



FROM SCREEN TO SOCIETY: THE INFLUENCE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CINEMA ON REAL-WORLD GENDER DYNAMICS

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the multifaceted relationship between the portrayal of female characters in cinema and its impact on real-world gender dynamics. Drawing on feminist film theory, audience reception studies, and sociocultural analysis, this study explores how cinematic representations of women both reflect and shape societal attitudes towards gender roles, equality, and empowerment. This paper examines the historical evolution of female characters in cinema through a comprehensive literature review, from traditional stereotypes to more complex and diverse portrayals. It delves into how these portrayals reflect and perpetuate societal norms and values, including beauty standards, sexuality, intelligence, and agency. The influence of female characters on audience perceptions and behaviors, exploring how identification with cinematic representations can internalize gender norms and influence attitudes towards gender roles, power dynamics in relationships, and career aspirations. This paper highlights the nuanced ways in which cinema shapes and reflects realworld gender dynamics. It also discusses the potential implications of these findings for filmmakers, policymakers, educators, and activists working towards gender equality and social justice. Overall, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between media, culture, and gender, emphasizing and the need for diverse and empowering representations of women in cinema.

Keywords: Cinema, Women Empowerment, Gender, Dynamics, stereotypes, Societal changes.

Introduction

Cinema is a powerful mechanism of entertainment, change and influencing or reshaping societal norms with each of its new production. It can be considered as a mirror of society, that reflect cultures, attitudes and ideologies of society. Through its narratives and portrayals, cinema has the potential to bring significant changes in society, affecting attitudes not only towards women but also altering mental perceptions and behaviors of people. What is depicted in cinema and what should be depicted depends on the kind of changes desired in society. The content of films directly influences societal demeanor, either positively or negatively. The way female characters are portrayed in cinema plays a crucial role in conversion of public perceptions. Films that showcase women as independent, decision-makers, empowered individuals with positive attitudes, contribute to maintaining and enhancing the dignity of women in modern society. Cinema has the power to challenge conventional and traditional norms, engaging audiences to reconsider entrenched gender dynamics that hinder women's empowerment. By presenting progressive and empowering portrayals of women, cinema can inspire society to adopt more equitable and respectful attitudes towards women.

Cinema gives a new outlook to print media by giving the power of audio-visual aids and becoming the inspiration and influencing illiterate people by hatching enrapture films. It helps to explore the new dimension of societal norms and challenges, existing in society for instance gender dynamics in terms of casteism, colorism, objectification, discrimination, and sexual harassment of women. Bollywood has produced a large number of films that deal with the theme of different spheres like family, social drama, religious stories, affairs and issues of family and society. It cannot denied that cinema has the power to change the mindset and perception of society towards women, but still needs to change the status of women in society.

In the last decade, Bollywood boasts an extensive catalog of women-centric movies, in which women's roles have been shifted from traditional roles to complex and diverse ones. Female characters are showcased as crossing the boundaries of conventional norms and breaking stereotypical barrier. But on the other hand women's portrayal was limited to specific criteria like wives, mothers, house makers, dutiful women etc. If a working woman is depicted on screen, it's normal to inform the audience that she has to face lots of challenges, from objectification to sexual harassment during their working pace and place or beside.

The Journey of Women in Film: From Subjugation to Strength

Women are the backbone of society; we can say that if there are no women, there is no society. Women have always had an epochal side in the development of the nation and society as well. That time was a thing of the past when women were treated as objects, slaves and worked as housemakers. Women were excruciated in the mode of gender dynamics, stereotypes, and traditional rules. These obstacles were like a quagmire that trapped women in itself and tarnished their identities. Women were tied up with rivets like perpetrators and treated in the same way. But time does not always remain the same, the door of opportunities for women opened after a long struggle. The woman of the 21st century achieved several milestones in every sphere of life and became the inspiration of others. Despite these all things, can't say undoubtedly that the image of women is unscathed by traditional norms and stereotypes and has been transformed completely. Still, some steps need to be taken to change women's status in society and on screen. Cinema plays a momentous role in the portrayal of women by introducing or advocating fascinating characters, strong themes, and nuanced storytelling. The Bollywood industry has a significant women-centric films repertoire that shows the power of women empowerment such as in the Bollywood

movies, from *Mother India* to *Thappad*, *Dangal*, *Chak De ! India*, *Mardaani*, *Pink*, and many more. These movies depicted the strong leading character who changed the temperament of society towards women.

The journey for women to become empowered is not as easy as it seems. Things that appear easy equally difficult in reality. It was very discriminating when I came to know that there were no female characters in the first released movie *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) by Dada Sahab Phalke, regarded as the father of Indian cinema. Societal norms and taboos prevented women from participating in public performances. Later, Dadasaheb Phalke understood the presence of women in cinema. *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913) by Dada Sahab Phalke was the first movie in which women were introduced, Durga Bai Kamat first female artist and Kamla Bai Kamat first female child actress. Furthermore, Devika Rani acknowledged worldwide as the first lady in Indian cinema for pioneering contribution as the first talkies actress and co-founder of the Bombay talkies studio. She had a successful career in cinema which spanned ten years.

In earlier times, the portrayal of women in cinema did not mean that they wanted to change people's perceptions towards women; rather, their way of portraying women was such that the audience could enjoy the objectification of women. In those times, people used to compare the art of performing women with prostitution. *Heeramandi*, a recently released web series by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, highlights the historical background of Heera Mandi. In which the lives of courtesans were publicized. Through this series, Bhansali has made people aware the reality of the view, people have about courtesans today and also about the various kinds of torture and troubles they had to face. Earlier, being a courtesan was not a sin; rather, they used to entertain kings and emperors through *Mujra*, and not only this, but people from rich families used to send their children to them to learn manners, etiquette, and the art of

music. However, as the regime changed, the actual role of courtesans began to vanish. Courtesan did not practice prostitution in earlier times but some rulers forced them to become prostitutes. The talent suppressed in them slowly started disappearing, and they started doing prostitution along with *Mujra*, the way people viewed courtesan had changed from courtesans to prostitute. Heera Mandi, which was famous for its moon phase of art in earlier times, but has now evolved into 'red light district'. This type of depiction shows how male dominance power changes the scenario of women in society. This raise the question of how talented women have to mold themselves according to their societal perceptions and lose their capabilities!

Empowering Portrayals and Social Inspiration

After the depiction of women as facing violence, objectification, and stigma, the new wave came, the first woman-centric movie, *Mother India*, as the name represents the power of women. Women who have the power to up bringing the child, husband, family, and society and the power to face challenges and fight against injustice. In this movie, Radha is represented as a multifaceted role who became the epitome of a woman of high standards and became the inspiration of society. The popularity of the film also inspired cinema and paved the way for producing more women-centric films in the treasure of Bhartiya cinema. The portrayal of this conscientious woman figure persona of the showcasing branch of depiction in the popular culture of Hindi cinema. However, taking a look at Nirupama Roy's role in cinema, attributed to the queen of misery, worshipped her husband like God, followed the traditional and stereotypical role. She portrayed quintessential Indian mothers on screen in numerous films. Her performance was marked by deep emotional resonance and garnered widespread acclaim. The pathetic characters in cinema are shown as if they have no purpose in their own life. Their only purpose in life is to worship their husband as a Pati

Parmeshwar and follow the path they have made may be full of torture or trouble. No voices should be raised against them in any way. The portrayals of women were limited to sacrificial mothers, dutiful wives, homemakers, objects of sexual desire, and held moral responsibility. Women did not have any authentication of the existence in cinema, but necessary for entertainment purposes in cinema; they were not shown as independent but shown as dependent on men.

Inspiring Societal Change through Mythological Characters

Indian cinema is not only a treasure trove of horror, romance, action, etc. films, but religious films also have a huge and important contribution in it. Which remains an inspiration for our changing society and gives the examples to follow that path they paved. Like Sita from *Ramayana*, If a woman raises her voice against the atrocities happening in her family and society, then some women of society who believe in old customs and some people who have a male chauvinistic mindset, say that you should become like Sita who lived a normal life despite so many problems. When a princess living in a palace is spending fourteen years in exile, then why can't you bear all this? Why don't the people who say this have such a mindset for men that women don't have the right that if they can become a wife like Sita, then why can't their husband become like Ram, a symbol of virtue and dignity? If society wants to see women as Sita, then the same ideology will apply to men as well that they too will have to become like Shri Ram. But in the end, King Ram also refused to accept Sita. History repeats itself; even today such ideology is prevalent in society. Why society doesn't give the example of Draupadi who fought against oppression and sought justice through public questioning to the kauravs.

Item Songs in Bollywood: From Entertainment to Exploitation

The another name of exploitation of women in cinema is their arrival wearing extremely short clothes to expose body in an item song. Women dance in front of the male audience to please them. The foundation of the item songs was laid in the film of the 50s. They started degrading women's dignity and captivating the spectators to the theatre through item songs. From the 1950s to the 2020s, Helen to Malaika plays a scopophilian role in the item songs to attract the male gaze. Feminists criticized and questioned such a faded portrayal of women. On the one hand, Item songs are playing an important role in uplifting cinema financially, but on the other, they are tarnishing the image of women in society. The item songs paved the way to open the door of the dark room where women were facing subject to various kinds of torture like rape, physical violence, sexual harassment, etc. In the item songs, girls are not dancing to please only the hero but rather than everyone who is sitting in front of her or out of front to become popular. These songs have become the biggest source of popularity of cinema but they have also become the means of promoting atrocities and violence against women in society and country. Somehow due to the way women are shown in the item songs, the popularity of cinema is based on the portrayal of women's sexuality. For instance, *Munni Badnaam Hui* from *Dabangg* (2010), *Sheila ki Jawani* from *Tees Maar Khan* (2010), *chikni Chameli* from *Agneepath* (2012), *Fevicol se* from *Dabangg 2* (2012), *Laila main Laila* from *Raees* (2017), etc. The depiction of women in these item songs promotes objectification, rape culture, and stereotypical norms towards women in society.

Women in Charge: Progressive Narratives in Indian Movies

Cinema has now progressed many folds, and the portrayal of women has changed from stereotypes to empowered women. But

steps are still to be taken in this area but whatever steps have been taken are commendable and are playing an important role in changing the condition of women. Earlier, women were shown to be dependent on men, but now women are shown to be independent. There are many women-centric films, in those the images of women are shown differently from the earlier images, and women are shown as empowered and independent. They can take decisions or make decisions for themselves. Whatever the field of life, they will become a role model for others in every field, whether it is economic, political, societal, or educational. Now, they have left behind the societal outlook towards women in sports and are moving ahead and making the country proud. Like in these movies *Chak De! India* (2007), it was lauded for addressing social issues like sexism, regionalism, and the importance of unity and teamwork. It resonated with audiences and critics alike for its inspirational message and realistic portrayal of sports. *Mary Kom*, (2014) is the real story of an Indian boxer named Mary Kom. This story highlights the struggle, dedication, and hindrances she faced in her personal and professional life. It is more than just a sports film; it is a tribute to the grit and perseverance of Mary Kom, celebrating her contributions to boxing and her role as a trailblazer for women in sports.

It also sheds light on the socio-cultural barriers women face in the pursuit of their professional dreams in India. *Dangal* (2016), a film about wrestling, addresses broader themes of gender equality, the importance of parental support, and the power of determination and hard work. It had a significant cultural impact, inspiring many to take up sports and challenging traditional gender roles in Indian society. These are all movies in that women have made all women proud by achieving success in the field of sports and challenging the stereotypical norms and societal attitudes against women. Apart from the sports films, we have numerous examples demonstrating

women's empowerment, illustrating how women have become empowered. *Queen* is a 2013 Indian comedy-drama film directed by Vikas Bahl, starring Kangana Ranaut in the lead role as Rani Mehara young girl from a traditional family. When her fiancé refused to get engaged to her one day before the ceremony that was unacceptable for her. She turned this shock into an opportunity and made a trip to go honeymoon alone. she visited Paris and Amsterdam, tried to find the real truth of her life, and learned that she doesn't need a man to live life happily. She found a new dimension of living life confidentially without man's support. when Vijay comes to confess his mistake she rejects his proposal and moves forward in her life. She portrays empowering and growing women from splintering women. This story gives an inspiring message to all those women whom men rejected. It is not necessary that women always need a man to live their lives. If misogyny people reject women, then they can live a valuable life alone and can also fulfill all their responsibilities very well.

Kahaani (2012) film directed by Sujoy Ghosh. It is a fascinating story of a woman named Vidhya Bagchi (Vidhya Balan) who comes back to Kolkata from London by faux pregnancy, not to find her lost husband but to find her husband's murderer and take revenge for his murder on Durga pooja. This film has also been given a religious touch. It gives a positive message against the day-to-day atrocities on women that whenever atrocities against women increase, then they will take the form of an equal power like Maa Durga and fight against the atrocities being committed against her.

MOM is a 2017 Indian thriller drama film directed by Ravi Udyawar, starring Sridevi in the lead role as a biology teacher named Devki. This movie visualized the best example of a step motherhood whose daughter gets raped by her students and the students' acquaintances. The mother's love for her children shown in this film is non-

discriminatory. This film is an answer to those people who think that a stepmother cannot give the children the same love as their real mother gives. In this film, the opposite is shown a daughter treats her mother stepmotherly but a mother does not treat her daughter stepmotherly. Despite all this, she crosses all limits to take revenge for the atrocities committed on her daughter and also succeeds. Where the law could not punish the rapist, a mother, without caring for her life, takes revenge on her daughter's rapists and kills them one by one. This depiction changes the attitude of society towards stepmothers and also gives the message that not every mother behaves like a stepmother; a mother is a mother who cannot be anyone else.

Thappad (2020) film directed by Anubhav Sinha, starring Taapsee Pannu (Amrita Sandhuas) in the lead role. The movie addresses the issue of domestic violence against a woman who got divorced from her husband because of a slap by her husband. When her husband did not even realize that he had done anything wrong. She was fulfilling all the responsibilities of a wife and daughter-in-law of the family but a slap dismissed her life. It was not just a slap that hit her face, it was a slap on her self-respect that hurt her dignity. In this film, many female characters have been shown who were facing domestic violence like Netra (Advocate), Sunita (Maid), Shivani Fonseca, Vikram's neighbor. Amrita's step inspired all of them and raised their voice against domestic violence and won. This film illuminates the path for women to raise their voices against domestic violence against women and suggests that raise their voices against any small or big atrocity that is happening to them or later it takes a bigger.

In conclusion, cinema wields significant influence in shaping and reflecting gender dynamics within society. The ongoing evolution of female characters in films underscores the medium's potential to challenge entrenched stereotypes, inspire social change, and contribute to the advancement of a more

equitable and inclusive world. This research has highlighted several critical aspects. The portrayal of women in cinema has historically mirrored societal attitudes, from traditional, passive roles to more empowered and diverse representations. This progression not only reflects changing societal norms but also actively participates in accelerating these changes. Cinematic depictions of strong, multidimensional female characters can significantly influence audience perceptions, dismantling harmful stereotypes and expanding the perceived roles and capabilities of women in society. This has a ripple effect, encouraging real-world behavior changes and aspirations. Female characters in cinema serve as vital role models, particularly for younger viewers. By presenting women in leadership, action, and intellectually robust roles, films can inspire viewers to pursue similar paths, fostering a generation that values and strives for gender equality.

Progressive portrayals of women in films can act as catalysts for broader social change. By influencing public discourse, these portrayals can help shape policy and societal attitudes towards gender equality, promoting a more inclusive and just society. Despite notable advancements, there remain significant challenges in achieving authentic and comprehensive representation of women in cinema. Future efforts must focus on increasing diversity in storytelling, ensuring women are portrayed in a wide range of roles and narratives, and promoting gender equity behind the scenes in the film industry. To maintain and build upon this positive trajectory, both research and industry practices must prioritize the continuous enhancement of female representation in cinema. By pushing the boundaries of how women are depicted on screen and ensuring their stories are told with depth and authenticity, the influence of female characters in cinema can continue to drive meaningful progress in real-world gender dynamics. This commitment to gender equity in

cinema is not only a reflection of societal progress but a powerful driver of it, paving the way for a world where gender equality is the norm rather than the exception.

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