



Negotiating Spectacle and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

S. Krishnapriya^{1*}, Dr. S. Suresh²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalaignar Karunanidhi Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, Affiliated to Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

*Corresponding Author: Email: krishnapriya999n@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor of English, Kalaignar Karunanidhi Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, Affiliated to Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.2.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.2.1)



S. Krishnapriya

Article info

Article Received: 03/03/2026
Article Accepted: 06/04/2026
Published online: 16/04/2026

Abstract

The representation of women in Hindi cinema has historically been shaped by patriarchal visual regimes that position female characters as objects of spectacle rather than autonomous subjects. Drawing on feminist film theory and gaze studies, this article examines the transformation of female representation in contemporary Hindi cinema. Through a close textual analysis of *Laapataa Ladies*, *Thappad*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, the study investigates how recent Bollywood narratives negotiate the tension between spectacle and female subjectivity.

Using theoretical frameworks developed by Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Bell Hooks, and M. Madhava Prasad, the article analyses how cinematic techniques such as framing, narrative perspective, and performance construct alternative modes of spectatorship. While *Laapataa Ladies* critiques patriarchal marriage structures through rural realism and satire, *Thappad* exposes the normalization of domestic violence and emotional labor within middle-class households. In contrast, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* reconfigures spectacle as a form of political visibility within the marginalized context of sex work.

The study argues that contemporary Hindi cinema is undergoing a transitional shift from spectacle driven femininity towards subjectivity centered storytelling. However, these transformations remain constrained by industrial conventions, commercial imperatives, and limited engagement with intersectional identities such as caste and class (Ganti 34). The article concludes that Bollywood's feministic turn represents a negotiated

reconfiguration of patriarchal visual regimes rather than their complete dismantling.

Keywords: Hindi Cinema, Female Gaze, Feminist Film Theory, Spectacle, Female Subjectivity, Bollywood.

Introduction

Cinema has long functioned as a powerful cultural medium through which social identities, gender norms, and ideologies values are produced and circulated (Viridi 12). In India, Hindi cinema popularly referred to as Bollywood occupies a particularly influential position within the national media landscape. With its wide reach across linguistic, regional, and class boundaries, it play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of femininity, masculinity, and domestic life (Dwyer 5).

Historically, the representation of women in Hindi cinema has been confined to a limited set of archetypes that reinforce patriarchal values. Women have frequently been depicted as self-sacrificing mothers, dutiful wives, or romantic figures whose primary narrative function is to support the male protagonist (Prasad 45). Within this framework, the female body becomes a site of visual pleasure and aesthetic display.

This pattern aligns closely with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which argues that classical cinema structures spectatorship in ways that objectify women while privileging male agency (Mulvey 6). Expanding this argument, Prasad observes that mainstream Hindi cinema constructs a narrative universe in which the male hero resolves social conflict, while the female character embodies emotional stability and moral order (Prasad 47).

However, recent developments in Hindi cinema indicate a gradual transformation in the representation of women. Contemporary films increasingly foreground female experiences question patriarchal norms, and explore themes of autonomy and resistance.

These shifts reflect broader socio-cultural changes, including feministic discourse and changing gender roles (Ganti102).

This article examines how contemporary Hindi cinema negotiates the relationship between spectacle and female subjectivity through an analysis of Laapataa Ladies, Thappad, and Gangubai Kathiawadi. By analyzing narrative structure, visual composition, and character development, the study explores how these films challenge traditional visual regimes while operating within the constraints of mainstream commercial cinema.

Research Design and Methodology:

This study adopts qualitative research design grounded in feminist film theory and textual analysis. The objective is to examine how cinematic narratives construct female subjectivity through visual and narrative strategies.

The films were selected based on their female centered narratives, engagement with gender politics, and cultural relevance in contemporary discourse. Additionally, they represent diverse socio-cultural contexts: rural (Laapataa Ladies), urban middle-class (Thappad), and marginalized (Gangubai Kathiawadi).

The analytical framework draws on Mulvey's theory of the male gaze (Mulvey 6), Doane's theory of female spectatorship (Doane 74), hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze (Hooks 122), and Prasad's ideological analysis of Hindi cinema (Prasad 45).

The analysis follows a three-step process:

- narrative analysis,
- visual analysis, and
- theoretical interpretation.

Narrative analysis focuses on plot structure and character arcs; visual analysis examines framing, camera movement, and mise-en-scene; and theoretical interpretation connects these elements to feminist film theory.

To ensure validity, interpretations are grounded to establish theoretical framework and supported by close textual reading. Secondary scholarship on Indian cinema further strengthens analytical consistency (Gopalan 18).

Feminist Film Theory and the Politics of the Gaze:

The concept of the gaze is central to feminist film studies, providing a framework for understanding how visual media constructs gendered subjectivities. Mulvey argues that classical cinema positions women as objects of erotic spectacle through visual techniques such as fragmentation and fetishization (Mulvey 11).

Doane complicates this model by examining the position of the female spectator, suggesting that women negotiate identification within a system that objectifies them (Doane 80). Hooks further extends this discourse through the concept of the oppositional gaze, which enables marginalized viewers to resist dominant visual ideologies (Hooks 122).

In the context of Hindi cinema, these frameworks are particularly relevant due to the industry's reliance on spectacle, especially in song-and-dance sequences (Gopalan 23). However, contemporary films increasingly challenge these conventions by foregrounding female interiority and agency.

Historical Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema:

The representation of women in Hindi cinema has evolved across different historical phases. In the post-independence era, films often depicted women as embodiments of moral virtue and national identity (Viridi 45).

By the 1970s and 1980s, commercial cinema increasingly reduced female characters to decorative roles within male-centric narratives. The rise of spectacle intensified the objectification of the female body (Kabir 67).

The liberalization era of the 1990s introduced the image of the "modern woman," yet her autonomy remained constrained by romantic narratives and patriarchal expectations (Dwyer 102). Contemporary cinema, however, signals a shift toward more complex and agency-driven representations.

Rural Realism and Feminist Satire in *Laapataa Ladies*:

Laapataa Ladies critiques patriarchal marriage practices through satire and rural realism. The narrative device of exchanged brides exposes the erasure of female identity within patriarchal systems.

The film's minimalist visual style resists spectacle, instead emphasizing emotional realism. This aligns with a broader shift away from the objectifying gaze towards subjective representation (Mulvey 15).

The veil functions as a symbolic marker of invisibility, reinforcing patriarchal control over female identity. At the same time, the film uses satire to destabilize normalized gender practices, encouraging viewers to question their ideological foundations.

Domestic Violence and Emotional Labor in *Thappad*:

Thappad presents a powerful critique of domestic violence by focusing on a seemingly

minor act a single slap. The ordinariness of the event underscores the normalization of gendered violence within domestic spaces (Virdi 88).

The film's slow pacing and emphasis on silence disrupt conventional cinematic spectacle. By foregrounding repetitive domestic labor, it makes visible the structural inequalities embedded in everyday life.

This strategy challenges Mulvey's concept of visual pleasure by replacing spectacle with duration and affect (Mulvey 16). Amrita's decision to seek divorce represents a reclaim of agency, challenging deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

Spectacle and Political Agency in Gangubai Kathiawadi:

Unlike the other two films, Gangubai Kathiawadi embraces spectacle. However, it reconfigures spectacle as a site of power rather than objectification. Gangubai's visual centrality challenges traditional hierarchies of representation. The film transforms visibility into political agency, aligning with Hooks' concept of reclaiming the gaze (Hooks 126).

At the same time, the film raises questions about the commodification of empowerment, as spectacle remains tied to commercial aesthetics (Ganti 140).

A Transitional Gaze in Contemporary Bollywood:

These films collectively illustrate the emergence of a transitional gaze in Hindi cinema. They challenge traditional visual regimes while remaining embedded within commercial structures. This hybridity reflects an ongoing negotiation between feminist politics and cinematic convention (Shohat and Stam 210).

Results and Discussion:

This study examined how contemporary Hindi cinema negotiates the

relationship between spectacle and female subjectivity through a close analysis of Laapataa Ladies, Thappad, and Gangubai Kathiawadi. The findings reveal a significant, though incomplete, shift in representational strategies, where traditional modes of objectification are reworked through emerging cinematic forms that foreground female agency, interiority, and resistance.

Reconfiguring Identity and Visibility in Laapataa Ladies:

The analysis demonstrates that Laapataa Ladies destabilizes patriarchal constructions of identity through its central narrative device of exchanged brides. This narrative exposes the systemic erasure of female individuality within patriarchal marriage structures, where women are rendered interchangeable and defined through relational roles rather than personal identity.

The veil functions as a crucial visual metaphor, symbolizing both physical concealment and ideological invisibility. Unlike conventional cinematic representations that eroticize the female body, the film employs a restrained visual style, characterized by medium shots, natural lighting, and minimal camera manipulation. This approach resists the fragmentation associated with the male gaze and instead allows the spectator to engage with the characters as subjects rather than objects (Mulvey 11).

Furthermore, the film's use of satire enables a subtle yet effective critique of normalized gender practices. By exaggerating familiar customs such as arranged marriage and gender separation, the narrative exposes their internal contradictions. This aligns with the oppositional gaze described by hooks, as the viewer is encouraged to question dominant ideological structures rather than passively accept them (Hooks 122).

However, the film's reliance on humor and nonconfrontational storytelling also reflects a negotiation with mainstream audience expectations. While it successfully foregrounds female subjectivity, its critique remains moderated, avoiding radical disruption of patriarchal norms.

Domestic Space, Emotional Labor, and Structural Violence in Thappad:

The findings from Thappad highlight a shift toward affective realism in the representation of gendered violence. The film's central incident a single slap functions as a narrative rupture that exposes the normalization of domestic violence within everyday life. By presenting the act without dramatic amplification, the film underscores its ordinariness and systemic nature.

A key contribution of the film lies in its visualization of emotional and domestic labor. Through repetitive sequences of household work, the film makes visible forms of labor that are typically marginalized within both social and cinematic frameworks. This aligns with feminist critiques of unpaid labor and expands Doane's discussion of female spectatorship by enabling identification with the protagonist's lived experience (Doane 80).

Cinematically, the film disrupts the logic of visual pleasure by privileging duration, silence, and introspection over spectacle. The camera lingers on moments of stillness, inviting the viewer to engage with the emotional consequences of violence rather than its visual dramatization. In doing so, it challenges Mulvey's notion of the gaze as inherent tied to pleasure, replacing it with an ethics of witnessing (Mulvey 16).

Amrita's decision to seek divorce marks a critical moment of agency, as the narrative rejects the conventional resolution of reconciliation. Instead, it foregrounds dignity and self-respect as foundational to subjectivity.

However, the film's focus on an urban, middle-class setting limits its engagement with broader structural inequalities, particularly those related to caste and economic marginalization.

Spectacle, Power, and Political Agency in Gangubai Kathiawadi:

In contrast to the realism of the other films, Gangubai Kathiawadi employs spectacle as a central aesthetic strategy. However, rather than reinforcing objectification, the film reconfigures spectacle as a site of power and political visibility.

Gangubai is consistently framed as a figure of authority, occupying central positions within the frame and commanding visual attention through costume, lighting, and performance. This visual construction subverts traditional dynamics of the male gaze by transforming the female body into a source of agency rather than passive display (Mulvey 15).

This transformation resonates with Hooks' concept of reclaiming the gaze, where marginalized subject assert control over their representation (Hooks 126). The performative identity of Gangubai particularly in scenes of public address functions as a form of self-authorship, enabling her to negotiate power within a socio-economic system.

At the same time, the film raises critical questions about the commodification of empowerment. The aestheticization of Gangubai's narrative risks converting her struggle into a consumable spectacle, reflecting the influence of commercial cinema (Ganti 140). Thus, the film simultaneously challenges and reproduces the structures it seeks to critique.

Emergence of a Transitional Gaze:

Taken together, these films illustrate the emergence of a transitional gaze in contemporary Hindi cinema. This gaze does not fully abandon the conventions of mainstream film making but instead reworks them to

accommodate new forms of female subjectivity.

Each film adopts a distinct strategy:

- Laapataa Ladies minimizes spectacle to foreground identity and critique patriarchy through satire
- Thappad replaces spectacle with emotional realism and ethical spectatorship
- Gangubai Kathiawadi reclaims spectacle as a mode of political agency

These variations demonstrate that the transformation of the gaze is neither linear nor uniform. Instead, it operates through negotiation, producing hybrid forms that combine resistance with conformity. As Shohat and Stam argue, cinematic representation is always shaped by ideological and industrial contexts, resulting in complex and often contradictory visual regimes (Shohat and Stam 210).

Discussion of Key Findings:

The analysis identifies three major shifts in contemporary Hindi cinema:

1. From Objectification to Subjectivity: Female characters are increasingly portrayed as agents with emotional depth, interiority, and narrative control, marking a departure from traditional objectifying frameworks.

2. Reconfiguration of Spectacle: Spectacle is no longer exclusively tied to visual pleasure and objectification but is reimagined as a site of critique (Laapataa Ladies) and empowerment (Gangubai Kathiawadi).

3. Transformation of Spectatorship: The spectator is repositioned as an active participant, encouraged to critically engage with cinematic representation rather than passively consume it. However, these transformations remain partial. The persistence of constraints, limited commercial intersectional

representation, and the continued influence of traditional narrative structures indicate that the shift toward feminist representation is still in progress.

Limitations and Contradictions:

Despite their progressive themes, these films exhibit several limitations. First, they demonstrate limited engagement with intersectionality, particularly in relation to caste and rural marginality (Dwyer 145). Second, their narratives are shaped by market driven considerations, which often moderate their political critique (Ganti 156). Finally, the persistence of spectacle suggests that objectification has not been eliminated but rather transformed into more subtle forms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that contemporary Hindi cinema is undergoing a significant yet incomplete transformation in its representation of women. Through the analysis of Laapataa Ladies, Thappad, and Gangubai Kathiawadi, it becomes evident that filmmakers are increasingly engaging with themes of female subjectivity, agency, and resistance.

Each film offers a distinct reworking of cinematic form: satire and realism in Laapataa Ladies, affective introspection in Thappad, and stylized spectacle in Gangubai Kathiawadi. Together, they reflect an evolving cinematic language that seeks to move beyond the constraints of the male gaze while remaining embedded within the commercial structures of Bollywood.

However, this transformation is best understood not as a complete rupture but as a negotiated reconfiguration. The persistence of spectacle, the influence of market forces, and the limited engagement with intersectional identities highlight the ongoing tensions within contemporary cinematic practice.

Future research can build on this study by examining a broader range of films, incorporating regional cinemas, and exploring audience reception to better understand how these shifting visual regimes are interpreted and contested.

Ultimately, the emergence of a transitional gaze signals an important moment in the cultural politics of Indian cinema one that reflects both the possibilities and limitations of feminist intervention within mainstream media.

References

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Chatterji, S. (1998). *Subject cinema, object women: An analysis of the portrayal of women in Indian cinema*. Parumita Publications.
- Chopra, A. (2000). *Sholay: The making of a classic*. Penguin Books.
- Doane, M. A. (1987). *The desire to desire: The woman's film of the 1940s*. Indiana University Press.
- Dwyer, R. (2014). *Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a guide to contemporary India*. Reaktion Books.
- Dwyer, R., & Patel, D. (2002). *Cinema India: The visual culture of Hindi film*. Rutgers University Press.
- Erens, P. (Ed.). (1990). *Issues in feminist film criticism*. Indiana University Press.
- Ganti, T. (2013). *Bollywood: A guidebook to popular Hindi cinema*. Routledge.
- Ghosh, S. (2010). *Fire: A queer film classic*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.
- Kaplan, E. A. (1983). *Women and film: Both sides of the camera*. Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Prasad, M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Oxford University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemsen, P. (1999). *Encyclopedia of Indian cinema*. Oxford University Press.
- Sangari, K., & Vaid, S. (Eds.). (1990). *Recasting women: Essays in Indian colonial history*. Rutgers University Press.
- Srivastava, S. (2007). *Masculinity, consumerism, and the post-national Indian city*. Routledge.
- Thomas, R. (1985). Indian cinema: Pleasures and popularity. *Screen*, 26(3-4), 116-131.
- Uberoi, P. (2006). *Freedom and destiny: Gender, family, and popular culture in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Virdi, J. (2003). *The cinematic imagination: Indian popular films as social history*. Rutgers University Press.

Films Cited

- Bhansali, S. L. (Director). (2022). *Gangubai Kathiawadi* [Film]. Bhansali Productions.
- Rao, K. (Director). (2023). *Laapataa ladies* [Film]. Aamir Khan Productions.
- Sinha, A. (Director). (2020). *Thappad* [Film]. Benaras Mediaworks.