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The Many Selves of *Shershaah*: Screening Selfhood through Hindi Cinema for National Unity

Prof. Pawan Singh Malik
Professor,
Dept. Communication and Media Technology,
J.C. Bose University of Science & Technology, YMCA,
Faridabad, Haryana

Kajal Verma
Research Scholar,
Dept. Communication and Media Technology,
J.C. Bose University of Science & Technology, YMCA,
Faridabad, Haryana

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Abstract

Hindi cinema has long served as a powerful medium for storytelling, playing a vital role in shaping narratives and forging shared identities. In recent years, biographical films have emerged as a particularly popular and impactful trend across genres. These films go beyond the narration of historical facts to represent portraits of individuals whose lives intersect with national memory, moral values, duties and collective identity.

This study delves into the critically acclaimed Hindi film *Shershaah* (2021) a war biopic based on the life of Captain Vikram Batra. The objective is to understand how different types of selfhood are portrayed through cinematic storytelling. This study draws upon secondary data related to the respective film like research papers, film reviews, and other published materials. Along with narrative interpretation and analysis to understand the construction of selfhood within the film's character arcs.

Through this lens, the paper illustrates how *Shershaah* provides a layered portrayal of the self—personal, moral, social, and national within the backdrop of conflict, love, and sacrifice that resonates with audiences and reinforces the role of Hindi cinema in shaping ideals of service, courage, and national pride.

Keywords: Self, Hindi cinema, moral self, national identity, *Shershaah*

Introduction

Cinema plays a pivotal role in shaping our collective imagination. As a visual and storytelling medium, it entertains, educates, and often inspires audiences across generations. It goes beyond just entertainment. It acts as a cultural force that reflects societal values, questions norms, and often redefines identity. Hindi cinema, synonymised with Bollywood has portrayed historical moments, amplified social issues, and brought personal stories into public consciousness, creating a shared cultural narrative, through its vibrant storytelling.

Among the many genres that have flourished in Hindi cinema, from drama, romance, and action to epics, the biographical film or biopic has gained particular prominence in recent years. By serving as cinematic reconstructions of real lives, it allows viewers to engage with real individuals whose journeys are often marked by struggle, courage, and public service. These films build emotional bridges between the viewer and the subject, highlighting values like moral responsibility, and personal sacrifice. The genre has become a powerful tool for preserving memory and shaping how we remember national icons.

At the core of many biopics lies the exploration of selfhood- how a person understands their identity in the world, in

relationships, and society. Films like *Shershaah* tap into this framework to construct a protagonist not merely as a person, but as a layered representation of values. These stories show us how identity is not one-dimensional, but shaped by emotions, decisions, relationships, and the socio-political environment.

This paper studies the film *Shershaah* (2021), which tells the story of Captain Vikram Batra, an Indian Army officer who gave his life during the Kargil War. To explore how the film portrays the idea of selfhood through cinematic depiction, using a qualitative approach, the study focuses on the representation of four dimensions of self- personal, moral, social, and national. To understand how Hindi biopics like *Shershaah* not only narrate individual histories but also contribute to a broader cultural discourse around values like patriotism, love, community, ethical leadership and unity at the national level. By drawing from critical reviews, scholarly articles, and analysis of the film, this research examines how the film constructs identity in ways that resonate with the viewer and with contemporary Indian society.

Literature Review

Gopinath (2024) analyzed how Hindi biopics portray the ideal Indian citizen by reflecting state-aligned narratives. The study reviewed two films- *Manjhi- The Mountain Man* and *Pad Man*, concluding that such portrayals often simplify complex individual journeys into moral and patriotic templates. Gopinath warned that while these films foster civic pride, they may also limit space for critical reflection or alternative viewpoints.

Rani, Sharma, and Sharma (2023) examined how biopics in Hindi cinema contribute to cultural values and promote social change. Their study found that biopics influence public behavior by reinforcing ideals of discipline, courage, and social responsibility. The authors argued that the genre serves as an informal educational tool, encouraging viewers to emulate positive role models portrayed on screen.

Pal and Karmakar (2023) focused on the representation of marginalized identities through biopics, using *Mary Kom* as a case study. The research showed that Bollywood biopics often balance the personal and national self of the protagonist, highlighting both individual agency and national symbolism. The authors pointed out how these films reshape cultural perceptions, especially around gender and regional identity.

Singh (2021) focused on the construction of masculinity and national identity in Bollywood sports biopics, by analyzing the films- *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* and *Dangal*. The study explored how these films depict the personal journeys of athletes as embodiments of national pride and resilience. By examining the interplay between individual achievements and collective national identity, the research shed light on the role of cinema in shaping societal notions of masculinity and patriotism.

Verma (2021) wrote a scholarly review of *Shershaah*, offering a comprehensive critique of Captain Vikram Batra's life. The author contextualized the film with the heroism of Vikram Batra during the Kargil War (1999) noting its role in bringing the story of Batra's bravery and sacrifice to a younger generation unfamiliar with the conflict. The efforts made in the film to reconstruct the war event highlighting the Captain's valor and personal sacrifices were appreciated. The author highlighted that although the narrative balances patriotic fervor with emotional depth emphasizing patriotism, sacrifices of soldiers and depiction of Batra's relation with Dimple Cheema respectively, describing it as a reconstruction of recent national memory and a cinematic tribute that reinforces collective identity and pride. However, struggled to fully engage the audience due to conventional predictable

narrative techniques lacking emotional depth. The author concluded by emphasizing the educational potential of such films suggesting that they should be taught in schools to benefit future generations as they not only serve as a tribute but also as reminders of the ethical and historical lessons embedded in narratives.

The author contextualized the film historically, analysed the narrative structure, storytelling techniques and thematic elements and critiques the stylistic choices along with emotional and psychological portrayal.

Chakraborty and Halder (2019) studied the psychological appeal of Indian biopics, focusing on how viewers emotionally engage with the personal struggles and triumphs of real-life characters. Their research underlined the growing popularity of biopics and noted that audiences find inspiration in watching stories of resilience, identity, and morality unfold on screen. The authors concluded that these films play a therapeutic and motivational role for viewers.

Nayak and Paramaguru (2018) explored the cultural impact of Hindi biopics, arguing that such films are essential tools for preserving forgotten historical narratives. The study examined several biopics and found that these films help rebuild public interest in national icons. The authors emphasized that biopics serve as a bridge between historical

memory and present-day patriotism, especially among younger viewers.

Shailo (2016) explored how Bollywood films construct narratives of national identity and difference, particularly in the context of India-Pakistan relations. Through the analysis of films such as *Earth*, *Lagaan*, and *Sarfarosh*, the study demonstrated how cinema serves as a geopolitical text, shaping perceptions of belonging and mistrust. The research highlighted the role of film in reinforcing nationalistic ideologies and the portrayal of the 'other' in the subcontinental context.

Bedi (2016) analyzed the depiction of Pakistan in Bollywood films, exploring how cinema contributes to the discursive formation of national identity. Using Ontological Security Theory, the study examined narratives in films that portray Pakistan as the 'other', often in the context of war and terrorism. The research highlighted how such portrayals align with dominant political ideologies and influence public perceptions, emphasizing the intersection of cinema and politics.

Dwyer (2013) examined the narrative and cultural role of Hindi biopics and how these films help shape public memory and national identity. The study highlighted the way biopics construct idealized versions of historical figures by blending fact with

emotion and symbolism. Dwyer emphasized that such portrayals often go beyond realism to fulfil cultural expectations of heroism, particularly in the Indian context.

Analysis of Film Reviews

The critical reviews of *Shershaah* given by The Week, Times of India, NDTV, Film Companion offers spectrum of responses from deeply appreciative to sharply critical. It acknowledged the cultural importance of telling Captain Vikram Batra's story but differ in the way depth, emotional tone and cinematic choices of the film were assessed.

Personal Self

The Week and Times of India highlighted the emotional and intimate aspects of Vikram Batra's character praising the romantic subplot and mentioning that the love story adds emotional depth, respectively. NDTV and Film Companion were criticized for overly restrained emotional segments and lacking insight into Batta's emotional and psychological complexity reducing him to a biopic stereotype respectively. The absence signifies a missed opportunity to engage viewers with the hero's journey.

Social Self

Some reviews depicted that the film's portrayal of familial and social bonds has been depicted as conventional and stereotypical

reinforced familiar tropes found in mainstream Bollywood, lacking originality in social representation. Times of India shed light on Batra's social identity by referring to his bond with the team, through the scenes of his role within Army hierarchy and his Camaraderie with fellow soldiers. While Film Companion criticized this dimension calling interpersonal dynamics formulaic and emotionally flat. NDTV reviewed that several characters were underwritten which prevented the social structure of the army from feeling fully layered.

Nation Self

The most contested element across the reviews is the portrayal of the nation's self. The Week and Times of India appreciated the film in evoking patriotism without overdoing nationalism and successfully retailing an important chapter of India's military history respectively. While

film companion critiqued/criticized it for following familiar, hyper patriotic formula common in major Indian biopics.

Moral self

Across the reviews, there is consensus on the film's emotional sincerity and its cultural significance. It received a mix of praise and critique on the way the film represented the moral self of Captain Batra. On one hand, reviewers acknowledged his strong sense of

right and wrong, especially in his willingness to lead missions and protect his comrades. NDTV recognized this through his recurring ethical clarity and commitment to duty, though it criticized the execution as being shallow in parts. The Guardian echoed this sentiment, stating that while Batra's bravery was movingly portrayed, the film lacked depth in exploring the moral complexity behind those actions. Many critics also noted that while scenes like Batra's declaration, "If there's any casualty other than the enemy, it'll be me," were powerful, the film overall leaned more toward patriotic symbols and straightforward heroism than a nuanced moral journey.

Thematic Content Analysis of the Film

To understand how different forms of selfhood are constructed in *Shershaah*, key scenes and sequences that significantly contribute to the representation of different aspects of self- personal, moral, social and nation self were identified and analysed. The analysis aims to synthesize the film's portrayal of Identity through its character development, dialogues, emotional framing and symbolic elements.

The film starts with "Durge Mata ki Jai" and the sound of bomb explosions and gunshots.

Personal Self

Captain Vikram Batra's self is portrayed through his family life, romantic relationships, and the personal dreams and choices that shape his journey. From early college scenes such as his first interaction with Dimple, emotional vulnerability, to the moments they share before he is deployed including farewell at the railway station humanize Vikram and contrast sharply with the later war sequences. Similarly, in another scene where Batra makes a phone call from the front lines attempting to reassure Dimple while hiding his fear and uncertainty. This reflects a personal self deeply rooted in love, longing, and emotional commitment.

"Oye Vishal! Fauji banunga main. Dekh Lena!"- this early declaration made during his college years highlights Vikram's youthful ambition and personal sense of purpose. It reveals the foundations of his identity long before he formally joins the army. The dialogue, delivered in a light-hearted yet determined tone, captures his inner drive and childhood aspiration, setting the emotional groundwork for a personal self shaped by dreams, courage, and a heartfelt desire to serve the nation.

Moral Self

The moral self is expressed through a combination of ethical resolve empathy for fellow soldiers and a clear distinction between personal gain and collective good. "If there's

any casualty other than the enemy, it'll be me”.

Social Self

Batra's interactions with fellow officers and soldiers along with the residents where he was posted in Sopore, Kashmir illustrate the construction of his social self. His bonding with peers has been evident in casual tent scenes, sharing jokes and motivating troops. A conversation scene between Batra and his fellow soldier regarding the latter's newborn daughter portrays not only the side of the personal self but also the social self. Friendly nature and gesture with residents. “*Are Aadaab, Fareeda bi! Kesi hain aap? Acha Afzal Khaalu kese hain? Unko mera Salaam dijegा.*” “*Gafoor Bhai! Aur dhandha kesa chal raha hai?*”

Nation Self

This has been the most emphasized aspect of Vikram's character in the film. Scenes of him saluting the flag, participating in strategic military briefings, and celebrating territorial victories are charged with patriotic symbolism. A visually striking moment occurs when Batra hoists the Indian flag after reclaiming a key post, reinforcing his embodiment of national pride. The climactic battle scene, culminating in his death, is followed by a montage of his legacy- news clips, family reflections, and public tributes—

solidifying his transformation from soldier to symbol of India. These sequences portray the nation self not just as loyalty to the country, but as a deep internalization of national values.

“*Oye Fikar na kar Jani! Ya Tiranga lehrakar aaunga, nahi to usme lipat kar aaunga, lekin aaunga jarur!*”

While Batra was on leave, the news of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir pops on Television. He decides to join the duty early without any order reflects his zeal and dedication towards the profession and nation.

Batra- “Acha, Sun! mai soch raha hoon ki kal hi nikal jata hoon. Dimple se mil ke seedha Base.”

Batra's friend- “Kyun bhai tu 3-4 din rukne vala tha na yaar! Kya hua vo? Upar se bulava aa gaya kya?”

Batra- “*Bulava andar se aaya hai yaar!*”

Different facets of self seemed to be interconnected. A conversation scene between Batra and his fellow soldier regarding the latter's newborn daughter portrays not only the side of the personal self but also the social self. “*Meri chiz merese koi nahi le sakta papa*” Vikram said this for the cricket ball he took back. But conveys a deeper meaning concerning the personal belongings or nation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis shows that more than war film *Shershaah* is a story of who Captain Vikram Batra was as a person. The movie helps us see different sides of him- his loving side through his bond with Dimple Cheema and his family; his sense of right and wrong through the choices he makes as a soldier; social side as seen in his warm and respectful relationships with his fellow army men and national self where his life and sacrifice become symbols of India's pride.

The film constructs Vikram Batra's identity through a layered narrative that brings together the emotional, ethical, social, and national dimensions of selfhood. On the battlefield his self shifts into his moral self a man willing to lead dangerous missions with a clear ethical stance "If there's any casualty other than the enemy, it'll be me." Many critics have appreciated this layered portrayal. They note how the film balances emotional storytelling with strong visuals and a patriotic message. It reminds viewers that real-life heroes are not just defined by big moments, but also by the small, human experiences that shape them.

This interconnection of selfhood illustrates how each type whether personal, moral, social, or national self- reinforces and contributes to the others. His personal emotions influenced his decisions, morals

shaped the leadership and it all together makes him not just a soldier, but a hero to be remembered. The film's narrative strategy enables viewers to witness a self in love, a self in service, a self in community, and a self in nation.

In the end, *Shershaah* adds meaningfully to how we think about identity and courage in today's world. It shows that each type of self- personal, moral, social, and national, is connected and helps build the others. Together, they create a complete and inspiring picture of a life lived with purpose. Captain Vikram Batra's story, as told through this film, is not just about bravery, but about how one person can stand for values that matter to an entire nation.

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