

## Shifting roles of Women through the Lens of Indian Popular Media

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### Abstract:

The importance of mass media has increased as a result of the development of new communication technologies. By portraying only a portion of truth and via the constant repetition of the same visual and audio, the mass media affects our ideas of social reality. Although the form and content of the media have evolved significantly over the past years, the media has always supported the stereotypical perceptions of women and their social responsibilities. The news about women's struggles and the injustices committed against them has always cast a shadow over them and their social contributions. In a changing world, it is essential that the print and electronic media paint a fair picture of women's multifaceted lives and contributions to society. This study aims to provide a picture of how women are perceived in the popular media, primarily the Bollywood movies and soap operas based on an analysis of the shifting stereotypes in the media's projection of women. It contends that women and their issues are no longer marginalised in the media. However, outdated sex stereotypes have persisted in various forms. Women have become more and more of a commodity in the media as a result of its rising commercialization. The mainstream media, on the other hand, frequently co-opts and re-constructs progressive rhetoric on women's concerns in order to establish the hegemony of dominant socioeconomic classes. As a result, in the setting of a capitalist economy, it is much harder to change how women are represented in the popular media.

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*Keywords: stereotypes, Bollywood cinema, patriarchal, projection*

### Introduction

Women were treated with the highest respect and integrity in ancient Indian literature like the Vedas, Upanishads, Grihya Sutra, Dharmasastra, and epics like the Puranas and Smritis. According to Manu Smriti, families that ill treats women will perish. Despite the fact that male and female are by nature bisexual, they complement one another as "Purusha" and "Prakriti." Women were once taught the fine arts like painting, dance, and singing at the Nalanda and Thakshila Universities. Marriage was regarded as a sacred ceremony up to the third century B.C., and women were considered as the epitome of love, care and sacrifice. These serve as evidences that women have absolute status and treated as par with males. With the passage of time some school of thought actively promoted misogyny towards women. "Draupadi's bastra haran" in the Mahabharat illustrates the mistreatment of women. Even the Ramayan propagates the idea that women are very pious and their heart is like a sharp blade and it's really very difficult to truly understand a woman's true emotions. The mistreatment towards Sita and the discrimination faced by Suparnakha is an eye opener for the society. The story of Krishna and his Raas with Gopi and the ideology of polygamous relationship pioneered by the mythology has somehow set the innate tone of the women as a submissive and tolerant being. The identity of the whole womanhood is questioned again and again when the voices are suppressed and the violence is unquestionably accepted by the community. Even though the mythological stories and our religion at a very later date came up with the explanation to redeem and bring justice to the females but the gender role and patriarchy has taken its sweet time to suppress the effect and continued inflicting the society with the crooked ideas. Inequality and discrimination against women become an issue over time as a result of tradition and customs and were gradually restricted to domestic chores. From the 1890s to till time, women have been represented differently. In the past, women dressed themselves elegantly, covering themselves in clothes to

show their status and elegance. But, today we can mark a drastic change in the way women carry themselves as there is a horserace to dress scantily to display their feminine charm.

Despite all the injustice and mistreatment, they have never been able to revolt to put an end to it. If the pursuit of happiness, freedom from fear, and self-development in conformity with one's desire are considered to be human rights, then it may be confirmed that women in India are severely denied these rights. Men are regarded as being superior to women in all settings of life. Women are portrayed as weak and timid in society, whereas men are seen as strong and courageous. Men and women do, of course, differ biologically, but society tends to highlight these distinctions. It is notable that Simone de Beauvoir said in this regard, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (P.301). So, rather than being innate, womanhood is something that a woman accomplishes and this continued till late eighteenth century. When television was first introduced in India, media houses began producing television programmes to entertain viewers in the privacy of their own homes. Women are frequently presented in these programmes decently at the beginning but with the passage of time they were projected as sex symbols, frail housewives, and gold-diggers. It is now very usual for any human being to think negatively of women because the popular media has already placed a ceiling on how audiences can perceive women.

### **Discussion**

India's film industry has historically dominated Indian culture. Movies have various social effects in India and have an impact on people's personal life. Commercial Bollywood films have a direct or indirect impact on every aspect of a person's life, including what they wear, how they speak, and how they behave in public. These movies no doubt have entertainment values, but it frequently comes at the expense of women's self-esteem and dignity. Bollywood frequently portrays women as stupid, thoughtless beings whose existence is limited to sexual gratifications. Objectification of women, as sexual objects is very common in commercial Indian movies. Such stereotypes can be found everywhere. The heroine is never depicted as a person of wisdom, her ideas and thoughts about anything other than romance or family are not depicted. Most of the movies portray woman as a headless fly following the lead of the male protagonist. Heroines are nothing more than accessory to elevate the ideology and importance of the male protagonist. In some movies heroines and their roles exist just to show the sharp contrast between both the protagonist and support the male superiority in the Bollywood productions. But this was not the case when movies were initially produced in India as majority of films have drawn a lot of inspiration from the religious and mythological conception of women characters as the epitome of virtue and values who could do no wrong. After independence, numerous movies have frequently referred to women as "Sitas." Hindi cinema was successful in institutionalising patriarchal norms through the concepts of loyalty and obedience to the spouse. A number of movies, including *Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *Devi* (1970), and *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988), portrayed women as quiet, subservient spouses who were ideal role models and ready to sacrifice for their own families. Although patriarchal traditions were indirectly questioned in these films, they were patronised in the sense that the victim wife refused to leave her husband's house despite experiencing extreme physical and emotional abuse on the pretext that she would only leave the marital home at the time of her death. During this time, women in Bollywood were primarily restricted to the position of a devoted wife or mother. This mother figure was frequently portrayed as being subjected to abuse and harassment while keeping quiet out of duty and ultimately finding salvation by male intervention. *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) and *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972) starring Hema Malini, are two films that properly illustrate this notion. The "decent" female character were portrayed in both the film as a quiet, repressed woman who silently endured mental and even physical abuse at the hands of her family. Their decision to remain silent in the face of such suffering was praised as a quality that all women should exhibit.

Despite all of this, there has always been controversy about the realistic portrayal of women characters in light of social norms. Their concerns, wants, aspirations, emotions, and viewpoints are entirely absent from the movies. *Abhimaan* (1973), for instance, opens with the assumption that the wife (Jaya Bachchan) is more talented than the husband (Amitabh Bachchan). This stands in direct opposition to the stereotype. The movie begins to fall apart, though, when the wife decides to give up her successful music career in order to appease her husband's ego. This leads to a predictable ending that calls for devotion to traditional notions of marriage and parenting. Even though they were educated and eager to establish their own identities, Bollywood heroines

have typically been modest and content to live happily ever after in the institution of marriage. Even the women pursuing jobs and holding professional positions were always been silenced. Women played a variety of occupations in Hindi film during the 1970s, such as Hema Malini's portrayal of a tonga rider (horse carriage) in "Sholay" and Jaya Bachchan's roles as a singer and a knife sharpener in "Zanjeer" and "Abhimaan," respectively. On the other hand the popular blockbusters of the 1980s restricted Indian women to the confines of house and we hardly found movies where women are projected as self reliant or working class. The heroine is always projected as secondary to hero and hardly a movie is made where a heroine is projected as the protagonist of the movie. Her function is outlined in relation to any central male characters in the script. She lacks any sense of independence, and the story of the film focuses on how the male character affects her journey. Women's roles are constrained to those of glamorous, calm and solely for entertainment purpose.

The majority of Bollywood films from the 1980s were action-based, and the female protagonists in these films were overshadowed by the hero. She was made to appear as a glamorous extra in the movies, dancing around in the vivid background, sometimes abducted, raped, or killed. In *Mirch Masala* (1987) Smita Patil chooses to take on the formidable subedar (Naseeruddin Shah). When the chilli factory's guard (Om Puri) came to her rescue, the women and the teacher of the village were ready to sacrifice her. This movie featured several situations where women were portrayed as seductive figures and the lustful subedar staring at them. Later in the 90s Bollywood movies, an actress's body became the basis to her success. Physical attractiveness or time spent working out in the gym suddenly became requirements to work in a movie. The dressing room was where the female leads spent hours. The space that women had established for themselves appeared to have wasted. Their presence didn't add any value to the plot because, in higher budget movies, the heroes took centre stage and the heroines remained more of a glamorous element.

Gradually we saw a paradigmatic shift in Bollywood movies, slowly film makers dared to make woman centric movies as a result of globalisation. As more number of Hollywood movies were released in Indian theatres, the Indian audience loved to see more offbeat movies. Female perspectives and opinions were finally explored as more women were engaged in the process of movie making. The public became more familiar with examples of progressive cinema from around the world because to the exposure provided by the internet and rising levels of literacy, and they started to reject the concept of a one-dimensional female character seen through the eyes of a man. We can see in *Queen* (2014), a small-town girl's life is turned upside down, but she quickly makes the decision to stand up for herself and on a solo honeymoon. She makes new friends, learns about the world and life while she's away, and when she returns, she's a different person who is prepared to take charge of her life. *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) is a film that demonstrates how an ordinary woman can overcome all obstacles and fight for justice. *Pink* (2016) proclaimed to the nation that a woman's "No" truly means "No". No matter what she wears or how she lives, no one can force her to do anything against her choice. The modern film industry has made an effort to tackle impermissible topics like live-in relationships, surrogacy, divorce, and other sexually explicit topics.

There are numerous films with stories that are centred on women in modern Bollywood cinema and these films portray women as powerful individuals who take charge of their own lives and are granted the same rights as male actors. The popularity of female-centric films shows that women have recently made significant progress in Indian entertainment industry. *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*, starring Kangana Ranaut, is the first female-led Bollywood movie to gross over Rs100 crore. Both "NH10" starring Anushka Sharma and "Piku" starring Deepika Padukone performed well at the Indian box office. In addition to that, a significant number of filmmakers have defied the gender norms imposed by mainstream cinema and ventured to examine topics from the perspective of women. Films like *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *CheeniKum* (2007), *Chameli* (2003), *Ishqiya* (2010), *Paa* (2009), *Dirty Picture* (2011), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Mardani* (2014), *Sarbjit* (2014), *Thappad* (2020), and *GangubaiKathiawadi* (2022) have depicted exceptional subjects and portrayed women as being crucial to the story line. These movies have compelled its makers to re-examine the various roles that women have played and to reflect on the stereotypes that predominated in the past. The present generation of actresses deserves praise as well for not being afraid to take on challenging roles.

Since women have played powerful, autonomous roles, the camera's attention has temporarily been diverted from the female body to the woman herself. ShomaChatterji, a film critic and author, stated with great accuracy that "Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal frame-work of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema" (p.110). The portrayal of women in Hindi cinema varied with each period, although they were mostly limited to the traditional, patriarchal framework of Indian society. The Indian film industry does not, however, adequately represent women in all positions. Only one in ten film directors in India's film industry are women, and this disparity in film fraternity are a result of the dearth of women in influential roles in India's film industry. Ganti has rightly observed that:

Men predominate in the Bombay film industry. Women in Bollywood, most frequently pursue the career either as an actresses or a playback singer. In recent years, this pattern has shifted as more women have established themselves as choreographers, costume designers, editors, and screenwriters, although their numbers remain very less in contrast to those of their male counterparts. Women composers and lyricists are quite rare. Despite a small number of them venturing into direction, they have not found the same commercial success as their male counterparts (p. 94).

It seems reasonable to assume that the representation of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints and may not necessarily explore women's world views, perceptions, and subjective realities in an industry with so few women working within it.

The protagonist in recent commercial films have been under fire for supporting behaviours like eve-teasing, persistent stalking, making sexually suggestive comments, trying to touch the ladies against their consent, and attempting to strip them naked. No matter how many times the female lead denies to be the victim of honeytrap, the hero in Indian films persists until she gives in. Although this situation is not ideal for either men or women, it also serves as an example of how men have historically attracted the attention of the ladies they loved in classical literature. Kareena Kapoor, one of the top leading actresses in India has said,

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema is changing and increasingly film directors are creating more meaningful roles for them. Bollywood has begun portraying women in a more positive manner... Women's roles are being written by new and young directors and they are showing that we are not just objects of desire. For the most, part women lead subservient lives in India, and Bollywood's portrayal of women is no different. In most Indian films, the female lead's job is to pout and make the male protagonist look good (Henderson, 2013)

A wide variety of audiences are catered to by the Indian film industry. Even if certain unorthodox concepts and movies may have drawn in a broad audience, such instances are very rare. In order to turn a profit, the industry is under constant pressure to provide what viewers want to see. For the film to be satisfying to the predominantly male audience, there must be some commercial aspect (symbolic sex, song and dance), and as long as the audience is satisfied by it, cinema with women in repetitive roles will continue. The male vision of the modern Indian lady is thus satisfied by having a "modern" woman on TV, which typically entails wearing more revealing clothing and dancing sensually. By itself, wearing or not wearing exposing clothing is not a moral issue. The point is that the outfits and the hip-shaking obscene moves are all that the female protagonist does in these movies. The female lead's position ultimately lacks depth, and her character is reduced to just eye candy. As Vinayachandran said in an interview "Most roles for women involve glamorous skin show, a vivacious song and dance routine and in supporting the male hero to achieve his goals" (personal communication, March 30, 2011). Thus, the female protagonists are clearly supported by the position of the male protagonist and provide for an intriguing addition to the story. As a result of seeing these characters time and time again, the audience starts to label them as eye candy and the only roles that women can play in Indian cinema.

Due to its widespread appeal among the general public, Indian soap operas are often regarded as a fundamental component of Indian society. Due to their ability to cater to the diverse interests of the audience, they have established a position for themselves. In Indian soap operas, women often perform a variety of roles. However, the majority of these television shows frequently highlight how women spend most of their time at home, supporting the stereotypical perception of women in an unfamiliar setting. All of these TV operas share the conventional male chauvinism, which encourages women to settle for the so-called "ideal existence," which comprises of a devoted husband, obedient kids, and a fulfilling career. Her physical attractiveness is of the biggest significance in such characters, who are decked out in expensive gowns and jewellery. They also highlight how women are often willing to compromise and make sacrifices. In order to instil this value in the minds of the viewers, the patriarchy is particularly fond of and eager to portray this type of woman.

Indian soap operas have seen an increase in viewership over the past two decades, particularly among women, which has resulted in a wave of change. Our values must have undergone a revolution as a result of the TV series, which also gave our culture a fresh, new perspective. The general perception is that these television shows represent the ideal of womanhood and the prevalent stereotypes that are thought to be part of the culture followed in every household. However, since these ideas don't seem to reflect the true values of Indian culture, one must question whether they represent reality or are merely an illusion.

Women's representation on television has long been a sensitive topic in today's society. Television soap operas frequently feature scenes that include physical abuse of the mother-in-law or daughter-in-law, as well as the portrayal of women as sex objects. Tanu and Alia, two characters from the *Kumkum Bhagya* television series, are notorious for lowering the position of women in Indian culture. The majority of these TV serials all follow the same format for their featured stories. The personification of the character "Satisavtri" is that of a silent woman who is infamous for bearing the brunt of all the malicious schemes of her "Saas," or mother-in-law. The stereotypical mother-in-law is an enraged, envious woman who is antagonistic toward her "Bahu" or daughter-in-law[i]. TV series have a significant influence on how people think in society. Therefore, portraying female characters in such a demeaning manner will result in the loss of peace in our community.

In order to maintain the patriarchal power structure at all times and to ensure that people's desires, particularly those of males, were catered, a specific value system in society determines how women need to be represented on screen, how their sexuality needs to come across. It had less to do with the movie's genre or the plot's necessity and more to do with appeasing various audiences' dreams and how those fantasies might be addressed in light of societal constraints. Film serves as a vehicle for escapism, luring viewers into dreams that are constrained by what is or is not socially acceptable. It is quite evident that many a time the scantily clad female lead is singing in the rain to appease the male fantasies which has nothing to do with the story line. Movies find ways to explain why the heroine is performing these song and dance numbers, and more often than not, it's because the hero and the heroine are in love or because the female lead is doing something for the benefit of the male lead, like saving his life or getting him out of a sticky situation. The core concept of the male gaze, masculine imagination, and male perspective has not yet been forgotten. Because producers and directors don't actually evaluate storylines or scripts from the perspective of women during this process, women wind up playing very specific stereotypical roles. Due to the fact that roles are derived from the socio-cultural context in which people live, even slightly upgraded roles in recent years did not represent a paradigm shift in ideology or how people view women. Vinayachandran has rightly pointed out "the roles of women in Indian cinema come from the culture in which they live "As much as it is culture driven it is also market driven" (personal communication, March 30, 2011).

## Conclusion

In fact, the dissemination of stereotypical images of women in culture and society is best preserved through mass media like cinema and television. The mass media has turned into a holy grail for the male superiority and patriarchy to continue the lineage of suppression. In the study of gender and film, the problem of women's identities has received a lot of attention. The "second wave" feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, which criticised women's positions in the film industry and the study of women's representations in cinema, actually gave this subject a lot of attention. Things in Bollywood are progressively becoming better. The current generation of female actors are quite vocal about the prejudice they face. Bollywood is under fire for its misogyny and

hypocrisy, which ranges from unequal pay to unachievable body ideals. Criticizing Bollywood won't help women's issues. Actresses who speak out and stand up for their rights are constantly criticised as being "loud-mouthed" and unreasonable. If an actress speaks out about a social topic, she finds herself in awkward situations. The top players in your industry are likely to boycott you if you criticise it. The numerous women who are eager to take on any task, however, have not been discouraged by this. The clearest example of this might be the MeToo campaign, which empowered women in business and exposed male predatory behaviour in that industry. There is still work to be done even after the reform process has begun. Obviously, the change is coming from within the film industry. Bollywood has the responsibility of progressively converting the audience and creating a sophisticated sense of film, even though the public must put in some effort as well. Women-centric movies are now attracting more attention. One such movie is *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, which has gotten positive reviews from critics and viewers alike. Even if the way in which women are portrayed in Bollywood is changing, there is still more that has to be done to address its concerns with women. Since the early 1900s, women have consistently been represented as being weak, unproductive in business and politics, and occasionally even as sex objects or sex icons and were confined to the house hold chores. Even though this trend continued for a very long period, today women are no longer seen as weak rather given the equal status as men.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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