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From Damsel in Distress to a Mole in the hole an insight into diversity of portrayal of Indian Women on Bollywood Screen

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Abstract

Cinema has long been a dominant medium of entertainment in India, a country characterized by its vast population and significant socio-economic disparities. It has historically been the most affordable form of leisure, particularly for a society grappling with pervasive poverty and hunger. The relatively low cost of cinema tickets made it accessible to individuals from marginalized economic backgrounds, such as rickshaw pullers and daily wage labourers, who formed a formidable audience and shaped the way characters were depicted on screen. This audience segment played a critical role in shaping cinematic narratives and the depiction of characters on screen. The unparalleled cultural significance of Hindi cinema in India lies in its ability to act as a powerful tool for constructing dominant social images, shaping public opinions, and influencing societal identities. At the same time, it has been instrumental in both challenging and perpetuating social stereotypes. As Gupta and Gupta (2013) observe, "Indian movies have been a vital medium to communicate social insights and conditions while continuing to function as an important mode of entertainment to the masses."¹

Keywords: Cinema, Narratives, Social Images, Social Identities, Stereotypes

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Introduction

The term Bollywood at one time was considered derogatory by people in movie business yet it grew in acceptance, becoming a part of Indian psyche. Today the term has become synonymous with Hindi Film Industry. The size and reach of the industry has grown massively over the past few decades creating a remarkable influence and viewership not just in India but abroad as well within diaspora. With the growth in the size of Hindi Film Industry there has emerged considerable scholarship regarding the various aspects of this Industry; including a feminist discourse specially focussing on the portrayal of women in Hindi Films. This research paper intends to explore diversity in representation of women being portrayed on silver screen, featuring constantly evolving face of modern, confident, ambitious, career oriented woman in Bollywood landscape.

The early years of Indian cinema drew inspiration primarily from mythological narratives, such as Raja Harish Chandra, and historical depictions, such as *Jahan Ara*, which reflected the prevailing social ethos and belief systems. In the course of past century, Indian films have undergone significant evolution, not just in thematic concerns but also in technical and artistic dimensions. Elements such as character development, plot structures, themes, storytelling, and cinematography have advanced substantially since the inception. The size of the industry has grown tremendously as Dwyer (2006) notes, "The Indian film industry is one of the largest annual producers of films globally and serves the largest diaspora audience in the world."²

Recent years, have witnessed a growing academic discourse surrounding the representation of women in Indian cinema. The portrayal of female characters in the early years of Hindi cinema

was deeply influenced by societal norms and the patriarchal structures of Indian society. Women were often depicted through two dominant archetypes: the self-sacrificing *devi* (goddess-like figure) confined to the domestic sphere and characterized by compassion and virtue, and the seductive *vamp*, who sought to lure the male protagonist with her alluring demeanour and provocative dance moves. These roles frequently relegated female characters to fringe, where they were primarily portrayed as dutiful mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters, or as the hero's love interest. More often than not, these characters lacked agency and were denied a voice of their own. Numerous scholars have questioned, "Bollywood's portrayal of women" and arguably "with much of the discourse critiquing the predominance of the patriarchal gaze and the subjugation of women, which relegates them to peripheral and secondary roles."³(Bandyopadhyay, 2004)

This paper seeks to explore Hindi cinema as a cultural force that both reflects as well as influences ever evolving gender norms, with a particular focus on a nuanced and seemingly empowered diverse characterization of female protagonists in contemporary main stream cinema. Recent examples, such as Gangubai Kathiawadi, present a re-imagined feminist narrative, with a strong protagonist asserting her presence in a challenging social milieu. Similarly, the female lead in Pathaan embodies a glamorous yet morally ambiguous persona, embracing the complex dimensions of human character. Furthermore, a film like *Crew*, which centres on an all-female heist, underscores the growing diversity in the representation of women, signalling a shift toward narratives that emphasize female agency and empowerment.

Literature Review

The progression of women-centric films in Indian cinema mirrors broader transformations in societal attitudes toward gender roles and representations. Historically, Indian cinema has faced criticism for its limited and stereotypical portrayal of women, who were often confined to supporting roles defined by their relationships with male characters (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Nevertheless, scholarly work has identified a gradual evolution in the depiction of women in Indian films, particularly during the late 20th century, a period shaped by increasing awareness of gender inequality and the influence of feminist activism (Ramaswamy, 2007).

Laura Mulvey, introduced the concept of 'Male gaze' in her seminal work 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) drawing upon the psychoanalytic works of Freud and Lacan. She takes into cognisance the idea of Scopophilia (pleasure of looking) which is associated with "voyeurism, in which a viewer derives pleasure from looking at a subject". In her view the portrayal of female characters in Hindi cinema largely aims objectification of women.

Mukherjee (2017) explores the dynamics of power in Indian cinema, emphasizing how gender influences cinematic narratives and character development. She asserts that the emergence of women-centric films represents a significant departure from traditional storytelling conventions, providing a platform for female voices and experiences. These films actively challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies, offering alternative representations of femininity and womanhood.

The representation of gender in Indian cinema is further analysed through the framework of cultural hegemony by Bandyopadhyay (2004). He contends that dominant ideologies and power structures significantly influence cinematic narratives, shaping audience perceptions of gender roles and identities. However, Bandyopadhyay notes that women-centric films disrupt these hegemonic structures by foregrounding female experiences and resisting traditional power dynamics. These films serve as sites of resistance, offering counter-narratives that envision gender equality and empowerment.

Gangoli (2016) delves into the complexities of masculinity and its pervasive influence on Indian cinema, observing how male-dominated narratives have historically framed the portrayal of women. She argues that women-centric films act as counter-narratives, providing nuanced

perspectives on gender relationships and dynamics. By centering female agency and subjectivity, these films challenge patriarchal norms and destabilize traditional notions of male dominance.

The recent transformation in the cinematic landscape of Bollywood can be attributed to the forces of globalization, which have played a pivotal role in shaping the industry's evolving dynamics. The expansive Indian diaspora has fostered the emergence of a significant and influential audience, whose preferences have catalysed a demand for more substantial and complex female characters. This shift is evident in the prominent roles of women in films such as *Fashion*, *Corporate*, *Queen*, *Dirty Picture* etc. Moreover, this trend is also reflected thematically in narratives that foreground stronger female protagonists, as seen in films like *Filhaal*, *Tumhari Sulu*, *Pink*, and *Raazi*.

Notably, these films do not belong to the realm of parallel cinema but are part of the mainstream film industry, thus marking a significant evolution in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema. The themes explored in these films span a wide range, from surrogacy and the struggles of a middle-class housewife in a contemporary setting to issues of legal rights and espionage. Collectively, these films have contributed to the creation of a more equitable platform for the portrayal of female characters, redefining the way women are represented in the evolving discourse of Indian cinema.

The scholarship on women-centric films underscores their transformative potential in challenging entrenched gender norms and promoting social change. Researchers have highlighted the thematic, narrative, and cultural significance of these films, particularly their ability to reshape societal perceptions of gender roles and identities. As women-centric cinema continues to evolve, it remains an essential medium for feminist activism and progressive storytelling in India. According to Ahad and Akgül (2020), "Over the past ten or so years, there has been an increase in Bollywood films featuring women due to the country's expanding public conversation on women" (2020). The thematic shift on women's agency, embodiment, and the battle for empowerment and transformation can be observed in numerous films of the previous decade such as *Pink*, *Thappad*, and *Chhapaak* which shift the focus on the voice of women and their stories in different circumstances. Most of these movies tackled difficult topics featuring women as victims.

Another major source of changing perspective can be traced back to forces of liberalization and globalization in the post 1991 India. This opening of doors of India to foreign investors and an exposure to cable network and foreign media majorly altered life styles, choices and preferences of people which according to Nijhawan (2009), marks the entry of a "new woman" in the Bollywood industry (p. 107).

This shifting lens in the portrayal of women in Hindi Cinema was due to "socio-economic changes that accompanied India's economic liberalization in the 1990s and their impact on cinematic narratives and representations of gender" (Saxena & Zafar, 2017) This paper attempts to capture the changing face of Heroine of mainstream cinema where the narrative can be women centric but she is able to transform herself from Abala Nari to Sabala Nari (from a victim to woman of substance) with a capability to take charge of her life.

The films chosen for this research paper are those with high box office success: *Gangubai* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Pathaan* a Yash Raj Production and *Crew* by Balaji Productions.

Gangu Bai: The Mafia Queen with a feminist heart

In this film, the central protagonist is a female character who lands up in a brothel after being duped by her supposed lover with whom she had eloped and who ends up selling her off. The story is a journey of a young woman forced into prostitution who eventually becomes the owner of her own brothel sub sequentially becoming a mafia queen gaining supremacy and influencing the corridors of power through her sharp acumen and negotiations. There have been numerous

films with female lead essaying the role of a prostitute which range from the delicate *Pakeeza* to a stark *Mandi* or a more recent and extremely dark *Begum Jaan*, in each of these women lacked agency and voice, which were depicted as victims of their circumstances. *Gangu Bai* moves beyond that sympathetic narrative where director Sanjay Leela Bhansali seamlessly presents the story of *Gangubai* with all her dark shades instead of just invoking the sympathy of his audience.

It may be noted that most of these earlier films except *Pakeeza*, were from the directors in the realm of offbeat cinema, yet this film by *Bhansali* as a part of mainstream Bollywood cinema is markedly an unconventional step. Accepting, 'The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics,' (Ahmad 1992) the Feminist undertones reflected in the powerful dialogue: "jab shakti, sampatti aur samridhi...", underscore the film's emphasis on empowerment and agency.

Pathan: The Mole in the Hole

In this movie the role of the leading female protagonist covers a broader ambit where Deepika Padukone in her extremely glamorous avatar is not just limited to playing the love interest of *Pathan* (Shah Rukh Khan) an undercover RAW agent, but acts as his alter ego playing an ISI Agent. This Yash Raj Film attempts a Hollywood style espionage flick on the lines of *Mission Impossible* or *007 Bond*, however unlike most Indian Movies this film accords almost equal footage to the female lead as well. The changing representation of a female lead is visible in the story of deliberate betrayal by the character of Deepika Padukone who lures *SRK* into a trap not once but twice once leaving him presumably to die. The role essayed by Deepika in this film is more akin to the quintessential vamp or bad girl of earlier movies, who had low moral ethics. From the choice of skimpy clothes to the ulterior motives of her action; it reeks of a role more suited for the B Grade Actresses like Helen, Aruna Irani, or Bindu of yester years. This is a purely masala movie yet the unabashed boldness and ease in presenting the ambiguous persona of female lead seems rather rare for mainstream cinema. Deepika's Character in *Pathaan* moves out of the cocoon of a stereotypical female character. The very choice of her profession: a spy; is in stark contrast to most of the roles meant for heroines of Hindi Cinema. She does not seem to choose espionage as a profession due to some moral compulsion nor is she portrayed as a deviant character, her actions seem to be part of the game, later of course the film does a volte face where the character of Deepika undergoes a change of heart in joining hands with *Pathan* played by Shah Rukh Khan. The unapologetic mole in the hole is an extremely bold choice for a female avatar on the silver screen of Hindi cinema and the fact that the movie went on to become one of the highest grossers with a collection of Rs. 1050.30 Crore at the box office shows the acceptability of such a portrayal by a large section of population in India and diaspora. A similar case of a tale of love and betrayal by the leading lady Kajol in *Dilwale* (2015) had bombed badly at the box office reflecting low level of audience acceptance for such characterization. *Pathaan* however moves beyond archetypical Hindi Film's female lead, it has a female lead who is perpetrator of devious deception without any moral trappings. *Pathaan* appears to be intended for a global audience in terms of theme as well as characterization wherein Deepika's ambiguous persona shuns a stereotypical Indian Ethos.

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Crew-Winner takes all

The last film which I have selected is the recent flick *Crew*, the movie is a tale of a heist undertaken by an all women cabin crew of an air-line facing severe financial losses. The movie which is a take-off on the fiasco of Vijay Mallya's *King Fisher* weaves the story of three women whose paths cross when they serve as a part of the Cabin Crew in the airline. The narrative touches upon post liberalized India's all too familiar tales of corporate financial mal-practices, including the prevalent malaise of delayed salaries creating chaos and uncertainties in the lives of its work-force. The movie is extremely insightful in highlighting the changing role of women

in Indian Society; we find the character of Tabu is forced to shoulder the financial liabilities of her family due to her husband's failed career. She finds work in the airline taking up the task of becoming a bread winner for her family, Tabu moves out of the role of stereotypical middle class house-wife, transforming herself into a working woman when she takes up the job of a Flight Attendant. She is a modern woman who does not shy away from supporting her husband's aspiration of setting up a business; her characterization reflects a departure from female characters of yore that were left with little option except bewailing against the change which fate had bequeathed them. From Nirupa Roy in *Amar*, Akbar Anthony, to Jaya Prada in *Akhiri Rasta*, a horde of leading ladies fell prey to the evil designs of Villains in case of a job loss or a failed business of their husbands, the entire narrative was woven around the tale of misfortune which befell them and they were left at the mercy of villain who took advantage of their misfortune. The film uncovers the economic uncertainties of a growing Indian Middle class and a paradigm shift in the roles of women. Tabu finds her moral grounding as she overcomes the love of her blood ties forcing her brother to move out of her house, since he was adding to her financial woes by leeching her.

Presented in a comic vein, this film authentically manages to delineate day to day existentialist struggles in the lives of these three women who are able to meander through brazenly exploitative practices of airline industry, together with agonizing delays in their salaries remaining undeterred in having fun. The chaos of their middle class lives is weighed against a glamorously flashy life which they encounter during their flight stop overs. The difference in the age group of all three ladies (Tabu, Kareena and Kriti Sannon) helps to maintain their individuality in this movie wherein they undertake the notorious task of gold smuggling routinely and when faced with legal consequences of their actions they end up literally executing a heist with élan. This comedy closely examines changing social milieu through a female lens, looking at the reality of divorce along with its damaging impact on kids, issues related to underemployment as faced by the character of Kriti Sannon (Divya) and go-getting spirit of modern women who do not undergo any moral dilemmas when indulging in criminal activities. The film has received good critical reviews, among others Devesh Sharma of *Filmfare* wrote, "Tabu- Kareena Kapoor-Kriti Sanon-starrer Crew totally smashes through stereotypes".

Conclusion

Film industry is one of the most significant players in the field of entertainment; this powerful influence is not only an expression of entertainment but also a formative cultural force that both reflects as well as shapes public life.

It serves as a reflection of society's evolving norms as well as an active participant in constructing those norms. Movies communicate social insights and offer glimpses into societal issues, and as such, become integral to the evolving perceptions of social identities and cultural values, including expectations around gender, power, and societal roles.

The above movies have been cited to show an emerging trend of women centric films which have evolved over the last two decades under the influence of globalization and an on-going feminist centric dialogue voicing the need for agency and empowerment amongst women. These three films which have a range in genres also showcase a growing diversity, individuality and empowerment among the female protagonists. Through this paper the researcher has focussed on the evolving landscape for women in Hindi cinema who appear to have moved out of bounds of the stereotypical mother, wife or the hero's love interest, they are not limited to being viewed through the male gaze. They proclaim their unabashed individuality; they are able to air their aspirations and desire shifting the lens from 'life as a struggle' to 'life as a journey' with women being active participants of their story rather than mute spectators in the unfolding drama of life.

Post liberalization a new globalized India is both influencing and being influenced by global trends of fashion, social norms and gender depiction, thus we have a Mission Impossible style heroine in Deepika Padukone in Pathan, Air Hostesses in pivotal role in Crew and a very avowedly feminist Alia Bhatt in Gangubai ushering in winds of change for women in Indian Cinema.

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