

Lajja: A Sociological Analysis of Female Characters through Theoretical Frameworks

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Abstract

The quintessential film Lajja (2001) emerges as a resonant chorus of female voices who assert their agency amidst systemic suppression. The narrative unveils how society, despite its ritualistic reverence for feminine divinity continues to subjugate real women through the insidious weapon of shame. Unlike many cinematic portrayals that romanticize resistance or offer reductive resolutions, Lajja confronts the viewer with unsettling truths; truths that remain largely unarticulated even in contemporary filmmaking. The film narrates the stories of women who have either been tormented or exploited by men for their selfish gains. It begins in the opulent city of New York and ends at a remote village in Uttar Pradesh. This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach that is grounded in media analysis. The film's seven female protagonists are each situated within distinct theoretical frameworks, allowing for a nuanced sociological analysis. Their identities are further contextualized through the lens of their intimate relationships, which often serve as mirrors to their oppression. Upon examining each character, it becomes clear that, despite their different geographies, castes, and social positions, they are all connected by a common thread: institutionalized patriarchy. This pervasive structure orchestrates their suffering, silencing, and resistance. "Lajja" is not simply entertainment; it serves as an interrogation—a cinematic experience that invites reflection rather than mere applause.

Keywords: Systemic suppression, Feminine divinity, Shame, Unsettling truths, Institutionalized patriarchy, Interrogation.

1. Introduction

The film appears to function as a slice of reality (Carroll, 1985). In the realm of Indian cinema in 2001, the film "Lajja," directed by Rajkumar Santoshi, transcends mere entertainment and serves as a profound sociological critique. Lajja is a Hindi film that battles against patriarchy in developing countries such as India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and so on (Tiwari, 2022). It effectively highlights the lived experiences of Indian women, reflecting the complexities associated with class, caste, and geographic diversity. Structured as a multi-narrative tapestry, the film chronicles the journeys of seven female protagonists, each confronting distinct yet interconnected forms of patriarchal violence. This movie challenges the stereotypes of women constructed by patriarchal societies (Devi, 2018). Their experiences, ranging from domestic abuse and dowry exploitation to moral policing and caste-based brutality, mirror the entrenched gender hierarchies and cultural hypocrisies that pervade South Asian society.

The film opens with a captivating credit sequence: a red dupatta drifting through the illuminated skyline of New York City, accompanied by the orchestral splendor of the Budapest Radio Symphony. The dupatta becomes a recurring visual motif in the narrative, ultimately culminating in flames symbolizing the harsh reality of gender-based violence and molestation. It serves as a metaphorical witness to the suffering and resilience of women, uniting various stories into a collective protest. Despite its commercial format, Lajja ambitiously compresses a multitude of social evils into its runtime, offering a panoramic critique of patriarchy. It constructs a courtroom of culture, where each scene interrogates the norms that tether women to silence, sacrifice, and suffering. Vaidehi decides to leave her husband, marking the beginning of a significant journey. But she finds that she is not the only

one. In fact, the horror has only begun. The film is seen through her agonised eyes. Vaidehi escapes an abusive marriage and, in her journey, encounters women from varied social strata: Maithili, Janaki, Lata, Ramdulari, Fulmati, and a nameless sex worker, each embodying a facet of gendered injustice. Through their stories, the film exposes how honour, family, and faith are weaponized to perpetuate control, and how shame becomes a tool of suppression.

Ultimately, *Lajja* stands as a cinematic act of resistance, challenging the normalization of violence against women and reclaiming narrative space for voices long silenced.

2. Literature Review

Lajja Movie Review by Adarsh Taran (2001) highlights Janaki, a pregnant character who endures the ire of a crowd, leading to her miscarriage on the street. Tiwari notes that Janaki dares to live by her own unconventional rules and challenges patriarchal norms.

Presentations of Women in Bollywood Cinema: Characterization, Songs, Dance, and Dress in Yash Raj Films from 1997 to 2007 (2009) by Ramkissoon analyses *Lajja* through a liberal feminist lens but feels unable to grasp the film's deeper implications. She critiques the depiction of the four main characters, particularly Vaidehi, arguing against portraying women solely as sexual and biological beings. Ramkissoon discusses how the film addresses themes of Hinduism, mythology, family, tradition, and patriarchy.

Deconstructing *Lajja* as a marker of Indian womanhood by Sinha and Chauhan (2013) analyses *Lajja* as a marker of Indian Womanhood to investigate the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral aspects of the film, portraying it as a complex and multifaceted depiction of Indian womanhood.

Lajja: The Concept of Honor, Shame, and Modesty of a Woman in Indian Popular Culture by Qamar (2015) offers a socio-cultural analysis focused on the various discriminatory beliefs about women within Indian society, including their portrayal as reproductive entities, the practice of dowry, the expectation of chastity, and the violence stemming from discrimination.

Assertion of Feminine Identity: A Study of Female Consciousness in *Lajja* Movie by Kuldeep and Prabha Pant (2016) analyzes the status of contemporary women, focusing on their exploitation within the family, using the film "*Lajja*" as a reference. On one hand, women are revered as symbols of goddess-like purity; on the other hand, they endure humiliation and oppression due to harmful societal norms and laws. The analysis also explores the challenges women face when they speak out against their exploitation and demand their rights in Indian society, often finding themselves as victims in a male-dominated hierarchy. Additionally, it highlights the concept of the "new woman," who breaks away from traditional norms in this patriarchal society.

Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology Women-Centric Films in India by Sarkar (2016), examines the experiences of four Indian women who face various challenges stemming from different economic and social backgrounds. He suggests a Marxist/Socialist feminist perspective but admits his analysis remains somewhat superficial.

Shame on Patriarchy: A Theoretical Analysis of *Lajja* by Arjun Prasad Tiwari (2022) explores how patriarchy views women as mere incubators, often oppressing them in the name of tradition, culture, social norms, and values. Janaki observes that every man seems to oppress the woman they are connected to. Despite being loyal to their partners, male counterparts often distrust women. The analysis focuses on Janaki's character through the lens of radical feminism, as she questions the societal rules that label men as exploiters.

Lajja: A Movie Review by Devananda Edamadathil (2025) suggests that in the movie, women are different yet entwined, resonating with the pain of one another, forming jigsaw pieces of a corrupted system, colored by misogyny and male chauvinism. Rooted in years of suppression and oppression of women, unquestioned and hidden, in the light of day. The film is a caricature of high caliber, aimed to shoot at the nuances of a repellent

society that expects women to be idealized versions of themselves but, in return, is at the receiving end of torture, humiliation, and cruelty.

3. Purpose of the Study

Having reviewed several scholarly articles on the film *Lajja*, I found them insightful and well constructed; however, I observed that certain characters, such as Lata, Fulmati, and the unnamed sex worker, were consistently overlooked. These seemingly peripheral figures, though briefly present, carry significant symbolic and sociological weight. Motivated by this gap, I sought to integrate even the most fleeting characters into my analysis, assigning each a distinct sociological framework to illuminate their roles within the broader narrative. In doing so, I have not only employed feminist theory, which constitutes a major and autonomous branch within sociology, but also incorporated complementary theoretical lenses such as structural violence and symbolic interactionism, to offer a more nuanced and multidimensional perspective. This approach aims to reconceptualize *Lajja* not merely as a cinematic text, but as a layered sociological document that reveals the complexities of gender, caste, and resistance across diverse social locations.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach rooted in media analysis to examine the sociological dimensions of female representation in *Lajja*. The choice of *Lajja* was intentional, as it depicts various female experiences that collectively critique patriarchal systems. The film was viewed with meticulous intent, ensuring that no character, however fleeting, was overlooked. Dialogues were transcribed and revisited, as recurring lines often revealed layered meanings upon each viewing. Each character was briefly contextualized and then analyzed through a distinct sociological framework, allowing for a multidimensional interpretation of their roles. Where relevant, male characters were also examined to illuminate the traits, behaviors, and power dynamics that shape and reinforce the gendered realities depicted in the film.

5. Character Analysis

5.1 Vaidehi

Vaidehi, an Indian woman residing in New York within an affluent household, was married to Raghu solely for her physical beauty and endured persistent domestic abuse at his hands. Whenever she sought emotional support, her husband responded only with material possessions, reducing intimacy to transactional gestures. When she turned to her father-in-law for help, he advised her to simply adapt, just as her mother-in-law had insisted that such “minor inconveniences” were part of a woman’s duty to uphold familial honor.

As Vaidehi began to resist her husband’s control, her father-in-law instructed her to leave the house and return to India. However, upon discovering that she was pregnant, the family urged her to come back, not out of concern for her well-being, but to claim the unborn child. Recognizing their intentions, Vaidehi ultimately fled, asserting her autonomy and rejecting their conditional acceptance.

This character can be analyzed through Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of the “Looking Glass Self.” Initially, Vaidehi’s self-image was constructed around how she imagined her husband, family, and society perceived her: as the ideal, compliant wife. As Raghu’s abuse intensified, she began to internalize his degrading view of her as worthless, disposable, and voiceless. Her eventual escape signifies a rupture in this reflected identity. Vaidehi begins to reject the externally imposed image and reconstructs her sense of self around dignity, maternal agency, and moral clarity.

5.2 Maithili

Maithili is set to marry her college boyfriend, Atul, but during the wedding celebrations, her family is coerced into providing dowry. They are continuously blackmailed with the threat that the marriage will be called off if a specific sum is not paid. When Maithili confronts Atul about this demand, he dismissively responds that the payment must be made, as he is merely a puppet of his father. The dowry is euphemistically referred to as “gifts,” masking its transactional and coercive nature. Witnessing the humiliation inflicted upon her family, Maithili ultimately refuses to marry Atul, stating it's better to be Sati than to be his wife.

Maithili's character can be analyzed through the lens of socialist feminist theory, which interrogates the dual structures of patriarchy and capitalism as mutually reinforcing systems of female subjugation. Her experience within the institution of marriage is shaped not by emotional intimacy but by economic transaction, wherein her value is tethered to the dowry her family is expected to provide. The degradation her father suffers during the wedding negotiations exemplifies how capitalist logic commodifies women, transforming marriage into a site of financial exchange and class performance. Her refusal to marry under these conditions marks a rupture, a deliberate rejection of both patriarchal authority and capitalist commodification. Through this act of defiance, Maithili asserts her agency, challenging the socio-economic structures that seek to define her worth.

5.3 Unnamed Sex Worker : The Unpaid Woman

There is a sex worker in the film who is denied payment for her services, and when she demands her rightful compensation, she is publicly humiliated in front of others. Her character can be critically examined through Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma. Her profession becomes a moral label that legitimizes her economic exploitation and renders her socially invisible. Despite fulfilling the transactional role expected of her, she is denied both remuneration and dignity, treated not as a laborer, but as a contaminant. Her portrayal illustrates how stigma functions not merely through moral condemnation, but through systemic denial of agency, voice, and social worth.

5.4 Janaki: The Condemned Creator

Janaki, an actress working in the Rangmahal Natak Company, becomes pregnant by her would-be husband, Manish. Their employer, Purushottam, attempts to sexually exploit Janaki, and when she resists his advances, he deliberately sows discord between the couple. As a result, Manish refuses to acknowledge Janaki or accept responsibility for the pregnancy. In response, Janaki raises her voice, not only in defense of herself but on behalf of all women who are silenced in the name of tradition. Her act of defiance, however, leads to her social ostracization as an unwed mother.

Her character can be critically examined through the lens of the Reproductive Justice framework. Janaki's experience reveals that motherhood is culturally sanctioned only when it aligns with patriarchal expectations. Her right to conceive and raise a child is not denied by legal structures, but by social stigma, gendered double standards, and moral hypocrisy. She is not punished for becoming a mother, but for doing so without the validation of male authority.

Through Janaki, the film exposes how reproductive autonomy is policed by cultural norms that equate legitimacy with submission, and motherhood with marital sanction.

5.5 Lata: The Silent Wife

Lata, the much younger wife of Purushottam, the proprietor of the Rangmahal Natak Company, is routinely silenced and controlled under the guise of tradition. Referred to dismissively by her husband as “Lata,

tujhe kuch nahi pata,” she is denied autonomy and treated more like a possession than a partner. Her age, comparable to that of Purushottam’s daughter, further accentuates the power imbalance within their marriage. Lata is perpetually veiled, prohibited from standing by the window, and forbidden from speaking to any man other than her husband. Her existence is confined to the domestic sphere, stripped of agency and voice.

Lata’s character can be critically examined through the lens of Structural Functionalism, which views society as a system of interdependent parts working to maintain equilibrium. Within this framework, her role as a submissive and silent wife serves the “function” of preserving domestic harmony, even if it necessitates the suppression of dissent and personal freedom. Her silence is not merely personal; it is structural, reinforcing the patriarchal family unit that is deemed essential to social stability. By conforming to these rigid expectations, Lata becomes a symbolic anchor of traditional order, illustrating how gender roles are institutionalized to sustain the broader social fabric.

5.6 Ramdulari: The Voice Beneath Ashes

Ramdulari, a Dalit midwife and rural widow, resides in a village where caste and patriarchy intersect to shape everyday oppression. Despite her marginalized social position, she is highly educated and skilled with technology. She often encourages other women to pursue education and self-reliance while reprimanding men who attempt female infanticide. Her dialogues openly challenge patriarchal dogma, particularly the oft-repeated adage “Aurat nark ka dwar hoti hai” which she subverts by asking how a woman can be equated with hell when she nurtures life and bears children. Her resistance, however, provokes violent backlash. She is sexually violated and ultimately burned alive by two powerful and misogynistic brothers who dominate the village, enraged by her son’s inter-caste relationship with Gajendra’s daughter. This horrifying act is not only a personal assault but a symbolic execution—intended to silence her and serve as a warning to any woman who dares to challenge entrenched hierarchies.

Her character can be critically examined through the lens of intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Ramdulari’s suffering is not the consequence of a singular identity, but of multiple, overlapping structures of domination. Her gender, caste, class, and rural location converge to render her exceptionally vulnerable to systemic violence. She is punished not merely for resisting as a woman, but for resisting as a lower-caste, economically disenfranchised woman whose voice disrupts the social order. Ramdulari thus becomes a potent symbol of how layered identities intensify marginalization, and how resistance from the periphery is met with the most brutal forms of silencing.

5.7 Fulmati :The Everyday Subaltern

Fulmati, living in a rural village that is deeply rooted in caste hierarchy and patriarchal dominance, epitomizes the everyday rural woman constrained by tradition, fear, and rigid social stratification. Her character can be critically examined through Johan Galtung’s theory of Structural Violence, which elucidates how institutional arrangements and entrenched hierarchies systematically inflict harm by denying individuals agency, dignity, and access to justice. When Fulmati resists working in Virendra’s fields, a modest yet courageous act of defiance, she is subjected to ritualized humiliation: her face is painted black to publicly shame her, and her head is forcibly shaved as a symbolic warning, ensuring that no one dares to dissent in the future. This punishment transcends personal retaliation; it reflects the embedded violence of a sociocultural system that normalizes caste-based exploitation and enforces gendered obedience through acts of degradation and fear.

6. Findings and Discussion

Upon completing the character analysis in *Lajja*, it became evident that despite belonging to an affluent household, Vaidehi lacked agency within her family. Her suffering was not limited to physical abuse; she endured persistent emotional violence, revealing that domestic oppression transcends economic class. This challenges the common misconception that domestic violence is confined to marginalized communities, and raises a critical question: why are men, across social strata, often unable or unwilling to provide emotional support to women?

Maithili, though deeply familiar with Atul and set to marry the man she loved, found herself unsupported when confronted with dowry demands. He remained passive, deferring entirely to his father's authority. This dynamic illustrates how romantic love often collapses under patriarchal pressure, especially when a woman seeks emotional or moral support. Men, conditioned to uphold familial loyalty above relational empathy, fear societal judgment that they have been "changed" or weakened by a woman's influence.

The unnamed sex worker in the film exposes the hypocrisy of societal morality. While prostitution is prevalent, sex workers are routinely exploited, denied payment, and subjected to verbal abuse. Her portrayal underscores the duplicity of a society that morally condemns sexual labor while simultaneously economically benefiting from it, rendering the laborer invisible, yet indispensable.

Janaki, upon becoming pregnant, is abandoned by her beloved at a moment of profound vulnerability. His rejection, rooted in a misunderstanding, leaves Janaki to face societal condemnation alone. Her pregnancy outside wedlock becomes a source of brutal harassment, revealing how reproductive autonomy is policed by cultural norms that equate legitimacy with male sanction.

Lata, the young wife of Purushottam, is treated not as an autonomous individual but as the property of her husband, confined to a narrowly defined domestic role. Her existence is governed by prescribed behavioral expectations, framed as the norms of a "respectable" woman, which serve to restrict her mobility, voice, and agency. Purushottam, projecting his own exploitative tendencies as seen in his treatment of Janaki, assumes that all men share his mentality. This projection fuels his deep-seated insecurity, leading him to exercise rigid control over Lata. He fears that without constant surveillance and domination, she might assert her independence or flee the oppressive confines of their marriage. Thus, Lata's confinement is not merely personal but ideological, reflecting a patriarchal impulse to discipline women through moral codes masquerading as tradition.

Ramdulari, a Dalit widow and midwife, envisions a peaceful life with her son, only to be violently assaulted due to caste and gender dynamics. Her molestation is not incidental; it is a deliberate assertion of male dominance. Her marginal social location intensifies her vulnerability, demonstrating how intersectional oppression operates through caste, gender, and rural disenfranchisement.

Fulmati, too, becomes an easy target not for any transgression, but for simply refusing to work in the fields of a dominant-caste man. Her punishment, including public humiliation and symbolic degradation, exemplifies structural violence. It reveals how dominant groups cannot tolerate dissent from marginalized women, whose refusal is perceived as a threat to entrenched hierarchies. The expectation remains that women, especially those from oppressed communities, must remain subordinate to male authority.

7. Conclusion

Cinema is a true mirror of society, and *Lajja* exemplifies this with piercing clarity. The film portrays a bleak and unsettling portrait of Indian society where women are revered as embodiments of Durga, Saraswati, and Kali, yet are abandoned when they confront real-life injustices. Females from different oppressed groups have experienced a grouping of oppression for centuries in the name of tradition. The men think of women as puppets. Even their closest companions, their intimate partners, often remain passive in the face of social evils. They are questioning each hypocritical norm and value of patriarchal society, and challenge every issue of gender

discrimination. Patriarchy is the main complication of women's progression and development that keeps a woman as a machine to reproduce and an object to have sexual pleasure. It has been the shame of the 21st Century in the World. The movie Lajja shows how women are endangered by gender and traditional beliefs associated with religion. The patriarchal norms do not let women fulfill their aspirations. Later, they have to repress their deep inner cravings, which would eventually turn into virtual deprivation and thus become a way of their living. The screenplay is one of the standout aspects of the film, as it effectively connects various storylines through the perspective of a central character. Although the film was well-crafted and had the potential to be successful, it underperformed at the box office upon its release in 2001, likely due to the audience's lack of readiness to engage with the complex themes presented. The filmmakers took a bold approach by addressing social issues and challenging religious sentiments. However, it's important to note that, despite the film's release date, many of the issues faced by women remain unresolved even as we look ahead to 2026. This film serves as a significant watch, as it offers insights and resonates with the experiences of women in society.

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