Chhavi or *Dhi*? Punjabi Action Cinema's Tussle with Female Characterization

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Abstract

Pakistani films' portrayal of female characters often fits within the normative paradigm of femininity in Pakistani society. Punjabi action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, however, experienced a shift towards a regular inclusion of subversive female characterization. This paper is an examination of this transformation in the characterization of women in Punjabi action cinema of this time. In these films, female characters handled rifles instead of flowers, their *dupattas*[42] were exchanged for tight-fitting *dhotis*[43] and *kurtas*[44] and their genteel gait was replaced with heavy, pounding steps. While such characterization of women is considered a subversion of the highly patriarchal setting of cinematic rural Punjab, it can also be interpreted differently when one views it as a product of patriarchy itself. Women in such films come off as bold characters at first glance; however, they can also be simply recycling the hyper-masculine characteristics of their male counterparts to appear dauntless onscreen. As the plots progress, these *chhavis*[45] ('smart-mouthed girls') are eventually relegated to the traditional roles of *dhis* ('daughters'), obedient *behnas* ('sisters') or committed *sohniye* ('dears' or 'lovers').

Keywords: Punjabi Action Cinema, Gender in Film, Subversive Female Characters, Hyper-masculinity

Cinematic Confusion: Characterizing Women in Pakistani Cinema

Punjabi action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s brought forth a plethora of films that deviated from conventional portrayal of female characters in Pakistani cinema. The generally established pattern of female characterization in Pakistani cinema focused on "the traditional, introvert *chhooi-mooi*[46]

[42] A scarf that is worn over the chest and head by women in South Asia. It is symbolic of modesty and chastity, when worn over the head, in Pakistani/Punjabi context.
[43] A part of South Asian attire that includes a piece of garment tied around the waist so that it covers most of the legs.
[44] A loose, collarless shirt/ tunic that is worn by people in South Asia.
[45] Punjabi/Hindi word, meaning "a smart-mouthed or brazen girl", used as a reference to 1979 Punjabi- Pakistani film *Hathyar*.
[46] Urdu for "fragile", "delicate"

girls, who never raised their eyes before the elderly and men and closely guarded their self-respect and sexuality" (Rizvi 73). Where films such as *Phul Mere Gulshan Ka* (dir. Iqbal Akhtar, 1974) and *Mera Nam Hai Mohabbat* (dir. Shaba Kiranwi, 1975) of the Urdu cinema portrayed women as delicate and feminine love interests, others like *Maula Jatt* (dir. Younis Malik, 1979) and *Sher Khan* (dir. Younis Malik, 1981) broke away from the mainstream female portrayal and presented assertive and bold women of rural Punjab onscreen. These women were brandishing weapons and using the normally masculine speech genre of Punjabi *barhak*, which is stereotypically considered "the backward, the rural, the crude, … above all, 'loud'" (Kirk 2014). Considering that General Zia-ul-Haq's[47] heavily censored agenda of Islamization had taken over the country during the time period of late the 1970s and 1980s, Punjabi action cinema presented an act of resistance by having bold female characters assert their dominance on the cinematic screen through verbal and physical displays of power. However, the main concern of this research is to understand how such portrayals of women can also be considered as products of patriarchy which is valorized as the moral and social framework of these films. Female characters act as agents that internalize patriarchy and project it in their dealings with their male counterparts.

Women in such films, despite their unconventionally headstrong characteristics, act as a catalyst for toxic masculinity to thrive onscreen. With protagonists such as Maula Jatt, whose strength lies in verbal jousting and aggressive physical displays of power, toxic masculinity becomes an underlying presence in Punjabi action cinema. Toxic masculinity is a social science term "used to refer to a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly" (Sculos). It highlights the exaggeration of regressive masculine traits such as lack of emotional display, inclination towards violence, subordination of women and other men and sexual aggression. The films of Punjabi action cinema, especially the ones under consideration, celebrate the aforementioned traits that fit in the classic definition of toxic masculinity.

In this context, toxic masculinity is attributed to male characters that are presented as *chaudarys*[48] or *jatts*[49] in the feudal landscape of cinematic Punjab. In such films, the contribution of female characters to toxic masculinity occurs as a result of subverting the gender-transgressive portrayal of women by connecting their character to one of the major male characters. Female intervention in spatial dimensions of the male characters, either as a victim, a vengeful woman or a love interest, gives rise to the issues of *izzat*[50] (honor), which drive the storyline forward in the films being observed for this research. The subversive portrayal of women in Punjabi cinema thus falls short of representing women's complete liberation from the strictures of patriarchy as "Pakistani films … construct narratives of pleasure to reinforce patriarchy and its values" (Rizvi 76).

In this research, I focus on two films, namely *Maula Jatt* and *Hathyar* (dir. M. Akram, 1979). Each film encompasses the overarching theme of masculine rivalry in the rural settings of Punjab. They

[47] General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq was the 6th president of Pakistan who took over through a *coup d'état* and acted as a military dictator for a period of 12 years (1 March 1976 – 17 August 1988).
[48] *Chaudhary* or *Chowdhury*: A South Asian (mostly sub-continental) caste referring to heads of rural communities. They are mostly landlords.
[49] *Jatt*: A caste of traditionally agricultural people that belongs to Indo-Pak sub-continent. The *Jatt* people are centered mostly in the Indian and Pakistani Punjab.
[50] A very masculine/patriarchal concept in Pakistan which relies upon upholding the family's name by not submitting to a rivalling demand, preventing freedom of (female) sexuality and maintaining the conventional norms of family settings.

also present the unconventional representations of women as bold characters who negotiate, fight and even take up arms when the need arises. The analysis of two female characters, namely Daro from *Maula Jatt* and Gulabo from *Hathyar,* is pivotal in supporting the paper's argument regarding the transformation of the bold female characters through the course of the films. Despite Punjabi cinema's efforts to present an "onscreen proletarian resistance [including the women's], not only to state violence but also to the linguistic and cultural hegemony of the Urdu-speaking establishment" (Kirk 501), the female characters still bear the brunt of patriarchy as they recycle elements of toxic masculinity in order to assert their limited dominance in the rural settings. In a manner subversive to conventional female portrayal, they use similar methods of verbal jousting and brandishing weapons as their male counterparts do. However, as the plot progresses, they continue to be women who are defined in relation to the men of the films, as lovers, sisters, daughters or mothers. This links back to the conventional depiction of female characters "centered in themes of self-sacrifice, defined … in relationship to children or to men" as in the romantic Urdu film *Anjuman* (dir. Hassan Tariq, 1970), in which the *tawaif*[51] Anjuman commits suicide at the feet of her lover at his wedding (Montgomery 39). The subversion of the women comes forth by taking individualistic agency away from them, as with Gulabo the blacksmith in *Hathyar*, whose bold and witty character is relegated to that of a love interest as the plot progresses.

Battle of the Sexes: Female Subversion of Cinematic Patriarchy

The notion of female subversion of patriarchy exists in the wider spectrum of literary works due to its pervasive importance and massive influence on "the talents [people] cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and others, the socio-structural opportunities and constraints they encounter" (Bussey and Bandura 676). These gender dynamics are further projected on the film screen through depictions of the characters and their involvement in the plot. Similarly, Punjabi films under consideration present an image of female rebellion in a highly patriarchal, cinematic Punjabi society. Following this line of argument, this research borrows from works on Punjabi cinema in Pakistan, and female characterization through the years. This includes writings by Gwendolyn Kirk (2014) and Iqbal Sevea (2015) that focus on the genre of Punjabi action films and describe how male characters of this genre project their masculinity on their surroundings through verbal jousting and acts of aggression. These works also comment on female characterization and how women play a part in helping to uphold the patriarchy of cinematic rural Punjab. Sevea argues that the strong female characters in Punjabi action cinema are not valorized for their aggressive displays of power, which are ironically the markers of masculinity for the male characters (135). Kirk focuses on the Punjabi *barhak*, which is a verbal art used to exert power. It is key to the performances of the spirited female characters in Punjabi action films under consideration, yet the women in these films are not able to achieve parity in agency with their male counterparts.

Arshad Ali et al. (2014), Sumera Jawad (2015) and Wajiha Raza Rizvi (2014) discuss female characterization in Punjabi cinema over the years, noting the transition of conventional female characterization in Punjabi action cinema of the 1970s, where the characters of bold women became a more common aspect. Rizvi attributes this shift to the resistance that crystallized in wake of General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, writing how "the images of real women and their

[51] Urdu for a "highly sophisticated courtesan, who is well-trained in performance arts, literature and etiquettes"

representations mirror shifts in the opposite directions since Zia" (73). Zia's martial law, and the subsequent implementation of Islamization introduced a change in the cinematic representations of women. Islamization focused on the establishment of an Islamic state which made "*shari'a* ['Islamic religious law'] the ideological cornerstone" (Kepel 98). Such a law introduced "stifling censorship policies" which "discouraged displays of affection" and demanded the women onscreen to be displayed in a certain, traditional norm of the *chooi-mooi* femininity (Jawad 200). In such conditions, it was a rebellious act by the Punjabi action cinema to present unconventionally bold and demanding women onscreen. It may be seen as a subversion of the dictatorial rules that Zia imposed upon Pakistan's real and reel conditions.

The notion of female characters in films rebelling against normative understandings of femininity is an aspect of the human social reality. For instance, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) focuses on instances of female rebellion in the Egyptian-Muslim clan of Awlad-e-Ali despite patriarchal constraints. Abu-Lughod notes how women make space in restricted patriarchal domains to counter the normally asserted notions of femininity. These acts include "minor defiances of the restrictions enforced by elder men," done by reciting poetry that verbally attacks masculinity, smoking cigarettes and resisting arranged marriages (43). These acts of unconventional female behavior resonate with the female portrayal in Punjabi action cinema and highlight how women challenge male dominion through acts of asserting autonomy and vocalizing dissent. However, Abu-Lughod argues that these "resistances are again, therefore, neither outside of nor independent from the systems of [masculine] power" (50), which speaks to female characters' re-appropriation of patriarchal elements to establish their power in certain cinematic domains. The women in Punjabi action cinema do present an unconventionally subversive portrayal, but they function in a domain that is made on the very principles of patriarchy that put the women in submissive positions. The women are eventually pushed out of the masculine domain and into the conventional roles of mothers, sisters, and lovers.

This paper also engages with the literature of gendered dynamics of power relations with reference to how they shift between male and female characters. Raewyn Connell (2005) describes the "inherently relational" nature of masculinity and how it does not exist in a vacuum in the larger society (5). She elaborates on the different ways that masculinity may be perceived through the normative, essentialist and positivist perspectives that deal with the standard notion, the core and statistical psychology of masculinity respectively (6). She also mentions the notion of linguistic hegemony of masculinity that exists as a part of patriarchy. This aspect is further contextualized within the Pakistani narratives by Sevea and Kirk. Connell's work on masculinity finds support in the work of Abeda Sultana (2011) and Preeti S. Rawat (2014). Both discuss patriarchal practices and how their toxicity has become ingrained in the society over the course of time, working to "control and subjugate women" (Sultana 10). These frameworks help to understand how certain viewpoints emerge onscreen and manifest themselves in form of characterizations in order to cement certain socio-political conventions. Since cinematic productions can "take art outside of its conventional context and use it to serve society," Punjabi action cinema's unconventional portrayal of women has implications for understanding gender dynamics in Pakistani society (Sellam 1).

To elucidate my argument, I focus on how female characters uphold the notions of patriarchy and toxic masculinity in such films. For this purpose, the paper follows the narrative structure analysis of the films, which focuses on "story elements, including plot structure, character motivations, and theme" ("Film Analysis"). For instance, Daro in *Maula Jatt* appears as a bold woman who rides

horses and kills her own brother in the name of *izzat*. This is an act that is mostly carried out by men against women in rural Punjab. Daro's action makes her an agent that subverts the hyper-masculinity of rural Punjab, but she is refigured into a patriarchal kinship framework of a *behan* (sister) by the end of the film. Her boldness is indicated through the traits that align with the highly masculine traits of cinematic rural Punjab, such as wielding weapons and hurling verbal abuse.

These symbolic masculine traits of the chosen films are examined through semiotic analysis, which includes the study of signs and their significance in the wider context of the film. For instance, the weapon *gandasa* has a strong connotation of masculine violence associated with it in Punjabi action films. Iqbal Sevea describes how the *gandasa* is "portrayed and celebrated as the ultimate weapon of choice of the true man" and is linked to "the *izzat* of the true man" (133). When Gulabo in *Hathyar* (1979) is shown to be prancing around the protagonist Sultan during the song "*Sohneya Nar Patole Vargi"* ([Your] Darling is a Pretty Girl like a Doll), she is holding a *gandasa*. Her action of carrying such a weapon complements her character as a feisty blacksmith who throws fiery remarks at the villain Maalu when he threatens to kidnap her. It represents Gulabo as a strong woman who is in charge of her life and ambitions, though this portrayal gradually shifts as she is relegated to the position of the protagonist Sultan's love interest.

Furthermore, female characters in Punjabi action films of the 1970s and 1980s present a divergent demeanor from the *chhooi-mooi* girls of Urdu cinema of the same era (Rizvi). This paper explores the figure behavior of chosen characters, which entails describing "the movements, actions or expressions of the actors" (Villarejo 40). Punjabi action cinema's female characters are, as D. Kazi puts it: "representations of free women, who ride horses …,dance in public, reveal themselves as lovers, prostitutes, seductresses" (qtd. in Rizvi 94). In order to observe this shift in figure behavior, this paper looks at how and why women in Punjabi action films take up such expressions of their personalities and how it affects their characterization in terms of progression, and then regression, of their characters.

Lastly, the research is heavily supported by an analysis of *mise-en-scène*, which focuses on the rural setting of the films under consideration. *Mise-en-scène* constitutes "visual, aural, textual and contextual elements and contents" that help to "create human stories that are never complete without female characters" (Rizvi 76). The aspect of sets and locations as shown in the films are examined in context of *mise-en-scène*. The elements incorporated in this category call attention to the way patriarchy is reinforced in cinematic rural Punjab through dialogues and actions. These features also explicate the female characters' subversion of masculinity in certain domains, such as Gulabo's weapon shop in the village in *Hathyar* and Daro's clan whom she serves as a leader for in *Maula Jatt*. The *mise-en-scène* analysis helps to understand the idea of the female characters' movement in a certain space that they own within the patriarchal setting. It also includes the music and sounds that accompany the female characters onscreen and helps to understand the particular characterization in clearer terms.

Slapped into Submission: Maula Jatt's Daro

In the chosen films, the repetitive pattern of female characters affirming bold behavior exists as a secondary feature to the main plot. Despite the films' focus on hyper-masculine male characters, one cannot help but note the vivacious women who actively take part in furthering the plot. In *Maula Jatt*, the audience is first introduced to Daro, who is the sister of Makha Nath and the antagonist, Noori Nath. The scene in which Daro is introduced includes the low, ominous beat of

drums that gives off the notion of a looming threat. After being ordered by Maula Jatt to offer up his sister for marriage to one of Maula's associates, Baala, as restitution for attempting to rape a village girl Taani, Makha Natt nervously rides on his horse to his home. With his head bowed low and his shoulders hunched, he walks towards a door when Daro's voice echoes in the background, stopping him in his tracks: "*Aithai hi ruk ja Makhiya!*" (Stop right there, Makha!). Holding a rifle over her shoulder, Daro stands tall and assertive, in a way that echoes masculine body posturing. With her shoulders thrown back and a hand on her hip, she engages in a dialogue with her brother in which she reprimands him severely for bringing the Nath clan to a compromising situation.

In midst of her family of rogues, Daro shoots her brother for bringing dishonor upon the Nath clan and for offering her up for a crime he committed. This action of "honor" killing is reversed onscreen as it is commonly an act that targets women in patriarchal Pakistan. The conventional notion of the *izzat* (honor) of a family being affixed with female sexuality and its tarnishing as a consequence of unsolicited female sexual activities is inverted in *Maula Jatt*. Daro shoots her brother dead for dishonoring the family name through his submission to Maula's demand of marrying Daro off to one of his accomplices. Her act is one that defies the traditional notion of men as the protectors of *izzat* and her defiant character is the first one who confronts Maula Jatt, challenging him to prove his worth. This act also recalls the idea of having female characters "in positions of power" that help them establish their agency in a certain domain (Lagamba 2). Daro's domain is also characterized by her use of the loud technique of verbal jousting, a definitive feature of Punjabi action films.

Daro's use of loud verbal methods to overwhelm her opponents aligns with Kirk's definition of *barhak,* which is "artful style of verbal dueling, challenge, and insult that features loudness and shouting" (79). It usually deals with the patriarchal topics of courage, bravery and honor that are prevalent in cinematic rural Punjab. *Barhak* exists within the larger phenomenon of using oratory strength to destabilize the enemy before physically defeating them. Sevea defines a similar phenomenon as *kharak*, which is literally "a loud sound that can startle or scare" and is used in relation with "heroic masculinity" of cinematic rural Punjab (134). *Kharak* is a masculine feature that serves to overwhelm the enemy through "exaggerated and loud verbal brawls" (Sevea 13). However, *kharak* also serves to "to metaphorically represent the violent actions of film characters" (Kirk). Daro's character uses the masculine performances of *kharak* and *barhak* in her negotiations with her male counterparts; the notable scenes being her confrontation with her brother Makha and her conversations with Maula Jatt.

Despite Daro's challenge to the strongest man in the rural landscape of the film, using *kharak* and her unflinching shot, which she directs towards her brother, one can see how her character gradually regresses as the film proceeds. The re-appropriation of the masculine practice of *kharak* by Daro becomes a part of her transgression into male territory, and it is a subversive feature of the conventional female portrayal. However, this trespassing into the masculine domain is subverted as a result of the narrative arc that is introduced in the film. Maula's associate, Baala, who is to marry Daro as a retribution for Makha's antics, slaps Daro when she puts on a display of *barhak*. Sevea calls it a reminder for Daro and her wrongful transgression in a male domain (135). Furthermore, Maula Jatt's rivalry with Noori Nath is signified by Maula's attempt at getting Daro to side with him through the superficial relationship of brother and sister. Maula Jatt's insistence on making Daro call him *vira* (brother) crystallizes in the climactic scene of the film, when Maula finally defeats Noori Nath. Just as he is about to swing his *gandasa* at Noori, Daro rushes to kneel in front of Maula and begs him to spare her brother's life. Her act is reminiscent

of a selfless sister ready to sacrifice herself for her brother. On witnessing this, Maula engages in a monologue where he claims that all he wanted was for Daro to understand that he cared for her as his own sister. Daro breathlessly declares, "*Vira!*" as Maula embraces his "sister." This instance in the film is monumental to Daro's character development as it negates her earlier bravado. Her identity is stripped of its inherent valor and audaciousness, and she is consigned to the role of an obedient, submissive sister in the end. The dauntless Daro who moved around her village on horseback, carrying a rifle, transforms into *behna* Daro, who now stands meekly in her *vir* Maula's embrace as he covers her head with her forlorn *dupatta*[52].

Killed for Kindling a Fiery Presence: Hathyar's Gulabo

Gulabo in *Hathyar* is another dauntless female character who fills the screen with her presence. Branded *chhavi* by the antagonist Maalu, Gulabo is first shown in the middle of the village square, surrounded by men outside her shop where she sells weapons. With personal weapons banned by the police in their village, hers is the only licensed shop that stores weapons, and it is where the family of the protagonist Sultan gets their weapons from. The antagonist Maalu arrives at Gulabo's shop to obtain weapons that would assist him in murdering Sultan's family; an action evoked by an old rivalry between the two clans. With a discernible expression of distaste for Maalu and his gang on her face, she disregards them by turning her head the other way. Her occupation as a blacksmith, which is predominantly a masculine job, is made evident when Maalu calls her *lohariye* which is a feminine form of *lohar* (blacksmith). The two engage in a dialogue in which Gulabo blatantly refuses to offer up her weapons to Maalu and his gang and throws witty jabs at the gang that has surrounded her. She considers Maalu to be a "*giddaḍ*"[53] (hyena) or "*ullu*"[54] (owl) instead of a lion because he has come to her with a whole dancing troop and his gang instead of coming alone. This action of Maalu bringing a group of men to assist him in his errands represents the idea of "true maleness [which is] underlying male bonding and war", and thus reinforces the hyper-masculine nature of the village setting of *Hathyar* (Tiger qtd. in Connell 6). In such a setting, Gulabo's refusal to assist the men presents her as a digressive agent who does not conform to the expected social norms of femininity and is acknowledged as such by the men in the scene as well. As a response to her comments, one of Maalu's associates refers to her as a "*tikhi talvar*"[55] who does not give in to the threats of the dangerous men.

Further on in the film, Gulabo's dominance extends from the domain of her shop to her personal life, where she seems to be leading her decisions. She is the one who goes to the protagonist Sultan's home to ask for his hand in marriage; a role taken on by men in the patriarchal setting of Pakistan. Here, film reverses reality by bringing in elements that are subversive to the traditional settings of patriarchy. Marriage becomes a domain that the woman takes control of by vocalizing her opinion, and through her resistance to the inherent patriarchy via "form of irreverence towards the mark of masculinity" (Abu-Lughod 45). Another instance of Gulabo's agency in her personal life is when she leads Sultan's horse on their way back from the court where the verdict of Maalu

[52] As mentioned earlier in the definition of *dupatta,* it holds the connotation of modesty and chastity when placed on one's head in a Pakistani-Punjabi context.
[53] The word has negative within the context and is often used for cowardly people.
[54] Though owls are used as a connotation for wisdom in the West, yet in South Asia, they are associated with stupidity.
[55] Literally, "sharp sword". Used in context of Gulabo's fierce character

and Sultan's fight is announced. After being released on bail, Sultan and Gulabo make their way back to the village. Mounted on a horse with his chest thrown out, Sultan moves in a domineering way as Gulabo leads his horse, dancing along to the song "*Tu Gabru Jatt Punjab Da"* (You Are the Handsome Jatt of Punjab) that valorizes Sultan. The notable aspect of this song sequence is how Gulabo is in the background, yet her assertive self is represented. There are only a few close-up shots of Gulabo as the song proceeds, and those only include her dance moves, as she remains vocally absent throughout the song. Despite the lack of dialogues, Gulabo's assertive character shines through as she dances in front of the very policemen who had her fiancé in their clutches just a while ago. It is reminiscent of Kirk's "onscreen proletariat revolution" that Punjabi action cinema of the 1970s presented, and Gulabo is shown to be an active part of it (501).

However, Gulabo's character development regresses when she becomes enticed with the idea of Sultan and her marriage to him. By showing Gulabo only in relation to Sultan and later, to her brother who has escaped from jail to help Sultan, the plot of the film seems to do away with Gulabo's originally audacious character as it proceeds. It shifts the entirety of its focus to the fight to settle decades-old family scores between Maalu and Sultan. The plot's revolution around the reinforcement of hyper-masculine patriarchal nature of familial rivalry gains a stronger grip as Maalu and Sultan get involved in a brawl that gets them caught and subjected to court hearings and intense police surveillance. The character of Gulabo is a contested entity for the remainder of the film. The tussle of the Punjabi action cinema with female characterization becomes evident as Gulabo's portrayal of an unconventionally headstrong woman experiences a precarious phenomenon. Gulabo's assertive dance sequence for the song "*Sohneya Nar Patole Vargi*," which includes the lyrics, "*Dil te ganvaya bazi phir bhi nahin harai gi"* (I may have lost my heart [to you], but I will never lose the game), is followed by a lack of verbal assertion by Gulabo. The plot progression features how after the instances of standing up to Maalu and his gang of vagabonds and asking for Sultan's hand in marriage, Gulabo's character lacks sufficient verbal interactions onscreen. The film transforms Gulabo's character through a series of tumultuous events, where she is either shown as an active agent who participates in physical brawls or a passive character that is not even given enough screen time.

Gulabo's passivity is more prominent during the negotiations between Maalu and Sultan. While, she is present during the negotiations, and it is notable how Gulabo is the only woman in an all-male space, her presence serves the purpose of an "exhibitionist" figure who is "an enticing forte for the male gaze" than her as an interventionist in masculine spatial dimensions (Rizvi 93). Her character becomes a "silent spectator or an idle showpiece [that is present to] entertain viewers with her inactive presence and pleasure-giving kinesics" (Jawad 210), evident by Gulabo's lack of dialogues and inclusion in the negotiations that take place between the male characters. She stands on the side, often out of the frame, as a background character.

Gulabo's boldness is reignited for an instance when she talks back to Maalu's men when they come to kidnap her, so she can be married off to Maalu's mute nephew. Gulabo makes the decision for herself by accepting Maalu's proposition as she believes for a moment that Sultan has no romantic feelings for her. However, in the next shot, Gulabo's speech is cut off as Sultan rides in on his horse in a typical "knight in the shining armor" demeanor. The camera pans to Sultan who exhibits his *kharak,* as he saves the woman he loves from Maalu's gang of rogues. Henceforth, Gulabo's character is reworked into the framework of traditional femininity, as her only scenes are song sequences. She is shown to be dancing alone to "*Jee Sajna Jeedara*" (My Beloved is Brave), serving as pleasure for the "male gaze" (Mulvey), and prances alongside Sultan during "*Sohna Yar*

Tavitan ala" (One with an Amulet) as he looks on. These song sequences are notable as they present Gulabo as "an idle showpiece… as part of a dance … or a semi-romantic atmosphere" (Jawad 210).

Gulabo disappears altogether from the cinematic screen as the film delves into the bloody rivalry between the two main male characters. Her characterization becomes complicated in the very end of the film, where she appears on the screen for thirty seconds. One immediately thinks of Gulabo's character as being restored to its original bravado as she comes to take part in the bloody fight that is going on between the two clans. Yet before one can comprehend the sudden growth in her characterization, Gulabo is run through with a spear by Maalu's associate and she dies on the spot.

Such a death is reminiscent of how female characters are "easily disposed of" once they step out of their normative femininity (Lagamba 24). The notion becomes prevalent that the "worst will happen if one … does not remain in one's designated gender position" (Projansky 73). Gulabo's very last moment is not glorified as her fight against the enemies for her love interest, rather it becomes a reminder of a woman's ultimate demotion to the patriarchal notion of women's inferiority to the cinematic Punjabi man. Like Daro in *Maula Jatt*, her transgression into the male domain is eventually curbed through a man's action, which in Daro's case is Baala's slap to her face and in Gulabo's case is her death. The characters of Gulabo and Daro are relegated to that of a love interest and a sister respectively, as a contrast to how they are introduced in the films as assertive, independent women. The female character in both the cases is "not a presence in and of herself but both an extension and negation of the hero, an idealized figure who signifies his fate" (Lagamba 8).

Conclusion

Women in Punjabi action films experience patriarchal hegemony despite being provided with the space for displaying their dominance within a particular domain. That domain, for instance, becomes Gulabo's weapon shop or her position as a blacksmith in *Hathyar,* or Daro's role as an unyielding figure that kills to protect family honor in *Maula Jatt*. These domains become the "sphere where the defiances take place" in face of patriarchy (Abu-Lughod 43). Where hegemonic masculinity extends throughout cinematic rural Punjab, women are only given a limited domain for asserting their autonomy, that too for a short time and through recycling elements of toxic masculinity. Punjabi action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s seems to be engaged in an on-going tussle with female characterization that results in the transformative nature of female portrayal. The transformative nature appears due to a quest to strike the right balance between an unconventional female representation and reinforcement of patriarchal values. The characters switch from bold to shy, assertive to obedient and active to docile. Arshad Ali et al. put the matter into simple words as they write about the female character of Punjabi cinema: "Simultaneously, she is strong and weak, prominent and hidden, wise and foolish" (17). Despite an attempt to break free from the strictures of the patriarchal framework, the active *chhavi* of Punjabi action cinema, circa 1970s and 1980s, gets reworked in the traditional female characterization as a passive *behna, sohneye* or *dhi*.

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