

Self-Sufficient but Emotionally Starved: A Thematic Analysis of Emotional Maturity and Relationship Failures in Selected Indian Movies

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Abstract

In recent years, women's financial independence and expanding social roles have transformed the structure of modern relationships, especially within South Asian contexts. However, this progress has not eliminated the persistent issue of emotional deprivation experienced by many self-sufficient women. This study examines the gap between material autonomy and emotional fulfillment through a thematic analysis of selected Indian films. Guided by a feminist theoretical perspective, the research explores how emotional maturity, communication patterns, and gendered expectations contribute to relationship instability and emotional distress. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the study closely investigates narrative choices, character interactions, and cinematic techniques that highlight emotional imbalance between partners. The findings reveal that women frequently carry the weight of emotional labor, while male characters often display emotional immaturity, resistance to communication, or a lack of reciprocal emotional engagement. These factors collectively lead to unresolved conflicts, relational breakdowns, and inner turmoil for women. By analyzing these portrayals, the study sheds light on broader cultural issues surrounding emotional wellbeing, gender roles, and evolving relationship dynamics, making the discussion relevant to both contemporary social discourse and film studies.

Keywords: emotional maturity, emotional labor, feminist film analysis, relationship failure, Indian cinema, gender roles, emotional deprivation.

Introduction

The social and cultural landscape of South Asia has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly in terms of women's roles within families and society. With increasing access to higher education, professional opportunities, and financial independence, women today occupy positions that previous generations could not easily imagine. This shift has also influenced modern relationships, where traditional gender roles are gradually being renegotiated. Yet, despite these encouraging developments, emotional inequalities between men and women continue to persist. Many women may appear self-sufficient in practical or economic terms, but they still find themselves struggling with emotional neglect or a lack of meaningful support within their intimate relationships. This contrast between outward

independence and inward emotional deprivation lies at the heart of contemporary relational tensions.

The central issue addressed in this study is the emotional void that many financially independent women continue to experience. Although society increasingly celebrates women for their professional success and autonomy, emotional support from partners and families often remains limited. Women are still expected to manage the emotional environment of their relationships, ensuring harmony, understanding, and communication. This responsibility becomes burdensome when their own emotional needs are minimized, dismissed, or left unacknowledged. As a result, emotional labour—already a deeply gendered phenomenon—continues to fall disproportionately on women, even in relationships where both partners appear equal in material or intellectual capacities. The imbalance creates a silent strain that frequently leads to conflict, dissatisfaction, or relationship breakdown.

This study finds its significance in the context of Indian cinema, a powerful cultural medium that shapes and reflects public attitudes, social values, and gender expectations. Indian films have long influenced audiences, not only by entertaining them but also by presenting idealized or normalized depictions of relationships and emotional behaviour. Female characters, in particular, are often portrayed within narrow emotional frameworks—either as strong yet self-sacrificing figures or as independent women who are misunderstood, emotionally sidelined, or perceived as difficult. These cinematic patterns contribute to broader stereotypes that affect how real women's emotional needs are understood or dismissed in society. By examining films that depict emotionally starved yet self-sufficient women, this research aims to uncover how cinema mirrors cultural anxieties about women's autonomy and emotional expression.

The study seeks to answer several key questions. How do selected Indian films portray women who are independent in practical terms yet deprived of emotional support? What recurring themes of emotional immaturity—especially in male characters—contribute to these strained or failing relationships? How does the lack of emotional acknowledgment impact the female characters' mental wellbeing, decision-making, and sense of identity? And finally, how can feminist theoretical perspectives help explain these portrayals, particularly in relation to emotional labour, gender expectations, and power dynamics within relationships?

Through this investigation, the research aims to analyze the emotional dynamics portrayed in contemporary Indian cinema and highlight the persistent gendered patterns of emotional labour. It further seeks to explore how emotional maturity or immaturity shapes narrative conflict and relationship outcomes in film. By doing so, the study intends to reveal the complex relationship between women's autonomy and their need for emotional recognition, showing how cinematic narratives often echo real-world experiences of emotional imbalance. Ultimately, the research aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of how films depict—and sometimes reinforce—the emotional realities faced by modern women in their personal relationships.

Literature Review

The emotional experiences of women in contemporary relationships have received growing scholarly attention, particularly as feminist researchers highlight the often invisible emotional labour women perform to sustain harmony within families and intimate partnerships. Hochschild's (1983) seminal concept of *emotional labour*—initially applied to service-sector professions—has since broadened to describe how women regulate, absorb, and manage emotional tension within domestic and relational settings. Feminist psychologists argue that from early childhood, girls are socialized to embody empathy, nurturance, and emotional sensitivity, whereas boys are encouraged to suppress vulnerability and remain emotionally restrained (Brody & Hall, 2010). This gendered social conditioning places a disproportionate emotional burden on women, who are expected to navigate both their own emotional landscapes and those of others. Patriarchal norms reinforce such expectations by glorifying women's emotional resilience while simultaneously sidelining or trivializing their emotional needs (Gilligan, 1982). Consequently, women often operate within relational frameworks where their emotional contributions remain unacknowledged or taken for granted.

These ideas intersect meaningfully with feminist film theory, which interrogates how cinematic narratives construct and perpetuate gendered emotional roles. Mulvey's (1975) foundational critique of the male gaze explains how mainstream cinema frames women as objects of visual pleasure rather than as complex emotional subjects. Although developed in the context of Western cinema, Mulvey's theoretical claims extend to Indian film culture, where female characters are frequently confined to limited emotional archetypes. Research shows that Indian cinema often portrays women as self-sacrificing, endlessly patient, or morally superior, yet narratively sidelined (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013). Even films that showcase professionally successful or independent women frequently frame their autonomy in relation to male approval or emotional discomfort. While contemporary Indian films attempt to challenge conventional depictions, they often revert to familiar tropes that constrain women's emotional expression, revealing broader cultural anxieties surrounding women who seek both independence and emotional recognition.

Scholars examining gender representation in Bollywood consistently identify recurring portrayals of women as “sacrificial figures” or “silent sufferers” whose emotional endurance stabilizes immature or conflicted male characters (Dwyer, 2014). These portrayals contribute to the perception that women are inherently more patient, emotionally intelligent, and responsible for maintaining relational balance. Even within modern narratives featuring educated and self-reliant women, their emotional realities are frequently overshadowed by male-centered plotlines. This paradox—external independence coupled with internal emotional neglect—creates fertile ground for analyzing emotional starvation despite autonomy.

Parallel to film scholarship, contemporary psychological research provides essential frameworks for understanding emotional maturity within intimate relationships. Emotional maturity encompasses empathy, self-regulation, constructive communication, and the capacity to recognize and respond to a partner's emotional needs (Reis & Clark, 2013). Emotional immaturity, by contrast, manifests through avoidance, withdrawal, defensiveness, or an inability to interpret others' emotional states. Such traits often stem from childhood

trauma, restrictive gender norms, or underdeveloped communication skills (Cordova, 2014). In many patriarchal societies, emotional immaturity is more frequently normalized in men because cultural expectations discourage emotional openness. Consequently, women disproportionately bear the responsibility of initiating communication, soothing conflict, and interpreting their partner's emotional cues. These imbalances contribute not only to emotional dissatisfaction but also to long-term relational strain and breakdowns.

As gender roles shift in rapidly transforming societies, emotional maturity becomes increasingly central to relational stability. Financially independent women now expect emotional reciprocity and companionship, not mere economic partnership. When emotional unavailability persists—often rationalized through cultural norms that excuse men's communication deficits—women experience emotional deprivation that affects wellbeing and challenges traditional expectations of quiet endurance (Chadha & Misra, 2016). Cinema often reflects these cultural tensions, yet scholarly attention to emotional maturity in film narratives remains limited.

Despite extensive research on gender, patriarchy, and representation in Indian cinema, there is a notable gap in studies focusing specifically on emotional maturity within cinematic narratives. While scholars have examined women's empowerment, agency, and socio-cultural constraints, emotional deprivation—especially among self-sufficient women—remains underexplored. Likewise, few studies analyze how emotional immaturity contributes to relational failure in film or address the disconnect between women's financial independence and their continued emotional neglect. Furthermore, existing work seldom integrates feminist theory with emotional psychology, limiting the depth of analysis.

Addressing these gaps, this study examines how selected Indian films portray the emotional experiences of independent yet emotionally deprived women. By integrating feminist film theory, emotional labour scholarship, and psychological research on emotional maturity, the study offers a comprehensive lens for understanding relational dynamics in cinema. Its focus on emotional deprivation—rather than solely economic or social inequality—provides a fresh contribution to discussions on gender representation in Indian films. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how cinematic narratives mirror real-world emotional struggles, highlighting persistent cultural expectations that women must remain emotionally strong regardless of the emotional support they receive. Through this integrated analysis, the research offers deeper insights into the intersection of autonomy and emotional fulfillment in contemporary cinematic portrayals.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical grounding for this study is drawn from three major strands: feminist theory, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT), and psychological perspectives on emotional maturity. Together, these frameworks help explain why emotionally self-reliant women continue to experience emotional deprivation in intimate relationships, particularly within cultural representations seen in Indian cinema.

Feminist theory provides the foundational lens for understanding how traditional gender roles shape emotional expectations and relational behaviour. In patriarchal societies, women are commonly socialized to embody emotional resilience, patience, and nurturing qualities, whereas men are often exempted from participating in emotional communication or vulnerability (Connell, 1987). This uneven distribution of emotional responsibility limits women's agency, even when they attain economic independence or social mobility. Feminist scholars argue that while modern cinematic portrayals may highlight women's ambition and autonomy, deeper layers of emotional inequality persist beneath the surface (hooks, 2000). Emotional deprivation thus becomes a subtle but powerful form of gendered oppression, restricting women's emotional wellbeing and diminishing the quality of their intimate relationships. Through this lens, feminist theory exposes how emotional needs are often trivialized, leaving women emotionally unsupported despite outward independence.

Relational-Cultural Theory further strengthens the analytical framework by centring the significance of emotional connection and mutual empathy in human relationships. RCT posits that psychological growth occurs through relationships characterized by mutuality, responsiveness, and shared emotional understanding (Jordan, 2010). When partners acknowledge and validate one another's emotional experiences, relationships become sources of strength and relational resilience. Conversely, relational disconnection—marked by emotional distance, lack of responsiveness, or invalidation—leads to feelings of isolation and emotional pain (Miller & Stiver, 1997). For women who are culturally conditioned to maintain relational harmony, such disconnection is especially damaging. RCT helps explain why women in Indian cinema are often depicted investing emotionally in relationships even when male characters remain unresponsive or emotionally unaware. This theoretical lens reveals how emotional neglect disrupts connection, deepens frustration, and reinforces gendered emotional burdens.

The third theoretical component involves psychological perspectives on emotional maturity. Emotional maturity encompasses the ability to regulate emotions, communicate openly, exhibit empathy, and take responsibility for one's emotional influence on others (Thompson, 2014). Emotionally mature individuals engage constructively during conflict and support emotional balance within relationships. Emotional immaturity, however—characterized by avoidance, defensiveness, withdrawal, or self-centered emotional behaviour—undermines relational stability. In many cultural contexts, emotional immaturity is more commonly normalized in men due to restrictive norms surrounding masculinity and emotional expression (Levant, 1992). As a result, women are often left compensating for emotional deficits by performing additional emotional labour. Indian cinema frequently illustrates this dynamic through male characters who evade responsibility, disengage during emotional conversations, or minimize their partner's feelings. Such behaviours contribute to emotional starvation for women, who may possess independence and strength yet remain unable to secure emotional reciprocity.

Integrating these three theoretical strands—feminist theory, RCT, and emotional maturity concepts—provides a comprehensive and multidimensional framework for analyzing women's emotional experiences in selected Indian films. Feminist theory exposes the gendered roots of emotional inequality, RCT explains the relational consequences of emotional disconnection, and psychological theories of emotional maturity illuminate the

behavioural patterns that contribute to emotional imbalance and relationship instability. Together, these perspectives enable a nuanced exploration of how emotional deprivation persists even in the lives of autonomous women, both in cinematic narratives and broader cultural contexts.

Research methodology

The present study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing thematic analysis to explore the emotional experiences of women in selected Indian films. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for examining complex social and psychological phenomena, as they allow for an in-depth understanding of human experiences, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis provides a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. In this study, the analysis focuses on multiple narrative dimensions, including dialogue, character psychology, and critical scenes that highlight emotional labour, autonomy, and relational conflict.

The sample for this research consists of two Indian films, selected based on their contemporary portrayal of female independence, emotional struggles, and relational dynamics. The specific titles will be finalized upon further review; however, the selection criteria prioritize films in which women are depicted as financially and socially autonomous while simultaneously confronting emotional neglect or relational challenges. This purposive sampling approach ensures that the films are relevant to the study's objectives and provide rich material for exploring themes of emotional maturity, gendered expectations, and relational disconnection (Patton, 2015).

The data analysis procedure involves several iterative steps. Each film will be viewed multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of narrative subtleties and character development. During this process, recurring themes related to emotional deprivation, communication gaps, and relational conflicts will be identified and coded. Key interactions, conflict sequences, and moments of emotional expression will be analyzed in detail. The coding framework will be informed by feminist theory and concepts of emotional maturity, enabling a nuanced interpretation of how gendered expectations and emotional competence influence relational outcomes (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach allows the study to capture both explicit and implicit representations of emotional dynamics within cinematic narratives.

Ethical considerations are integral to the research process. The study prioritizes fair and unbiased interpretation, striving to respect the cultural and social contexts depicted in the films. Care will be taken to avoid imposing personal or cultural biases on the analysis, and all interpretations will be grounded in theoretical frameworks and textual evidence. By adhering to these ethical guidelines, the research maintains rigor while offering insightful commentary on the emotional experiences of self-sufficient yet emotionally constrained female characters.

Analysis and Discussion

Both *Tamasha* (2015) and *Gehraiyaan* (2022) depict the tension between female autonomy and emotional deprivation, highlighting the nuanced experiences of women who are socially

and financially independent yet emotionally starved. In *Tamasha*, Tara exemplifies independence and creativity, pursuing personal interests and self-expression through storytelling and performance. Despite her autonomy, she encounters a male partner, Ved, whose emotional engagement is inconsistent, often hindered by personal insecurities and societal expectations. In *Gehraiyaan*, Alisha embodies self-sufficiency as a successful entrepreneur and emotionally aware partner, yet her relationship with Zain reveals frequent emotional detachment and reluctance to acknowledge her needs, creating a persistent gap between emotional expectation and fulfillment. These portrayals demonstrate that autonomy does not guarantee emotional validation, emphasizing how gendered emotional inequality continues to persist (Hochschild, 1983; hooks, 2000).

The films further illustrate the disproportionate emotional labour women undertake. Tara and Alisha repeatedly initiate conversations, mediate conflicts, and absorb emotional tension caused by their partners' avoidance. In *Tamasha*, Tara attempts to decode Ved's moods and adjust her behavior to maintain harmony, while Ved relies passively on her emotional availability. Similarly, Alisha in *Gehraiyaan* navigates relational ambiguity, often compensating for Zain's emotional unavailability by self-regulating her responses and prioritizing his comfort over her own. This dynamic underscores the silent societal expectation that women hold relationships together, contributing to emotional burnout and neglect of self-care (Brody & Hall, 2010).

A recurring theme in both films is male emotional immaturity, manifested through avoidant behavior, defensiveness, and failure to recognize partners' needs. Cultural norms discourage men from expressing vulnerability, while women are socialized to prioritize relational harmony (Gilligan, 1982; Levant, 1992). Cinematically, these traits appear in scenes where male characters withdraw from difficult conversations, fail to apologize, or deflect responsibility, directly contributing to the emotional starvation experienced by the female protagonists. This imbalance often leaves women performing extensive emotional labour without reciprocal support.

The internal conflict of the female characters emerges as a central theme. Tara and Alisha struggle to balance their personal identities with relational expectations. They experience guilt for asserting self-care while being pressured to remain nurturing, patient, and emotionally available. In *Tamasha*, Tara suppresses her creative impulses to maintain Ved's comfort, whereas Alisha in *Gehraiyaan* confronts moral and emotional dilemmas, reflecting societal pressure on women to prioritize others' needs. These conflicts illustrate the psychological consequences of emotional neglect, showing how autonomy intersects with societal expectations to create emotional distress (Thompson, 2014).

Cinematic techniques in both films accentuate emotional deprivation. *Tamasha* employs empty spaces, muted color palettes, and wide-angle framing to convey isolation and emotional distance, particularly during moments of miscommunication between Tara and Ved. Silence, pauses, and unspoken gestures externalize Tara's internal turmoil. *Gehraiyaan* uses reflective surfaces, subdued lighting, and sound design, including ambient music and minimal dialogue, to highlight Alisha's emotional emptiness and relational ambiguity. These stylistic choices reinforce narrative themes and evoke empathetic responses, making the psychological impact of emotional starvation visually and aurally tangible.

Both films depict financially independent women navigating emotionally challenging relationships, highlighting consistent societal and relational patterns. They converge in representing female emotional labour, male emotional immaturity, and the internal conflicts women experience when balancing autonomy with relational demands. Both protagonists face guilt for prioritizing self-care and endure subtle emotional oppression despite their competence. The films differ in tone and resolution: *Tamasha* explores emotional liberation through romanticized storytelling and fantasy, while *Gehraiyaan* foregrounds realist, contemporary relational complexities. Despite these differences, both films illuminate a broader cultural phenomenon in which women's emotional needs remain undervalued, showing that autonomy alone does not shield against emotional deprivation.

The analysis reveals five critical findings. First, self-sufficiency does not equate to emotional satisfaction. Second, women disproportionately perform emotional labour. Third, male emotional immaturity undermines relational stability. Fourth, women experience internal conflict balancing autonomy with relational expectations. Fifth, cinematic techniques effectively communicate emotional deprivation. These insights highlight the importance of emotional recognition, empathetic communication, and relational equity in contemporary society, demonstrating how Indian cinema reflects and perpetuates cultural expectations of gendered emotional responsibility.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Tamasha* (2015) and *Gehraiyaan* (2022) demonstrates that self-sufficiency and financial independence do not necessarily safeguard women from emotional neglect in contemporary relationships. Both films reveal consistent patterns in which female characters, despite being competent, autonomous, and professionally accomplished, bear the disproportionate burden of emotional labour. They initiate communication, manage conflicts, and attempt to preserve relational harmony, while their male partners often exhibit emotional immaturity, avoidance, or failure to acknowledge their needs. This dynamic results in emotional starvation, internal conflict, and psychological stress for women, highlighting a significant gap in emotional reciprocity that persists even within ostensibly modern and equitable partnerships.

Emotional maturity emerges as a critical but often missing factor in these relationships. The inability of partners to regulate emotions, engage empathetically, and respond sensitively contributes directly to relational instability and dissatisfaction. Indian cinema, through narrative choices, character development, and visual techniques, effectively portrays these socio-cultural realities, showing that women's autonomy alone does not guarantee emotional well-being. The films examined underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing women's emotional contributions, suggesting that relational balance depends on mutual emotional engagement rather than solely on financial or social equality.

From a feminist perspective, these cinematic portrayals are particularly significant. They expose structural and cultural norms that continue to assign women primary responsibility for emotional maintenance, while men's emotional underdevelopment is normalized or excused. By highlighting these imbalances, the films offer an opportunity to reflect on societal

expectations, challenge traditional gender roles, and encourage discussions about equitable emotional participation in relationships.

The findings of this study also indicate several directions for future research. Expanding the sample to include additional Indian films or works from other South Asian contexts would provide a broader understanding of regional cultural patterns and emotional dynamics. Longitudinal or larger-scale studies could further investigate how emotional maturity—or the lack thereof—affects relationship outcomes across different demographic groups. Such research could offer practical insights for relationship counseling, feminist scholarship, and cinematic representation, ultimately contributing to more nuanced portrayals of women's lived emotional experiences in society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations emerge for different stakeholders. For filmmakers, there is a need to portray women's emotional needs with greater nuance and authenticity, moving beyond stereotypical representations of self-sacrificing or endlessly patient characters. By highlighting the complexity of emotional labour and relational dynamics, cinema can contribute to more realistic and socially impactful narratives. For society at large, efforts should be made to normalize male emotional expression and encourage empathetic engagement in intimate relationships. This cultural shift can reduce the disproportionate emotional burden often placed on women and promote healthier relational balance.

For women, it is important to strengthen emotional boundaries and cultivate assertive communication skills to articulate needs effectively without guilt. Developing self-awareness and seeking reciprocal emotional engagement can help mitigate emotional deprivation and enhance overall well-being. Scholars and researchers are encouraged to expand the study of emotional labour within cinematic contexts, exploring diverse genres, regional film industries, and broader South Asian settings. Such research can provide deeper insight into gendered emotional dynamics, influence societal perceptions, and inform future cinematic and psychological interventions.

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