



(Re)Looking at the Women of Indian Cinema in the Praxis of Conventional Rendering

Aakash Sharma

Department of English

Satyawati College, University of Delhi

Abstract

Films significantly impact social consciousness as they have the power to shape opinions, influence perspectives, and contribute to cultural conversations. In shaping perceptions, films enable people to perceive certain issues, events, or groups of people from dissimilar viewpoints. This paper looks into the nuances of representation of Indian women in films, primarily in Hindi cinema, and how their portrayal differs when their identities are constructed by writers and directors of the opposite gender. It argues for an equitable position for representing women in cinema and highlights the role of intersectional relationships between race, class, sexuality, and ability for the same. With an emphasis on feminist film theory and its praxis, this paper traces the history of Indian cinematic renderings in giving agency to women in films and how the perspectives of women writers and directors seeps into their creations for a positive outcome, whereas the male centric industry hinders the proper portrayal of the lived experience. It finally advocates for an academic understanding of the lacunas that exist in the entire ecosystem and offers an expansive approach for devising actionable and sustainable solutions to the critical problem of representation.

Keywords: *Film, Cinema, Representation, Gender, Praxis, Women, Intersectionality, Feminist theory*

If there has ever been a medium that possesses the power to transgress boundaries across geographies, cultures, ethnicities and a myriad of other peripheries, it is cinema. The French word cinematographer, which comes in part from the Greek kinema, symbolizes eternal movement; movement not just of frames and images that are captured by the lens of a camera but of the thoughts and ideas that they carry to stir up the viewers' mental and psychological penchants. It is the movement of ideas that encompass the thoughts of a multitude of characters and their creators. And it is this 'moving picture' — cinema — which serves as an edited reality and a mirror of society. Renowned Indian poet, lyricist and screenwriter Javed Akhtar has remarked on 'Cinema & Society' that "while society decides morality, films are

desperate to connect with the audience and fulfil what the society fancies” (Mandal 1). Before films existed as a medium, the popular social and cultural concord was vastly molded by the literature of respective contemporary eras, which itself struggled for the ‘influencing power’ amongst different genres of expression, from prose becoming an appetite of the masses and poetry reticent to the educational elites. However, films overcame this anxiety of influence, that is, the anxiety posed by the influence of its literary antecedents, rather quickly and seamlessly. Not only have films occupied a much more significant role in shaping the social and cultural discourse than literature in modern society, but they have also created a gargantuan ecosystem on which entire industries bank their existence. This capitalist and utilitarian nuance to understanding the influence and role of cinema is necessary for highlighting the underlying power that it carries in shaping the collective consciousness.

Films significantly impact social consciousness as they have the power to shape opinions, influence perspectives, and contribute to cultural conversations. In shaping perceptions, films enable people to perceive certain issues, events, or groups of people from dissimilar viewpoints. They influence public opinion by portraying different perspectives, offering insights into marginalized communities, and shedding light on social issues that may have been overlooked. With cinema's vast scope in reaching a larger audience, it has played a pivotal role over decades in furthering numerous causes and hindering many others. For instance, Indian cinema’s portrayal of disability has “started to move away from offensive characterization to an inclusive view of disability as part and parcel of society” (Sharma 6), as witnessed in films like *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Andhadhun* (2018). Yet, when it comes to the subject of gender representation in popular culture, specifically the Hindi cinema and its well-extended universe of ‘Bollywood’, the ecosystem of female participation and representation consistently falls short in giving women an equitable space in the system. While there has been a lot of effort in pursuing the path of representing females outside of the prejudiced purview of traditional roles and gendered characters in Indian films, the desire to put women on the periphery of narratives and at the objectifying end of the cinematic scope still pervades. It is in this light that over the past half a century feminist film theory emerged as a response to the male-dominated film industry and the representation of women in cinema. It aims to explore and challenge the ways in which gender is portrayed, constructed, and understood within films. By analysing the social, cultural, and political implications of these representations, feminist film theorists seek to expose and critique the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. American philosopher Cynthia A. Freeland has outlined the theory in her essay *Feminist Film Theory* as having a “dominant approach involving a theoretical combination of semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis” (Freeland 1). Freeland notes that human subjects are formed through complex signifiatory processes in films. They have the potential to challenge and debunk stereotypes and prejudices. By presenting authentic and complex portrayals of individuals and communities that go beyond simplistic narratives, films can challenge biases and encourage viewers to question their own assumptions and beliefs.

The Damsel in Distress and The Heroic Male

Historically, films have often portrayed men and women in stereotypical roles. Men were typically depicted as strong, dominant, and the primary breadwinners, while women were portrayed as nurturing, emotional, and confined to domestic spheres. These roles reinforced societal expectations and gender stereotypes. A common stereotype in films is the "damsel in distress", where women are portrayed as helpless and in destitution of rescue by a male protagonist. This portrayal undermines women's agency and perpetuates the idea that women are weak and unable to care for themselves. Films often depict male characters as the heroes and main protagonists, engaging in action-packed adventures and saving the day. This portrayal reinforces the notion that men are strong, brave, and leaders, while women are relegated to supporting roles. British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey highlighted in her now canonical essay titled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) that "men and women are differentially positioned by cinema: men as subjects identifying with agents who drive the film's narrative forward, women as objects for masculine desire and fetishistic gazing" (Mulvey 805). Mulvey's essay is heavily invested in this theory; it is rightly cited as the founding document of feminist film theory.

Feminist film theory emerged as a response to the male-dominated film industry and the representation of women in cinema. It aims to explore and challenge the ways in which gender is portrayed, constructed, and understood within films. By analysing the social, cultural, and political implications of these representations, feminist film theorists seek to expose and critique the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. Several key strands of feminist film theory have influenced praxis — the application of theory to practise

— in the field of cinema. Gender roles and stereotypes in film have been a prominent aspect of the medium for many years. While headway has been made in recent times to challenge

and break away from these traditional portrayals, it is still important to acknowledge their historical prevalence and impact on society. By applying feminist film theory to praxis, filmmakers and theorists have contributed to developing a more inclusive and diverse cinematic landscape. They have challenged and reshaped the dominant narratives, representations, and power dynamics within the film industry, opening up space for more nuanced and authentic portrayals of women and exploring the complexities of gender and identity.

Women's history in cinema is complex and multifaceted, marked by struggles, achievements, and significant contributions. From the nascent days of silent film to the present, women have made important strides in various aspects of the industry, including acting, directing, producing, and screenwriting. However, their representation and opportunities have often been limited by patriarchal structures and gender biases within the film industry. The gendered segregation of women in films is not limited to actresses. It has found an institutionalised structure that hinders female actors, writers, directors, producers, cinematographers, and others in the same format. Indian screenwriter Juhi Chaturvedi, who started her film writing career with the film *Vicky Donor* (2012), revealed in a Film

Companion interview how she was buttoned down as a writer who could write only on ‘vulgar and cheap issues like sperm donation’. Attempts were made to typecast her as a non-serious screenwriter in the larger Hindi film industry. Chaturvedi has since written scripts for some of the most critically acclaimed Hindi language films, such as *Piku* (2015), *October* (2018) and *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020), thwarting the inherent bias that is held against women working in the film industry.

Praxis in feminist film theory involves not only analysing and critiquing existing films but also actively engaging in alternative filmmaking practices. Feminist filmmakers have adopted various techniques and strategies to challenge dominant narratives and power structures. This can include experimental storytelling, collaborative production models, and the use of non-traditional cinematography or editing techniques. The goal is to disrupt conventional norms and offer alternative visions of gender and power.

Parched (2015)

Violence, hatred and the negative effects of patriarchy still pervade in India, where rape and honour killings of women and gender-biased marriages for young girls are carried out despite constitutional laws prohibiting such practices. However, the fight for women's rights has

intensified over the years in the world's largest democracy. Leena Yadav's 2015 film *Parched* is a shocking and moving movie that challenges these stereotypes and promotes women's empowerment. Set in a village occupied by a group of radical men, the movie revolves around women who become friends and then become active advocates for liberation. It is the saga of four women in a desert village of Gujarat. Several age-old traditions, social evils, and conventions of patriarchy, child marriage, dowry, marital rapes and physical and mental abuse plague the village and the society.

The film takes one into a disturbing and thought-provoking territory that reflects the female experience in the remote areas of India, a subjugated and sidelined role for women in rural societies. It also touches upon themes that Indian cinema rarely indulges with. It delves into the “erogenous illusions of long-suppressed village women who are no longer willing to countenance their restrictive veils, without evolving into something exploitative” (Chatterjee 3). It takes on the convoluted and often dark topic of sexual politics in rural India while indicting the patriarchal norms dictating the fates of rural women. In the stories of Rani, Lajjo and Bijli, director and writer Leena Yadav captures the realistic female experience of a rural woman in the film without using the women as props and carriers of a phallogentric film agenda. Rather, it lays bare the resultant oppression of women at the hands of a phallogentric order of society that tortures and maims the female identity while subverting their existence into oblivion. Nandini Ramnath of Scroll.in has rightly noted that “Leena Yadav’s female empowerment drama is an extraordinarily good-looking film at ugly truths” (Ramnath 1).

While *Parched* presents a familiar scene of women coming together to fight against frustrated men in their lives and the constraints that govern their behaviour, the film presents some well-written scenes of women's solidarity, taking severe digs at male privilege. Why are Hindi slurs still reserved for women, Bijli wonders in the film, as she continues to explore alternatives for abusive mother and daughter references and replace them with fathers and sons. Yadav's screenplay is an apt update on

the New Wave of Indian women's empowerment that started in the 1980s and early 1990s. Even though a happy ending is difficult for the women in *Parched*, their issues are addressed within the ambit of their reality and lived experience - a feminist reading of their situation. Violence is portrayed as blowing into the air with a mirror margin in the women's experience. Rani's inability in the film to understand that she is visiting her own exploitation on her daughter-in-law points to the internalisation of misogyny by women. Even Bijli's relative free agency does not protect her from dastardly treatment by the fiendish men.

Earth (1998)

Earth, the 1998 film directed by Deepa Mehta, is based upon Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (originally published as *Ice Candy Man*), set during the 1947 partition of India. The story is set in Lahore in the time directly before and during the partition of India in 1947. Mehta's film gives the agency of narration to a young disabled girl Lenny, who recounts the story through the voice of her adult persona. She is adored and guarded by her parents and tended to by her ayah, named Shanta (played by Nandita Das). The film portrays the intersperse sexual encounters of Lenny's caretaker Shanta, giving a modicum of personal agency to a woman's narrative since there is no other available arena for her to experience free will. Mehta's portrayal of Shanta's relationship with Dil Navaz, the Ice-Candy Man (played by Aamir Khan), and Hassan, the Masseur (played by Rahul Khanna), collates into a complex microcosm laced with ethnic underpinnings and religious tensions, both of which are rooted in subtle patriarchy and misogyny. The fault lines of religious and cultural differences are shown to be aggravated by the seething tensions due to the partition based on religious lines, and tragedy ensues.

Drawing on the powerful compilation of partition narratives as inspiration, works such as *Earth* that are directly related to the resettlement of refugees, the stories of abducted and raped women, and the complexities of familial and communal relationships in the wake of Partition, find a way to delve into the issues of gender, race and ethnicity. They bring the history of partition closer to physical and lived experience while recounting the Indian subcontinent's backstory with its political power. Women's state in *Earth* is shown as the abject consequence of a proto-patriarchal social structure, which renders women to be used as tools and be leveraged in case violence ensues in any altercation between the male stakeholders. Partition of India in 1947 was an extremely tragic event marred with displacement, violence and trauma. Women became the multipolar sufferers and bearers of the partition's immense sexual, physical, mental, economic and social violence as they were subjugated into suffering at the hands of their male domineers. Deepa Mehta portrays the vehemence of this violence throughout the film. The *mise en scène* of a train pulling into a station signifies the imagery of displacement amidst horrific bloodshed. That the train was filled with nothing but blood-soaked dead bodies encapsulates the brutal reality and paradox of partition and Indian independence. Amidst this violence is found the usage of women as pawns in sending a deeper message to the 'other' side. The aggressors used bags filled with 'women's chopped off breasts' in the bloodied train as the message of vanquished

annihilation. Dorothy Barenscott delineated in her work "This is our Holocaust": Deepa Mehta's *Earth and the Question of Partition Trauma* that,

“Recent historiographies of the Partition, particularly those that focus on the abduction and rape of women — the very drama around which *Earth* finds a moment of dramatic climax — have attempted to reveal how women's bodies can be made the contested ground. In conflict, the territory itself establishes notions of subjectivity, agency and national imagination in times of violence. Drawing on India's rich tradition of postcolonial feminism and feminist research, addressing challenging cultural practices such as the practice of Sati, it expands possibilities for theorising the gendered nature of subjectivity and identity formation” (Barenscott 15-16).

In the two films discussed above, the creators significantly shape and influence cultural norms by depicting certain behaviours, values, and ideologies. They contribute to the collective imagination and attempt to reinforce or challenge existing social norms, promoting discussions and debates about societal values and expectations. Both *Parched* and *Earth* adhere to the tenets of realism in their portrayal of women. If this apt depiction is to be credited to the common trope of 'women writing women in films' (Leena Yadav and Deepa Mehta-Bapsi Sidhwa have done commendable work in their respective works), then this approach may seem rather parochial. Sensitivity is for all and is not exclusive to genders (and castes and other social-artificial bifurcations). Only when an individual transcends the social boundaries and gets in the empathetic shoes of the 'other' can they attempt to realise the other side of silence, as is mostly the case in women's representation in films and cinema. Nevertheless, it is still a truth at large that the male-centric entertainment industry, which derives its profits from the commodification of women (and their characters), remains dazed by the truths of the social and cultural implications of such portrayals.

The 'Male Gaze', coined by Laura Mulvey in her compelling essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, refers to how women are often depicted as objects of male desire in films. It reinforces traditional gender roles and positions women as passive and subordinate. Feminist filmmakers and theorists have sought to subvert the male gaze by creating alternative narratives and representations that prioritise female perspectives and agency. In fact, it is often witnessed that when male directors and creators attempt to take this issue head-on, their attempt falls short and even backfires due to an apparent sense of prerogative. Most recently, a song from the world-famous Telugu-language action drama *Pushpa: The*

Rise titled 'Oo Antava' was written by lyricist Kanukuntla Subhash Chandrabose with the aim of devaluing the male gaze. However, the song could not entirely break away from objectifying women. 'Oo Antava' turns the gaze back at the men who are looking at a woman's body, suggesting that it does not matter what a woman is wearing (saree or a short dress) or how she looks (fair-skinned or dark, plump or thin, tall or short), the men around her, regardless of age, will always find ways to ogle. It blames the gaze of the men and their thoughts for this and says it has nothing to do with the women. Sowmya Rajendran of *The News Minute* asks, “But, does the song actually question patriarchal ideas about women's bodies and sexual violence? While the move away from the typical item number is a welcome shift, the song still compares women with food (sweet grapes/sugar) and

implies that men cannot keep away from them because of this” (Rajendran 3). Such comparisons are unfortunately all too common and only add to the theory that sexual violence is inevitable because women are 'too tempting' for men to resist.

Women writers and directors undoubtedly bring insights that may have never occurred to a male filmmaker. On this notion, Kannada film writer Sandhya Rani, who has worked on the renowned 2018 film *Nathicharami*, has remarked that,

“There is a scene in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* in which a woman (who works as a nude model at art school) says, ‘उन दिन भी मुझे बैठना पड़ा’ (‘I had to sit on those days also’ – a reference to her period). I think this thought might not have crossed a male writer’s mind. I also loved another film I recently watched, *Still Hide To Smoke*, directed by a woman. In this film, women gather in a common bath, and the whole film is about their discussions” (Shekar 3).

The intimacy of the female experience expressed on screen without it having had to be sexualised and weaponised by a filmmaker is an ability that is lacking from the fabric of the current era of filmmakers and screenwriters. It also does not help that when women try to touch upon these issues from their own perspective and experience, they more often than not run the risk of being typecast and blocked into wonted categories. The skewed ratio of female participation in the film industry further hinders de règle praxis of female representation in films and popular culture.

Denouement

It is consequential to note that while films have the potential to shape social consciousness, their impact varies depending on individual interpretations, cultural contexts, and the overall media landscape. Nonetheless, films significantly shape public discourse, foster empathy, and inspire social change. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and push for more diverse and nuanced representations of gender in film. Many filmmakers challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes by presenting complex, multi-dimensional characters that break away from limiting expectations. There has been an increase in films featuring strong, independent, and empowered female characters who challenge traditional gender norms. These characters serve as positive role models and help counteract the previous tropes of passive and dependent female characters.

It is also essential to recognise that gender roles and stereotypes intersect with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. Intersectional representation in films is crucial for addressing the experiences and perspectives of diverse individuals and breaking away from monolithic portrayals. Intersectional feminist film theory acknowledges that gender intersects with other forms of identity, such as race, class, sexuality, and ability. It recognises that women's experiences and representations are not uniform and that different groups of women face distinct forms of oppression and discrimination. Intersectional feminist filmmakers strive to incorporate a range of voices and perspectives, highlighting the experiences of marginalised women and challenging the homogeneity of mainstream cinema.

While progress has been made in challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes in film, there is still work to be done. Increased representation, diverse storytelling, and conscious efforts to challenge and subvert stereotypes are important steps towards creating a more inclusive and equitable cinematic landscape. In recent decades, augmented awareness and activism have encircled gender representation and equality in the film industry. Women directors like Kathryn Bigelow and Ava DuVernay in the West have broken barriers and achieved critical and commercial success. At the same time, actors like Meryl Streep and Cate Blanchett have used their platforms to advocate for change. Indian filmmakers like Sai Paranjpye, Zoya Akhtar, Meghna Gulzar, and Gauri Shinde, among others, have also broken the glass ceiling in the Indian cinematic landscape. Nevertheless, the arena still remains a largely male-dominated one. Women's role needs to be expanded from the fundamentals up to the ladder in the hierarchies of the film industry. This can change the ecosystem and the way traditional roles are perceived in the industry. Global movements like the #MeToo and Time's

Up have also shed light on issues of harassment and inequality, sparking conversations and efforts to create more inclusive and equitable spaces for women in cinema.

Despite progress, significant challenges remain. Women continue to face barriers in accessing funding, securing directing opportunities, and receiving recognition for their work. By highlighting the existing disparities and academically analysing them to provide actionable solutions, a lot can be done as part of the much required reforms in the film landscape of Indian culture. Inclusion of women from marginalised communities, who face additional hurdles in an industry that lacks diversity and representation, can also go a long way in transforming the contemporary situation. Exertions must be made to address disparities, including establishing women-focused film festivals, mentorship programs, and initiatives to promote gender parity in the industry. The history of women in cinema serves as a reminder of the need for continued advocacy and change to ensure equal opportunities and representation for all women in the film world.

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Corresponding Author: Aakash Sharma

E-mail: sharma.aakashdu@gmail.com

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