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# **Grief, Identity, and Rebellion: Analysis** **of Film Paan Singh Tomar**

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## **Abstract**

The paper undertakes a critical analysis of the film Paan Singh Tomar (2012), directed by Tigmanshu Dhulia, from the perspective of the five stages of grieving model proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The model was initially designed to explain the emotional changes a person goes through during terminal illness or death; however, the model's application and use have broadened over the years. The paper will attempt a critical discussion and show how the protagonist's change from a national sporting star to a gangster is a metaphor of sorts for the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, proposed by the model. The rests of the paper will discuss the film through the theoretical framework of textual film theory and the five stages of grieving model and identify the relevance of applying film theory and psychology theory to understand the relevance and the usefulness of the film in a broader social politics perspective.

**Keywords:** film analysis, Kübler-Ross model, grief theory, Indian cinema, character psychology

## **Introduction**

Sports-based biopics usually deal with themes of perseverance, nationalism, and individual glory. However, director Tigmanshu Dhulia's 2012 movie Paan Singh Tomar: The Ballad of a Brave Running Man presents a dramatic turn of events by choosing to focus on the story of a sports icon who fails due to injustice and the hierarchy of rural power. Based on the real story of a soldier from India, who was also a national champion at steeplechasing, the story explores aspects of identity, dignity, manhood, and marginality, instead of deluding audiences with criminality as a product of native deviance.

Based on this concept, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) identified a series of five stages of grief and loss faced by individuals, as follows: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Though the study was carried out to elucidate experiences faced by patients with terminal illness, later studies have employed it to illustrate experiences of grief and loss in relation to psychological trauma and self-identity. Paan Singh Tomar: Using the concept to understand the transformation of an individual, as a process of mourning loss of faith in institutions, societal regard, and self-identity.

This paper argues that the narrative arc of *Paan Singh Tomar* mirrors the Kübler-Ross stages, thereby structuring the protagonist's psychological evolution. Through this lens, the film becomes not only a biographical drama but also a study of grief shaped by systemic injustice.

## **Context and Background of the film**

*Paan Singh Tomar*, directed by Tigmanshu Dhulia, is a Hindi biographical drama based on the real-life story of an Indian army soldier and national steeplechase champion who later became a notorious outlaw. The film stars Irrfan Khan in a National Award-winning performance and is widely regarded as a landmark in contemporary Indian biographical cinema.

The film is set in post-independence India, primarily spanning the 1950s–1980s, and reflects rural socio-political realities such as feudal power structures, bureaucratic indifference, and systemic injustice. Unlike conventional sports biopics that celebrate national glory, *Paan Singh Tomar* examines the fragility of institutional recognition and the precarious status of individuals once they cease to serve state interests. The narrative frames the protagonist's transformation not as a moral fall but as a consequence of social neglect.

## **Narrative Structure**

In terms of narrative style, the film has adopted a nonlinear narrative style in which the events are narrated in retrospect as flashbacks while being spoken in the perspective of a journalist interviewing Paan Singh, creating a sense of distance as the viewer is introduced to the outlaw at first, while also creating a sense of closeness as they are gradually humanized by their past experiences, creating a sense of dramatic irony as the viewer is aware of the fate of the outlaw since the beginning, while also being exposed to the factors that led the outlaw to its fate

## **Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative interpretive methodology, combining film analysis with psychology theories. Three analytical methods were employed:

Close textual analysis - Key scenes were analyzed to identify evidence of visual composition, speech, performance, and editing patterns suggestive of emotional shifts.

Theoretical mapping - the observed emotional states and behavioral changes were matched against the stages proposed in Kübler-Ross's theory from a category of interpretation rather than a category of diagnosis.

Contextual interpretation - character responses were also examined in relation to the socio-political context presented in the film, including the apathy of bureaucracy and feudalism in rural areas. This interdisciplinary method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of character development and thematic construction. The method recognizes that stages of grieving are not necessarily linear, with some stages possibly being simultaneous, as emphasized by contemporary psychological studies.

## **Theoretical Framework: Grief and Narrative Structure**

Kübler-Ross (1969) developed a conceptualization of grief that is a progression of emotional responses to loss. Subsequent research highlighted the importance of these stages of grief as a heuristic model rather than a formula. Narrative theory implies that stories tend to resonate with psychological processes, particularly because the structure of drama is a progression of conflict, crisis, and resolution (Chatman, 1978). Cinema, as an audiovisual form, holds a singular position of representing emotional states through performance, light, editing, and sound (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

To use the grief model on Paan Singh Tomar, we would have to extend our understanding of grief to include existence, society, and so on. So, the plot of Paan Singh Tomar develops in ways that correlate with grief, with an element of institutional failure.

### **Analysis: Stages of Grief in *Paan Singh Tomar***

#### **Denial: Trust in the System**

Denial: Paan Singh is shown to be disciplined, patriotic, and loyal in the beginning of the movie. His being a soldier and an athlete further strengthens his belief in the fairness of institutions. When faced with land disputes and harassment, he pays no heed to the fact that justice will not be served. This is an example of denial as a psychological factor inhibiting their ability to grasp the reality of injustice. Cinematography also adds to this outlook.

#### **Anger: Recognition of Injustice**

Humiliation and apathy accumulate and gradually build into a frustration that builds into anger. The significant point is that the anger builds up gradually rather than through any impulse. The use of close-up shots creates a sense of contained emotion. This is the point at which the protagonist becomes aware of the structural nature of the injustice.

#### **Bargaining: Attempts to Resolve Issues**

Before resorting to violence, Paan Singh prefers to try legal and social means. This can also be seen as bargaining, where people try to regain control or reverse their situation. The narrative purpose of these scenes is to show that rebellion is not his first choice but the last.

#### **Depression: Identity Collapse**

When peaceful measures fail, Paan Singh faces the defeat of his identity. His achievements as a national-level sportsperson lose value, and disillusionment is encountered. A shift to darker images and a slower pace is noticed, depicting emotional exhaustion. This is a stage of existential defeat, the symbolic death of his old self.

### **Acceptance: Transformation into Outlaw**

The final stage is characterized by calm resolve rather than anger. Paan Singh comes to accept the futility of justice through conventional systems, which leads him to a rebellious identity. His actions become conscious and planned. This acceptance, therefore, speaks of psychological closure, where he has mourned the loss of identity and has assumed a new one.

### **Discussion**

When Paan Singh is brought under the sunlight of the Kübler-Ross model, it illustrates rebellion as a product of emotional transformation rather than a product of criminal nature. The film subverts moral ideologies with its celebration of outlawry resulting from grief because of negligence. It also speaks volumes against institutions of the state that symbolize celebration but is actually about abandonment.

Such a reading proves the benefits of cross-disciplinary analysis. Psychology supplies us with models of character motivation, while theories of film explain how depictions of emotions are illustrated. The correspondence between narrative structure and the progression of grief implies that forms of narrative construction might conform to universal patterns of human behavior.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has made the argument that Paan Singh Tomar is an icon of grief which follows the stages of grief as outlined in Kübler-Ross's stages of grief theory. Through the journey of an athlete-turned-outlaw, the film shows the stages of grief as depicted by Kübler-Ross. This analysis of the movie is helpful in enriching its meaning via an understanding of the emotional psychology of the movie as depicted in the stages of grief. To conclude, the story in the movie shows that grief leads to revolt, an aspect that is not rooted in history but in contemporary politics.

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