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Unveiling the Rhetoric of Victim Blaming: Perpetuating Language Patterns in Select Bollywood Films Depicting Sexual Assault

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Abstract

This research investigates the rhetoric of victim blaming of women in select Bollywood films portraying instances of sexual assaults. By examining the language patterns employed in these films, this study aims to unveil the underlying narrative constructs that perpetuate victim blaming and contribute to the cultural discourse surrounding sexual violence against women. Using an integrated Discourse and Thematic analysis, two Bollywood films, Damini (1993) and Pink (2016), have been critically analysed to identify recurring themes, dialogues, and character portrayals that potentially reinforce victim blaming. The findings of this study shed light on the perpetuating complex interplay between popular media representations, gender dynamics, and the interrogation and introspection culture (in a particular space— courtroom) post-sexual assault, even after a gap of more than two decades. Ultimately, this research aims to sensitise and encourage dialogue around the importance of responsible storytelling in the entertainment industry and its potential role in fostering empathy, understanding, and support for survivors of sexual assault.

Keywords: Rape; Bollywood Films; Victim Blaming; Gender Roles; Discourse Analysis; Femininity; India

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Introduction

Victim blaming, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, refers to saying or implying that a person who has suffered harm or injury is responsible for it rather than the person who caused it (2023). This means that the victim is somehow held accountable for the act of violence that happens to them, whereby they are at a loss. At the same time, since the victim shares the accountability of the crime, the blame of the perpetrator(s) is lessened, which further problematises the harmful act for the victim(s). The accountability shifts in such a manner that the responsibility of the perpetrator is often overlooked, especially in a heteronormative patriarchal society like that of India.

In a patriarchal society like India, honour, respect, and self-esteem have always been central to comprehending the status of women in society (Gangoli & Westmarland, 2011; Menon, 2006). Violence against women can be inflicted in the form of rape, molestation, murder, kidnapping and other acts of violence. A woman, be it married, unmarried, divorced, or single, is often seen with downright disgrace after going through any of the above-mentioned forms of violence. Along with the mental and physical toll one has to tolerate, they are slut shamed for the deeds they never committed. This ideology creates a double-edged sword for women. On the one hand, they suffer the physical pain of sexual assault; on the other, they are overlooked and labelled weak and docile. The aftermath of such a traumatic event often leaves survivors grappling with a range of emotions, including fear, shame, guilt, and confusion. Rape survivors often struggle to put their experience into words due to the never-ending nature of the trauma they have gone through. The complexity and horror of the event can be incredibly tough to articulate, leading to a sense of helplessness in effectively conveying the extent of their suffering. Moreover, survivors frequently face societal stigmas and victim-blaming attitudes (Suvarna et al., 2020), which can make it even more challenging to share their experiences. They may fear being judged [for

being bold or dressing in a certain way (Kohli, 2012)], disbelieved, or ostracised, which further silences them and adds to their emotional burden.

Additionally, the psychological impact of rape can manifest in a range of symptoms, such as flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, and depression. These symptoms can interfere with survivors' ability to articulate their experiences coherently, as they may struggle with memory gaps, dissociation, or difficulties in organising their thoughts.

Furthermore, the social and cultural context surrounding rape can complicate survivors' attempts to explain their experiences. They may encounter disbelief, scepticism, or victim-blaming attitudes, which can make them question their perceptions and hinder their ability to communicate their ordeal.

Van Dijk (2008) argues that it is through discourse that many ideologies are formulated, reinforced, and reproduced. This is why women's sexuality and secondary representation have always been a subject of discussion. The ideology that perpetuates the notion of women having weak or inferior sexuality is regressive, oppressive, and harmful. It undermines women's agency, autonomy, and sexual expression, limiting their ability to explore and embrace their desires, preferences, and identities freely and without judgment.

In several films, rapes are sensationalised, focusing more on the violence itself rather than its impact on the victim (Indriyana & Albab, 2020). Such portrayals can trivialise the gravity of the issue and reinforce stereotypes (Lees, 1993). Similarly, in certain films, the victim's character may be portrayed in a way that perpetuates victim-blaming attitudes or stigmatises survivors. This can contribute to a culture of shame and silence surrounding sexual violence.

During the courtroom trial, the survivor's lawyer typically questions her to present her version of events, establish her credibility, and elicit details about the alleged assault. The questions may

focus on the circumstances surrounding the incident, the identity of the perpetrator, and the survivor's emotional and physical state before, during, and after the assault. The aim is to provide a clear and comprehensive account of the events. The defence lawyer cross-examines the survivor, which is insensitive without caution. The purpose of cross-examination is to test the accuracy and reliability of the survivor's testimony. The defence lawyer may ask questions about potential inconsistencies, prior statements made by the survivor, or any other relevant information that may cast doubt on her testimony. However, the questions should be respectful and avoid victim-blaming or re-traumatisation, which usually is not.

So, broadly, this study aims to understand the discourse of victim blaming in select Bollywood films. This work's research gap and importance are discussed in the subsequent section. This article has four further sections: literature review, theoretical framework and research design, analysis, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Several researchers have tried to understand the role of media regarding violence against women (Cuklanz, 1996; Humphries, 2009; Projansky, 2001,) especially rape, in terms of portrayal, justice to the victims and the image it represents. The portrayal of rape, in terms of language and pictorial representation, concerning the degree of aggravation or appeasement of the rape discourse has been discussed in cultural studies and linguistics thoroughly (Mardorossian, 2014:1-2).

Gender is a social construct. The members of the society accept, recreate, and follow these norms (Vauquline, 2015). Rape can be stated as a systemic, brutal, and forceful reimposition of power reinstatement whereby the perpetrator (a man) vandalises the victim (mostly female) to establish himself above the victim in the complex social power structure. It is, however,

not limited merely to the vice of the perpetrator. Rape, like any other form of violence against women, is the result of a systemic encumbrance whereby the power structure among the genders creates a hierarchy, and the members of society feel entitled to fit in to live in the society (Vauquline, 2015).

Victim blaming is an aftermath of the uneven dynamics of the power of gender. Stahl et al. (2010: 3) quote the concept of system justification theory, which states that "people are motivated to justify and rationalise the way things are, so that existing social, economic, and political arrangements tend to be perceived as fair and legitimate". They argue that people perceive the world to be a fair place, and the concept of rape or the rape victim appears to be a threat to this idea, due to which they look for a problem in the choices or identity of the victim (Stahl et al., 2010).

Men are perceived to be the centre of most of the social setup. Women, being the *second sex* (Beauvoir, 2015), must consistently fight to maintain the status quo for their safety, or they are perceived as a threat to society. Research shows that men accept the rape myths[1] comparatively easily as compared to women (Grubb & Turner, 2012). This is because women being rigorously conditioned by patriarchal norms, can mainly empathise with the position of the victim. However, it is quite convenient for men to accept such myths because this gives them a position of power. Therefore, it was also found that women who challenge the conventional gender roles are more prone to be victim-blamed than those who carry the conventional gender roles (Grubb & Turner, 2012). This means that women who reportedly consumed alcohol before the attack are more likely to be blamed for the rape than those who are not intoxicated (Ghosh, 2020). This claim is further justified by earlier research that analyses the effects of victim blaming on the psyche of the victim (Pedro, 2020; Hamid, 2021). Gender is a

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[1] Rape myths consist of prejudicial, stereotypical, and inaccurate beliefs regarding sexual assaults, perpetrators, and victims. Some of the common rape myths are that women commonly lie about rape, rape is the victim's fault if they wear revealing clothes, strangers commit most rapes, and it is not 'rape' unless the victim is physically injured.

significant factor when accepting rape myths or sharing empathy with the victim (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Thus, it has been further found that men were more likely to accept the rape myths and showed little to no empathy for the victim of rape. Women, on the other hand, exhibited more sympathy for the victim of the rape across conditions (Chatterjee, 2019). However, there was greater acceptance of the rape myth once the verdict was guilty. This shows that women, despite being the empathisers, give in to the constant conditioning of the patriarchal order and accept that women can be a cause of the crime inflicted on their selves.

Media plays a significant role in forming the perception of rape. Kitzinger (2009) analysed the media coverage of rape in the early twenty-first century in both the US and UK. She states in this research that "television reports, newspaper articles, films and other media help to shape understandings of what counts as rape" (Kitzinger, 2009:74). Media usage is a constant practice in the daily lives of most people. This essentially means that people perceive the notion of rape through the picture and the language used by the media. She cites the example of a few newspapers which use words like "fondling" and "having sex" to describe a gang rape whereby the face of the victim was bashed with a rock (Kitzinger, 2009: 84). She states that such reports give an edge to the perpetrators and discredit the identity of women and their experiences. The objectification of the victims adds up to the problem. The use of dressing provocatively and not behaving modestly are framed as a reason and a factor while rape is discussed in context. Thus, she finds that the media essentially fails to understand and represent the complexity of power in rape cases. The "glamourisation of overwhelming sexual desire" and "the trivialisation of rape" together blur the line between sex and rape (Kitzinger, 2009: 85).

The language used by the media is quite euphemistic while framing such news. There is no direct blame on the victim of rape or sexual assault; rather, they use personal information of the victim (like dress and presence in particular setup) hideously portraying these pieces of information as significant factors in rape. A recent study by Thacker (2017) says that the media often blames victims because the justice system struggles to protect them, leading to the victim being revictimised. This re-victimisation is done in order to analyse the truthfulness of the complaint of the victim, which impacts negatively and traumatises the victim. She also concluded that degrading lines of questioning in the court are essentially used for women and not male rape survivors. Male rape survivors are never asked about their sexual history, their intoxication, or their choice of dresses. Correspondingly, male rape survivors are never represented "in terms of their attractiveness in media coverage of their trials" (Thacker, 2017: 96).

Globally, women have been ill-represented in films due to the need of the makers to create a fanbase for the characters. While analysing six of the highest-grossing films which are based on the *Marvel* comics, it is found that the superheroines in these films were primarily ill-represented in terms of "dialogue, costume design, and character relationship" (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021: 1). Although women have been an integral part of *Marvel* films and comics, the films lack representation of women. When analysed from a feminist lens, it was found that these films are essentially male-centric and "marginalise the roles of their superheroines" (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021: 2). This essentially means that in an economically and academically growing nation, the USA, the cinematic boundaries still limit the feminist approach towards filmmaking. A similar narrative is visible in Indian movies despite the cultural differences. Nandkumar (2011) says that the patriarchal society imposes stereotypical roles on women, reflecting male fantasies often portrayed in films. She also states that these roles cater to male desires, and women have internalised them as usual rather than oppressive. Additionally, women may not recognise these roles as impositions from a patriarchal power structure due to their deep internalisation.

Films in India have been portraying and propagating the rape culture ever since their advent. According to Sheth et al. (2021), in India, post-independence, the male gaze subjected the construction of female characters, and their representation was, thus, quite sexist. The Bollywood industry has faced significant criticism not only for its misrepresentation of women but also for perpetuating misogynistic attitudes. The 2024 Hema Committee, inspired by the global #MeToo movement of 2017, highlights the systemic abuse women face in the Malayalam film industry. It exposes a culture of sexual exploitation, substance abuse, wage disparity, and inhumane working conditions. However, the discourse, as already argued, often shifts toward victim blaming, with survivors being scrutinised for their choices, attire, or participation in the industry, thus deflecting accountability from the perpetrators and maintaining a culture of silence and complicity in the exploitation of women (Pandey, 2024).

Despite having the power to dispose of the notions of prejudice and provide a just society, Bollywood focuses on doubtlessly emboldening, unfair prejudices. The aim of films, as in any media, has always been to entertain a specific type of audience. Also, the identity of women having "traditional gender roles" and being "shy and domestic" has been embraced by the agrarian belt of India, especially Punjab, which has marked such representations in the films (Sheth et al., 2021: 11). Nevertheless, the construction of the toxic boisterous Punjabi male has also been reinforced. Thus, the representation of gender in films has always remained centred on women and men from the perspective of the male gaze. According to Rane & Chowdhary (2023), women in Indian cinema are objectified because of the delineated projection. The female characters are portrayed in a derogatory manner, often stereotyped, in order to cater to the male gaze.

However, most of the countries are sensitive about rape. There are several laws surrounding it in order to provide legal aid to the victims. However, the production of certain films often escalates the circulation of rape myths. Movies like *Section 375* (2019), directed by Ajay Bahl, whereby the woman falsely accuses a man of rape and wins the case against him, reinforces the logic that laws can be manipulated in order to trap innocent men. Nair and Tamang (2016), in their work, study the pattern of two films and state that *Badlapur* (2015) movie blurs the line between rape and sex and it humanises the perpetrator, whereas the movie *Gone Girl* (a popular American film) shows that there are public institutions that easily believe a woman as a false victim can harm and manipulate the male members of the society.

The novelty of this work lies in its focus on the significantly underexplored area of victim blaming in Bollywood cinema. It is an issue that has received limited attention in the existing body of research. While much of the current literature critiques the objectification of women through the male gaze and patriarchal norms, this study ventures into the distinct yet related domain of how mainstream cinema perpetuates or challenges these harmful gendered narratives (particularly the discourse of victim blaming). By examining the production and portrayal of misogynistic notions in both spheres, the work seeks to fill a critical gap in understanding the broader cultural environment that blames the victims for the crimes that happen against them.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

This study employs a blend of thematic discourse analysis as the primary methodological framework to investigate the rhetoric of victim blaming in the films Damini (1993), directed by Rajkumar Santoshi, and Pink (2016), directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury.

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative approach because it allows for an in-depth exploration of linguistic and narrative elements in films, which are essential for understanding nuanced social issues like victim blaming. By focusing on the details of the text, we shall explain how language and narrative techniques shape perceptions of victims. A comparative analysis between *Damini* and *Pink* enables us to identify both common patterns and distinct variations in their portrayal

of victim blaming. This method is suitable for this study because it reveals deeper cultural and social contexts that help to explain how narratives reflect or challenge societal attitudes toward victims in different settings.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

Films— Damini (1993) and Pink (2016) have been chosen as the primary texts for analysis due to their thematic relevance and widespread cultural impact in the Indian context (Jha, 2005). Both films depict instances of sexual assault and the subsequent societal response, providing rich material for examining victim-blaming discourse. The rationale behind selecting only these two films is to analyse the dialogues and utterances in depth. The data for analysis consists of dialogues, scene descriptions, and contextual information obtained from the films. Multiple viewings of the films were conducted to ensure comprehensive data collection and to capture nuances in language use and narrative framing. Since the aim is to analyse films from different periods to observe the changes and/or similarities, we have purposively chosen two movies that have a gap of more than two decades.

Analytical Process

This research employs an integrative approach, combining Thematic Analysis and Discourse Analysis to examine these two films. The thematic analysis provides a structured framework for identifying and analysing recurrent themes, while Discourse Analysis (Harris, 1952; Gee, 1999) delves into the language and communication strategies employed in these films. The Thematic Analysis allowed us to systematise and categorise the coded content and arrange the extraction of implicit and explicit messages in a connective/argumentative manner. The aim is to decipher the underlying themes that shape the narrative of these films, providing insight into the cultural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions embedded in these messages.

Further, Discourse Analysis complements Thematic Analysis by focusing on the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the films by implicitly using select tools of Discourse Analysis such as Speech Act, Presupposition, Politeness Theory, Implicature, and Conversation Analysis. It examines how language constructs meaning, shapes perceptions, and influences the audience. This analysis extends beyond surface-level content to explore underlying ideologies, gender dynamics, and cultural representations embedded in the discourse of these films.

Tools of Discourse Analysis

The following are the tools that have been covertly used to analyse the dialogues in both movies and to draw similarities between them.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis is majorly used in sociolinguistics and studies the structure and organisation of human interaction, focusing on how people create and manage conversations in various social settings. It examines the detailed features of naturally occurring talk and how participants in a conversation collaboratively construct meaning. In the 1960s, Emanuel Schegloff, Harvey Sacks, and Gail Jefferson coined the term conversational analysis (Sidnell, 2010). It consists of turn-taking, opening conversation, closing conversation, repair, adjacency pair, and feedback (Sidnell, 2010).

Implicature

Implicatures are complex and context-dependent. They arise during a conversation when a speaker implies something that goes beyond the literal meaning of their words. Conversational implicatures are based on the cooperative principle, a fundamental concept introduced by H.P. Grice in 1975. The cooperative principle states that people engaged in a conversation are expected to be cooperative, informative, relevant, and clear.

Grice further formulated four maxims of conversation, known as Grice's Maxims, which speakers are expected to follow to maintain effective communication:

- Maxim of Quantity: Be as informative as necessary, but not more informative than required.

- Maxim of Quality: Do not provide false or misleading information.
- Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.
- Maxim of Manner: Avoid ambiguity and obscurity; be clear and concise.

Conversational implicatures occur when a speaker flouts (violates) one of these maxims. The listener, aware of the cooperative principle and the maxims, infers the intended meaning based on the context, the specific maxim being flouted, and the conversational implicature intended by the speaker.

Therefore, implicature refers to the additional meaning that is implied but not explicitly stated in a conversation. Conversational implicatures depend on context, the cooperative principle, and Grice's Maxims, allowing listeners to infer intended meanings beyond the literal interpretation of words.

Speech Acts

Speech Act Theory is one of the most essential methods available to decode and interpret meaning in the practical language discipline. The words are employed to accomplish a task and describe the facts. Speech actions assist us in analysing words and phrases in light of the context in which they are being used. J.L. Austin first presented speech acts in a collection of lectures titled *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). However, Searle (1998) expanded on it afterwards. While Austin claimed that "by saying or in saying something, we are doing something" (Austin, 1962: 12), Searle (1998) expanded on this idea in his book by further exploring the effects of 'saying'. There are three categories of speech acts: locutionary (just vocalising sounds), illocutionary (the purpose of an action or speech), and perlocutionary (the impact of an action or speech on the recipient). These are accountable for how the speaker and the speech can be assertive, imposing, questioning, counter-assertive, or ordering. This aids in understanding the power structure and/or its abuse when evaluated under critical discourse analysis.

Presupposition

In his book *Pragmatics* (1996), George Yule defines presupposition as a background belief, knowledge, or assumption taken for granted in a conversation. *Presuppositions* are the implicit meanings that underlie the words and sentences used in communication. They are not stated directly but are crucial for understanding the intended meaning of a sentence. Presuppositions help in conveying information indirectly, allowing speakers to imply things without explicitly stating them.

Politeness Theory

In their influential work on politeness theory, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) proposed a socio-linguistic framework to understand how people manage and mitigate potential threats to face, which refers to a person's public self-image or social value in interactions. Their theory, presented in the book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987), provides insights into how people navigate social interactions, considering the social norms, hierarchical relationships, and cultural context in which communication occurs.

Discursive Strategies

Discursive strategies aid in delimiting the meaning of utterances. Society, in general, is constructed of order(s). These orders essentially work on an idea/ideology that drives their very being. These ideologies, along with the orders henceforth created, question or trod down some of the identity while placing few at the top of the order, creating a hegemony. Discursive strategies help decode these structures and understand their underlying spectrum of subjectivity.

Teun A. van Dijk (2008) focussed on the sociocognitive aspect of discourse. He states that to understand "power and power abuse", it is essential to go beyond the "social conditions" (Dijk, 2008: 7). His emphasis on the inclusion of a cognitive aspect while understanding a social order has resulted in a "sociocognitive approach" to understanding or deconstructing a discourse (Dijk, 2008: 7). He emphasises the study of mental models, which are essentially the person's internal representation of a

particular external reality, often used to explain and predict events. The utterances produced by individuals are mostly the representation of their mental models. Therefore, as part of the discursive strategy, the sociocognitive approach helps to provide sustaining research on language and its implications for society.

"Gender identities are represented, constructed and contested through language", and thus discursive strategies unveil the subtle or complex aspects of gender, specifically in terms of language (Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002: 1). In other words, the problem associated with language and gender does not solely lie in the identification of problems; it requires, if not a solution, a subjective intersectional discussion. For instance, specifically for a third-world nation like India, in order to understand the challenges of a woman, it is essential to delve into the personal accounts registered (utterances produced by them), their communication methods, patterns, and the utterances that surround the discourse of woman and womanhood. Discourse analysis aids in discovering the power dynamics or abuse, which further illustrates the technicality of women's problems and aims to devise a solution.

Analysis

About the Movies

Rajkumar Santoshi directed Damini (1993). The movie revolves around the main character Damini who witnesses the dreadful act of gang rape on her friend and maid, Urmi, and ex-lawyer Govind. The (woman) protagonist of the film is Damini, who encounters her brother-in-law and his companions raping their housekeeper. She fights for justice for Urmi despite several challenges. As a compadre of the victim, she also becomes a victim of the blackmail and violence of the people around her. Ex-lawyer Govind and her husband assist her.

Pink (2016) is a Bollywood film directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury and written by Shoojit Sircar, Ritesh Shah, and Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. The film revolves around the lives of three (women) protagonists, Minal, Falak, and Andrea, among whom Minal and Andrea are sexually harassed by two men, Rajveer Singh and Raunak (aka Dumpy), respectively. The film is based in the city of Delhi, where the three women are seen fighting against the system when they are falsely accused of attempting to murder. Deepak, a renowned retired advocate and the neighbour of the victims, takes over the case and helps them win it and punish the perpetrators for their actions.

Use of Characterisation

This study delves into two significant aspects defining the respective films' plots. We deal with the characterisation of the victims and perpetrators in the films, whereby the psycho-social aspect of the characters is deconstructed. Also, we have studied the court trial and the language used in terms of words, jargon, style of interpretation, and gestures.

The characters of both films have been quite diverse but somehow have some similarities. The female protagonists seem to be breaking the heteronormative role that they are expected to perform. The three women (Minal, Falak, and Andrea) from *Pink* stay in a house without a male member and are employed in diverse fields according to their career choices. In the movie Damini, the female protagonist *Damini,* on the other hand, is a professional entertainment dancer, which, according to the time the movie was released, portrays Damini as the one with no authority over her. This entitles the movie's characters to indulge and interfere in the women's lives, as we see in society. In *Pink,* the neighbours, essentially men, continuously keep an eye on the women's house as to what they do, who enters their house, and at what time they return home. One of the witnesses, who is also the victims' neighbour, states *maine dekha hai…ladke toh aate hain inke yahan* (I have seen boys often visit their place) during the courtroom proceedings. In *Damini*, Urmi lives in the house of their employers as she belongs to a low socio-economic background tantamount to Damini's background. If a woman chooses to work late, does not have a male authority guiding her, or does not fall under the heteronormative structure of the family is bound

to bear the criticism of society according to these films, which is quite evident in the Indian setup.

Men in these films, especially the perpetrators, can be seen to be belonging to wealthy affluent families who have the stereotypical familiar values of a heteronormative Indian family. Their households are primarily driven by patriarchal values, which essentially drive the heteronormative family structures. Thus, in both films, we see the perpetrators being advised by the men in their families or sexist/patriarchal men of the law. They display their understanding of women as ones who are bound to stay 'good', which means fitting in the norms of patriarchy. Their sexism seems to heighten when they commit crimes against women and seem to ignore their mistakes and accuse the victims of their deeds. In *Pink,* we see Rajveer Singh and his friends Raunak and Ankit blackmailing Minal Arora, the survivor of the rape attempt, by kidnapping her in a van and further threatening her. In *Damini*, we see Urmi and Damini not only receiving threats from the perpetrators but also being subjected to murder and attempts of physical and sexual assaults, respectively. In both movies, the mental sanity of the victims is played with. While Damini is declared a mentally unstable woman during the court hearing, Falak, in *Pink,* along with several minor incidents of breakdown by the other two women, breaks down mentally and accepts the false accusation of taking money. The directors essentially do this to gather sympathy from the audience, primarily women, who are subjected to such violence regularly. Despite the attempt to send messages through these movies, the directors portrayed the helpless and insensitive pre-existing condition of women's lives to maintain the relatability of the context.

The men who help these women fight against systemic oppression are part of the judiciary system. However, both Deepak (in *Pink*) and Govind (in *Damini*) seem to have given up their faith in the law. According to the plot, Deepak has to give up his practice of law due to his deteriorating mental health, while on the other hand, Govind loses his hope in the law when he fails to fight the system to get justice for his deceased wife. These men were learned, but the system failed them because their outlook differed from the patriarchal values. However, it is noteworthy that the characterisation of these men as helping these victims also emphasises the importance of the agency of men in society. Through these characters, who are also a representative of the law, the notion of women's identity as either being associated with men or being defined or protected by men is represented here.

Despite the difference in the ages of release of both these movies, the agency of men remains an essential norm in society. *Damini* was released in 1993, while *Pink* is a 2016 movie; despite the two-decade gap between the films, the social norms remain the same whereby women are directed and represented by patriarchal norms and their flagbearers, which leads to their subjugation, harassment, and abuse.

Use of Language

Language aids the construction of discourse (Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). A discourse is constructed only when communication takes place among the actors of a context. The audience comprehends the understanding of the plot and message being sent by the films based on the language used in the films to narrate the context. Using terms to identify the characters or build their characteristics is also responsible for understanding the audience's context. Also, these terms or phrases help individuals bridge the gap between the reel (films) and the reality (social norms).

In terms of the language used by Indian cinema, specifically Bollywood, the language has been euphemistic in general. However, if we delve deeper, we find movies like maintain the cultural association of the movies with the audience's social lives. In awe of familiarity, the audience watches these movies and shows, intrigued by the stories and plot twists. The familiarity of discourse or narratives in these two movies is also maintained through the usage of language.

The language used in *Pink* by the perpetrators during the court trial to denote women, such as *raand*, a sexist slang to refer to a woman who is frequently involved in numerous sexual relationships. In *Damini*, the mother-in-law uses the term *badchalan* to refer to Urmi as a woman who does not have any morals or values when she is interrogated by the police about her, suggesting that Urmi had sexual relationships with numerous men. It is to be noted that since *Damini* was released in the late 1990s, using sexist slang was not a trend in the movies. Thus, unlike *Pink, Damini* used euphemistic terms to refer to the victims, but these accusatory terms were essentially meant to denote the victims, not the perpetrators.

Perpetuating Courtroom Proceedings

Men dominate the court in both films. However, in *Pink*, we see a few women being a part of the judiciary, but their participation is negligible. It is also noteworthy that the women being the victims are accused, represented, and trialled by men only. The three women (Minal, Falak, and Andrea) in the movie *Pink* and Urmi and Damini in the movie *Damini* are falsely accused of being extortionists and characterless and mentally unstable women, respectively. During the court trial in *Damini*, the lawyer named *Chaddha* asks questions regarding the act of rape, which makes Damini quite uncomfortable. He specifically demonstrates and asks about the act by asking her where the hands of the rapists were when she encountered the perpetrators raping the victim. Questions like, *kya dekha aapne* (what did you see?), *nangi thhi* (was the girl naked?), *aadhi nangi thhi* (was she half naked), *ab ye bataiye ki woh chaar ladke kya kr rhe thhe* (now tell, what were the four boys doing?) and the questions poised by this lawyer go on until he brings men to the court and asks Damini to identify who were the culprits. He brings the men quite close to her while asking to identify them in a threatening manner. This goes on until Damini breaks down due to the mental trauma, and later in this scene, the defence lawyer, *Chaddha* convinces everyone with the help of a false witness that Damini is mentally unstable and needs to be treated in a mental hospital.

In *Pink*, similar to *Damini*, the sheer phenomenon of constant questioning and framing of the victims for a false crime displayed the problematic matter of representation. The prosecution seems to accuse women by referring to them as 'these types of women' (*aisi ladkiyan*), indicating them as sex workers (prostitutes). The shame associated with the word *prostitute* or *sex worker* is evident in the film. Thus, the prosecution and the witnesses use the phrase *aise ladkiyan* or *aise type ki ladkiyan* in several incidents to belittle their existence. The stigma associated with prostitutes and prostitution itself requires an illustrative study. However, the lack of ethics associated with women being sex workers is deprecating enough for the identity of women. The women in the court have little to say, yet we see in some scenes that these characters voice their opinions. For instance, when Andrea is cross-questioned by her defendant lawyer, she states *Sir, I feel as a Northeastern girl, I am being more harassed than the average Indian girl on the street*. The inclusion of intersectional feminism here, whereby the victim brings up the topic of being harassed due to her gender and sociocultural identity, can be identified as a bold move by the film's writers. However, everyone in the courtroom ignores the statement. The defendant's lawyer resumes asking questions about the night when the harassment and attempt to rape took place. In another incident where the prosecution questions Falak, she is indirectly accused several times that the relationship she had with her boyfriend was just physical in exchange for money. The prosecution uses phrases like *she is a professional* and orders statements to Falak like *Please accept ki aapke aay ka zariya yahi hai* (Please accept that this is the primary source of your income) while questioning and representing the matter. The prosecution, through these lines, tries to portray her as a sex worker. While trying to voice her opinion, Falak, like Damini in the movie *Damini*, breaks down and accepts the false accusation of extortion. She cries and says *liye hain humne paise…* (Yes, we took the money) which made the case weak. This is a ground-breaking move on the characters' part to not entitle themselves

shame worthy even at the position of a sex worker; however, the comment is acknowledged only by a woman, Sara, Mr. Sehgal's wife, while the rest of the characters remain biased or at most indifferent towards this move.

Therefore, it can be said that *Pink*, like *Damini*, portrayed the court trials through the agency of men. The reality of the agency of men and its importance of validation for the existence of women and the other gender remains at hand, especially regarding the judiciary and its justice. The victimisation of women who are working or are out of the hegemonic structure of the gender remains constant. They are shamed, belittled, and attacked mentally, physically, and emotionally at every move of their lives.

These portrayals starkly contrast what the Justice Verma committee[2] drew heavily on the discourse of human rights and the equality provisions of the Indian Constitution. The report proposed the rights for women that would note "certain practices including cultural, social, political, religious and customary norms are patriarchal and impair the agency, dignity, and equality of women" and protect every woman's right "to express and experience complete sexual autonomy" (Verma et al., 2013: 429). The report situates violence within societal and institutional structures and calls for a more substantive view of where and how violence manifests itself.

Subtle Way of Provoking the Victims

In both the movies, there is an emphasis on speaking louder. In *Damini*, the lawyer asks Damini to speak loud (*Zara ooncha boliye)* in several instances in loud voices. In *Pink*, the lawyer uses the word '*what'* in order to persuade or provoke the victim. According to the speech act theory, the act of asking questions or giving orders always puts the speaker in a position of power above the listener. Thus, in the court trials of both films, the victims remain powerless with little to no say. Moreover, in the incidences whereby we witness them speaking, they are

seen either breaking down or obstructed by the lawyers or the judge midway. However, if we study the subjectivity of both films, *Pink* turns out to be comparatively more woke in that it delves into the matter of patriarchy and its victims thoroughly. The rules framed by Mr Sehgal and referred to as the *Girls' Safety Manual* are an ironic attack on the patriarchal rules that force women to abide by the norms of patriarchy and shame them for actions that are expected only by men; these actions may include, laughing and talking, drinking with men or only drinking, etc.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that even after a gap of more than two decades, the subjugation and defamation of women are still the same in movies portraying victim blaming. They are victimised and are considered solely responsible for the harm that happened to them. They suffer at several levels pre- and post-incident. They not only go through mental trauma, physical pain, and the social stigma of insult associated with these incidents but also suffer during courtroom proceedings where they go to seek justice. They appear powerless and helpless before the provoking and traumatic questions asked to them by both the prosecution and the defence lawyers. In both the films *Damini* and *Pink,* we find the perpetuating language patterns used for victim blaming through courtroom proceedings.

While the movies gave a powerful message about consent and how important it is to acknowledge a woman's consent, it is also noteworthy that the significant part of the movies, both protagonists and antagonists, were played by men. The lawyers specifically have been eminent actors in the Indian film industry. It is ironic because the participation of women is belittled in the respective movies, which talk about a systematic rape culture. The plot juggles between a fight that becomes a matter of pride to the lawyers, making women secondary

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[2] The Justice Verma Committee was formed in 2013 to recommend amendments to the Criminal Law in response to the 2012 Delhi gang rape. The committee's goal was to

provide faster trials and harsher punishments for criminals who sexually assault women.

characters and thus reinforcing patriarchy. The movie *Pink* emphasises the matter of consent specifically. The infamous dialogue "No means no!" delivered by Amitabh Bachchan puts into perspective the victim blaming and the rape culture existing in India. Victims of sexual assault are often slut-shamed for their behaviour, attire, and/or the profession they choose. In this movie, the perspective of a mere "No!" being a statement rather than a simple word highlights how often the victim's perspective is either overlooked or shunned in seeking justice. It also draws a boundary between sex and rape, stating that the willingness of a woman to have sex cannot be interpreted as a license to rape her.

When engaging with any media, it is crucial to approach portrayals of women with discernment, understanding that they only offer a partial glimpse into the diverse spectrum of women's experiences and societal roles. Media representations and their language often simplify and generalise, failing to capture the multifaceted nature of women's lives. It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of these depictions and strive for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities that define women's contributions, challenges, and identities. A critical perspective allows us to appreciate the richness of women's experiences beyond the confines of stereotypical representations in various forms of media.

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Since our research does not include human participation, it does not require ethical approval.

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We do not have any conflict of interest to declare.

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Shubham Pathak: Conceptualisation, collecting resources, methodology, writing the final draft

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