



## **Erased Yet Central: Female Representation in *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi***

**Bimala Sharma, PhD**

Associate Professor of English

Balmiki Campus, Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal

Email: bimalashrma74@gmail.com

**To cite this article:** Sharma, B. (2024). Erased yet central: Female representation in *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi*. *Humanities and Social Sciences Journal*, 16(1-2), 15–23.

<https://doi.org/10.3126/hssj.v16i1-2.87397>

**Received:** January 14, 2025; **Accepted:** November 7, 2025; **Published:** December 14, 2025

---

### **Abstract**

This research paper critically investigates the representation of women primarily concentrating on the character of Batuli in the Nepali film “Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi.” Studying the film from gender perspective employing feminist film theory, the article interrogates the methods in which Batuli’s presence, actions, dialogues and eventual erasure is systematically performed which replicates wider societal attitudes towards women who challenge conventional societal norms. In spite of Batuli’s decisive role in sparking the transformation in her family, she is systematically erased from the canvas of the film, resonating the true-to-life marginalization of women’s contributions reflecting broader patriarchal structures embedded in both cinematic and societal frameworks. By positioning the film, in both Nepali cultural context and feminist film theory, this research accentuates the necessity of re-evaluating representation of women in contemporary cinema. The paper seeks to answer: how Batuli is represented in Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi and why is she simultaneously erased on screen and still central in narrative function? It employs a qualitative methodology analyzing the content of the film which is grounded on Laura Mulvey’s feminist film theory of the male gaze and visual semiotics. E. Ann Kaplan’s work on the female image in patriarchal cinema, and Stuart Hall’s concept of representation. The main focus is on dialogue, cinematography, and narrative structure to grasp the symbolic positioning of women. All this assist a critical study of how women characters are represented and function within the cinema.

**Keywords:** Female representation, gender roles, marginalization, Nepali cinema, patriarchy satisfaction, work experiences.

---

## **Introduction**

*Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi-A journey of Common Father* is a 2024 Nepali family drama directed and written by Saroj Poudel and Mahesh Dawadi. It was produced by Binod Poudel and Ramesh Chaulagain under the banner of Seven Seas Cinema. The film features Bijay Baral, Mukun Bhusal, Anjana Baraili and Prakash Saput. It offers a nuanced portrayal of caste, class, and generational struggle. Moreover, it emphasizes on the struggles of Gandharva community highlighting on the preservation art, culture, and tradition. The film also portrays love, separation, fear, and the challenges they face in accessing education and earn their living. In addition, it replicates their resilience amidst social and economic hardships. While the central narrative revolves around Purna Bahadur and his son Kamal, the film's emotional and narrative depth is significantly shaped by Batuli, a woman who dares to defy societal norms. This paper investigates how Batuli's character serves as a lens to understand the systemic erasure of women in both cinematic and societal narratives. Despite Batuli's contribution in emotional and moral transformation in her family specifically in reframing the protagonist's worldview- her contributions are neither maintained nor celebrated in the film. This narrative of marginalizing reflects the systematic invisibilization of women's efforts and agency in patriarchal societies. By positioning the cinema in the socio-cultural backdrop of Nepal and employing theories of female subjectivity, narrative authority and representation, the paper discusses for a more nuanced and equitable depiction of women in cinema. While doing so it is urgent to focus on the paradox- how women can be central to a cinema's emotional and moral framing and simultaneously being symbolically erased from the core of narration. The narration is about the tensed sprouting bond between the father figure Purna Bahadur who is a Sarangi player, middle-aged man and his son Kamal. The father is struggling to maintain his traditional way of living (playing sarangi) which is on the verge of extinction day by day. He wants his son to learn sarangi playing so that he can make his living whereas the son Kamal chooses a different way of living. Although, the whole cinema revolves around these two characters, the female character Batuli seems to be marginalized but in reality, symbolically she is the one who injects the intensity of emotion and ideological gravity in the cinema. Batuli, is from a Dalit community, she appears to be more than just a supporting character. Her calm resistance, choices and experiences function as strong counter-narrative to the male-dominated narration.

This paper studies Batuli as a supportive character or a narrative device rather as critical lens through which the systematic erasure and marginalization of women can be examined in both cinematic and social contexts. Her story, basically unfolds in the backdrop of the core father-son conflict, replicates the wider historical trend of Nepali cinema to marginalize women's voices even if they are the foundations to the core of the narrative. A critical examination of Batuli's representation and the choices she opt for in a patriarchal and caste-based oppressive society, this study aims to reveal the calm yet radical subtext of resistance weaved in her character. This contributes to much wider intense discussions about gender, representation and the politics of visibility in cinema.

## **Review of Literature**

The asymmetrical gender representation in Nepali cinema has attracted an increasing interest among the scholars with the focus on the themes as agency, resistance and marginalization. Intellectuals foreground the performative aspects of female resistance in

artistic domains, arguing that Nepali art has become a crucial site for “embodied resistance” and the assertion of female agency (Baraili, 2023; 88).

Adding to this, Dangal studies female protagonists in current Nepali drama and accentuates how they resist enforced silences through subtle but rebellious actions of defiance (2022; 41). In similar manner the dominant narrative structures in Nepali cinema often rely on “gendered silences” to marginalize women’s voices (Shrestha, 2019; 39), however, the post-conflict cinematic landscape for systematically erasing the feminine (Sapkota, 2023; 95).

Umesh Karki (2021) explores *Sarangi* from political point of view and discloses the fact about the survival of people based on music in a society marked by violence and poverty (Karki, 2021; 28). The sprouting role of women in cinema as being shackled “between tradition and transition,” replicating broader socio-cultural shifts in Nepal (Thapa, 2020; 45). The discourse of motherhood, deciphers care work as a fundamental political act in Nepali cinema, positioning maternal figures not as passive nurturers but as resilient actors of resistance (Khadka, 2023; 33). The exploration of South Asian cinema, where the memory of maternal sacrifice often becomes central to the cultural imaginary (Pokharel, 2022; 59).

The influential works on *Fire* offers a theoretical structure for comprehending queer and non-normative yearnings within South Asian visual cultures (Ghosh, 2010). The classic paper by Laura Mulvey on “visual pleasure” also persist as fundamental to feminist film criticism, specifically in deconstructing the gaze that dominates patriarchal cinema (Mulvey, 1975;6).

Intersectionality is another fundamental aspect in this knowledge. Manisha Rai (2022) questions the junctions of caste and gender, affirming that Nepali cinema often procreate marginalization under the guise of realism (Rai, 2022; 110), similarly the encounters of mythological tropes that enforce gendered obedience, urging a re-reading of cultural narratives to empower women (Lama, 2023; 73). The ethnographic perceptions into rural Nepal disclose how female agency demonstrates not only in resistance but also in everyday negotiation and survival (Sharma, 2021; 22). The public discussions about cinematic depiction are also replicated in media dialogues. The interview entitled “Purne or Batuli: Who is the Real Hero?”, attracts widespread discussions on gendered heroism and encounters the accepted centrality of male protagonists in current Nepali cinema (Chaudhary, 2024).

In sum, above mentioned works enlighten a sprouting academic and critical struggle to examine, reclaim, and restructure the images and voices of women in Nepali films and associated cultural forms.

### **Research Gap**

Although the prevailing body of literature has investigated gender roles and the representation of women in South Asian and Nepali films, there is an absence of concentrated study on *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi*, specifically in relation to its complicated treatment of women characters as both marginal and central.

### **Research questions**

This study focuses on the following questions:

- a. How Batuli is represented in *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi*?
- b. Why is she simultaneously erased on screen and still central in narrative function?

## **Research Objectives**

- a. To analyze the narrative and symbolic role of Batuli in the film.
- b. To explore how Batuli's absence constitutes a form of presence.

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the research lies in showcasing the representation of women characters in recent Nepali cinema. Specifically, as the film is analyzed from gender perspective using feminist film theory. It questions the strategies by which the main woman character's presence, actions, dialogues and finally her absence is tactfully presented. This projects wider societal attitude towards women who threaten traditional societal norms set for women which helps understand the condition of women in Nepalese society.

## **Research Methodology**

This research paper adopts a qualitative research methodology analyzing content through close frequent watching and studying of the primary text *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi*. The analysis is based on the scrutiny of its visual and narrative elements using feminist film theory and visual semiotics. Selected scenes are explored for dialogue, cinematography, and narrative structure to comprehend the symbolic positioning of women. By engaging in close textual analysis, the study examines how women are represented and positioned within the cinema.

The paper is informed by Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which criticizes how mainstream cinema often objectify women, positioning them as passive subjects for male pleasure. In addition, E. Ann Kaplan's work on the female image in patriarchal cinema, offers a critical lens to examine and evaluate how women's roles are constructed, often reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Similarly, Stuart Hall's concept of representation further support the study by emphasizing the processes through which meaning is constructed and communicated through cultural texts as films, specifically in relation to power and ideology.

In sum, these theoretical frameworks assist a critical interrogation of the film's representational strategies. They support in uncovering how female characters are represented and function within the cinema's visual and emotional economy- whether as active agent, passive recipient, symbolic figures, or marginalized presences. Specific selected scenes are analyzed not only for their surficial content rather for the underlying ideological work they perform, revealing the complicated interplay between gender, power and cinematic form.

## **Analysis**

### **Representation of Batuli in *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi***

Batuli the female character in *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi* is a paradoxical character- at the same time she is central and marginal or peripheral. She is constantly talked about but hardly visible on the screen. In comparison to the other characters present in the film she is found invisible on screen most of the time. This form of representation aligns with what E. Ann Kaplan illustrates as a distinctive strategy in patriarchal cinema: fabricating the female character more as an emotional symbol or an object of male memory rather than as a sovereign subject. She is represented on screen:

### **Through Sensory Memories**

Purne frequently recalls the small, everyday objects, events and moments with his- the comb and her hair which he always carries with him, the sound of bangles, the smell of her body, the way she used to talk, her voice usually echoes in his mind, her gaze when she used to look at him. All these sensory memories of minute details surface involuntarily on the screen, signifying how intensely she is inscribed and imprinted in his consciousness.

### **As a Figure of Silence and Suffering**

He repeatedly remembers her quiet endurance, specially at times when he is unable to identify or regard her emotional world. She is left alone with her pain and suffering when she wants to revolt against the society. Her muteness becomes louder in her absence, encountering him with his own carelessness.

### **With Regret and Guilt**

Purne's reminiscences of Batuli are fastened with repentance. It is found in the cinema that he regrets on losing her because of his behavior. He remembers moments he disregarded her aspirations and humanity, considering her more as a domestic fixture than as a companion. When she asserts that she wants to educate her son she is discarded by him. Later when Batuli leaves him, he recalls her frequently with guilt. Her absenteeism proves his past behavior with her, evoking a sense of self-approach.

### **As an anchor of the Past**

In his deserted present, Purne clings to memories of his wife as symbols of a more meaningful time. The past memories of Batuli helps him navigate present difficulties with emotional support. The frequent close ups of Purne in the dark room with the belongings of his wife link him with the past. Her absence signifies the emotional void in his current life and emphasize the calm strength she brought into their shared universe.

### **With Romanticized Yearning**

Although Purne discarded Batuli's emotional desires, in his memories, he romanticizes her- recalling her beauty, her care, and the love she presented him. He quite often recalls the way she opposed the society and got married to a person out of her caste. He remembers the way he proposed her and the way she accepted him. Despite being competent enough to win him in a Dohori Battle she agreed to lose the battle to win Purne. This idealization seems to function both as a coping mechanism and an unconscious confession of loss.

Batuli the female character is not introduced and portrayed through her own voice or presence on screen rather through Purna Bhadur's memories and the melancholic strain of the song, music, sarangi, and other Batuli's belongings. The sarangi (the musical instrument) itself is represented as a semiotic stand-in for Batuli. She is recalled and quite often her name is evoked in tandem with the music, specifically in closeup scenes where Purne plays the sarangi in solitude. This suggests that Batuli's existence is more as a mnemonic trace rather than as a living character. In one of the scenes in the cinema it is shown that Purne is playing his sarangi alone in a dimly lit room, the camera gradually zooms in his face while the background music is on. There is no dialogue only the music (sound of the strings of sarangi) and the overlapping of Batuli's name echoes whispers distantly. The setting of the scene which includes dim lit room, Purne's solitude, the stalking silence, the kind of sound that parallelly echoes in between the sound of the sarangi and the expressions on Purne's face showed through closeup all

highlight that Batuli has become more of a spectral presence- one that haunts rather than inhabits the narrative space in the cinema.

Not only this, in the introductory scenes Purne remembers how he fought the *dohori* battle with Batuli and finally was able to win her and how carries her in a *doko* and took her to his home. During the *dohori* battle the closeups of Batuli is shown more and camera focuses more on her face and body rather than other things. The scene suggests that Batuli is youthful, alluring, beautiful, and sexy. This clarifies that the cinema was more focused on exhibiting her body rather than her intelligence because it was not focusing on how she was confidently battling through her strong replies through song. This aligns with the theory of the male gaze by Laura Mulvey which explains that women are represented not as agents with their own voice or narratives but as objects that serve male desire, loss, or guilt. The characterization of is framed through the subjective collective memory of the male protagonist Purne her husband. Batuli is not seen doing rather she is remembered being. The audience never gains access to Batuli's subjectivity directly-her desires, motives, emotions, or internal universe are occluded.

### **Batuli's Simultaneous Eraser on Screen and Still Central Presence in Narrative Function**

Batuli's erasure is not accidental; it is structurally significant. She is central to Purna Bahadur and Kamal's emotional world and therefore central to the narrative drive, yet her physical absence mirrors the erasure of female agency in traditional storytelling. The camera rarely lingers on her. When she is shown, it is often in fragmented shots—hands, back of the head, or silhouette—never as a fully fleshed-out presence. This technique visually enacts her narrative marginalization.

Batuli's representation exemplifies a broader trend in cinema where women serve as emotional or symbolic anchors for male characters while being denied their own narrative agency. Through the lens of Mulvey, Kaplan, and Hall, Batuli's role in *Purna Bahadur Ko Sarangi* can be seen as a product of both patriarchal cinematic structure and cultural memory, where female figures are revered yet silenced, central yet invisible.

Her absence is not empty but ideologically loaded—it allows the male protagonist's emotional depth to be explored while keeping the woman as a silent echo. The film thus exemplifies how cinema can construct presence through absence, but also how such constructions may perpetuate gendered hierarchies.

Narrative Function is a specific well-documented pattern in cinema, in which women often serve as the emotional, symbolic, or moral core of a story as in this cinema but often are denied complete subjectivity, screen appearance/presence, or agency. This tension exhibits how cinema can depend upon women narrative while marginalizing them visually and politically. Some of the examples are illustrated below to reveal how this paradox operates:

### **Batuli's Erasure on Screen**

The wife is not provided screen time, dialogue, or even a presence for most of the portion of the cinema. The camera never grants her a presence that permits her to exist as a full human subject. She is not allowed to speak or act within the cinematic present. She is glimpsed only as a shadow in flashback, reduced to a visual cue- the hair and the comb, the dim lit room, and silence.

### **Batuli's Centrality**

Batuli is one of the striking examples of a character who is absent in cinematic presence but central to narrative structure. Her memory and symbolic presence frame Purne and Kamal's actions, dialogues, guilt, and identity. She is the unseen compass of the story. Purne's guilt, his retreat into music and son, his refusal to remarry, and his melancholia- all hinge on this absent woman Batuli. She is the ghost around whom Purne's life spirals.

This generates a spectral presence: she haunts the film without ever inhabiting it. Her non-presence becomes more significant than any screen time would.

Purne is haunted by the memory of his wife whose absence drives much of the narrative. She is never introduced properly. She does not speak. She does not appear in the later scenes which was expected. Yet it is her absence-her silence, her erasure which fabricate the protagonist's emotional world. Despite her rare presence on screen, her absence becomes a narrative engine- she is the main reason of education of their son Kamal and his career building. She is used as an introductory note to the main character Kamal and later she becomes absent in the whole film. This demonstrates how women are often employed as ghostly anchors for male characters development while being denied representational depth.

### **Visual and Representational Erasure**

In the cinema, the audience is led to sense a gap in Purna Bahadur's life as he is shown with his small son, but this gap is not immediately named. The wife does not appear in the household scenes where her presence is expected. There are no shared conversations, no intimate scenes. Even in flashback sequences, she is reduced to a quiet, almost faceless figure, sometimes seen walking, sometimes performing chores- but never looking directly into the camera and never speaking to the audience.

The visual withholding is very profound. The camera's refusal to fully represent her signals, her erasure: she is denied subjectivity, denies the right to exist on her own terms. She is not allowed to express her views, not even shown what happened to her she elopes from the screen. The narrative withholds her life and takes her absence for granted. This erasure replicates the social conditions in which women's lives especially those of rural, working-class wives-are normally unrecorded, both in real life and in art as well. Batuli's cinematic silence parallels the silence by patriarchy in everyday life.

### **Narrative Centrality and Emotional Function**

In spite of being visually erased, Batuli holds immense narrative power. The viewer gradually learns that she has left the family behind and eloped. Her absence frames Purne and Kamal's identity, behavior and emotional background. She is in this sense, the moral compass of the film. Although Batuli never accused him, never spoke a word, only once appeared in a scene of confrontation, her non-presence becomes the source of Damber's internal emotional turmoil. His decision to immerse himself in playing the sarangi and upbringing his son is a form of penance-a musical mourning for the woman he lost, for the silence he helped create. Her disappearance is not simply a background tragedy. It reconfigures the entire meaning of the cinema. The sarangi becomes not a musical instrument only rather a medium through which Purne expresses his grief, regret, and a desire for redemption and it also becomes a medium of his earning. Every note he plays is haunted by her memory. She does not live in the cinema, but she lives through the cinema-through his pain, the silence, the music, her belongings and her flash backs.

### **Haunted Narrative: Absence as Presence**

In the cinema, Batuli operates like a ghost, but not in a supernatural sense. She is a structuring absence- a missing presence whose impact is greater than most characters who appear on the screen. The narrative constantly circles around her without ever letting her speak or act. She is the story's emotional axis, yet she remains beyond reach. This ghostliness is highlighted by the cinema's aesthetics through the quiet tones, the empty spaces in the frame, and the repetitive resonances of the sarangi- all induce the sense of somebody absent. Batuli's life is not displayed, instead her absence is celebrated in the very mood of the cinema.

### **Cinematic Strategy or Social Commentary**

The motif of cinema in *Erasing Batuli* visually and retaining her narratively can be studied from two perspectives:

As a cinematic strategy: The cinema denies her presence calculatingly, turning her into a haunting force. This permits the concentration to retain on the one hand on Purne's guilt and on the other on the transformation in the lives of Purne and Kamal, while still recognizing that something-and someone-irreplaceable is lost.

As social commentary: The cinema criticizes the technique women are often reduced to waiting figures, silent victims, objects, or memories. They tolerate the prices of neglect and abandonment but are refused to have voice and space in the cinema as well as in society. Batuli turns out to be an authoritative representation of this erasure.

In a flashback scene where Batuli and Purna Bahdur meet in privacy near the river, the camera circumvents complete frontal shots of Batuli. She is always framed either from behind or in partial shadow, signifying both secrecy and a type of systematic invisibilization. Her dialogue is marginal, whereas Purna Bahadur asserts about his dreams, ambitions and sorrow-positioning her directly in the realm of narrative function instead of the character development.

This kind of use of cinematic language replicates what Stuart Hall argues about representation: meaning is not merely communicated but fabricated through codes, symbols and absences. Batuli's on screen visual absence or minimal screen presence fabricates her as a symbol instead of an individual. She replicates lost love, nostalgia, and the irretrievable past. In this way her absence turns into a profound presence- she exists in the film through music, memory, and emotional resonance.

Additionally, Batuli's disappearance or absence marks a significant turning point in the cinema's narrative structure. Her absence from the life of Purna Bahadur propels his descent into solitude, providing the cinema its emotional arc. Consequently, her narrative centrality is in sharp contrast with her representational erasure.

### **Conclusion**

Batuli is never really visible, never really heard, still she defines the whole emotional arc of the protagonist. She is simultaneously erased on cinematic screen and present centrally in function because the cinema employs her absence to reveal the psychological and moral significances of abandonment. Her muteness is not barren- it is overloaded with meaning. In doing so, cinema pushes us to encounter an alarming truth: that women's stories often persist untold, even when they are at the very core of the story men articulate about themselves. The dominant female figure in the cinema is visually elusive- often appearing in fragments or through flashbacks and objects like sarangi, hair and comb. Her voice, although scarcely heard,



echoes through the Purna Bhadur's musical journey. The sarangi turns to be a metaphor for the lost love, emotional trauma and unspoken desires and a medium of earning his living. In spite of marginal screen space or presence, the female character is the linchpin of the protagonist's motivations. Scenes which depict flashbacks, dream sequences and musical interludes place her at the emotional core, exhibiting how her symbolic weight surpasses her physical presence. Additionally, the visual framing often isolates the male protagonist in vast backgrounds or dimly lit interiors, highlighting the absenteeism of the female figure. Still, her memory infiltrates these spaces, exhibiting how invisibility can turn into a form of haunting presence. This cinematic strategy aligns with the feminist theories of symbolic erasure, wherein the woman is removed from the frame but is retained structurally fundamental. *Purna Bahdur Ko Sarangi* instances a nuanced approach of female representation where women are not issued agency or voice in the conversational sense, still they persist essential to the cinema's emotional and narrative architecture. These dual placing welcomes a feminist critique that moves beyond visibility to study symbolic centrality. The cinema thus serves as an important text for comprehending gender dynamics in Nepali cinema.

### References

- Baraili, A. (2023). Embodied resistance: Performing female agency in Nepali art. *The Himalayan Review*, 8, 88-101.
- Chaudhary, T. (2024). Interview by onlinekhabar, "Purne or Batuli: Who is the real hero?" *Crimson Reviews*.
- Dangal, R. (2022). Resisting silence: Female protagonists in contemporary Nepali drama. *Kathmandu Literary Review*, 7(2), 41-56.
- Ghosh, S. (2010). *Fire: A queer film classic*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Karki, U. (2021). Songs of survival: Sarangi and gender politics in Nepal. *Music and Identity Journal*, 2, 28-42.
- Khadka, B. (2023). Motherhood as resistance: The politics of care in Nepali cinema. *South Asian Feminist Review*, 4, 33-48.
- Lama, R. (2023). Myths of obedience: Rewriting gendered expectations in Nepal. *Studies in Myth and Modernity*, 3, 73-86.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Pokhrel, B. (2022). Invisible sacrifices: Motherhood and memory in South Asian films. *Visual Anthropology*, 15(2), 59-72.
- Rai, M. (2022). Representing marginality: Gender and caste in Nepali films. *Studies in South Asian Cinema*, 4(2), 110-125.
- Sapkota, R. (2023). The erasure of the feminine in post-conflict Nepali films. *Postcolonial Screens*, 5(1), 95-109.
- Sharma, A. (2021). Parallel struggles: Women's agency in rural Nepal. *Nepal Journal of Gender Studies*, 9(1), 22-37.
- Shrestha, A. (2019). Gendered silences in Nepali cinema. *Cinema and Society*, 6(3), 39-51.
- Thapa, K. (2020). Women in Nepali Cinema: Between tradition and transition. *Journal of Nepal Studies*, 12(1), 45-58.