

A Psychoanalytic Analysis of the Hindi Film *Dhurandhar*: Trauma, Moral Anxiety and Identity Fragmentation

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ABSTRACT

Dhurandhar is a contemporary Hindi espionage thriller that, beyond its action-driven narrative, offers a psychologically rich portrayal of trauma, identity fragmentation and ethical conflict under conditions of extreme coercion. This psychoanalytic analysis approaches the film as a psychological text, examining how prolonged exposure to violence, sustained role performance and moral compromise shape the protagonist's psychological functioning. Drawing on classical and contemporary psychoanalytic frameworks including, Freud's structural model of the psyche, repetition compulsion, and group psychology; Lacan's theory of imaginary identification; Winnicott's concept of the false self; and Shay's formulation of moral injury, the paper traces the progressive erosion of ego integration, moral coherence and subjective continuity in the central character. The analysis further explores how national belonging operates as a form of primary identification, drawing on Freud's (1921) account of the ego ideal to illuminate the psychic costs of sacrificing personal identity in the service of collective allegiance. Particular attention is given to culturally shaped masculinity and emotional suppression, contextualised through Kakar's psychoanalytic work on Indian male identity. The role of silence and non-symbolization is examined to show how the failure of language under trauma displaces reflection into repetitive action. The antagonist is analysed as a projected shadow figure through which disowned aggressive impulses are externalised rather than integrated. Overall, the paper argues that *Dhurandhar* portrays survival not as resolution but as an ongoing psychic condition marked by emotional constriction, ethical strain and fragmented subjectivity, underscoring the value of psychoanalytic perspectives in the study of contemporary Indian cinema.

Keywords: *Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Repetition, Moral Anxiety, Masculinity, Silence and Symbolization, Hindi Cinema*

Cinema has long been recognized as a capable medium of representing unconscious desires, conflicts and emotional struggles through narrative and imagery. Psychoanalytic film theory, grounded in the work of Sigmund Freud and later expanded by Jacques Lacan, examines how unconscious processes and identity conflicts are expressed in cinematic texts and how viewers identify with characters on screen. Film thus provides a symbolic space in which internal psychological conflicts can be visually enacted.

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Psychoanalysis emphasizes the role of unconscious motives and internal conflict in shaping behavior. Freud's structural model of the psyche (id, ego and superego), offers a framework for understanding how individuals negotiate instinctual impulses, moral demands and external reality (Freud, 1923). Lacan further proposed that identity is constructed through identification with external images and roles, rendering the self vulnerable to fragmentation (Lacan, 2006). This formulation is especially relevant to characters who are required to sustain conflicting identities over extended periods of time.

Hindi cinema has traditionally relied on dramatic conventions and simplified representations of psychological distress, often prioritizing narrative impact over nuanced engagement with mental processes and subjectivity (Bhugra, 2008). However, Contemporary Hindi cinema has increasingly moved beyond melodramatic resolution to depict psychologically complex characters operating under conditions of stress and ethical uncertainty. *Dhurandhar* exemplifies this shift. While structured around covert operations and national security, the film foregrounds the psychological consequences of prolonged danger, deception and moral compromise. The protagonist's repeated identity alteration and emotional suppression result in a state of sustained hypervigilance.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the film depicts a psyche under siege. Emotional distress is rarely verbalized and is instead expressed through silence, aggression and repetitive action, consistent with psychoanalytic accounts of trauma as an experience that returns through repetition when it cannot be consciously processed (Freud, 1920; Herman, 1992). The film also raises questions of identity stability in contexts of sustained role immersion, suggesting a tension between authentic subjectivity and socially required performance that resonates with Winnicott's (1960) concept of the False Self (Winnicott, 1965).

The present review examines *Dhurandhar* through a psychoanalytic lens to explore how trauma, identity fragmentation and moral conflict are represented in the film, approaching it as a psychological case study rather than solely an action narrative.

PLOT

Dhurandhar is a Hindi action–espionage thriller, that follows the story of an Indian intelligence operation aimed at dismantling a dangerous criminal network with cross-border links.

The film centers on Jaskirat, an undercover intelligence officer tasked with infiltrating the world of Rehman Dakait, a powerful and feared gangster. To gain access, Jaskirat assumes the identity of Hamza and slowly earns trust through carefully staged encounters, acts of loyalty and displays of bravery. As he moves deeper into the criminal hierarchy, he becomes closely involved with Rehman's inner circle and family, navigating rivalries, betrayals and shifting alliances.

As the operation progresses, Jaskirat's mission grows increasingly dangerous, culminating in coordinated attacks, betrayals and high-stakes confrontations. The film ends without fully resolving the protagonist's fate or mission, deliberately setting up a continuation in a second part, while underscoring the high personal cost of prolonged deception.

METHODOLOGY

The Hindi film *Dhurandhar* was selected for psychoanalytic review based on its thematic emphasis on violence, identity and psychological conflict. The film was viewed multiple times on a digital platform to closely observe narrative structure, character behavior, dialogue and visual elements. An interpretative qualitative approach was adopted, using concepts derived from psychoanalytic theory to analyze the psychological functioning of major characters and underlying themes. The analysis focused on unconscious processes, trauma responses, identity formation and moral conflict as represented in the film.

PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS

Identity and Ego Fragmentation in the Protagonist

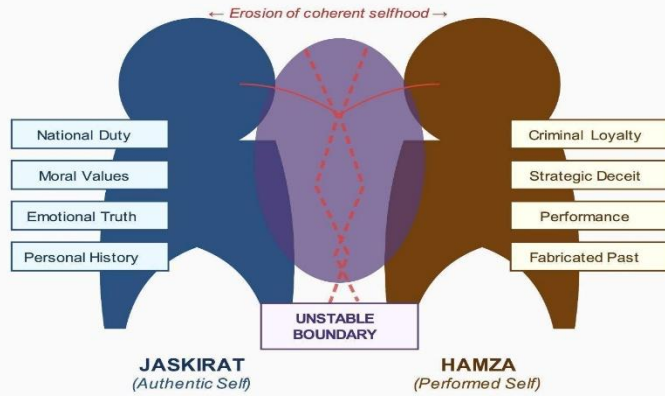
The central character in the film is presented as an undercover agent where identity is not stable but continuously negotiated. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the protagonist's psychological functioning reflects a fragmented ego structure, shaped by prolonged exposure to danger, deception and sustained role performance. His actions suggest a psyche organized around survival rather than self-integration, warranting examination through the lens of structural psychoanalysis.

Freud conceptualized the ego as the mediating agency between instinctual drives (id), moral constraints (superego) and external reality (Freud, 1923). In the film, this mediating function is repeatedly strained, as the protagonist is compelled to suppress personal emotions and ethical hesitation in order to fulfill externally imposed demands. The repeated requirement to act against internal values places the ego under constant pressure, leading to emotional numbing and psychological detachment. Rather than integrating experiences into a coherent narrative, the ego functions instrumentally, responding only to immediate threats, a pattern commonly observed in individuals exposed to chronic trauma (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2015).

Beyond the structural strain on the ego, the protagonist's predicament also raises fundamental questions about the construction of identity itself. Lacan's formulation of identity formation further illuminates this fragmentation. According to Lacan, identity is constructed through identification with external roles and images rather than emerging as a fixed internal essence (Lacan, 2006). In *Dhurandhar*, the protagonist is required to inhabit a role that conflicts with his internal sense of self. Over time, this sustained performance intensifies imaginary identification with the cover persona, eroding the boundaries between the performed identity and any stable sense of self exhibited in *figure 2* (Erikson, 1968). In present analysis, such prolonged identification with a conflicting role can be understood as identity diffusion, a divided subjectivity marked by psychological alienation rather than integration.

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Figure 2: Identity Fragmentation – The Jaskirat-Hamza Split



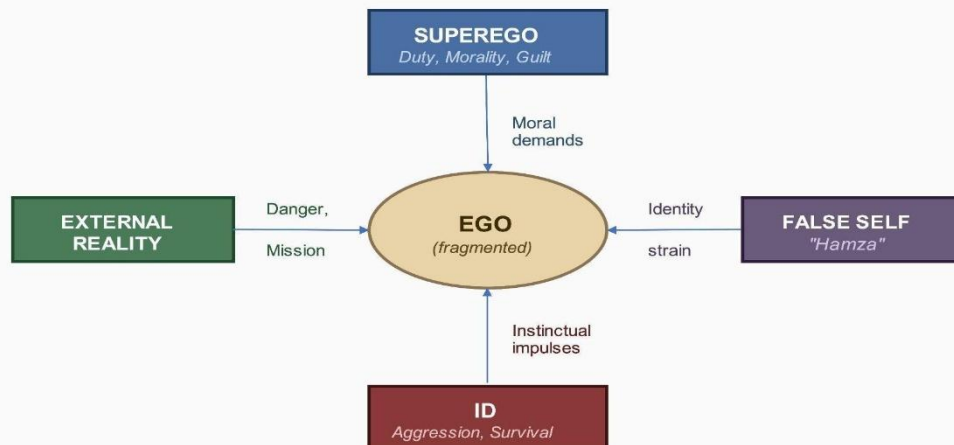
Legend:

The protagonist's psyche is split between authentic identity (Jaskirat) and performed cover identity (Hamza). The central overlap zone represents the increasingly unstable boundary, marked by fracture lines indicating psychological strain.

This fragmentation manifests most clearly in the protagonist's restricted emotional expression. Feelings such as fear, guilt and grief are rarely verbalized and are instead displaced into action, aggression, or silence. Psychoanalytic theory understands such emotional restriction as a defensive response aimed at protecting the psyche from overwhelming anxiety and internal conflict (A. Freud, 1936). While this defense may enable short-term functioning, it ultimately limits emotional processing, and deepens psychological isolation.

Thus, the protagonist's identity in *Dhurandhar* can be understood as a fractured construct shaped by sustained dissociation and ego strain. The film illustrates how prolonged exposure to extreme circumstances can erode the coherence of the self, resulting in what Winnicott termed a 'false self' as a compliant, functional persona organized around external demands and survival imperatives rather than authentic internal experience (Winnicott, 1965). Identity becomes instrumentalized rather than integrated and survival takes precedence over self-reflection. The cumulative structural pressures acting on the protagonist's ego are schematically represented in *figure 1*.

Figure 1: The Ego Under Siege – Structural Model of Psychic Strain



Legend:

The ego, positioned at the center of Freud's structural model, mediates between instinctual drives (id), moral constraints (superego), and external reality. In *Dhurandhar*, the additional pressure of maintaining a false identity intensifies fragmentation.

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National Identity and the Boundaries of Selfhood

The film engages, implicitly, with questions concerning the relationship between individual and collective identity. Jaskirat's willingness to fragment his personal identity in the service of national security suggests that national belonging operates at a level deeper than rational choice. It functions as a form of primal identification, analogous to early attachment processes rather than conscious allegiance (Freud, 1921).

The film implicitly asks what it means to love one's nation enough to lose oneself. This question resonates with Freud's formulation of group psychology, individuals become bound to a collective through processes of identification and a shared ego ideal, which in the film is represented by the nation (Freud, 1921). Jaskirat's sacrifice involves not only the risk of physical death but a more destabilizing loss: the erosion of a coherent sense of self.

Trauma, Repetition and the Psychology of Violence

Violence in the film functions not merely as a narrative device but as a psychological manifestation of unresolved trauma. From a psychoanalytic perspective, sustained exposure to life-threatening situations overwhelms the psyche's capacity for symbolic processing, resulting in traumatic responses that are enacted through behavior rather than integrated into conscious memory (Herman, 1992). Freud's formulations of repetition provide a useful framework for understanding the consequences of this disruption, suggesting that unresolved experiences may return through action rather than conscious recollection (Freud, 1914, 1920).

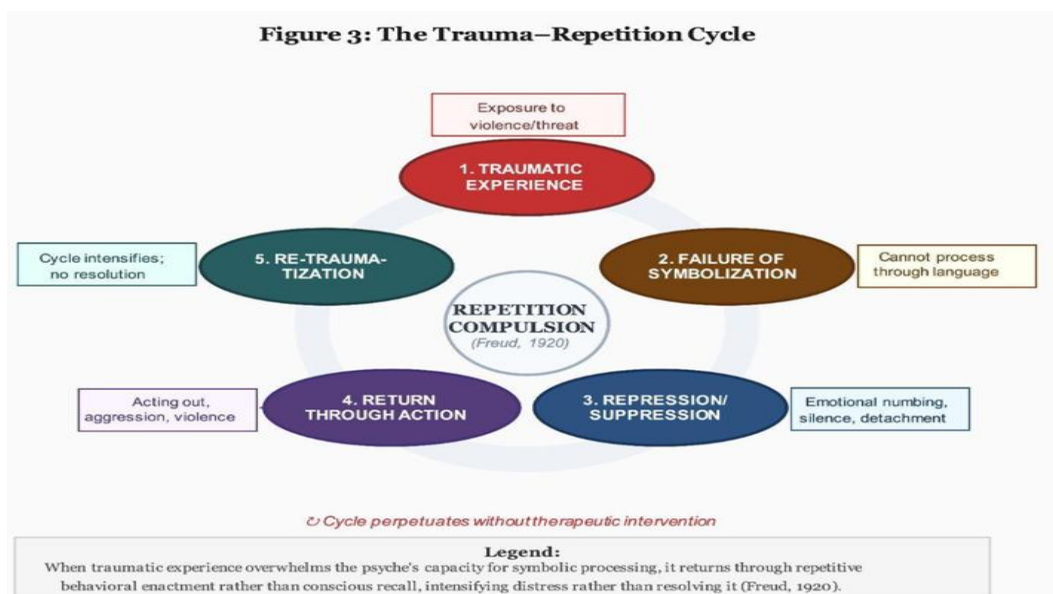
The protagonist's repeated involvement in violent encounters can be understood within this framework. Rather than reflecting deliberate moral choice, these actions suggest an unconscious compulsion to return to situations of danger. Psychoanalytic accounts of trauma describe this pattern as one in which experience resists reflection and returns through action. Freud noted that when remembering is blocked, the individual repeats the experience in action, often without awareness of the underlying cause (Freud, 1914). In *Dhurandhar*, violence thus appears as a form of acting out, indicating that traumatic experience has not been symbolically processed.

Repetition in the film does not lead to resolution. As Freud later elaborated, repetition compulsion involves the recurrent enactment of painful experiences despite their lack of pleasure or resolution (Freud, 1920). This is evident in the protagonist's increasingly mechanical engagement with violence and his emotional detachment from its consequences thereby resulting in affective numbing.

When traumatic experience remains unsymbolized, its return through action is accompanied by a failure of language. Trauma theory suggests that when traumatic experiences cannot be represented through language, they are displaced into bodily action and repetitive behavior (van der Kolk, 2015). In the film, such un-symbolized experience is registered through recurrent acts of violence and sustained action sequences rather than dialogue, reflecting cinema's capacity to communicate unconscious and affective meanings through visual signification rather than direct verbal expression (Metz, 1982).

Taken together, the film presents trauma not as a resolved past event but as an ongoing psychic condition, organizing behavior around survival and action rather than memory, meaning, or emotional integration (summarized in *figure 3*).

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Moral Conflict, Moral Anxiety and Superego Dynamics

A central psychological tension lies in the protagonist's ongoing moral conflict, which can be understood through Freud's concept of the superego. The superego represents internalized moral standards and societal prohibitions, functioning as an internal authority that evaluates actions and generates feelings such as guilt and shame (Freud, 1923). In the film, the protagonist is repeatedly compelled to engage in actions that conflict with personal and ethical values, placing the superego under continuous psychological strain.

Unlike classical psychoanalytic formulations where guilt follows voluntary moral transgression, *Dhurandhar* presents ethical violations as unavoidable consequences of survival. This condition aligns with what Shay (1994) conceptualized as moral injury. It is a form of psychological suffering that emerges when individuals are compelled to act in ways that violate deeply held moral beliefs under conditions of extreme threat and coercion. Unlike conventional guilt arising from voluntary wrongdoing, moral injury reflects enduring damage to one's moral framework, sense of ethical coherence and moral self-understanding (Shay, 1994).

Under such circumstances, the superego ceases to function as a stable moral guide and instead becomes punitive and distressing. The ego, tasked with mediating between external danger and internal moral demands, increasingly adopts an instrumental mode of functioning, prioritizing immediate survival over ethical reflection. This shift does not indicate moral disengagement but rather psychological overload, where moral deliberation becomes a liability rather than a resource. The protagonist's relative absence of overt guilt or remorse may therefore be understood not as evidence of diminished conscience but as a consequence of sustained moral injury, wherein repeated exposure to ethically compromising circumstances disrupts the integration of moral experience into a coherent sense of self (Freud, 1923, Herman, 1992, Shay, 1994).

The protagonist's limited expression of guilt or remorse should therefore not be interpreted as an absence of conscience. Drawing on psychoanalytic accounts of defense mechanisms and trauma adaptation, this analysis suggests that persistent exposure to psychological conflict may lead to defensive modifications in emotional experience and expression (A.

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Freud, 1936; Herman, 1992). This adaptation is reflected in emotional withdrawal, diminished interpersonal engagement, and a flattening of affect, which together suggest ongoing psychological distress rather than ethical indifference.

Thus, the film illustrates the profound psychological cost of survival under coercive conditions, where maintaining life increasingly requires the suspension of moral integration.

Masculinity, Emotional Suppression and Defense Mechanisms

In *Dhurandhar*, masculinity is portrayed not merely as a social identity but as a psychological structure that regulates emotional expression. The male characters, including the protagonist, are consistently depicted as restrained, silent and action-oriented, with minimal verbal articulation of fear, grief, or vulnerability. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such emotional restriction is better understood as a defensive adaptation rather than an absence of emotional experience.

Freud conceptualized defence processes as largely unconscious operations of the ego to manage anxiety arising from internal conflict or external threat (Freud, 1923, 1926). Within the film, emotional suppression functions as a dominant defensive strategy, enabling the male characters to maintain psychological functioning under conditions of constant danger. Affects that might interfere with survival such as fear, guilt, or sadness are repressed, contributing to their indirect expression through behaviour. Aggression and hyper-vigilance thus emerge as culturally acceptable modes of emotional expression within the masculine framework depicted in the narrative.

Kakar's discussion of Indian masculinity highlights how masculine identity is frequently linked to control, endurance and the management of dependency needs, making vulnerability difficult to express openly (Kakar, 1978, 1989). Within this framework, aggression, stoicism and emotional silence can be understood as culturally sanctioned ways of managing fears of helplessness, loss and dependency without explicitly acknowledging them. Masculinity is maintained through action, control and endurance rather than reflection or verbal expression. In *Dhurandhar*, the protagonist's reliance on silence, bodily action and emotional containment closely reflects this cultural pattern, wherein vulnerability is unconsciously equated with weakness and psychological exposure.

Importantly, Kakar does not regard such masculine formations as inherently pathological but as culturally shaped modes of adaptation and self-organization (Kakar, 1978, 1989). However, when emotional restraint becomes prolonged and is reinforced by conditions of chronic danger or psychological stress, it may contribute to difficulties in emotional integration, self-awareness and intimate relationships. The film illustrates this dynamic by portraying masculinity as a necessary adaptive structure for survival that simultaneously constrains emotional integration and self-reflection.

Winnicott's concept of the false self-further illuminates the intrapsychic consequences of this process. When authentic emotional expression is experienced as unsafe, individuals may develop a functional or compliant self that prioritizes external demands over internal needs (Winnicott, 1965). The protagonist's and other male character's controlled demeanor and emotional flatness suggest the operation of such a false self, organized around endurance and performance rather than emotional authenticity. While this structure facilitates survival, it also deepens emotional isolation.

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Antagonist as Projection of the Unconscious

The antagonist functions not only as a narrative opposition to the protagonist but also as a psychological figure through which unconscious conflicts are externalized. From a psychoanalytic perspective, antagonistic figures in cinema often serve as projections of disowned impulses, fears, or aggressive tendencies that the protagonist cannot consciously acknowledge. Projection is a defense mechanism through which unacceptable internal impulses are attributed to an external object or person (A. Freud, 1936).

The antagonist in *Dhurandhar* embodies qualities that the protagonist must suppress in order to sustain psychological and moral functioning. These include unrestrained aggression, emotional detachment and instrumental use of violence. While the protagonist attempts to regulate and contain these impulses within socially sanctioned limits, the antagonist appears to act upon them openly and without hesitation. This contrast allows the film to externalize internal conflict, transforming unconscious tension into visible interpersonal confrontation.

This dynamic can also be understood through Jung's concept of the shadow, which represents those aspects of the personality that are rejected or denied by the conscious self (Jung, 1966). He suggested unconscious contents are frequently projected onto external figures, allowing individuals to disown qualities that are incompatible with their conscious self-image and therefore difficult to acknowledge as their own. In the film, antagonist operates as such a shadow figure, carrying the most disturbing expressions of violence and moral transgression that the protagonist struggles to contain within himself.

The repeated proximity between protagonist and antagonist suggests that this projection is psychologically unstable. The film subtly reveals similarities between the two figures in their strategies, emotional restraint and willingness to use violence when necessary. This mirroring effect destabilizes moral binaries and reinforces the psychoanalytic insight that projected aspects of the self often return in distorted or intensified form. The antagonist thus becomes a psychological mirror, representing what the protagonist risks becoming if ethical restraint and emotional regulation collapse entirely. Through this use of projection and shadow dynamics, it avoids simplistic moral categorization and presents conflict as an expression of divided internal states, reinforcing the film's broader depiction of psychological fragmentation under extreme conditions.

Babu and Rehman: Father, Son and the Illegitimacy Complex

Rehman Dakait's reaction to discovering that he is the illegitimate son of the rival crime-lord Babu Dakait forms one of the film's most potent psychoanalytic dramas. The revelation precipitates extreme violence, including the murder of his mother and crystallizes the illegitimate son's rage toward both paternal rejection and perceived maternal betrayal. This moment exposes the deep psychic fault lines produced by denied lineage and fractured authority.

Rehman's illegitimacy functions as a persistent psychic wound, marking him with social exclusion that manifests as profound feelings of shame and exclusion. In Freudian terms, he exhibits an incomplete Oedipal resolution. He is unable to achieve identification with the father, who remains rejecting and inaccessible, while simultaneously failing to relinquish maternal attachment (Freud, 1924). From a self-psychological perspective, this denied paternal recognition also constitutes a severe narcissistic injury, disrupting the development of a cohesive and valued sense of self (Kohut, 1971). Furthermore, the violent severing of

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the maternal bond through matricide further reflects not resolution but desperation, leaving Rehman trapped in a state of unstable and conflicted identification.

The eventual murder of Babu represents not psychic closure but a repetition of unresolved conflict (Freud, 1914, 1920). Parricide in this context does not enable the son to assume symbolic authority or internalize paternal law; instead, it serves as an attempt to annihilate the source of humiliation and illegitimacy. From Kohut's perspective, such destructive rage may be understood as a response to profound narcissistic injury, arising from the repeated failure of a crucial selfobject relationship to provide affirmation and recognition, leaving the individual vulnerable to chronic experiences of rejection and non-recognition (Kohut, 1971). Although this act appears to promise resolution, it fails to repair the underlying narcissistic injury or confer the legitimacy that Rehman seeks. Consequently, the film portrays violence as a futile attempt to resolve developmental trauma that remains structurally unaddressed.

Hamza's Infiltration as Psychological Seduction

Hamza's infiltration into Rehman Dakait's inner circle is achieved through carefully staged acts of protection rather than overt coercion. His entry point is an intervention during an attack on Dakait's children, whom Hamza helps to rescue. This act positions him as a trustworthy and morally aligned figure. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such a strategy exemplifies psychological seduction, wherein acts of care and rescue are mobilized to generate trust, emotional allegiance and access (Freud, 1912).

The rescue of the children functions as a powerful symbolic act that facilitates Hamza's incorporation into the group in a filial register. By assuming the role of protector, Hamza is unconsciously taken in as a quasi-kin figure, eliciting gratitude and loyalty while temporarily stabilizing a volatile relational environment. This filial positioning enables the rapid formation of transference, as heightened dependency under threat becomes attached to the figure who offers protection and containment (Freud, 1912). Hamza thus comes to function as a temporarily stabilizing selfobject, providing a sense of cohesion, security, and relational continuity ((Kohut, 1971).

The subsequent betrayal reveals the deceptive foundation of this stabilization. Having secured trust and proximity, Hamza later orchestrates violence against Rehman Dakait himself. After the assault, Hamza again performs the role of caretaker, concealing his role in the attack. This gesture of apparent care masks the annihilating intent underlying the relationship. For Rehman, this betrayal may recapitulate earlier patterns of trust and abandonment, characteristic of traumatic relational dynamics (Freyd, 2009; Herman, 1992).

Hamza's deception portrays psychological seduction as a weapon that exploits dependency, filial identification and the longing for stability. The film thus reveals how intimacy and protection can be strategically mobilized as instruments of control, transforming trust into a precondition for annihilation.

The Unresolved Return

The film's ending leaves Jaskirat's psychological state deliberately unresolved, with a second part promised to explore his continued operations. From a clinical perspective, this lack of closure mirrors the reality that deep-cover trauma rarely lends itself to neat resolution. The operative cannot simply return to a pre-mission self, as prolonged exposure to extreme

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conditions may reshape identity and psychological functioning long after the original danger has passed (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2015)

Psychoanalytic and clinical literature suggests that recovery from such experiences does not involve discarding the assumed identity but integrating it into a broader sense of self. Effective therapeutic work with individuals exposed to prolonged identity fragmentation requires acknowledging that “Hamza” was not merely a tactical disguise but a lived psychological reality that must be mourned, symbolized and integrated rather than defensively disavowed.

The film thus frames the unresolved ending not as narrative incompleteness but as psychological realism. The question deferred to the second part is not simply whether Jaskirat will survive future missions, but whether he can achieve psychic integration after inhabiting multiple selves under extreme conditions. Will the fractured identities be held together within a coherent internal narrative, or will he remain suspended between them, caught in a state of permanent psychological division?

CONCLUSION

Psychoanalytic readings of cinema often draw attention to what remains unspoken in narrative form like silences, repetitions and relational tensions that communicate psychological conflict more powerfully than dialogue. In *Dhurandhar*, such elements shape a cinematic world where psychic life is organized less around insight or resolution and more around endurance under sustained threat. The film’s emphasis on action, moral ambiguity and fractured relationships reflects psychoanalytic understandings of trauma and ethical conflict as experiences that resist symbolic integration and instead persist through repetition and behavioral enactment.

By refusing narrative closure, it departs from conventional cinematic treatments of violence and heroism and instead gestures toward the enduring psychological consequences of survival-driven functioning. It engages implicitly with broader psychosocial concerns about identity, morality and relational vulnerability in contexts shaped by coercion and violence, inviting reflection rather than resolution.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that *Dhurandhar* operates as a psychological field in which omnipotent identification, narrative repetition, and historically shared wounds converge, subtly positioning the spectator within the same economy of defense, endurance, and unresolved trauma that structures the protagonist’s psychic life.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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