



Research Paper

Unveiling the Metaphor of Veil in Kiran Rao's Laapataa Ladies

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Abstract

Kiran Rao's Laapataa Ladies offers a nuanced satirical critique of the long-standing tradition of veiling in Indian society, using humor and irony to expose the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures governing women's lives. Set against the backdrop of rural India, the film foregrounds how customs such as the veil are not merely cultural practices but mechanisms of control that shape women's identities, mobility, and agency. Through its narrative of mistaken identities and displaced brides, the film subtly unravels the absurdities embedded within these traditions while simultaneously illuminating their psychological and social consequences.

This paper examines how the film situates marriage as a critical site where patriarchal norms are both enforced and contested. It explores the symbolic function of the veil as an instrument that obscures individuality and enforces conformity, reducing women to interchangeable figures within a rigid social framework. By tracing the journeys of the female protagonists, the study highlights their gradual movement from invisibility to self-recognition, thereby framing the veil as both a literal and metaphorical barrier to selfhood.

Engaging with feminist and Marxist perspectives, the paper interrogates the intersection of gender, class, and tradition, demonstrating how rural women are doubly marginalized within socio-economic and cultural hierarchies. It further argues that the film resists simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity, instead presenting a layered critique that acknowledges women's resilience and capacity for negotiation within oppressive systems.

Ultimately, the paper contends that Laapataa Ladies reimagines identity beyond patriarchal prescriptions, offering a powerful commentary on the possibility of reclaiming selfhood within and against the institution of marriage.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Veil, Selfhood, Marriage, Rural India

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I. Introduction

Traditions are a set of rituals and cultural practices passed on from one generation to another. The Purdah system is one such practice. Introduced by the Islamic invasion, the tradition of putting a woman behind Purdah or a veil to protect her from male gaze is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition (Sahu). Generations of women have led their entire life inside the confinements of a long cloth that covered their face. The system of veiling not only separates the two genders but also acts as a tool of subjugation of women especially in the south Asian cultures where this tradition is widely followed.

Kiran Rao, who is a well known director and screen writer, through her film 'Laapataa Ladies' has exclusively focused on the tradition of veiling and the limitations that it brings in the life of the women of an Indian society. The word 'Laapataa Ladies' means lost women which itself suggests the dilemma of women who are confined to breathe only inside the walls of a veil and have lost or rather concealed their identities behind yards of cloth covering their body as well as their vision of self. Marked as the second film directed by Rao, Laapataa Ladies, made its mark on the entire world when it got nominated for Oscars, 2021 (PTI). The plot of the film navigates the world while obscured by a veil and provides metaphorical counsel on the proper comportment of women within patriarchal structure that encapsulates the film's central preoccupation with vision, visibility, and the politics of the gaze.

The veil is used as a metaphor to emphasize on the manifold layers of a women's personality, her internal struggles, her autonomy of thoughts and ideas succumbed to the boundaries of patriarchy, her desires and her subjective idea of femininity. The rural setting of the film represents the simple, rustic Indian life, displaying an uncomplicated yet subjugated ideology of the society.

The film makes an attempt to delve deep into the disposition of women with and without the veil. The film focuses on the psychology of the women when they are inside the veil and what happens when the veil is removed from their heads. The film investigates the feminist film theory by contextualizing the metaphor of veil which becomes an embodiment of the characters that complete a journey from suppression to self recognition.

II. Metaphor Of Veil

Laapataa Ladies, directed by Kiran Rao is a satirical take on the tradition of Purdah followed by brides post marriage. The pilot scene of the movie displays a fairly young couple who are about to start their marital journey. The bride, Phool is told by one of her relatives that the veil is a part of a married woman's attire and puts a long cloth on her head, covering her face which is filled with the nervousness of this new journey. The veil blurs her vision to which she is advised to get habitual to this vision even when she trips and nearly falls. She is schooled by another relative who says –“ Arre, Sambhalke. Lagikaa, Phool? Ekbaar Ghoonghat le liye, tohaagenahi, nechedekhkechalnaseekho!” (Laapataa Ladies, 3:26 -3:33) Hey, be careful. Are you hurt Phool? Once you have taken the veil, learn to see downward while walking and not forward. Phool is told about her marital duties as well as marital restrictions wherein she is not allowed to see the world with naked eye. She needs to see it through her veil and whatever she could gather from her indistinct vision; she is expected to act accordingly. The veil in this context functions as what film a technology of erasure and a material practice that simultaneously produces and enforces gendered invisibility. The veil not only distinguishes women from men but also becomes an important part of her subjugated identity.

Simon de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* says that “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” (Beauvoir 1), argues that becoming of a woman is a product of her social development rather than a biological function insisting the societal interpretation of a woman's persona and how she is carved into the stereotypical image of an ideal woman by the society. The characteristic of a woman is not a biological phenomenon but is the end product of the expectations of a patriarchal society. The tutelage of Phool's relatives regarding her conduct as a married woman who is supposed to coexist only with the veil on her face is an evident example of Beauvoir's theory of becoming of a woman. A girl who is born, breathed, taught and preached in open air, is supposed to breathe the air filtered through her veil, see the view that her veil allows her to see and transform into a woman behind the concealments of that very veil. As the couple bids farewell to Phool's parental home, they embark on their marital journey. A scared yet eager Phool looks at her childhood home one last time, uplifting her veil. This might be the last time when Phool is able to breathe outside her long veil. Phool's character is an epitome of patriarchal orientation of a woman's identity. Beauvoir's idea of a woman illustrates the areas of oppression of a woman's identity and establishes the marital institution as the site of production of the subjugated female identity such as Phool's character post marriage.

During the journey, Deepak suggests Phool to submit all her jewellery to him in order to avoid any kind of theft that may occur during their journey. The obedient wife as she was taught to become her entire life follows Deepak's instructions. Deepak tells her, “Hamre eehakahaawathai–jewarchori, dui dukhpaana, chhotadukhchori, badadukhthaana!” (Laapataa Ladies 4:36- 4:43) There is a saying at our place which says when there is a jewellery theft; you receive two kinds of grief. The theft is the small grief and the police station is the big grief.

The dutiful wife listens very carefully and blindly follows her husband's beliefs, so much so that she refuses going to the police station even in most dreadful incident that occurs to her as the story moves forward. This represents how marriage brings in a set of new rules and beliefs into an individual's life and in a patriarchal society like India, it is usually the beliefs of the husband and his family that the wife is expected to acquire.

Alfred Tennyson in his work *The Princess* says that
“Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.” (Tennyson, lines 427–429)

These lines of Tennyson's poem set the most fundamental framework of a quintessential patriarchal society. Tennyson through these lines conveys that the only duty of a woman is to obey the command of the man. If society is like a human body, then the man is the brain of the society. The woman who according to Tennyson is the heart, is only supposed to love, nurture and follow the commands of the man. Phool who is an epitome of a stifled Indian woman, during the onset of her marital journey carefully listens to every word uttered from her husband's mouth and makes it the corner stone of her life without giving it a thought. The construct of a female in a patriarchal society aims to envision her as the thoughtless counterpart of a male. Kiran Rao, attempts to carefully investigate the consequences of this oppressed ideology through the character of Phool who goes through a character arc after having this epiphany that she is wronged by her family and society who raised her in a way that delimited her capability as an individual.

III. Veil As A Symbol Of Patriarchal Control

The comic confusion of the plot takes place when the wedded couple boards a train and encounters two other couples who are “just married” and are dressed in the similar kind of wedding dresses. All the three brides on the train are covered in the same long, red veil which depicts the similarities of their fates as married women. The red veil worn by all the three brides is a metaphorical representation of the patriarchal code that causes the oppression of women from all the sections of the society. As the train moves towards its destination a casual conversation between the passengers takes place wherein, they start discussing the dowry that they have received from the family of the bride. Deepak does not involve himself in the conversation to which a lady, Sarla who also happens to be the mother in law of Phool's foil character Jaya's in the movie comments that 'JaroorLadkemein koi kothoga'(Laapataa Ladies, 6:55 – 6:57)There must be some issue with the guy (Deepak). Sarla's comment mirrors the fallacious ideology of the Indian society which disregards the grooms who refuses to take dowry. The normalcy of this evil practice is embedded to such an extent in the society that those who reject to succumb to this tradition of giving and receiving dowry are looked down upon. Dowry is a crucial part of the kinship of marriage in India especially the northern part of India. the groom and his family is given huge amount of gifts including jewellery, cash and property before or during the ceremonies of marriage. Dowry becomes the status symbol of the families of the bride groom representing their financial capabilities. The practice of dowry was banned by the law under the Dowry Act, 1961 of the Indian code (Dowry Prohibition Actsec. 3) atwhich prohibited both the parties of marriage to exchange any valuable objects in relation to dowry. However, it still continues to be a significant part of the Indian tradition, representing the commodification of marital relations. This utilitarian view of marriage is precedence in the film over the issue of suppression of woman because it pioneers the entire tradition of restricting woman in the name of marriage.

As the night proceeds, the first couple de-boards the train, shuffling the seating arrangement of the brides who have no subjective identity of their own. They are categorized by the grooms sitting beside them as to who is whose partner. This embodies Engels idea of monogamy as a function of patriarchal organization of the society that views woman as a property of a man(Engels Preface).According to Engels, monogamy was a practice that was introduced to the society in order to secure the rights of inheritance thereby constricting women to a single man who is the custodian of the financial and domestic affairs of a woman. This disfigures the position of a woman in the society and associates her as the suppressed subject of the patriarchal society. Due to this shuffling, Deepak gets confused and holds Jaya's's hand and de-board's the train whereas Phool ends up sitting with Jaya's's husband Pradeep. It is not until Deepak reaches home and his mother lifts up the veil of the bride, that they realize that she is not the one that Deepak is married to. He gets scolded by his father, Vidur for such a huge blunder,“Aree, Saamaanbadaljaaye, jutabadaljaaye, cycle, chattari ,atachikisaurka utha le aadmi.Haen? Doosra ka gharwalikaiseuthalaatahai koi?” (Laapataa Ladies, 14:07 – 14:16)Things get exchanged. One can pick someone else's bicycle, umbrella or shoe. How can someone pick up someone else's bride?

To which Deepak replies “Ab, Baujikaad, kaathiekjaisa,laal saadiekjaisaaurphirghunghatthatoh...”(“Laapataa Ladies”, 14:16 – 14: 14:21) Father, the height and structure are the same, the red saree is the same and on top of that there was veil so...

The father furiously shuts him down, “Chupekdam! Ghunghattha “(Laapataa Ladies,14:21- 14:22)Shut up at once! There was veil!

Jaya's backs up Deepak “Theek hi tohkehrahehai” (Laapataa Ladies,14:22 – 14:27)What he is saying is right.

As Jaya utters these words, there is a sense of surprise among the villagers especially the women, who don't expect a woman to speak in such affairs. In a patriarchal society woman are not expected to speak in the matters of men and when they do like Jaya's did, a sense of judgment is felt in the eyes of the people.

Gayatri Spivak in her seminal work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' renders the idea of the subjugated voice of the women (Spivak). Spivak's argument that the subaltern, understood as the subject who is structurally excluded from hegemonic discursive formations, cannot "speak" because any articulation is necessarily mediated, co-opted, or rendered unintelligible within dominant frameworks has been subject to extensive debate, critique, and refinement.Jaya offers a different modality of subaltern response. Where Phoollearns to speak within the system, Jaya learns to refuse the system altogether. What Jaya represents, rather, is the possibility of refusal—the insistence that subalternity is not destiny, that the veil can be lifted, that the horizon can be imagined. This is not a politics of revolution but a politics of the gap: the small space of autonomy that opens when patriarchal systems fail to achieve total surveillance. Spivak's pessimism about subaltern speech is balanced, in Laapataa Ladies, by a cautious optimism about subaltern action. Jaya cannot fully "speak" within the dominant order, but she can move; she can choose; she can refuse

Getting past the judgment of the people around her, Jaya's continues to speak.“Isstambujaiseghunghatkepaarnaatohladeejkisakaldikhtihai, naladeej ko

questions and approaches helps Phool in unlearning the patriarchal teachings that she had received from her mother since she was a kid.

Chotu introduces Manju Maai as a powerful woman who will be able to resolve Phool's issue. He tells Phool that "Tabhitoh hum bole ki Manju Maai kedu kaan pe chal. OO to dnikalegi. Chotathat abbe se heeyankaamkarta hu. Maai badidayaaluhai" (Laapataa Ladies.), That is why I told you to go to Manju Maai's shop, she will find a solution. I have worked here since I was a kid. Mother is very kind.

The film's most intriguing figure, from a Spivakian perspective, is Manju Maai. As a woman who left her husband, built a business, and now serves as a mentor to younger women, Manju Maai occupies an ambiguous position. She is no longer subaltern in the strict sense. She has achieved a degree of economic independence and social standing, but she remains marginal to the dominant order. She is a single woman running a tea stall, constantly vulnerable to male harassment and legal challenge.

Manju suggests Phool to go back to her own house. Phool refuses to do so. When asked for the reason behind her decision by Manju, Phool replies Bahut badnaamihogi... sab kahengey ki Phool mein hi kauno dos-gunaah hogi kitesan par chodaaya... (Laapataa Ladies, 36:44- 36:48) There will be a lot of slander. Everyone will say that there must be some fault in Phool that is why her husband left her on the station.

Manju replies to Phool, "Gaanv walo ka baare mein hare jaakar sochna, haen? Pahle Khoj Khaajke Maikhe chali jaachupchaap." (Laapataa Ladies, 37:14- 37:19) Think about the villagers once you go home. First find out and go back to your parents house silently.

Phool who is stuck in her conventional mind set says, "Bhalegharki bahu-betibinapatike Maikenahijaati" (Laapataa Ladies, 37:24- 37:27), Daughter and Daughter in law of a good family doesn't return to her parents home without her husband. Manju annoyed by Phool's ideology schools her that she has been ignorant of her independence so much so that she is unaware about the address of the house she is supposed to go to.

After a few more teachings and scoldings by Manju, Phool decides to work on her shop until her husband returns. Manju's empowered presence makes Phool realize that how society has only taught her to become a shadow of her husband and not explore the strength within her. As soon as she uplifts her veil, she is able to see a world where she can handle the challenges thrown on her without the support of a patriarchal power. She feels overwhelmed when Manju Maai gives her first income that she has earned by making sweets at the shop.

Virginia Woolf in her work *A Room of One's Own* lays emphasis on the significance of financial freedom in a woman's life. She exerts the ideology of self-expression in a woman's life through her work which is directly proportional to her financial freedom. Woolf focuses on the reason of a woman's role which is limited to domestic chores is her financial freedom. (Woolf) A male is assigned the role of being the bread earner which delimits a woman's independence of her choice of career. Kiran Rao, through Phool's character addresses the long-standing battle of women's freedom by giving Phool the weapon of her financial freedom which helps her fight the voice inside her which was suppressed due to her socio-economic conditioning. Phool becomes aware of her potential and the key to her cognizance of self is her financial freedom.

IV. Unveiling The Constraints Of Veil

Deepak on the other hand keeps looking for Phool. Jaya's however has a hidden motive to run away from Deepak's house only to give wings to her dreams which were shattered by her own mother who refused Jaya's of studying further and forced her to marry Pradeep who was a greedy and violent husband. Jaya uses her veil to hide her motive of pursuing her dreams. During the course of the film she is seen sneaking out of Deepak's house where she is taken as a guest until her husband arrives. She sneaks out to complete the formalities of her admission to study agriculture which interests her a lot. Every time she suspects that her freedom is at risk, she shields herself with the veil. She uses the same veil that restricted her of her dreams as armor to now protect her from every force that threatened her idea of self, which was empowered and strong. This act of Jaya's resembles her post colonial identity which has traces of her subordinate self. The veil metaphorically becomes a tool of concealment and a protector for Jaya's.

Jaya's presence in Deepak's house acts as a source of fresh air for the women of the house. She enlightens these women about the importance of self care and female friendship. She embraces her friendship with Deepak's sister in law, Poonam who is a classic example of lost identity of a married woman. This friendship between the two women of the house that is breathing between the confinements of the veil represents the solidarity of the situation. Rao brings together two women of indifferent motives and aligns their voids of friendship.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her work, *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, Practicing Solidarity* focuses upon the identity of Collective Sisterhood which envisions the experience of womanhood as a central idea, without generalizing the social, economic and political situation of women all over the world. It advocates an inclusive way of understanding feminism wherein the differences are honored along with the bridge of solidarity. (Mohanty) The friendship between Poonam and Jaya's is a product of

collective sisterhood, suggested by Mohanty and the strength of solidarity which eases the journey of the two women and gives them a reason to be depend upon each other with empathy.

The movie represents the different layers of society via the multifaceted metaphor that the veil holds. The female protagonists, Jaya's and Phool not only break the constraints of the veil but also break the constraints of their destined destinations to reach at their desired destinations. They gather the courage to look beyond the veil, beyond the patriarchal restriction and embark upon a journey of finding their self.

V. Conclusion

Kiran Rao introduces the narrative of veil as a tale of tradition, societal norms and societal expectations, but as the movie moves forwards and the same veil becomes the source of metaphorical irony, mirroring the double standards of the society which aims to find the identity of a woman by covering her into yards of cloth like every other women of the society. The movie towards the climax represents the veil as a site of resistance from the oppression of the society.

The film examines the stereotypes of a marital relationship, and the patriarchal structure of kinship in India. It encourages viewers to investigate the multiple layers of tradition and its impact on both the genders. The film urges to take a deep insight in our rituals and eradicate the social evils embedded in the name of culture which not only restrict our progress as a society but also affect the social and mental growth of a particular section of the society and in this case it is the women of the society that are affected by such traditions. These traditions not only separate them from the opposite sex but also mark a sense of inferiority in them, as shown by the character of Phool. The protagonist, Phool and Jaya's bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern ideology of the women and the common struggles that they share. The film urges a sense of urgency in the viewers to look beyond the traditions and work on the ongoing issues of the society.

The film "Laapataa Ladies" is the testament of Rao's commendable capability of depicting the issues of the society in the most impactful manner. The film leaves a mark on the viewers challenging them to work actively on the issues such as gender discrimination and inequality. Laapataa Ladies concludes with an image of women in motion. Jaya boards a train, alone and unafraid, heading toward her future. Phool returns to Deepak, but on her own terms, having discovered a voice she did not know she possessed. The veils that caused the initial confusion remain, but they have been transformed: no longer instruments of erasure, they become markers of a visibility that has been earned rather than imposed.

As one critic writes, Rao's film "asks us to lift our veils and confront the injustice and discrimination that we have normalized over generations"(Datar). This call is addressed not only to the film's characters but to its audience. The veil, in this reading, is not merely a cloth worn by rural brides but a metaphor for all the ways we refuse to see the comfortable ignorance that allows injustice to persist. To lift the veil is to see clearly, to recognize the "lost ladies" in our midst, and to acknowledge that being lost is not a personal failing but a structural condition.

The film's final gift is its insistence on hope without naivete. Change is possible, Rao suggests, but it is slow, uneven, and always incomplete. The lost ladies may be found, but only if we are willing to look and to see what has been hiding in plain sight.

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