IJEEL
Peer-Reviewed International Journal

International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL)

ISSN: 2583-3812 Journal Home Page: https://ijeel.org/
Vol-4, Issue-5, Sep-Oct 2025 Journal CrossRef DOI: 10.22161/ijeel

"I Choose My Husband and Child": A Semiotic–Feminist Reading of Sakina in *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*

Dr. Krushna Chandra Mishra

Professor of English, Department of English, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, India
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-5530-0743

Article Detail:

Received: 11 Sep 2025;

Received in revised form: 09 Oct 2025;

Accepted: 14 Oct 2025;

Available online: 19 Oct 2025

***Keywords*— semiotics, feminist film theory, Sakina, Gadar: Ek Prem Katha, Partition cinema, Bollywood melodrama, agency, citizenship**

Abstract

This article undertakes a semiotic–feminist reading of Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (Anil Sharma, 2001) by focusing on Sakina's assertion, "I choose my husband and child." The line, delivered at the height of the film's melodramatic intensity, signals a critical point where a female character claims subjectivity within a narrative otherwise driven by patriarchal, national, and communal forces. Drawing upon Barthesian and Peircean semiotics alongside feminist film theory, the article decodes Sakina's moment of choice through mise-en-scène, dialogue, and intertextual codes. The analysis situates the film within the tradition of Partition cinema and Bollywood melodrama, highlighting how gendered agency intersects with nationalist allegory and familial duty. By rereading Sakina not merely as an emblem of sacrifice or communal reconciliation but as a semiotic site of resistance and self-assertion, the article reorients critical discussions on Gadar. Ultimately, it argues that Sakina's line destabilizes the film's otherwise homogenizing vision of nation and family, opening a feminist interpretive space within popular Hindi cinema's representation of Partition.

I. INTRODUCTION

When *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* was released in 2001, it quickly became one of the highest-grossing Hindi films of all time, its popularity fed by a blend of patriotic fervour, melodrama, and Partition nostalgia. Situated at the intersection of nationalist discourse and commercial cinema, the film presents the story of Tara Singh, a Sikh truck driver, and Sakina, a Muslim aristocrat, whose marriage unfolds against the traumatic backdrop of Partition. While much of the film's attention gravitates towards the male protagonist's heroic stature, it is Sakina's seemingly quiet but powerful assertion—"I choose my husband and child"—that constitutes the emotional fulcrum of the narrative. The utterance crystallises a rare moment of female agency, where a woman articulates her subject position against the competing demands of kinship, community, and nation.

Partition cinema in India has often foregrounded women as bearers of communal honour, sacrificial figures, or allegories of the violated nation (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Vasudevan, 2010). In this interpretive framework, female voices are frequently muted or ventriloquised through patriarchal scripts. Sakina, too, is caught in such currents—daughter of an aristocrat, wife to a Sikh man, mother to a child born across religious lines. Yet, her spoken choice complicates this paradigm. The moment draws attention to the semiotics of cinematic signification: mise-en-scène, bodily gesture, costume, and sound together work to inscribe Sakina's act not as a mere familial decision but as a symbolic rupture within the patriarchal melodrama.

A semiotic–feminist analysis is particularly apt for this moment. Following Barthes (1972), the film may be read as a system of signs where Sakina's utterance challenges dominant connotations of womanhood as passive or sacrificial. In Peircean terms, her act functions as a symbolic sign that indexes resistance against patriarchal/nationalist scripts. Feminist theorists such as Mulvey (1975) and Butler (1990) have foregrounded the politics of gaze and performativity; their frameworks illuminate how Sakina's speech act negotiates between being objectified and asserting subjecthood. The articulation "I choose" is performative, transforming Sakina from a passive figure into an agentive subject whose decision shapes the film's resolution.

This article poses two interconnected questions: How does Sakina's utterance operate semiotically to reconfigure her subjectivity within the film? And to what extent does the film allow her agency to unsettle or re-stabilize the gendered logic of Partition melodrama? To answer these questions, the study combines semiotic close reading with feminist film criticism, drawing also on the broader discourse of Partition studies. By situating Sakina's moment within Bollywood's larger semiotic economy—where women oscillate between allegories of nation and objects of desire—the article argues that *Gadar* inadvertently offers a fissure for feminist interpretation, even as its dominant narrative remains complicit with nationalist melodrama.

The discussion unfolds in five parts. The first outlines the theoretical and methodological framework, drawing from semiotics and feminist theory. The second sketches the narrative context of *Gadar*, with emphasis on Sakina's arc. The third offers a scene-by-scene semiotic analysis of her "choice," paying close attention to visual framing, sound, costume, and intertextual codes. The fourth discusses how this moment produces ambivalence between agency and containment. The conclusion reflects on the implications for feminist readings of Bollywood's Partition films, suggesting that popular cinema, often dismissed as conservative, may contain moments of symbolic rupture that feminist semiotics can recover.

II. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A feminist semiotic reading of *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* requires careful negotiation between two sets of discourses: first, the global traditions of semiotic and feminist theory that have illuminated the politics of cinematic signification; and second, the specific historical and cultural debates surrounding Partition cinema in South Asia. This framework therefore situates the analysis at the intersection of Roland Barthes's and Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic models, the feminist interventions of Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the Partition scholarship of critics such as Ravi Vasudevan, Ashis Nandy, Urvashi Butalia, and Ritu Menon. The integration of these approaches provides both conceptual and methodological grounding for interpreting Sakina's line—"I choose my husband and child"—as a semiotic rupture and a feminist claim to agency.

Semiotics and Cinematic Signification

Roland Barthes's structural semiotics offers one crucial entry point. In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes famously argued that cultural texts operate on two levels: the denotative (literal) and the connotative (ideological). Films, as semiotic systems, not only represent stories but also naturalize dominant ideologies by making them appear as "myth." In *Gadar*, the denotative level frames Sakina as a wife and mother choosing her family, but the connotative level extends her act to signify broader ideological themes: fidelity to conjugal love over patriarchal kinship, and loyalty to domestic bonds over communal obligations. Barthes's notion of myth helps uncover how the film simultaneously reproduces nationalist melodrama and inadvertently enables a counter-myth of feminist agency.

Peirce's triadic model—icon, index, and symbol—adds further nuance. Unlike Barthes's focus on connotation, Peirce conceptualized meaning as a dynamic process of semiosis, where signs are interpreted through their relation to objects and interpretants. In Sakina's scene, her gesture (lowered eyes, clutching her child) functions iconically as maternal devotion; her words index a rejection of patriarchal dictates; and symbolically, her utterance reconfigures the grammar of Partition cinema, where

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

women often symbolize either violated nationhood or familial sacrifice. The triadic model underscores how Sakina's choice resonates across levels of representation: as bodily performance, as situated indexical act, and as cultural symbol.

The Greimassian actantial model also illuminates the narrative logic of *Gadar*. In this schema, characters function as actants occupying roles such as Subject, Object, Sender, and Opponent. Tara Singh is cast as Subject pursuing the Object of Sakina's love, with Partition and Sakina's father operating as Opponents. Yet in the climactic moment, Sakina herself assumes actantial agency: she becomes the Subject who actively chooses, thereby displacing Tara's exclusive narrative authority. This shift complicates the film's melodramatic logic and reveals the semiotic fault lines where gendered agency intrudes upon patriarchal storytelling.

Feminist Film Theory and the Question of Agency

If semiotics provides tools to decode cinematic signification, feminist film theory interrogates the gendered politics of that signification. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) argued that classical cinema positions women as objects of the male gaze, subordinated to male desire and narrative resolution. Bollywood melodrama, as many scholars note (Chatterjee, 1998; Dwyer, 2014), frequently reproduces this structure, idealizing women as sacrificial mothers, dutiful wives, or erotic spectacles. Sakina, played by Ameesha Patel, is initially inscribed within this schema: her beauty is fetishized, her vulnerability displayed, and her agency circumscribed.

Yet Sakina's utterance complicates Mulvey's model. Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) helps here. For Butler, gender is not an essence but a set of repeated acts that constitute subjectivity. When Sakina declares "I choose," she performs an act that destabilizes her socially ascribed role. It is not merely that she exercises agency within existing structures, but that she reconstitutes her subjectivity through language, performing a feminist break within patriarchal melodrama. The performativity of her utterance—its ability to enact what it declares—constitutes a semiotic event that disrupts conventional gendered signification.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question—"Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988)—further sharpens the stakes. Spivak contends that the subaltern woman is doubly silenced, spoken for both by colonial and patriarchal discourses. Partition historiography, as Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin (1998) remind us, has often erased women's voices, portraying them only as victims of abduction, honor killings, or communal exchange. Sakina, as a Muslim woman in a Partition narrative, bears this double marginalization. Her utterance of choice thus becomes an exceptional moment where a subaltern figure momentarily speaks, asserting desire and agency within a cinematic and historical discourse that typically denies her subjectivity.

At the same time, the ambivalence of her speech cannot be overlooked. Luce Irigaray's critique of phallocentric discourse (1985) reminds us that women's speech is often co-opted into male symbolic orders. Sakina's choice, while asserting agency, also reinscribes her within the patriarchal ideal of the selfless wife and mother. The feminist reading must therefore attend to this tension: her utterance both disrupts and conforms, both resists and stabilizes.

Partition Cinema and Indian Melodrama

To situate Sakina's moment within the specific cultural matrix of South Asian cinema, it is necessary to recall the narrative conventions of Partition films. As Ravi Vasudevan (2010) observes, Partition cinema often operates through melodrama, staging the trauma of communal violence through familial and romantic allegories. Women in these films are frequently cast as sites of communal conflict: abducted, converted, or compelled into sacrificial gestures. Ashis Nandy (1995) notes that Partition narratives often reinscribe patriarchal and nationalist anxieties, using female bodies as terrains of honor and betrayal.

Gadar belongs to this tradition, but also to the post-1990s phase of Bollywood, where hyper-nationalist melodramas (e.g., *Border* [1997]) catered to a rising middle-class audience. The film celebrates Tara Singh as a patriotic hero, while Sakina's Muslim aristocratic lineage is used to dramatize communal conflict. Within this framework, Sakina's assertion appears anomalous: instead of being exchanged as a token between families or nations, she asserts her

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

subjectivity as wife and mother. Partition scholarship (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998) shows how real women during 1947 often resisted being returned to natal families, insisting on chosen relationships. Sakina's line resonates with these historical counter-narratives, suggesting that popular cinema, even when steeped in nationalist melodrama, may inadvertently register women's resistance.

Methodological Approach: Semiotic Close Reading

Methodologically, this article employs semiotic close reading of selected sequences from *Gadar*, focusing on Sakina's utterance and its surrounding mise-en-scène. Following Barthes, the analysis distinguishes between denotative representation (the literal choice of husband and child) and connotative ideological coding (the symbolic challenge to patriarchal and communal expectations). Peirce's triadic model guides the parsing of gestures, costumes, and dialogue as icons, indices, and symbols. The Greimassian actantial schema is used to map Sakina's shifting narrative position.

This semiotic analysis is integrated with feminist interpretive strategies. Mulvey's gaze theory prompts questions about how Sakina is framed visually: does the camera invite voyeuristic pleasure, or does it allow her a speaking subjectivity? Butler's performativity sharpens attention to how her utterance enacts agency through speech. Spivak's critique of subaltern silence situates her voice within the broader context of Partition representations. Together, these perspectives enable a layered reading: Sakina is decoded not simply as a character but as a sign within intersecting systems of cinematic, cultural, and gendered meaning.

Balancing Semiotics, Feminism, and History

One risk of semiotic analysis is abstraction, detaching signs from their historical and material contexts. To avoid this, the framework situates semiotic interpretation within the socio-political discourse of Partition. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) reminds us, cultural texts in South Asia must be read with attention to the specificities of postcolonial modernity, not merely through imported theoretical models. Thus, Sakina's choice is read not only through Barthes or Mulvey but also in dialogue with Partition historiography and South Asian feminist scholarship.

This balancing act underscores the dual contribution of the article. On one hand, it extends semiotic analysis into Bollywood melodrama, demonstrating how sign systems encode gendered power. On the other, it brings feminist Partition historiography into conversation with film theory, recovering women's agency where it is most often occluded. Methodologically, this means oscillating between close textual analysis and broader cultural contextualization, reading Sakina's utterance both as a cinematic sign and as a symbolic echo of women's historical resistance during Partition.

Toward a Semiotic–Feminist Praxis

In sum, this framework positions Sakina's "I choose my husband and child" as a site where semiotic and feminist readings converge. Barthes helps decode the myth of female sacrifice; Peirce clarifies the layers of signification; Mulvey interrogates the gaze that frames Sakina; Butler highlights the performativity of her speech; Spivak warns of subaltern silencing, even when women appear to speak; and Partition scholarship anchors the reading in South Asian history. The methodology is thus deliberately plural: no single theory suffices to capture the complexity of Sakina's moment.

This theoretical architecture not only grounds the subsequent analysis but also gestures toward a broader feminist semiotic praxis in film studies. By combining structural semiotics, feminist critique, and historical contextualization, the article demonstrates how popular Hindi cinema, often dismissed as melodramatic and regressive, can be re-read as a contradictory text where female subjectivity intermittently surfaces. Sakina's line is one such surface rupture: a semiotic and feminist crack in the edifice of patriarchal melodrama.

III. CONTEXT AND NARRATIVE OVERVIEW

Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (dir. Anil Sharma, 2001) occupies a singular position in the cultural history of Indian cinema. Released at the turn of the new millennium, when Bollywood was increasingly globalizing its narratives and aesthetics, *Gadar* reasserted the melodramatic register of the nationalist blockbuster. It dramatized the trauma of the 1947 Partition through a love story between Tara Singh, a rustic Sikh truck

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

driver played by Sunny Deol, and Sakina, the aristocratic Muslim daughter of a wealthy zamindar, portrayed by Ameesha Patel. The film's enormous commercial success—becoming one of the highest-grossing films in Hindi cinema history—was indebted to its populist formula: patriotic fervour, emotional excess, spectacular violence, and an appeal to nostalgia for Partition-era sacrifice. Yet beneath this surface of hyper-masculine heroism and nation-building allegory, the film embeds a narrative arc that allows Sakina, at least fleetingly, to assert her own agency.

Sakina's Arc within the Partition Narrative

The film opens by establishing Partition as a backdrop of displacement and trauma. Tara rescues Sakina during communal riots, initiating their improbable romance. Their love across religious and communal lines is staged as a metaphor for reconciliation, yet it also reproduces familiar tropes of Partition cinema, where female bodies become symbols of national and communal contestation. Sakina's aristocratic background renders her both desirable and politically charged: she represents not merely a romantic interest but also the residual memory of a pre-Partition Muslim elite now displaced in the Indian nation.

Their marriage, dramatized through the popular song "Main Nikla Gaddi Leke," situates Sakina within the domestic sphere of rural Punjab. Here she embodies the archetypal wife and mother—dutiful, nurturing, and supportive. Yet this positioning is precarious: her aristocratic father in Pakistan, Ashraf Ali (Amrish Puri), refuses to accept the cross-communal union, seeing in it not only familial dishonour but also symbolic defeat. The return to Pakistan to seek Ashraf Ali's blessings becomes the turning point of the film, where Sakina's subjectivity is tested amidst conflicting patriarchal claims.

The Climactic Tension

The crucial sequence unfolds in Pakistan, when Tara, Sakina, and their child travel to Lahore. What begins as a negotiation for familial recognition devolves into a struggle over possession. Ashraf Ali and his household assert patriarchal control, attempting to reclaim Sakina into the fold of her natal family and community. This echoes historical accounts of abducted women during Partition who were forcibly "repatriated" by state and family, often against their own wishes (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). In these histories, the woman's choice was largely effaced; what mattered was the preservation of communal honor.

It is in this context that Sakina utters the pivotal line: **"Main apne pati aur bachche ko chunhti hoon" ("I choose my husband and child").** Spoken at a moment of heightened melodrama, the utterance reconfigures the narrative stakes. Instead of allowing her father to determine her destiny, or letting Tara's heroism alone resolve the conflict, Sakina voices her preference. Her act refuses to be a silent object of exchange between patriarchal structures. The line is more than dialogue: it crystallizes a semiotic event, where gesture, voice, and mise-en-scène align to signify choice, rupture, and assertion.

Semiotic Resonances

The semiotic power of the moment lies in its layering. Denotatively, Sakina is choosing her conjugal family over her natal family. Connotatively, she is resisting patriarchal control—both her father's aristocratic authority and, implicitly, the film's masculinist narrative that centers Tara's heroism. Symbolically, her choice destabilizes the nationalist allegory of Partition: rather than being a passive emblem of communal reconciliation, she enacts a micro-politics of desire and loyalty. The cinematic grammar—close-up framing, dramatic lighting, the clutching of her child—visually underscores her agency while also reinscribing her within the maternal role.

Historical and Cinematic Context

To appreciate the force of Sakina's choice, it must be located within the broader corpus of Partition cinema. Films such as *Train to Pakistan* (1998), *Earth* (1998), and *Pinjar* (2003) foreground the violence, displacement, and trauma of 1947, with women often depicted as abducted, violated, or sacrificial figures. These narratives reproduce what feminist historians like Butalia and Menon have documented: women's bodies became terrains on which communal and national identities were inscribed. Yet oral histories also reveal women's acts of resistance, refusal, and self-assertion, often suppressed in official narratives. Sakina's "I choose" resonates with these subaltern counter-memories, even as it remains framed within the melodramatic codes of mainstream Bollywood.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

The melodramatic mode itself is significant. As Ravi Vasudevan (2010) argues, Indian melodrama stages social contradictions through affective excess—songs, heightened emotions, familial confrontations. In *Gadar*, melodrama is harnessed to patriotic fervour, with Tara Singh's larger-than-life gestures epitomizing the nation's muscular defense. Yet melodrama also enables Sakina's rupture: the excess of emotion legitimates her act of speech, allowing her choice to be framed not as betrayal of family honor but as the climactic resolution of conflict. The melodramatic mode thus becomes ambivalent—repressive in its patriarchal coding, but generative in its allowance of female voice.

Setting the Stage for Semiotic Analysis

This narrative overview underscores why Sakina's utterance warrants close semiotic attention. It emerges at the intersection of Partition's historical trauma, Bollywood's melodramatic conventions, and the gendered politics of nationalist cinema. Methodologically, the scene crystallizes a moment where dialogue, gesture, mise-en-scène, and intertextual codes converge, producing a multilayered sign. The subsequent analysis will parse these semiotic dimensions—visual framing, sound and dialogue, costume and gesture, intertextual motifs—demonstrating how Sakina's choice operates as both a disruption and a containment of patriarchal-nationalist narratives.

IV. SCENE-BY-SCENE SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

The semiotic–feminist reading of Sakina's declaration "I choose my husband and child" requires close engagement with the cinematic texture of *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*. To understand how this utterance operates as a sign, one must attend to the layered codes that structure the sequence: the **visual framing**, the **soundscape and dialogue**, the **costume and bodily gesture**, and the **intertextual references to Partition and melodrama**. Semiotic theory teaches us that meaning is never singular but constructed through multiple signifying systems (Barthes, 1972; Peirce, 1931–58). A feminist perspective reminds us that these systems are rarely neutral: they are embedded in patriarchal and nationalist ideologies (Mulvey, 1975; Butler, 1990; Spivak, 1988). By bringing these strands together, this analysis highlights how Sakina's utterance operates as a moment of rupture—producing agency—yet also remains caught within ambivalent representational codes.

Visual Framing: The Semiotics of the Gaze

The scene in which Sakina voices her choice is set in her father Ashraf Ali's mansion in Lahore, a space heavy with patriarchal authority. Tara, Sakina, and their child stand confronted by Ashraf Ali and his guards. The camera initially frames Tara in medium shots, emphasizing his muscular defiance, a trope central to Bollywood's nationalist melodrama of the 1990s. Yet as the confrontation reaches its peak, the camera cuts to a close-up of Sakina, her face framed against the backdrop of familial hostility.

In semiotic terms, this shift in framing redirects the **gaze**. As Mulvey (1975) argues, classical cinema is structured around the "male gaze," positioning women as passive objects of visual pleasure. Here, however, the close-up invests Sakina with subjectivity: she is no longer merely seen, but allowed to speak. The close-up becomes an **indexical sign**, pointing to the intensity of her emotional state, while also functioning symbolically to shift narrative authority from Tara to Sakina. The lowered camera angle, which had previously privileged Tara's towering stature, now equalizes Sakina's presence, subtly reconfiguring the balance of power.

What is critical here is the **semiotic disruption of the gaze**. Sakina's face in close-up rejects voyeuristic objectification; instead, it becomes the locus of enunciation. In Peircean terms, the close-up is both an **icon** (resembling her actual expression of anguish and resolve) and a **symbol** (signifying female assertion against patriarchal coercion). This interplay allows the audience to perceive Sakina not merely as Tara's beloved or Ashraf Ali's daughter but as a subject who enunciates her will.

Dialogue and Sound: The Performative Utterance

The power of Sakina's line lies not only in its lexical meaning but also in its **performativity**. As J. L. Austin (1962) argued in *How to Do Things with Words*, some utterances do not simply describe reality but enact it. Butler (1990) extended this insight to gender, contending that identity is constituted through repeated performative acts. When Sakina declares, "Main apne pati aur bachche ko chunhti hoon" ("I choose my husband and child"), the utterance is not a

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

description but an act of choosing. Its performative force reconstitutes her subjectivity: in speaking, she becomes the agent of her own destiny.

The sound design amplifies this performativity. The score momentarily recedes, allowing her voice to resonate in the diegetic space. The silence of surrounding characters underscores the authority of her words. The deliberate pauses—"Main apne pati… aur bachche… ko chunhti hoon"—extend the utterance, emphasizing its weight. Each pause functions as a **syntagmatic break**, drawing attention to the elements of her choice: husband and child. In semiotic terms, the rhythm of her speech generates meaning beyond the literal words, connoting deliberation, resistance, and determination.

Moreover, the utterance's reception within the diegesis underscores its semiotic import. Ashraf Ali is visibly shaken; Tara is momentarily silent. The guards lower their weapons. The father's authority, until then absolute, is destabilized not by Tara's physical power but by Sakina's speech. Here, Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes relevant: Sakina, a Muslim woman in a Partition narrative, is granted a voice. Yet, as Spivak warns, the subaltern's speech is often co-opted. Sakina's choice is framed in alignment with patriarchal ideals of wifehood and motherhood. Her performative utterance thus simultaneously resists silencing and reinscribes her within maternal domesticity.

Costume and Mise-en-scène: Semiotic Codes of Femininity

Costume and mise-en-scène play a crucial role in encoding meaning. Sakina, in this climactic sequence, is dressed in modest traditional attire, her dupatta (scarf) draped over her head. The dupatta here functions as a **symbolic sign**: denotatively a garment, connotatively an index of modesty, respectability, and cultural belonging. In Partition cinema, the dupatta often signifies a woman's honor, vulnerable to violation or reclamation. By retaining her dupatta while asserting choice, Sakina negotiates between patriarchal expectations and feminist assertion. She is not rejecting traditional femininity but re-signifying it as a site of agency.

The mise-en-scène further encodes this negotiation. Sakina is positioned physically between Tara and her father, visually dramatizing her conflict. The child in her arms becomes a semiotic anchor: an **index** of maternal devotion and a **symbol** of continuity across communal divides. Her act of clutching the child while speaking invests her choice with moral weight. The child becomes both literal and figurative justification, enabling her agency to be read not as rebellion but as loyalty to family values. This ambivalence is crucial: her agency is permitted precisely because it aligns with maternal domesticity, a condition of possibility but also a limit.

Lighting and spatial arrangement reinforce this dynamic. While Tara is often lit in harsh contrasts, emphasizing his masculinity, Sakina is illuminated with softer, diffused light. This aesthetic choice encodes her as morally pure, emotionally authentic. The semiotic function of light here is symbolic: it casts her as the "truth-teller," the bearer of affective sincerity. Such coding resonates with melodramatic conventions, where women's moral clarity often provides narrative resolution (Thomas, 1995). Yet in Sakina's case, this moral clarity is voiced through an explicit act of choice, marking a departure from silent suffering to articulated agency.

Intertextual Codes: Partition, Nation, and Melodrama

Semiotic meaning is rarely contained within a single text; it emerges intertextually, through echoes of cultural myths and cinematic tropes. Sakina's utterance reverberates with Partition's history of abducted women. As Butalia (1998) documents, many women refused to return to natal families, choosing instead to remain with husbands or children across communal lines. Their choices disrupted state and community narratives of honor. Sakina's line thus echoes these suppressed histories, inscribing them within a mainstream Bollywood narrative.

At the same time, the scene draws upon the melodramatic trope of the **"mother's choice."** In Indian cinema, the mother often embodies ultimate moral authority, choosing family unity over social expectations (as in *Mother India* [1957]). Sakina's utterance aligns with this tradition, yet it is distinct: she is not yet a mythic mother figure but a young woman claiming her conjugal and maternal identity. The intertextual resonance with *Mother India* is significant: while Nargis's character chooses nation over son, Sakina chooses husband and child over

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

father and community. The reversal highlights the shifting terrain of female agency in nationalist melodrama.

Furthermore, Sakina's line operates within the discourse of Bollywood's post-1990s nationalism. Films like *Border* (1997) and *LOC Kargil* (2003) foreground masculine heroism, with women relegated to the sidelines. *Gadar*, too, centres Tara's hypermasculinity—his iconic handpump scene epitomizes national strength. Yet Sakina's utterance disrupts this paradigm, inserting female voice into a narrative otherwise dominated by male spectacle. Intertextually, her line challenges the convention that male heroism alone resolves national crises, suggesting instead that female agency has a role in shaping narrative closure.

Peircean Triads in Action

Applying Peirce's triadic model clarifies the multiple levels at which Sakina's utterance signifies.

- **Icon**: Her tear-streaked face and trembling voice iconically represent emotional intensity.
- **Index**: Her act of speaking, clutching her child, directly indexes maternal devotion and conjugal loyalty, pointing to her lived attachments.
- **Symbol**: The utterance "I choose" symbolically reconfigures her role: from object of exchange to subject of decision. Within the symbolic order of Partition cinema, where women typically embody communal honor, her speech re-signifies womanhood as agency.

The power of the triad lies in its simultaneity: Sakina's act is immediately recognizable as maternal devotion (iconic), materially grounded in the presence of child and husband (indexical), and culturally transformative in its symbolic challenge to patriarchal control.

Ambivalence and Containment

Despite its radical potential, the scene remains ambivalent. As Irigaray (1985) cautions, women's speech in patriarchal discourse often reinscribes the very structures it resists. Sakina's choice is permitted because it conforms to patriarchal ideals of wifehood and motherhood. She does not claim autonomy for herself as an individual subject beyond family; her agency is tied to her relational roles. This containment tempers the feminist rupture, reabsorbing it into the melodramatic resolution.

Nevertheless, the semiotic–feminist reading insists that ambivalence does not negate resistance. As Butler (1993) notes, subversive acts often emerge within, not outside, regulatory frameworks. Sakina's utterance destabilizes patriarchal authority, even if temporarily. It inserts female voice into the semiotic fabric of Bollywood melodrama, opening interpretive possibilities that challenge monolithic readings of women as passive symbols.

V. DISCUSSION: AGENCY, AMBIVALENCE, AND PARTITION MELODRAMA

The preceding semiotic analysis has illuminated how Sakina's utterance—*"I choose my husband and child"*—operates across multiple registers of cinematic signification: visual framing, dialogue, gesture, costume, and intertextual resonance. In this section, I extend those findings into a broader interpretive synthesis. The discussion addresses three interconnected questions: (1) How does Sakina's utterance intervene in the semiotic economy of Bollywood melodrama? (2) What ambivalences shape the feminist potential of this moment within Partition cinema? (3) How does this reading recalibrate our understanding of agency and representation in popular Indian film?

By drawing upon semiotic theory (Barthes, Peirce, Greimas), feminist critique (Mulvey, Butler, Spivak, Irigaray), and Partition scholarship (Butalia, Menon & Bhasin, Vasudevan, Nandy), this discussion foregrounds both the radical and constrained dimensions of Sakina's act. Ultimately, it argues that the scene crystallizes the contradictory possibilities of Bollywood melodrama: a form that often reinscribes patriarchal and nationalist ideologies, yet can also stage moments of rupture where female subjectivity momentarily asserts itself.

Melodrama as a Semiotic Field

Melodrama, as scholars like Peter Brooks (1976) and Christine Gledhill (1987) have argued, is not merely a genre but a mode of signification characterized by affective excess, moral polarization, and heightened spectacle. In the South Asian context, Ravi Vasudevan (2010) extends this insight, showing how melodrama

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

mediates social contradictions in Indian cinema—between tradition and modernity, family and state, religion and nation. *Gadar* exemplifies this mode: Tara Singh's hyper-masculine heroism, the spectacular violence against Pakistanis, and the tear-soaked family confrontations all dramatize contradictions between communal conflict and conjugal love.

Within this semiotic field, Sakina's utterance is both enabled and constrained by melodrama's grammar. On the one hand, melodrama's heightened affect provides the conditions for her voice to be heard. Her trembling declaration, framed by close-ups and underscored by silence, is made legible precisely through melodrama's privileging of emotional truth. On the other hand, melodrama also structures the containment of that voice: Sakina's choice is validated because it conforms to the moral resolution expected of melodramatic closure. As Thomas (1995) notes, Hindi melodrama often legitimates women's voice only when it aligns with familial unity and moral clarity. Sakina's utterance thus participates in a familiar semiotic economy: it disrupts patriarchal control momentarily, but it is reabsorbed into the patriarchal family as the narrative's resolution.

Agency as Semiotic Rupture

From a semiotic perspective, Sakina's choice represents a rupture in the chain of signification. In Barthesian terms, the denotative meaning of her line—choosing husband and child—is straightforward. But the connotative level destabilizes the patriarchal myth of woman as passive object. Instead, Sakina emerges as a sign of resistance, asserting subjectivity against competing familial and communal claims. The myth of female sacrifice is thus challenged by a counter-myth: that of female agency enacted through choice.

Peirce's triadic model helps clarify this rupture. Sakina's utterance is an **icon** of maternal devotion, an **index** of lived attachment to Tara and their child, and a **symbol** of feminist assertion within Partition cinema. The simultaneity of these sign-functions produces ambivalence: while she symbolically resists patriarchal control, her iconic and indexical dimensions tie her agency to maternal and conjugal roles. Semiotics thus illuminates how her agency is both produced and delimited by the signifying codes of cinema.

The Greimassian actantial model further underscores the rupture. Until this scene, Tara Singh dominates the narrative as Subject, with Sakina as Object. But in the climactic confrontation, Sakina assumes the Subject position: she actively chooses, displacing Tara's singular narrative authority. This actantial shift destabilizes the film's melodramatic logic, creating a fissure where female subjectivity momentarily takes center stage.

Feminist Ambivalence: Speaking within Patriarchy

Feminist film theory sharpens the ambivalence of Sakina's agency. Mulvey (1975) reminds us that women in classical cinema are typically framed as objects of the male gaze, denied subjectivity. Sakina's close-up interrupts this logic, granting her a voice. Yet the camera still frames her through conventions of modesty and maternal virtue. Her speech act is thus mediated by patriarchal codes of representation.

Butler's theory of performativity (1990) reveals both the radical and constrained dimensions of her utterance. By saying "I choose," Sakina performs the act of choosing, enacting subjectivity through language. This performative rupture destabilizes her prior role as passive object. Yet, as Butler cautions, performativity always occurs within regulatory frameworks. Sakina's choice is legible precisely because it conforms to normative ideals of wifehood and motherhood. Her agency, then, is real but circumscribed: it emerges only within patriarchal parameters.

Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988) is particularly apt. As a Muslim woman in a Partition narrative, Sakina occupies a doubly marginalized position. Her utterance appears to answer Spivak affirmatively: she speaks, claiming choice. Yet the ambivalence persists: her speech is permitted only insofar as it reproduces patriarchal familial values. In Irigaray's terms (1985), her voice remains inscribed within the phallocentric symbolic order. The feminist reading must therefore acknowledge both the subversive and complicit dimensions of her speech.

Partition Historiography and Cinematic Memory

Partition historiography offers another lens to interpret Sakina's choice. Historians like Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin (1998) have documented how women during Partition were abducted, exchanged, or forced into marriages, often

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

stripped of agency. Yet oral testimonies reveal acts of resistance: women refusing to return to natal families, choosing relationships forged in displacement. Sakina's utterance echoes these historical counter-narratives, re-inscribing them within the cinematic imaginary.

At the same time, the film's nationalist framework complicates this resonance. Ashis Nandy (1995) argues that Partition narratives often reinscribe patriarchal anxieties, using women as symbols of communal honor. *Gadar* participates in this logic: Sakina's aristocratic lineage and Muslim identity mark her as contested property. Her choice resists this logic, but the film ultimately reabsorbs it into nationalist melodrama, celebrating Tara's heroism and framing Sakina's agency as secondary.

Nevertheless, Sakina's utterance disrupts the homogenizing narrative of Partition cinema. Films like *Earth* (1998) and *Pinjar* (2003) foreground women's suffering, often leaving them silenced or victimized. Sakina, by contrast, speaks, however ambivalently. This difference is crucial: *Gadar* inadvertently stages a counter-memory of Partition, where a woman asserts her desire in the face of patriarchal and communal control.

The Contradictory Logic of Popular Cinema

The ambivalence of Sakina's agency reflects the contradictory logic of popular Hindi cinema itself. As scholars like M. Madhava Prasad (1998) and Rachel Dwyer (2014) have shown, Bollywood melodrama simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes dominant ideologies. It reproduces patriarchal family structures, yet also stages their crises. It glorifies nationalist masculinity, yet also provides space for female voice through melodramatic excess.

Sakina's utterance exemplifies this contradiction. On the one hand, it challenges patriarchal and communal authority, inserting female subjectivity into a nationalist narrative. On the other, it reinscribes her agency within maternal and conjugal roles, foreclosing more radical possibilities of autonomy. This ambivalence is not a weakness but a structural feature of popular cinema, which negotiates between ideological containment and subversive possibility.

Spectatorship and Reception

An important dimension of this discussion concerns reception. How do audiences interpret Sakina's utterance? Semiotics reminds us that meaning is not fixed but negotiated by spectators (Hall, 1980). For many viewers, Sakina's choice may simply affirm familial values, reinforcing patriarchal norms. For feminist readers, however, it opens a space of resistance. The ambiguity of the sign allows for multiple readings, enabling both conservative and subversive interpretations.

This multiplicity is crucial for understanding popular cinema's cultural role. As Vasudevan (2010) argues, Bollywood melodrama functions as a public arena where social contradictions are staged and negotiated. Sakina's utterance participates in this arena, inviting audiences to grapple with questions of gender, family, and nation. Whether interpreted as conservative or feminist, the scene forces recognition of female voice within a narrative otherwise dominated by male spectacle.

Toward a Semiotic–Feminist Praxis in South Asian Cinema

What does Sakina's utterance teach us about feminist semiotic analysis in South Asian cinema more broadly? First, it underscores the need for **integrative methodologies**. Semiotics alone cannot capture the gendered stakes of representation; feminist theory alone risks overlooking the signifying codes of cinema. By combining both, we can uncover how female subjectivity is simultaneously produced and constrained.

Second, it highlights the importance of **historical contextualization**. Sakina's choice resonates with Partition histories of women's resistance, but it also risks being co-opted into nationalist melodrama. A historically grounded semiotic reading can hold both dimensions together, acknowledging ambivalence without collapsing it into either victimhood or triumph.

Third, it suggests that popular cinema, often dismissed as ideologically regressive, may contain moments of feminist potential. These moments may be fleeting, ambivalent, and contained, but they matter. They provide interpretive fissures where alternative meanings can emerge, challenging monolithic narratives of patriarchy and nationalism.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

VI. CONCLUSION TO THE DISCUSSION

This discussion has foregrounded the ambivalence of Sakina's agency within *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*. Her utterance "I choose my husband and child" disrupts the patriarchal semiotic economy of Partition cinema, asserting female subjectivity through visual framing, performative dialogue, and intertextual resonance. Yet this rupture is circumscribed by melodramatic conventions that validate her agency only within maternal and conjugal roles. The feminist potential of her speech thus coexists with its patriarchal containment.

By synthesizing semiotic, feminist, and Partition frameworks, the discussion reveals the contradictory logic of Bollywood melodrama: it is at once a site of ideological reproduction and a space of resistant possibility. Sakina's voice embodies this contradiction. She speaks, and in speaking, she asserts agency. But her speech is heard only because it conforms to familial values. This tension is not a limitation but the very terrain of popular cinema's cultural politics.

Conclusion

The analysis of Sakina's utterance—*"I choose my husband and child"*—in *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* demonstrates the interpretive power of a semiotic–feminist framework for reading Bollywood melodrama. At one level, the line may appear as a conventional affirmation of conjugal loyalty and maternal devotion, neatly aligned with patriarchal ideals of wifehood and motherhood. Yet, when examined semiotically and historically, it emerges as a significant rupture in the semiotic economy of Partition cinema: a moment when a female character, long positioned as object within nationalist melodrama, claims subjectivity through speech.

The close reading revealed how this moment functions across multiple signifying systems. The **visual framing** in close-up displaces Tara Singh's towering masculinity to foreground Sakina's enunciation. The **soundscape** amplifies her voice by suspending musical excess, making her words the focal point of the sequence. The **costume and gesture**—her dupatta intact, her child held close—anchor her agency in culturally legible codes of femininity. The **intertextual resonances** with Partition histories of women's abduction and refusal, and with cinematic tropes of maternal sacrifice, provide further depth. Together, these codes inscribe Sakina's speech as both a site of resistance and a performance of patriarchal containment.

From a feminist perspective, this ambivalence is instructive. Mulvey's theory of the gaze reminds us that women in cinema are often constructed as visual objects; Sakina's close-up both repeats and disrupts this dynamic. Butler's theory of performativity clarifies how her utterance constitutes agency through language, while also noting that such agency is constrained by normative frameworks. Spivak's reminder that the subaltern's speech is often ventriloquized by dominant discourses underscores the paradox of Sakina's moment: she speaks, yet her speech is only permitted because it aligns with familial duty. Irigaray's critique of phallocentric discourse illuminates how women's voices can be both present and subordinated within patriarchal symbolic orders. These frameworks together highlight the contradictory quality of Sakina's choice: radical in its assertion of female subjectivity, but recuperated into patriarchal melodrama.

Partition scholarship contextualizes this contradiction within the historical trauma of 1947. Historians like Butalia (1998) and Menon & Bhasin (1998) document how women's voices were erased by both nationalist and communalist narratives, their bodies reduced to tokens of honour. Yet oral testimonies reveal women asserting choice, refusing to be repatriated, and forging new familial bonds. Sakina's "I choose" resonates with these suppressed histories, staging in popular cinema a counter-memory of female agency during Partition. At the same time, as Nandy (1995) observes, Partition narratives often reinscribe patriarchal anxieties; *Gadar* does so by ultimately centring Tara's heroism. Sakina's speech therefore oscillates between historical resonance and cinematic containment.

This ambivalence is not accidental but symptomatic of Bollywood melodrama itself. As scholars like Vasudevan (2010), Prasad (1998), and Dwyer (2014) have argued, Hindi cinema is a contradictory cultural form, at once reproducing dominant ideologies and staging their crises. Melodrama's grammar of affective excess allows women to speak, but only within boundaries that secure patriarchal and nationalist resolution. Sakina's utterance exemplifies

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

this: it is a rupture that destabilizes paternal authority, but also a resolution that reaffirms family unity. The feminist semiotic reading must therefore attend to both dimensions, holding disruption and containment together rather than privileging one over the other.

The implications of this reading extend beyond *Gadar*. First, it demonstrates that popular cinema, often dismissed as ideologically conservative, can be a terrain where feminist meanings emerge in contradictory ways. Semiotic–feminist analysis allows us to identify and interpret these fissures, showing how women's agency is encoded, however ambivalently, in mainstream narratives. Second, it suggests that Partition cinema, typically framed as a male-dominated discourse of trauma and nationhood, contains within it submerged traces of women's subjectivity. By recovering these traces, film studies can contribute to a more inclusive memory of Partition, one that recognizes women not only as victims but also as speaking subjects.

Finally, the case of Sakina underscores the necessity of **methodological pluralism** in film studies. Semiotics alone might decode her utterance as a sign, but without feminist theory it would miss the gendered stakes of representation. Feminist critique alone might emphasize her containment, but without semiotics it would overlook the material codes—framing, sound, gesture—that enable her speech. Partition historiography provides the historical grounding without which her utterance risks abstraction. Only by weaving these approaches together can we fully apprehend the cultural and political significance of such cinematic moments.

In the end, Sakina's "I choose" is less a resolution than a provocation. It provokes us to rethink how women are positioned within nationalist melodrama; it provokes us to reconsider how popular cinema encodes agency within structures of constraint; it provokes us to read ambivalence not as failure but as the very space where feminist semiotics operates. *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* may have been designed as a celebration of muscular patriotism, but in Sakina's quiet utterance it also registers a different truth: that even within the most patriarchal of cinematic forms, women can, and do, speak.

REFERENCES

[1] Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Oxford University Press.
[2] Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang.
[3] Brooks, P. (1976). *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess.* Yale University Press.
[4] Butalia, U. (1998). *The other side of silence: Voices from the Partition of India.* Penguin Books.
[5] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* Routledge.
[6] Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* Routledge.
[7] Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference.* Princeton University Press.
[8] Chatterjee, G. (1998). *Awara: Fifty years of a legend.* HarperCollins.
[9] Dwyer, R. (2014). *Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a guide to modern India.* Reaktion Books.
[10] Gledhill, C. (Ed.). (1987). *Home is where the heart is: Studies in melodrama and the woman's film.* British Film Institute.
[11] Greimas, A. J. (1983). *Structural semantics: An attempt at a method.* University of Nebraska Press.
[12] Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.
[13] Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one* (C. Porter, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
[14] Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders and boundaries: Women in India's Partition.* Kali for Women.
[15] Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen, 16*(3), 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6
[16] Nandy, A. (1995). The invisible holocaust and the journey as an exodus: The poisoned village and other papers on Partition. *Economic and Political Weekly, 30*(24), 1455–1462.
[17] Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
[18] Prasad, M. M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction.* Oxford University Press.
[19] Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
[20] Thomas, R. (1995). Melodrama and the negotiation of morality in Hindi cinema. In C. Breckenridge (Ed.), *Consuming modernity: Public culture in a South Asian world* (pp. 157–182). University of Minnesota Press.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14

[21] Vasudevan, R. (2010). *The melodramatic public: Film form and spectatorship in Indian cinema.* Permanent Black.
[22] *Earth* (1998). Dir. Deepa Mehta. India/Canada: Jhamu Sughand Productions.
[23] *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001). Dir. Anil Sharma. India: Zee Telefilms.
[24] *LOC Kargil* (2003). Dir. J. P. Dutta. India: J.P. Films.
[25] *Mother India* (1957). Dir. Mehboob Khan. India: Mehboob Productions.
[26] *Pinjar* (2003). Dir. Chandraprakash Dwivedi. India: Lucky Star Entertainment.
[27] *Train to Pakistan* (1998). Dir. Pamela Rooks. India: Kaleidoscope Entertainment.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.5.14