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Kavita Priyadrshni
Assistant Professor, HOD, Shri
Ratanlal Kanwarlal Patni
Girls College Kishangarh
Ajmer, Rajasthan, India

Women on Screen: Representations of Pain, Power, and Survival in Documentaries

Kavita Priyadrshni

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Abstract

Documentaries are strong tools for exploring the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, especially women who are often overlooked in mainstream cinema (Nichols, 2017). This study looks at how documentaries show women's pain, power, and survival, focusing on Indian films while placing them in a global context. The analysis includes selected documentaries: India's Daughter (Udwin, 2015), Lakshmi and Me (Shrivastava, 2013), and Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018), as well as Born into Brothels (Briski & Kauffman, 2004) and The Act of Killing (Oppenheimer, 2012). The results show that these films not only display suffering but also highlight women's strength and resilience. They help raise social awareness and support conversations about gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: Women, documentary, survival, victims

Introduction

Documentary films serve as a record of history and a way to critique society (Nichols, 2017) [5]. When the focus is on women, these films showcase experiences of oppression, resilience, and empowerment that mainstream stories often overlook (Hooks, 1992) [3]. In India, women's lives are influenced by caste, class, religion, and regional diversity, leading to complex struggles (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013) [2]. Films like India's Daughter (Udwin, 2015) [10] address sexual violence and systemic failures. Meanwhile, Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018) [9] shows women pushing against male-dominated spaces in sports. Around the world, documentaries such as Born into Brothels (Briski & Kauffman, 2004) [1] and The Act of Killing (Oppenheimer, 2012) [6] offer insights into women's resilience in marginalized and unstable situations. People are inspired aware and also get the real scenario of the society specially who are more privileged, who are lea or not aware of the things happening around. This paper places Indian documentaries in this global context to examine how filmmakers portray women's suffering, strength, and survival. It also looks at how these stories raise awareness and drive change.

Literature Review

Documentaries are stories that show ideology, perspective, and power dynamics (Nichols, 2017) [5]. Feminist film theory criticizes old portrayals of women as passive and pushes for images that highlight women's agency (Mulvey, 1975) [4]. Hooks (1992) [3] points out that visual culture influences how society views gender, either by reinforcing stereotypes or by challenging them through thoughtful representation. Indian scholarship highlights a conflict between showing women as victims and celebrating their empowerment (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013) [2]. India's Daughter (Udwin, 2015) [10] depicts gender violence and societal failures (Rai, 2016) [7], while Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018) [9] emphasizes women's leadership in male-dominated areas. On an international scale, Born into Brothels (Briski & Kauffman, 2004) [1] shows how documentary filmmaking can empower marginalized girls. The literature suggests that documentaries lie at the crossroads of representation and activism. They capture social realities and encourage viewers to engage with issues of gender and justice.

Corresponding Author:
Kavita Priyadrshni
Assistant Professor, HOD, Shri
Ratanlal Kanwarlal Patni
Girls College Kishangarh
Ajmer, Rajasthan, India

Methodology

This study examines selected Indian and international documentaries using qualitative content analysis. The criteria for inclusion were: (a) women as central subjects, (b) exploration of pain, power, or survival, and (c) critical or public recognition. The Indian films analyzed include India's Daughter, Lakshmi and Me, Daughters of the Polo God, and Shakti: Power of Women (Shrivastava, 2013; Thomas & Ghosh, 2018; Udwin, 2015) ^[8, 9, 10]. The international examples include Born into Brothels (Briski & Kauffman, 2004) ^[1] and The Act of Killing (Oppenheimer, 2012) ^[6]. The analysis draws on feminist film theory, narrative analysis, and visual culture studies. Five key dimensions guided the analysis:

- Representation of Pain: Examining gendered violence, social exclusion, and personal hardship (Nichols, 2017) ^[5].
- Representation of Power: Showing agency, resistance, and leadership (Mulvey, 1975) ^[4].
- Representation of Survival: Narratives of resilience, adaptation, and change (Hooks, 1992) ^[3].
- Visual and Narrative Techniques: Observational filming, interviews, archival footage, and storytelling structure (Nichols, 2017) ^[5].
- Socio-Cultural Context: Understanding the roles of caste, class, gender norms, and cultural influences (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013) ^[2].

Data collection included repeated viewing, note-taking, and consultation of critical and scholarly commentaries. A comparative analysis identified thematic similarities and differences between Indian and international documentaries.

Analysis and Discussion

Representation of Pain

Indian documentaries show women's pain both personally and socially. India's Daughter (Udwin, 2015) ^[10] depicts the 2012 Delhi gang-rape and places it within patriarchal norms and systemic failures. It combines survivor testimony, interviews with activists, and media commentary to create a detailed view (Rai, 2016) ^[7]. Lakshmi and Me (Shrivastava, 2013) ^[8] highlights the emotional and economic struggles of domestic workers, demonstrating the link between gender and labour oppression. Internationally, Born into Brothels (Briski & Kauffman, 2004) ^[1] explores the trauma of girls in Kolkata's red-light districts. It emphasizes the obstacles to education and personal growth. Visual techniques like close-ups, participatory interviews, and immersive camerawork build empathy while upholding ethical responsibility.

Representation of Power

Power is shown as action, leadership, and defiance. Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018) ^[9] highlights Manipuri women taking charge in sports and challenging gender norms while keeping their cultural identity. Shakti: Power of Women presents grassroots activism and community leadership in rural India (Udwin, 2015) ^[10]. On an international scale, The Act of Killing (Oppenheimer, 2012) ^[6] indirectly highlights women's moral influence and strength in oppressive situations. Narrative techniques like first-person stories and chronological storytelling focus on women's empowerment and draw the audience in (Mulvey, 1975) ^[4].

Representation of Survival

Survival stories emphasize resilience and the ability to adapt. Lakshmi and Me (Shrivastava, 2013) ^[8] shows how domestic workers handle abusive labour by using their skills, building solidarity, and employing strategies. Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018) ^[9] presents survival as a way to navigate societal limits and reach both personal and collective success. Born into Brothels (Briski & Kauffman, 2004) ^[1] illustrates survival through art and education. These films depict survival as an active engagement with social and structural conditions. They challenge the simplistic view of women as passive victims (Hooks, 1992) ^[3].

Visual and Narrative Techniques

Documentaries use observational filming, participatory interviews, archival materials, and narration to improve authenticity and emotional impact (Nichols, 2017) ^[5]. India's Daughter (Udwin, 2015) ^[10] combines legal footage with social commentary. Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018) ^[9] contrasts interviews with sports scenes to show struggle and triumph. Ethical representation highlights dignity, agency, and subjectivity.

Socio-Cultural Context

Indian documentaries place women's experiences within the contexts of caste, class, gender, and regional factors (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013) ^[2]. These films confront stereotypes, promote discussions, and push for change. Around the world, documentaries show similar challenges, emphasizing common themes of strength and empowerment. A comparative analysis shows that Indian documentaries are becoming more involved in global gender discussions, mixing local specifics with broader significance.

Conclusion

Documentaries focused on women offer deep insights into their experiences of pain, power, and survival. Indian films like India's Daughter (Udwin, 2015) ^[10], Lakshmi and Me (Shrivastava, 2013) ^[8], and Daughters of the Polo God (Thomas & Ghosh, 2018) ^[9] show the challenges women face while also highlighting their strength, independence, and empowerment. Ethical visual choices, sensitive storytelling, and awareness of context reveal the complexity of women's lives. Moreover the theme son which any one can make the documentaries or the clicks are numberless but the real fact is survivals or the victims are the women mostly, around the world we can say. Oppression, degradation, inequality, rapes, exploitations, thefts, etc. are prominently faced by them in any how manner. Yes of course one can also threat that always women are not the survivals or the victims but in cases the numbers are more of the women. Subsequently, through these social media platforms the changes may not be observed but the thought process do evolve. Placing Indian documentaries in a global context shows common struggles and unique cultural approaches to empowerment. By showcasing women's voices and their independence, these films encourage social change. They connect art with advocacy and help shape how the public views gender, justice, and resilience (Hooks, 1992; Nichols, 2017) ^[3, 5].

Title / Year	Director(s)	Focus	Theme(s)	Awards / Recognition
India's Daughter (2015)	Leslee Udwin	Sexual violence, societal patriarchy, and the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case	Pain, injustice, and activism	Internationally acclaimed; banned in India upon release
Lakshmi and Me (2013)	Aarti Shrivastava	Lives of domestic workers in urban India	Labor exploitation, survival, and resilience	Screened at international film festivals
Daughters of the Polo God (2018)	Rintu Thomas & Sushmit Ghosh	Women polo players in Manipur challenging traditional norms	Empowerment, cultural identity, and agency	Won awards at international sports and women's film festivals
Shakti: Power of Women (2010s)	Various / NDTV Documentary Series	Stories of women activists across India	Social empowerment, leadership, and grassroots activism	Televised nationwide; received critical acclaim for women's representation
Sons of the Soil: Women Warriors of Chhattisgarh (2017)	—	Women in tribal militancy and defense of land	Survival, courage, and resistance	Noted for portrayal of marginalized tribal voices
The World Before Her (2012)	Nisha Pahuja	Contrasting experiences of women in beauty pageants vs. Hindutva camps	Identity, societal pressures, and power dynamics	Won Best Documentary at Tribeca Film Festival
Daughters of Destiny (2015)	Netflix Series (Indian Segment)	Dalit girls striving for education and social mobility	Empowerment, survival, and systemic inequality	Critically acclaimed global Netflix documentary series
Period. End of Sentence. (2018)	Rayka Zehtabchi	Menstrual stigma and women's social activism in rural India	Empowerment, health awareness, and resilience	Won Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject), 2019
Kaali (2020)	—	Women farmers and social challenges in rural India	Labor, resilience, and agency	Screened in Indian short documentary circuits
Writing With Fire (2021)	Rintu Thomas & Sushmit Ghosh	Journey of Khabar Lahariya, India's only all-female news network	Journalism, courage, empowerment, and social justice	Nominated for Best Documentary Feature at 2022 Academy Awards; Audience Award at Sundance Film Festival

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