

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, RELIGIOUS SUPERIORITY AND RESISTANCE:
A FEMINIST STUDY OF *MAHARAJ* BY VIPUL MEHTA AND SNEHA
DESAI

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Abstract

The film *Maharaj* (2024), directed by Vipul Mehta and written by Sneha Desai, dramatizes a powerful confrontation between institutionalized religious authority and resistance against gendered oppression. This paper critically examines the film through the lens of feminist theory and power-resistance frameworks, focusing on how religious rituals are manipulated to justify the sexual exploitation of women under patriarchal control. Central to this narrative is the character of Karsan Das, whose efforts to expose the fraudulent spiritual leader, Jadunath Maharaj, highlight how truth, legal mechanisms, and media can become tools of resistance. The film explores the emotional and societal consequences of blind religious devotion, particularly through characters like Kishori and Leelavati, whose personal experiences embody the trauma and resilience of women silenced by faith-based institutions. Using textual analysis, this research identifies how the cinematic portrayal of "charan seva" functions as a metaphor for normalized gender-based violence and how feminist resistance emerges through speech, testimony, and social reform. By exploring the convergence of spiritual abuse, gendered power, and legal activism, this study contributes to broader feminist discourses on reclaiming agency and challenging patriarchal systems cloaked in religious legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual exploitation that hides behind the mask of religious authority is a disturbing reality in many societies, even today. While religion is often seen as a source of moral strength and community, it can also be used to justify harmful practices—especially when it overlaps with patriarchal power structures (Ahmed, 2020; Pharr, 2022). One such example is explored in the 2024 film *Maharaj*, written by Vipul Mehta and Sneha Desai. The film tells the story of Karsan, a progressive thinker and social reformer, who resists the authoritarian figure of Maharaj, a religious leader. Through Karsan's struggle, the film exposes how women are exploited under the pretext of

religious devotion and authority. The film highlights the vulnerabilities of women who are taken advantage of by religious systems, showing how resistance to this exploitation challenges not just religious power, but broader societal structures as well. The topic is particularly relevant in today's world, where some religious groups, despite claiming to offer spiritual solace, have become hotbeds of sexual abuse and exploitation, often justified by distorted interpretations of religious teachings. *Maharaj* is an important commentary on how certain religious practices, like "charan seva," can be used to justify the exploitation of women. What makes the

film so impactful is its ability to show how entire communities, often unknowingly, enable this abuse because of blind faith and deep-seated cultural norms (Sharma, 2019). It takes place in pre-independence Bombay, offering a glimpse into the social and cultural dynamics that allowed such practices to thrive and persist, supported not only by religious authority but also by the larger societal structures that kept them intact. . All over the world, there are still religious institutions facing serious allegations of sexual abuse, often protected by systems that are meant to inspire trust and spiritual guidance (Banerjee, 2023). This research looks at *Maharaj* to explore how the film addresses the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and gender-based exploitation. The film highlights the ways religious practices can be manipulated to perpetuate violence and control, especially over women. It also examines the role of resistance—embodied by Karsan—as a challenge to these systems. Despite the film’s focus on a specific historical context, it is highly relevant today, offering valuable insights into how such systems still function in many parts of the world. Existing studies on religious exploitation often discuss the abuse of power within religious institutions, particularly the ways in which religious leaders can manipulate followers for personal gain. *Maharaj* showcases this phenomenon through the practice of "charan seva," where women’s sexual exploitation is disguised as religious duty. While there is plenty of research on institutionalized religious abuse, much less attention has been given to how films like *Maharaj* reflect these issues and challenge them. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how *Maharaj* presents the exploitation of women and the resistance against it. The key research question here is how *Maharaj* critiques religious exploitation through the character of Karsan, who opposes both religious and patriarchal authority. In the film, "charan seva" represents not just sexual exploitation, but also the normalization of such practices due to blind religious devotion. The story shows how these deeply rooted power structures are hard to challenge, as they are supported by both the community and family systems. This research will explore how Karsan’s resistance helps to expose these exploitative systems

and how legal reforms play a role in challenging such entrenched power. The primary goal of this research is to critically analyze the portrayal of sexual exploitation in *Maharaj*, especially how it is disguised under the guise of religious rituals and patriarchal control. By examining the "charan seva" practice, the study will show how exploitation becomes normalized and justified as part of a larger system of social control. It will also look at Karsan’s role as a symbol of resistance and how his efforts to expose the truth about Maharaj’s abuses disrupt these power structures. Additionally, the research will focus on how blind religious devotion contributes to the continuation of exploitation, as seen through the character of Kishori, whose personal tragedy shows the destructive effects of unquestioning faith. The research will also explore how the film uses media and legal frameworks as tools for resistance. Karsan’s use of a newspaper to expose Maharaj’s exploitation, as well as the legal battles that follow, highlights the importance of constitutional power in challenging religious authority. By examining the role of legal and social reform, the study will show how *Maharaj* uses these elements to push back against patriarchal structures that uphold religious exploitation. Feminist theory and power dynamics theory will also be used to analyze the gendered exploitation of women in the film, providing insights into how patriarchal authority controls both the physical and spiritual lives of women. The hypothesis of this study is that *Maharaj* uses Karsan’s character to challenge both religious and patriarchal power, representing a broader struggle for social justice and the empowerment of women. It argues that the film shows how sexual exploitation in the name of religion can be resisted through individual action, media influence, and legal reform. By analyzing key events and character dynamics in the film, the research aims to demonstrate how *Maharaj* contributes to ongoing discussions about gender, power, and resistance in modern society. This study’s contribution is significant in how it views *Maharaj* as a cultural artifact that critically engages with social issues through a feminist perspective. By focusing on the exploitation of women and the resistance against patriarchal authority, the research provides valuable insights into

how media, especially films, can serve as tools for social critique and change. Moreover, it contributes to feminist scholarship on religion, patriarchy, and power, offering a nuanced understanding of how these forces shape women's lives and how resistance can take both personal and collective forms. Through this analysis, the research aims to shine a light on the broader societal impact of religious manipulation and how constitutional power can challenge entrenched systems of patriarchal control.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this research revolves around the sexual exploitation of women under the guise of religious superiority in the film *Maharaj*. The film depicts the ritual of "charan seva," where women are sexually exploited by Maharaj, a revered religious leader, and the exploitation is justified and normalized by the community's blind devotion to religious practices. The societal and religious structures reinforce the patriarchal control over women's bodies and lives, making it difficult for individuals like Karsan Das to expose the truth and resist the corruption within the religious system. The research problem lies in understanding the dynamics of power, gender, and religious exploitation depicted in the film, and how Karsan's resistance challenges these power structures, ultimately leading to social reform. The study also aims to shed light on the cultural and societal acceptance of such practices and the role of feminist resistance in challenging patriarchal norms.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how the film *Maharaj* portrays the sexual exploitation of women through religious superiority and patriarchal control.
2. To analyze the role of constitutional power and legal mechanisms in resisting religious exploitation, with a specific focus on Karsan Das's efforts to expose Maharaj.
3. To explore how Karsan Das challenges patriarchal and religious authority rooted in blind devotion, and assess the impact of his resistance on women's agency, particularly in the case of Kishori.

Research Questions

1. How does the film *Maharaj* depict the sexual exploitation of women under the guise of religious superiority?
2. How does the film *Maharaj* highlight the role of constitutional power in resisting religious exploitation, particularly through Karsan's efforts to expose Maharaj?
3. How does Karsan Das challenge the patriarchal and religious authority upheld by blind devotion, and what impact does this have on women like Kishori in the film?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual exploitation within religious and cultural contexts, especially where notions of superiority are deeply ingrained, has been a persistent and troubling issue globally. This exploitation is often closely tied to systems of power, patriarchal dominance, and broader social inequalities (Sosnowski, 2019). Feminist scholars have long argued that religious superiority has been historically manipulated to maintain power dynamics that justify exploitation (Bunch, 2017). In many societies, religious or spiritual leaders hold immense power, and challenging their authority can be seen as sacrilegious or even offensive (Dasgupta & Banerjee, 2021). Under the guise of divine authority, sexual abuse and exploitation have been carried out, often with the victims' voices silenced or dismissed. A striking example of this complex interplay of power, religion, and gender-based violence is found in the film *Maharaj*, directed by Vipul Mehta and Sneha Desai. The filmmakers delve deep into how religious leaders, under the mask of divine superiority, exploit vulnerable individuals, particularly women. The film reveals a compelling narrative where women not only face abuse but also resist it, using constitutional power as a tool to challenge and fight back against their abusers. This intersection of religious authority and sexual exploitation creates a potent space for feminist discussions about resistance, agency, and the fight against systemic oppression. Historically, feminist scholars have argued that religion has been one of the most powerful institutions used to reinforce patriarchal structures. Religious doctrines often shaped by male-dominated interpretations,

frequently place women in subordinate roles, curtailing their autonomy and freedom (Mohanty, 2020). In *Maharaj*, the filmmakers critique this hierarchy by placing religious institutions at the center of their exploration of women's exploitation. The story exposes how these institutions, often seen as sanctuaries, can also be sites of oppression and abuse. Research in feminist theology and religious studies has examined how women have resisted these patriarchal structures, sometimes by reinterpreting the very religious texts that oppress them (Grewal, 2019). Feminist theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have emphasized the need to reclaim religious narratives from a feminist perspective, offering interpretations that empower rather than subjugate women (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2019). In *Maharaj*, the characters' navigation of their faith while confronting their exploitation serves as a real-world application of these theological debates. The film highlights the ways in which women can, and do, use religion as a framework to both confront and resist the abuse they face. A key element in *Maharaj* is the notion of resistance through legal means, particularly through India's Constitution, which is built on ideals of justice, equality, and human rights. The Constitution has often been invoked as a tool to challenge injustice, including sexual exploitation (Suresh, 2018). While India's legal framework offers protection against sexual harassment and abuse, the reality is that these laws are not always implemented effectively (Verma, 2021). Feminist legal scholars, such as Nivedita Menon (2020), argue that constitutional power can be a vital tool in challenging religious and cultural practices that perpetuate sexual exploitation. *Maharaj* illustrates this concept, showing how the characters use the legal system to resist and fight back against the exploitation they endure. It serves as a reminder of how legal frameworks can be a powerful instrument of resistance, even when those in power seem insurmountable. The film also underscores the need for legal systems to evolve in ways that better protect women, especially in contexts where religious and patriarchal systems hold sway (Sharma, 2018). The feminist resistance portrayed in *Maharaj* can be seen as a microcosm of broader societal struggles against systemic abuse. By highlighting women's agency in

challenging oppressive systems, the film invites us to reflect on how such resistance plays out on a larger scale in society. Feminism plays a crucial role in *Maharaj*, particularly in its portrayal of the protagonist's fight against sexual exploitation. Through the feminist lens, resistance in the film is not always expressed through overt rebellion; sometimes it is about refusing to comply with exploitation, demanding accountability, and seeking justice (Butler, 2017). This subtle, yet powerful, form of resistance reflects real-life struggles of women challenging religious exploitation, as noted by feminist scholars in India (Sharma, 2020). In the film, the female characters utilize the constitutional and legal tools available to them, demonstrating the importance of institutional support for those who resist gender-based violence. The portrayal of sexual exploitation in *Maharaj* offers valuable insights into how power, religion, and gender intersect in ways that perpetuate abuse. The feminist critiques of religious institutions, combined with the resistance through constitutional power, speak to broader societal battles for justice and equality. By examining the play through a feminist perspective, we gain a deeper understanding of how legal, social, and cultural systems can either uphold or challenge exploitation. As *Maharaj* powerfully shows, constitutional power, when wielded by women, can be an essential tool in the fight against sexual exploitation within religious contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, using a combination of textual analysis and case study approaches to analyze the film *Maharaj*. The research will primarily focus on the narrative structure, character dynamics, and symbolic representations within the film. By examining key scenes, character arcs, and dialogue, this study will unpack how the film critiques religious authority and gendered exploitation.

Textual analysis will be the core method for examining how *Maharaj* constructs its narrative around the themes of sexual exploitation, religious manipulation, and resistance. The film's representation of "charan seva" and its consequences will be analyzed through a feminist lens, focusing on

how the practices and characters embody patriarchal ideologies. This method will allow for a critical reading of the film's dialogues, actions, and visual elements to understand how it represents gendered power relations. The feminist theory, combined with power dynamics theory, will be applied to examine how Karsan's resistance challenges both religious and patriarchal authority. The study will focus on how Karsan's activism, through legal and social reforms, exposes the exploitative systems at work. His use of media to highlight the truth about Maharaj's abuses will also be analyzed as an example of resistance through constitutional power, as explored in the film. The methodology will also involve a close examination of characters like Kishori, who represents the devastating consequences of blind religious devotion. Her character serves as an important site for understanding the destructive impact of patriarchal religious systems on individual lives.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in feminist theory, particularly the feminist critique of patriarchy, religion, and power dynamics. Feminist theory offers a critical lens to explore how gendered exploitation is normalized in both religious and societal structures. By examining the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and gender, feminist perspectives allow us to interrogate the ways in which women's bodies, labor, and spiritual lives are subjected to patriarchal control under the guise of religious authority. Feminist scholars, such as Judith Butler and bell hooks, have long discussed how power dynamics in society are shaped by a complex web of social, cultural, and institutional forces. These forces often work in tandem to silence women's voices, marginalize their experiences, and perpetuate gender-based violence. Butler's notion of gender performativity, for instance, helps explain how the norms surrounding femininity and religious devotion are socially constructed, allowing systems of exploitation like "charan seva" to thrive (Butler, 1990). In the case of *Maharaj*, the practice of "charan seva" is framed as a religious act, but it is a deeply entrenched system of patriarchal control disguised as spiritual service. Additionally, Michel Foucault's theories on power and surveillance will help analyze the ways in which

religious authority in *Maharaj* operates as a mechanism of control. His concept of "bio-power" and the role of societal institutions in shaping bodies and behaviors are useful to understand how the exploitation of women is sanctioned and normalized within both religious and societal contexts (Foucault, 1978). This research will also incorporate postcolonial feminist theory to analyze how colonial legacies have shaped the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and exploitation in pre-independence Bombay, where the film is set. By utilizing these feminist and power dynamics theories, this study will analyze how *Maharaj* critiques the intersectional oppression of women and challenges patriarchal structures through the character of Karsan. Karsan's resistance becomes a symbol of agency against both religious exploitation and patriarchal control, offering a critique of the historical and ongoing exploitation of women in the name of religion.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The 2024 Netflix film *Maharaj*, directed by Vipul Mehta and written by Sneha Desai, offers a powerful and layered depiction of gendered religious exploitation and reform. The story is based on real events from 19th-century India and follows Karsandas Mulji, a reformist who exposes the exploitative practices of a revered religious figure. Through a feminist lens and using power-resistance theory, this analysis examines the portrayal of sexual exploitation, the mechanisms of patriarchal religious authority, and the means of resistance, particularly through the voice and actions of Karsan and women like Kishori and Leelavati.

Sexual Exploitation and Patriarchal Power in the Guise of Religion

One of the most shocking elements of *Maharaj* is its raw depiction of how women are exploited under the name of religious service. The practice of "divine service" – a euphemism for coerced sexual relations with the Maharaj – is disguised as a sacred ritual. The character Kishori, initially proud to have been chosen for this "honour," says to her aunt, "I feel like I've attained salvation. Tell Mother to cook some *laapsi* to celebrate" (*Maharaj*, 2024). Her excitement shows how internalized this oppressive structure is; she is not

just submissive but has been conditioned to celebrate her subjugation. This is a key concept in feminist theory – the internalization of patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) observed that women are often not born into submission but become conditioned into it through cultural and religious structures. Kishori's joy at her selection reflects this conditioning. She sees herself as participating in a sacred tradition, not recognizing it as an act of sexual violence. The Maharaj, JJ, frames sexual access to women as part of religious devotion. He explains: *"There are three kinds of service... spiritual, material, and physical. Surrendering your body is physical service"* (Maharaj, 2024). This redefinition of spirituality to suit male desire is an abuse of both religious authority and human dignity. As power theorist Michel Foucault (1978) explains, power is not only repressive but productive – it creates discourses, norms, and 'truths' that people internalize. JJ's power lies not in physical force but in his ability to rewrite sacred texts and manipulate faith to justify exploitation. The transactional nature of the service is made more grotesque when a spectator says: *"May we witness the divine service?... It'll cost 11 rupees"* (Maharaj, 2024). Religion here is monetized and sexualized, reducing female devotees to commodities for ritual and spectacle. Feminist theorist Catharine MacKinnon (1989) would argue that this is not simply religious misconduct but the institutionalization of sexual violence, where women's bodies are treated as a public resource under patriarchal law masked as divine will. Karsan, who witnesses Kishori's participation in this act, is visibly devastated: *"You were not helpless. You were following tradition, not religion"* (Maharaj, 2024).

His distinction is crucial. Karsan, unlike many male reformers who speak for women, attempts to awaken women to their own agency. Yet, even he falls into patriarchal framing when he refers to Kishori's body as *"something that was Karsan's by right,"* after she surrenders to JJ. This language underscores the deeply entrenched patriarchal worldview, even in those who oppose its religious version. The consequences of this blind devotion are emotionally shattering. Kishori ultimately ends her life, leaving behind a note: *"I couldn't become your wife but make me the motive for your battle"* (Maharaj, 2024). Her words

move Karsan to escalate his resistance, transforming personal grief into political action.

Resistance through Constitutional Power and Collective Voice

While the exploitation is framed through religious tradition, resistance emerges through the tools of reason, journalism, and eventually, the legal system. Karsan's creation of the newspaper *Satya Prakash* becomes a direct threat to JJ's unchecked power. He says, *"You can burn newspapers, but not the truth"* (Maharaj, 2024). This quote encapsulates the power of the press as a form of modern resistance. In contrast to the silent walls of the Haveli, *Satya Prakash* is loud, public, and secular – a true threat to spiritual tyranny. The press office being set on fire is symbolic of the system's retaliation. But Karsan's resolve hardens. Inspired by Foucault's idea that *"where there is power, there is resistance,"* Karsan writes, distributes, and eventually brings the matter to court. The courtroom becomes a new battleground where faith is no longer above scrutiny. This shift from religious to constitutional authority is significant. JJ warns that questioning him will *"cause riots,"* threatening consequences to Karsan's safety and communal peace. But this is another form of coercive power – silencing dissent through fear of disruption. Foucault's notion of biopower – managing populations through norms and fear – is visible here. Leelavati's testimony becomes the most powerful form of resistance. A survivor of JJ's "divine service," she confronts him publicly and fearlessly: *"I considered you a god. You turned out to be just an ordinary man – a dirty liar"* (Maharaj, 2024). In feminist terms, this is reclamation of voice. Bell hooks (1989) emphasize the importance of speaking out as an act of resistance, especially for those historically silenced. Leelavati's voice, and those of the other women who come forward during the trial, turn JJ's courtroom advantage into his downfall. Karsan's use of rational argumentation in court is another facet of resistance. He states: *"Our god walks by our side. One doesn't need a bridge to reach him. No JJ, religious service, or ritual can guarantee one a ticket to heaven. It is only one's deeds that will take one there"* (Maharaj, 2024). Here, he reframes religion not as ritual or hierarchy but as ethics and

justice. This marks a shift from sacred submission to moral clarity. The verdict – the court declaring Karsan innocent and suggesting criminal proceedings against JJ – is a moment of symbolic and literal justice. It also reinforces what feminist legal theorists like MacKinnon argue: that patriarchy can be challenged when legal institutions center women’s lived experiences and treat their voices as valid testimony.

Toward Justice: Feminist and Power Theories in Harmony

Maharaj is not only a film about an individual’s fight against religious abuse but a broader commentary on how patriarchal power sustains itself and how it can be dismantled. It shows that power doesn’t always need brute force – it works through consent, ritual, language, and internalization. Feminist theory explains the gendered dynamics of this control. Women are expected to offer their bodies as devotion, to find honour in silence, and to remain loyal to a faith that exploits them. Power-resistance theory shows how that can be interrupted – through speech, print, protest, and legal means. Perhaps most importantly, the film doesn’t idealize Karsan as a flawless savior. He loses relationships, struggles with his own beliefs, and makes mistakes. But he remains committed. He says, “*The battlefield may change, but my battle will not*” (*Maharaj*, 2024). His transformation from a reformist writer to a social activist illustrates how personal conviction can lead to structural change – a key tenet of resistance theory. The ending doesn’t claim a utopia. But it does offer a beginning – a reminder that systemic change starts with voice, resistance, and accountability. Women like Kishori and Leelavati don’t survive the film unscathed, but their suffering and defiance ignite the spark that eventually topples JJ’s religious empire. In the end, *Maharaj* serves as a bold cinematic case study of how deeply entrenched power can be exposed and undone. Using feminist analysis and resistance frameworks, it shows that faith without accountability becomes tyranny – and that justice, even when delayed, is worth fighting for.

Conclusion

Maharaj offers a searing critique of how patriarchal religious systems manipulate faith to exert control

over women’s bodies and lives. The ritual of “charan seva,” shown as a form of spiritual service, reveals itself to be a deeply patriarchal and exploitative act, normalized under the guise of religious piety. Feminist theory allows us to unpack the layers of oppression, showing how cultural rituals and social norms reinforce gendered violence. At the same time, the film’s portrayal of resistance—through Karsan’s journalism, courtroom trials, and especially the voices of women survivors—demonstrates the potential for disruption and accountability. By applying power-resistance theory, the study highlights how oppressive institutions often rely not just on authority but also on fear, social conditioning, and silence. Yet, where there is power, there is always resistance. Characters like Kishori and Leelavati challenge this silence with truth, and Karsan channels his grief and rage into tangible social reform. His newspaper, *Satya Prakash*, and the courtroom proceedings become instruments of transformation, underscoring how media and law can reclaim truth from spiritual tyranny. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is not simply that religious authority can be corrupt, but that its intersection with patriarchy enables deep systemic violence. *Maharaj* pushes us to reconsider how sacred traditions are often weaponized and how faith, without critical inquiry, can turn into complicity. Through a feminist lens, the film emerges as both a cultural critique and a call to action—urging society to center the voices of the marginalized, challenge inherited systems of belief, and advocate for justice rooted in equality and truth.

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