

## UNSILENCING THE SILENCED : KIRAN IN MOVIE *PROVOKED*

**Dr. Shivani Vashist**

Assistant Professor,  
Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University,  
Katra ( J&K)

Literature, life and cinema lie at a common interface which is marked by a constant flux of emotions and ideals. In the recent times this flux has become a matter of interest as both literature and cinema are easily accessible and are integral to the contemporary Indian psyche. Many writers worldwide have portrayed the dire need for emancipation of woman. Issues pertaining to women like gender disparity, psychological turbulence, schizophrenic psychosis, existential predicament etc have been highlighted by novelists. It is now media who has taken the responsibility of bringing these issues forcefully to its audience. Media definitely caters to a wide variety of audience and as compared to Literature, has a wider response.

Laura Mulvey, best known for her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, was influenced by Freud and Lacan, and brought about the intermingling of film theory, psychoanalysis and feminism . Cinema, according to Mulvey, affords two forms of pleasure: “scopophilia”; the erotic, voyeuristic pleasure of subjecting others to a “controlling and curious gaze” and which is associated with the “libidio”; and the “narcissistic” pleasure of “identification” with the male protagonist (or the camera’s point of view) which Mulvey associates with the “mirror phase” of Jaques Lacan. Mulvey argues that there were two distinct modes of male gaze of this era: “VOYEURISTIC” (i.e. seeing women as “whores”) and “FETISHISTIC” (i.e. seeing woman as Madonnas)

Mulvey, insists on the idea that film and cinematography are inadvertently structured upon the ideas and values of a patriarchy. It is under the construction of patriarchy that Mulvey argues that women in film are tied to desire and that female characters hold an “appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact”. The female actor is never meant to represent a character that directly effects the outcome of a plot or keep the story line going, but is inserted into the film as a way of supporting the male role “bearing the burden of sexual objectification that he cannot”.

Patriarchy has been used by class societies in their own interest to survive and perpetuate itself across time and space. Norms indicate a patrilineal, patrilocal and monogamous family where women are submissive to men. The mass media especially television through daily soaps and advertisements glorifies, reinforces and portrays the patriarchal family constitution. The portrayal of woman as mother, housewife, nurturer and caregiver is not treated equally but as subservient to the male in his and his family interest. Daily soaps enhance and reinforce patriarchal value system and even lead to reinforcement of gender disparities.

Given the low status of women in many segments of Indian society, a high level of violence against them may not be altogether surprising. Activists argue that women face

discrimination at each stage of life, resulting in everything from female foeticide and neglect of girl children to child marriage and disregard for widows.

*Violence against women has a lot to do with patriarchal values which are not challenged within our educational system once deeply ingrained it is very difficult to dislodge them,* Noor Jehan Safia Niaz of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (Indian Muslim Women’s Movement) wrote in an email. Domestic violence therefore continues to be “unabated” (www.globalpost.com).

*Some women who face abuse have nowhere to go. There are few women’s shelters, and women are likely to be financially dependent on their husbands. Likewise many families and communities pressure women to stay with abusive husbands and accommodate their behavior rather than go through the public humiliation of divorce,* according to Leena Joshi, the director of Apnalaya, an organization working with women and families in Mumbai’s slums. (mobile.globalpost.com)

Lavina Melwani has described Non-Resident Indian abandonment cases as the “*ugly underside of outsourced marriages.*” (*law-journals-books*). Patterns of marriage and migration within the Indian Diaspora have generated new forms of abuse that manifest themselves in a wide range of desertion scenarios involving new brides. Indian brides experience violence which involves physical forms of abuse including beatings, sexual violence or forced servitude with the most tragic cases resulting in death. In other circumstances violence manifests in mental torture and harassment for dowry by the spouse and/or his extended family, as well as other mechanism of control, psychological harm, isolation and deprivation of resources. Marriages between Indians living in the Diaspora and Indians living in India involve contemporary global shifts which produce new types of consumerism in the form of escalating dowry demands, requests for consumer goods instead of money and the requirement of lavish designer wedding. In addition there is an increased desirability to parents to have their daughters seek marriages to spouses living and working abroad. Victims of NRI domestic violence are left with little or no recourse overseas. To make matters worse, because these women are married often even their own natal families do not want to take responsibility for them. Some parents fear that their daughter’s failed marriage will bring shame upon the family or negatively impact the chances of their other children being able to marry.

*Provoked* is the true story of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a Punjabi woman who moved to London after her marriage with Deepak Ahluwalia. Her husband seemed caring at first but then began to beat her up. He started drinking a lot and sleeping around with other women, he also subjected her to spousal rape. After ten years of marriage and having two children with Deepak, Kiran sets him on fire while he is sleeping, two hours after another scene of domestic violence. He succumbs to the injuries and she is sentenced to life imprisonment for premeditated murder.

*Provoked* is a denunciation of male domestic violence. We find the depiction of the male-dominated society, where Kiran finds herself in a precarious situation bearing the grunt of Deepak’s frustration. The domineering Deepak is both attracted physically to his wife and beats her when she doesn’t fulfill his need. (Scene time duration= 67mins:81secs to 69mins:38secs).

Deepak behaves towards Kiran as he would do towards a mother-figure phantasm: attraction and disgust combined and violent domination as response to her demands for mature behavior. This situation can be seen in the scene when Kiran inhibits Deepak to have an intercourse in presence of children as it would create bad impact on their psyche. Here Kiran is seen to be demanding mature behavior on the part of her husband and to have self control over

his lust. But unfortunately this genuine demand of hers leads to her spousal rape. (Scene time duration= 60mins:85secs to 62mins:63secs). Deepak threatens Kiran with the hot iron (Scene time duration=89mins:94secs to 91mins:93secs) also he doesn't hesitate to push her down the stairs when she's pregnant (Scene time duration= 67mins:81secs to 69mins:38secs) . A notable scene (Scene time duration=26mins:10secs to 27mins:11secs) showed horrible side of Deepak is when Kiran buys a wool jacket and decides to wear it on the evening her husband, Deepak plans to take her out to a cinema. He cringes at seeing his wife in a wool jacket and screams at her telling her to stop dressing like a white woman. He also enjoys tossing his wife down the stairs to deter her from dressing as "to copy white girls".

Kiran's character reveals a struggle for female autonomy against the backdrop of the patriarchal culture pattern. Her character is portrayed psychologically rather than sociologically. Kiran asserts her feminine psyche through protest and defiance. She finally emerges as a new woman, not a stereotypical victim. In a male-dominated society, it is the male who shouts, hurls abuses bullies, reproaches, criticizes and is the woman who listens, tolerates and remains passive. But the iconoclastic new-women rejects the myths of male-dominated society. They react violently and their reaction earns them the sobriquet of being insane or abnormal. This is clearly evident in Kiran's case, when psychologist suggests that the only way to save Kiran from life imprisonment would be to prove that she is a patient of Endogenous depression which indirectly meant to prove her insane. To this, Radha Dallal (Nandita Das) angrily responds

*"What kind of world is this where a woman has to loose her marbles to get justice and a man just has to loose his temper."* (Scene time duration 83:54 secs to 83:99 sec )

Women suffer more deeply the harsh sting of dislocation between ideology and reality. They are thus loners and losers grappling to win some understanding out of an intensely privatized world of personal emotions. They are the failed questers trying hard to hurtle past the emotional blocks set up by unheeding insensitive social conditions. Kiran through the course of movie *Provoked* becomes aware of her potentialities and sense of direction. She rebels against the compulsion to succeed in conformity, she refuses to accept and compromise. She is aware of the incompatible sex roles inflicted upon women by society, of the determinants and threats to feminine identity. As we confront Kiran in the beginning of the movie, she is a living dead. The physical numbness, the emotional paralysis that she seems to be suffering from, is nothing short of suggesting her deadness. This deadness is suggestive of the death of the conventional woman and stereotypical woman who tolerates violence and abuses at the hands of her husband and through the course of the movie, we find that the protagonist Kiran, has been able to revive and recover the part of herself she had lost. Her journey of self- discovery has been, indeed a journey from death to life, from ignorance to knowledge, from withdrawal to reintegration, from illusion to reality. She has learnt that survival is tough because there are strong opposing forces threatening her existence, yet she is prepared to struggle to survive not by and escape from reality but by a bold confrontation of it. She seems to be returning to home from jail with a new hope. Kiran has in fact, emerged as a new woman capable of establishing her identity.

The movie speaks very strongly about domestic violence suffered by woman. And in recent years, domestic South Asian women in Canada especially from the immigrant Punjabi community have witnessed a rise in number of domestic violence victims. *One woman in every four South-Asian Woman is abused physically, emotionally, financially and psychologically*, says

Baldev Mutta, Community development officer at the Peel Health Department, Toronto, a government agency ([www.boloji.com](http://www.boloji.com)).

Before Kiran's appeal hearing her case was taken by a women's group called "Southall Black sisters", which is a non-profit All-Asian organization based in Southall, West London, UK. The SBS was originally established in order to provide a focus for the struggle of Asian women in the fight against racism, but became increasingly involved in defending the human rights of Asian women who are the victims of domestic violence and in campaigning against religious fundamentalism. They supported her in the case and were eventually successful. They brought Kiran's plight to the attention of the media by organizing rallies and gathering public support. When her appeal was heard in September 92' at Old Bailey, Kiran Ahluwalia's plea of manslaughter on the ground of 'diminished responsibility' was accepted. The judge sentenced her to three years and four months in prison-the exact time that she had already served.

By acknowledging the state of "diminished responsibility" and of being provoked the British Court allowed, for the first time, the battered woman syndrome' as a legal defense, acknowledging that a battered woman doesn't always strike out in self-defense immediately many a time, the hurt and the abuse will be smoldering within her and she might strike out at time of low abuse. Kiranjit's case upturned the British judiciary and her appeal and retrial are now the stuff of every basic criminal law text in Britain.

The movie *Provoked* traces her journey from a victim of Domestic violence to convicted murder to the woman who changed public opinion towards battered women who kill their abusers. Kiran's legal case also helped change the law. Kiran's successful appeal against her murder conviction set a historic precedent – that women who kill as a result of severe domestic violence should not be treated as cold-blooded murderers. As Ahluwalia says, "I never intended to kill him; I just wanted him to stop hurting me" ([m.guardian.co.uk](http://m.guardian.co.uk)).

The movie *Provoked* belongs in fact to India's social movie strain, because it has a message to pass on: that of male abuse against silent wives, so there are no songs, only Rahman's efficient background music when the suffering gets unbearable and through them we hear something of humanity's chant for mercy. It springs up as Kiran is thrown down on floor by her iron man. (Scene time duration= 67mins: 81secs to 69mins:38secs).

There are also spirited scenes in the prison especially that moment when Kiran unbuttons her sympathetic cellmate's blouse to create a better effect at an interview and whispers *bosoms* (Scene time duration=82 mins:77secs to 82mins:78secs), in reference to a reading class where Kiran has stumbled over that word (Scene time duration=66mins:74secs to 67mins:48secs). But of course, the allusion underlines her contribution to the effort towards feminine empowerment. In the movie *Provoked*, we find Kiran in jail surprises her lawyer when she tells her she's at least free there; and she doesn't fight at first at first, convinced she's guilty and sinful.

*I sinned, I must pay.* (Scene time duration=47mins:37secs to 47mins:49secs)

Radha: How do you feel in here (jail)? Are they treating you well?

Kiran: *I feel free* (Scene time duration=34mins:56secs to 35mins:12secs)

Macho culture indoctrination takes time to rub off. Her freedom comes first from the fire she lights on him, a purification process which is her response to the defilement she's endured (spousal rape by Deepak) and then of course from the physical distance from the fear and danger she faced in his presence. Any enclosed space might have done the job and of course

it's shocking for our freedom- built individualism that Kiran said that she's freer in prison than outside.

It was also found on analysis that Deepak is an over-possessive husband in the flashback scene where Deepak insists Kiran to first dance with his friend and then on returning back home, Kiran has to pay the price by receiving abusive and violent treatment from her husband. Then in the kitchen, Deepak finally attacks Kiran by harassing her. (Scene time duration=29mins:36secs to 32mins:20secs)

Further we see that Sheila Ahluwalia , Kiran's mother-in-law, stubborn and blinded by her son's death, fails to tell the jury about the abusive situation that used to play out in front of her eyes. One scene (Scene time duration=39mins:51secs to 40mins:33secs) shows when Kiran is cooking with her mother-in-law and Deepak bursts in cursing. He grabs Kiran and begins to strangle her against the wall while his mother begs him to stop. Despite this, Kiran's mother-in-law denied ever witnessing abuse towards Kiran by making following irrational and negative statement (in imperfect English spoken by immigrants) in court.

Sheila Ahluwalia: *I see nothing*

*She very arrogant. Always orders Deepak around. She treats Deepak like a servant.*  
(Scene time duration=39mins:28secs to 41mins:46secs)

Kiranjit Ahluwalia suffered brutality in the hands of her husband, a man who vowed to love and cherish her till the very end. A man who not only betrayed her trust but also gave her pain and agony that will remain with her forever. At a function, when asked about her thoughts on the movie, she said...*"I'm glad that the film has been made. Hopefully my story would help women like me, who are trapped in similar situations to come out and let the world know about their plight. Women who have suffered like me need not feel it's the end of the world for them. I want them to know that there's hope."* (www.sakshijuneja.com)

Kiran had endured ten years of persistent sexual, physical, and mental torture. Her aversion is not to the man, as she weeps inconsolably on his death. Neither is it to the institution of marriage, as she is reluctant to remove the memento and signature of marriage on her neck (*Mangalsutra*) as the jailor asks her to (Scene time duration= 15mins:20secs to 18mins:02secs). Rather it is to the inhuman chauvinism of the man in question, that she wants to put an end to. Ironically the jailor comes across as more kind as compared to her irreverent spouse. Paradoxically Kiran exclaims to the reporter Radha Dallah on her question as how she feels in jail: "I feel free." (Scene time duration= 34mins:56secs to 35mins:12secs). It was not her physical being that was being jailed within the constraints of her husband, but her spiritual self.

The flashback techniques serves to illustrate the different negative shades to Deepak's character- the possessiveness, the suspicion, the infidelity, the inhumanity, the callousness, his utter lack of respect for Kiran to reduce her to something lesser than even a physical entity. Kiran's entry to the jail is set against her entry to her married home, the latter appearing more despicable in contrast to the former. The mother-in-law being a woman herself refuses to acknowledge the harassment Kiran has faced over the years. She also forms a part of the mindset of the patriarchal society that we thrive in. The court sentences Kiran to a life imprisonment amidst loud protest from women. Kiran considers herself to be a sinner in spite of everything and doesn't go out to justify herself in the first hearing.

The second half of the movie focuses on her growth as an individual as she finds her space. The abstract growth is concretized in her makeover. She becomes more vocal about her innermost thoughts protesting against the concept that a woman is a toy, broken at will and stuck at will.

The reporter Radha Dallal fights out her case, underlining the issue and upholding her motto that a lost cause is better than no cause at all. With the verdict, there seems to be a ray of hope for many out there with a similar predicament as the name Kiran itself symbolizes ‘ray’ of hope. The movie handles the sensitive issue with a strong message that functions as a pointer to the numerous submissive women out there, as Radha quips as if her reputation was *more* important than her freedom.

After a turbulent legal fight, Kiran’s sentence was changed from murder to manslaughter. The film grabs viewer from start to finish. It captures the emotions of the main character incredibly as well as depicts the unfair judgement that society tends to have. Also how people from different background, especially women are misjudged and are not always understood properly. The noteworthy scene (Scene time duration 15mins:20secs to 18mins:02secs) is when Kiran is asked to take off her jewelry and clothes at prison, including her *Mangalsutra*, a sacred necklace for married woman and her *Kara*, a traditional Sikh bracelet. She is made to strip her Punjabi clothes for prison rags, right in front of the officer.

A woman, who has never even undressed in front of her husband by choice, was told ‘to take off her clothes’ by the jailor. To Kiran, this symbolized a loss of faith and dignity. Another immensely interesting scene is that of Kiran’s first lunch at jail (Scene time duration=28mins:00secs to 28mins:51secs), when she is served beef which her religion (Sikhism) forbids her to eat. What is quite interesting about the story is that Kiran never intended to murder her husband. She simply wanted to set his feet on fire so that he couldn’t run after her, but once he woke up, she screams and pours it all over him, quickly lighting him on fire. Truly, this is a shocking film that captures the atrocities inflicted upon the women by the insensitive and brutal men with patriarchal ideology. The film has a strong message. It urges the viewers to not turn a blind eye to the evil of domestic violence inflicted upon women wherein they meekly suffer in silence.

Dr Kanupriya in her essay titled *Feminism and the Emerging Woman in Anand’s The Old Woman and the Cow*, observes:

*Marriage is said to be deepest as well as most problematic of all human relations. Religiously, marriage is supposed to be the holy union of two souls and bodies. Amongst Hindus, the wife is known as ‘Ardhangini’ or ‘sahadharmini’, terms which emphasize her equality and ‘oneness’ with husband. Despite the idealized concept of marriage, woman in reality is essentially a subservient partner in marriage. (Feminism in Indian Writing In English, p .78)*

Betty Friedan an American writer, activist and feminist admits in her book *The Feminism Mystique* that the core problem for women is not sex but identity which has always been denied to them. Friedan declares that

*For woman, as for man,  
the need for self-fulfillment –  
autonomy self realization,  
self actualization- is as  
important as the sexual need,  
with as serious consequences,  
when it is thwarted. (p.282)*

No doubt the young women of today are becoming aware of the biased attitude of society. They have started asserting their individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. While the orthodox women accept their false conditioning into subordination and dependence

without demur, the sensitive and iconoclastic women accept the need for individuality and revolt against the established norms by leaving a marriage that has become an emotional wasteland for them. Hence they defy the institutions and break away from their destroyers to seek self-fulfillment. Awareness in a woman that she can live a different but happy and purposeful life asserts self-confidence in her. She emerges as a New Woman, to be more precise, an Iconoclastic Woman, though the process of awakening in her is quite slow and revolt comes after much retrospection.

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