

## **MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND GENDER STEREOTYPING: ANALYSING PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Indian cinema is a huge part of the Indian culture and society and therefore the depictions in these movies play a very crucial role in impacting the mindset of the people. Indian cinema not only depicts movies but also portrays various aspects of human life and various ideologies that are viewed by people in the country. This research paper explores the legal framework governing and regulating Indian cinema and the impact it has on society with respect to public morality and decency. The paper also sheds light on the depiction of women in Indian cinema, especially with respect to laws pertaining to obscenity and indecency in India and how these movies impact society's perception of women in India. The paper also emphasizes the lacuna in the ambiguous approach of the judiciary in determining what constitutes obscene and vulgar. It is imperative that there is a balance of regulation of the content in movies that are broadcasted in public forums in order to ensure that they don't violate public morality and at the same time the protection of the filmmaker's freedom of speech and expression.*

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The perception of women in India has gone through various changes. In the Vedic period, women were seen as pure and pious and were equated with God, but over time women's status in society degraded especially during the Mughal period with the imposition of various regressive practices such as Jauhar, and the purdah system. The image of women in India is seen from contrasting viewpoints. On one hand, women are portrayed as Hindu goddesses and are worshiped, but on the other hand, women are also depicted as mere objects and property of men whose sole purpose is to please and entertain men in society. The latter viewpoint is often seen in the portrayal of women in movies. In earlier Indian films, women were often portrayed as loyal and dependent on men. The songs often describe defenceless women, damsels in distress, waiting for their loved ones to save them. For example, in the classic film "Mother India" (1957), the protagonist Radha symbolises the perfect image of a mother and a woman

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who gives everything to her family. Radha is a strong heroine, but her portrayal perpetuates gender stereotypes.

As Indian cinema entered the 1970s and 1980s, there was a trend toward greater violence against women. Movies like “Seeta Aur Geeta” (1972) and “Mr India” (1987) show women who are independent and able to make their own decisions. But even in these films, the songs often portray women in traditional ways, emphasising their attractiveness. and sexuality.

Indian cinema has recently shown women in a more nuanced light, giving female characters more impact and depth. Films like Queen (2013) and Piku (2015) were praised for their originality and relevance. These films also present women in a more positive light, portraying them as strong and independent. The songs are often about showing off the body, and the songs are about its attraction and seduction. This can be especially devastating for rural residents who may not have access to other media and entertainment.

Despite the existence of laws like the Obscene Publications Act of 1912 and the Hicklin test used for interpreting obscenity, there remains ambiguity in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema. This ambiguity may stem from various factors, including the interpretation of these laws, societal attitudes toward women, and the commercial considerations of filmmakers and songwriters. Filmmakers and songwriters need to be mindful of the messages they convey, especially in songs that could influence the audience’s perceptions and behaviours. So, although Indian cinema has managed to portray women in a better and more authentic way, there is still a lot of work to be done to eliminate stereotypes. Filmmakers and songwriters must be careful about what they sing, especially in songs that may influence the audience in areas.

### **SEXISM IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA**

In recent times, sexism in movies remains a prevalent issue despite having the certifying board and increasing awareness, and efforts towards gender equality. One of the common manifestations of sexism in recent movies is the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Women are often portrayed in limited, traditional roles, such as the love interest. There are several directors who are trying to bring out a real depiction of women in movies as in life. But the attempts often made get offset by the films still promoting gender role stereotypes in various ways, the aim is that the roles tend to reinforce outdated notions of femininity and can limit in terms of the complexity and depth of female characters.

Another form of sexism in movies is the objectification of women. Women are depicted in the item song which then influences viewers, especially the people living in rural areas as they by seeing such a song create a similar kind of notion about women. This can be seen in a way that female characters are often portrayed as objects of desire, with their appearance and sexuality which is defined by the roles they perform in the movies. Thus, scenes that focus excessively on a woman's physical attributes or sexual appeal majorly contribute to the objectification of women leading to harmful stereotypes.

Films like *Fashion*, and *Corporate*, which are considered women-centric, ended up conforming to social gender bias and gender archotyping. The lead actress in *Fashion* suddenly gives up her ambition to become a mother and starts becoming conscientious of morality and rights and wrongs only after giving in to cocaine and racism, the one in *Corporate* setting an example of poor professional decision-making capacity (sacrifice for love, again) despite being a hardcore professional, were nothing but characters formed on the basis of social stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> Despite making a definite effort to change the depiction of women in Indian cinema in the last one or two decades, mainstream movies have depicted women as being the goddesses, or the impulsive-irrational-irresponsible, or the immoral.<sup>2</sup>

Sexism in movies also extends to unequal representation and opportunities for women both in front of and behind the camera. Women are often underrepresented in leading roles, directing, writing, and other key creative positions in the film industry. This lack of representation not only limits the diversity of stories being told but also perpetuates a male-dominated perspective in filmmaking. Additionally, the trend of pay disparity between male and female actors, where male actors are often paid significantly more than their female counterparts for similar roles. The disparity reflects deep-rooted gender biases and also contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality in the industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanchari Mukhopadhyay and Debanjan Banerjee, 'Bollywood, Popular Visual Media, and Sexism in India: A Critical Glance Back' (2021) 3 Journal of Psychosexual Health 256.

<sup>2</sup> Nandakumar S. The Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in Commercial Indian Cinema; May 2011 <<https://uh-ir.tdl.org/handle/10657/217>> accessed 20 March, 2024.

## WOMEN IN REALISTIC CINEMA

Realistic cinema is different, there has been a shift towards portraying women in more authentic and multifaceted ways, moving away from traditional stereotypes. Women are now often depicted as complex individuals with their own desires, ambitions, and struggles, reflecting the diversity of women's experiences in real life.

One aspect of this portrayal is the depiction of women in item songs, which has been a subject of controversy. Item songs typically feature scantily clad women dancing provocatively, often with lyrics that objectify women. It may be argued that these songs are empowering for women and a form of artistic expression, but then it majorly emphasizes reinforcing harmful stereotypes and contributing to the objectification of women.

It is interesting to examine some films from this brand of cinema which is becoming popular among audiences. This type of cinema combines popular appeal and critical acclaim. Movies like *Black Friday* (2004), *Udaan* (2010), *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010), *Akrosh* (2010) etc can be listed under this type of cinema.<sup>3</sup> In order to provide clarity, Madhur Bhandarkar's films have been selected for analysis. Bhandarkar's cinema is associated with gritty realism. He basically focuses on the brigade of contemporary Hindi filmmakers who have filmed real-time issues and have been appreciated for the same. His films usually depict bold and unconventional themes like the exploitation of women, a cycle of poverty, organized crime, police and govt. corruption, a cult of celebrity and journalism, the ruthlessness of big business and industrial espionage. The majority of his films had female protagonists. The females in Bhandarkar's films are usually shown as bold and empowered women who lead a life on their own terms, make their own decisions, are rebels who don't conform to social norms and excel in their respective professions.<sup>4</sup> A very positive portrayal of an independent leading lady characterizes the initial reels of his films. However, as the film progresses, the protagonist's assertion weakens, and she gradually begins to conform to society's expectations. Finally, she must either conform to society's expectations or become a victim. There is a subtle reinforcement of the very value system that the film critiques at its

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<sup>3</sup> Vatika Sibal, 'STEREOTYPING WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA' (2018) 5 Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies.

<sup>4</sup> Eagly A, Carli LL. Women and the labyrinth of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*; September 2007, <<https://hbr.org/2007/09/women-and-the-labyrinth-of-leadership>> accessed 22 March 2024.

outset. His films have been disparaged for being too judgmental by giving lessons on morality to the viewer.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of *Samaresh Bose v. Amal Mitra*<sup>6</sup>, the court held that a man in a book having sexual feelings does not amount to obscenity. The court had emphasized that for something to be considered obscene, the intention of the filmmaker or book writer must be to deprave or corrupt the audience. However, the same was criticized for its vagueness and ambiguity, particularly regarding how to determine the intention of the creator. As the certifying board is only allowed to categorise the movies as either Adult or Universal and is not allowed to rate or remove a particular scene that amounts to be obscene. Thus, the case highlights the challenges in regulating and interpreting obscenity laws, especially in the context of artistic expression. While it is important to protect freedom of expression, it is also crucial to ensure that artistic works do not present women as mere objects and promote gender bias. Filmmakers and creators must be mindful of the impact of their work and strive to portray women in a respectful and empowering manner.

## CONCLUSION

The changes in the portrayal and depiction of women in Indian cinema can be seen as a reflection of the changing attitude and mindset of society. In earlier movies, movies were predominantly centred around men as the protagonists, and women were not given bigger roles to play. Moreover, the depiction of women in movies promoted the objectification of women which included instances of vulgarity and obscenity. This results in the mindset of the society getting affected, and they in turn treat women in a similar manner. As emphasised by the Supreme Court in *KA Abbas v Union of India*<sup>7</sup>, movies are a combination of sound, light and movement and therefore impact the viewers more than books. Therefore, the movies must be made keeping in mind public morality, where women are not viewed as sexual commodities as this would lead to crimes against women.

Such progress depicts sexism in movies as a prevalent issue in contemporary cinema. Gender stereotypes are often perpetuated through limited and traditional roles for women, such as the love interest or the damsel in distress. However, there has been a gradual change in the

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Samaresh Bose & Anr. v. Amal Mitra & Anr.*, 1985 (4) SCC 289.

<sup>7</sup> *KA Abbas v Union of India*, 1970 SCC (2) 780.

depiction of women in Indian cinema, and filmmakers are mindful of portraying women as sexual objects. But there still is not a clear test of what constitutes obscene and therefore it is important that laws like the Obscene Publications Act of 1912 must undergo changes to incorporate current practices and viewpoints of society to ensure that the dignity of women being portrayed in cinemas is protected.

Due to the ambiguous nature of this law, where the rational man's perception of the movie is relied on, it could lead to subjectiveness which might be detrimental to the interests of the filmmakers as the understanding of what constitutes vulgar and obscene differs from person to person. The law must ensure that the filmmaker's freedom to speak and express their creativity in the form of movies is protected, but at the same time, it is not at the cost of the women being depicted in an obscene manner. The portrayal of women in Indian cinema has completely evolved over the years, reflecting changes in social norms and values. Be it the early days of Indian cinema, where women were often depicted as loyal and dependent on men, to the more recent trend of portraying women in a more nuanced and realistic light, there has been a noticeable shift in how female characters are represented on screen. Such progress depicts sexism in movies as a prevalent issue in contemporary cinema. Gender stereotypes are often perpetuated through limited and traditional roles for women, such as the love interest or the damsel in distress. The objectification of women, particularly in item songs, also contributes to harmful stereotypes and reinforces the notion of women as objects of desire.

In contrast, realistic cinema has made efforts to portray women in a more authentic and multifaceted manner, moving away from traditional stereotypes. Women are being portrayed as multidimensional persons with their own wants, ambitions, and challenges, mirroring the breadth of women's experiences in real life. Madhur Bhandarkar films have attempted to depict bold and empowered women who live life on their own terms. However, there has been subtle reinforcement with regard to societal expectations, with female protagonists ultimately aiming to conform according to society's norms.

The highlighted challenges in regulating and interpreting obscenity laws in the context of artistic expression. The court held that for something to be considered obscene, it is essential that the intention of the creator must be to deprave or corrupt the audience. However, determining the intention of the creator can be subjective and open to interpretation, which then leads to ambiguity in the application of these laws.

The Obscene Publications Act of 1912 and the Hicklin test for interpreting obscenity play a role in regulating the depiction of women in cinema. However, the role of the certifying board, which is responsible for categorizing films as either Adult or Universal, is limited in its ability to regulate specific scenes or content within films. Thus, while there have been positive strides in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema, there is still much work to be done to eliminate sexism and promote gender equality. Filmmakers and creators must be mindful of the impact of their work and strive to portray women in a respectful and empowering manner. Additionally, there is a need for clearer guidelines and regulations regarding the depiction of women in cinema, to ensure that artistic expression does not come at the cost of perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

