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The Role of Cinematic Aesthetics in Social Activism : A Study of 'Padman' as an Adaptation of 'The Legend of Laxmi Prasad'

Abstract : This paper explores the intersection of cinematic aesthetics and social activism by examining Padman (2018), a Bollywood film adaptation of Twinkle Khanna's short story "The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land" from her anthology The Legend of Laxmi Prasad. The film, inspired by the real-life story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, addresses the taboo surrounding menstrual hygiene in India. While the literary narrative offers a poignant, grassroots portrayal of gendered stigmas in rural settings, the cinematic adaptation amplifies the message using visual storytelling, star power, and emotional appeal. Through the use of vibrant imagery, symbolic framing, background score, and emotionally charged performances, Padman transforms a social issue into a powerful public discourse. This study analyzes how the film's aesthetic choices such as mise-en-scène, narrative pacing, and dramatization aid in normalizing conversations about menstruation while balancing entertainment and activism. The paper also considers how mainstream cinema can adapt literary texts to mobilize awareness and action among diverse audiences. By bridging art and activism, Padman exemplifies how cinema can not only reflect social realities but also shape them,

offering a compelling model for socially engaged filmmaking. The study underscores the potential of cinematic adaptations to influence public perception and inspire policy-level changes in deeply entrenched cultural contexts.

Keywords : Cinematic aesthetics, social activism, adaptation studies, menstrual hygiene, Bollywood, visual storytelling, gender studies, Indian cinema.

Introduction : Cinematic Activism in the Indian Context

Indian cinema has certainly had a complex relationship with the social reform movement, as it had to juggle with the commercial ambitions and at the same time with the cultural commentary. Padman (2018), a movie directed by R. Balki and produced by Twinkle Khanna, is a significant evolution of that tradition in the way it is a mainstream Bollywood adaptation of Khanna's literary work The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad that was inspired by Arunachalam Muruganantham's revolutionary work on menstrual hygiene, and in which Akshay Kumar stars. The movie came out in a period when menstrual health was one of the most persistent taboos in India, with barely 58% of women in the age group of 15 to 24 having access to hygienic menstrual protection, and parts of rural India, like Bihar, being at the bottom of the list, with rates as low as 31%. The National Family Health Survey (2015-16) even states that more than half of Indian women lacked access to menstrual

hygiene products and had to use many unclean things such as rags, sand, leaves, or even ash.

While Khanna's literary piece provided the readers with closely observed episodes of gendered life in the Indian countryside, Balki's movie made use of the combined forces of star power, visual symbolism, and narrative intrigue to reach a larger audience. The adaptation of this movie is indeed an instance of what Kamilla Elliott calls "the concept of film as a translation of text," where cinematic resources do not simply provide illustrations from the source, but actively reinterpret the meaning. Through a range of aesthetic features, such as mise-en-scène that allows for menstrual products to be seen as normal, performance styles that put a human face on taboo issues, and narrative pacing that walks the fine line between didacticism and entertainment—the present paper suggests that Padman has been very successful in creating a new framework for socially conscious cinema in India.

The film demonstrates cinema's unique capacity to bridge grassroots realities with policy-level discourse, ultimately contributing to tangible social changes including state-level menstrual hygiene initiatives and the controversial #PadManChallenge that flooded social media with celebrity pad selfies.

From Page to Screen : Adaptation as Activist Strategy

Twinkle Khanna's The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad (2016) is a collection of four short

stories. It is a creative fiction which explores feminist themes and one its stories The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land is inspired by Muruganantham's mission and his real life efforts to produce low-cost sanitary pads for rural women after he saw his wife using dirty rags for her periods. To be more specific, the psychological depth was given to the main character rather than the plot mechanics. The story was focused on emotional Exploring of Muruganantham's banishment after the emotional evocation of the incident where the villagers called him "a pervert" and "madman" as they were unable to understand his passion for the subject of menstruation. Khanna's writing style closely followed the menstrual stigma's intersectional nature, pointing out the link between gender inequality, economic disempowerment, and educational access. Instead of directly talking about menstruation, Khanna's literary approach used metaphorical images to represent this topic. Indeed, Khanna said her primary intention was journalistic: "I found out his story when I was doing research for a column in The Times of India."

The movie version, however, required the original narrative to be altered considerably due to the commercial and sensory factors. Screenwriters Balki and Swanand Kirkire, in their adaptation, have given the story a much larger canvas and the village councils, medical professionals, and urban

allies are some of the main characters who slosh the narrative with their dark and light shades. Firstly, most importantly, the addition of new characters in the film among them is the personality of Pari Walia (Sonam Kapoor), an MBA student who becomes Lakshmi's business partner a narrative device absents from Khanna's story. This figure was conceived mainly for the cinema as it served multiplex audiences the function of an urban identification figure, alongside with a comedy bit and the role of the exposition of the information about the pad manufacturing technology and the development of the new characters' subplot of the romantic one. Khanna acknowledged that she took "creative liberties" to make the story "entertaining" as she said: "I didn't want to make a documentary, I wanted to make a commercial film so people can see it."

The adaptation had a lot in common with the changes that had gone into the play. It also gave the story a new spatial dimension, shifting Muruganantham's Tamil Nadu roots to the Hindi-speaking heartland of Madhya Pradesh as a strategic decision to enhance national appeal. Muruganantham himself accepted this relocation: "I did not want the film to be confined to one part of the country".

This translation of the story into a different geographical area was a reflection of Bollywood's traditional function as a national unifier, whose use

of Hindi-language storytelling allowed them to address the regionally specific issues. Importantly, the film took a direct approach to the topic of menstrual management with scenes such as the pad fabrication, Lakshmi's self-experimentation with blood-filled bladders as well as a close-up of a stained rag, therefore it was quite explicit. These visual decisions were in line with what the scholar Bill Nichols calls "the politics of representation" making the invisible visible through cinematic disclosure.

Aesthetic Frameworks: Cinematic Techniques for Normalizing Taboos

Padman utilized a variety of visual and auditory means to break down the audience's barrier of resistance toward the menstrual Discourse. Cinematographer P.C. Sreeram's warm color palette, which mainly consisted of earthy yellows, browns, and ochres, not only visually connected the rural environment where Lakshmi lived but also the menstrual products that were the same colors. This, therefore, implicitly naturalized pads as part of the agrarian life. In essence, it was to the blue-and-white colors that typically represented the clinical nature of commercials for hygienic products that these colors stood out in deliberate contrast. The film's mise-en-scène repeatedly represented menstrual hygiene in the situation of family intimacy and particularly in the early scenes, for example, when Lakshmikant (Akshay Kumar) saw his wife Gayatri (Radhika Apte) retreating to the verandah

while she was on her period. Recurring wide shots of identical village verandahs, each housing menstruating woman created a strong visual metaphor for systemic isolation.

The narrative tone of the film was a mixture of didactic sequences and commercial entertainment tropes. The first half was very close to Muruganatham's real-life problems with using melodramatic amplification to raise emotional stakes when the villagers found out about Lakshmi's experiments with menstrual blood, they drove him out of the village physically in a scene reminiscent of when Frankenstein's monster was chased by the torch-wielding peasants.

Reviewer Baradwaj Rangan noted this section's "emotional logic," particularly the "stupendously conceived interval block" where Lakshmi tests a pad himself and suffers public humiliation when it leaks. This visceral sequence created what film theorist Laura Mulvey might term "haptic empathy" using bodily spectacle to trigger audience identification.

Padman's soundtrack featured a romantic duet "Aaj Se Teri," which was based on traditional Bollywood love metaphors like "Tere maathe ke kumkum ko Main tilak laga ke ghoomunga" and "Teri baali ki chhun-chhun ko," but at the same time, its musical core was shown through different musical cues. Amit Trivedi's music made a calculated decision to go between the mood of the

light romance and the harsh dissonance when the scenes of menstrual stigma were depicted. Movie reviewers pointed out that the contrast worked during the first sequences of social ostracism of the main character but sometimes went "unforgivably heavy" if there were too many similar moments like when Lakshmi did her public experiment with the pad and percussive clangs overemphasized the horror of menstrual leakage.

The film's most radical aesthetic choice involved embodied performance: Kumar wearing a sanitary pad and simulating menstrual leakage, a sequence about which reviewer Anupama Chopra called "something I never imagined I would see in a Hindi film". This literal embodiment of menstrual experience constituted what scholar Vivian Carol Sobchack terms "carnal cinema," where the actor's physicality becomes a site of ideological intervention.

Star Power as Activist Catalyst

The choice of casting Akshay Kumar, Bollywood's typical "macho hero," to play the role of Lakshmikant Chauhan was a strategic move aimed at gender discourse. Kumar extended the reach of a topic that was typically marginalized as "women's issues" into the mainstream and hence menstrual advocacy became a universal humanitarian issue and Akshay raised this issue very well through his performance in this film. Director Balki acknowledged this strategic casting: "It would be a game-changing event if Kumar... wore a sanitary pad". Kumar's star

persona combined everyman accessibility with patriotic credibility, enabling him to transcend regional and class divisions that might limit activist messaging. His act really drew attention to the fact that Lakshmi was just an ordinary person—something that Kumar had made evident through his subtle gestures and clumsily mixed and awkward Hindi-English diction during the UN speech sequence.

Kumar's involvement extended beyond performance into production advocacy. Having previously starred in the sanitation-themed Toilet: Ek Prem Katha (2017), Kumar established himself as a pioneer of Bollywood's "issue-based" genre. His star power ensured wide distribution, including Russia—where Padman became the first Hindi film to premiere on its original release date and China, where it earned ₹207.73 crore worldwide and this film also won the 66th National Film Award for the best Film on other social issues. Critically, Kumar leveraged his masculine image to model male allyship, telling TIME: "Pad Man will show every man what should be done—for their mothers, their daughters, their aunts". This reframing went against those perceptions that menstruation was a matter only for women, and it thus allowed it to be seen as a matter of societal responsibility.

Female performances provided crucial emotional counterpoints. Radhika Apte's portrayal of Gayatri captured the internalized shame afflicting rural women; her delivery of lines like "Auraton

ke liye sabse badi beemari hai sharam" (For women, the biggest disease is shame) encapsulated patriarchal complicity.

Sonam Kapoor's turn as Pari Walla offered urban audiences an identification figure with whom they could relate, but critics still found the character's romantic subplot to be "unnecessary and unconvincing," thus weakening the activist message. The supporting actors in the film had a wide range of intersectional perspectives to present, such as Jyoti Subhash who portrayed Lakshmi's mother, a character that was the representation of the generational conflict between tradition and change.

Impact and Reception : From Screen to Society

Padman's cultural impact went beyond individual attitude shift; it also touched the commercial market, policy advocacy, and global solidarity building. The film premiered alongside the #PadManChallenge, a social media campaign that asked stars (including Twinkle Khanna, Akshay Kumar, and Muruganantham himself) to post pad selfies with captions normalizing menstruation. Muruganantham's also wrote a post on Instagram: "Yes that's a Pad in my hand & there's nothing to be ashamed about. It's natural! Period. #StandByHer" #BlessedtoBleed. This digital activism reached populations beyond the film's theatrical distribution, particularly urban youth.

At the policy level, the film amplified existing menstrual hygiene initiatives.

India's 2011 Menstrual Hygiene Scheme was only "low" successful as a result of inconsistent supply chains, and, in addition, the "Pink tax" of 12% on Pads that was very controversial was still there at the time of the release. Padman gave the advocacy groups some cultural arms; they arranged the screenings for the parliamentarians, which was one of the reasons for the tax abolition in July 2018.

Several states—including Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal integrated Padman into existing programs promoting pad production through women's self-help groups (SHGs), some supported by World Bank-funded rural livelihood projects. Muruganantham's real-life network of 4,000+ pad-making machines across Indian states received renewed attention, with the film acting as a promotional vehicle for low-cost pad initiatives.

The methodological criticism of the film was immense. Some reviewers felt that the second half, especially the UN summit scenes and the romantic subplot, was "alienated from logic or reality". Academics questioned whether the hero-centric narrative obscured collective action, with the real Muruganantham noting: "We want to make India into an understanding country", stressing upon a collective "we"? The urban-centric release of the film initially constricted its rural reach, although the NGOs like Maya Vishwakarma's "Pad Woman" initiative later employed mobile screenings in

villages of Madhya Pradesh. Most significantly, the film sparked debate about whether commercial entertainment could sustain complex social discourse; as one critic noted, "The instructive overtone mars the narrative". Globally, Padman contributed to menstrual activism beyond India. Screenings at the United Nations and Times Square positioned menstrual equity within the Sustainable Development Goals framework. WHO Executive Director Nata Menabde stated: "The film highlights the importance of universal access to sanitary products... imperative in eliminating stigma". The film's China release (where 40 million lack menstrual facilities) demonstrated how localized stories could spark transnational movements.

Conclusion : Cinematic Aesthetics as Change Agent

Padman is reflecting a shift in the socially-engaged film industry that is talking how aesthetic decisions can influence socially public discourse around entrenched taboos. The film has facilitated the process of going from the grassroots level to the masses by making menstrual vocabulary pop culture. It involved turning the literary work of Twinkle Khanna into the languages of mainstream Bollywood, the film has thus become the element that has enabled Muruganantham's movement to penetrate mass society. The film exemplifies adaptation as cultural translation, where cinematic tools

reconstruct source material for new audiences and purposes.

The case study reveals some significant lessons. To start with, strategic amplification proves to be crucial while translating a delicate social issue for the commercial film sector; Padman's dramatization of Lakshmi's ostracization and the experiment carried out not only deeply affected the audience but also helped them to grasp the issue in a way that mere numbers couldn't convey. Second, star power functions as activist accelerator, particularly when stars embody ideological positions counter to their established persona as Kumar did by associating hyper-masculinity with menstrual advocacy. Third, cinematic activism operates through emotional contagion more than rational persuasion; the film's most effective moments (Lakshmi's pad experiment, the verandah sequences) bypassed intellectual resistance through sensory engagement.

On the other hand, the film also brought out the struggles that occurs with activist cinema. The commercial-entertainment imperative at times compromised the social message, especially in the romantic subplot that was too underdeveloped and the simplistic resolution. The urban-rural distribution gap brought to light the infrastructural barriers that exist for activist cinema. The most significant aspect is that the film's hero-centric narrative may have covered up the systemic analysis and the need for

collective action. However, this limitation is reduced to some extent by Muruganantham's real-life network of women-led pad manufacturing units. Despite these tensions, Padman's legacy confirms cinema's unique capacity to bridge art and activism. As menstrual advocate Radha Paudel noted, global taboos—from Nepal's chaupadi to Japan's sushi chef restrictions require cultural disruption. Padman modeled how cinematic aesthetics can provide such disruption, transforming private shame into public discourse. Future activist adaptations might build on this model by integrating more intersectional perspectives, ensuring rural accessibility, and balancing hero narratives with collective action stories. Ultimately, Padman demonstrates that in visually literate societies, cinematic aesthetics constitute not merely entertainment but essential infrastructure for social change.

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