

Shifting portrayal of women and their relationships in Bollywood Films

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ABSTRACT

Bollywood films have always had a major influence on societal values and have played an important role in promoting Indian culture. It has not only created, but also communicated a shift in social transformation to a level that no other kind of visual art has ever achieved.


However, even when the Hindi film industry has undergone a paradigmatic technological shift in the way stories are told, the representation of women remains clichéd. Of the multitude of movies produced by Bollywood, a vast majority of them continue to be hero-centric with the female lead having limited screen space and in some cases just to provide gloss to the movie.

This paper attempts to lay out the discriminatory and unchanging roles given to women in Hindi cinema (also popularly known as Bollywood), despite the fact that there has been an abundance of talented female actors in each decade. Furthermore, the chapter will weave together the exemplary work displayed by women actors over the years whose work was widely recognized and at the same time did successfully at the box office. The depiction of strong woman characters have not only influenced to bring about a change in the traditional conservative prevailing mind-set of society but at the same time changed the lens through which the women were looked through.

Keywords; *Bollywood cinema, women characters, societal impact, change in mind-set*

Besides cricket, Hindi cinema is another important and popular medium that brings our country together. Bollywood films have had an enormous influence, and despite the burgeoning TV channels and OTT platforms, there is still a large number of regular moviegoers who head to theatres to experience the magic of films on the big screen. Cinema is designed to entertain, transporting the audience to an altogether different realm providing an escape from the everyday grind of existence.

Cinema is a widely consumed media that plays a critical part in shaping attitudes, defining images, and reinforcing prevalent cultural norms. The focus and trends of today's cinema have changed dramatically with

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the integration of cutting-edge foreign technology, but one fixation that has remained practically unchanged in Bollywood is the representation of women in particular.

INTRODUCTION:

India has a rich illuminating history, with sagas of strong and powerful women from the mythological Draupadi to the present-day Kalpana Chawla, which are told to youngsters as part of the process of instilling the proper values. Patriarchy continues to dominate the thinking set to some level, and despite the worship of a profusion of deities, the respect and attitude toward women has not changed significantly. To be honest, women face a great deal of discrimination because it is considered that they are incapable of self-rule and cannot manage on their own. Bollywood effectively encourages this illusion, which is why, even today, 80 per cent of Hindi films have a heroine just to provide glamour and vitality to the narrative.

Films and cinema are the most widely used mass media for connecting with the public. Cinema's ability to communicate social realities, personal dreams, community concerns, and individual goals elevates it to a humanistic discourse with the power to affect our daily lives. (Jain & Rai, 2002). However, adopting media-related content can lead to a loss of identity, sense of autonomy, cultural background, nationality, and sexuality and divisions between 'us' and 'them' (Dines & Humez, 2003). Although the media, particularly television and movies, are frequently regarded as social mirrors, they frequently distort social reality.

Cinema can shape an individual's behaviour, perspective, and status in society. It includes all areas of society. Women's projection has a particular significance since they encounter a variety of challenges in society, including inferiority, identity development, psychological and economic dependence, denial of rights discrimination, harassment, and sexual exploitation (Dasgupta, 1996, p. 178). On the same note, women's representation and status within media power systems are long-standing issues in all societies. It might be argued that the media is critical in the construction of gender beliefs and gender socialization.

The internationalization and Hollywood's profound effect have had a profound effect on India as well, but only on exotic locations, usage of the most advanced techniques to create special effects, the most advanced musical gadgets, a commercial method for film advertisement and marketing, and fashion shifts in the

look of the characters, but the change in representation of the key characters played by women continues to be unchanged in most of our movies with a few deviations.

Efforts have been made in Indian cinema to change the limited portrayal of women and give them a more significant role. Women's roles in traditional Indian cinema differ from those in theatre, which critiques the construction of womanhood and femininity. Modern Bollywood films also deviate from traditional gender roles, especially in terms of sexuality (Virdi, 2003). Despite the long journey that Hindi cinema has taken to achieve its current zenith, there is still a long way to go in showing women as they are, devoid of preconceived stereotypes (Panda, 2018).

However, cinema is increasingly becoming an important medium for women empowerment by freeing women roles from being centrally tied to the male protagonist's romantic interest to having an independent existence. The trajectory has begun over the years and is being reflected in shifts in mainstream movies, such as *Bahubali* (2015), featuring strong female characters alongside their male counterparts.

INFLUENCE OF CINEMA

The perception of watching film varies for each person, as does the influence that movie produces on the mind-set. Movies are a reflection of the society as well as have the potential to bring about change in it. The sway that cinema holds on all aspects of American culture; ideology, politics, gender, class, race and war (Ross, 2014). Movies (pornographic, violent, smoking or drinking, romantic, musical and comedy movies) have a strong influence on adolescent behaviour (Udofiya and Anyim, 2017). Movies are not only tools of entertainment but in contemporary times becoming agents of responsible portrayal of social and cultural transformations (Kumar and Sarkar, 2022).

Sartorial choices have been determined by movies (Singh and Gupta, 2014), the ultra-tight fitting churidar suits worn by Asha Parekh and Saira Banu in the 1960s, the purple embroidered sari worn by Madhuri Dixit in *Hum Apke Hain Koun* (1995) to the T-shirt with Patiala salwar worn by Kareena Kapoor in *Jab We Met* (2007). Even the fringe haircut sported by Sadhana Shivdasani became popular as the eponymous Sadhana cut. The strong influence that movies have on the populace can be gauged from the popularity of Hindi movie dialogues in common parlance such as "Pushpa, I hate tears" from *Amar Prem* (1972) and "Mere paas Ma hai" from

Deewar (1975). “Me Madhuri Dixit BannaChahti Hun” (2003) was the manifestation of the aspiration of a common girl to be like her favourite actress.

Rao (1989) finds films to be “calculated blend of reality and fantasy that holds a mirror to society but filters the reflected image.” They are also being recognised as invaluable historical document as they are strong mediums of social significance. The typical audience enjoys fantasy or intimidating characters, but interacts with or sympathizes with characters who elicit emotions akin to those of the average person. By and large, the producer is more concerned with the male counterpart, the HERO, who is expected to earn revenue at the film office. The HEROINE’S role and presence are normally to bring in the glamour and a de-stressing moment through thematic songs, as well as to add the romance element to the image. The female protagonist’s appearance changes with the latest fashion, as demonstrated by her costumes, hairdos, language, and so on, but there are very few films that have been tailored to bring out her true spunk and character.

Films are portraying changes in society with regards to the ideas of love and marriage, live in relationships, choice of career options, attitude, mental and physical health, ethics and belief system. Kya Kehna (2000), Salaam Namaste (2005), Pink (2016), DearZindagi (2016), Mimi (2021) were some of the female centric mainstream Bollywood movies which brought important social and cultural changes to the forefront.

Verma and Ansari (2024) have traced the way women have been depicted in Bollywood movies. A lot of female characters were depicted as epitomes of sacrifice with many a reference to Nirupa Roy’s roles who has been termed as “queen of misery”. However, her role in Deewar (1975) where she chooses to be with her poor but righteous son, meanwhile reprimanding the other son, Vijay, who is coercing her to choose a life of luxury with him has not been appreciated enough. In a similar vein, Nargis’s role in Mother India (1957) who single-handedly fought against all obstacles to bring up her two sons and did not hesitate to kill her own son when he tried to dishonour another woman has been hailed as a trailblazer.

There have been a slew of movies which show women with agency such as Mirch Masala (1986), Drishti (1990), Rudaali (1993) and Daman (2001) among others which have been side-lined as art films. In the earlier movies, there was a direct contrast between the good

and bad woman as they depicted the female characters as long-suffering mothers, wives, and love interests on the ‘correct’ road, as opposed to the ‘modern’ woman who goes clubbing, drinks, and expresses her desire for the hero openly. These preconceived ideas were thoroughly examined in Nandkumar’s thesis (2011).

Movie scenes which objectify women are found to significantly influence the way people, especially men, perceive women.”Fevicol se”, “chiknichameli” and “Sheila kijawani” saw mainstream Bollywood actresses such as KareenaKapoor and Katrina Kaif grooving to item numbers which was earlier a niche area for “item girls” such as RakhiSawant (Mohabbat he mirchi) and MalaikaArora (Munnibadnaamhui). When men watch movies objectifying women they perceive women’s sexual desires to be secondary to men and that women derive pleasure from being raped. It increases the likelihood of the men acting as perpetrators (Milburn, Mather and Conrad, 2000). Koch and Silberman (1982) discuss and critique voyeurism, identification and transference in great detail to understand why women watch movies.

FAR AND BETWEEN: STRONG ROLES OF WOMEN IN BOLLYWOOD MOVIES

There was an obvious demarcation between characteristics of good and bad women, with the good woman being sacrificial, pure, and virginal, and the evil woman being contemporary, uncontrolled, and self-centered. Butalia contends that films that look at a woman as a human being in her own right are few and far between. In majority of the movies, women are shown as helpless victims because of a preconceived notion of the physicality of strength. In majority of the movies, the women characters are projected as sex objects (Butalia, 1984).

On the contrary, they are taking control of the situation. In 1980, BR Chopra ‘s Insaaf KaTarazu (Scales of Justice), highlighted the challenges of character assassination and miscarriage of justice that a female rape victim experiences when seeking justice for herself. She goes on to kill the rapist after he rapes her sister with impunity. In contrast, Rekha in Jeevan Dhara (1982) takes on all of the family’s responsibilities and sacrifices her wants in the face of hardships. Women characters in movies are no longer willing to suffer and wait for someone to rescue them. Khoon Bhari Maang (1988), Anjaam (1994), Ek HasinaThi (2004), Mom (2017), Maatr (2017) show the female protagonist

transforming into anarchic lawless vengeful people when they were wronged.

Kahaani (2012), Raazi (2018) and Black (2005) subvert the images of the pregnant, the newly wedded bride in a new home and a visually impaired girl respectively which are generally caricatures of the woman in her most vulnerable position to take on the defined villains in their lives and finish the job at hand.

The feisty “sikhni of bhatinda” Geet from Jab We Met (2007) ran away from home because she wanted to live life on her own terms, and her mistakes and regrets should be hers alone, not someone else’s. The film did not portray her as a fallen woman because she fled. Chandramukhi (played by Kalki Koechlin) of Dev D (2009) is a student by the day and a sex worker by night but she is not hapless. She is very much in control just like Paro (played by Mahie Gill) who though very much in love with Dev does not put up with the humiliation and chooses to move on with a man who respects her. They play real women in real world who make their choices and live them and change according to situations.

The gender dynamics in the institution of marriage was questioned in Thappad (2020), which depicted the story of Amrita, whose seemingly perfect life is shattered when her husband slaps her once at a party, and that one slap in public causes her to reconsider her relationship and what it stands for. Damini (1993), Mrityudand (1997), Lajja (2001), Daman (2001), and Pink (2016) brought gender injustice to the forefront by depicting strong female characters who fought against the patriarchal discrimination.

In the epic film Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (1962), Meenakumari’s character is undoubtedly a path breaking representation of a woman who wanted her husband to stay at home with her and went to any length to attract him, even drinking herself to self-destruction. The song “Na ja o saian”, she boldly demands sexual fulfillment from her husband, an audacious move at that time and age. Seema in Chetana (1970), Paro in Dev D (2009), Veronica in Cocktail (2012), and the characters in Lipstick under My Burkha (2016) are the female protagonists who unapologetically own up their sexuality and do not hold back their carnal desires. In earlier movies, the vamps, portrayed by Bindu, Helen and Nadira were allowed to be provocative and maleficent to contrast with the innocent and passive beneficent Indian woman.

Action scenes in Hindi movies continue to be a male bastion. Rekha and Hema Malini were the yester year actresses who did action sequences in a few movies such as Desh Ke Dushman (1989) and in Phool Bane Angarey (1991). Roma in Don (1978, 2006) was a woman of action. In Mardaani (2014) and its sequel in 2019, very uncommon female-led action films have the dynamic SP Shivani Roy, played aptly by Rani Mukherji, a policewoman on a mission to unravel a child-trafficking cartel, and in the second part brings to justice a psychopath. JaiGangaajal (2016) an Indian crime drama film directed by Prakash Jha, a follow-up to the 2003 crime film Gangaajal and stars Priyanka Chopra who played a capable cop battling prejudices in small town India. In these movies, the female protagonist is mostly a cop who fights injustices in a highly contextualized environment and the action scenes are never gory. In contrast, movies like Pushpa (2021) and Kill (2023) feature grisly, brutal and blood spattered scenes catering to a predominantly young male audience.

Biopics on women who have marked their presence in society have also seen a rise in the recent past. Umrao Jaan (1980) was a milestone in Hindi cinema as well as in Rekha’s career who played the titular character impeccably. Bandit Queen (1994), Godmother (1999), Mary Kom (2014), No One Killed Jessica (2011), Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi (2019), Chhapaak (2020), Gangubhai Kathiawadi (2022) are some of them. In the same genre, Padmaavat (2018) is problematic because the Rajput queen chooses to self-immolate herself (the practice of jauhar) to uphold the honour of her community guided by the patriarchal mindset that a man’s honour is paramount and is more important than even the life of a woman (Fitria, 2023; Hannula, 2020).

However, this contrasting black and white division is slowly merging with grey shades of women being depicted more and more in Hindi cinema. Kishore (2014) also finds that the “lead actress can be actively interpreted as the merger of the classic heroine and vamp characters.”

In the age of male villains, the vamps performed by lead heroines have different colors and are still remembered by moviegoers. Simi Grewal, famed for her grace and elegance, played the critically lauded role of Kamini Verma, the murderous wife from a previous life, which earned her a Filmfare nomination for Karz (1980). The suspense film is remembered by audiences as one of the best films based on incarnation, lyrical

melodies, and Simi Grewal. In Gupt (1997), Kajol played a psychopathic killer, despite her sweet girl next door persona. Urmila Matondkar's performance in *Pyaar Tune Kya Kiya* (2001) as a fervent, envious mistress who eventually becomes an attacker after countless charming girl next door roles was nothing short of brilliant. In *Aitraaz* (2004), Priyanka Chopra played a dominating boss who tries to seduce her subordinate, one of the first movies where a powerful woman was shown exploiting her subordinate for sex.

In the horror genre, Ramsay movies were the staple diet for a long time where women were fetishized as both victim and the monster. A feminist tone in the supernatural was introduced in *Stree* (2018) and *Bulbul* (2020) where instead of a white saree clad female ghost who is controlled by an evil male 'tantrik' who terrorizes the people who have antagonized the tantric, we have a young woman in all riches and finery who terrorizes the men who perpetuate violence against women.

The shift toward women-centered roles began slowly but was evident in every decade of cinema. The simple fact is that society was resistant to change due to an enduring patriarchal ethos.

DEPICTION OF WOMEN CONNECTIONS IN MOVIES

Evolution of roles played by women has gradually become more thought provoking and has substance. In the latest release of 2023, *Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire*, an Indian Telugu-language epic action thriller, Sriya Reddy played the bad part, and looking stunning, dangerous, and beautiful, with audiences admiring her appearance more than the leading lady toppling the prevailing mindset that only the positive characters can look attractive and steal the limelight.

A majority of the mainstream (masala) movies depicts the woman as someone whose only relevance in the movie is because of the romantic interest that the male protagonist has in her. Her existence is secondary to the male protagonist and her desires and ambitions do not merit independent essence. She is shown to the audience through the hero's eyes (Sharma, 2014). Even her relationships are non-existent; the only primary relationship in her life is that which she has with the central male protagonist which is strictly romantic. In some movies, the brother-sister bond has been explored as in *Kaajal* (1965) even though romance is the main thing. A few movies have also shown a beautiful father-daughter bond, albeit always on a secondary plane, on the fringes of the main romantic theme.

In contrast, romance is on the fringes of the bickering father-daughter duo in *Piku* and the competing mother-daughter in *Neel Batte Sannata* (2015). When her fiancé refuses to go ahead with the wedding, Rani of Queen (2013) emboldened by her sassy Dadi embarks on a journey of self-discovery by going on her honeymoon tour alone. The complexities of a mother daughter relationship have been the focal point for *Tribhanga* (2021) and *Darlings* (2022).

For years, the sister in Bollywood films has been the most helpless character, constantly abused or raped after which she commits suicide, leaving her powerful brother to revenge her murder. However, there have been a few films that have highlighted a unique sibling bond and have been well received by audiences. In the period of clichéd movies, *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971) showed a different brother-sister relationship and highlighted that love between siblings withstands even when their parents separate. Dev Anand embarks on an emotional journey to find his separated sister Zeenat Aman, who is mired in substance abuse. The film broke the monotony of our dreary flicks and was ahead of its time. 'Ek hazaron mein meri behnahai' is still a popular bhai-behen song. *Dhanak* (2015) explores sibling love where a responsible elder sister in her teens embarks on a journey through the desert of Rajasthan so that she can help her visually impaired brother reach the avenue for an eye operation. Similar themes have been delivered into in *Jigra* (2024) and *Do Patti* (2024).

Another outstanding film starring two tremendously gifted performers, Rakhee Gulzar and Rekha, depicted the fight between two sisters' emotions as a result of unfortunate circumstances in *Basera*. Rakhee's realization of life after 14 years of absence, along with the intuition that something is amiss, drives her to pretend to be insane and return to the mental asylum so that others, particularly her sister, can continue to live normally. This ground breaking picture was developed in 1981 with a fresh mind set, focusing on the portrayal of woman with substance. In a similar vein, Rekha in *Jhuthi* (1985) plays the main protagonist for whom romance takes a backseat when her sibling's honour is at stake.

Aditi in *Astititva* (2000), portrayed to the hilt by Tabu, a two-time national award winner, discussed the male ego and the predicament of women in society today, who are responsible to everyone, including their children. Shamed, deserted, and side-lined by her husband and son, Aditi's goes on a journey of self-

discovery, leaving behind her family and the highlight of the movie was that her would-be daughter-in-law, helps her to arrive at a decision, breaking her relationship with her boyfriend, Aditi's son.

A beautiful friendship between the women was depicted in *Dor* (2006) and *Cocktail* (2012) where the bond of the women is tested over the man they love. *Fashion* (2008) depicts the journey of a small town girl who strives to reach the pinnacle of success and is betrayed by the man and the system surrounding the fashion industry when she refuses to play by their rules. The film is noteworthy in showing how the female protagonist rises again from the nadir with the help of other women friends whom she had riled up on her way down.

Films are no longer afraid of showing women in "bad" light. The effervescent and genteel Deepti Naval with a girl-next-door image was quite a revelation in *NH 10* (2015) as the unassuming and kind-looking Ammaji, the architect of the nightmare that Meera (the female protagonist) finds herself in. Ammaji, the village sarpanch, has orchestrated the killing of her own daughter by a gang of violent men headed by her son because she defied the village norms by loving outside her caste. She doesn't hesitate to kill Meera who is a witness to the killing who valiantly defends herself. The pitching of the two women who are on opposite sides of the patriarchal system is a strong indication of the brave new face of mainstream Hindi cinema which does not hesitate to hold up a mirror to the gender dynamics where women themselves are upholders of the patriarchy. Similarly, the dominating Dina Pathak locks horns with the chaotic Rekha in a family drama in *Khubsoorat* (1980) where the highlight of the movie was not the romance but the relationship dynamics between the two women.

Alizeh in *Ae Dil He Mushkil* (2016) reprimands the male protagonist when he cannot bear the cold and collapses on the snow all the while wearing a jacket whereas she is in a chiffon sari grooving to a song. This scene is a critique of the scores of Hindi movie scenes where the woman has no warm clothing in cold environments and is dancing happily in just sari and heels around the hero who is standing and posing in warm clothes. In this movie, a platonic relationship was celebrated between the female and male protagonists. In contrast, *Fire* (1996) openly addressed homosexual relationships between the characters of Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das. There was a lot of controversy after its debut, but critics and

spectators praised the explicit portrayal of a homosexual relationship as fearless, turbulent, and innovative.

However, this pattern has been slowly shifting over the years, and women have broken the monotony and demonstrated time and again that if given the correct role, they can perform admirably and garner accolades as well as break box office records. Many films in which women play bold and strong roles have not performed well commercially but have been receiving rave comments and full appreciation from all sectors.

The characters, which challenge the stereotype that women are typecast in Hindi films, were previously performed by women who never played the female protagonist. Mainstream actresses previously failed to challenge the stereotype of the "sabyabharatiyanari" image because the general audience rejected them, as is evident with the extremely gifted Rehana Sultan. As a result, a few women were cast in these parts, becoming clichés of "bad modern women". However, times have changed, and grey and negative roles are now being played by mainstream actresses and accepted by the public.

Today's modern woman balances her life between work and family, but many want to stay at home to care for the duty, which does not mean that she should be less valued. To depict this tug of war between her and her position in the family, an independent woman character was shown in the film

CONCLUSION

The mainstream media has long been seen as society's watchdog, and this tradition imposes a moral obligation on them to reflect on the direct the process of social transformation. However, due to many difficulties, mass media has become the exclusive commercial channel in modern India, failing to reflect everybody's social problems or objectives, particularly women's challenges. As a result, the representation of women in Indian media, whether in films, television shows, visual advertising, or newspapers and magazines, has sparked widespread concern among social researchers and scholars. Today's electronic and print media frequently portray women as commodities, sex objects, or victims (Maqbool, 2022).

Men control Bollywood movies, as they do in every other sphere, but it's time that it should stop staying male-centric. The central character is always played by a male character as a lead who is the protector of

humankind, and almost a super hero, who can save his mother, sister, or girl friend from the villain prison unhurt after beating about hundred armed goons without backup. The heroine has an insignificant part to play, some dialogues to mouth, sing a romantic song getting drenched in the rain or in snow filled mountains providing the romance to the movie with the hero and break the monotony of fight sequences songs, and in the end of the film and have a coy smile on her face since she is included in the family group photo at the end of the film.

Cinema is a reflection of society as well as a harbinger of change. Women's representation in movies has changed dramatically. Previously, women were viewed as flag bearers of virtue, which was wearing traditional clothes like saris or salwars and not questioning the status quo. It was a very black and white world. Cigarette smoking, drinking, going to the club, and having fun with male friends were all considered vices, and women who engaged in those activities were obviously not righteous women.

Views were so ingrained that actresses who desired to play mainstream heroes were either not offered these roles, did not accept them, or were discouraged from playing characters with these flaws. These were portrayed by a small number of actresses, who were then typecast in these conventional negative parts throughout their careers. or relegated to performing them exclusively. Even then, women characters were depicted to have influence over their lives, though these films were few in number.

However, these roles that show reality rather than a specific manner of presenting women are now seen as meaty roles that mainstream actors are gradually taking on. Women are now writing roles that portray women as they are rather than what they should be, living up to a specific standard, as was the custom in the early decades when men wrote women's roles. The society is also valuing the flesh and bone women who are seen around us. Even today, glamour is a vital element of an actress's presence but more and more real-life are manoeuvring their lives in the direction they desire, thus becoming agents of change and at the same time are appreciated by the society.

Actresses depicting small town girls with minimal make up, going about their lives and taking decisions have seen a great boost to their popularity indicating that the society is now more acceptable of real time women who are working hard to provide for their families coexisting

with the fantastic world where women dance to the music in chiffon saris in the snow covered mountains being coveted by their heroes.

The women are shown as complete personalities in their own right, with independent lives outside of the romance. They are doctors, engineers, architects, aviators, cops, spies, unemployed, maids, sex workers, and drug addicts. These women are dedicated to their careers, and are fighting against all odds to live a life of dignity and respect. The border between good and evil is fading away, and the women in movies are compelling society to confront hard realities. When the world is talking about gender equality, it's encouraging to see that not only Bollywood, but film as a whole, is gradually accepting that if given the opportunity, a woman can portray any character with the same kind of talent, conviction, and potential.

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