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"Shaadi License Nahin Hai": *Chiraiya* and the Anatomy of Conjugal Coercion

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Abstract: This article offers a feminist literary and cultural analysis of *Chiraiya* (2026), a six-episode Hindi-language web series directed by Shashant Shah and written by Divy Nidhi Sharma. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of feminist critics, the article argues that *Chiraiya* constitutes a sustained critique of the structural conditions that make marital rape possible, invisible, and legally unpunishable in contemporary India. The series interrogates the legal architecture of impunity, the camouflaging function of educated patriarchy, the genealogy of conjugal entitlement, the dynamics of internalised patriarchy, and the political possibilities of female solidarity. The article situates *Chiraiya* within the broader tradition of feminist cultural production, contending that its most significant achievement is its insistence on naming conjugal sexual violence without euphemism, and on locating feminist resistance where the law will not go.

Keywords: *marital rape, feminist theory, patriarchy, female solidarity, bodily autonomy, postcolonial feminism*

Introduction: Against the Grammar of Ownership

In March 2026, a six-episode Hindi-language web series quietly exploded one of the most incessant myths ingrained in Indian domestic life: that the institution of marriage bestows upon a husband immutable, unequivocal dominion over his wife's body. *Chiraiya* — the word which means "sparrow" in Hindi — arrived on JioHotstar carrying a jingle as brusque and as revolutionary as any feminist manifesto: *Shaadi License Nahi Hai* ("Marriage is not a License"). Directed by Shashant Shah and written by Divy Nidhi Sharma, the series does not simply gesticulate toward the theme of marital rape; it lodges itself inside it, declining to look away. Set in a tightly-knit, apparently liberal joint family in Lucknow, *Chiraiya* builds an intense inspection of how marital sexual violence is not the anomaly of a egregious individual but the expectable product of a patriarchal ecosystem — one controlled over by a man of unimpeachable cultural refinement, who cites verses about women's sovereignty even as his household imposes their enslavement.

The series arrives at a precise and crucial political juncture. Notwithstanding unrelenting backing from women's rights organisations and at least two noteworthy judicial intercessions, India continues to absolve husbands from rape prosecution, upholding a lawful silence that is not unintentional but ideological. *Chiraiya* takes this silence as its focus, and its intent is to make that silence perceptible — to label, in the domestic Hindi of middle-class Lucknow, what the Indian Penal Code still declines to name.

Feminist critics from Susan Brownmiller onward have contended that the question of rape, especially marital rape, is inseverable from the question of whose body the law recognises as sanctified and whose it treats as accessory to the rights of men. *Chiraiya* dramatises this argument not in the abstract but in the granular particulars of family life: the wedding night, the breakfast table, the shared kitchen, the consulted lawyer, the silenced daughter-in-law. It is a text that appeals to be read in conversation with the feminist critical tradition it so scrupulously, if sometimes erratically, occupies.

Read through the lens of feminist critical theory, *Chiraiya* elucidates four interlocking concerns: the structural invisibility of marital rape within Indian legal and social architecture; the seductive peril of the "educated patriarch," whose liberalism operates as a smokescreen for deep-seated gender violence; the pedigree of conjugal entitlement and its transmission through family pedagogy; and the metamorphic supremacy of female solidarity as the only sustainable mechanism of defiance in a system that affords women no legal alternative. Taken together, these concerns design a text that is, at its best, as incisive and as politically necessary as anything that has appeared on Indian screens in recent years.

The Law's Silence: Marital Rape and the Architecture of Impunity

To comprehend the world *Chiraiya* occupies, one must commence with what Indian law declines to say. Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, now partially succeeded by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, describes rape but conveys a clear-cut exception: sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, on condition that she is not under eighteen years of age, is not rape. This exception — rooted in the colonial-era doctrine enunciated by Sir Matthew Hale in the seventeenth century that a wife by the act of marriage gives binding consent to her husband — continues to hold in Indian statutory law, rendering marital rape literally unnameable as a crime within the criminal justice system.

Chiraiya makes this legal void viscerally concrete. When Kamlesh (Divya Dutta) and Pooja (Prasanna Bisht) eventually seek legal remedy for what Arun (Siddharth Shaw) has done to Pooja, they are informed that the law allows them no direct avenue. The series does not dramatise this as a moment of bureaucratic inconvenience. It is the abyss at the centre of the narrative, and the series is careful to warrant that its audience understands this abyss not as an accident of legal backwardness but as the outcome of a specific ideology: the ideology that a wife's body belongs, in some meaningful sense, to her husband.

Catharine MacKinnon, in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989), argues with merciless rigour that the law of rape has historically encoded and enforced male sexual access rather than protected female bodily integrity. "Legal rules defining rape," she writes, "are implicated in the same power dynamics they purport to prohibit. The exemption of husbands from rape prosecution reveals that what is being protected is not women's sexuality but men's access to it" (MacKinnon 174). MacKinnon's anatomy of rape law applies with uncomfortable precision to the Indian context that *Chiraiya* inhabits. The exemption clause is not a legislative oversight; it is a statement of ideology — a formal declaration that a wife's body is not fully her own.

Susan Brownmiller's foundational argument in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) — that rape functions as "a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (Brownmiller 15) — takes on a specifically domestic dimension here. *Chiraiya* maintains that the law's silence does not merely fail to punish marital rape; it actively enables and normalises it, by teaching husbands that their access to their wives' bodies is juridically guaranteed. The series' promotional tagline — 'marriage is not a licence; consent does not expire at the mandap' — functions as a direct counter-inscription to this legal logic.

Reviewer Sana Farzeen of *India Today* observed that the show "does not claim to have all the answers. Instead, it leaves you with questions — difficult, uncomfortable, necessary questions. Because sometimes, the first step towards change is not action, but acknowledgement" (Farzeen). It is

exactly this posture — of undaunted acknowledgement in the face of institutional silence — that states the series' political character.

The Suhaagrat as Scene of the Crime: Naming the Violence

The narrative's provoking violence is placed with measured, disturbing precision. On her *Suhaagrat* — the wedding night, her *mehendi* still fresh on her hands — Pooja is forced into sex by Arun despite her repeated refusals. *Chiraiya* does not aestheticise this violation. There is no score swelling to signal catharsis, no melodramatic camera work reaching for the operatic. Instead, the series traces the aftermath: trembling hands, the instinctive flinching at his touch in public, the silence that closes around the new bride like a shroud. The violation is presented as an event whose consequences are ordinary and cumulative — precisely because, in this household and in this legal system, it is treated as no event at all.

Outlook India's reviews noted that the series "presents the trauma in a restrained, almost gentle way, which somehow makes it hit harder. You feel the weight of her silence, her isolation, and the slow suffocation that follows". This formal restraint is itself a political choice: *Chiraiya* rejects the voyeuristic logic that so often rules screen representations of sexual violence, in which the camera's gaze imitates the violator's. Instead, it focuses on the internal landscape of the survivor, on the ways in which trauma resides in the body long after the invasion has ended.

Vinamra Mathur of *Firstpost* noted with precision: "In most of the Hindi movies that we have seen, the wedding room represents intimacy, to celebrate what we call Suhaagrat. In *Chiraiya*, it's depicted as a room for horror and loneliness" (Mathur). This inversion of one of Indian popular culture's most romanticised spaces is the series' first and most powerful political act. The *suhaagrat* — a cultural institution that conflates a woman's sexual initiation within marriage with celebration — is here stripped to its coercive substrate. What has been sentimentalised by decades of Hindi cinema is reestablished to what it has always also been adept of being: a site of assault.

This defamiliarisation of the sacred-domestic is a characteristic move of feminist literary and cultural critique. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born* (1976), argued that the institutions through which women's lives are organised — marriage, motherhood, domesticity — are concurrently sites of genuine feeling and instruments of systemic oppression, and that the task of feminist analysis is to hold both truths simultaneously without resolving the contradiction into sentiment (Rich 42). *Chiraiya* takes this instruction seriously: it does not permit the *suhaagrat* to be only a horror, nor does it permit the marriage to be only a trap. The emotional texture of the series is more complex than polemic, and that complexity is precisely what gives its critique its force.

The Velvet Glove: Sukumar Bhramar and the Educated Patriarch

Of all the critical contributions *Chiraiya* makes to feminist discourse around domestic violence, its most formally audacious may be its characterisation of Sukumar Bhramar, the family patriarch played by Sanjay Mishra. Bhramar is definitely not the brute of social melodrama. He is a celebrated poet and scholar — a man who quotes verses about women's freedom, who reprimands Kamlesh for wanting a son instead of a daughter, who presents to the world the face of a reformist, cultivated elder. He is, in the series' own devastating logic, the most dangerous kind of patriarch precisely because he is the least visible as one.

BH Harsh of *Cinema Express* captured this with acute critical precision, writing that the series "tells us to be cautious of those animals who thrive in broad society under the endearing allure of poetry" (Harsh). The reviewer for *The Hollywood Reporter India* similarly observed that *Chiraiya* presents in Bhramar "a liberal mind undone by a conservative body" — a man whose intellectual commitments and ideological reflexes are in radical dissonance, and who is entirely oblivious of the dissonance (Hollywood Reporter India).

Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), established that patriarchal power operates not only through brute force but through culture, ideology, and sentiment — that it is the structures of feeling, the rituals of "respectable" domestic life, that most effectively maintain gender hierarchy: "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family," she writes, and its chief instrument is the conditioning of both men and women to accept the naturality of masculine authority (Millett 25). Bhramar is a walking incarnation of Millett's analysis. His power in the household is total, exercised not through overt coercion but through the softer tyranny of expectation, honour, and reputation.

When the carefully calibrated image of his family is exposed by Pooja's disclosure, the mask falls. For Bhramar, the real cataclysm is not what Arun did to Pooja — it is the *badnaami*, the dishonour, the threat to the family's social standing in Lucknow's cultivated circles. The poet who celebrates women's freedom in verse reveals himself, in crisis, to be the guardian of the system that forbids it in life. Rich's formulation of the family as "the primary instrument through which women are conditioned to serve, to endure, and to protect the very system that destroys them" finds its most urbane illustration in Bhramar's drawing room (Rich 42). The poetry is real; so is the cage.

This characterisation has implications that extend well beyond the series itself. The *Chiraiya* figure of Bhramar is an intervention in the reassuring cultural narrative that locates gender violence exclusively in uneducated, lower-class, rural men — a narrative that has historically exempted precisely the men with the cultural and social capital to shape public discourse from inspection. Feminist critics have long identified this as a structural problem: the men who set the terms of feminist

debate, who are lauded for their liberal positions, who are platformed as allies, can simultaneously maintain, within the privacy of household authority, the very hierarchies their public personas condemn.

The Grammar of Conjugal Ownership: Arun Kumar and Entitlement

Where Bhramar epitomizes the systemic, institutional face of patriarchy, his younger son Arun (Siddharth Shaw) characterizes its personalised expression — the man who has so thoroughly assimilated the ideology of conjugal ownership that he does not apprehend what he does to Pooja as violence at all. The *Hollywood Reporter India* singled out Shaw's portrayal as the series' most fully realised characterisation: "not a calculating villain but an entitled man-child whose warped understanding of love makes him all the more haunting" (Hollywood Reporter India). Arun does not think of himself as a rapist. He thinks of himself as a husband.

Crucially, *Chiraiya* makes the genealogy of Arun's prerogative visible. Through a series of flashbacks, we see Kamlesh herself, in her role as surrogate mother, unconsciously instilling in Arun a sense of absolute supremacy — pampering him, justifying his errors, teaching him that as the younger son of an honoured household, he is freed from accountability. The *Bollywood Holic* review notes that this makes the series "a brave, uncomfortable cautionary tale. It reminds us that how we raise our sons directly determines the safety of our daughters-in-law" (Bollywood Holic).

bell hooks, in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004), argues that patriarchal masculinity does not arise spontaneously — it is taught, reinforced, and rewarded within families, and women are often its primary transmitters within domestic spaces: "When females teach males that patriarchal thinking and behavior are natural and normal, we collude in the production of the very violence that victimizes us" (hooks 17). *Chiraiya* dramatises this argument with forensic exactitude. Arun's sense that his wife's body is his entitlement is not simply his individual pathology; it is the culmination of a household pedagogy in which every authority figure told him, implicitly, that he was owed.

This genealogical framing is one of *Chiraiya*'s most significant formal choices. By showing us where Arun's entitlement comes from — by maintaining that his violence has a history, and that its history is the history of an ordinary middle-class household — the series refuses the exculpatory logic of the monster narrative. Arun is not incomprehensible. He is produced. And the system that produced him continues, in the logic of the narrative, to protect him: from legal consequence, from social stigma, and from the gaze of his own family until it is far too late.

Internalised Patriarchy and the Slow Awakening: Kamlesh's Transformation

The emotional and intellectual backbone of *Chiraiya* is not Pooja's trauma — though Prasanna Bisht renders that ordeal with amazing fastidiousness — but Kamlesh's metamorphosis. Divya Dutta's performance is the series' most persistent and nuanced triumph, and the series is at its most urbane when it declines to sentimentalise Kamlesh's awakening into a simple arc of feminist transformation.

At the series' opening, Kamlesh is the idealised daughter-in-law: altruistic, dedicated, and unswervingly loyal to the family's honour. She dotes on Arun as a surrogate mother, defers to Bhramar as her patriarch, and has built her entire identity around the performance of perfect 'wifeliness.' She has internalised, in Patricia Hill Collins' formulation, the "controlling images" imposed on women by a patriarchal order — and made those images the architecture of her self (Collins 69). She is not a villain. She is conditioned — so completely that she has become an enforcer of the system from within.

When Pooja unburdens to her, Kamlesh's first response is denial, then blame. She urges Pooja to adjust, to be silent, and to protect the family's reputation. The *Outlook India* review observes: "Every action of hers is questioned. Every resistance is labelled as disobedience. And Kamlesh, at least initially, becomes a part of that machinery" (Jhunjhunwala). She is not a figure of female solidarity — not yet. She is the mechanism by which the institution polices itself from within, the woman who has endured by becoming, in Spivak's resonant formulation, a subject whose speech reproduces the discourse of her own subordination (Spivak 295).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern — the gendered subject whose speech is structurally prevented from being heard — applies here with a recursive irony: Kamlesh's position recalls what Simone de Beauvoir identified as the "immutable feminine" — the woman who internalises the conditions of her subordination so completely that she becomes the custodian of patriarchy itself (de Beauvoir xlvii). Yet her condition may also be read through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, wherein gender operates not as an essence but as a repeated social script sedimented through ritualised acts of obedience, silence, and domestic conformity (Butler 191). Kamlesh performs the role of the "ideal woman" with such compulsive fidelity that patriarchy no longer appears external to her; it becomes psychically embodied. In this sense, her complicity is not freedom but what bell hooks calls the tragic consequence of "patriarchal thinking," a structure that teaches women to reproduce the very violences that diminish them (hooks 2). Her eventual transformation is therefore neither instantaneous nor redemptive in any simplistic sense. It is cellular, painful, and existential — a slow dismantling of inherited emotional architectures, an agonising unlearning of everything she has been conditioned to recognise as love, duty, and virtue.

As the *Bollywood Holic* review captures it: "She realizes that the 'respect' she earned was actually just a reward for her silence" (Bollywood Holic). This is the insight that breaks the seal of Kamlesh's complicity — the realisation that what she mistook for dignity was compliance, and that the honour she has spent her life protecting is not worth the price Pooja is paying for it.

The Sparrows Fly Together: Female Solidarity as Counter-Politics

Given that Indian law gives Pooja no direct legal cure, *Chiraiya* finds its politics of resistance in the space that patriarchy most fears and most systematically works to prevent: female solidarity. The series' emotional and narrative climax is not a courtroom scene but something quieter and more deep-seated — the moment when Kamlesh chooses Pooja over the family she has spent her life protecting; when she looks at her sister-in-law and sees, for the first time, not a peril to household order but a woman in pain who has been failed by every institution that should have sheltered her.

Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), theorises communities of women as "safe spaces" that generate "alternative ways of knowing" within oppressive systems — spaces where women can articulate experiences that the dominant order refuses to recognise, and where collective knowledge becomes the foundation for collective action (Collins 98). *Chiraiya* dramatises exactly such a space forming, episode by episode, between Kamlesh and Pooja, and ultimately encompassing the other women of the household.

Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider* (1984), asserts that women's survival depends on the willingness to "make common cause with other women" across difference, to refuse the fragmentation that patriarchal structures impose by pitting women against one another (Lorde 112). *Chiraiya* stages exactly this refusal: Kamlesh and Pooja do not originally speak the same language of grievance; they occupy different positions within the household hierarchy; and yet what they build between them — gradually, excruciatingly, across episodes of misunderstanding and betrayal and return — is something the series recognizes as the only court of appeal possible for them.

The series' ending — in which the women of the family walk away owning their truths — refuses the approvals of legal vindication specifically because those approvals are not available. Instead, the verdict is relational: these women have named the crime between themselves, witnessed each other, and declined to return to the silence that preserved it. In a legal landscape that will not hear them, they bear witness for each other. This, the series suggests, is not a negotiation or a succor; it is where feminist politics must live when institutions will not act.

The Body as Text: Pooja's Act of Extremity

Elizabeth Grosz, in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), argues that bodies are not biological neutralities but surfaces of social inscription — that power writes itself upon the flesh and that resistance, too, can be inscribed corporally: "The body is neither simply natural nor merely cultural but a threshold, a limit, the site of an exchange between the inside and the outside, the self and the world, the biological and the social" (Grosz 141). Perhaps the most gut-wrenching sequence in the entire series, Chiraiya utilizes this insight to deliver a quietly devastating experience.

Unable to raise legal protection, unable to count on on family loyalty, unable to access any institutional apparatus of recompense, Pooja harms herself to avoid another battering, and, in the series' climactic act of corporeal protest, takes the very extreme and irreversible action against her own body — a gesture of desperate self-sovereignty: if the law will not protect this body, she will render it unavailable by force. The act is excruciatingly disturbing, and the series presents it without sensationalism — as the logical terminus of a chain of failures: the failure of law, the failure of family, the failure of the institutions that should have named and prohibited what Arun was doing.

Grosz's formulation of the body as the site where social power is both enforced and challenged finds its most literal dramatisation here. Pooja engraves her refusal directly on her body — the only text she fully controls, the only territory in which, however viciously and at whatever cost, she retains decisive jurisdiction. The act is not displayed as heroism; it is presented as the outcome of a system that has left her nowhere else to go. It is, in this sense, the series' most damning indictment: not of Arun, who is the instrument of violence, but of the legal and social architecture that made his violence conceivable, continual, and unanswerable.

This sequence has attracted both critical admiration and discomfort. It is, perhaps, the point at which *Chiraiya* most fully surpasses the register of the social-issue drama and enters the territory of genuine tragedy — the presentation of a suffering that is at once individual and systemic, personal and political, and for which the narrative offers no redeeming decision because the real world offers none.

Formal Accomplishments and Limitations

The critical consensus around *Chiraiya* has been broadly affirmative and occasionally uneasy, with reviewers noting both its formal strengths and its moments of didactic excess. The series occasionally slips into the register of the public-service announcement — a tendency that is understandable given the severity of its subject and the advocacy impulse that animates it, but that can flatten the dramatic texture that is, at its best, the series' most effective instrument. The pacing across six episodes is not always consistent, and certain expository sequences work against the emotional intelligence that characterises the finest scenes.

These are legitimate formal objections. They do not, however, diminish the scale of what *Chiraiya* attempts and, in its best sequences, achieves. The performances — particularly Divya Dutta as Kamlesh and Sanjay Mishra as Bhramar — carry a weight of unspoken interior life that the script does not always earn but that the actors supply from their own reserves. The cinematographic decision to render Pooja's interiority through close attention to the body — to the surfaces of skin, the mechanics of touch, the language of avoidance and flinching — is consistently more stirring than the dialogue.

The Hdmovies reviewer noted that Bhramar "smiles warmly at family functions yet tightens his jaw when challenged, embodying the quiet violence of 'respectable' patriarchy" (Hdmovies Review). This is the kind of observational exactness that the series sustains at its best — the ability to locate ideology in gesture, in tone, in the micro-politics of whose discomfort is attended to and whose is explained away.

What the Law Will Not Say

In the closing episodes of *Chiraiya*, the sparrow of the title acquires its full symbolic resonance. The *chiraiya* — small, domestic, unregarded — has always been a figure for the contained and the constrained. In Shashant Shah's series, the sparrows refuse, at last, to be caged alone. The refusal is costly, partial, and without the consolation of legal vindication. But it is real, and it is chosen, and in the world the series constructs, that is the most radical thing imaginable.

What *Chiraiya* achieves, at its best, is the articulation of a feminist counter-discourse within the most popular and accessible of contemporary media forms. It takes the theoretical insights of MacKinnon, Millett, hooks, Rich, Collins, Grosz, and Spivak — insights developed in the academy and articulated in the specialised vocabulary of feminist scholarship — and translates them into the grammar of domestic drama: into wedding nights and breakfast arguments and lawyers' offices and family WhatsApp groups. It does this imperfectly, unevenly, and sometimes with more earnestness than elegance. But it does it.

MacKinnon argued that the struggle against rape is, at its core, a struggle against an ideology of male ownership — one that the law has historically encoded and enforced, and that can only be dismantled when women's experience of sexual violation is recognised as a juridical and political fact (MacKinnon 174). *Chiraiya* is a six-episode act of counter-inscription against that ideology. By placing the wedding night — that most sacrosanct of Indian domestic rituals — in the register of horror, and by insisting that the horror is not exceptional but structural; by presenting the educated, poetry-quoting patriarch as the system's most effective agent; by showing the transmission of entitlement through a mother's indulgence; and by locating the only available resistance in the solidarity of women who

should have been pitted against each other, the series makes a contribution to Indian feminist cultural discourse that is greater than the sum of its formal parts.

Lorde wrote that "it is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences" (Lorde 122). *Chiraiya*, in its best moments, is a drama about exactly this: about women learning to recognise one another across the differences that patriarchy has imposed, and about what becomes possible when that recognition occurs. The law, it insists, will not save them. But they might, if they can see each other clearly enough, begin to save themselves.

In a media landscape that has historically either sentimentalised or sensationalised the Indian home, *Chiraiya* occupies a more difficult and more necessary position: it takes the home seriously as a political space, a space where power is exercised and contested, where ideology is reproduced and challenged, where the most intimate forms of violence are enacted and, sometimes, survived. That it does so in a popular streaming format, in the Hindi of everyday conversation, with the production values of contemporary entertainment rather than the austerity of art cinema — this is not a compromise but a strategy. The series speaks the language of the audience it needs to reach. And what it says, in that language, is something Indian cultural production has too rarely and too quietly said: that marriage is not a license; that a wife's body is her own; and that the silence which has surrounded conjugal sexual violence for so long is not neutrality but complicity.

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