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Awakening of Female Self-Consciousness in Indian Cinema ——An Analysis of the Female Characterization in *A Thursday*

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Abstract:
Indian films, as an important part of Indian culture, reflect the changes in Indian society and the evolution of women's status.This paper focuses on the critical theme of "emotion" in Indian cinema and its significance within the unique social context of India, particularly in the film A Thursday, which is a thriller and crime genre movie. The paper explores the role of ecofeminism in shaping the characters within the film. The story revolves around a kindergarten teacher, Yami Gautam, who deliberately kidnaps 16 children and garners widespread attention through live streaming. Her shocking actions shake the city of Mumbai and its police force, sparking intense debate across the nation, particularly among political figures. As the movie progresses, Yami's true motive is revealed: to secure a safer environment for women across India, showcasing the profound feminist concerns in Indian cinema.

Keywords:
Indian Cinema, Laura Mulvey, Dai Jinhua, Masala Films, Feminism

1 Emotional Aesthetics in Indian Cinema

In Indian history and culture, "emotion" has always held a place of importance. In Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, the aesthetic concepts of "emotion" and "flavor" are crucial. Recent years have seen Indian films rise in acclaim, no longer dismissed as shallow, illogical musical dramas but recognized for their high quality and emotional depth. Unlike Western dramatic theory and aesthetic experience, which emphasize plot, Indian cinema focuses more on emotion.

"Indian films are not as genre-specific as Hollywood films; they possess distinct local characteristics." This stems from Indian directors' focus on social issues within their country, presenting these societal pain points through realistic, relatable characters. For example, *Dangal* tells the story of two girls who become world-class wrestlers, blending sentimentality with an inspirational narrative that courageously confronts the low societal status of women in India. The protagonists of many Indian films are often ordinary people, making it easy for audiences to emotionally engage with the film and its social commentary. Indian directors' attention to social realities, combined with narrative strategies that evoke pleasure, allows Indian and Asian societal issues to be portrayed on screen. The reflection and criticism inherent in these films, alongside the "emotion"

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the directors aim to convey, have deeply moved audiences.

2 Indian History and Indian Cinema

The success of Indian cinema is not just due to directors' emotional mastery but also because of India's unique cultural background, social conditions, and distinct national aesthetic forms. Indian religion, notably Buddhism, imbues Indian cinema with a philosophical, cosmic spirit, expressing profound metaphysical concepts that remain deeply human, focusing on human emotions, feelings, and moods, thus awakening aesthetic sentiments. Indian films often feature traditional costumes, giving them a national aesthetic characteristic that sets them apart in global cinema. Although India's languages are mixed, English is predominantly used, which has helped Indian films gain global popularity. This form of cinema is known as "*Masala Films*."

"*Masala Films*" refers to a unique genre of commercial cinema in India, characterized by a blend of various elements that appeal to audiences, including social issues, national history, and religious beliefs. The unique social and historical context of India has allowed Indian cinema to gradually shed its previous labels of "musical drama" and "illogical storytelling," evolving into the critically acclaimed cinema we see today.Over the last several decades, Indian films have witnessed a significant transformation in the way women are portrayed through films. The creation of *A Thursday* is deeply connected to India's cultural and historical backdrop, reflecting the despairing situation of women in contemporary India. The rise of feminism has also had an indelible impact on Indian cinema. India's religious culture, caste system, and social norms contain numerous rules and ideas that restrict women's freedom and discriminate against them. The *Manusmriti*, a Hindu scripture considered a *Brahminical* code of ethics, is revered in India. It contains numerous provisions that discriminate against women, thereby determining the low social status of women in ancient India.

In the final scene of *A Thursday*, a chilling statement is presented: "Since you started watching this movie, statistically speaking, eight women in India have been raped." Modernization in India came with its own set of issues which raised more questions than answers. It has been observed since ages that no matter how much progressive and modern we claim to be; we are still very much a part of the society where a variety of atrocities and violence against women like killing and aborting the girl child, honour killing, acid attacks, rape, etc. The alarming frequency of these crimes is partly due to India's inadequate criminal justice system, where the punishment for rapists is not clearly defined, and the final sentences are often lenient. Postmodern feminism advocates for discourse and power, aiming to create new knowledge and theories, ultimately establishing new rights. This is why the protagonist of *A Thursday*, Yami Gautam, goes to great lengths to ensure that two rapists are brought to justice. Her actions stem from a desire to break free from patriarchal and normative oppression, striving for a brighter future for women.

3 Yami Gautam: Self-Redemption Amid Blood and Tears

Laura Mulvey's Hollywood experience highlights a prevalent rule: men look or women are looked at; men are active subjects/women are passive objects. Under this rule, female characters are often single-dimensional, existing to serve the actions of the male protagonist and to advance the plot. Yami Gautam, however, differs from other classic female characters. She is no longer a woman under the male gaze but a character with

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depth, whose personal growth, personality formation, and ideological evolution are gradually revealed to the audience, making her a fully fleshed-out character.

At the beginning of the film, the director uses shadowed lighting to portray Yami Gautam as a "kidnapper," contrasting sharply with her earlier image as a kind and gentle kindergarten teacher. Yami chooses to livestream her actions to pressure the police and achieve her goal of meeting the Prime Minister. Until she meets the Prime Minister, everyone speculates about Yami's true intentions—some believe she is after money, while others think she is seeking fame. The most ironic aspect is that the female police officer, without investigating the cause of the incident, directly labels Yami as a "show-off." This highlights the subjective and narrow views of society towards women's actions in a specific time and place. Yami Gautam's character is stereotyped by everyone, and their limited understanding of her leads to a "halo effect," where judgments about her are based on personal biases rather than her actual experiences and motivations.

As the fog lifts, Yami's past is gradually revealed. During her high school years, she was a cheerful and innocent girl until she was assaulted by two strangers on a school bus, a trauma that haunted her for life. In her quest for justice, Yami's family paid a heavy price, yet their efforts were in vain-her father passed away, her mother was left in tears, and Yami herself fell into depression. At this point, Yami sought light from society but received no help. Ultimately, she chose self-redemption, seeking delayed justice.

In the later stages of the film, it is particularly ironic that the police couple responsible for the kidnapping case are the same officers who handled Yami's rape case years ago. At that time, they neglected the case, deeming it "unimportant" in their pursuit of career advancement. The female officer, despite sharing the same gender as Yami, never empathized with her plight, reflecting the internalized patriarchy among women who aspire to align with male power. These women aspire to be strong and force themselves to adopt male traits, forgetting that women can also be powerful.

In the film's climax, Yami achieves her goal of meeting the Prime Minister, revealing that the children who seemingly "died" during the livestream were merely playing a game with their teacher. Yami's true intention was to seek justice for girls like her. Yami Gautam's character is highly successful-she is no longer a female character under the male gaze but a truly vibrant, autonomous individual. Her actions are consistent with human development, embodying resilience, courage, determination, and the unique softness of women. She represents the great strength of self-rescue in the face of adversity and the noble cause of seeking justice for countless women. Unlike Laura Mulvey's description, where the audience's perspective is solely through the male protagonist's eyes, Yami's character is portrayed independently, with her own agency and motivations.

This film, inspired by the 2012 "*Delhi Bus Rape Case*", is part of a broader cinematic movement addressing women's issues in India, as seen in other films like "*Mom*". The film tightly intertwines cinema with social and cultural issues, highlighting the director's intent to address and improve societal problems.

4 The Prime Minister: Holding the Weak in Her Heart from a High Position

The character of the Prime Minister plays a crucial role in *A Thursday*, serving as a pivotal force in the

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film's narrative. Upon learning of Yami Gautam's demand to meet her, the Prime Minister immediately consults with her advisors. Despite their advice to ignore the incident, the Prime Minister, driven by concern for the children's safety, insists on taking action. The Prime Minister criticizes her subordinates, stating: "If you do not care about the matters of your own country, there is no point in working for me." This situation highlights the deep-seated gender biases in society, where even a female Prime Minister's decisions are questioned because of her gender. As Laura Mulvey once said, we cannot create a new heaven under the shadow of patriarchy because today's society is still patriarchal, permeating every aspect of life, even affecting those in high positions like the Prime Minister.

In the film's conclusion, the Prime Minister voices support for Yami Gautam's proposal in a meeting, even though such a stance might cost her votes. This act pushes the film to its climax, subtly reflecting the awakening of female self-consciousness in contemporary India and the various societal shackles imposed on women.

5 Media: A Double-Edged Sword in the Information Age

The media serves as "the window through which the public perceives the world." However, the shape and size of this window can significantly influence people's understanding of the world. In the information age, most events are widely disseminated online, where the public freely comments. Yami Gautam expresses her frustration with the chaotic state of social media: "This is my first time broadcasting on TV. I finally understand why people look so confused. Everything is delayed by 7-8 seconds. This is like the delay between the government and the police, the delay between the police and journalists, and the delay between journalists and the public. During this time, people like you add sensationalism to the news and ruin lives." This statement reflects Yami's dissatisfaction with the media's lack of responsibility and awareness, as they often prioritize sensationalism over the potential harm their reports may cause.

In the film, a child's mother, who is a journalist, exemplifies this issue. After her son is safely released, she exposes Yami Gautam's private information for her own professional gain, spreading false rumors and accusations without considering the impact on the still-trapped children. This selfish, irresponsible behavior highlights the chaos within the media landscape, where the public is often misled by misinformation, and no one seems to care about the truth. The media is a double-edged sword—while it can bring issues to light, it can also obscure the truth. For the media to serve the public effectively, it must grow and improve, ensuring it protects the public rather than exploiting them for profit. This is likely the message Yami Gautam and the director of *A Thursday* wish to convey.

6 Conclusion

"Ecofeminism emerged in the mid-19th century and early 20th century, influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of 'liberty, equality, and natural rights.' Women in France, Britain, and the United States fought for their rights to freedom, equality, education, and employment, striving to end patriarchal society." Indian feminist scholar Vandana Shiva led Indian women in ecological and social activism, exploring the relationship between women, the environment, and social development in her work *The Violence of the Green Revolution*. This ideological movement has led to the emergence of strong female characters in Indian cinema who speak

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out for themselves and for all women, breaking away from traditional portrayals of women.

The concept of women fighting for justice, despite experiencing personal injustice, is reflected in *A Thursday*. In the film, Yami's ideas are voiced by the Prime Minister in court, symbolizing the passing of the torch of female empowerment, ultimately leading to a brighter future for women. "The miserable status of women is caused by specific social and cultural factors. Therefore, the task of the women's movement is to challenge the existing order, change it, and elevate the status of women." The international dissemination of New Century Indian cinema "incorporates international humanistic concerns into films, enabling audiences from different cultural backgrounds to understand and resonate with them." The emergence of films like *A Thursday* reflects this spirit of humanistic concern.

Ecofeminist thought has profoundly influenced Indian cinema, yet there is still much progress to be made. Feminist film theory, feminist films, and films about women are still evolving, moving forward on their journey.

India, as a rapidly emerging economy, is no longer the India of our stereotypes. Today, India is one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with its government vigorously developing its manufacturing sector to drive economic growth. In 2022, India's GDP ranked fifth globally, and the World Bank predicts it will become the world's third-largest economy in the future. However, alongside its economic growth, India faces significant social and cultural challenges that need to be addressed.

The authors, *Taylor & Francis 2024*, posit that the alternative narratives, created by Bollywood and accepted by mainstream audiences, have become a catalyst to elevate women or female actors to protagonists, without the need to conform to the sexist mores of mainstream Bollywood. The film ends with a group of women looking hopefully at their teacher, Yami, as the newspaper announces that the Prime Minister has presented Yami's proposal in court. Although this scene remains an unrealized dream for Indian women, it is a hopeful vision for the future. As more films that awaken female self-consciousness continue to emerge, one day, the small lights will converge into a torch, bringing the dawn of a brighter future for Indian women.

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