



RECLAIMING THE FEMALE BODY: GENDER, DESIRE, AND AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI CINEMA

DR. PANKAJ LOKHANDE

Assistant Professor,
Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce,
Pune (MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Hindi cinema has undergone a significant transformation in its representation of women, sexuality, and desire. While earlier Bollywood films frequently portrayed women as passive objects of male desire within patriarchal narratives, recent films increasingly depict women as autonomous subjects capable of articulating their own desires and identities. This research paper examines the representation of gender, body, and desire in contemporary Hindi cinema through a feminist theoretical framework. Drawing upon the works of Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault, the paper analyzes how the female body has shifted from being merely a spectacle for the male gaze to becoming a site of resistance, agency, and self-expression. Through textual analysis of selected films such as Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016), Queen (2014), Parched (2015), Gehraiyaan (2022), and Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022), the paper explores the changing discourse surrounding female sexuality, bodily autonomy, and identity in Bollywood. The study argues that contemporary Hindi cinema reflects evolving social attitudes toward women's agency while simultaneously negotiating patriarchal anxieties and cultural conservatism. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that cinema functions as a contested cultural space where gender identities and sexual politics are continuously reconstructed.

Keywords: Gender, Body Politics, Female Desire, Hindi Cinema, Bollywood, Feminist Film Theory, Male Gaze, Sexuality, Agency, Representation

DR. PANKAJ LOKHANDE

1 Page



INTRODUCTION

Cinema has always served as a powerful medium for reflecting and shaping social realities. In India, Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, occupies a central place in cultural imagination and public discourse. As one of the world's largest film industries, Bollywood not only entertains but also constructs ideologies related to gender, sexuality, nationalism, class, and morality. The representation of women in Hindi films has historically been shaped by patriarchal norms in which female characters often functioned as passive objects existing primarily to support male narratives.

Traditional Bollywood cinema largely idealized women as symbols of sacrifice, purity, and domesticity. Female characters were frequently represented through binaries such as the virtuous woman versus the immoral woman, or the self-sacrificing wife versus the sexually liberated vamp. Desire was predominantly coded through male subjectivity, while women's sexuality was either suppressed or demonized. The female body became a visual spectacle intended to satisfy masculine fantasies and reinforce patriarchal control.

However, contemporary Hindi cinema has witnessed important shifts in its portrayal of women and sexuality. The emergence of urban narratives, globalization, digital media, feminist movements, and OTT platforms has enabled filmmakers to explore female desire, bodily autonomy, and gender identity with greater complexity. Films now increasingly depict women who question traditional roles, articulate sexual desires, resist social oppression, and seek personal freedom.

This paper examines how contemporary Hindi cinema negotiates the politics of gender, body, and desire. It investigates the changing cinematic language surrounding women's representation and analyzes the tensions between empowerment and objectification. By applying feminist film theory and gender studies perspectives, the paper seeks to understand whether contemporary Bollywood genuinely challenges patriarchal structures or merely repackages women's liberation within commercial frameworks.

Objectives

1. To examine the representation of gender and female sexuality in contemporary Hindi cinema.
2. To analyze the politics of the female body in Bollywood films.
3. To explore the transformation of women's agency and desire in post-2000 Hindi cinema.



4. To study the role of cinematic techniques in constructing the male gaze.
5. To evaluate whether contemporary Hindi cinema challenges or reinforces patriarchal ideologies.

Questions

1. How is female desire represented in contemporary Hindi cinema?
2. In what ways does Bollywood construct and commodify the female body?
3. How do contemporary films negotiate patriarchal control and women's agency?
4. To what extent do modern Hindi films challenge traditional gender stereotypes?
5. How do feminist theories help in understanding the politics of representation in Bollywood?

Literature Review

The representation of women in cinema has been extensively studied within feminist film criticism. Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) argues that mainstream cinema operates through the "male gaze," where women are presented as objects of visual pleasure for male spectators. Mulvey suggests that cinematic techniques such as camera angles, close-ups, and narrative structures position women as passive spectacles rather than active subjects.

In the context of Indian cinema, scholars such as Madhava Prasad and Rachel Dwyer have explored the ideological functions of Bollywood narratives. Prasad argues that Hindi cinema often reproduces patriarchal and nationalist ideologies through melodrama and family-centered narratives. Similarly, feminist critics have pointed out how Bollywood historically objectified women while simultaneously idealizing feminine purity.

Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality emphasizes that desire is socially constructed through systems of power and discourse. Foucault's ideas help explain how cinema regulates and negotiate sexual identities within cultural frameworks. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity further challenges the notion of gender as fixed, suggesting instead that gender identities are socially enacted through repeated performances.

Recent scholarship on contemporary Hindi cinema highlights the emergence of films that foreground women's experiences, sexuality, and autonomy. Researchers have examined films like *Queen*, *Pink*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, and *Parched* as examples of feminist

DR. PANKAJ LOKHANDE

3 Page



interventions in Bollywood. However, many scholars also argue that despite progressive narratives, commercial cinema continues to commodify the female body and operate within patriarchal market structures.

This paper contributes to existing scholarship by analyzing how contemporary Hindi films simultaneously reproduce and resist dominant gender ideologies through representations of body and desire.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory provides the primary framework for this study. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is particularly useful in analyzing how women are visually represented in Hindi cinema. According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema privileges male spectatorship by portraying women as erotic objects rather than narrative agents.

The male gaze functions in three ways:

1. The camera's gaze.
2. The male character's gaze.
3. The audience's gaze.

These dimensions work together to objectify women and reinforce patriarchal power structures.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not biologically fixed but socially constructed through repeated actions and performances. Contemporary Hindi cinema often portrays women negotiating socially imposed gender roles. Films depicting women rejecting domestic expectations or expressing sexual independence can be interpreted through Butler's framework.

Michel Foucault and Sexuality

Foucault's concept of sexuality as a product of power relations is significant in understanding how Indian cinema regulates desire. Bollywood frequently mediates sexuality through censorship, morality, and cultural anxieties. Female desire is often portrayed within socially acceptable boundaries, revealing the tension between liberation and control.

DR. PANKAJ LOKHANDE

4 Page



Gender and the Female Body in Hindi Cinema

The female body has long occupied a central place in Bollywood visual culture. Traditional Hindi cinema frequently reduced women to decorative figures whose primary function was to provide romantic and sexual appeal. Songs, dance sequences, and costume design often emphasized the eroticization of the female body.

The phenomenon of “item numbers” illustrates the commodification of women’s bodies in Bollywood. Songs such as “Munni Badnaam Hui” and “Sheila Ki Jawani” demonstrate how female bodies are fragmented and sexualized through camera movements and choreography. These sequences prioritize visual pleasure and reinforce patriarchal spectatorship.

However, contemporary Hindi cinema also presents more complex representations of the body. Films such as *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Parched* depict women’s bodies as sites of oppression as well as resistance. In these films, women challenge social restrictions surrounding sexuality, marriage, and bodily autonomy.

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, female characters openly express desires that patriarchal society seeks to suppress. The film critiques the moral policing imposed on women and foregrounds their struggles for personal freedom. The body becomes a political space where resistance against patriarchal norms is enacted.

Similarly, *Parched* explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, and social oppression in rural India. The film portrays women trapped within systems of domestic violence, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation. Yet, it also highlights their emotional resilience and solidarity.

Thus, contemporary Hindi cinema increasingly recognizes the female body not merely as an object of desire but also as a medium of self-expression and resistance.

Desire and Female Agency

One of the most significant transformations in contemporary Bollywood is the representation of female desire. Earlier Hindi films often denied women sexual subjectivity, presenting them instead as passive recipients of male affection. Female characters rarely articulated their own desires openly.

Contemporary films challenge this silence by portraying women who actively pursue emotional and sexual fulfillment. In *Queen*, the protagonist Rani embarks on a journey of self-discovery after being abandoned by her fiancé. The film rejects the traditional idea that



women's identities depend upon marriage. Instead, Rani gains confidence, independence, and personal agency.

Similarly, *Gehraiyaan* explores modern relationships, intimacy, and emotional dissatisfaction. The film portrays female desire with psychological complexity rather than moral judgment. The protagonist's choices challenge traditional notions of feminine virtue and domestic stability.

In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, the female protagonist negotiates power within the patriarchal world of prostitution. While the film acknowledges exploitation, it also portrays Gangubai as a powerful figure capable of asserting agency and leadership. The body becomes both a site of commodification and empowerment.

These films indicate a shift from passive femininity to active female subjectivity. Women are increasingly represented as individuals with desires, ambitions, and emotional depth. However, the extent of this empowerment remains contested because commercial cinema often frames female liberation within glamorous and marketable aesthetics.

The Male Gaze and Objectification

Despite progressive developments, the male gaze continues to shape contemporary Bollywood. Female characters are frequently sexualized through cinematography, costume, and narrative framing. Even films promoting women's empowerment sometimes rely on conventional beauty standards and visual objectification.

The commercial structure of Bollywood contributes to this contradiction. The industry often markets female sexuality to attract audiences while simultaneously claiming to support feminist narratives. This duality creates tension between empowerment and commodification.

For example, films featuring "strong female characters" may still emphasize physical attractiveness and conventional femininity. Women are often expected to conform to beauty ideals associated with slim bodies, fair skin, and glamour. Such representations reinforce consumerist notions of femininity.

Moreover, many films continue to normalize toxic masculinity and possessive male behavior. *Kabir Singh* serves as an example where problematic masculine aggression is romanticized. The female character lacks narrative agency and primarily exists to support the male protagonist's emotional journey.



Therefore, while contemporary Hindi cinema has made progress in representing women's agency, patriarchal visual structures remain deeply embedded within mainstream filmmaking practices.

OTT Platforms and Sexual Representation

The emergence of OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ Hotstar has significantly transformed Indian visual culture. Digital platforms have enabled filmmakers to explore themes previously restricted by censorship and mainstream commercial expectations.

OTT content often portrays sexuality with greater realism and openness. Web series and films now address issues such as queer identity, female pleasure, marital dissatisfaction, and bodily autonomy. Shows like *Made in Heaven* and *Four More Shots Please!* foreground women's desires and emotional complexities.

Unlike traditional Bollywood narratives, OTT productions frequently challenge heteronormative structures and patriarchal morality. Female characters are represented as flawed, independent, and sexually expressive individuals.

However, OTT platforms also face criticism for excessive sexualization and commercialization. Some scholars argue that explicit content is often used as a marketing strategy rather than a genuine attempt to promote progressive discourse. Thus, digital media simultaneously expands representational possibilities while participating in consumerist commodification.

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

Contemporary Hindi cinema reflects the tension between traditional Indian values and modern individualism. Female sexuality remains a contested subject because it challenges patriarchal control over family, marriage, and morality.

Films depicting sexually independent women often face public criticism and censorship controversies. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* initially encountered resistance from the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which described the film as "lady-oriented" and excessively focused on women's fantasies. Such reactions reveal broader cultural anxieties surrounding female desire.

At the same time, urban audiences increasingly embrace narratives centered on women's autonomy and identity. This shift reflects changing social realities influenced by education, globalization, and feminist activism.



Bollywood therefore operates within a contradictory cultural space where progressive narratives coexist with conservative expectations. The industry simultaneously challenges and reproduces patriarchal ideologies.

CONCLUSION

The representation of gender, body, and desire in contemporary Hindi cinema reveals significant transformations in Bollywood's engagement with women's identities and sexuality. While traditional Hindi films largely portrayed women as passive objects of male desire, contemporary cinema increasingly foregrounds female agency, bodily autonomy, and emotional complexity.

Films such as *Queen*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, *Parched*, and *Gehraiyaan* challenge patriarchal norms by depicting women who articulate their desires and resist oppressive structures. These narratives demonstrate the growing influence of feminist discourse in Indian popular culture.

However, the persistence of the male gaze and commodification indicates that patriarchal ideologies continue to shape cinematic representation. Women's empowerment is often mediated through consumerist aesthetics and conventional beauty standards.

The emergence of OTT platforms has further expanded possibilities for representing sexuality and gender diversity. Nevertheless, digital media also participates in market-driven sexualization. Ultimately, contemporary Hindi cinema functions as a contested cultural arena where gender identities and sexual politics are continuously negotiated. The evolving representation of women reflects broader social changes within Indian society while also revealing the limitations of mainstream cinematic discourse.

WORKS CITED

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Dwyer, Rachel. *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Modern India*. Reaktion Books, 2014.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vintage Books, 1978.

Gopal, Sangita, and Sujata Moorti, editors. *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.



Kumar, Shanti. "Bollywood and the Politics of Gender." *Journal of South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 145–158.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.

Prasad, M. Madhava. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Uberoi, Patricia. *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Virdi, Jyotika. *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. Rutgers University Press, 2003.