



## DEPICTION OF WIDOWS IN BOLLYWOOD: THE JOURNEY SO FAR AND AHEAD

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses the depiction of widows in Bollywood films. Bollywood is a very powerful cultural mirror of Indian society. However, there are allegations of stereotyping certain section of the society, in particular women in general. Women actors and filmmakers have raised their voices regarding marginalization on a number of platforms on various occasions. The section of women that have been doubly marginalized over the year in Bollywood is that of widows. This paper traces the treatment and depiction of widows over the years and argues for greater space for widows in future.*

**Keywords:** widows, stigma, Bollywood, marginalization.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Hindi cinema has always portrayed women as peripheral and warped characters. It is a part of the cultural baggage that Indians have brought with them since the very start. It has been alleged that stories are written with male actors in mind and box-office returns are often pegged on hero worship. In an article entitled “Does Bollywood have a Woman Problem? Al Jazeera reported, “...the head of the All India Progressive Women’s Association, Kavita Krishnan...told Al Jazeera that even women who manage to break into Bollywood had little influence over the direction the film industry took.” (Mandhai & Gautam, 2018).

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It is indeed ironic that women still feel and are marginalized in a country where the ancient law of the land *Manusmriti* ruled that gods reside in the place where women are worshipped and places where they are not worshipped, all actions become futile (यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः । यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥ मनुस्मृति ३/५६ ॥) It is hard to imagine the empathy for the plight of the doubly marginalized group of women in a place where even the “privileged” group of women feel powerless. The group in question is widows. Despite more than 75 years of independence, India has a long way to go as far as treatment of widows is concerned. Baheti and Mirgane in their paper “Prem Rog: Screening the Social and Familial Plight of Widows” assert:

*An Indian woman who survives to old age is therefore almost certain to become a widow. Their condition is also very worse because amongst them 88% widows remain in their deceased husband’s village, some are allowed to stay in the same house and others are either abandoned often by their own sons to have claim on their father’s property or sent back to their parents house. Even today widows are under the immense psychological and social pressure. They are accursed of being responsible for their husband’s death. (Baheti and Mirgane)*

It is very important therefore, to expose the evil in whatever way it is possible because sometimes even intellectuals would choose to ignore the problem or deny its existence. It is very shocking revelation that even Swami Vivekananda is alleged to have denied the mistreatment of widows in India. In a lecture organized by, “Brooklyn Ethical association, on ‘India’s Gift to the World’” (VivekaVani) he denied the ill treatment of widows in India. Swamiji said, “it was untrue that child widows were abused or ill treated in any way” (VivekaVani). He added:

*It is a fact that some Hindus marry very young....When a husband dies all his possessions go to his widow. If a widow is poor she is the same as poor widows in any other country. Old men sometimes marry children, but if the husband was wealthy it was all the better for the widow the sooner he died. I have travelled all over India, but failed to see a case of the ill treatment mentioned. (VivekaVani).*

In his defence, it can be argued that perhaps Swamiji did not want to tarnish the image of India abroad or provide a weapon to the Christian missionaries to attack Hinduism. Social reform in India, therefore has to come indigenously from all sections of society and on all platforms. This is the ideal scenario but reality is quite different. As far as the equation of man and woman is concerned, Bollywood and Hindi movies have always been focused on



the romantic duet – the couple’s escapades to achieve their goals, their fortunes and their struggles. But a woman’s role is not as prominent as the hero’s, and she is a decorative prop rather than a character that stands out in the crowd. A counterpoint can be raised about the necessity of depiction of social evils in films. It might be argued that people go to the theatre to get entertained and not treated of their mindset as FL Lucas once remarked that theatre is not a hospital when he was interpreting Aristotle’s views on catharsis and purgation. To answer this, there can be various arguments like, “art must represent life,” or “the purpose of art is to instruct and delight,” etc. However, a more plausible and relevant argument is that everything that is done in the human world has some element of human interest. Films are an effective medium and it has been seen in the past that some films have brought out social change. One film in particular needs that to mentioned here is V Shantaram’s *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (1957) . Describing the impact of the film on Prison Reforms in India Arnab bannerjee wrote an article in *Hindustan Times* in 2007. He writes:

*It happened fifty years ago – a critically acclaimed film from India that made filmgoers from across the world sit up and take note of the enormous talent that emerged out of the Asian region – that of director V Shantaram’s with his magnum opus, Do Aankhen Barah Haath (Two Eyes Twelve Hands ), a 1957 classic that portrays a progressive jail warden who transforms six deadly prisoners into persons of virtue. An inspirational film endorsing prison reform and propounding the philosophy that even the most hardened, seemingly soul dead criminal can be softened, rectified, amended, and thus rehabilitated.”*  
(Bannerjee)

Bannerjee discusses the impact of the film on Prison Reforms. According to him, “the jailor sets an example even the likes of Kiran Bedi tried to emulate years later.” (Bannerjee) It is pertinent to mention that Dr. Kiran Bedi an IPS officer is well known for the prison reforms in the famous Tihar Jail of India while she was posted there. Therefore, the impact of films on social reform cannot be undermined.

## **2. The Journey after Independence**

Although film production in India started much earlier during the British occupation of India; our focus here is the time period after India achieved independence. The 1950s were a golden era for Indian cinema. Legends like Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar took the audience by storm. It was a time when new trends emerged, legacies were built and some unfortunate events occurred. It was also a time when filmmakers were given the freedom to express themselves and tell their stories. In the 1950s, films were a way to explore taboo topics like caste and class. They aimed to show the hardships women faced and how they reacted. However, they also showed the power of a woman who fought for her rights and

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won. This is a stark contrast to the traditional roles of widows who were expected to be silent and submissive. There were some empathetic films that portrayed the hardships of widows in India. In *Dahej* (1950), V Shantaram scathingly commented on the ill-treatment of women who were forced into loveless arranged marriages. In *Madhumati*, Bimal Roy, Ritwik Ghatak and Dilip Kumar combined their talents to produce a spellbinding drama. Although *Mother India* (1957) is a powerful film produced in this decade, it doesn't match with the scope of this paper as Radha played by Nargis is not essentially a widow; therefore, the stigma associated with widowhood is not seen in the film.

Most of the women centred films in this decade were written by the writers who were the products of the Progressive Writers Movement. The Progressive Writers Movement was an Indian political and cultural movement that used literature as a tool for spreading progressive ideals and inspiring political activism. It had a lasting effect on the subcontinent's literary landscape, leaving behind a lasting legacy. Writer-activists worked for the abolition of slavery, independence of India from Britain and women's rights. Their movement received widespread support from people with various political ideologies such as Gandhism and Marxism.

Moving ahead we find that while the 1950s was a time of socially conscious films, the 1960s saw a shift in Bollywood cinema. During this period, Hindi film directors began to make films that focused on Indian issues instead of Western ones. While Bollywood movies in the 1950s were awash with aspirational depictions of men overcoming class, caste and gender inequities, it was the 1960s that brought about more realistic stories about women. This was the era when Bollywood filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Guru Dutt and Ritwik Ghatak began making some of their best works. This era also witnessed the emergence of parallel cinema, where film makers would take influences from Hollywood and adapt them to suit the Indian audience. The movement was dominated by Bengali cinema, but Hindi filmmakers like Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Ketan Mehta and Govind Nihalani started making their own movies as well. During the 1960s widows in Bollywood were often portrayed as the victims of sexual aggression in and outside the home. These films often referenced mythology and named the female characters after Hindu goddesses. This way, the films hoped to subvert the common perception that women are only supposed to depend on their husbands and stay submissive to their treatment. These movies were a great success and had a lasting impact on the society. The 1970s marked a time of change for Bollywood. During the decade, the Indian film industry grew in size and international audiences developed, as a result of the success of popular Hindi films. The period also saw the beginning of Indian neorealism and the Indian New Wave. These films challenged the status quo of Bollywood by exploring themes such as sexuality, family, and gender. As a result, the portrayal of widows in Bollywood became increasingly problematic. While these movies don't have any sexual violence or explicit

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misogyny, they still have problematic dialogues and stereotyping of women. Watching old movies that may have been sexless or misogynistic can feel like a gut-wrenching experience.

Often, widows were depicted as unattractive and as victims of societal pressure. Moreover, they were shown as secondary positions that women were expected to play in society and were only allowed to be seen as respectable when under the protection of their husbands. This is an important aspect to remember, because it helps us understand the ways in which widows are treated in early cinema. It also highlights the fact that there are alternatives to this oppressive and regressive system of portraying women. One such example is *Prem Rog*, which tells the story of a young woman who fights for happiness after her husband dies four days after their wedding. Despite the negative aspects of this film, it is still worth watching because it showcased that even in a situation as difficult as widowhood; there are heroes who come through for their loved ones. One might argue that *Prem Rog* is not relevant in the twenty first century. The reality on the other hand is quite contrary. In an article published in 2008 in *India Today* Rohit Parihar reported the case of child widows in Rajasthan:

*There are thousands of child widows in the villages of Rajasthan, strangled forever by fate, leading lives of social anonymity they had no choice to reject....Suman is a widow. A widow studying in Class II, a widow for the past three years, and a widow for the rest of her life. Suman is not the only one. In the same village, lives Shanti Khati, all of 10 years old, and widow for the last three years. Shanti became a widow at seven when her husband Bheru Khati, of village Mataji ka Khera, drowned in a pond. (Parihar)*

### **3. 1980s and Beyond**

During the 1980s, Bollywood Hindi Cinema was in a creative slump. Many films were regressing, and the middle class was dropping off at the theatres. But this is also the decade when many Bollywood actors started to get recognized for their acting skills. Among the filmmakers of that era were Lekh Tandon, Shyam Benegal, Gulzar and Aziz Mirza. They were making serials on Doordarshan (DD), the state-owned broadcaster that fed a generation of film lovers. These shows were a breeding ground for new film concepts, and the TV influenced the way filmmakers made films. They were using cinema as a platform to explore taboo themes like caste and class. Widows were a common theme in these films and they were being portrayed as victims of violence. They were often being shown as dependent on their husbands, sex objectives and side actors. This is in part because of the patriarchal structure of Indian society, but also because it is expected that women should come secondary to men. The status of widows is worse; it is still believed that widows should live in a state of renunciation after the death of their husband. Despite this, there are several films in Bollywood that speak about the journey of widows through the shackles of society. These

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films tell stories of women who were able to rise above their societal expectations and break through the constraints of society. Even though they aren't always successful, these women do what's best for their families and themselves.

The 2000s saw a new wave of feminism in Bollywood and a lot of films with a strong feminist message. Widows are still not very common in Hindi cinema but their representation is gradually changing. In the 2000s, we have seen films like *Ishqiya* and *Rajneeti* that revolve around widowed women's journey. These films help in shedding light on their hardships and struggles as they navigate through life without any guidance or support from their family and society. The protagonists of these movies learn to break away from their shackles and build a new life for themselves. One of the most popular movies of this period is *Dor* which revolves around the story of a young widow Meera (played by Ayesha Takia) and her friendship with Zeenat (played by Gul Panag). Their relationship helps in breaking away from the shackles of their lives devoid of joy, exuberance and building a new life for themselves. Movies like *Astitva* (2002) and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) showed women as strong, self-reliant, and independent, rather than meek damsels in distress. They have questioned dominant social taboos while offering new perspectives on everyday people-centric stories. These movies also delve into issues that are unspoken in the society such as extramarital affairs and spousal abuse to name a few.

#### **4. Conclusion: The Change**

Hindu Widow Remarriage Act legalised the remarriage of Hindu widows in 1856, yet the condition of only a select few urban women was impacted by the law. The reason being, 'false' religious beliefs and lack of education. The word false is used deliberately because without reading the scriptures, the beliefs are formed due to a political agenda of the dominant sex. The most revered book in the Sanatana Dharma *Rig Veda* does not in any way condemn widows, or call for their mistreatment. On the contrary, it asks the permission from the widow to release her husband's body for cremation- "14th Richa in 18th Mandala of the 10th Sukta deals with treatment of widows. **Rigveda (10.18.8)** is recited by the dead man's brothers and others, requesting the widow to release her husband's body for cremation." (Vedic). The same verses ask the widow to stop grieving and get married again. "**Rigveda (10.18.8)** blesses a woman at her second marriage, with progeny and prosperity in this life time: Translation : Go up, O woman, to the world of living; you stand by this one who is deceased; come! to him who grasps your hand, your second spouse (didhisu), you have now entered into the relation of wife to husband." (Vedic).

However widowhood in India has traditionally been associated with stigma and discrimination. This is because of deep-rooted cultural and social beliefs that view widows as inauspicious and responsible for their husband's death. As a result, widows in India have

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often been subjected to social isolation, economic deprivation, and physical and emotional abuse. Historically, widows were expected to live a life of austerity, with limited access to education, employment, and social interactions. They were often forced to shave their heads, wear white clothing, and follow strict dietary restrictions as a mark of mourning. These practices were intended to signify that the widow had lost her status as a wife and was now considered a social outcast. The social rejection and stigma associated with widowhood can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and stress. It also impairs their capacity for caring for themselves or their families, potentially leading to self-harm or suicidal thoughts. They are also vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse, including sexual harassment and exploitation. Widows in India are also at a higher risk of poverty and homelessness, as they may not have access to inheritance or financial support from their families.

The situation of widows in India has improved over the years, but many of the traditional beliefs and practices associated with widowhood still persist in certain parts of the country. Widows continue to face discrimination in terms of education, employment, and property rights. Several NGOs and women's rights groups have been working to raise awareness about the issue and provide support to widows. Guilds of Service, the National Federation of Indian Women, and the Indian Widows' Association have been working to support widows and raise awareness of their issues. In addition, the Indian government has implemented policies for the welfare of widows to improve their social and economic such as providing pensions and financial support, housing, and job training programs.

These efforts of the government and the social organizations are also reflected in Bollywood films in the twenty first century. Some of the examples that can be cited here are as follows: *Rajneeti* (2005) "Katrina Kaif in *Rajneeti* plays the role of Arjun Rampal's widow. Arjun who is a political bigwig dies at a bomb blast leaving Katrina alone to contest elections and become the next chief minister. (WonderWoman.In, "New-age Widows in Bollywood Films"). *Dor* (2006), *The Japanese Wife* (2010), and *Ishqiya* (2010) are some landmark films in the twenty first century that depict widows in India. *Ishqiya* depicts the love triangle between a widow (played by Vidya Balan) and two men. *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (2017), accounts the journey of a 35 year old widow on her journey to meet the ex-girlfriends of a man she meets on a dating app. *Is Love Enough? Sir* (2018) is a groundbreaking film that explores the possibility of a relationship between a maid and her employer. The maid in question is a widow as well. Lastly, *The Last Color* (2019) and *Pagglait* (2021) need a mention here. *Pagglait* needs to be mentioned in a bit detail here because the protagonist in the film challenges the stereotypes associated with widowhood. During the mourning period, she has the desire to indulge in pleasures. Smita Singh summarizes the events that follow:



*Life takes a twist for her and the family when a life insurance agent walks into the house and reveals that her husband has left behind Rs 50 lakh for his wife. She is forced to re-examine her priorities and make some hard decisions....she learns how to free herself from her family and society, and find herself...craving for a pani poori and a chilled cola instead of mourning....During her journey, she realises that society judges her for wanting to live her life on her own terms, and so she says, “Jab ladki log ko akal aati hai na, toh sab unhe pagglait hi kehte hain.” ...that’s the crux of this liberating film....women who stand up for their rights have always been labelled misbalanced or crazy. (“Will Sanya Malhotra Starrer Pagglait Change the Portrayal of Widows?”)*

Lastly there is *Doctor G* (2022) starring Ayushman Khurna, Rakul Preet Singh, and Sheeba Chaddha. Sheeba Chaddha plays the role of Ayushman’s single widowed mother who gets judged by her son when she starts seeing a man she meets through a dating app. When cornered, she recounts her plight and tells him that she was in her last year of graduation when she got married and her husband passed away leaving her pregnant. She devoted her entire life in his upbringing and now that he is settled and wants to live her life, he judges her. He has no right to do that.

In conclusion, it can be said that films are depicting the plight as well as the changing status of widows in India. However, there is always scope for improvement.

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