

Visualizing Feminist Resistance: Reclaiming Feminine Identity and Space through Empowerment in *Laapata Ladies*

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Abstract

This article is an earnest endeavour to examine the cinema *Laapata Ladies* through a critical lens, analysing its plot, themes, narrative structure and obviously its political, social and cultural significance. The film directed by Kiran Rao undertakes a laborious venture offering a scathing yet distressing exploration of gender, patriarchy, and feminine identity in rural India. It narrates a derisive story of two women who go missing in a train journey. Through an invigorating narrative the film explores the superficially absent but inherently visible intersection of individual freedom and societal expectations. It realistically examines the struggles of its central characters confronting the pressures of tradition, family, and personal desires. The ordinary women defy the conventional roles the society expects them to play and instead they walk less treaded paths as they brave the personal and social constraints placed upon them by both the community and the family. Eventually, with a gripping and a persuasive narrative, *Laapata Ladies* realistically portrays feminine life in rural India by boldly challenging the orthodox pillars and conventional symbols. It certainly advocates the need for a radical change which has become the need of the hour displaying without embellishments the immense potential of womanhood towards empowerment.

Keywords: Gender, patriarchy, feminism, subversion, identity, self- reliance, women individuality and empowerment.

Introduction

It has been a long journey undertaken by the Indian cinema serving for over a century mirroring and reflecting the complex and yet a thriving Indian society. The themes created from the society and for the society vacillates between the fantastical fiction and acerbic social facts related to Indian society. Into this cinematic tradition, Kiran Rao's *Laapata Ladies* (2023) occupies a unique space as a film that interweaves humour with a deep contemplative narrative. It is set in the heartlands of rural India during the 1990s, and portrays the story of two young brides who disappear during a train journey. Through its appealing yet disconcerting storyline, *Laapata Ladies* questions societal constructs of gender, identity, empowerment and feminine individuality candidly appealing the people to review the deeply ingrained conventional socio-cultural norms within the society. It contextualizes within its broader framework a critique of patriarchal norms that is still prevalent and ubiquitously dominates as a governing force in rural India. It navigates through a seemingly simple narrative structure the complex psychological trauma of various characters comprising both females and males. It also highlights the film's significance in the contemporary socio-political landscape, where matters of gender inequality and women's empowerment remain are foregrounded for civic discourse.

Struggle for Empowerment

Laapata Ladies by Kiran Rao is a voyage by ordinary women to reclaim their real identity ensconced under the rubric of male supremacy in the Indian society. As a gripping tale of self-empowerment and liberation the cinema vividly presents a complex portrait of modern womanhood, highlighting the intricacies of identity, freedom, and the search for individuality in a world that often silences female voices. The cinema through these distinct women's journeys and a with grandeur narrative not only critiques the socio-cultural environment but also underscores the resilience and strength of women who boldly strive to carve their own paths for a promising career. At its core, *Laapata Ladies* simply presents a deceptively unpretentious plot; the sudden disappearance of two women and the subsequent pandemonium that unfolds in their small rural village. However, beneath this surface lies a rich tapestry of themes that critique the stringent and unruly patriarchal structures and above all the commodification of women. The film's rural setting serves as a microcosm of traditional Indian society, where women's identities are often subsumed under familial and societal roles. As Amartya Sen comments:

Women's capabilities are constrained not only by inadequate access to resources, but also by the social and cultural norms that govern their lives. In rural areas, these constraints often go beyond material deprivation, affecting women's autonomy, health, and educational opportunities. The freedom to choose one's path in life is a central aspect of human development, and it is essential to focus on improving women's capabilities in these dimensions to achieve true social and economic equality. (187)

The protagonists in the film, Jaya (Pushpa) and Phool, symbolize two divergent facades of womanhood. Jaya, with her daring demeanour, represents rebelliousness against societal expectations, while Phool symbolizes the quiet struggle of ordinary women making themselves compatible to traditional roles. Their disappearance sparks off a series of events that not only unravel the personal lives of their families but also expose the community's collective apprehensions regarding female freedom. The denial of female identity forms the basic plot of the cinema. The narrative shrewdly customizes satirical events to highlight the irrationality of these anxieties, as characters engage in a wide search for the missing women and grappling with the implications of their absence. P. Mehta aptly states: "The disappearance of women in cinema often serves as a metaphor for their erasure in societal narratives. Rao's approach in *Laapata Ladies* uniquely combines humour with critique, presenting the missing women as catalysts for societal introspection." (45)

Kiran Rao adeptly employs an array of cinematic techniques to bolster the film's thematic depth. The cinematography captures the rustic charm of rural India while juxtaposing it with the stark realities of gender inequality. Wide-angle shots of the village landscape emphasize the physical and metaphorical constraints placed on women, while close-ups of the protagonists convey their inner turmoil and resilience. Aravind Sharma says:

Rao's use of visual symbolism—such as the recurring motif of train tracks—serves to highlight the tension between freedom and confinement. The tracks, while representing mobility, also underscore the societal pathways that women are often expected to follow. (112)

The film's dialogue is a distinctive feature richly blending humour with sharp social commentary. The use of regional dialects adds authenticity to the narrative, allowing audiences to immerse themselves in the cultural context. Furthermore, the film's non-linear storytelling, intermingled with flashbacks, provides a layered understanding of the characters'

motivations and histories. Music also plays a pivotal role in *Laapata Ladies*, with the soundtrack navigating between the traditional folk tunes and contemporary melodies. This fusion reflects the film's thematic tautness between custom and modernism. The background score subtly underscores moments of tension and self-examination, enhancing the emotional impact of the narrative.

One of the film's most compelling aspects is its engagement with feminist discourses. By centring the narrative on two women and their journey, both literal and metaphorical, *Laapata Ladies* challenges the patriarchal narratives that dominate mainstream Indian cinema. The film critiques the patriarchal mindset that views women as possessions to be protected, controlled, or reclaimed. It also raises concerns of considering women as only commodity rather than living beings. Women seldom have the prospect to venture out of the house. Moreover, they are deprived of the all-possible opportunities to explore their life due to lack of financial liberty.

Phool and Jaya's disappearance triggers a catalyst for examining how society perceives women's mobility and autonomy. Their families' reactions range from genuine concern to fear of societal judgment, reflecting the cultural obsession with maintaining a woman's honour. The film's satirical tone underscores the hypocrisy of this obsession, as characters prioritize appearances over genuine care for the missing women. The protagonists' eventual reclamation of identity and individuality serve as a powerful statement against these oppressive structures. Through their journey, the central female characters discover several facets of their identities suppressed by societal expectations. This transformation is depicted with nuance, avoiding cliches and instead portraying their empowerment as a gradual, organic process. Shashi Tharoor states:

Women in rural India continue to bear the brunt of social and economic challenges. They are typically denied a voice in household decision-making and public policy, and their contributions to agriculture and rural economy are undervalued. Empowerment means transforming these systems of gender-based exclusion. It requires not just the provision of resources but a fundamental shift in attitudes towards rural women, recognizing their work as integral to national progress and allowing them equal participation in all spheres of life. (210)

A postcolonial lens further augments the understanding of *Laapata Ladies*. The film's rural setting and its portrayal of societal structures reflect the still prevalent impact of colonial

principles on the contemporary Indian society. The characters' struggle to assert their identity can be seen as a microcosm of the nation's broader struggle to redefine itself in the postcolonial era. The role of women in rural Indian household still compromises their existence. They are denied education, can't claim share in family land and are confined to the four walls of their home. They are directed to use the veil to cover their faces and in fact their identity. Kapoor aptly states that: "Rao's depiction of rural India captures the tension between colonial legacies and indigenous identities, highlighting how these influences intersect in shaping gender norms." (77)

Apart from the main central characters the female character of Manju Mai deserves special attention. She provides accommodation and food to Phool in her state of despair and Phool in turn repays her debt by baking the sweet delicious 'kalakand'. It becomes an instant hit among the passengers and Manju Mai is happy to have a helping hand in the form of Phool. Manju Mai is the finest instance of an empowered woman. She had a bitter married life and the bitter lessons learnt made her strong enough to brave the challenges posed by a patriarchal society. She teaches Phool the most important lesson of life, to stand on one's own feet for sustaining themselves. Women are robust and if situation becomes a challenge they will never baulk.

Manju Mai becomes the flawless symbol of a self-reliant person. She though hesitant to accept Phool at the beginning, due to her extreme submissiveness, later becomes her affable saviour and guardian. The life of a lonely woman trying to eke out a life on her own by selling 'samosas and chai' highlights the strong will power of woman in general during a daring situation. She makes Phool comprehend the inherent value of self-sustenance and economic independence. The film also engages with the socio-economic changes brought about by liberalization of the market and economy in the 1990s. This period of transition serves as a backdrop for exploring how shifting cultural paradigms impact individual identities, particularly those of women.

Laapata Ladies offers a nuanced portrayal of rural India, abjuring the romanticized depictions often seen in mainstream cinema. The film captures the vibrancy of village life, from its colourful festivals to its close-knit communities, while also addressing the underlying issues of gender inequality, caste dynamics, and societal hierarchies. The naivety of villagers is clearly visible through their acceptance of Jaya aka Pushpa. Their ardent belief in human relations and bonding is evidently portrayed through the characters of Phool her husband and Jaya. Jaya takes care of her sister and secretly sends money for meeting the

educational expenses. Iyer aptly comments: “Rural India in *Laapata Ladies* is neither a utopia nor a dystopia. Rao’s depiction strikes a balance, showcasing both the community’s warmth and its systemic flaws” (37). The village setting becomes a character in its own right influencing the narrative and shaping the protagonists’ experiences.

Set in the 1990s, *Laapata Ladies* resonates with contemporary audiences by addressing issues that remain pertinent today. The film’s exploration of women’s autonomy, societal expectations, and the tension between tradition and modernity echoes ongoing debates about gender equality in India and beyond. Kapoor comments: “By situating its narrative in the 1990s, *Laapata Ladies* invites viewers to reflect on the progress made since then while acknowledging the persistence of gender-based challenges” (76).

Jaya’s endeavour to assert her right to education is an eye-opener not only for the villagers but also to the tens and thousands of women who still are languishing in dark for they hardly have any chance to free themselves. Education is a powerful tool that can serve to emancipate rural women from the slavish life they are forced to endure due to lack of literacy. Jaya, on the other hand, received education and wants to pursue higher education to stand on her own feet. She understands the potency of education and the change it can bring to her otherwise monotonous life. Fate has played its role and now it is her chance to make a difference. She tries her best to show the vibrant facade of education to other illiterate characters. Even male characters find her intelligence and experience to be emulated. As Malala Yousufzai comments:

We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced. The empowerment of girls and women is not just about making them visible, but about giving them the tools to speak for themselves and to change the world around them. Every girl should have the right to go to school, to learn, and to decide for herself the future she wants to live. (314-315)

The narrative also reflects broader cultural shifts, as increasing numbers of women assert their independence and challenge traditional norms. By situating its story in a bygone era, the film highlights the enduring nature of these struggles while also celebrating the progress that has been made. This dual perspective allows *Laapata Ladies* to serve as both a critique of the past and a call to action for the present.

Conclusion

Laapata Ladies is a remarkable addition to the canon of semi-classical Indian Hindi cinema, blending humour, angst, and social critique to create a narrative that is both

entertaining and thought-provoking. Through its exploration of gender, identity, and autonomy, the film challenges conventional narratives and advocates for a more equitable society. Kiran Rao's direction, coupled with magnificent performances and insightful writing, ensures that *Laapata Ladies* leaves a lasting impression on its audience. As Indian cinema continues to evolve, films like *Laapata Ladies* play a crucial role in pushing the boundaries of storytelling and representation. By giving voice to marginalized perspectives and addressing pressing social issues, such films contribute to a richer, more inclusive cinematic landscape. *Laapata Ladies* is not just a cinema about two missing women; it is a compelling narrative about reclaiming individuality, women empowerment, challenging patriarchal norms and envisioning a future where every individual has the freedom to define their own identity.

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