

GENDER AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SANJAY LEELA BHANSALI'S *PADMAAVAT*

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ABSTRACT

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This article analyzes the gender and power interactions in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat*. An investigation was carried out on how traditional gender roles are dealt with, employing feminist theory with a specific focus on the concept of the male gaze. The film examines patriarchy, female agency, and idealized femininity, revealing how women are portrayed primarily through a male perspective that reinforces gender hierarchies. An in-depth textual analysis of key characters, specifically Rani Padmavati, Alauddin Khilji, and Maharawal Ratan Singh, is a necessary step in the process. Scholars argue that *Padmaavat* presents a multi-faceted idea of women's silence and rebellion, symbolizing both power and weakness. Maharawal Ratan Singh represents the epitome of manly values and heroism. Alauddin Khilji symbolizes male hegemony and authoritarianism at its worst, emphasizing the power dynamics established through the male gaze. The film positions Padmavati as an object of visual and narrative fascination, reinforcing traditional gender norms even as it attempts to challenge them. The primary data are derived from Bhansali's film, *Padmaavat*, while the supporting data are derived from English journals, e-books, and other internet sources. This research paper helps us to understand how modern films project gender issues in India. Both challenging and reinforcing traditional gender conventions offer insight into power relations as well as the limits of female agency in patriarchal societies. This paper contributes to cultural studies on gender by providing insight into the cultural significance of Indian cinema and its portrayal of gender differences and power dynamics through the lens of the male gaze.

Keywords: Gender roles; power dynamics; Sanjay Leela Bhansali; *Padmaavat*; feminist perspective; cultural studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Bollywood often categorizes female characters into gendered tropes, including damsels, Hindu goddesses, virtuous wives, mothers, vamps, molls, vindictive mothers-in-law, and justice-seeking avengers (Karandikar et al., 2021; Hedley, 2002). The role of women in Indian films has been growing, and they are shifting from a state of dependence on male counterparts to independent women who can propel their people to a bright future (Agarwal, 2014). Sanjay Leela Bhansali is a director, screenwriter, and renowned Bollywood filmmaker. He received the prestigious Padma Shri award from the government of India in Prashar (2015). Having directed innovative and highly acclaimed films such as *Black*, *Devadas*, *Padmavaat*, *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, and others, his contribution to the world of Bollywood films has been immense in the history of

cinema. Sanjay Leela Bhansali is an example of the warped alt-right; his movies support feminism, anti-Brahmanism, and neo-conservatism in precisely the proper amounts to placate gullible moviegoers (Mehta, 2018). His films portray them as romantic fairytales, which appeal to a middle-class sensibility. They appear to be situated in a specific historical context even though they are primarily ahistorical; thus, the drama, despite being excessive, is acceptable. His female characters are brave and imbued with dignity, strength, and courage. They are actively involved in decision-making for themselves when they wish to express their desire for a partner and how they will stand up for themselves if their morals are questioned. In the past, women were considered only as commodities that could be bought and sold, but through her films, Bhansali portrays women as brave figures imbued with dignity, strength, and courage (Singh, 2021).

Padmaavat is an epic historical drama based on the epic poem *Padmaavat* by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, which tells the story of the mythical Rajput queen Rani Padmavati and the brutal Sultan Alauddin Khilji's siege of the Chittorgarh fort in the 13th century (Chouhan, 2022). Sanjay Leela Bhansali's alleged historical fiction film *Padmaavat* is more fiction than history (Safvi, 2018). The *Padmaavat* tale has been employed to uphold patriarchal beliefs, foster historical awareness, and occasionally uphold authority by fabricating a glorious past for particular people (Hossain, 2023). *Padmaavat* embodied the courageous vigor of Rajput women, who can defend their rights alongside males without being alarmed by their opponents (Paul, 2023). Princess Padmavati, the princess of Singhal, and Maha Rawal Ratan Singh, the Rajput king of Mewar, are the subjects of the movie's love story. As the tale develops, Princess Padmavati later considers herself the Queen of Mewar. Until a vicious Sultan named Alauddin Khilji decides to launch a war in the kingdom of Mewar because he is fascinated by Queen Padmavati. She is happily wed to a Rajput monarch. The tyrant sultan and his warriors attack the wealthy kingdom, but Ruler Ratan Singh and his brave forces stand their ground and protect his beautiful wife. For its historical accuracy and portrayal of specific events and personalities, *Padmaavat* attracted attention and controversy, sparking demonstrations and discussions before its release (Qureshi, 2018). *Padmaavat* is more interested in secular traditions than religious ideas. The film carries the idea of Indian women's femininity, loyalty, and spirituality (Abrams, 2018).

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive study of how Sanjay Leela Bhansali, through his film *Padmaavat*, traditionally portrays women's roles in the context of historical stories. The study also aims to decipher the complex gender dynamics depicted in the movie. It sheds insight into how it navigates and depicts conventional roles, expectations, and power structures within the historical setting by closely scrutinizing the characters and their interactions. This analysis intends to shed important light on the film's gender presentation, giving viewers a better understanding of how it questions or upholds gender norms and the ramifications of such portrayals in the larger cultural and cinematic context.

Gender roles, according to Blackstone (2003), are the responsibilities that men and women are required to fulfil in society depending on their respective sexes. According to Sumarsono et al. (2023), gender roles include both people's private and public acts, indicating societal and cultural expectations put on both men and women based on their ascribed sex category. The conventional gender roles always put women in weaker positions than men. They are stereotyped as weak, passive, obedient to men, and must do the housework. Men have more power and authority than women. According to Budidarma et al. (2023), men used to be expected to display qualities like strength, power, and competitiveness rather than openly expressing their feelings of love and devotion. Indian women are traditionally required to conform to gender stereotypes that dictate they should be gullible, observant of others' needs, and ready to alleviate their distress (Callahan, 2015).

This study uses a robust theoretical framework that blends feminist film theory with a focus on Laura Mulvey's idea of the "male gaze" for interpreting the movie *Padmaavat*. In her groundbreaking article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey developed her thesis. The film examines these right-wing ideas by employing the fetishistic and scopophilic masculine gaze (Mulvey, 1999). This theory is crucial in exploring how traditional films frequently objectify women by portraying them as objects of desire from a male perspective (Rodriguez, 2022; Loreck, 2016; Shandilya, 2019). Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" involves projecting a patriarchal fantasy onto the female figure, leading to the styling of female characters by these cinematic conventions, all of which she aimed to deconstruct to reveal the mechanics of looking and their reinforcement of patriarchal ideals (Jackson, 2023). Bollywood films portray heroines who conform to international standards of beauty while yet adhering to the traditional Hindu patriarchal familial traditions (Banerjee, 2017). This idea offers a perceptive examination of how female characters are portrayed in the movie and their agency. In the past, the woman on screen served as both an erotic object for the characters in the screen story and the audience, with the tension between the looks on either side of the screen changing (Mulvey, 2013).

This study intends to undertake a thorough examination of how gender and power are connected in the movie and offer a nuanced analysis of how the characters and their relationships are portrayed by incorporating this theoretical approach. The primary basis of this study is to analyze how gender and power

dynamics are portrayed in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat*, the way the film navigates and challenges the dominance of patriarchal structures, especially about the characters of Rani Padmavati, Alauddin Khilji, and Maharawal Ratan Singh towards gender roles in their time, and the way the film conveys gender complexity and power dynamics through visual and narrative techniques.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses multifaceted techniques to thoroughly test Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat* to portray gender and power dynamics. To understand the way the film addresses gender roles and power relations, the study began with textual examinations of several key characters, including Rani Padmavati, Alauddin Khilji, and Maharawal Ratan Singh. This study also analyzes how the film presents women as active agents, objectification, and men's views on female roles using Laura Mulvey's theory. This analysis offers insight into how gender identities are constructed and destroyed within the story. To provide an understanding of how *Padmaavat* confronts traditional gender roles, patriarchy, and female autonomy, the conclusions from this thorough analysis are synthesized.

Previous papers were used to support the analysis of Bhansali's film, *Padmaavat*, providing a better understanding of the focus of the study. Varghese (2021a) concluded that *Padmaavat* depicts an ideal woman who gave her life to uphold her virginity and, in turn, the honor of her community. She is said to possess all the desirable traits men look for in women. Her commitment to these characteristics, as defined by patriarchal culture and her "Jauhar" act, elevated her to the status of a deity. However, these characteristics have always existed; they are not the only product of a specific society or period. The tale of Padmavati likewise uses this exact representation of the perfect woman and her exaltation.

According to Tira Nur Fitria's paper entitled *Jauhar as a Representation of Love, Sacrifice, and Loyalty of the Main Character in the Padmavaat Movie*, Jauhar in the film *Padmavaat* symbolizes women's love, loyalty, and sacrifice for their husbands. They choose to commit to Jauhar to avoid being enslaved by the conquerors (Fitria, 2023). It was found that the conflict between the two kingdoms is caused by Sultan Alauddin Khilji, who wants Queen Padmavati, the spouse of Raja Ratan Singh, the chief Rajput, and make her his wife. Jauhar in *Padmavaat* is a story of the love, devotion, and loyalty of a queen to her king. The film successfully depicts the battle to uphold the honor of women. Before they perished in the fire, the women felt proud despite losing their sovereignty. Alauddin suffered his most significant setback in Queen Padmavati's Jauhar, while Chittor achieved his greatest triumph.

In *Patriarchy, Piety, and Padmavati: The Sordid Story*, Sharma and Anamica (2018) concluded that the themes of Padmavati are patriarchy, women, honor, and death. The moral need to protect the woman's honor binds her to Jauhar. When a king wins an estate in battle, the men of the vanquished region are either slain or sold into slavery. At the same time, the women are kept as trophies of victory and frequently utilized for the monarch and army's sexual fantasies. The same thing will happen to Padmavati when Sultan Khilji defeats Ratan Singh. She decided to burn herself and her fellow women to death to remove the dishonor caused by Khilji's passion and sexual fantasies for her. The patriarchal mentality that a man's honor is paramount and is more important than even a woman's life is what drives this act of self-immolation.

Varghese (2021b) states that in *Padmaavat*, the dominant male society stereotypes women to exert control over them. Women are not fundamentally more feminine than men, and gender and gender roles are also constructs. Men perceive women as a creation of their fantasies. According to popular perception, Padmavati is a devout, devoted, woman who upholds all the patriarchal standards upheld by Rajput society. This may be seen in the sacrifice of her Jauhar, who devoted her life to preserving her honor and the honor of her community. She was forced to conform to the gender norms expected of a typical lady, and since she followed tradition and culture unthinkingly, her unique voice was silenced.

This study differs from previous studies by providing a new perspective through the integration of feminist theory and the male gaze concept, which has never been explicitly used in previous studies. Varghese (2021a) focuses on Padmavati's representation as an ideal woman, while Fitria (2023) analyzed Jauhar as a symbol of love and loyalty. This study analyzes how the male gaze frames and constructs the depiction, revealing the interplay between visual storytelling and gendered power dynamics. Sharma and Anamica (2018) emphasized themes of horror and patriarchal death, and Varghese (2021b) criticized the stereotypes of feminine representation. However, this study contributed to uncovering how cinematography techniques and narrative choices in *Padmaavat* caused or challenged these constructs. This study offers a new view of the cultural and ideological implications of film on existing discourses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Gender roles and power dynamics

This study aims to provide a nuanced analysis of how the characters and their relationships are portrayed and thoroughly investigate how gender and power are related in the film. The main research questions that underlie this study are how gender and power dynamics are depicted in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Padmaavat*, specifically how the film navigates and challenges patriarchal structures, especially the characters of Rani Padmavati, Alauddin Khilji, and Maharawal Ratan Singh, and how the film uses visual and narrative techniques to convey the complexities of gender and power dynamics. The medieval Indian setting of Bhansali's *Padmaavat* provides an excellent setting for exploring essential topics such as patriarchy, power dynamics, female agency, and idealized femininity. The plot and character relationships are expertly woven to incorporate these topics.

According to Mulvey, traditional cinema often objectifies women and portrays them as passive objects of desire for the male viewer (Galijašević, 2022). Mulvey (1999) said that in films, men are usually portrayed as active and controlling characters. In contrast, women are portrayed as passive, their presence as a spectacle, and judged based on their appearance rather than on their acting qualities (Habib, 2017). The movie depicts the conventional gender roles in medieval Indian culture. Men are supposed to dominate and protect, while women are frequently restricted to household duties. Females are more subservient than males, according to traditional gender stereotypes in a patriarchal culture; as a result, women should labor full-time at home caring for their partner and children. Women are supposed to be visually appealing, pure, innocent, timid, forceful, and dependent, whereas men are expected to be physically young, strong, gorgeous, courageous, heroic, and rebellious (Koenig, 2018). Despite her strength and knowledge, Rani Padmavati plays the queen and wife roles by traditional gender stereotypes. She must obey and be loyal to her spouse, Maharawal Ratan Singh, and be dedicated to him. Almost all of the kingdom's authority is in the king's hands. The power dynamics in Rani Padmavati's society, where women were expected to fulfil specific duties within the patriarchal system, are symbolized by her steadfast adherence to established gender norms and ideals. Her persona serves to underline how helpless women are in such a structure.



Figure 1: Padmavati standing next to Ratan Singh symbolizes that her existence is always under the shadow of the king

Rani Padmavati is often depicted as standing behind or beside her husband, indicating her position below her husband (Figure 1). Her intelligence and strategy, shown when she rescued Maharawal Ratan Singh from Alauddin Khilji, were overshadowed by the expectation that he would have to win the approval of the male officials. Like in the film *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), Jodhaa Bai's agency is limited by her role as the wife of King Akbar, although she has a strong character. In *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), Mastani's love and loyalty to Bajirao cause her to endure rejection, showing the limitations placed on women in a patriarchal society.

Male Gaze says that women do not create meaning in films, but their presence is only to convey it, which means that women are not given control over the scene, but their existence is only to be seen and used as objects (Sampson, 2015). The masculine gaze is noticeable in the visual and narrative treatment of the female

characters, especially Rani Padmavati, where her physical beauty and appeal are frequently emphasized through sumptuous clothing, detailed makeup, and sensual dance routines. Women are depicted in luxurious outfits, flawless makeup, and dazzling hairstyles, all to satisfy men, suggesting that films often focus on women's appearances to appeal to male audiences (Habib, 2017). Inviting the spectator to enjoy her from a male perspective, the camera dwells on her beauty. How Padmavati's beauty is portrayed in the film is the central attraction for the movie spectators. Padmavati is presented as the most beautiful woman among thousands or millions of women in the kingdom. Padmavati possesses the appearance of an international supermodel, adorning herself in magnificent traditional Rajasthani attire and jewelry that bestows upon her an aesthetic devoid of any sexual connotations. However, Padmavati is not the first wife of Ratan Singh and is the kingdom's queen. The movie's wardrobes, makeup, and sensual dances present how the male gaze is described. How Padmavati gets dressed, puts on makeup, and dances shows what or men, in general want to see a beautiful woman.

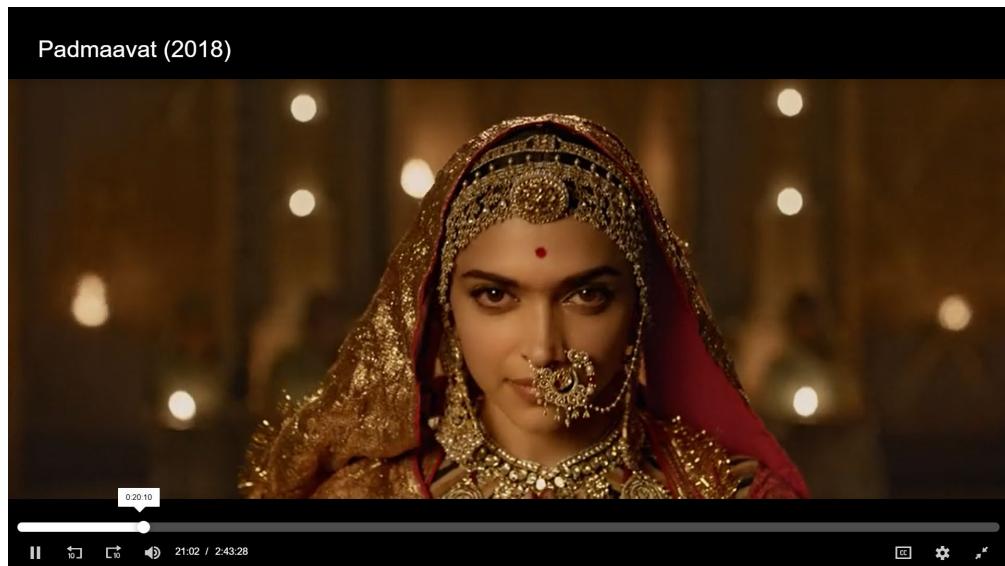


Figure 2: Padmavati was shot with a close-up camera to highlight her beauty and the luxury of her clothes and jewelry

Padmavati's depiction shows the male gaze by framing it in a majestic and luxurious setting, highlighting her physical beauty and ideal femininity (Figure 2). Scenes that show her treatment, luxurious clothes, and dance choreography are not only a visual spectacle but also reinforce the image of patriarchal femininity. This element functions in an aesthetic that visually appeals to the viewer while symbolically reinforcing the idea that women's worth lies in their appearance and conformity to traditional beauty standards. Ideologically, Padmavati's representation upholds patriarchal constructions that tie women's values to their beauty and virtue, illustrating that her ultimate power is rooted in her physical beauty rather than her agency and intelligence.

Compared to *Jodhaa Akbar* and *Bajirao Mastani*, which also emphasized the physical beauty and elegance of the female protagonists, *Padmaavat* becomes a higher-level spectacle with a focus on Padmavati's presentation in a luxurious way. Padmavati's repeated depictions of the jewelry she wears, her graceful way of walking through the palace corridors, and her dancing signify the film's reliance on men's gaze to create engagement and uphold a culture of women's beauty and devotion to men.

The movie also shows instances of female agency and inner power, which subverts the conventional objectification associated with the male gaze and provides a more nuanced picture of the female characters. Rani Padmavati's beauty is portrayed in a lavish and ethereal way. Expensive outfits, fine jewellery, and artistic makeup highlight her attractiveness and physical appeal. Her attractiveness is captured in the movie through close-up shots and slow-motion scenes, frequently lit in soft, flattering ways to bring forth her brilliance. Like films that use the male gaze, the camera often focuses on the female body, such as her breasts, abdomen, and waist, making women the only objects to be seen (Sheth et al., 2021). Additionally, Padmavati's grace and elegance, displayed in her dancing performances and regal demeanor, are linked to her beauty. How she is portrayed as beautiful is crucial to the plot because it plays a crucial role in the movie's conflict, arousing Alauddin Khilji's desire and setting the stage for what happens next. The female characters, including Rani Padmavati, might initially appear as objects of desire due to their aesthetic presentation and beauty. The Rajput queen of Mewar, Padmavati, is represented as being lovely and honorable. She is renowned for her wit, bravery,

and loyalty to her husband, King Ratan Singh. The character of Padmavati is portrayed as the personification of traditional Rajput honor and traditions, and the Mewaris greatly respects her. Her attractiveness has spread to the neighboring kingdoms, leading a Brahmin to act immorally and receive punishment. In addition, Sultan Alauddin Khilji's awe at her beauty prompts him to declare war on the Rajput Kingdom.

The film uses various cinematic techniques to highlight Padmavati's beauty and its symbolic significance. The warm, golden hues in the lighting support her majestic appearance, making her like an angel. The camera angle, for example, with close-ups and slow shooting, shows the majesty of the physique and the depth of emotions. His majestic entrance scenes often depict symmetrical compositions and wide shots that establish his dominance in the frame. The film also uses dynamic camera movements during the dance scenes, with sweeping shots using cranes and slow zoom-ins that focus on her intricate expressions and elegant movements, supporting the idea that she is an object of admiration and desire. This visual choice contributes to the themes of power, honor, and agency of women in patriarchal structures.

Men and women have different settings and obligations, as the movie illustrates. In the Rajput realm, everyone has a separate room, including Rani Padmavati. While the males handle the kingdom's duties, Rani and the other women are forced to remain at the palace and engage in customary pursuits like dance and embroidery. The division of roles and spaces highlights the traditional gender roles established at the time as accepted social standards. Although Rani Padmavati is portrayed as a stunning, resilient, and wise woman, her dedication to her husband, Maharawal Ratan Singh, defines her role as the queen. She cannot choose how she wants to extend his life alone. She is steadfast in her love for him, representing the conventional idea of spousal devotion. Their marriage was arranged to form a political alliance. Women must follow their parents' instructions, particularly those of their fathers. She cannot reject Ratan Singh's marriage proposal when his father encourages her to accept it. She intends to protect the realm's respect and dignity through her role as Ratan Singh's wife. This reflects the patriarchal society of the time, in which men held positions of power and made choices. Ratan Singh holds the reins of power and takes decisions that impact the Rajput King, while Alauddin Kilji seeks to enlarge his realm and establish himself as a conqueror. Kilji's desire to wed Rani Padmavati and other goals reflect the patriarchal power structure of the time.



Figure 3: Padmavati is undergoing an intelligence test by Rahav Chetan

However, the film goes beyond objectification by delving into these characters' inner strength and agency. This subversion of the male gaze challenges traditional cinematic conventions. Rani Padmavati is portrayed as a figure who defies traditional gender stereotypes and exhibits autonomy and intelligence. The conversation between Padmavati and Rahav Chetan indicates that the queen has the qualities of an extraordinary woman who has beauty, courage, and intelligence (Figure 3). For her, to be a queen, having a beautiful face and body is not enough. She must have skill, courage, and intelligence. Being a queen, a woman must have good spirituality and love and be ready to sacrifice anything she has, including her life.

Chetan: Your beauty is divine!

Ratan Singh: Not just beauty, but she's also blessed with great intelligence.

Chetan: So what is more important to the new Queen? Beauty or skill? Please answer his question.

Padmavati: Skill.

Chetan: And beauty?

Padmavati: That lies in the eye of the beholder. Some see God in every object, while some see God as another object.
Chetan: Describe life in three words.
Padmavati: Spirituality, love and sacrifice. ...
Chetan: I hear you're well-versed in the art of warfare. What is the greatest weapon on the battlefield?
Padmavati: Courage.
Chetan: Which is the most difficult moment in life?
Padmavati: Awaiting results after examination.
Chetan: And the biggest gift?
Padmavati: Blessings!

(Bhansali, 2018, 00:26:22-00:27:36)

Padmavati is shown as a brave and honorable monarch devoted to her realm and her spouse. She plays a crucial role in the movie's plot and its bravery, sacrifice, and dignity themes. It is made clear that Padmavati is a powerful, resolute individual who acts decisively to defend her honor and her throne. She is the opposite of King Ratan Singh's first wife, portrayed as a passive with no courage and quickly gives up. When Alauddin Khilji captures Ratan Singh, she blames Padmavati for getting the King in trouble rather than trying to find a solution. As a king's wife, she actively participates in making serious decisions. She is not a passive observer but contributes to discussions and deliberations on matters that affect the kingdom's safety. She does not just stand by and watch as her family and environment are cared for; she actively participates in the events as they develop. She had to defy her husband's orders to hide from Alauddin Khilji, but she chose to do so to prevent a war between the Rajput and Khilji kingdoms. She also had the guts to accept Alauddin Kilji's invitation to visit his realm to secure her husband's release. Her intelligence can be seen in the conditions she offers Khilji. If Khilji approves of her condition, she will see him in his kingdom. One of the conditions that she offers him is that she will come to his kingdom if Khilji is willing to behead Raghav Chetan, who is portrayed as a disgraced priest who, because of his immoral and unethical behavior, is exiled from the kingdom of Mewar, and let her 800 women accompany her. Her final act of "Jauhar" demonstrates her strength and moral integrity since she can inspire all the women in the palace to stand firm. She has leadership and influence since she can make all the women make a collective decision with her to commit Jauhar to protect their honor.

Like Penelope in *The Odyssey*, Padmavati depicts resilience, intelligence, and a strategic way of thinking, proving that women in historical narratives can gain power and influence in patriarchal structures while maintaining their integrity and dignity. Penelope is known for her intelligence and loyalty to *Odyssey* and his ingenuity in dealing with the men who proposed to him while he waited for *Odyssey's* return (Moller, 2021). These two women beat traditional gender roles by stepping into strategic and leadership positions that men usually hold. Other characters like Joan of Arc and Sita in *Ramayana* also have the same qualities. Joan of Arc led the army and inspired many people through her courage in taking on the role that men usually held in war (Beyer, 2024). Sita in the *Ramayana* is often described as a symbol of devotion, showing strength and agency through its moral message (Mishra, 2023). This comparison shows that female heroes are given agency and exceed their traditional gender roles by defeating their 'supposed' roles and performing just the binary opposition (a.k.a. male roles), challenging the patriarchal constraints imposed upon them.

Gora: This sword had sworn to protect Mewari's pride. But you've decided to go there. You have embarrassed us. Take this sword and behead me.
Padmavati: This is the only way to bring our King back.
Gora: Don't you trust our ability to bring our King back?
Padmavati: I do! But not every war is won with might. This time we'll have to use a different strategy... send a message to the Sultan.
Gora: I don't agree with your decision.
Padmavati: This is not a request from a sister, but an order of the Queen of Meswar!

(Bhansali, 2018, 1:41:02-1:41:35)

From the perspective of feminism, what Padmavati does in this scene shows a complex interplay between resistance and conformity with patriarchal values. Her assertive actions challenge traditional gender roles and show her feminine agency, but they also exist within the constraints of social expectations of honor and sacrifice. This scene shows the ongoing struggle for women to exercise their autonomy in a patriarchal environment while redefining their roles as leaders and strategists.



Figure 4: Alauddin Khilji sent the head of Chetan as one of the Padmaavati's conditions to come to Khilji's kingdom. It is one of her strategies to free Ratan Singh

Her committing Jauhar with the other women at the palace seems a passive effort at first glance, but it is very powerful. Their Jauhar is not only an act of deviance against Khilji but also a symbol of their determination to control their life and destiny (Figure 4). Her choice to commit the collective Jauhar with the women at the palace reflects her agency in deciding her fate and honor rather than allowing Alauddin Khilji to possess her against her will. Padmaavati becomes the inspiration not only for the women at the palace but also for her husband. Her devotion and loyalty to her husband and country motivated her to uphold their honor and kingdom as a husband and a king. Their committing Jauhar indicates the loyalty of all women at Mewar Palace, both for their husbands and their country.

The central theme of *Padmaavat* is depicted through the persona of Rani Padmaavati and the more significant cultural norms of the time. Rani Padmaavati is portrayed as embodying both grace and physical beauty. Her character has elegance and charm, and she has a faultless appearance. She adheres to conventional notions of feminine attractiveness and has chosen clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry that highlight her beauty. In the movie, idealized femininity is linked to moral uprightness and religious behavior. In addition to being aesthetically attractive, Padmaavati is also portrayed as being morally pure. She is depicted partaking in rites, prayers, and charitable deeds, emphasizing her chastity and dedication. Her religiosity fits the stereotype of a virtuous woman. Padmaavati has incredible resiliency and inner power. In the face of difficulty, she retains her composure and dignity while making difficult choices that determine the kingdom's future. The Jauhar action, emphasized throughout the movie, represents idealized femininity. Even though this is a tragic occurrence, it is portrayed as a heroic deed, highlighting the women's agency in determining their fate and upholding their honor. In patriarchal social structures, women's agency is diminished because they are portrayed only in the relationship of fulfilling men's desires, acting as a reflection of men's expectations rather than as independent individuals with their power and identity (Mambrol, 2017). The character of Padmaavati is more than just a passive representation of idealized womanhood; she also has an impact on and inspires others around her. The women in the palace are impressed by her grace and fortitude, and even her husband is motivated to protect their throne (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Padmavati and all the female inhabitants of the kingdom performed Jauhar by jumping into the flames because they did not want to be enslaved to conquer Khilji

Men are often portrayed as more dominant and proactive than women, taking a step forward as leaders and being in control (Hentschel et al., 2019). Ratan Singh and Alauddin Khilji reflect on the idea that men are portrayed as more agentive, taking responsibility. Ratan Singh is described as making decisions to protect the government and uphold its values. He is a moral and strategic leader, showing control over his actions and responsibilities. Alauddin Khilji is portrayed as a dominant and aggressive leader who seizes power with violence and manipulation. His actions in the film cause much conflict, showing that he is a figure who prioritizes his lust.

While Ratan Singh in *Padmaavat* exhibits traits and behaviors that go against preconceptions, he also conforms to some traditional ideas of what it is to be a man, giving his character more extraordinary richness and complexity. Ratan Singh is depicted as a valiant and expert warrior. He is well-recognized for his fighting skills, which fit the stereotypical male image of a fierce and courageous warrior. He is portrayed as a monarch who upholds moral principles in all conflicts and prioritizes the glory of his country over all others. He possesses the traits of a man and a monarch who does not exploit his adversary. If he wins it improperly, a victory is not the primary goal for a real guy. His dedication to defending his kingdom, Mewar, and its citizens shows that he represents men by traditional gender roles. It is the way the movie portrays the sense of duty and obligation that is frequently connected to male kings and soldiers in traditional civilization. As the monarch and warrior of the Mewar empire, Ratan Singh fulfills his responsibility to defend not just his queen but also his kingdom and his people from any threats. Ratan Singh displays emotional fragility as a warrior, especially in his intense love for Padmavati. Even if it means taking chances and facing hazards, he will give it all up for the lady he loves. He shows that he cares deeply about the woman he loves by making a sacrifice for her. Ratan Singh also focuses on love and honor rather than deceit or manipulation to accomplish his goals. He differs from his rival, Alauddin Khilji, in that regard. Both characters show the traditional depiction of men as action figures and decision-makers.

Khilji's character disrupts conventional gender roles and stereotypes; he is not depicted as depressing or distasteful. He acts as the story's antagonist and is shown to have done morally repugnant things. However, the representation of his character goes against the grain of what is typically expected of male characters in historical epics in terms of their interactions and behavior. Khilji is shown as a harsh, ambitious, and power-hungry king who is frequently connected with male characters in leadership roles. His unbridled ambition and willingness to do whatever it takes to succeed in his objectives go against the moral and ethical limitations traditionally placed on male leaders. He often defeats his opponents through deceitful means and deception. He opposes these principles by using strategy and deceit to obtain control. The sexuality of Khilji's character is solid and unreserved. His love for Padmavati reflects his hunger for power, and the fact that he is not ashamed to proclaim his attraction to her shows that he rejects the conventional idea of males who exercise restraint and respect for women's modesty. Khilji is not restricted by ideas of honor or chivalry, which are sometimes connected with traditional male duties, unlike Ratan Singh. He opposes these ideas instead by using deception and tactics to take control of the situation. It is evident how he outduels Ratan Singh and prevails. Additionally,

he is shown to be a man who will use any form of brutality, even against his own family, to achieve his goals. His acts go against the grain of the conventional view of male loyalty and stewardship to the family.

3.2. The embodiment and challenge of gender roles and power dynamics

Rani Padmavati, Alauddin Khilji, and Maharawal Ratan Singh are three personalities who exemplify and challenge gender and power dynamics in different ways. Rani Padmavati represents the gender roles that were common at the time. She is shown to be a moral and obedient queen who puts her husband and kingdom first. In a patriarchal society, a queen's principal duty is to uphold the respect and dignity of her family and country, and her behavior conforms to these accepted norms. She has a duty to the kingdom as queen and to her spouse. She must put her husband's and the kingdom's needs before her own and put everything else on hold for her husband and the kingdom, and she must always be available to the king in case he needs her.

Through the wit of Padmavati, Bhansali tackles gender stereotypes in *Padmaavat*. Despite playing by the rules, Padmavati breaks down gender norms with her wit, boldness, and analytical thinking. When Alauddin Khilji requests permission to see Padmavati through Ratan Singh, she can prevent a war between her country and him. Asking Ratan Singh to show him his queen is humiliating for the king and the realm, and it may lead to strife between the two kings. Thanks to her cunning and strategic thinking, Padmavati can evade the warring kingdoms by appearing in front of Khilji while hiding her face. She makes pivotal choices that affect the course of the story as she uses her wit and intelligence to defend her dignity and realm. She exemplifies how women can contribute significantly to governance and decision-making through her actions. She employs her intellect and cunning to free her husband after Alauddin Khilji captures him and asks that she travel to his realm to free him (Figure 6). She pledges to go, but only if Khilji is willing to murder Raghav Chetan and allow her to bring 800 women who are male soldiers of the kingdom disguised as women.

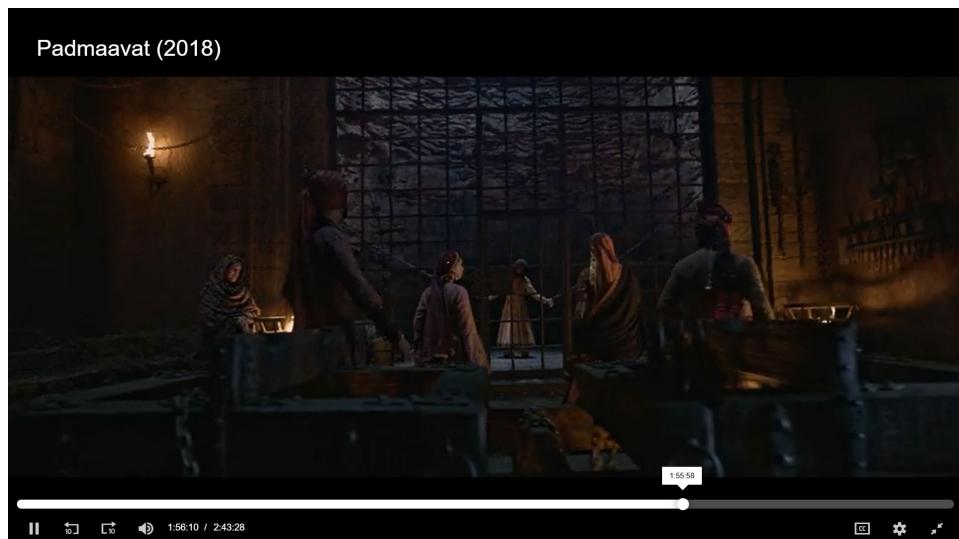


Figure 6: Padmavati found and freed Ratan Singh from the prison of the Alauddin Khilji's Kingdom

Padmavati utilizes her bravery and cunning to perform the last collective Jauhar after Khilji kills her husband and vanquishes the Mewar warriors. This collective Jauhar demonstrates to the world two things about her loyalty as a queen and wife. She can demonstrate her loyalty to both her spouse and her kingdom. She can defend the honor as a wife, a queen, and a woman in general, as shown by her ultimate Jauhar. She inspires all women in the place for her leadership and loyalty to her husband and kingdom. She commits Jauhar because she does not want Khilji and his soldiers to use her and the other women in the palace as objects of their sexual fantasies in addition to enslaving them. Her Jauhar is the most significant victory for Mewar women, while for Alauddin Khilji, it is his biggest defeat since he cannot achieve his desires.

Padmavati: If our brave hearts attain martyrdom today, the enemy would still not be victorious. Chittor will witness another war, one that is unseen and unheard of. And that war will be fought by us women! Our enemies shall watch how we turn our agony into victory. It is time to reignite the holy fire that stood witness to our oath that only death will do us part. We shall offer ourselves to the holy fire and perform Jauhar! Those who lust for our bodies would not even get their hands on our shadows! Our bodies will be reduced to ashes, but our pride and honour will remain immortal. And that will be the biggest defeat of Alauddin's life!

(Bhansali, 2018, 02:27:58–02:29:18)

Alaaddin Khilji is presented as a cruel and power-hungry invader who will do everything to accomplish his objectives. He embodies the stereotypical masculine monarch who desires to enlarge his realm by hegemony and conquest. His persona epitomizes conventional ideas of masculinity linked to strength, violence, and dominance. First, he attacks a country without the permission of her uncle, Jalaluddin Khilji, the King of Delhi. Secondly, he asks Jalaluddin's daughter to marry him, and he commits adultery on the night of their wedding. When he is ordered to fight against the Mongol invasion and wins the battle, he does not bring the princess he captures to his uncle, but he makes her his concubine. Moreover, the worst thing is that he assassinates his uncle for the throne of Delhi.

Jalaluddin Khilji: I've brought a precious gift for you too. This slave! Especially bought for you. He has the guile of a wolf and the agility of a cheetah. He will serve you in every way possible. You can put him to test.

Alaaddin Khilji: Hmm... What's the name?

The enslaved person: Malik Kafur, Sire.

Alaaddin Khilji: Not yours. The perfume you're wearing.

The slave: Jannat-ul-Firdaus.

Alaaddin Khilji: What can you do for me?

The slave: Anything. I can give my life for you.

Alaaddin Khilji: Can you take a life for me?

The enslaved person: Yes, Sire.

Alaaddin Khilji: -Hmm. Then kill these men.

(Bhansali, 2018, 00:40:06–00:40:58)

For his success in repelling the Mongol invasion, he is given an enslaved person named Malik Kaffur, whom he then asks to assassinate Jallaludin Khilji and his ministers. After killing his uncle, Alaaddin Khilji ascends to the throne and usurps Jallaludin Khilji's throne. After becoming the ruler of Delhi, he and Chetan are in an alley attempting to seize Padmavati from her husband, the ruler of the Rajputs. He is oblivious to the fact that his attempt to seduce the other man's wife violates both cultural and religious conventions. His desire for success leads him to want to murder Chetan. His willingness to kill his ally indicates that he only cares about his ambition.

The persona of Khilji questions societal norms and conventional morals. He is depicted as prepared to forgo conventional ethics and ideals to achieve his goals. His actions demonstrate a contempt for the accepted customs of the period and a rejection of the legitimacy of the established power structures. To maintain his position as the king of Delhi, he murders Jallaludin Khilji, his uncle, his father-in-law, and his cousin. He seeks to extort the wife of another monarch, disregarding morals and customs. It violates both religious principles and cultural norms. He is unconcerned about the effects of his actions on his subjects and realm. He disregards the morals and teachings of religion. It is implied that Alaaddin Khilji did not respect other kings. He is a monarch who disregards the fair rules of war and employs any tactics and techniques necessary to win any battle. His tactics might be cunning and unjust at times. He once said he would welcome Ratan Singh to his tent without any army, but instead, he set up a trap for Ratan Singh and took him prisoner. The second instance is when he engages Ratan Singh in combat and allows his slave, Malik Kafur, to launch arrows at Ratan Singh just as the latter is about to be defeated.

Maharawal Ratan Singh epitomizes the valiant and upright qualities of conventional Rajput masculinity. He is a brave warrior with the highest emphasis on loyalty and honor. His persona follows the Rajput code of ethics, which calls for upholding the dignity of his queen and safeguarding his land. Although no kingdoms around the Rajput does not support him, he decides to declare war against Khilji.

Gora Singh: What news have you brought Sujaan Singh? When are the troops of other Kingdoms arriving?

Sujaan Singh: Every Kingdom has refused to support us. No one wants enmity with Alaaddin. What should we do now Gora Singh?

Ratan Singh: Declare war.

Gora Singh: My Lord, please reconsider.

Ratan Singh: The decision is made. Chittor will fight its own battle.

(Bhansali, 2018, 01:03:49–01:04:24)

His quality and masculinity can be seen when he accepts Khilji's invitation to attend his tent, but he does not bring any weapons or men. Despite Padmavati's warning that Khilji can trap him, he enters the tent as a lone knight, with his warriors waiting outside. Ratan Singh consistently values the manly side of conventional Rajput manhood. Being an honorable fighter is more crucial than achieving victory in a dishonorable manner.

Ratan Singh could decline Khilji's invitation to attend his tent because Khilji might have created a trap. Ratan Singh still makes the trip to protect his and the Mewar kingdom's honor.

Even though there is a chance of falling for Khilji's trap, he arrives without any weapons and refuses to let his guard into the tent with him to meet Khilji. Ratan does not attempt to depart Delhi without visiting Alauddin once Padmavati frees him. As a knight, he must enter with his face and exit with his back shown to his adversary. Alauddin tells Ratan to use this chance to kill him while he is still vulnerable as Ratan confronts him. Ratan, however, declines because it goes against the Rajput belief that one should not attack the wounded.

Alauddin Khilji: Today is your opportunity. Pick up this sword and sever my head. Because if you leave me alive today, you'll regret it forever.

Ratan Singh: You're lucky your enemy is a Rajput. We don't attack the wounded and helpless.

Alauddin Khilji: You are so nice! And so are your ethics!

Ratan Singh: You should learn some ethics, too, Alauddin. They will make you into a human being.

(Bhansali, 2018, 01:59:02–01:59:32)

Ratan is the king who knows ethics well. He does not use his opportunity for his interest. He knows that he can kill Khilji, but he does not do it. For him, it breaks the ethics of war when a king kills a wounded opponent. He will wait until Alauddin Khilji recovers from his wound and is ready to fight against him. For Ratan Singh, victory is not more important than good manners and ethics. Because it is his battle with Khilji, Ratan never permits his army to participate in the conflict between him and the latter. He does not want his troops or people to suffer because of his private affairs. The Rajput kingdoms and his honor are at stake in his battle against Khilji.

4. CONCLUSION

Padmaavat interacts with Mulvey's (1999) idea of the male gaze by showing its female characters in ways that could be seen as conforming to conventional objectification but later subverts these conventions by stressing their agency, inner strength, and complicated histories. The one-dimensional portrayal of women frequently linked with the male gaze in film is challenged by this subversion, which adds to a more complex and empowered picture of women. The movie *Padmaavat* complicates and upholds traditional gender norms in various ways, and how it depicts gender roles has wider ramifications for society and culture. Rani Padmavati breaks gender stereotypes by showcasing a robust and intelligent woman. She makes pivotal choices that determine the future of her kingdom, defying gender stereotypes that paint women as weak, submissive, and lacking in brains and ambition and proving that they can become powerful, resourceful leaders. Although Rani Padmavati's character has certain liberating traits, the movie nonetheless takes place in a patriarchal culture where traditional gender roles are still mainly upheld. Despite being motivated by her agency, Padmavati's eventual self-immolation shows the restrictions on women's choices in her culture.

The figure of Maharawal Ratan Singh defies stereotypical masculinity by highlighting emotional acuity, vulnerability, and the power of love. This offers a more varied and compassionate representation of masculinity, challenging the idea that males should always be stoic and emotionless. Alauddin Khilji rebels against gender expectations with ruthlessness, outspoken sexuality, and cunning. Although he is not a good character because of these traits, they present a nuanced and unusual view of masculine authority. Alauddin Khilji's persona serves as a reminder that deviating too far from conventional gender and moral conventions can result in turmoil and disaster.

Women can feel empowered and inspired by the movie's depiction of strong, complex female characters like Padmavati, encouraging them to assert their agency and question social norms. The film can promote more diverse and healthy models of manhood by showcasing a complex view of masculinity through Ratan Singh's character and fostering conversations about traditional masculinity's negative repercussions.

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