

## Pausing Stereotypes: A Neo Menopausal Rendering through Select Movies Streamed Online

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**Abstract:** Discussions of menopause are often considered taboo in India which continues to be a silent experience that happens in every menstruating woman who reaches middle age. The available narratives on menopause always stressed its biological importance and forgot its psychological and cultural aspects. Menopause is an issue that has been largely forgotten or ignored, even in films produced in India. It would not be inaccurate to say that the popular movie industry had forgotten the seriousness of menopause as an essential transition in women's life. With the advent of multiple online streaming platforms and their various episodes, the experiences of menopause are getting depicted in movies. Alankrita Srivastava's *Bombay Begums* (2021), a drama series released on Netflix and Saumitra Singh's *Painful Pride* (2019), a short film streamed on Vimeo, are selected for analysing of the representations of menopause. These selected Bollywood movies will be analysed by giving close attention to the experiences of menopause by their female protagonists. The representation of menopausal experiences is studied within the contexts of social stigmatisation and the construction of feminine ethos. The biological changes in the female body won't be focused on here in detail.

**Key Words:** Menopause, feminine ethos, self-fear, disgust, stigma

### Introduction

Menopause is generally considered the time in a woman's life when she adapts to the physical, emotional, mental, and hormonal changes associated with ceasing to have menstrual periods. Some physical and psychological changes accompany this stage, including interrupted sleep patterns, hot flashes, and stress ( Ford 1). The issues of menopause were

primarily dealt with from the biological perspective, which once ignored the aspects of cultural, social, and emotional. In his book *Feminine Forever*, Dr Robert Wilson urged that menopause can be considered a hormone deficiency syndrome to be treated or cured by giving estrogen to every woman aged forty. Through this, she could continue menstruating without possessing the ability to conceive. There was a great deal of medical literature on the descriptions of treatment and symptoms of menopause.

The experiences and symptoms related to menopause would not be the same for all women. Many of them, after menopause, feel an improvement in their physical and emotional health, that they are free from the monthly stress and pains caused by menstruation. They opined that it didn't bring any essential effects or changes in their sexual life. They didn't acknowledge menopause as a loss of feminine identity even though they have undergone severe symptoms created by the condition. But at the same time, many women have been adversely affected by the immediate change of life (Freidan 141). The significant changes after menopause make a woman feel like a man, think like their functions as a woman have been completed, or her value decreases at the beginning of menopause (Lock).

The symptoms and experience of menopause differ for each woman according to their culture. For example, in Japan, the term 'Koneki' describes menopause. It has a different meaning than the western definitions of menopause, articulating the end of a woman's life. Ko means 'regeneration or 'renewal', Nen describes 'year' or 'years', and Ki refers to 'season' or 'energy'. Unlike Western understanding, Japanese culture perceives menopause as a new beginning of life, renewal, and not a miserable condition. "Menopause in Japan is a time of renewal during mid-life years, bringing a new purpose and growth. It is not a time to mourn what has occurred in the past but a time to embrace the future possibilities" (Southin). The experiences and challenges of menopause cannot be homogenised in that way. Menopause is often described as the end of menstruation, considered a universal experience. "This definition of menopause is recent in origin and is not widely accepted, comparatively speaking. Research has shown that meanings and subjective experiences, including symptoms, associated with menopause vary cross-culturally. Menopause may not be recognised as a concept, or is not closely associated with the end of menstruation, nor is it usually considered a difficult time" (Lock).

In India, the discussion of menopause is often considered taboo. Menopause is one of the most discussed and debated topics in the west; however, it is an under-researched topic in India. There is various research on women's reproductive health and problems, but studies on

menopause are very scarce. In Indian socio-cultural and medical discourses, women who undergo menopause are often marginalised and discarded. According to studies, the beginning of menopause among Indian women is around the age of forty-five years. It primarily differs from the median age of fifty-fifty-five years in Western countries. And the significant studies on menopause found in India are established in the biomedical discourse, which has been criticised for being Eurocentric and gendered. Those narratives are based on certain women's experiences, mainly from the West, or educated, and from upper-middle-class backgrounds. The patriarchal tradition of the country silenced the women from sharing their experiences and made them feel shy and hesitant to talk about them. The experiences of menopause in India are controlled and shaped by patriarchy and class. The country is not yet free from the prejudices and stereotypes related to menstruation, where menopause is still a silent, non-existing topic. The topic is neglected or dislocated from mainstream discussions. In a parliamentary speech in 2019, the ex-union Minister for Women and Child Development, Smriti Irani, highlighted the concern that there is no menopause policy for women in India. She suggested looking into the matter by doing extensive research on the welfare of middle-aged women who struggle to tackle their problems. The minister promised this in response to the concern raised by MP Ravikumar from the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu, India, on the menopause policy. It was a welcoming move from the government to think about the menopause issues, which was a sidelined topic in the mainstream discussions of the country (Chaudhary). It is a fact that many women and their families are not aware of this particular stage in their life. During the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, many women have undergone a difficult period of menopause-related symptoms. The lockdown has immensely affected various groups of people throughout time. Middle-aged and elderly females struggled with menstrual problems, abnormal uterine bleeding, and post-menopausal bleeding (Garg 11). In India, the discussions and debates on menopause should get maximum attention to bring changes in the women who undergo this.

### **Menopause in Indian Visual Culture**

Menopause is an issue that has been largely forgotten or ignored, even in films produced in India. Compared to the western cinema, Indian movies' portrayal of menopause is persisted only in its absence. The discussions of menopause don't have a space in Indian popular culture. The worries and problems of a middle-aged woman were not an exciting topic for the movie industry, which focuses more on the heroic actions of male stars. Nowadays, people are

becoming comfortable opening up about issues related to periods and menstruation but still consider menopause a taboo. The movies have given space for middle-aged women in the leading roles recently. Even many female-centric movies have emerged in India, but none of them dared to address the issues of menopause subtly. Their primary focus was on presenting the women as shadows of their male co-stars or improving their roles by supporting them. Even after the 2000s, many movies were produced those present middle-aged women in leading roles. In films like *Aaja Nachle* (2007), *Gulab Gang* (2014), *Mom* (2017), and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), where middle-aged women are in leading roles, the references to their struggle with menopause were not addressed. In these movies, women are given decisive roles, not their authentic selves and identities. The conscious or unconscious ignorance of menopause in the films produced in India is visible through its invisibility. It shows the still taboo and the deep-rooted patriarchy reflected in the movies. "This is an awful lot of women suffering in silence, then: physically uncomfortable and feeling unsupported. As long we don't have any kind of representation of menopause, in all its glory, then will continue to be seen as a sign that a woman is somehow redundant because she can no longer reproductive"( Moore). The influence and the increasing accessibility of OTT platforms are important in bringing prominence to the subject matter. The films started to capture the transformations happening in society over a decade. It is a fact that there are no box office numbers for movies streamed in OTT. The competition for the record is less. The shift has marked a significant opportunity in the movie industry that they have started to look eagerly at several matters. The reverberating issues of menopause started to get addressed through streaming platforms recently.

*Bombay Begums* is an Indian drama web series directed by Alankrita Shrivastava and Bornila Chatterjee. The script was written by Alankrita Shrivastava, Bornila Chatterjee and Iti Agarwal. It was released on Netflix on 8 March 2021. It consists of six episodes, "Women Who Run With The Wolves" directed by Alankrita Shrivastava, "Love" directed by Alankrita Shrivastava, "The Colour Purple" by Bornila Chatterjee, "The Bell Jar" by Bornila Chatterjee, "The Golden Notebook" by Bornila Chatterjee, and "A Room Of One's Own" by Alankrita Shrivastava. It portrays the life of five women of different ages of life and how each of them struggles to achieve their desire. The series shows the character of Rani (Pooja Bhatt), a middle-aged woman and her struggles with life. She has been portrayed as a successful CEO of the bank, working hard to run the family and also coping with her internal struggles caused by menopause. Pooja Bhatt, who was forty-nine years old when the movie was released, could play her exact age in the film with all the difficulties of a woman going through menopause. It

is presented that Rani rushes into the bathroom amidst her business meetings and splashes cold water on her face. She cannot recognise what happens around her when she gets hot flashes. Rani does not know how to cope with it, and it's only the AC remote and the tap water that helps her get relief from the frequent hot flashes. Rani sweats heavily and is unmanageable so many times with the changes in her body. Rani skips major official meetings and is confined to the bathroom to get relief from it. When Fatima tells her that the symptoms of menopause will be challenging to tackle, Rani replies that she is not undergoing menopause. And adds that she still has a long time to reach that stage. Rani's responses to Fatima reassure the fear of ageing. She does not show her willingness to acknowledge her age. Even though she is a successful woman with a very educated background and social and economic privilege over her, she didn't want to be seen as an aged woman.

In a conversation with Ayesha, she has been presented as sitting on her sofa, pressing an ice bag onto her forehead. She seeks relief from her hot flashes and cannot concentrate on anything. She has been equipped to undergo all such difficulties while functioning maximum for her career and family. In a discussion with her friend Devyani, Rani seems to know that Devyani also faces the symptoms of Menopause. Devyani tells her that menopause is making everything hard for her. At that time, Rani suppresses and hides that she is also undergoing the same circumstances. Devyani, a leading banker who holds a position that is the same as Rani, acknowledges her change and identity. But Rani often ignores the realities of accepting her menopause because of fear. Although the movie does not bring menopause as its central point, it could create a discussion on the topic critically. Rani's struggles with her psychological and physiological symptoms of the condition captivated the audience's attention.

*Painful Pride* is a short film directed by Saumitra Singh and produced by Maansi, starring Pallavi Joshi and Rituraj Singh in leading roles. The short film was released in 2019 and streamed on Vimeo, an American-based OTT platform. It has won several awards at various international film festivals. The movie got attention through its subject of menopause and the positive approach it offered. The silent and invisible issues of menopause that were limited in the families have come to the representation of Indian film discourse after a long time.

The short film begins when Vidya, the middle-aged woman, does her regular Yoga while her husband asks her suggestions about his dress for his office meeting. She seems to be busy in her life and has to look after everything in the house. It is portrayed that she even has to look after the maid, Suman, who is absent-minded while working there. Through the

conversation between Amit and Vidya, one can understand that they lead a happy and successful marriage. On the same day, there is a party at the couple's house where they invite their friends and family to their home. Amit is preparing the dinner; meanwhile, Vidya, her friend, and her daughter Jia are playing cards. Jia stopped her cricket coaching because of the monthly pain accompanying her menstruation. Vidya tells Jia's mother that pain and women are synonymous and that such pains are their pride. Amit offers Vidya some red wine during their dinner, and she refuses it by clarifying that she is not in the mood for that. Amit makes humorous jokes about Vidya, saying that she has been in Durga (Indian goddess) avatar since morning, and he and Suman have to face the rude behaviour.

Vidya scolds Amit for not keeping the kitchen clean. She seems disturbed, especially after Amit works in the kitchen. After noticing the changes in her behaviour, Amit asks her about the problem. Without giving him a convincing reply, she keeps on blabbering at him. When Amit says that it is because she is getting old, all her actions appear strange to him. She admits that she does not know her problems and keeps asking him questions. Vidya questions Amit about his frequent business trips and asks about the girl named Kriti, which makes Amit more disturbed. She harshly comments about Kriti, a young employee at Amit's office and questions their relationship. But the annoyed Amit denies the question and convinces her that she is of the same age as their son Rohan. Amit stops the conversation and leaves the kitchen, where Vidya stands, disturbed and lost. It is often considered that the female body's rage and anger at the time of their menopause are considered a way of expressing their resistance to the patriarchal restrictions that surrounded the female gender roles bestowed upon them. She also anticipates that her ageing body can no longer satisfy Amit, which develops doubts about her husband's activities.

In the next scene, it is shown that Vidya cannot sleep and shares her concerns with Amit. He advises her to take one of the sleeping pills and see the doctor the following day. Without getting enough sleep, she walks around the house, drinks water and sits alone on the sofa, thinking. Then she takes the sleeping pill and tries to get some sleep. The following day, Vidya again starts scolding Suman for not closing the tap water. She behaves rudely to the gardener and the laundry boy. Vidya seems restless and impatient to finish any of her work. Meanwhile, she sees her sanitary pad in her cupboard and searches the internet about the missed period at forty-five. She learns about menopause and decides to consult her friend, a gynaecologist. She opens up about her irregular sleeping patterns, restlessness, itchiness and constant, heavy sweating. The doctor asks her about her last period and she confirms that it

happened four or five months ago. The condition has been identified as menopause and is explained. She says that it happens to all women at a particular period; some face it quickly, and for some, it is difficult. The doctor said it could last at least four or five years, and there are no medicines for the psychological stress created by menopause, unlike the physical symptoms. The doctor has effectively communicated the importance of following a healthy life, diet and exercise to cope with the pressure. She motivates Vidya to adjust to the new beginning. When Vidya starts sobbing in front of her, she convinces her by saying that all menstruating women have to face it at a particular point in time and reveals she also takes medicine.

After coming home, Vidya meets Rohan, who reached home after a long time. In between their conversation, Rohan sees Vidya's medicines for menopause and inquires about them. She scolds him for touching her bag and warns him not to repeat it. She explains to him that these are vitamin tablets required at this age. Then the movie focuses on the conversation between Rohan and Amit, where Rohan asks what's happening between his parents. Amit discloses her surprise attacks and mood swings and how difficult it is for him to tackle them. While discussing her strange behaviour, Rohan informs her about the medicines he found in her bag. He clarifies that these are the medicines prescribed for menopause and understands that it would be a distressful time for her, and Amit is the only person who can help her in this journey. Later, the film shows the intimate conversation between Vidya and Amit, where Amit asks her to talk more about her. Amit lovingly holds her hands and assures her that she is not alone in this battle. Rosetta Reitz, who wrote *Menopause: A Positive Approach*, suggested dealing with menopause positively. She says by loving this stage of life and its symptoms, a woman can do the opposite of what the traditional culture used to teach (181).

As a lesser talked or communicated issue, menopause often brings physical and psychological issues and emotional and relationship problems with partners, children, family, and friends. Vidya seems irritated by her husband's activities, which she once enjoyed. "Menopausal rage is more than a symptom of disappointment at not being fertile or conventionally attractive or socially powerful- although it may be those things., too" (Manguso)

In this short film, Vidya accepts menopause. Even though she got disturbed and irritated by the symptoms, she found out the reason. She visits the doctor immediately and takes an opinion from her. For a woman "who had broken through the feminine mystique, going beyond the biological role which used to define their lives to a fully human personhood, would

experience a completely different aging process- that menopause would simply be another milestone of life and growth they would pass through”( Friedan 496).

The importance of familial support is an essential aspect while dealing with menopause. Because of the lack of awareness programmes in visual culture, menopause often does not become an active concern in families. The experiences of how women overcome the issues of menopause is a mystery that popular literature does not reveal anything about. Women from impoverished backgrounds, especially those with lesser education, find it more laborious to understand the issue. They often find it difficult to cope with it because of the families' lack of support. But, being educated and leading an elite lifestyle, Vidya could recognise her problems immediately, and so did her family. Her son's understanding of the problems and her husband's emotional support seems like a dream for many women.

"Menstruation and menopause have always remained problematic for women in the Indian socio- cultural context" ( Tiwari and Sharma 98). Menarche, or the first menstruation celebrated in certain cultures in India, marked the girls' preparation for her procreation. But discriminatory practices often occur in some religions or cultures when a woman in her menstruation days is alienated from the rest of the family, restricted from doing the household chores and even visiting religious places. The menstruating body is considered dirty, not clean and polluted. But above all this, the female body is admired for its childbearing or reproductive capacity. The female protagonists from these selected visual narratives suffer from their self-fear and self-disgust. These heroines are going through a situation where they understand that they are ageing and no longer will be considered reproductive to society. They both experience a kind of fear when they find out that they are undergoing menopause. Even though Vidhya tries to approach her menopause positively, she is not able to come out of it, which stresses that menopause is something which constitutes the end of a woman's life. These women belong to upper-class families, are independent, educated, and earn well. But still, they fail to recognise their problem at the earliest. The importance of menopause in female reproductive ageing is excluded by the patriarchal culture for an extended period of time. The negligence and the superiority of youth dominance create the abject position of menopause.

### **The Influence of Media**

Media has a significant role in creating images of menopause. It could, of course, be justly argued that, more often than not, media generates fear of menopause which focuses more on the health concerns of menopausal women. The stereotypical image propagated by the

media is that of a woman dealing with immense psychological and physiological problems. It mostly shows the unpleasant and horrible hot flashes, headaches, sweating etc. Through such representations, middle-aged and younger women receive a fearful attitude towards their menopausal years, especially for those who delayed their childbearing plans. It reinforces the stereotypes about women and ageing by creating fear and imposing the need for hormone replacement therapies. It gradually internalises the process of othering the menopausal women in society. Apart from the stereotypical images of women with severe hot flashes and stress, it is always shown that women depend on the cooler, fan or AC to relieve their frequent sweats.

The increasing popularity of the internet allows people to get information on menopause. Most women depend on the internet to get details about forbidden subjects, including menopause and sexuality. The available information related to menopause is contextualised in medical frameworks which offer women a cure for the disease. It does not perceive menopause as a natural change in life but as a disease which makes women restless. After remembering about the missed periods, Vidya searches on google about it and comes to know about her menopause. She also came across knowledge which is rooted in its medical perspective. Without offering a natural process of female ageing, doctors and physicians always tried to medicalise the symptoms of menopause. They offered medicines for hormonal imbalances and always stood for hormone replacement therapy. The doctor explains to Vidya the obstacles created by menopause and tries to cure it by giving medicines. And also repeating the popular narratives of tackling the issues by changing the diet and exercise. All these portrayals produce and circulate the stereotypical images of women with menopause. Not only carrying the importance of medical perspectives it also establishes a general perception to consider that the experiences of menopause are the same for all women.

### **Menopause and the Feminine Ethos**

A healthy female body is described in its abilities of reproduction, where the embodiment of menopause seems to be a subjective transformation in ageing women. It can transform gender identities and subjectivity through its bodily changes. The fear of ageing and the silence are often interconnected emotions. The interconnectedness of fear and silence is given critical importance in analysing the protagonists' experiences in these selected movies. When it comes to Rani (*Bombay Begums*) and Vidya (*Painful Pride*), the experiences of their menopause are entrenched in fear and silence. By treating menopause as a social stigma, women are demeaned for their ageing identity in public. People, especially women, who

approach menopause, are immensely influenced by the fear of ageing. Menopause and fear are often intertwined. The protagonists' fear of their menopause is because they consider it a decrease in health, and their femininity is rooted in the construction of feminine ethos. Rose Sybylla emphasises the concept of feminine ethos in her essay titled 'Situating menopause within the strategies of power', published in 1997. It is a significant aspect while discussing menopause. It can be considered a category of femininity formulated in the male-dominated structures, in which midlife women's voices are silenced ( Fenercioglu 234). As a socially constructed subject, it will devalue middle-aged women for not becoming the ideal female figures expected by society. Feminine ethos perceives women by relating to their reproduction and sexuality and constructs mainstream beauty standards of looking young and beautiful. Thus women are evaluated for their sexual attractiveness and youth-constructing feminine ethos. It can also be interlinked with women's oppressive status with their experiences of menopause. It is because of femininity's social construction, which is inherently thrust upon the reproductive function. It is firmly fixed on the ideas of youth-centred sexuality, which rejects menopausal women as sexually desirable. Thus the socially constructed feminine ethos becomes heteronormative society's standardised tool to perceive women.

Rani rejects her hot flushes and sweating as the symptoms of menopause. It is perceived that she experiences the feeling of shame with her fear and silence. Being a successful banker by profession, she fears being stigmatised as an older woman. Being tagged as a woman in her menopause is often regarded as an insult in a patriarchal society. " Young women are labelled as 'menopausal', which shows that the experience of menopause does not only indicate a stereotypical image but tend to be utilized as a way of insulting women" ( Fenercioglu 144). The constant attempts of Rani to control her fluctuating emotions and physiological disturbances are part of hiding her menopause because of the social stigmatisation. Here Rani has to suppress her menopause only because of the stigma and stereotypes preventing women from discussing it openly. Menopause experiences and narratives are absent because of such suppressions and forced invisibilisation. Rani thinks sharing her experience of menopause is shameful and to avoid being treated as an aged woman, which may negatively impact her profession. The issues of ageing, and the anxiety of losing reproductive capacity, which will devalue femaleness, are often interconnected in Rani's thoughts. The social and professional pressures force her to hide her menopause.

## Conclusion

The hard experiences of menopause can be related to women belonging to specific age groups, and it is a silent topic in the cinema. Female characters, mainly played by leading actresses, were limited to playing the roles of mothers after a particular period of time. "The onscreen invisibility of the menopause is a form of denial"( Moore). It has been considered something only to be dreaded, hidden and denied or cured. The worst part of menopause seen by women is that they are reluctant to admit changes, especially the realities of bodily changes. "Social science researchers have even proposed that menopausal symptoms are more the result of sociocultural attitudes and ideologies than of biology" (Dillaway 258). The films produced in India which represent the menopause experiences also shift their focus in creating this fear and insisting on the medical perspective. The visibility of this issue is given only through the stereotypical and fearful image of menopausal women. Showing menopausal women as aggressive and suffering from continuous hot flashes are popular representations in the available films on this subject. "The invisibility of menopause is reproduced due to women's tendency to hide it, which can be considered as a rational response considering both the abject character of menopause and the social stigmatization surrounding the meanings of that experience" ( Fenercioglu 257). There is a tendency among the protagonists to hide their experiences of menopause which reinforces the stereotypes of menopause as a terrible experience.

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