



## ***Sherni*: Vidya Balan's Subversion of Patriarchal Norms and Ecofeminist Narratives in Bollywood**

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### ABSTRACT

The representation of women in Bollywood has historically been shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, often restricting their roles to confined stereotypes both within households and professional spaces. This analysis delves into how Indian cinema has portrayed working women, focusing on the occupational and societal challenges depicted on screen. Women are frequently shown in nurturing professions like teaching or nursing, while rarely seen in positions of authority, such as doctors, lawyers, or police officers. Films like *Sherni*, featuring Vidya Balan, offer a counter-narrative by presenting women as resilient professionals navigating complex social and institutional barriers.

Through the lens of ecofeminism and gender politics, *Sherni* portrays its protagonist as a forest officer challenging societal expectations and corrupt systems. Vidya's character embodies a nuanced struggle—balancing professional dedication, familial expectations, and societal scrutiny. The film highlights her ability to navigate adversity, fostering a narrative that redefines traditional gender roles.

This study also explores Bollywood's evolving portrayal of working women in films such as *Dear Zindagi*, *Gunjan Saxena*, and *Mardaani*, which provide a more empowering view of women's professional lives. Vidya Balan's career, marked by roles in *Kahani*, *Tumhari Sulu*, and *Shakuntala Devi*, is examined as a significant contributor to this shift. These films illustrate the potential of Indian cinema to challenge patriarchal structures, advocate for gender equality, and inspire societal change by showcasing women as complex, multifaceted individuals.

Women have always been seen as an entity to be kept within the confined spaces of the household and not beyond it. Working women are seen as a taboo in Indian society and this reflection is evident in the depiction of women in earlier cinemas. Women stepping out to work and returning late from work is considered unethical and is still not acceptable in our society. This treatment of women can be seen throughout the history of Indian cinema, where they have been allowed to work but have been ridiculed for leaving their homes for work. We have a history of a hundred years in Bollywood, where working women have never been given their dues for earning their livelihood. Females in Bollywood have been permitted to work as teachers, secretaries, students, nurses and not as doctors, lawyers, or police officers.

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### Occupational Stereotypes in Bollywood

A study which compared the occupations of the male and female characters in a huge number of Bollywood cinemas found out that females were largely portrayed as teachers, secretaries, students, nurses and very rarely as doctors, lawyers and police officers. On the other hand, the study also found that 'males are given higher level occupations than females.' The study shows when it comes to occupations like teachers and students, females are high in numbers whereas males dominate in roles of doctors, lawyers and police officers in Bollywood.

### **Navigating Professional Hurdles: Women's Struggles in the Workplace**

Talking about the difficulties one must face as a woman in carrying out a profession has never been an easy task. We can estimate it by looking at the Indian Air Force, which took nearly six decades to induct the first batch of women into the Indian Air Force in 1994 as female transport and helicopter pilots since its inception in 1932, and nearly two decades to create a biopic, which was recently released under the title *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*.

There are only a few narratives in Bollywood where successful working women have found relatively better representation on the silver screen. But such a portrayal of strong women from real life to reel life has definitely changed the perception of society towards working women. Movies like *Dear Zindagi*, *Mardaani*, *Gunjan Saxena*, *Chak De India* and *Dangal* are the ones that stand out in this category.

Vidya Balan's *Sherni* is her salute to countless women who navigate through the 'jungle of life'. She said regarding the movie that "*Sherni* is an ode to countless women who navigate their way and overcome several challenges, sometimes even without making any noise." In this dramatization by Amit Masurkar's, Vidya Balan plays an upstanding forest official who is entrusted to resolve the man-animal conflict. Through her journey, the film follows how Vidya's character, Vidya, takes on the patriarchal society and navigates her way through social barriers put up for women.

During a press conference, she conceded that the film is a representation of women of all kinds, who are striving to make a change. "You don't need to roar to be a tigress. There are various shades, reflections of '*Sherni*' (tigress) that each of us represents. My character is a woman of few words, reserved but strong-willed. So you can be that. "You don't have to scream out loud from the rooftops to be heard all the time or even be visible all the time. In each of the households in India, there's a '*Sherni*' and a lot of times she's invisible. This is my salute to all of them out there," Vidya told reporters.

### **Vidya Balan's Contribution to Female Representation**

This chapter intends to investigate Vidya Balan's role as a working woman in *Sherni*. The character of *Vidya* represents working women in different fields, who grapple with their familial and societal struggles quite efficiently in the movies. The other supportive phenomenon of a relatively better representation of female characters has been the positive reception of our audience in the past two decades. And actors like Vidya Balan, Sridevi, Kangana Ranaut and Alia Bhatt have a lot to contribute to this list, where Vidya Balan leads them all with the majority of women-centric roles in her kitty. Women's central roles, which appear so natural and readily acceptable to us, have resulted from years of hard work and perseverance by filmmakers and artists who have always believed in the concept of equality of gender and its representation on screen. Vidya, too, has created her niche in such roles with a lot of hard work and perseverance. These roles almost feel like they are tailor-made for her. Given the limited market for women's cinema in Bollywood, these roles and narratives centred around females must have seemed unreal and unwise to many filmmakers in the past. Vidya has created a market of her own in the last two decades with films ranging from *No One Killed Jessica*, *Kahani*, *Tumhari Sulu*, to *Dirty Picture*, *Shakuntala Devi* and many more on the list. Furthermore, she has been phenomenal in all her roles and has done them justice, as well as having a very wise and flawless consistency in her film selections.

### ***Sherni* and the Representation of Ecofeminism**

Vidya Balan's recent release, *Sherni*, received widespread critical acclaim for her extraordinary performance, and the film highlighted the difficult work atmosphere for a female forest officer and the concept of ecofeminism. In the context of ecofeminism, there has been very limited work that has been done in Bollywood. The work has been praised and has brought to light the connections between women and nature in terms of their treatment by a patriarchal society. The story revolves around a female forest officer who has been posted in a remote village near a forest in Madhya Pradesh. She is portrayed as an ideal officer who struggles to function in the midst of a corrupt system. She has been portrayed as a woman who thinks differently, and is often misunderstood by many. Her independent choices, like not having a kid, may seem like a taboo in our society.

Various characters at different junctures in the movie treat her as a weaker entity. Her enthusiasm and dedication to her job, on the other hand, astounded them all. The movie also highlights her limitations as an officer who is not supported by her colleagues very often and her efforts to protect wildlife and the environment are frequently misunderstood and undervalued. As a women's-centric film, the movie does not shy away from emphasizing the characters' flaws, keeping the film real and relatable to the audience. This movie is plot-driven and provides significance to the narrative, besides weaving the story around a woman.

### **A Metaphor for Resilience and Ecofeminism**

The title of the movie, *Sherni*, means tigress, which metaphorically represents Vidya as the tigress of the movie, for her fearless nature as a forest officer. The first official poster of *Sherni* looks at Vidya through the lens of a camera of a shooting sniper which has her right on target. The poster has Vidya Balan written at the top, followed by *Sherni* in bold letters. Both the image and the words represent her as a tigress that is being targeted

by various people for different reasons. In the film, we see Vidya on the radar of various people who see her as a threat and want to take her down. At the same time, we see that the tigress is pursued by Vidya and a professor to protect her from being killed by various people. The poster also hints at a connection between Vidya and nature, as we see her in the poster surrounded by a dense forest. We realise this attempt made in the poster is related to ecofeminism. We also see her in a green shirt holding a satellite phone, which hints at her profession in the film.

The image's lone figure alludes to her role as the film's central figure. The other posters later released by Amazon online seem consistent in showcasing Vidya as the only dominant figure, except for a few posters that have some police officers along with her who seem to be on the lookout for something.

### **Challenging Patriarchy in the Wild**

The trailer for the movie begins with an extreme long shot which showcases the dense jungle located around a hilly region, followed by another long shot which is shot within the jungle. The background voice informs us that the tigers have endangered their lives and they need some solution to this problem. This is followed by another voice of a man who questions the deputation of a lady officer in the middle of this difficult situation. This definitely hints us towards the attitude of a male dominated society which under estimates women and treats them as incapable entities. The entire trailer has two occasions where we see two different men assuring different people of handling things on their own. They hint at Vidya's inability once again and highlight the patriarchal mind-set that undermines and denigrates women.

In contrast to these perceptions, we come across a tagline in between the frames that says, "Even in the dense jungle, the tigress knows her way." This line is aimed at Vidya, which indicates that she would find a solution to this problem and would likely bring about a balance between the forest and its inhabitants. *Sherni* has definitely got a lot of low points (where the male dominated society bogs her down) and high points (where she comes out victorious as a stronger woman). She has been portrayed as a tough nut to be cracked who is witty and a fighter by spirit.

### **Subverting Stereotypes: A Realistic Introduction to Vidya**

Vidya is introduced in the film as the Divisional Forest Officer for the first time through a long shot that helps us identify that a female has arrived but not clearly to be identified as Vidya. There is no zooming in or panning out of the camera, nor we find any special effects to introduce the lead character, rather an establishing long shot followed by a medium shot where we find Vidya interrogating the police officer and a few constables in the background about the drying out of watering hole in the forest. The first few frames establish the premise of the plot thereby creating a very realistic depiction of the narrative which constantly tries to minimise the gap between real to reel life portrayal. The first appearance of the protagonist has been kept low profile seems to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the director to create an impression on the audience that the character is built around the narrative and not vice versa hence giving priority to the narrative and not the actor. The other perspective can be the non-serious projection of Vidya's character from the viewpoint of other characters in the film. She is represented as a strict officer and she is bribed in the very next scene in her office. She attempted to deliver the show cause notice to the contractor but later avoided looking at the pleasant conversation her boss had with the contractor.

Unlike most of the movies in Bollywood movies we get a lot of insight about Vidya's work life in the movie. In fact, the second scene is set in her office and not to mention that the first scene finds her on field in the movie. We must have experience that very often than not there is a deliberate tendency to avoid the workspace of a female character of a mainstream cinema in Bollywood, unless necessary as a plot device, whereas it has a tendency to showcase men at work very often, whether it is in the hospital as doctors or working as a CEO in their chambers.

### **The Male Gaze and Bollywood's Gendered Portrayals**

'Female characters in Bollywood have largely been used as a staple for male leads in movies and are primarily represented in terms of their sexuality and as an object of desire. Their existence has always been in relation to their male counterparts and, very rarely, as characters with a personality, a backstory, a side story, dreams or aspirations. Laura Mulvey's idea of the representation of 'woman' as a 'spectacle' in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), where she argues that mainstream cinema is constructed for a male gaze, catering to male fantasies and pleasures, aptly fits into Bollywood. We do not have a dearth of movies in Bollywood that objectify women and showcase their regressive mentality towards women. Even the all-time commercial super hits like DDLJ and Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum, which showcase female characters that get access to education abroad, don't have any mention of their careers, nor do we see these characters as ambitious in terms of pursuing a career.

Unlike in male-dominated films, we meet a woman in *Sherni* who has worked her way up to the rank of district magistrate in the forest services. During a conversation with her husband, we learn that she wanted to quit her job because she hadn't seen any growth and incentive in her job, but the real reason is her inability to perform in a corrupt and ineffective system. In a phone call with her husband, she complains that everyone wants their

own way here and she doesn't have the freedom to do what she's supposed to do as a DFO. Her husband tries to convince her that she shouldn't even think of leaving her job. He claims that he is dissatisfied with his private job in this recession because it lacks job security, but his demeanour during conversation reflects that he does not feel able to give his best at work. He says he's never wanted to be the CEO of a company and hopes she doesn't want to be a chief forest warden or something similar. This is followed by a close-up of Vidya, who is disheartened by the entire conversation, particularly her husband's assumption that she would not aim too high in life or be overly ambitious in her career. Her husband's perception of work stems from the belief that society considers working women to be incapable and unfit for jobs outside the confines of the home, and thus, they are highly incapable and unfit for them.

During the conversation, her husband also mentions that his boss mocks him for not being enthusiastic about his job, and he implicitly accepts the notion that he does not aspire to be a CEO. Because her husband lacks passion for his work, he assumes Vidya to have a similar attitude towards her profession. However, we see a very passionate Vidya throughout the movie who considers her work with a lot of respect and does it dutifully. We do not get a lot of backstory of Vidya's character in the movie.

### **Vidya's Strength in Adversity**

Vidya is portrayed in the film as a very strong character that faces adverse situations quite bravely and diligently. Her abilities as an officer to mitigate circumstances and her efficiency as an officer are exemplary and this aspect of her character poses a threat to many corrupt men around her, i.e. her superiors, the local politicians and the hunter in the movie. She challenges their authority and confronts them all quite convincingly. The trying circumstances around her put her endurance and mental strength to test, but she proves to be a strong-willed woman ultimately. She looks stronger in her personality than most of the other male characters in the film and not to mention even her husband.

### **Negotiating Femininity and Motherhood**

Vidya has been portrayed as a simple woman in the movie when it comes to self-ornamentation who dislikes jewellery and make-up but wears it on request of her mother-in-law. This compliance with her mother-in-law helps her maintain her relationship with her mother-in-law but showcases the curtailment of her choice and individual desire. She chooses to wear bangles and jewellery against her will and addresses the issue of gender inequality in society to her husband later in the scene, where a female is forced to burden herself against her will in all walks of life. This is the scene in which Vidya's mother and mother-in-law are discussing jewellery and the concept of Karwachauth in northern India. This is followed by Vidya walking into the room, ready to leave for Professor Noorani's place for dinner, and her mother-in-law looks at her, surprised, because she is dressed plainly, without any bangles or jewellery on her body. Her mother-in-law suggests her to wear jewellery from the various sets she has gifted her. In the next frame, her mother enters with lipstick and says that her husband would like it and that Vidya should consider having children. This is followed by the next frame where her husband is dressed in casual clothes and she complains that only she has to be all decked up in order to step outside and not him. The scene deals with the idea of motherhood and the choice of motherhood, which should not be imposed on a woman, but should come, by choice. Also, there needs to be space for women to exercise their own choice of dressing rather than imposing the one which has been tagged as feminine. In the introduction to her edited book *Feminist Film Theorist*, Shonini Chaudhuri writes, "True to the slogan 'the personal is political,' many of the Second Wave campaigns focused on women's bodies and issues of feminine appearance. As well as putting women's right to control reproduction and motherhood on the agenda, they exposed the exploitation of women..." While white feminists often paint motherhood as the ultimate apparatus of patriarchy, many activist women of colour see in motherhood not only freedom, but also agency. This concept of motherhood in Vidya Balan's women's-oriented cinema will be discussed in depth in the chapter on Vidya Balan's brand of motherhood in *Shakuntala Devi and Kahani*.

There are several male characters who serve as plot points, the most important of which is the forest officer, Nangia, who Vidya admires for his strategies for dealing with poachers during her service training. He is a man who is respected by all, but his reality is revealed at the end of the film when he collaborates with the politically-supported Pintu Bhaiya to have the tigress killed through foul play. This enrages Vidya, and when her request for an investigation is denied by Nangia, she becomes even more enraged, and she doesn't hesitate to call him pathetic and a coward.

The other deputy DFO was surprised to see her at the site where a tiger movement was r'ported by the local people. Her boss was astounded to learn that Vidya was present on the field to take care of the proceedings on her own when a man was killed by a tigress. The entire film is full of such unexpected gestures by male counterparts who do not expect Vidya, as a woman, to be able to take care of her service as a forest officer, a job that requires a great deal of physical and mental strength. This unexpected gesture is made by a police officer right at the start of the film, when Vidya arrives alone in the forest to ensure the timely installation of cameras.

In one of the scenes where Vidya is having dinner at the professors' house, she gets an emergency call related to work. She leaves her food midway during her dinner at Noorani's place and leaves along with him to take

care of the situation. Before she walks away, she opens up all her jewellery and hands it over to her husband, who offers her company because it is already late at night. Vidya takes the lead and states that she can handle it on her own and moves ahead, handing all her jewellery to her husband.

### **Vidya and Female Solidarity**

The other female characters are the village women, who are mostly portrayed as being very vocal about their rights and who cannot be easily subdued. Among them, Jyoti's character stands out as the most confident woman in the village, who takes pride in introducing herself as a member of the village panchayat samiti. She has been portrayed as a very confident and courageous lady who doesn't shy away from speaking the truth in front of a police officer who is trying to suppress her. Vidya comes to her rescue as she is present at the scene and allows her to speak openly about the problems of the villagers and assures her of a possible solution soon. She proves helpful to Vidya in protecting the cubs of the tigress by secretly informing her about their location in the end.

Vidya seems to be socially responsible when she herself goes to meet the family and hands the compensation cheque to the wife of the man who was killed by the tiger. She has been represented as a woman who is compassionate and voluntarily connects with other women in the village. She is a caring daughter and daughter-in-law who abide by their request to wear jewellery when going out.

The portrayal of Vidya Balan as a working woman in *Sherni* exemplifies a significant shift in Bollywood's narrative landscape, where women are finally being shown as resilient, complex individuals navigating professional and personal challenges with agency and strength. Vidya Vincent, as a forest officer, encapsulates the struggles of women who operate in patriarchal spaces, often underestimated and undermined, yet determined to prove their worth. Her journey is not just a critique of gender inequality but also a celebration of quiet strength, resilience, and ethical resolve.

The film disrupts stereotypes by showcasing Vidya's work-life balance, her resistance to societal expectations, and her realistic, understated demeanor, which challenge the hyper-glamorized or submissive depictions of women commonly seen in Indian cinema. By emphasizing Vidya's professional challenges and personal decisions—such as her autonomy over motherhood and her rejection of imposed femininity—the narrative situates her as a beacon of modern feminism, advocating for individuality and choice.

Moreover, *Sherni* intertwines ecofeminism with Vidya's character, drawing parallels between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women in patriarchal societies. Vidya's fight to protect the tigress symbolizes her broader struggle against a corrupt system, representing both a personal and ecological battle. The film's nuanced depiction of rural women, like Jyoti, adds another dimension to female solidarity and grassroots empowerment, making it a holistic tribute to women in varied social strata.

In essence, *Sherni* marks a progressive step in Indian cinema, offering an authentic portrayal of a woman's journey in a male-dominated profession. Vidya Balan's compelling performance not only highlights the evolving representation of women in Bollywood but also inspires a larger societal dialogue about gender equality, environmental justice, and the understated strength of women who navigate the "jungles" of life with courage and conviction. The film's narrative demonstrates that while the journey may be fraught with challenges, the 'sherni' within every woman is more than capable of triumphing.

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