

**BEYOND RITUAL AND REFORM: PSYCHOLOGICAL  
TRAUMA AND WIDOWHOOD IN GHATASHRADDHA  
AND NATHICHARAMI**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Widowhood in Indian cinema has often been shown through societal rules, rituals, or moral judgement, while the emotional and psychological experiences of widowed women remain inconspicuous. This study explores how Kannada cinema symbolises widowhood as a form of psychological trauma shaped by silence and emotional restraint. This paper engages in a comparative analysis of Ghatashraddha and Nathicharami, and explores how grief, isolation, and inner conflict are communicated without dramatic dialogue or spectacle. Using Trauma and Affect Theory, through detailed analysis of the film text, this paper explores how signs of trauma emerge subtly in daily practices and habitual gestures. Ghatashraddha presents widowhood as a condition enforced by rigid social and religious practices, where the community dictates and suppresses a woman's grief. Nathicharami, set in a contemporary urban context, portrays widowhood as an internal struggle, where emotional pain is privately endured despite apparent social progress. In both films, silence evolves as a powerful cinematic tool which defies clear expression and agency. The paper argues that these films experience grief emotionally rather than viewing it from the sidelines. By avoiding melodrama and focusing on mood, stillness, and daily life, Kannada cinema offers a sensitive way of representing women's mental health. This paper offers critical reading by showing how cinema can humanize psychological trauma through quiet and compassionate storytelling.

**KEYWORDS:**

Widowhood, psychological trauma, silence, Affect theory,  
Kannada cinema.

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**Introduction**

Widowhood is not only a societal condition but also a deeply emotional experience that affects mental health, identity, and everyday life. The loss of a spouse often brings long-term grief, loneliness, and emotional uncertainty, which can be intensified by social norms and cultural restrictions. In Indian society, widows have historically been subjected to moral judgement, behavioural regulation, and varying degrees of societal exclusion. These conditions often leave little space for emotional expression or psychological healing, making widowhood a prolonged and silent form of suffering rather than a moment of closure.

Indian cinema has addressed widowhood across different periods and forms, frequently focusing on rituals, sacrifice, and social reform. However, many such representations prioritise external customs and moral debates over the interior emotional lives of widowed women. As a result, grief is often portrayed as something to be resolved or disciplined, rather than experienced and understood. This tendency limits cinema's engagement with widowhood as a mental health issue and obscures the regular emotional realities faced by women living with loss.

This paper examines how two Kannada films—Ghatashraddha (1977) and Nathicharami (2018)—offer alternative representations by foregrounding widowhood as psychological trauma rather than an entrenched social or ritual identity. Despite their different historical moments and cinematic styles, both films share a strong focus on emotional silence. Instead of dramatic confrontations or expressive dialogues, they use stillness, minimal speech, and

repetitive daily routines to convey grief and inner conflict. Silence in these films is not a lack of meaning but a powerful expression of emotional pain shaped by societal and cultural pressures.

By comparing these films, this paper seeks to understand how cinema can represent grief that is lived quietly and often alone. The study highlights Kannada cinema's ability to engage with women's mental health through subtle, humane storytelling, offering a space for empathy and reflection rather than judgement or spectacle.

## **Background**

Research in psychology and the social sciences consistently shows that widowhood can have long-term emotional and psychological effects, including grief, depression, anxiety, and persistent loneliness. The loss of a spouse often disrupts a person's sense of identity and emotional stability, particularly when adequate social and emotional support is absent. Studies on bereavement note that unresolved grief can continue over long periods and may reappear through withdrawal, silence, and emotional numbness rather than overt expressions of distress (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007).

For women, widowhood is shaped not only through personal loss but also by cultural expectations surrounding behaviour, sexuality, and respectability. In many societies, including India, widows are expected to embody restraint and emotional self-control, which can limit their ability to process grief openly. Such expectations often push women toward silence at a time when emotional expression and care are deemed to be essential for psychological healing. Scholars working on trauma and gender suggest that emotional pain that is beyond verbal articulation often manifests through routine, bodily stillness, and internal conflict (Herman, 1992).

Indian cinema has frequently represented widows as symbols

of sacrifice, suffering, or moral virtue, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward widowhood. While these portrayals draw attention to social injustice, they often reduce widows to symbolic figures rather than exploring their inner emotional worlds. As a result, grief is commonly externalized through melodrama or resolved through social reform narratives, leaving little space for sustained engagement with women's mental health (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013).

Parallel cinema and contemporary art-house films have gradually shifted this focus by foregrounding interior emotional states and everyday experiences. Influenced by realist aesthetics, these films rely on silence, slow pacing, and minimal dialogue to convey psychological suffering. Kannada cinema, in particular, has contributed meaningfully to this shift by using cinematic restraint to explore emotional trauma in humane and reflective ways. Such approaches align with trauma theory, which emphasizes that some forms of suffering resist direct narration and are instead expressed through silence and repetition (Caruth, 1996).

### **Objectives**

- To examine how widowhood is represented as psychological trauma through silence and everyday life in selected Kannada films.
- To compare how social context influences women's emotional experiences of loss in *Ghatashraddha* and *Nathicharami*.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars in trauma studies have consistently argued that psychological trauma is often difficult to articulate through language. Rather than appearing as a coherent narrative, trauma frequently manifests through silence, repetition, emotional withdrawal, and disrupted habitual behaviour. Herman (1992) explains that traumatic experiences overwhelm ordinary systems of meaning, making verbal expression inadequate or delayed. Similarly, Caruth (1996) emphasizes that trauma is marked by its resistance to direct

representation and often returns indirectly through memory, bodily responses, and fragmented experience. These insights are particularly relevant to cinematic texts, where silence and visual repetition can communicate psychological distress more effectively than dialogue.

Affect theory in film studies provides a complementary framework by focusing on how emotions circulate through mood, atmosphere, and bodily presence rather than explicit storytelling. Scholars such as Ahmed (2004) and Massumi (2002) argue that affect operates at a pre-verbal level, shaping how viewers feel rather than what they cognitively interpret. In cinematic terms, long takes, pauses, restrained performances, and minimal dialogue create affective environments that allow the audience to sense emotional states like grief, loneliness, and anxiety. Film scholars note that such techniques are especially useful for representing interior emotional experiences that are culturally discouraged from being spoken aloud (Rutherford, 2003).

Research on widowhood and mental health further supports the relevance of these theoretical approaches. Empirical studies show that widowed women are at a higher risk of depression, anxiety, and prolonged grief, particularly in contexts where emotional support systems are weak or inconsistent (Stroebe et al., 2007). Societal expectations surrounding appropriate behaviour for widows—such as restraint, modesty, and emotional control—can intensify psychological distress by discouraging open expressions of grief (Chen et al., 2022). These findings highlight widowhood not only as a social condition but also as a significant mental health concern.

Within Indian cinema studies, scholars observe that widows have traditionally been portrayed as symbols of sacrifice, suffering, or moral virtue, often reinforcing dominant cultural norms (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013). However, regional and parallel cinema have challenged these conventions by foregrounding lived experiences of women. Films such as *Ghatashraddha* have been discussed for

exposing the ritual of excommunication; the ritual of exclusion and social silence imposed on widows, while contemporary films like *Nathicharami* have been noted for their sensitive portrayal of personal grief, desire, and emotional recovery (Raghavendra, 2016).

Together, these films underline the importance of a cinematic analysis that brings together trauma, affect, and social context. They support the present study's focus on silence and emotional restraint as meaningful cinematic strategies for representing women's psychological trauma.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

This section investigates how *Ghatashraddha* and *Nathicharami* depict widowhood as psychological trauma in silence, stillness, and ordinary routines as opposed to dramatic expression. Utilizing trauma theory and affect theory, this analysis examines how emotional suffering is lived, embodied and enacted cinematically.

#### **Ghatashraddha: Widowhood, Silence, and Societal Control**

*Ghatashraddha* puts widowhood out of reach in an inflexible social and religious structure in which private mourning is trumped by ritual responsibility. The widow's trauma is not viewed as a personal emotional trauma but as a condition that should be publicly policed. Her silence is forced rather than chosen, mirroring Herman's (1992) conceptualization of trauma through environments that prevent victims from expressing themselves, linguistically or physically. The film continually situates the widow in spaces that are meant to be places for the community—prayer practices, religious education and domestic schedules—where she represents a person in a cycle of restraint and surveillance. Long takes and little dialogue on film highlight her physical stillness and her inner emotional turbulence. These incidents imply that trauma endures not solely in memory but also through repetitive social forms that perpetuate exclusion. Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is frequently recounted by repetition rather than conscious storytelling, a fact demonstrated

by what we can see here on the ritual sequences of the movie. On an affective level, *Ghatashraddha* is about mood more than plot to indicate pain. With muted colours, measured camera movement and long silences bringing an air of emotional suffocation. The viewer must feel the load of social oppression rather than merely seeing it. Thus, does the film turn silence into a cinematic language that verbalizes psychological injury for those who cannot explain why they need to be.

### **Nathicharami: Internalised Grief and Emotional Alienation**

*Nathicharami* refocuses us not to the ritual's process of exclusion but to the interior, internalized emotional struggle. Taking place in an urban setting of the present, the film depicts an isolated widow who seems socialised but emotionally isolated. Her trauma is serene, personal and gendered with guilt, desire and uncertainty. Unlike *Ghatashraddha*, the silence here is not openly imposed but slowly internalized. The movie employs intimate domestic settings, close-up photography and extended pauses to convey conflict. Common rituals, sitting by yourself, taking the road, pausing before trying to speak become carriers of meaning. Affect theorists say that such cinematic decisions produce experience rather than words, functioning on a pre-verbal level (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 2002). The protagonist's silence is indicative of the problem of expressing mourning in a society that recognizes loss yet denies emotional expression. Trauma theory accounts for some of this uncertainty. Trauma survivors typically find it difficult to make sense of the loss of a former life, [as Herman (1992) has argued] and experience emotionally detached and withdrawn responses on their current lives. *Nathicharami* does not narrate this grief, but weeps, and we may see the psychological impact of widowhood long after the event, even in an outwardly progressive home.

### **Comparative Reading: Silence as Shared Experience**

Read together, the two movies suggest continuity in women's emotional experience of widowhood, even though there are

differences between time and place. In *Ghatashraddha*, silence is imposed from without through ritual and community influence. In *Nathicharami*, internal silence manifests in emotional conflict and lack of empathy. In this sense, silence becomes the chief way trauma is transmitted and lived, in either case. This cinematic insight is supported by research on widowhood and mental health. Research has found it to be the case that widowed women are more likely to report experiencing depression and anxiety due to a lack of consistent or available emotional support (Stroebe et al., 2007); Cultural norms about modesty and respectability deter open displays of grief and amplify anxiety (Chen et al., 2022). These findings ring very true to the emotional terrains presented in both movies. By steering clear of melodrama and concentrating on stillness, routine, and affective atmosphere, *Ghatashraddha* and *Nathicharami* draw upon images of emotional space and effect, in order to convey the feeling of women's inner lives, and letting us witness sympathetic response, instead. Silence, instead of not being absent, is a purposeful presence that represents neglect, emotional resilience, forgotten abandonment, unresolved grief and social neglect, the long-ignored social isolation and emotional silence.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Kannada cinema portrays widowhood as a psychological trauma through silence and stillness and everyday life. Through examination of *Ghatashraddha* and *Nathicharami*, it has been demonstrated that widowhood in these movies exists not only as a social pejorative and a ritual identity but as a lived emotional state marked by loss, disconnection, and lack of ongoing assistance. Even so, for a film divided by four decades and various cinematic settings, both films use silence as a significant narrative medium and emotionality to express women suffering. *Ghatashraddha* illustrates how trauma is manufactured and reinforced through the societal and religious forms which deny emotional freedom to widowed women. The silence in this film is an external imposition that acts as social

discipline, a means of community regulation that turns private mourning into a public discipline. Nathicharami, by contrast, offers a modern picture where some of these rigid constraints have been removed, yet emotional solitude remains. Here, silence becomes internalised—rooted in guilt, uncertainty and the numbness of engaging with empathy. The films together show how changes in social structure do not necessarily bring emotional freedom for widowed women. Relating trauma theory and affect theory in a non-technological way, the study emphasizes the ways that cinema can enact psychological pain that is impervious to verbal communication. The focus on length, lack of dialogue, subdued acting and focus on regular living let these films convey grief in ways that invite empathy as opposed to criticism. In this context, silence becomes a cinematic language that expresses trauma, not accounts for it. The implications are significant for film studies and humanistic mental health literature for highlighting non-visible and gendered dimensions of trauma. They also illustrate the need to recognize widowhood as a mental health condition influenced by societal and cultural forces. In the future, one could further this analysis to other regional cinemas and also consider audience reactions and how these images play a role in public attitudes towards grief care and women's social wellbeing. In conclusion, the present study demonstrates the capability of cinema as a place for recognition, compassion and moral critique of lived psychological experiences.

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