanding feminist arguments viewing education as a catalyst for social change.

5.3 Manju Mai- A Self-Reliant Working Woman

If Phool and Jaya represent two different paths of change; Manju Mai exemplifies a path or alternative that has already been realized. She is an older woman who runs a tea and snack stall at the railway station. She lives outside the marital bonds and social norms that dictate the lives of other women. She supports herself through her own hard work and livelihood and speaks without sentimentality and in starkly clear terms about how women compromise with patriarchy. Her famous, pragmatic insight- that a woman capable of earning her own living need not be dependent on anyone, represents the most lucid expression of a working-class feminist thought in the film.

Manju Mai represents the clearest example of Shakti manifested as financial self-reliance in the film. She is neither a submissive, devoted wife nor a social reformer; rather, she is living proof that a working woman can lead a fulfilling life through her own labor and hard work. As a mentor to Phool, she embodies the dignity that comes from honest work. She demonstrates that, even while living within a male dominated society and indeed in opposition to it, women can sustain mutual solidarity and

economic independence (Kandiyohi, 1988). Her shop evolves into a small, shared space dominated by women- a place where one witnesses their hard work, mutual support, and the free exchange of advice.

5.4 Deepak's Sister-in-law: The Awakening Housewife (Discovering Her Own Identity)

In Deepak's joint family, his sister-in-law initially appears completely immersed in the mundane, unnoticed household chores. She is the quintessential daughter-in-law who has lost her individual identity, her existence reduced solely to serving the family.

However, under Jaya's influence, she begins to reclaim her suppressed creativity and rediscover the joy and interest she once found in her talent. While this transformation may not be dramatic in scale, its significance is profound: it demonstrates that women do not need to run away from home or create a major upheaval to awaken the capacity for self-discovery and independent decision making.

Even while living within the constraints of a joint family, a woman who manages the household can reclaim her identity. Her story powerfully illustrates how exposure to a different mindset like Jaya's can break the habit of self-effacement often seen in an obedient daughter-in-law; a trait society has come to regard as the norm.

5.5 The Female Matriarch: Guardian of Traditions

The eldest woman in the family embodies a well-known paradox of a patriarchal society. A woman who has spent her own life enduring the demands and rules of Stridharma (the code of conduct for married women) eventually becomes the very person who strictly enforces those same rules upon the next generation.

As the guardian of household order and traditions, she initially upholds the rules and restrictions that bind the younger women of the house (the daughters-in-law). Yet, the film also grants her the capacity to show empathy and reconsider her own mindset. It acknowledges that these women, who act as guardians of tradition, are themselves actually part of or victims of those very traditions. At the same time, it demonstrates that generational change often begins when an older woman chooses to understand the new generation rather than forcibly imposing rules (Chowdhry, 1994).

6. Transformation Arcs

The core premise of the film focuses on women who are going through transitions over time. Table 2 illustrates the transformation journey of the key characters. It highlights how the film directs its female characters away from traditional societal expectations toward a new mindset grounded in self-consciousness, competence, knowledge, and self-respect.

Table 2. The journey of role transformation

Character	Initial Status	Catalyst for Transformation	Evolved State	Thematic Significance
Phool Kumari	Helpless, living behind a veil, and completely dependent on her husband and in-laws.	Being left behind; Manju Mai's guidance; hard work put into the shop.	Confident and capable; she returns to married life as a partner.	Submission has now become the choice of a capable woman; devotion to her husband is combined with strength.
Jaya/ Pushpa	Trapped in a marriage involving dowry; hiding her identity.	Her own education and firm resolve; refusal to become a commodity for transaction.	An independent woman who shapes her own future in agriculture.	Knowledge and the desire to advance as the basis for working-class women's independence
Manju Mai	Self-reliant (right from the beginning of the film)	The longstanding experience of a male dominated society, which has	An Exemplar of a Mentor (Guru) and Self-reliance	Financial independence as a fully realized female ideal.

		now evolved into wisdom.		
Deepak's Sister-in-law	Suppressing her own desires, completely immersed in household chores.	Jaya's courage and the example she sets	She rediscovers her creative identity (art) while staying within the confines of her home.	The capacity (consciousness) to make one's own decisions can awaken even without leaving home.
Phool's mother-in-law / Elderly females	enforcer of traditions	Intergenerational dialogue and empathy	A softening of stance; willing to reconsider old rules.	The generational shift begins within the family itself.
Inspector / Male accomplices	Disillusioned, and bound by the rules of a male dominated society.	Women face truth and honesty	They act as allies in securing justice.	People in a male dominated society can also be transformed into allies.

The transformation of the characters is clear. Through its characters, the film steers the ideal of womanhood away from the mindset of living behind a veil and effacing oneself through dependency on others. Instead, it presents a new identity defined by competence, knowledge, mutual support, and self-respect. This transformation also emphasizes that this ideal is attainable even within the constraints of rural working-class life.

7. Conveying meaning through Cinematic techniques

'Laapataa Ladies' conveys the new ideal woman not only through the story but also through specific filmmaking techniques. Table 3 outlines these key techniques and their significance.

Table 3. Cinematic techniques and their significance in the context of women.

Cinematic Device	On-Screen Example	Thematic & Symbolic Resonance
Veil (ghoonghat)	The brides get swapped due to identical veils.	The erasure of the identities of working-class women; portraying women as easily replaceable pawns (or objects).
Spatial framing	Phool is often depicted within the closed walls of a home; Jaya and Manju Mai are depicted in open and public spaces.	Restrictions versus Freedom: Depicting women's constraints and liberty through space.
Parallel storytelling	Phool and Jaya's journey is shown unfolding simultaneously (with intercutting).	Two different ways of adapting to the same male dominated society, presented side-by-side.
Style of speaking (Dialogue register)	Phool speaking in a subdued, respectful manner versus Manju Mai speaking bluntly and without hesitation.	Conveying, through language and tone, the difference between living in submission and being autonomous (free).
Rejection of the eroticizing gaze	Women are shown working, thinking, and talking.	Challenging Mulvey's 'male gaze'; regarding women as living, breathing human beings rather than objects for display.
Motifs of labour	Showing the finer details of cooking, farming, and working.	Recognizing the daily work of working-class women and

		establishing it as the basis of their value.
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The ghoonghat (veil) warrants special attention. While mainstream cinema often uses clothing to eroticize women's bodies, Laapataa Ladies employs the ghoonghat to convey the exact opposite: the very veil considered a guardian of women's honor erases their identity to such an extent that one bride is mistaken for another.

In this way, the film transforms the symbol of the culturally sanctioned, devoted wife into a critique of that very ideal. Similarly, by portraying women engaged in continuous labor rather than merely as objects of display, the film argues that the dignity of a working-class woman lies in what she can do, what she knows, and what she can create.

8. Comparative Analysis of Ideals Women in other Films

'Laapataa Ladies' questions the ideals imposed on rural and working-class Hindu women. Placing it alongside these other women characters from the other films clarifies how it connects to this tradition and highlights its own unique contribution. Table 4 presents a comparative chart.

Table 4. Comparative chart of female ideals in selected Indian films.

Film (Year)	Protagonist(s)	Socio-Economic Setting	Imposed Societal Norms	Mode of Resistance
Laapataa Ladies (2024)	Phool, Jaya	Rural agrarian working class	Chaste and devoted wife; dowry marriage; veil custom	Competence, education, and solidarity among women.
Water (2005)	Chuiya, Kalyani	Widows living in a religious ashram	A forcibly imposed life of a widowed ascetic.	Refusal to tolerate or remain silent
Mirch Masala (1987)	Sonbai	A female laborer working in the village spice factory.	Living a submissive life as a wife; feudal (zamindari) patriarchy.	A vigorous, concerted protest
Astitva (2000)	Aditi	Middleclass/Working-class family	Loyalty and silence as a wife	Expressing one's identity and desires.
Lajja (2001)	Vaidehi, Janki, Ramdulari, Maithili	different, mainly ordinary classes	Remaining a "good woman" at every stage of life.	Mixed criticism (opposition) of a male dominated society.
Dor (2006)	Meera, Zeenat	A rural widow and a determined traveler.	Widowhood; dependence on others.	Interdependence, Friendships among women from diverse communities
Parched (2015)	Rani, Lajjo, Bijli	Desert village, working women	Marriage, motherhood (becoming a mother), and control over one's body.	Friendship and a joint exodus.

Several points emerge from this. First, the working class or rural settings are repeatedly depicted because it is precisely in these environments that the widest gap exists between society's prescribed

ideals such as the devoted, homebound wife and the reality of actual life, which involves women who work hard and step out into the world.

Secondly, these films repeatedly find women's strength and decision-making ability not merely in acts of individual bravery, but in solidarity such as the female friendships in *Dor* and *Parched*, and Manju Mai's guidance in *Laapataa Ladies*. Thirdly, the tone and emphasis of *Laapataa Ladies* is distinct: while many earlier films depict women's resistance through major tragedies or violence, Kiran Rao's film advances a fresh perspective on the ideal woman by patiently honoring warmth, humor, and the value of everyday hard work and knowledge. The working women here are neither martyrs nor helpless victims; rather, they are capable individuals who reclaim their sense of worth without abandoning the rural world the world of farming and agriculture that is truly their own.

9. Discussion

When viewed through the lens of class (the different strata of society) and the beliefs of Hindu culture, *Laapataa Ladies* appears to intelligently reimagine the ideals of the rural working woman. This conclusion can be understood through three interconnected arguments.

From self-effacement to becoming capable:

The film's most significant move is shifting the definition of feminine virtue away from the archaic notion of the submissive, self-effacing wife who quietly erases her own existence and instead locating it in the active competence of a hardworking woman (Leslie, 1989).

Phool's worth is not proven when she serves silently, but rather when she demonstrates her knowledge of food; Manju Mai's authority rests on her economic self-reliance; and Jaya's strength stems from her education. In each case the film confirms the feminine as generative power (Shakti) (Wadley, 1977) over the ideal of devotional passivity. It grounds shakti specifically in work and knowledge rather than in the leisure of the upper class (the wealthy) or merely an illusory freedom.

The role of class (the rich-poor divide) in defining ideals:

By focusing primarily on women from small scale farming and small trading families, the film highlights that the prevailing societal 'ideal of womanhood' is inextricably linked to the divide between the rich and the poor (class). In reality, the devoted wife confined to the domestic sphere and getting exempted from strenuous labor has historically been a privilege reserved for the wealthy (those possessing money and land) (Chakravarti, 1993; Chowdhry, 1994).

For working class women, engaging in labor is not a deviation from the virtues of a "good woman" or a violation of norms; rather, it is the very foundation of their identity. The film's most significant and quiet act of defiance lies in the fact that it does not view cooking, farming, and small-scale work as mere compulsions or burdens to be shed but instead regards them as the dignified basis for a new female ideal. In this regard, the film fully aligns with the working class and Dalit feminist perspective, which asserts that any discourse on study of Indian women must not sideline the viewpoint of the working woman but rather place it at the center (Rege, 1998).

Commitment, personal choice, and reform within the patriarchy.

The film does not merely pit tradition against modernity. Phool does not abandon the marriage; she returns to it transformed, turning a forced submission into a partnership chosen by her own free will, a relationship based on equality. The male characters- such as Phool's husband, Deepak, and the police inspector who is initially harsh and suspicious are also portrayed as capable of becoming allies rather than mere obstacles. Thus, the film envisions reform while remaining within the framework of family and society. It suggests that instead of simply rejecting the concept of *Stridharma* (the traditional code of conduct for married women), it can be redefined, giving identity to the new ideal (Kandiyoti, 1988). This argument is particularly relevant to the working-class context, where financial constraints make it nearly impossible to leave one's family and society behind. Consequently, any change they wish to bring about must be achieved by finding a way forward such as through dialogue within the domestic sphere itself.

When viewed collectively, *Laapataa Ladies* emerges as a cultural artifact that both portrays the ideal of the Hindu woman and introduces necessary transformations to it. Drawing on Hall (1997), the film serves as a platform where the meaning of the "ideal woman" is debated and reimaged; in line with

Butler (1990), it demonstrates that the roles of women can be transformed and reshaped.

And according to studies conducted on Hindu women, it illustrates the perpetual tension between the roles of the devoted wife (*pativrata*) and the embodiment of power (*Shakti*). Ultimately, for the working woman, the film resolves this dilemma in favor of the strength derived from her competence and knowledge.

10. Conclusion

'Laapataa Ladies' transforms a comical mishap- the mix-up of two veiled brides on a train, into a profound examination of the ideals imposed upon rural and working-class Hindu women.

The film smartly leverages its diverse cache of characters – a devoted daughter-in-law, an educated agricultural reformer, a self-reliant shopkeeper, a housewife awakening to her own identity, and a matriarch who upholds traditions- to showcase the full spectrum of possibilities available to women within the agrarian working class. The film takes us through the journey of transformation: as the characters make the shift from a state of dependency and concealment behind the *ghoonghat* (veil) to a life of dignity and agency to make their own decisions.

This research paper argues that the film's most significant contribution is in how it bases the virtues of its women characters- such as the knowledge of food that 'Phool' possesses, the farming technologies 'Jaya' wishes to study, and the shop 'Manju Mai' runs- in the foundation of work and knowledge.

Acknowledging this capability of the working class, the film reimagines the traditional societal ideal of the devoted wife; it does not outright reject the concept of devotion (*bhakti*) but emphasizes that such devotion must stem from the woman's own free will- a woman who is fully aware of her own worth. At the same time, it embraces the strength of the working woman as the finest and most authentic ideal for women.

As a cultural text, 'Laapataa Ladies' not only depicts or documents the shifting norms and beliefs surrounding the lives of rural Hindu women but also accelerates that change.

This demonstrates the power of popular cinema: it can accord dignity to the everyday lives of working women, showcase their hard work to the world, and present examples of female solidarity and self-respect that can be realized not only outside the confines of family and village but also within that very framework.

Future research could further expand upon this analysis of class (rich versus poor) and gender. An examination of how rural audiences perceive such films, the study of the impact of caste on the ideals discussed in this paper, and how the ideals of working-class women in these films compare to those portrayed in other regional Indian cinemas are a few examples of possible areas of study.

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