

## “There is a Fabulous Play in the House of Cards:” Gender and Memory-Mapping in the Film *Tasher Ghawr*

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### Abstract

The pandemic's collective memory features large-scale destruction in the public and private realms. This paper studies the latter by speculating on the complex interrelationship between gender, media, and collective memory. By foregrounding the potential of fictional experientialities to engage with real-life phenomena, the paper analyzes the movie *Tasher Ghawr* as an epitome of women's experience of the COVID-19 lockdown. This movie was selected pertaining to its current relevance. The paper undertakes a qualitative investigation through a textual analysis of the movie's narrative. The researchers use theories such as collective memory, gender performativity, affect, and counter-memory to illustrate how the protagonist Sujatha's individual gendered memory constantly constructs and deconstructs the collective memory of women as it pertains to the pandemic. The notion of collective memory is highlighted as complexly entangled and dialogically engaged with the memories of the individuals. This paper demonstrates this by constructing Sujatha as a subject defined by the norms embedded in the female collective memory and then shedding light on her subversive brilliance in questioning the stronghold of these discourses. This act of subversion produces a new strand of collective memory where women are no longer simply victims. The results of this study indicate that while women are constructed as subjects through collective memory processes, they also demonstrate a potential to subvert and question the stronghold of this collective memory that presupposes their submissiveness and servility. For future researchers, this movie provides ample critical space to discuss the notion of traumatic memory.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, collective memory, media, gender, affect, destructive plasticity, counter-memory

### 1. Introduction

Collective memory is a concept that has been substantially worked on and reworked. This notion foregrounds how individual and collective memories often overlap and engage in a dialogic relationship. This makes collective memory a fluid, dynamic and mutable space as it constantly engages with the memories of the individuals. (Halbwachs, 1992) (Note 2). This paper would like to foreground the notion of collective memory, its intricate, complex and dialogical relationship with individual memory, and how it is a dynamic process where the embedded discourses are written and rewritten. The current fascination with the study of individual and collective memories and their interrelationship owes its origin to the COVID-19 pandemic because the pandemic "has all the ingredients of a generation-defining experience" (Erll, 2020). This paper uses the current pandemic as the framework to foreground the dialogic relationship between individual and collective memories and the fluidity of the latter by drawing from the narrative of the Bengali movie *Tasher Ghawr*. Through the analysis of the movie, the paper would like to illustrate how the protagonist Sujatha's individual gendered memory constantly constructs and deconstructs the collective memory of women as it pertains to the pandemic. In this context, gendered memories refer to the differences between how men and women remember because of radically incongruent social and cultural positions (Neubauer & Geyer-Ryan, 2000).

The current pandemic produced large-scale destruction of lives, burdening the medical system and disrupting people's lives and conventional lifestyles. The domestic space became more stifling for women owing to the work-from-home culture and online classes that kept women on their toes due to non-stop domestic work. The burden also exponentially increased as domestic helpers were unavailable. In addition, the lockdown always placed women close to their husbands, who were often the source of abuse and violence (Basu, 2020). Domestic violence also increased due to the frustrations

arising from curbed mobility projected onto women (Maji et al., 2022). Distinguished newspaper *The Hindu* reports that domestic violence complaints during the pandemic/lockdown were at a ten-year high (Radhakrishnan & Singaravelu, 2020). This dramatic rise was aptly marked by referring to domestic violence as the "next pandemic" (Nandan, 2020) or "shadow pandemic" (Seth, 2021), or "hidden pandemic" (60 Minutes Australia, 2021). These sources throw light on the burgeoning incidents of domestic violence in India and worldwide. The select movie *Tasher Ghawr* foregrounds the issue of domestic violence that escalated during the pandemic.

During the crisis of the pandemic, the media played a vital role because it constantly reported the number of deaths and the increasing burden on the medical systems worldwide. The media also provided a space to define the pandemic as a collective memory. According to Erll (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is unique compared to other pandemics because this is "the first global pandemic of the digital age...[therefore] there will be an abundance of collective memory" (Erll, 2020). Media has the potential to shape current cultural recollections. This has enormous implications for media artifacts such as cinema, as collective memories (such as the pandemic) cannot be formed without public articulation (Silverstone 1994, 1999; Huyssen, 2000; Neiger et al., 2011). Further, the impact of fictional media narratives that represent the pandemic should also be duly acknowledged because, as Erll argues:

Fictional media such as novels and feature films are characterized by their power to shape collective imagination of the past...[and] possess the potential to generate and mold images of the past...[where] historical accuracy is not one of the concerns (Erll, 2008).

In other words, faithfulness to history is not a prerequisite in cinematic representations, but these representations can shape how the world sees the past. (Note 1) Therefore, this paper avers that analyzing fictional media accounts of paradigm-altering real-life phenomena such as the pandemic is vital because, at the nexus of memory and imagination, media produces "imaginary locations" essential to perform memory as imagination (Frosh, 2011). Here, media like TV and cinema become "authoritative storytellers" (Neiger et al., 2011).

Additionally, in a permacrisis like the pandemic, where people are restricted from the outside world, gender construction also depends on mass media's mediation of collective memories and images. Further, the nexus of media, such as cinema and memory, is conducive to capturing women's experiences by dissolving the dichotomy between the public and the private (in addition to dissolving the binary true/false) (Radstone & Schwarz, 2010; Dijck, 2007). Concerning films, this implies presenting to the public women's private experiences. In an era of the global pandemic, this helps cognize domestic phenomena such as women's closeted experiences during the lockdown as a function of more significant sociocultural gender inequalities.

Gendered memories of women have found space in the works of Ang (1985), Radway (1987), Gray (1992), Hermes (1995), and Kuhn (2002). However, sustained interrogation into how media texts act as a repository of gendered collective memory and expressions has largely been ignored. Hence, this paper looks at the Bengali film *Tasher Ghawr* (2020), which dramatizes a woman's account of the lockdown in order to highlight how the fictional experientialities of the movie provide space to explore the pandemic as experienced by women in a domestic space under the constant threat of violence and abuse from their husbands. This paper would like to cognize how a woman's gendered memories of the pandemic contribute to and contest women's collective memory of the pandemic and otherwise.

The movie *Tasher Ghawr* (*House of Cards*) is a Bengali film released in 2020. The movie captures the life of the protagonist Sujatha during the pandemic-induced lockdown as she is caught in the domestic sphere between domestic chores and an abusive and gluttonous husband. The movie employs a "breaking the fourth wall" strategy where Sujatha narrates her life story directly to the viewers without any mediation. This renders her experiences more intimate. Also, breaking the fourth wall produces a semblance of what Assmann (2008) would call "communicative memory," through which Sujatha can communicate her memory of the pandemic to the viewers, enabling the female audience to identify with her. The movie's storyline revolves around Sujatha's experience of the lockdown that forces her to occupy the same domestic space with her abusive and violent husband. She narrates to the viewers about her two miscarriages and how they traumatized her. The viewers can notice that Sujatha's traumatic rupture began with her miscarriages, even though it is not explicitly articulated. The movie portrays Sujatha as being drawn to smells and the non-human world of plants around her, often reminding her of the babies she lost to miscarriages. She also talks about how her husband violently abuses her and his gluttony, making her overwork. She further talks about her verbally abusive mother-in-law on her deathbed, constantly demanding her attention and care. Her account illustrates the friction between her and the domestic space around her, resulting in her feeling "suffocated" (Roy, 2020). However, Sujatha is simply not a victim. She implicitly suggests how she orchestrated the death of her mother-in-law by not being attentive enough. By the end of the film, she also facilitates the death of her husband without any guilt or remorse. Throughout the film, Sujatha shows callous emotional indifference towards her orchestration of her abusive mother-in-law's death, her husband's affair, his constant abuse and anger, or her eventual murder of him. The film portrays her as a cold and distant individual who is

both insensitive to her own pain and the pain of others. Sujatha's malicious retaliation problematizes the binary between the victim and the perpetrator.

This paper places the movie *Tasher Ghawr* within the framework of memory in general and collective memory in specific, as these phenomena are articulated through the global pandemic crisis. This paper argues that Sujatha's memory is one of the many memories of the female experiences during the pandemic that constitute women's collective memory of the pandemic and the lockdown. The paper expounds on how collective memory constructs Sujatha's gendered identity and demonstrates how Sujatha's resistance can potentially intercept this collective memory as she engages in a mutually influencing relationship.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Criteria for Text Selection

The movie *Tasher Ghawr* (2020) was selected for analysis due to its contemporary relevance. The movie is situated within the context of the pandemic and projects its domestic dimension. This adds to its currency as discourses on domestic violence during the pandemic are rampant, as indicated by the examples from newspapers. The film provides scope to analyze the private or the "shadow"/ "hidden" pandemic within the larger context of the public health crisis. Additionally, the movie provides ample scope to demonstrate the construction of women's gendered memories of the pandemic and highlight how these memories simultaneously add to and subvert the collective memory of women. To accomplish the latter, the film sheds light on how the character and behavior attributed to women through years of accumulated memory have been toppled down by the subversive brilliance of the film's protagonist, who problematizes the binary between the victim and perpetrator. The medium of cinema is here conducive to representing the often neglected but true realities by carefully treading the line that weaves fact and fiction. Additionally, fictional media representations of women are important because women have always been systematically excluded from public mnemonic processes (Anderson, 2001).

### 2.2 The Current Study

The paper foregrounds a qualitative study of the movie *Tasher Ghawr* through textual analysis. For such an analysis, it uses theories such as Butler's gender performativity and Radstone's and Beauvoir's notion of affective responses as socio-culturally ratified responses for women. The authors combine these notions with collective memory. According to Butler (1990), gender exists solely because of its repeated performance across generations carried forth simply as a specter with no original. Radstone (2007) and Beauvoir aver that women are socio-culturally coded to respond corporeally and affectively to environmental stimuli (Reading, 2016). To combine these concepts with that of collective memory, the paper refers to Ahmed's (2004) argument that gendered constructions and affective responses of women are constituted by their histories and, extrapolating it, their collective memories. These concepts illuminate how the protagonist falls in line with the discourses embedded in the collective memory of women. Here, the protagonist becomes a conventional submissive wife through socially ratified gendered responses. Simultaneously, Malabou's (2012) notion of destructive plasticity and Foucault's (1980) concept of counter-memory help shed light on the protagonist Sujatha's resistance to conformity. The concept of destructive plasticity highlights the role of trauma in defining an affective flatness and indifference in its victim. The traumatized fail to perceive the pain of others as well as themselves. Foucault's notion of counter-memory (1980) indicates the presence of resistant strands of memory that fail to be accommodated into the mainstream memories, thus providing space for resistance. The protagonist Sujatha's acts of retaliation against her oppressors could be seen through the critical lenses of destructive plasticity and counter-memory. Her actions significantly deconstruct the mainstream collective memory of women as victims (Samir, 2018). Since the film is in Bengali and this paper uses English subtitles, it draws from Kershaw (2014) and Long and Yu (2020), who use the notion of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980) (Note 3) to place the original and translated versions of the same text on equal pedestals. The paper argues, therefore, that it is valid to use translated versions in an analysis such as this.

The paper's first section examines how Sujatha's hypersensitivity and insensitivity to affect are complexly interloped. The character's olfactory and affective sensibilities are seen as socio-culturally coded through an inheritance from collective memory. In its latter part, this section looks at Sujatha's affective flatness and indifference to pain in terms of the psychological phenomenon of destructive plasticity. This section blurs the binary between victim and perpetrator through the notion of destructive plasticity produced by the trauma of domestic violence and miscarriages. The final section carries ahead the dissolution of the victim/perpetrator binary and presents the radically subversive potential of counter-memory by introducing it in terms of gender performativity. This section highlights the fluidity of collective memory that is highly malleable to individual acts of resistance and subversion.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 *A Paradox of Affect: Hypersensitivity and Insensitivity*

Sujatha shows a proclivity towards responding affectively to myriad shades of smell around her. This section discusses both the positive as well as negative dimensions of her olfactory experiences. In the latter part, the section draws attention to the simultaneous flattening of affect that characterizes Sujatha's interaction with her environment. Thus, the section foregrounds a paradox that defines Sujatha's affective tendencies as characterized by both an overarching affective response to olfactory stimuli and a simultaneous lack of affect in response to interaction with human beings or odors associated with the trauma of her miscarriage.

Sujatha shows a natural attraction to smells. She says, "I feel drawn to smell, you know. So many different kinds of smell" (Roy, 2020). The viewers see her constantly smelling things and demonstrating a pleasant or repulsed disposition. She repeatedly refers to a "fishy smell" that reminds her of her miscarriages, her mother-in-law's death, and her husband's affair, where he often masturbates over video calls. For her, there is always a negative connotation associated with the fishy smell that reminds her of her original traumatic rupture, her miscarriages and the resultant inability to bear children. While the odor of plants and inanimate artefacts such as food soothe her, Sujatha responds negatively to odors from the human body. This negative response originates from the traumatic memory of her miscarriage as she associates the human bodies around her (her husband and mother-in-law) with the fishy smell accompanying the traumatic event. Odors can evoke autobiographical memories through a process referred to as the "Proust phenomenon" (Jellinek, 2004). Therefore, the traumatic memory associated with Sujatha's miscarriages gets activated by the human odors in her immediate environment, which are also simultaneously connected to her ongoing abuse. A miscarriage can elicit negative emotions and their corresponding coping behaviors (Swanson et al., 2003) (Note 5). Therefore, the fishy smell associated with the autobiographical traumatic memory of her miscarriages evokes strong negative emotions that push her into violent behaviors where she metamorphoses into a monstrous perpetrator from a helpless victim.

In general, women demonstrate an intense proclivity to respond to odors emotionally and behaviorally compared to men. Women's heightened response to smell is hard-wired into their collective embodiment (Doty & Cameron, 2009; Vermetten & Bremner, 2003). This observation is further corroborated by Beauvoir (Reading, 2016) and Radstone (2007), who argue that women's oppression and their affective and embodied response to their environment are intricately connected. This stance is further supported by Ahmed (2004), who posits that women's embodied affective responses to the other are implicated in histories, narratives, and discourses that preexist them. Even though affect (Note 4) is conceived as a purely embodied phenomenon (Deleuze, 1968; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), it is simultaneously discursively shaped (Brennan, 2004; Wetherell, 2013; Golanska, 2017). Further, "collective memories are always supported by social and moral props" (Halbwachs, 1992). Therefore, sociocultural structures carried forward by collective memory generate gendered identities and experiences in the present. Sujatha's affective response to the odors in her environment is socio-culturally coded into her embodiment through a collective memory process. Hence, Sujatha's oppression and the impetus from the larger culture determine how she affectively connects to her husband, her mother-in-law, and the reality around her.

Even though Sujatha demonstrates an affective potential, there is a simultaneous flattened affect to the extent that she cannot feel her own pain or the pain of others. For instance, when she talks about her husband's affair, she cannot explicitly demonstrate pain when she says, "I'm relieved that he is not my headache anymore" (Roy, 2020). This emotional freeze is also symbolically indicated by the frozen template on which the movie's title appears and the cold weather outside her house that pervades the city. When she tells the viewers about her husband's affair, or his violence and abuse, she accompanies it with a hollow laugh. Her facial expression also shows a callous indifference. Further, when she talks about her mother-in-law's death due to her negligence, she shows a lack of emotions. She felt indifferent to her mother-in-law's suffering and could not fulfill her responsibilities towards her. She says, "I couldn't take it anymore. So, one day my mother-in-law fell off the bed and died." In addition to the indifferent remark, "so" in the second sentence indicates that she orchestrated her mother-in-law's death. Further, she informs her viewer about the copious amounts of blood thinners she had mistakenly given her mother-in-law, which in the context of the movie, looks like a premeditated act that would lead to her death. Blood thinners are significant in the movie as they are given for miscarriages, and administering them to her mother-in-law signifies a carrying forth of her trauma.

It is possible to explain Sujatha's lack of emotions through the theories of Catherine Malabou, as proposed in her work *The New Wounded* (2012). Malabou propounds a theory of "destructive plasticity," which refers to trauma's potential to alter the brain beyond recuperation because of the brain's inherent "plasticity." According to Malabou, this leads to a radical metamorphosis of a person's ontology (Malabou, 2012). On one level, her miscarriages lead to a "radical rupture" of Sujatha's psyche. They transform her into "a new, unrecognizable person" severed from her psychic history leading to "an identity without precedent" (Malabou, 2012). On another level, she experiences daily trauma due to her husband's

constant abuse and violence. This:

[S]uffering manifests itself in the form of indifference to suffering...the inability to experience suffering as one's own...a type of suffering that creates a new identity, the unknown identity of an unknown person who suffers (Malabou, 2012).

In other words, Sujatha's constant suffering renders her emotionally insensitive to pain: both hers and others.' Sujatha demonstrates subjective and intersubjective "behaviors of indifference or coolness" (Malabou, 2012). Therefore, she emerges as an existentially detached person. In addition, destructive plasticity can eventually lead to dissociation, which adds to cold detachment. Malabou draws from Antonio Damasio's theory of emotions to argue that "emotions organize and coordinate cerebral activity" (Malabou, 2012). Therefore, one can cognize a complex entanglement between emotion and cognition, and anything that flattens emotions also affects one's thinking patterns. Malabou's theory could explain why Sujatha demonstrates a flattening of emotions and simultaneously skewed thought patterns. This makes her inconsiderately facilitate her mother-in-law's and husband's death. Her aggressive response makes destructive plasticity dissolve the binary between the victim and the perpetrator.

### 3.2 *Performance of Resistance and Counter-Memory*

Even though Sujatha is shown as a submissive wife at the movie's beginning, the undercurrents of resistance are ever-present. This resistance to authority and domination finally manifests in facilitating her mother-in-law's death and murdering her husband. This paper seeks to explain Sujatha's subversive tendencies through the lenses of gender performativity and collective memory. Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" explains gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time...through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990). Further, Ryan (2021) argues that "our relationship to the past is invariably gendered" where gender roles and "sexist traditions" lead to the "performance of gender." Gender is, therefore, a construct that is carried forward in time through its repeated performance. Thus, this paper argues that gender performativity and collective memory are complexly entangled phenomena. Therefore, Sujatha's performance of her gender as a submissive and dutiful wife is informed by the inherited schema that makes her repeatedly engage in acts that attest to her status as a woman bound by sociocultural norms.

However, Butler (1990) also argues that within the construct of gender, its subversion is possible. This subversive potential could be explained through the lenses of memory by drawing from Michel Foucault's (1980) concept of "counter-memory." For Foucault, counter-memory denotes how subversive memory acts in the present detach themselves from the past collective memory by articulating repressed and underrepresented memories. Sujatha embodies counter-memory as she questions the general perception of women as victims (Samir, 2018). Her story is inherently subversive. This resistant strand of memory becomes part of the collective memory of women, presenting scope for resistance against victimhood. However, Sujatha is not the first textual icon to blur the line between victim and perpetrator. (Note 7)

## 4. Results

In the first section of its discussion, the paper has illustrated how hypersensitivity and insensitivity to affect can coexist. This section used theories such as Beauvoir's and Radstone's notion of women's culturally encoded proclivity to affectively respond to smells, and Malabou's notion of destructive plasticity that leads to a flattened affect. These phenomena are embodied by the protagonist Sujatha whose paradoxical response to affect highlights her potential to blur the victim/perpetrator binary. Both olfactory sensitivity and destructive plasticity radically alter Sujatha's subjectivity and intersubjective responses. Further, in the context of destructive plasticity, Sujatha's trauma is both manifest by the singular experiences of her miscarriages and her prolonged exposure to everyday trauma. In the second section of the discussion, the victim/perpetrator binary is further blurred where Sujatha's submissiveness as a conventional wife coexists with her resistance to such conformity. This section uses notions such as Judith Butler's gender performativity and Michel Foucault's counter-memory. These notions foreground Sujatha's capacity to intervene, modify and subvert the collective memory of women as victims. Sujatha metamorphoses from an innocent and passive victim to an active perpetrator of violence towards her abusers. This section highlights the fluidity of collective memory that is highly malleable to individual acts of resistance and subversion. Extrapolating the paper's findings suggests that domestic violence has been experienced very commonly during the pandemic that it could become a part of women's collective memory of the pandemic. At the same time, the analysis highlights that there are multiple strands and modalities of resistance in the face of domestic violence and abuse.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper presents Sujatha's experience of the pandemic-induced lockdown as one of the many experiences of women caught in the throes of a patriarchal domestic space produced during the lockdown. The paper also explicates how media provides a space to articulate the female experience of the pandemic and thus contribute to women's collective

memory of the lockdown. Women's identity and present experiences are always construed within a collective sociocultural framework that draws from generations of female experiences, gender roles, and attributes. Through an analysis of the character Sujatha, her experience, motives, and behaviors, this paper presents how a woman can be cognized within pre-existing sociocultural norms. For this, the paper analyses a woman's affective and olfactory responses as biologically, socially predetermined, and ratified. The paper also illustrates a paradox in Sujatha's affective responses by foregrounding an entrenched insensitivity to affective stimuli that culminates in indifference to suffering. Nevertheless, what makes this paper unique is its ability to challenge the stronghold of the sociocultural discourses that construct gender identity and behavior. To this end, the paper problematizes the binary between victim and perpetrator and foregrounds the subversive potential of acts of counter-memory. For future researchers, this movie provides ample critical space to discuss the notion of traumatic memory.

## Notes

Note 1. Terms such as “mediated memories,” “connective memory,” “cinema/memory”; “memory film” “meta-archive” “tangled memories” “memory texts” “lieu de memoire” and, “prosthetic memory” arose in response to the dialectical relationship between cinema and memory (Quoted in Neiger et al., 2011).

Note 2. Halbwachs' work was originally published in French as *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* in 1925

Note 3. Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality. The key tenet of intertextuality discourages considering texts as self-contained meaningful units (Kristeva, 1980).

Note 4. Affect denotes the capacity of two bodies/objects to mutually affect and disrupt the intensity of each other (Deleuze, 1968; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)

Note 5. According to Swanson et al. (2003), the distress that corresponds to miscarriage can develop because of a strong bond formed between the unborn child and the mother

Note 6. Herz (2016) gives studies demonstrating that memory provoked by odors is significantly more emotional. These odors stimulate the neurobiological substances of emotive processes and bring people to the original location and time of their memories compared to the same experiences remembered using other emotional cues.

Note 7. Fictional accounts beginning with the short story “Jury of Her Peers” (1917) to the contemporary TV shows “Big Little Lies” (2017-2019) and “Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors” (2020) have problematized the binary between victim/perpetrator.

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