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MATRIMONY VS. SURVIVAL: EXPLORING AGRARIAN CRISIS, PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN JAYANT SOMALKAR'S *STHAL* (2023)

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Abstract

The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra is well known as the center of India's farming crisis and farmer suicide belt. In Jayant Digambar Somalkar's first Marathi film *Sthal* (A Match, 2023), we see how this economic breakdown meets the rigid patriarchal social system, creating a deeply painful reality for rural women. The film is set in Dongargaon village in Wardha district and shows how farming debt, cotton farmer distress, and the patriarchal marriage system together destroy the dreams, freedom, and identity of rural women. The film won the NETPAC Award at the 48th Toronto International Film Festival and has been widely praised for its realistic and compassionate yet unsentimental portrayal of a young woman trapped in the suffocating world of arranged marriage in rural India.

This paper studies how *Sthal* reveals the deep connection between the farming crisis and patriarchal marriage practices in Vidarbha. It shows how an average-looking rural girl becomes a financial burden in a debt-ridden farming family, and how her dreams and identity are systematically pushed aside in favor of getting her married off.

The paper uses Marxist feminist theory, Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence, intersectionality theory, and subaltern feminist scholarship to show that cotton farmer debt does not simply exist alongside gender oppression how it actively makes it worse. In this context, marriage is not a joyful social celebration but a desperate survival strategy that destroys female subjectivity.

This paper uses feminist and cinematic analysis, treating *Sthal* as a form of cinematic ethnography, a sociological text that captures the lived realities of gender, caste, and class in rural Vidarbha with documentary-like accuracy. The film's use of non-professional local actors, local dialect, and observational camera work is understood as a deliberate political and methodological choice that brings abstract sociological ideas — patriarchy, structural violence, female agency down to the specific ground-level realities of Vidarbha's farming communities.

The paper makes three main arguments. First, it examines how the economic pressure of farming debt forces families to treat daughters as financial burdens that need to be urgently married off. Second, it analyses the arranged marriage ritual the kanda-poha ceremony, the public examination of the bride, and the dowry negotiation as organised forms of symbolic violence that reinforce caste hierarchy, colorism, and gender inequality all at once. Third, it recovers the inner world of the protagonist Savita as a form of quiet, bodily resistance within a system of limited choices. This draws on Spivak's foundational question of whether the subaltern woman can speak and at what cost.

The paper argues that *Sthal* is not merely a film about arranged marriage but a detailed sociological document about gendered survival under structural pressure. It calls for interdisciplinary frameworks that place rural women's marriage experiences within the larger political economy of farming distress, challenging policy thinking that treats farmer welfare and women's empowerment as separate concerns.

Keywords: Vidarbha Agrarian Crisis, Arranged Marriage, Female Subjectivity, Patriarchy, Symbolic Violence, Feminist Sociology.



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Introduction

Marathi cinema has a long tradition of social realism and political engagement, from the progressive cultural films of the 1940s and 1950s to the new wave of socially aware films that emerged in the 2010s following Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016). Scholar Sharmila Rege argues that regional cinema offers a unique perspective for examining social hierarchies that mainstream Hindi cinema tends to hide or romanticise (Rege, 2006). Ashish Deshpande has similarly argued that Marathi cinema, because it is less driven by commercial pressures than Bollywood, has historically been able to engage more directly with the specific social conditions of Maharashtra — including caste violence, rural poverty, and gender discrimination (Deshpande, 2009).

Within Vidarbha specifically, a new generation of Marathi filmmakers has started to move beyond the well-established template of farmer suicide stories — which, as the Film Critics Guild has noted, risk reducing farming distress to a single dramatic act — toward more nuanced explorations of the everyday social realities of rural life. *Sthal* is a clear example of this new approach. By placing the story not around a farmer's suicide but around his daughter Savita Wandhre's painful matrimonial experience, Somalkar shifts the focus from the most dramatic outcome of the farming crisis (death) to its everyday social consequences — the suppression of female aspirations.

Agrarian Debt as the Economic Cause of Forced Marriage

The opening scenes of *Sthal* quietly and efficiently establish the economic situation of the Wandhre family. Cotton bales are stacked in their home — a visual image that appears repeatedly throughout the film, directly linking Savita's matrimonial ordeal to her family's unstable position in the cotton economy. Her father Daulatrao's anxiety is not primarily that of a patriarch rushing to fulfill a traditional duty; it is the anxiety of a man in debt who fears that his financial window for arranging his daughter's marriage — a process that requires spending heavily on dowry, ceremonies, and gifts — is rapidly closing.

As one critic points out, the film's moral is best captured in the line spoken by Mangya's (Savita's brother) friend: "A farmer's son shouldn't fall in love — they never get a fair price." If we replace "son" with "daughter," the film's central argument becomes clear: in Vidarbha's cotton economy, daughters, like cotton, are treated as commodities whose value is decided by market conditions their families cannot control.

This economic framing turns the search for a groom into a financial transaction in which Savita's "marriageability" — her ability to attract a husband without requiring too much dowry spending — becomes a measure of the household's financial health. Every rejection Savita faces is both a personal humiliation and a financial setback — another possible solution to the family's debt problem ruled out. Daulatrao's decision to meet an excessive dowry demand when a seemingly suitable match finally appears is not shown as a patriarch being indifferent to his daughter's wellbeing. Rather, it is the desperate calculation of a man who has run out of choices — a nuance the film portrays with considerable empathy. This does not excuse the structural violence of the dowry system, but it places it within its material conditions: it is farming debt, not simply patriarchal ideology, that drives Daulatrao's determination to get his daughter married at any cost.

From a Marxist feminist perspective, Savita's position in this economy is one of double alienation. As a woman, she is cut off from the product of her domestic labour, from decisions about her own body and future, and from the economic resources — land, credit, income — that would allow her to live independently. As the daughter of a cotton farmer, she is additionally subject to the unpredictable nature of commodity capitalism: her matrimonial prospects rise and fall with cotton prices, depend on the monsoon, and are ultimately determined by forces as impersonal and uncontrollable as global textile markets. She is, in the film's most powerful visual metaphor, a bale of cotton — a product of her family's labour, given a market value by others, and traded when economic necessity demands.



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This analysis has important implications for how we understand the relationship between farming policy and women's empowerment in Vidarbha. Existing policy approaches tend to treat these as separate areas: agricultural welfare schemes address farmer debt and crop insurance, while women's empowerment programmes focus on education, skill development, and awareness of gender rights. *Sthal* argues, quietly but powerfully, that these areas are structurally inseparable. No women's empowerment programme can be effective in Vidarbha's cotton belt if it leaves unchanged the farming conditions that make daughters into financial liabilities and marriage into a survival strategy.

Matrimonial Ritual as Organised Symbolic Violence

The kanda-poha ceremony — the ritual visit during which a prospective groom's family comes to the bride's home, is served refreshments, and subjects her to a standard set of questions — is *Sthal's* central dramatic device and its most powerful sociological argument. Somalkar depicts these ceremonies with a numbing, almost comedic repetitiveness that is itself a formal expression of their social function: their power comes not from being rare or unique but from being repeated over and over, not from exceptional cruelty but from the unremarkable routine of their performance. This repetition — the same questions, the same stool on which Savita is made to sit and display herself, the same silencing of her agency — is precisely what Bourdieu means by symbolic violence: domination exercised not through open force but through the endless reproduction of normalised practice.

The ceremony enacts what the film's TIFF advisor described as a process in which women are "treated like slaves or products," assessed through a checklist : name, height, complexion, education, cooking ability, farming capacity while no equivalent examination is applied to the groom (Shedde, 2023). This asymmetry is the ceremony's most telling feature: it is not merely that Savita is questioned and the groom is not, but that the very structure of the encounter who sits in judgment, who is displayed, who speaks and who is spoken about enacts and reproduces the gendered power imbalance that the matrimonial system both reflects and perpetuates. The ceremony is a performance of patriarchal authority in Bourdieu's sense: a ritual that, precisely because it is experienced as custom rather than as power, secures the misrecognition upon which symbolic violence depends.

Intersectionality is essential to a full understanding of the ceremony's violence. Savita's rejection is not produced by gender alone but by the coming together of gender with colorism (her dark complexion marked as aesthetically undesirable within a caste-influenced hierarchy of female beauty), class (her father's inability to offer a competitive dowry), and the social stigma of being the daughter of a struggling cotton farmer in a region associated with farming failure. Each aspect of her marginalisation intersects with and amplifies the others, producing a form of social rejection that is multiply caused and mutually reinforcing something a single-axis analysis cannot fully capture.

The film also draws attention to the involvement of the women within Savita's household , her mother and female relatives who serve the guests, stay silent, and manage the ceremony's emotional labour as an illustration of Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition. These women are not simply passive victims of patriarchy; they are active participants in its reproduction, because the matrimonial system is the only framework within which their own value and social standing have been built. Their participation in the ceremony is not genuine consent but habituated complicity — the mark of a symbolic violence so thoroughly internalised that it is no longer experienced as violence but as duty, care, and social responsibility.

Female Subjectivity — Erasure, Interiority, and Micro-Resistance

This section focuses on Savita's subjectivity the inner world of her aspirations, discomfort, and suppressed defiance that the film insists on making visible, even as the social world it depicts insists on rendering it invisible. This is where *Sthal's* feminist argument is most clearly expressed not in its story content but in its cinematographic choices, and specifically in its sustained, close attention to Savita's face.



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The film opens with a dream sequence in which the gender roles of the matrimonial encounter are reversed: Savita and her friends sit in judgment as a male suitor is brought before them for examination. This utopian inversion brief, vivid, and immediately undercut by the reality that follows is the film's statement of Savita's desire and its acknowledgment that this desire has no legitimate social form. The dream is not a fantasy of romantic love but of power: the power to evaluate rather than be evaluated, to judge rather than be judged, to be a subject rather than an object of the matrimonial gaze. That this power is available to Savita only in sleep is the film's most concise feminist argument.

Throughout the film's depiction of the kanda-poha ceremonies, Somalkar's camera returns repeatedly to Savita's face, capturing small expressions of discomfort, embarrassment, suppressed anger, and quiet longing that her social position requires her to hide. This cinematographic attention performs a feminist act: it insists that Savita has an inner life, that she experiences her situation as a subject rather than merely inhabiting it as an object, even as the social world around her treats her as the latter. In Spivakian terms, the camera attempts to create the conditions for a subjectivity that the social world has made inaudible not by giving Savita speech (she remains largely silent throughout), but by making her silence itself meaningful and legible.

Yet the film is also honest about the limits of this interiority as resistance. Savita's discomfort, however palpable to the audience, produces no change in her circumstances. Her aspirations toward higher education and the MPSC examination remain unrealised. Her final act of defiance the climactic slap that the film's last sequence depicts is directed not at the patriarch who has orchestrated her subordination but at a figure whose culpability is ambiguous, raising genuine questions about whether individual acts of bodily resistance can constitute meaningful political agency within structures of symbolic violence as deeply entrenched as those *Sthal* depicts.

This ambiguity is not a flaw in the film's feminist argument it is its most honest and rigorous dimension. As Spivak warns, romanticising subaltern resistance risks projecting onto the oppressed a coherent political agency that the structural conditions of their domination systematically foreclose.

Discussion: Implications for Interdisciplinary Scholarship and Policy

The analysis of this film carries significant implications for how sociologists, gender studies scholars, and policymakers understand the relationship between farming distress and rural women's lives in India. Three implications deserve particular attention:

First, the need for integrated analytical frameworks- The existing tendency in scholarship and policy to treat agricultural welfare and women's empowerment as parallel but separate domains is both analytically inadequate and practically counterproductive. *Sthal* demonstrates with ethnographic precision that these domains are structurally inseparable in Vidarbha. No intervention that addresses only the economic dimensions of farmer distress, while leaving intact the patriarchal structures through which that distress is managed at the household level, can meaningfully improve rural women's conditions. Equally, no women's empowerment programme that treats female marriage patterns as a cultural problem separate from agrarian political economy can understand why those patterns are so resistant to change. The gendered agrarian crisis requires an interdisciplinary analytical framework that holds economic and feminist perspectives in view simultaneously.

Second, the epistemological value of regional cinema as sociological evidence- This paper has demonstrated that *Sthal* functions as a form of cinematic ethnography a mode of social knowledge production that generates insights about rural women's lives with a depth, specificity, and empathy that conventional quantitative sociological methods cannot easily achieve. The film's documentary-inflected realism, its use of non-professional local actors, its attention to vernacular speech and material detail, and its sustained focus on the protagonist's inner life collectively constitute a form of feminist sociological argument. Sociologists and gender studies scholars should engage more systematically with regional cinema



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particularly the new wave of socially engaged Marathi filmmaking as an archive of social knowledge about communities and conditions that academic research has often addressed only partially.

Third, the politics of visibility and voice- *Sthal's* insistence on making Savita's subjectivity visible — on rendering audible, through cinematographic attention, a form of female interiority that the social world treats as irrelevant raises important questions about the politics of representation in feminist scholarship and activism. Who speaks for rural women in Vidarbha? Whose accounts of their experience are granted credibility and institutional weight? The film's director, a man from the same community, has made choices including the choice to centre the female protagonist's perspective and to foreground her suppressed aspirations that are themselves political and ethical acts. These choices deserve critical scholarly attention, both for what they enable and for what they may inadvertently foreclose.

Conclusion

Jayant Digambar Somalkar's *Sthal* (2023) is not simply a film about arranged marriage in rural India. It is a feminist sociological document — a work of cinematic ethnography — that exposes the structural entanglement between the farming crisis and patriarchal marriage practices in Vidarbha, Maharashtra. It demonstrates how this entanglement produces what the paper has called the **double dispossession** of rural women: their economic dispossession as financial liabilities within debt-ridden farming households, and their social dispossession as subjects whose aspirations, agency, and identity are systematically pushed aside in favor of getting them married off.

Through three interlocking analytical arguments concerning the economic determinism of farming debt, the symbolic violence of the matrimonial ritual, and the suppressed subjectivity of the rural female protagonist the paper has demonstrated that *Sthal* makes a coherent and rigorous sociological argument about the conditions of rural women's lives in contemporary Maharashtra. This argument is advanced not through explicit lecturing but through the formal resources of observational cinema: sustained attention to material detail, close focus on the protagonist's face, the numbing repetition of the matrimonial ceremony, and the ironic contrast between the opening dream sequence and the social reality that follows.

The paper has also argued that *Sthal* represents a significant development within the emerging tradition of socially engaged Marathi cinema from Vidarbha — a development that moves beyond the established template of farmer suicide narratives to explore the everyday social consequences of farming distress for those whose suffering is less dramatic but no less devastating: the daughters of indebted cotton farmers, whose futures are mortgaged alongside their fathers' land.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond film studies or literary sociology. They point toward the urgent need for interdisciplinary frameworks. Frameworks that hold agrarian political economy and feminist sociology in simultaneous view to understand and address the conditions of rural women's lives in India's cotton belt. As long as policy thinking treats farmer welfare and women's empowerment as separate domains of concern, the daughters of Vidarbha's cotton farmers will continue to be married off when the crop price falls, their aspirations sacrificed, as *Sthal's* final image makes devastatingly clear, not to cruelty but to necessity; not to hatred but to debt.

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