



Between Decline and Renewal: The Representations of Menopausal Bodies in Select Indian Cinema

Athira Suresh

Research Scholar,
PG and Research Department of English,
St. Joseph's College, (Autonomous) Devagiri,
Kozhikode, India.
athisuresh12@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6907-6504>

Dr. Moncy Mathew

Professor,
PG Department of English,
Govt. Arts and Science College,
Kozhikode, India.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9015-7112>

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Abstract:

Menopause is an overlooked area of study in the Indian context. This paper discusses the representation of menopause in Indian cinema through the analysis of selected films. It uses theoretical frameworks of embodiment, abjection, and the male gaze, along with Singh and Sivakami's notion of menopause as distress. Through these frameworks, this study analyses the physical symptoms and psychological distress of the protagonists to interpret menopause as rooted in social and cultural interpretations shaped by stigma rather than a mere biological process. Protagonists' everyday experiences, domestic space, social encounters and moments of solitude demonstrate how social and cultural discourses construct menopausal bodies as disruptive to normative expectations of femininity and framed as abject. Visual and narrative strategies of these films highlight women's anxiety about the loss of youth and desirability during menopause. It shows cinema can challenge the taboo surrounding menopause. This paper contributes to emerging feminist film studies and menstrual studies.

Keywords: Menopause, Indian Cinema, Menopause as distress, Male gaze, Embodiment, Abjection, Ageing Female Body.

“Menopause is a biological phenomenon marked by the permanent cessation of menstruation” (Singh and Sivakami 985). Most women experience menopause between the ages of forty-five and fifty-five. Menopausal transition is a gradual process that can last several years (World Health Organization). This period is referred to as perimenopause. The World Health Organization defines perimenopause as the phase that begins when the signs are first observed (usually changes in menstrual cycles) and ends one year after the final menstrual period. Perimenopause is sometimes referred to as the “menopausal” stage because it precedes the time when women become menopausal (qtd. in Dillaway 254). It can affect the physical, emotional, mental and social well-being of women (World Health Organization). The symptoms of menopause include hot flushes, night sweats, headache, fatigue, insomnia, depression, etc. Social Science researchers have proposed that menopausal symptoms are more a result of sociocultural attitudes and ideologies than of biology itself (Dillaway 258). Despite being a universal phenomenon, women experience considerable variations in the age at which menopause occurs and the signs and symptoms associated with it (Dasgupta and Ray 20).

Due to its large population, India ranks second in the world in the number of women aged fifty or older. This age is generally associated with menopause and midlife transition (Tiwari and Sharma 94). Similar to many other nations, patriarchal values shape India, often silencing women’s voices. In the Indian context, “menopause and menarche are taboos,” which are rarely discussed (Singh and Sivakami 992). These cultural norms influence the desirability and visibility of women’s bodies (Ray 269). Despite the growing attention to menstruation and reproductive health, menopause itself remains underrepresented in both academic and cultural domains. This knowledge gap is an “exposure of the power of misogyny and stigma to suppress knowledge production” that could affect the change (Bobel 1). The dearth of literature on menopause in India can be attributed to patriarchal notions that stigmatise menstruation and menopause and assume that the importance of women’s health end with their reproductive

years (Tiwari and Sharma 94). Women use euphemisms to discuss their basic biological function, such as menstruation, due to the existing sociological taboo surrounding women's physical experiences (Gottlieb 145). This research seeks to fill the gap in Indian film and literary scholarship, where perimenopause and menopause remain critically neglected as a significant life stage of women.

However, contemporary feminist and body-centred approaches challenge this silence and treat menopause as a natural process where women renegotiate their identity and sexuality. A small but growing number of Indian films now begin to reflect this shift, portraying menopause as a locus of both vulnerability and renewal. This study examines the representation of menopause in recent Indian cinema, tracing a shift from dominant narratives of bodily decline toward a representation that resists such constructions.

Scholars in medical and feminist discourses, such as Frances B. McCrea, Madeleine J. Murtagh, and Julie Hepworth, trace the evolution of medical and feminist discourses of menopause as a deficiency, neurosis, or disease, reinforcing patriarchal control. McCrea, for instance, claims in his article "The Politics of Menopause: The 'Discovery' of a "Deficiency Disease" that "the moral entrepreneur who, during the 1960s, led the crusade to redefine menopause as a disease was the prominent Brooklyn gynecologist Robert A. Wilson" (112). Wilson claimed menopause to be a deficiency disease like diabetes and thyroid dysfunction and declared "that menopause is a malfunction threatening feminine essence" in the book *Feminine Forever* (113). Wilson further described the menopausal body as a "living decay" (113) and promoted Estrogen Replacement Therapy (ERT) to keep women "feminine forever"(113).

Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist critics redefined menopause as a natural biological process and argued that patriarchal structures stigmatised it to regulate and control women. Postmodern and poststructural feminists questioned both medical and modern feminists for

sharing epistemological assumptions about the body (117). “I Cannot Let This Happen to Other People” (2025) documents Kate Muir’s experience of menopause. Kate Muir is a journalist, author and a significant figure in the UK Menopause Movement. Kate Muir states that the New Menopause Movement, which began in 2020, is a digital, media and medical revolution that overturned the scientific discussions, gender bias and misinformation regarding hormone treatments (Takhar et al 379). Her two award-winning documentaries, *Davina McCall: Sex, Myths and the Menopause* (2021) and *Davina McCall: Sex, Mind and the Menopause* (2022), sparked the menopause revolution in the UK, thereby increasing awareness of menopause and Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). Breanne Fahs shows how disgust regulates ideals of femininity, linking fear of ageing, fatness and bodily excess to moral judgment and social control.

Elizabeth Barry’s “Endogenous Misery: Menopause in Medicine, Literature and Culture” analyses how age, gender, and sexualities intersect in cultural and medical discourse. She argues that social structures construct the medical pathologisation of menopause. She turns to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* to depict how literature offers a more nuanced understanding of menopause and later-life sexuality than pseudo-scientific generalisations. She explains that feminists such as Simon de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, and Virginia Woolf critique the pathologising language related to menopause and challenge taboos reinforced by ageism and sexism.

Victoria McMahon’s doctoral thesis explores menopausal anxieties in Shakespearean tragedies, arguing that while explicit portrayals of menopause are absent, menopausal experiences surface through subtextual clues and embodied anxieties in characters such as Gertrude, Tamora, Volumnia, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra. McMahon states that cultural narratives represent ageing female body through images of dryness and the enduring myth of the “wandering womb” (McMahon 33). Using humoral and embodiment theory, she interprets

their silencing or “sudden, sometimes brutal vanishing” (2) as reflections of the social invisibility of aged women. Soledad Marambio’s “The Hero’s Bloody Journey: What Female Characters Encounter in Menopausal Narratives” (2023) applies Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey narrative structure to menopause narratives of Darcey Steinke, Deborah Levy, and Dana Spoitta. Marambio recognises three major stages in characters’ lives: departure (from the familiar world/fertile body), initiation (challenges), and return (restoring themselves with new gains).

Marjolein de Boer and Annemie Halsema examine the representation of menopause in contemporary TV shows. They identify four dominant myths surrounding menopause: the liberated woman, free from menstruation and reproduction; the “empty-nester” seeking her children’s presence and/or a new purpose; the old, ugly, and sexless witch; and the mild, wise, and yet desexualised woman. Drawing on Beauvoir and Irigaray, the authors propose two methods of resisting these myths: the representation of diverse menopausal experiences and mimicking these myths by magnifying and ridiculing them.

Conroy et al. examine the portrayal of menopause in the top hundred highest-grossing films in the United States from 2009 to 2024, which predominantly feature women aged forty and older on screen. The report explicitly asserts that menopause is clearly invisible on screen, as only 6% of 225 films featuring 40-plus women characters released during this period mentioned menopause. Among these films, only one film deals with a prominent menopause storyline, while most others use menopause as a comedic device. It was used as a joke to explain women’s anger, even for non-menopausal characters, reinforcing the stereotype that women’s emotional volatility is due to biology. The report also notes a mix of accurate and inaccurate menopause symptoms in these films (2).

Bre’on Kelley compares global attitudes toward menopause. While Anglo/European cultures view menopause as distressing and medicalised, women in Egypt, Japan, Latin America and

India view it positively. Kelley posits that Indian women welcome menopause as a new stage of womanhood, with a purified body and increased familial authority. A. Sengupta, in “The Emergence of Menopause in India”, states that Indian women, especially women in rural India, have a positive attitude towards menopause due to “freedom from many taboos attached to menstruation, attaining greater social recognition or empowerment ... and greater economic productivity and/or newly acquired self-esteem” (92). He further observes that this seemingly positive attitude reflects negatively on their health-seeking behaviour. They are unaware of the short-term as well as the long-term implications of the morbid conditions associated with middle and old age (93).

The study conducted by Marcha Flint on four hundred eighty-three Rajput caste Indian women from Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh depicts that they had few symptoms during perimenopause other than changes in the menstrual cycle. This is attributed to the increased visibility and freedom that postmenopausal women gain in India. For instance, Rajput women from both Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh could come out of their secluded lives and actively participate in domains traditionally dominated by men. “These women were no longer considered to be contaminative” (162). Menopausal attitude, signs and symptoms are shaped by women’s life circumstances, social location, their expectation of reproductive ageing and their knowledge of this transition (Dillaway 258).

The comparatively positive attitude of Indian women towards menopause can be linked to their liberation, to an extent, from patriarchy. In India, menopause “removes the societal restriction that came with the cultural view that menstruation is polluting,” such as entering places that are considered sacred (Singh and Sivakami 987). In their study, Singh and Sivakami identified three distinct but co-occurring narratives: menopause as a normal life transition, menopause as distress because it is taboo and menopause as freedom from monthly distress and societal restrictions (989). Indian women, even highly educated upper-class women, refrain

from consulting health professionals due to their sociocultural conditioning, and they associate menopausal symptoms with natural problems of ageing (Tiwari and Sharma 101).

Although contemporary Indian cinema portrays women's bodily autonomy in films such as *Sara'S* (Malayalam, 2021) and menstrual health in *Pad Man* (Hindi, 2018), menopause remains underrepresented. The erasure of menopause from popular media contributes "to a history of menopause being shrouded in mystery or even in shame" (Conroy et al. 2). This study uses two Indian films, *Star* (2021) and *Painful Pride* (2019), to analyse the shift in representation of menopause in recent Indian cinema. *Star* is a Malayalam film directed by Domin D'Silva, written by Suvin S. Somasekharan and starring Sheelu Abraham, Joju George and Prithviraj Sukumaran. *Painful Pride* is a Hindi short film directed by Saumitra Singh and written by Neha Sharma, Simran Suri, and Sankalp Raj Tripathi. The prominent characters are played by Pallavi Joshi, Rituraj Singh, Suneeta Sengupta and Akash Deep. These films depict how menopause is viewed in the contemporary Indian cultural context, thereby functioning as cultural texts that reflect the dominant attitudes towards midlife womanhood and their bodily changes.

The Malayalam film *Star* combines the genre conventions of horror and domestic drama to represent the stigma and ignorance of Indian society surrounding menopause. The protagonist, Ardra (played by Sheelu Abraham), is a middle-aged woman who experiences the physical and psychological symptoms of early menopause. A college lecturer, she is married and has four children, including a stepdaughter. The film opens with a song sequence that maps Ardra's birth to her moving out of her maternal home after an inter-religious marriage. Her husband Roy (played by Joju George) is a businessman. He is confused and sometimes irritated by the changes in Ardra's behaviour. No one in the family, not even the elder maid or Ardra's mother, understood what she was going through. The one reason apart from the cultural ignorance for this could be that menopause affects women differently.

Painful Pride is a thirty-minute short film about menopause, starring Pallavi Joshi as the protagonist. She plays Vidya Mehra, a homemaker married to Amit Mehra (played by Rituraj Singh), a businessman. The film addresses how Vidya's menopausal symptoms cause problems within her family. Her husband Amit, like Roy, is initially bewildered and frustrated by Vidya's behavioural changes. The conflict resolves when her family understands menopause and supports her.

Both Ardra and Vidya belong to higher strata of society and are highly educated. Ardra, in *Star*, is a college lecturer. Despite their education and social position, they continue to be influenced by the cultural beliefs associated with menstruation and menopause. "Even highly educated women perpetuate menstrual taboos in intimate and public ways alike" (Gottlieb 194). Both of them belong to the upper-caste Hindu religion. "Women in Hindu society are usually designated a lower status (within patriarchy) by which they are placed at the centre of the domestic arena from where they are not expected (or meant) to move out" (Das 39). The Vedic texts provide mythological explanations for the polluted/impure and inferior status assigned to menstruating women in the Hindu religious tradition (31). To impose the status of impurity and pollution, restrictions are assigned to them during this period. "The emergence of these taboos was successful in discriminating between men and women sharper" (39).

Both women characters selected for this study live in nuclear families where they confirm the socially constructed ideals of wife and mother. The physical and emotional changes during the perimenopausal stage disrupt this identity. They fall within the second thematic narrative identified by Singh and Sivakami: menopause as distress. The "distress emerged mainly from somatic changes (heavy and painful bleeding, sleepless nights, irritability, anxiety, mood swings, and frequent headaches) are exacerbated by negative life events and an inability to share their experience with anyone" (991). They experience various somatic changes such as hot flashes, headaches, mood swings, insomnia, etc. Both of them are unable to share their

menopausal experiences, even with their husbands, due to anxiety about ageing and loss of desirability. Thus, menopausal transition creates tension within the families.

The scenes depicting Ardra's symptoms, such as excessive sweating, bleeding, mood swings, and insomnia, are framed through close-up shots, high-angle shots, static shots and shadow-heavy lighting to infuse mystery and horror. These visual choices reflect the perception of the people around her that she is possessed. The film, until its climax, encourages the audience to see Ardra as possessed, echoing Laura Mulvey's notion of the spectator's gaze. Laura Mulvey theorises the concept of spectator's gaze as the process through which cinema adopts various visual and narrative techniques - such as camera movement, editing and narrative alignment - to shape spectators' perception of characters and events from a particular point of view. She argues that cinematic structure encourages viewers to identify with a masculine point of view, even when they are not consciously aware of this position. This male-centred perception aligns with patriarchal ideology, which limits the subjectivity of female protagonists. The visual language of a film determines the subject, object and how meaning is produced. In *Star*, the spectators are initially encouraged to align with the gaze of the female characters, such as maids, Ardra's mother and daughters, to interpret Ardra's condition as possessed. Their gaze positions Ardra as an object of suspicion and scrutiny rather than as a speaking subject, demonstrating how patriarchal ways of seeing can operate within female characters. Her silence and stillness throughout the film visually reinforce her position as an object rather than a subject. Furthermore, the film mediates through Roy's confusions, emotional discomfort and family distress rather than directly addressing Ardra's menopausal transition. Thus, the spectator's alignment with the characters reproduces patriarchal logic or the masculine point of view.

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze helps explain how the film portrays Ardra and other older women, including her mother and elderly maids, as "monstrous" figures excluded from the

sphere of desirability. The film depicts Ardra's mother using a witch-like imagery. Ardra's son Abhi tells his schoolmates that, "my granny has got some problems ... the moment granny wakes up from her sleep, everyone of us would get scared" (00:25:23 - 00:25:35). This dialogue is followed by a close-up shot of the grandmother as she awakens, with selective lighting emphasizing her eyes while the rest of her face is cast in darkness (00:25:36). He also adds that "anybody seeing her would get scared and run for their lives" (00:25:47). Apart from this, Ardra's husband Roy, mistreats the old maid in front of children reinforcing and normalizing disrespect towards ageing. (00:17:01 - 00:17:20). Their undesirability is contrasted with that of her young daughters, which reinforces and idealises youth and beauty as the normative femininity (01:01:01 - 01:04:44).

The visual techniques that misinterpret menopausal symptoms can be analysed as the cultural tendency to pathologize women's bodily changes and ageing. Ardra internalises these anxieties and feels insecure in her own body. "Professional women in modern society may be more self-conscious about vasomotor symptoms and view menopause as a nuisance," as it causes loss of control over themselves (Hall et al. 111). She often seeks validation from people close to her, such as her husband and a friend. In a scene, Ardra appears distressed when her friend remarks, "you look upset" (00:19:30 - 00:19:34), but she immediately appears reassured when the same friend consoles her that, "you are becoming more beautiful day by day, to make others jealous of you" (00:19:56 - 00:20:03). She also seeks validation from her husband "am I beautiful" (01:11:28 - 01:11:30). These instances highlight Ardra's sense of inferiority and growing dependence on external validation.

Furthermore, Ardra's suspicion of her husband's infidelity and distress in her daughters' youth further illustrate a heightened sense of bodily inferiority developed with menopause. Her daughters' youth and beauty, in particular, become a source of resentment and emotional distress for Ardra. This echoes Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, where the leaking and

uncontrollable body becomes a site of fear, disgust, shame and decline. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system and order.” (4). She also adds that menstrual blood “stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (71). Kristeva’s idea is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where menstruation and menopause are considered as taboo, as demonstrated by Singh and Sivakami, and Das.

Kristeva’s concept of abjection and the idea of menopause as distress proposed by Singh and Sivakami offer a productive lens to understand how the menopausal body in India is constructed as disturbing and culturally stigmatised. Women, especially in Hindu society, are seen through the “classic dichotomy of goddess/whore; where they are revered for their good, ‘goddess-like’ qualities and punished for any non-normative behaviour” (Das 39). Throughout the film, Ardra’s physical and emotional distress, such as hot flashes, sleeplessness, and mood swings, are primarily framed as a transformation that unsettles the domestic order rather than as a subjective lived experience. Her body becomes a site of surveillance for all the other characters, most notably through the maid’s perspective, which frames Ardra as possessed. This framework situates her body outside society’s normative boundaries of health, femininity and domestic functionality, amplifying her distress.

The film repeatedly associates Ardra’s stillness and silence with abnormality, reinforcing the idea that her body “disturbs identity, system and order” (4). Her body is framed as a threatening abject that destabilises the socially accepted images of women, therefore positioning it as in need of regulation. The exorcism scenes (*Star* 01:26:48 - 01:30:11) symbolically represent society’s attempts to control or regulate the disruption caused by menopause, thereby restoring Ardra to a “normal” femininity construct. Her grandmother, *Amman*, who is like a goddess

figure in her family, is the only person who understands Ardra and empathises with her. She criticises Ardra's mother and maids for their failure to comprehend Ardra's experience (01:30:35 - 01:30:45).

Menopause is often associated with the decline of youth, beauty and desirability. Conventional metaphors used for the representation of menopause include "dried river beds and cracks on the pavement stained by the colors of Holi, a shade of rust (Ray 269). Ardra's hallucinations, distracted behaviour and her inability to complete the paintings (00:15:53 - 00:16:14) can be interpreted as symbols of distress caused by menopause. Her experiences are framed through narratives of decline, and others constantly remind her that she once embodied the "good" mother and wife role. In a scene, Roy remarks, "It is the first time in the 20 long years [of being together], you are behaving like this to me" (00:30:32). Her daughters complain about her inability to understand them. Her identity shifts from an ideal partner and caring mother to someone unstable, and her troubled marriage is contrasted with her young daughter's romantic relationship (00:35:15 - 00:50:16).

Cultural practices construct menopausal body as abject and unstable, thereby challenging the social order. In the family setting, especially the male partners and at times children, become exasperated with "uncontrollable" female bodies, which will further complicate the perimenopausal experience as they have to handle others' perception of signs and symptoms (Dallaway 257). Both films represent their protagonists, Ardra and Vidya, as lonely during the menopausal phase. In addition to the scenes that depict their sufferings in solitude, the film portrays them as isolated even when the family engages in routine activities. They are visually segregated through the frames, such as being seated apart, standing at a distance, or positioned at the margins of the frame. Both films feature a dining table scene in which these women are isolated from the family and portrayed as disrupting domestic harmony (*Star* 00:15:53 - 00:16:35, *Painful Pride* 00:08:07- 00:08:54). In these scenes, the protagonists either sit in

silence or are involved in an argument. This strategic framing of social isolation, even within the domestic sphere, reflects their marginalisation and withdrawal from society. These scenes also reflect the notion of abjection, in which bodily corporeal processes become sources of shame and fear, thereby disrupting a stable identity. The idea of abjection is heightened in India due to the strong patriarchal ideology that constructs menstruation as impure and taboo.

Star presents the body as a locus of lived experience representing how menopausal symptoms influence the protagonist's identity. Ardra's physical symptoms destabilise her own sense of self and affect the family. Several scenes depict her inability to connect with her children (00:21:17 - 00:21:38) or to effectively communicate with her husband, even when he tries to initiate a conversation (00:29:49 - 00:30:44). Her identity is repeatedly questioned by people around her due to the changes in behaviour, illustrating Merleau-Ponty's idea that the body is the medium through which people understand and communicate with the world. In his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher states, "the body is our general medium for having a world" (169). He claims that identity is continuously shaped through lived bodily experiences rather than through abstract or purely psychological processes. This is evident in the conversation between the maid and her step-daughter Aami, when the maid remarks "Sometimes, she [Ardra] behaves as someone else" (*Star* 01:15:56 - 01:16:05) and "She is not our Ardra"(01:16:46). Ardra's return to her maternal house, attempt to dress as she did in her youth, worries about her appearance and seeking validation, reflect her attempts to escape from a body that is now associated with shame and disgust. Her insecurity and shame in her body affect her personality and attitude towards others. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's notion that "I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, ... a provisional sketch of my total being" (231).

Menopause, most often, is considered the threshold of women's ageing process. Stotland argues that the major issues or concerns faced by modern women related to menopause are

grief about the loss of youth, beauty and bothersome symptoms (qtd. in Hall et al. 111). Thus, women's view and experience of menopause significantly depend on whether they equate menopause with ageing. The above-mentioned concern about the loss of youth and societal value after menopause is evident in Ardra and Vidya. This is explicitly expressed in Vidya's interior monologue "My unusual bizarre emotions should be seen closely by you, but I am scared of telling them even to myself, don't know why I talk less about my age nowadays, though I am quite strong and a proof of my strength. But I hold myself back from saying it to you. I'm scared" (00:13:10 - 00:13:55).

Moreover, Vidya is constantly reminded of her age. She is complemented by her friend's daughter Jia as, "at 45, you look so amazing, even if I can maintain half at your age, seriously, I feel so blessed" (00:05:15 - 00:05:20). Another instance is when her son Rohan (played by Aakash Deep) says "Mom, age and you?" (00:24:00- 00:24:07). This suggests that youth is the norm of feminine beauty and with age beauty declines. Thus, Vidya constantly tries to maintain a youthful appearance to meet society's expectations through strict diets and fitness routines. Similar to Ardra, Vidya's suspicion of her husband's infidelity leads to marital tension. Amit is shocked and accuses her of becoming old. After this, he stops talking to her. (00:10:07 - 00:10:50). This could be due to the reiteration of the idea that old men can be good-looking. At the same time, women lose their "feminine", "healthy" and "sexy" attributes in midlife and begin a continual decline after that (Dillaway 259).

In both films, husband characters Roy and Amit represent patriarchal attitudes that shape the experiences of menopausal women. Their behaviour is significant to understand how menopause is interpreted within the domestic sphere. They also function as cultural agents who challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies. Both films underscore how men are unequipped or uneducated to recognise or respond to menopausal distress. It is observed that husbands who want to be supportive lack the appropriate knowledge and feel unsure about how to help (qtd.

in Dallaway 262). Their lack of understanding reflects the cultural silencing of women's bodily experiences as well as the limited emotional vocabulary of men in a patriarchal society. They are portrayed as "ideal fathers" and "good husbands" in accordance with the society's norms. They adhere to conventional masculine gender roles as hardworking providers of the family who endure professional pressures. Both films establish this notion in the beginning itself (*Star* 00:09:08 - 00:10:30, *Painful Pride* 00:36 -00:46). Both of them expect emotional stability and support from their wives and become frustrated when it breaks (*Star* 00:11:47 - 00:12:45, *Painful Pride* 09:15 -09:46). These men are portrayed as "helpless" who struggle to understand the women's experiences. They expect their wives to explain or "educate" them about the bodily changes, even when they are in distress. Dillaway's study has reported that perimenopausal women have discomfort communicating with their partners about their signs and symptoms (262). Therefore, the emotional incompetence of husbands heightens the sense of isolation and insecurity among women (both Ardra and Vidya), serving as a mirror for patriarchal societal anxieties.

Both *Star* and *Painful Pride* end with a shift from misunderstanding and stigma to a positive reorientation of menopausal experience. In *Star*, the doctor's (played by Prithviraj) explanations demystify Ardra's symptoms, which the family had considered supernatural. He redefines menopause not as an end but as a natural process. The doctor assures Ardra and her family that "this is only a pause, not a full stop" (01:40:49 - 01:40:53). This moment helps them (including Ardra) to understand what menopause is and how it is a natural biological process rather than a possession or moral decline. In the final scenes, her husband and children reinforce this understanding through their support, restoring Ardra's sense of belonging.

Similarly, *Painful Pride* concludes with Vidya's family becoming aware of her emotional and physical challenges, along with the pressures of societal beauty standards. Her son breaks the silence, asking his father to talk to Vidya and create a space for her to express her feelings.

Both films conclude by raising awareness in society that menopause is a biological process, which may or may not require medical assistance, depending on the individual. It also highlights the need for emotional support and eradicating the stigma related to menopause. However, the shift towards understanding and acceptance, in both the films, is initiated not by women but by male characters - the male doctor in *Star* (01:36:01 - 01:40:51) and Vidya's son Rohan in *Painful Pride* (00:25:45 - 00:26:33). It can be interpreted as a symbol of how authority and legitimacy are still culturally coded as masculine.

In *Star*, the male doctor scientifically explains menopause to the family, eradicating their superstitious beliefs around it. His authority becomes a catalyst for the family's transformation and validates Ardra's experiences. He also adds that even after being a doctor, he was unaware of menopause when his mother experienced it. He says, "when this happened to my mother, I was clueless about what to do"(01:37:39). This demonstrates the height of ignorance surrounding menopause in India, that even a medical student could not recognize menopausal symptoms.

Similarly, in *Painful Pride*, Vidya's son explains menopause to his father and the viewers. He educates his father regarding menopause and the possible sufferings that his mother experiences. He also advises his father to be supportive and empathetic towards Vidya. This points out how menopausal women themselves are culturally silenced to articulate their bodily experiences while men mediate the moment of awareness. Significantly, both films begin these explanatory scenes with a close-up shot of Ardra and Vidya, emphasising their fatigue and emotional vulnerability. Thus, even though the endings of both films suggest renewal and recognition of the problem, the reliance on the male figures to impart knowledge, rather than the women who experience it, exposes the persistent gendered hierarchy of authority in patriarchal society.

Apart from the covert reaffirmation of male authority over knowledge, both films end with a shift in perception towards menopausal women. There is a shift from ignorance and marginalisation to awareness and family support. Initially, the menopausal body was treated as a site of fear, shame, stigma and decline, which by the end shifted to a space of renewal and resistance. For instance, *Star* marks a narrative transition in which Ardra's emotional and physical changes are considered as a natural biological process rather than possession. This demystification enables Ardra to reclaim her bodily experiences, resisting the patriarchal cultural narratives. The support from her family marks the beginning of a renewal within her body (01:43:14 - 01:43:26), which aligns with contemporary feminist notions. Similarly, in *Painful Pride*, the ending marks a moment of recognition and acceptance enabling Vidya to move away from self-surveillance and internalized stigma surrounding menopause and ageing. The film concludes with another monologue by Vidya stating that "Perhaps by telling it to you, I want to tell this to myself, my identity is not in my age" (00:29:01 - 00:29:09). Vidya's monologue ends with, "I am least bothered about these phases in my life, I just want to live freely, relentlessly and limitlessly" (00:29:12 - 00:29:23). Hence, there is a sense of reconstruction of self and body offering a resistance to dominant cultural narratives of decline.

Several cinematography techniques, such as close-up shots, extreme close-up shots, static shots and high-angle shots, depict the isolation and stigma. Close-up shots of the body are used to show the menopause symptoms, namely night sweats, hot flashes, and ageing signs, including wrinkles (*Painful Pride* 00:04:10). Extreme close-up shots of the eyes (*Star* 01:36:39) and static shots (*Star* 00:47:13 -00:47:50) are used to show emotional turmoil faced during menopause and their isolation. Furthermore, the recurrent use of mirror shots in both films foregrounds the protagonists' fear of losing attractiveness, of ageing and of internalised stigma shaped by patriarchal beauty standards. High-angle shots are used to show the vulnerability and instability. Handheld camera movements are used to depict the anxiety

(*Star* 01:34:39 -01:35:00). *Star* makes use of dramatic lighting - natural lighting contrasted with dark and shadow lighting technique to infuse horror. On the other hand, *Painful Pride* mostly uses natural lighting but avails dark and shadow lighting techniques to suggest extreme distress, for instance, to show symptoms like sleeplessness. In addition to these camera techniques, the background score of both the films contributes to creating an atmosphere of loneliness and horror (especially in *Star*). It underscores the protagonists' emotional vulnerability and transforms ordinary domestic spaces into sites of confusion and chaos.

The narrative of both films follows a more linear structure. The narrative structure of *Star* highlights Ardra's nostalgia for her youthful identity and her current struggles. On the other hand, *Painful Pride* adopts a narrative that centres on daily life. The narratives of both films move through everyday scenarios, such as family gatherings and social encounters, juxtaposed with the protagonists' solitude and introspection. Through these contrasts, these films attempt to reveal psychological, social and cultural impacts of menopause, aligning with the theory of embodiment. This approach also highlights menopause as embedded in social and cultural interpretations rather than merely as a biological process, as discussed by numerous studies mentioned earlier.

The representation of menopause in both *Star* and *Painful Pride* depicts how women's bodies and the changes associated with them are shaped by gendered expectations and cultural stigma in Indian society. Both films initially portray menopause through a narrative of decline and social withdrawal caused by "menopause as distress." The films also display how ageing female bodies are constructed as abject. Through horror-inflected cinematography in *Star* and realistic framing in *Painful Pride*, the films reveal how the symptoms of menopause, particularly sweating, bleeding, mood swings, and anxiety, are misinterpreted through the lens of superstitions and moral judgment. Depending on the severity of the symptoms and who is present during that time, women may feel stigmatised by the public nature of these symptoms

or worry that others view them negatively (qtd. in Dillaway 257). The frameworks of Mulvey, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, Singh and Sivakami further illuminate how these narratives construct the menopausal body as abject, stigmatised and excluded from desirability in a patriarchal society. The protagonists' isolation reflects the taboo surrounding menopause in Indian households.

However, the climactic moments of both films redefine menopause as a natural biological process rather than a rupture of femininity. These films endeavour to break the silence around menopause and contribute to a cultural vocabulary that acknowledges women's ageing bodies. They demonstrate that while Indian cinema often participates in perpetuating dominant cultural narratives, it also holds the potential to challenge these narratives by portraying menopause as a site of transformation and resilience.

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