



# Representation of Women in Indian Cinema: An Analysis of Women- Centric Bollywood Movies

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*Abstract: Indian society is a cinema obsessed society, where films act largely as social mirrors. Films are the true reflection of the values and norms of the society. Cinema has such a deep impact on the minds of the society. No other medium could ever achieve this important position. Throughout the journey of cinema, the placement of women remains central, even if their roles are not primary and a peripheral. The focus remains on their body or beauty. The portrayal of women in Indian Hindi cinema has not elevated womanhood rather it has always degraded.*

*The present paper highlights the contribution of Hindi movies of Bollywood which have addressed the cause of women-empowerment. There is a chunk of film-makers who have raised their voice against the stereotypes set by mainstream cinema through their movies. By picturizing extraordinary themes, they have tried to portrayed women as central to the story line; these film-makers are exploring subjects from the women's perspective. These films have forced creators to take a fresh look at the different roles played by women and introspect into the kind of typecast that were being perpetuated earlier. Bringing these issues on the big screen has become possible due to the current crop of actresses who have not been hesitant to accept bold roles.*

*The paper concludes that those films which project women in the rational perspective, get attention and appreciation of the masses. There is a need of those filmmakers, who can construct films portraying strong, self-reliant and purposeful women protagonists who are able to set out and rise beyond their conventional concerns.*

**Keywords:** Cinema, Bollywood, Women Empowerment, Entertainment, Films, Film makers

## Introduction

Indian society is a cinema obsessed society, where films act largely as social mirrors. These give true reflection of society, its norms and its values. Cinema has such a deep impact on changing scenario of society that no other medium could ever achieve this important position. Cinema is basically for entertainment and it takes the viewer to a world that is totally different from the real one, a world which provides them an opportunity to escape from the daily grind of life. It is taken as a popular media of mass consumption which plays a key role in constructing opinions, modeling images and reinforcing dominant cultural values of the society. Cinema in India is a very popular medium, which touches every caste, class, race and religion and addresses different socially relevant issues. No other medium can be so effective which can reach to the masses with such an appeal.

## Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema

Throughout the journey of cinema, the placement of women remains central, even if their roles may be secondary or peripheral. The focus remains on their body or beauty. As it is true that without women there will be no cinema, so women has been in the center in many hindi bollywood movies. There are many important issues which are being highlighted by the cinema and the issues related to women are central to every political and social debate. All the social relations, social institutions, social construct revolve around these only. As film making has largely been money making concern, so most of the film makers aim to reach large audiences, so that they can earn huge profits. Such films are conservative in their view point and offer escapist, fantasy worlds. If ever an attempt is made to question any social practice, the plot structure manages to subvert the initial rebellion, and brings every character back into the fold of the prevailing hegemonic ideology.

The image of women shown in Indian Hindi cinema has worked for defaming the womanhood rather than celebrating it. The standard image of a women here is of a traditional 'pativarata' nari, who is beautiful, full of 'sanskaras' and takes very good care of her family.

In a world which has always been dominated by man, cinema has shown a woeful picture of marginalization of women, where she has to compromise, sacrifice and to be contented with the inferior position. Whether it is a film of the 60s, 80s or 90s, there has been little difference in the image of the woman. The Indian cinema has tried to show the women characters portrayed as



housewives, dutiful daughters-in-law, sacrificing mothers, and loyal girl friends. Those women accept that there are two different worlds with different rules and regulations; one for men and other for women.

This image of a dutiful housewife has been deeply ingrained into the female psyche that they themselves have started believing in this self sacrificing portrait of them. Most of the film makers were men, who emphasized through their movies that this is the way society goes. When asked about their myopic perspective about the image of women in cinema, they claim that they are simply showing what the audiences want to see. There is a strong resistance to the image of an independent, articulate and strong vocal woman by the society. So, Women in Indian cinema are usually silent and have no voice of their own. At the same time women have been portrayed in a traditional way and gifted with tremendous inner strength to overcome all the odds coming in the way of her family

It has been seen that the stories shown through Indian cinema are not written keeping in mind the female characters, though there are some exceptions also. These movies usually show the struggle, conflicts, aspirations, revenge, and the desires of the male characters. While highlighting their heroism, the women exist only in relation to the men. They are the mothers, wives, daughters and especially their lovers. It is very hard to find some stories in Indian cinema, which show unattached women.

There is usually a strange logic shown in many bollywood hindi movies, that heroine falls for the hero, who rescues her from the unwanted attentions of certain unsavoury characters. Now, after all, those people are doing exactly what the “hero” has been doing all along – spouting coarse comments, making uncouth gestures, blocking her path. When she faces the same kind of behavior from the hero, he rather accepts him. The question remains there, why the hero feels moral outrage, when he himself is doing the same.

### **Portrayal of Rebel Women**

Rebel women are often portrayed through ridicule and comedy. Rebelliousness need not always be conclusive or even approved within the narrative structure. At times it may be part of the discourse on modernity and perceived as a potential threat to patriarchy through the values of modernization, westernization, education and independence. There are some positive portrayals of the questioning of the rebels also as in *Mirch Masala*, *Damini*, *Pratighat*, *Astitva*, *Gulabi Gang*, *Purush*, *Zakham*, rebellion itself upholds traditional values and the courage or heroism displayed falls within *Durga/Kali* image, that is the image of the vengeful mother-goddess.

There have been films with strong women characters that remain in the memory for a long time like *Bandini*, *Mother India*, *Aandhi*, *Pratighat* and *Mrityudand*. In *Arth*, we come across a woman character who is trying to find the meaning of her life after being betrayed by her husband, whereas *Khusboo* portrays a woman whose expectations from the institution of marriage are based on her own terms of equality and dignity. The woman of substance is missing from such portrayals, the women who can lead her life independently and take decisions without relying on any male is completely absent till now.

### **Challenging Traditional Stereotypes by Portraying Strong Women Characters**

But today the time has changed. Under the influence of globalization, feminism became one of the most discussed topics in the country. When everyone is taking a step to make some contribution to the cause of women-empowerment, bollywood is not lagging behind. These days, some of the daring and sensitive film-makers are trying to break the stereotypes set by mainstream cinema. In the last few years, many movies have been made from women’s perspective which have got very good response from the public. Due to this encouragement more and more directors are now taking up social issues to give voice to the marginalized sections of the society especially the women. Some of these movies are; *Chameli*, *Astitva*, *Ishqiya*, *Dirty Picture* *Mary Kom* *Mardani* etc. These movies have redefined the role played by women characters by picturising the extraordinary but important themes related to women. These have portrayed the desires, conflicts, and aspirations of women. She is being put as central to the story line and he is playing a role which is attached to her.

The portrayal of women is not being redefined only because of the directors, the credit goes to many new actresses also, who look forward to accept these bold roles as *Vidya Balan*, *Konkana sen Gupta*, *Tabu*, *Rani Mukherjee*, *Deepika Padukon*, *Kangana Ranaut*, *Taapsee Pannu*, *Alia Bhatt* and many more, who are trying their best to break these traditional stereotypes. While time has changed and women characters have taken central place in Bollywood cinema, it would be interesting to investigate some of the movies in this direction.

A very bold movie “*Rihaae*” treats the gender subject little differently by presenting an alternative image of a woman, where lead character played by *Hema Malini* insists of giving birth to her child, which she has conceived from her extra-marital relationship,



asserting that the child is her baby – her flesh and blood. The story hinges around a change from silent endurance to expression of self, a story of a woman claiming a right on her own body. The movie shows the social norms which deny the individuality of the woman and discriminate against her on grounds of morality. In another movie “Mrityudand”, a character played by Shabani Azmi boldly challenges the traditional norms by starting not only an extra-marital affair but getting pregnant also. When the wife of her brother-in-law Madhuri Dixit asks “whose child is this”, she answers with a meaningful smile on her face “mine”, giving a slap on the face of her impotent husband, who has been rejecting her throughout her married life blaming her to be infertile.

Another movie ‘Astitva’, pitched as a feminist film, also raises question that rake up the very issue of existence of a woman. It is justifiably titled Astitva as the film demands space and identity for the fulfillment of being a woman within the institution of marriage. It is an appeal to womenfolk to break their silence and consolidate themselves for the final crusade.

Now the modern movies are projecting women characters as bold and strong characters. The women, who want to live a quality life, the women who respect themselves, and the women, who try to change the traditional thinking of society about them. Some very sensitive movies have been made especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where women characters are looking for their own happiness. Giving respect to their personal feeling, they are speaking their heart. They find asserting strongly that, they are also human beings, they also have heart, they also need love and getting attracted to someone outside their marriage is just as normal as it is for men. These movies challenge the dual standards of society, the hypocrisy that expects different kind of behaviour from men and women in the same circumstances. Some of the movies in this direction are “Queen”, “Life in a Metro”, “Aey Dil Hai Mushkil”, “Cocktail, etc.

In the Super hit film of 2014 *Queen*, the lead character Rani whose fiancé calls off their wedding because their status do not match, decides to go to her honeymoon alone to Paris listening to her heart. Initially it becomes difficult for her to cope up with the pain, but in the end her solo honeymoon becomes a beautiful adventure for her and she finally comes back to India as a strong, happy and independent woman.

A cute story of two old lovers is the highlight of the movie, ‘Life in a Metro’. The old lady, who has been deserted by her son and is forced to live in a old age home decides to live last days of her life listening to her heart only, when she finds her college love, a role played by Dharmendra, both of them spend memorable and happy moments together and then she dies with cancer in the arms of her lover. She hardly gives any importance to the fingers raised on her character.

Similarly “Cocktail” presents a woman, who rejects her husband in the end when he tries to come back to her life after deserting her for years.

Not only this, the bollywood movies are showing many non-traditional issues related to women as live-in-relations, surrogacy and even extra-marital relationships of women, which were earlier not at all acceptable to the public. If movies on such bold issues are doing good business, it means somewhere society is accepting these ideas. There is change in the outlook of general society to look at the woman. These global human values have made our bollywood cinema vocal for women characters also. Now, they don’t prefer suffering silently, but raise a strong voice against all the discrimination done to them

## Conclusion

Indian cinema is not only popular in India, but in the whole world. Around 1000 movies are released in one year in Bollywood, which is more than any other country. Hollywood also releases only 500 movies per year. This medium is accessible to all the sections of the society, so it has more responsibility than any other medium of entertainment and communication. Films should portray an image of women in a rationalistic and humanistic point of view. Though the main aim of this industry is to earn huge profits, but it should not forget about its social responsibility. Indian love bollywood than anything else, and actors and actresses have an emphatic effect on masses. That’s why; it is the responsibility of the Indian cinema to play an active role in shaping the mindset of its people about women’s issues and women’s concerns. It can become a strong medium of social change because of its tremendous mass appeal. Can women be redefined and re-categorized is an important question which needs to be answered with reference to modern portrayal of women in bollywood cinema.

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