



**THE RECASTING OF FEMALE GENDER ROLES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN BOLLYWOOD CINEMA
(NATIONAL FILM AWARDS 2010–2018)**

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
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Department of Media and Cultural Studies**

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March 2026

DECLARATION

I, **Nisha Ramlutchman**, certify that the work in this thesis entitled: 'The Recasting of Female Gender Roles: An Analysis of the Representation of Female Protagonists in Bollywood Cinema (National Film Awards 2010–2018)' has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

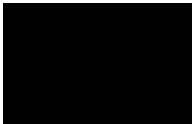
I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used in the thesis are cited according to the requirements of the Harvard style of referencing.

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family.

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I wish to express my sincere gratitude to:

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You have said
all the things
I need to hear
before I knew
I needed to hear them.

To be unafraid
of all the things
I used to fear,
before I knew
I shouldn't fear them.

(Lang Leav, 2022)

ABSTRACT

Hindi cinema, popularly referred to as 'Bollywood', is a part of the wider Indian film industry, which includes regional language cinema such as Bhojpuri, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Telegu and others. Hindi cinema is enjoyed across the globe, beyond the Asian sub-continent, extending to, for example, South Africa, Nigeria, Russia, Australia, Greece, Canada and the United States of America. With the expansion of the Indian diaspora across the world and internet-driven globalisation, Hindi films are today viewed as a transnational cultural force. This research investigates whether Indian National Film award-winning performances in the category of 'Best Actress' lead to a recasting, or any evolvement, in the representation of female gender roles in selected Hindi films. Film production in India exceeds over one thousand films annually, of which Hindi cinema's contribution accounts for approximately 340 films (Galalite Screens, 2025). Concomitant with its global transnational reach, Hindi cinema also plays a crucial role in the construction and circulation of dominant social norms, cultural values and Indian identity. It can be argued thus that Hindi cinema's global visibility magnifies its position as an ideological apparatus. Specifically, the thesis analyses four films between 2010–2018: *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Queen* (2013), *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015) and *Mom* (2017).

Through the theoretical framework of feminist film theory and interpretive paradigm of social constructionism, the study explores three key research questions: (i) how female characters in the films under analysis appear on screen (the 'presences') and thus, how do they not appear (the 'absences'); (ii) how do these representations reflect broader constructions of female gender roles; and (iii) how the issue of women representation is reflected in Hindi (National Award) films today in comparison to traditional and stereotypical representation of women in mainstream Hindi films. A qualitative methodological approach addresses these questions, through a combination of a close reading (textual analysis) of each film and a reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring motifs across the films. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the films as the period is marked by a heightened visibility of women in Hindi cinema.

The study identifies three recurring absences across all four films: stable professional identity (episodic depictions of career, largely unexplored); recognised legitimacy

(recognition in the domestic domain in conditional and gatekept ways); and substantial sexual desire (desire is either commodified, a spectacle, sanitised, ignored or not self-authored). The study highlights that whilst women may appear as narratively central figures, this centrality does not result in a meaningful shift (a recasting) of female representation on screen. National award-winning films echo female stereotypes and key figures prevalent in mainstream Hindi cinema such as the vamp, the obedient daughter, the contrite (and eventually dutiful) wife and the self-sacrificing mother. The study recommends that scripts should be crafted that explore durable female agency with stable and sustained professional identities; self-authored sexual desire and unconditional domestic recognition. A further recommendation is for the expansion of female presence 'behind-the-scenes' to shift the gendered narrative structure and move towards more authentic, multi-faceted and complex depictions of women.

ISIFINGQO

Ibhayisikobho yaseHindi, evame ukubizwa ngokuthi 'Bollywood', iyingxenye yezimbongi zamafilimu eseNdiya abanzi, iBollywood ihlanganisa amafilimu ezifunda ezahlukene ekubalwa kuzo iBhojpuri, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu kanye nezinye. Ibhayisikobho yaseHindi iyajabulelwa emhlabeni wonke, nasemazweni angaphandle kwe-Asia. Ijabulelwa emazweni afana neNingizimu Africa, eNigeria, eRussia, e-Australia, eGreece, eCanada kanye nase-United States of America. Ngokukhula kwabantu baseNdiya abahlala phesheya kwezilwandle emhlabeni wonke kanye nokuhwebelana okuthuthukiswa ubuxhakaxhaka bozokuxhumana, amafilimu aseHindi namuhla athathwa njemafilimu anamandla ngokusabalalisa isiko laseNdiya kwimingcele yezwe lonke. Lolucwaningo luhlola ukuthi kungabe ukuwina izindodo kumncintiswano weNational Film Awards yaseNdiya esigabeni somdlali ohamba phambili phecelezi 'Best Actress' kuyaholela yini ekubuyekazweni noma kunoma yikuphi ukuthuthuka ekubonisweni kwenzindima zobulili besifazane kumafilimu aseHindi akhethiwe.

Ukukhiqizwa kwamafilimu eNdiya kudlula amafilimu ayinkulungwane (1000) ngonyaka, lapho amafilimu ebhayisikobho akhiqizwa yizwekazi laseHindi abalelwa cishe kumafilimu awu-340 (Galalite Screens, 2025). Ngokuhambisana nokufinyelela kwayo emhlabeni wonke, ibhayisikobho yaseHindi ibamba iqhaza elibalulekile ekwakheni nasekusakazeni izinkambiso zenhlalo ezihamba phambili, amagugu esiko kanye nobunikazi baseNdiya. Kungathiwa-ke ukuthi ukubonakala kwebhayisikobho yaseHindi emhlabeni kukhulisa isikhundla sayo njengesikhali semibono (ideological apparatus). Ngokukhethekile, leliphapha (thesis) lihlaziya amafilimu amane akhiqizwa phakathi kweminyaka u-2010 kuya ku-2018 okubalwa kuwo: *The Dirty Picture* eyakhiqizwa ngo-2011, *Queen* eyakhiqizwa ngo-2013, *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* yona eyakhiqizwa ngonyaka ka-2015 kanye ne-*Mom* eyakhiqizwa ngo-2017.

Ngokusebenzisa uhlaka lwemibono ye-feminist film theory kanye nendlela yokuchaza ukwakhiwa kwencazelo (social constructionism), ucwaningo luhlola imibuzo ebalulekile emithathu yocwaningo: (i) abalingisi besifazane kumafilimu ahlaziywayo bavela kanjan

kumabonakude ('presences') futhi ngakho-ke, abaveli kanjan ('absences'); (ii) ukuvela nokungaveli kwabesifazane kumafilimu kubonisa kanjan ukwakheka okubanzi kwezindima zobulili besifazane, umbuzo wesithathu okuzohlolwa nagwo (iii) ukuthi udaba lokumelwa kwabesifazane lubonakala kanjan kumkomelo wase Hindi (National Film Awards) namuhla uma kuqhathaniswa nokumelwa kwendabuko kanye nokubukwa okujwayelekile kwabesifazane kumafilimu aseHindi. Indlela yocwaningo olusebenzisa ukufunda nokuhlaziya kwamagama nemisho (qualitative) yiyo esetshenziwe kulolucwaningo ukucwaninga imibuzo ekhethiweyo ngokufunda okuseduze kwefilimu ngayinye kanye nokuhlaziywa kwe-thematic reflective ukuhlonza izihloko eziphindaphindayo kuwo wonke amafilimu. Kuphinde kwasetshenziwa i-purposive sampling ekukhetheni amafilimu njengoba isikhathi simakwe ngokubonakala okuphezulu kwabesifazane ebhayisikobho yaseHindi.

Ucwaningo luthole ukungabikho okuphindaphindayo okuthathu kuwo wonke lamafilimu amane: ubunikazi bomsebenzi ozinzile (ukuvezwa komsebenzi okwezingxenye, okungacutshunguliwa ngokujulile); ukwamukelwa okusemthethweni (ukwamukelwa endaweni yesikhaya ngendlela enemibandela futhi elawulwa ngendlela evimbayo); kanye nesifiso esijulile sobulili (isifiso singaba yinto ethengiswayo, umbukiso, ehlanjululiwe; enganakiwe noma esingazimeli ngokwaso). Ucwaningo lugqamisa ukuthi nakuba abesifazane bengase bavele njengabalingisi ababalulekile emdlalweni, lokhu kubaluleka akubangeli ukushintsha okomqoka noma okuphusile (recasting) ekubonisweni kwabesifazane kumabonakude. Amafilimu awina imiklomelo kazwelonke aphinda izinkolelo-mbumbulu zabesifazane kanye nezinhlobo eziyinhloko ezikhona ebhayisikobho yaseHindi evamile umuntu wasefazane okhombisa ukuzethemba nokuheha ngokocansi (vamp), indodakazi ethobelayo, umfazi ophendukayo (futhi ekugcineni othebekile) kanye nomama ozidelayo.

Ucwaningo luphakamisa (recommend) ukuthi imibhalo kufanele yakhiwe ngendlela ehlola amandla abesifazane azinzile nahlala isikhathi eside, ahambisana nobuwena bomsebenzi obuqinile futhi obuqhubekayo, isifiso sobulili esizibhalela sona uqobo; kanye nokwamukelwa kwasekhaya okungenamibandela. Esinye isiphakamiso esengeziwe,

ukwandisa ubukhona babesifazane “ngemumva kwezigcawu” ukuze kushintshe ukwakheka kwezindaba, okucwasa ngobulili, kuholele ezithombeni zabesifazane eziyiqiniso, ezinemikhakha eminingi futhi eziyinkimbinkimbi.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Film analysis enables us to recognise how the filmmakers have their magic on us, how all the constituent elements of the film have combined to create that magic. Rather than rob us of the pleasures of watching films, this approach affords us the even greater pleasure of deep engagement. (Lewis, 2017: 3)

1.1 Introduction

Cinema is regarded as one of the most popular and powerful forms of global media in terms of the circulation of ideologies, values and ideas in society (Tombu, 2024: 2). The power of cinema is derived from the combined use of sound, image, story, performance and mise-en-scène to influence and shape audience perceptions at various social, cultural and affective levels. Cinema, notes Bujgoi (2025: 1) also reflects and shapes “society’s realities, struggles and aspirations”. Filmmakers, through cinematic conventions such as visual elements, narrative structures and character depictions explore critical issues that affect society such as, discrimination, inequality, political conflict and gender dynamics. In doing so, cinema can be viewed as a medium that not only drives public discourse around important issues, but also one that actively shapes public perceptions and discourse. On the other hand, Dwyer (2014: 8) in relation to Hindi cinema, contends that cinema does not simply reflect society, rather, “imagines it” and that it “does so in ways that often eschew the values of realism, suggesting that cinema plays a highly significant role in creating a way of comprehending the way society is and how it should be”. Viewed in this light, as cinema imagining society, critical questions around *who* and *what* are imagined and *how* these imaginations are framed need to be explored.

One area of cinema where ‘imaginations’ remain a site of debate and contention for scholars is the representation of women in films. Over the years, there have been several studies that have explored how cinema portrays women. Early seminal studies (c.f. Kuhn, 1982; Mulvey, 1989; Stacey, 1994) focused on ‘western’ cinema (Hollywood) but there has been an expansion of the original focus to include cinema from other parts of the world. One such expansion is the inclusion of Bollywood

cinema,¹ which continues to be a site of scholarly investigation in relation to the representation of women. Bollywood cinema, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai (India) is one of the largest producers of films worldwide. On average, India produces over 1 000 films annually, of which the Hindi cinema industry alone accounts for around 340 films (Galalite Screens, 2025). Bollywood cinema is not only popular in India but also has a wide global appeal especially in countries (such as South Africa, Canada, United States of America, England and Australia) where there is a significant number of people from the Indian diaspora. Additionally, Bollywood films are also enjoyed by diverse audiences in Nigeria, Russia and Kenya (Thomas, 2008).

Given its global audience and the concomitant opportunity to further extend its appeal and reach, Bollywood cinema has, over the years, begun to evolve. Filmmakers have recognised the changing Bollywood audience and have begun to develop stories that have a wider, more global appeal that extends beyond India's nationalist agenda. Ganti (2004) argued that early Bollywood cinema (1947–1990) was used to channel and promote Indian traditions and nationhood. As such, Bollywood films produced during this period largely focused on notions of tradition/modernity, for example, the juxtaposition of East/West culture and values which were usually channelled through characterisations of the lead protagonists. During the 2000s, Bollywood filmmakers began to shift their focus from only a nationalist agenda to include other narratives (Dwyer, 2014). With the shift in focus, came a marked change in the gender narrative – specifically, the representation of women in Bollywood cinema. The global appeal of Bollywood films has also affected the representation of Indian women in Bollywood films. According to Anujan, Schaefar and Karan (2012) globalisation has led to the emergence of alternate modes of Indian femininity as portrayed in Bollywood cinema which is a departure from the depiction of Indian women as the upholders of moral code.

Traditionally, Bollywood films have been made with the male protagonist as the lead, often larger than life 'heroes' who drive the plot, whilst female characters played second fiddle to their male counterparts. Alternate, parallel or art-house cinema was viewed as the space where female actors could assume substantial and complex

¹ This study uses the terms Bollywood and Hindi cinema interchangeably to denote the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, India.

leading roles (discussed in Chapter Three of this study). The last decade, however, has resulted in an increased visibility of female performances on screen (Shah and Kapoor, 2018). This study aims to examine a purposively selected subset of these performances – four Hindi films between 2010–2018 for which actresses received a National Award² (category: Best Actress). A critical exploration is to determine whether these awarded performances translate into a recasting of female gender roles (or not).

1.2 Preliminary Literature Review

There are several key studies that have explored Bollywood cinema as culturally-loaded texts. Many scholars have touched on the complex portrayals of women and these studies are largely framed within the varied contexts of, for example; national identity (Chakravarty, 1993; Kasbekar, 2001); diaspora studies (Kaur and Sinha, 2005; Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Therwath, 2010) the sociology of Indian cinema (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2004; Dudrah, 2006); globalisation (Datta, 2000; Mishra, 2002; Rai, 2009) and politics and transnationalism (Nandy, 1998; Kasbekar, 2001 and Dwyer and Pinto, 2011). These studies make significant contributions towards understanding not only the history of Bollywood cinema but also the power and influence it wields within cultural, political and sociological spaces. In relation to studies of representation of women in Bollywood cinema, there are a number of seminal works in this area.

Bagchi's (1996) study explored the role of women in Indian cinema. Whilst the study specifically looked at women in cinema; the focus was not limited to Bollywood cinema only. However, Bagchi's (1996) study focused on a small sample of three films produced between 1957 and 1994 and does not account for the significant changes to Bollywood cinema since 1994, especially in the kinds of stories being told. Datta (2000) examined representations of women in Indian cinema – Indian cinema, in the study, is used interchangeably with Bollywood cinema - and concentrated on globalisation and the homogenisation of Bollywood films to appeal to diasporic audiences. Furthermore, Datta's study examined how larger ideological forces and market forces impact the representation of women in Indian cinema in two films

² The National Film Awards in India, which started in 1953, is an annual incentive by the Government of India acknowledging the making of "artistic, competent and meaningful films". It is viewed as a prestigious award in the country and upheld as a yardstick for "good" filmmaking.

produced during 1997–1998. Datta’s analysis, while valuable, is constrained by its small film sample and by the synonymous treatment of Indian cinema and Bollywood.

Gangoli (2005) investigated the representations of female sexuality and belonging in Hindi cinema, however, the study focus is limited in that it only addresses ‘western’ and ‘Anglo-Indian’ women, leaving other female social groups unexplored. Sarkar (2012) examined the representation of women in ‘women-centered’ or parallel cinema. The films under analysis (nine films, produced between 1983 and 2007) focused on women as ‘avengers’ or protesting against violence. The aim of the study was to highlight the real problems faced by women in Indian society, hence the selection of parallel cinema which is often considered to be more realistic in its reflection of socio-economic issues. D’Souza’s (2019) thesis focused on the portrayal of Indian Christians in eleven Bollywood movies released during the period 2004–2014 and employed discursive formation as the methodological approach. D’Souza’s (2019) study demonstrated that representations of Christians as hypersexual women and emasculated men within an emergent Hindu modernity discursively constructs India as a Hindu nation, and Christians as the westernised other. Although a critical contribution to research on Hindi cinema, D’Souza’s study is constrained by its focus on a single religious community. Adding to the body of work on representation studies, Akhtar’s (2019) thesis focused on the representations of peace and conflict in Kashmir in Hindi cinema to understand the social, political, and artistic manifestations in the films under analysis

In terms of local (South African) studies, Ayob (2014) conducted a comparative analysis on transnationalism and the representation of women in Bollywood cinema, specifically three films (1998–2006) by director Karan Johar. Ayob’s (2014: 245) research revealed that Bollywood cinema has become a “transnational/cultural role player for both Indian national and diasporic audiences”. Ayob’s (2014: 248) research also concluded that in Johar’s films “there are layers of subtexts that can and should be used positively to change mind-sets, re-shape cultural attitudes and thereby influence people and societies”. Although offering critical insight into an evolving Bollywood cinema and changing representations of women Ayob’s (2014) study is limited to the works of only one director. Maistry’s (2009) dissertation examined the distorted representation of Indian women from its colonial and diasporic origins to its

contemporary neo-colonial evolution, focusing on two films directed by Gurinder Chadha, *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). Her study revealed that these films, although offering alternate representations of women, are still conceptualised and produced within capitalist frameworks which in turn affects the ways in which women are represented. While offering valuable insight into diasporic representation, Maistry's (2009) work does not analyse mainstream Hindi-language cinema.

Ramkissoo's (2009) dissertation explored the ways in which women are represented and misrepresented in Bollywood cinema by looking at the main features which make Bollywood what it is (that is: the stock characters, song and dance routines and elaborate dress). The study was confined to films produced by Yash Raj during the period 1997–2007. Each of the elements identified above were discussed to illustrate the formula that is used in Bollywood cinema to undermine women. Ramkissoo's (2009) study provides a detailed analysis of the portrayal of women in Bollywood, but is limited to films from one production house. The literature review conducted reveals that whilst there are several studies that focus on Bollywood cinema and representation, there is certainly room for additional research. Considering the continued growth and appeal of Bollywood cinema as well as changes to film narrative(s) there is space for ongoing research in the field. The literature indicates space for scholarship, specifically an exploration of female award-winning, mainstream Hindi film performances in the 2010s – which is the research gap that this thesis addresses.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted from the perspective of feminist media theory, which is rooted in feminist theory in that it applies concepts, philosophies and principles from a feminist paradigm to the media. Steiner (2014: 359) argues that feminist media theory takes “gender seriously – as a factor that structures identity and experiences – without assuming permanent or static gender differences”. In other words, gender is seen as intersecting with complex issues of “identity, race, class, ability, nationhood, and sexual orientation, as well as with the relations of subordination or domination that these categories carry along” (Steiner, 2014: 359). One of the earliest feminist media theory scholars, Tuchman (1978) applied the concept of symbolic annihilation to the

study of women in the media. Symbolic annihilation explores the ways in which the media 'annihilate' women through omission, trivialisation, and condemnation. Symbolic annihilation is also used to describe how women are marginalised or kept in their 'proper place', by their absence, neither seen nor heard. Tuchman (1978) focuses on how the media reflect society's dominant social values and symbolically denigrate women, either by not showing them at all or by depicting them in stereotypical roles. The concept of symbolic annihilation forms a critical framework for understanding the ways in which women are represented in Hindi cinema – specifically looking at presences (what is seen) and absences (what is unseen).

Related to the feminist media theoretical framework, is the concept of gender roles, which are the standardised patterns of characteristics and behaviours expected of individuals based on their biological sex (Basow, 1992; Lindsey, 2015). Such standardised patterns of behaviour are based on gender norms, which refers to the shared rules that guide behaviour in specific situations. In her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) argued that being female is not a 'natural' occurrence, rather it appears natural only through repeated performances of gender. These repeated performances then reproduce and define the traditional categories of sex and/or gender. Messages in the mass media (films, television, music videos and so on) serve as channels through which gender norms and gender roles are taught and repeated (Holtzman and Sharpe, 2014). In other words, the media serves as an influencing factor in defining (and redefining) gender and gender role stereotypes. Gender role stereotypes can be described as either descriptive or prescriptive (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). In relation to women, descriptive gender roles are the beliefs about female characteristics that women possess. On the other hand, prescriptive gender roles are the beliefs about characteristics that should be possessed. Women usually face discrimination or harassment when viewed as violating prescriptive gender roles (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). This study focuses on an analysis of both descriptive and prescriptive female gender roles with the aim of understanding how film has influenced the idea of gender and gender role stereotypes in the films under analysis.

The theoretical framework is also informed by the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and the practices of representation. In order to explain the concept of representation

and how it connects meaning and language to culture, Hall (2013) distinguishes between three different accounts or theories: the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist approaches to representation. “Does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events (reflective)? Does language express only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, his or her personally intended meaning (intentional)? Or is meaning constructed in and through language (constructionist)?” (Hall, 2013: 1). This study employs a social constructionist approach to representation which acknowledges that “neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don’t mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs” (Hall, 2013: 11). In this approach, representation is viewed as a social and discursive construction in that representations are not transparent reflections of reality or solely determined by the intentions of the creator, but rather are actively constructed and negotiated within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. Hall (2013: 11) states that:

representation is a practice, a kind of ‘work’, which uses material objects and effects. But the meaning depends not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function. It is because a particular sound or word stands for, symbolizes or represents a concept that it can function, in language, as a sign and convey meaning – or, as the constructionists say, signify (sign-i-fy).

In relation to film analysis, the social constructionist approach examines how different elements such as cinematography, editing, sound, narrative structure, plot, and symbolism influence and shape a film’s meaning. The idea is to understand and interpret the underlying ideologies, social contexts and cultural influences that shape a film. The social constructionist approach is therefore used to understand the representation of women in the selected Hindi films, focusing on how these representations work as symbolic functions. The study is also located within an interpretive framework, with a specific focus on social constructionism as it provides a framework for the ontological and epistemological position of this study as well as understanding how the media and gender (with a focus on female characters in the selected films) are socially constructed.

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

In order to gain deeper insight into the representation of women in Bollywood cinema (National Film Awards 2010–2018), the following objectives apply:

1. To explore how the concept of symbolic annihilation applies to the representation of women in Hindi films.
2. To understand the implications of such representations in terms of upholding and/or breaking female gender roles.
3. To explore the importance of reflecting new trends in gender relations on film, thus producing a platform on which to engage in debate and critique popular, traditional and stereotypical representations of women in Hindi films.

The following key questions guide the study:

1. How do the female characters in the films under analysis appear in film (the ‘presences’) and thus, how do they not appear in film (the ‘absences’)?
2. How do these representations reflect broader constructions of female gender roles?
3. How is the issue of women representation reflected in Bollywood (National Award) films today in comparison to traditional and stereotypical representation of women in mainstream Bollywood films?

1.5 Research Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research design to analyse the representation of women in Hindi cinema, with a focus on National Film Awards between 2010 and 2018, specifically in the category of ‘Best Actress’. The National Film Awards in India, which started in 1953, is an annual incentive by the Government of India acknowledging the making of artistic, competent and meaningful films. It is viewed as a prestigious award in the country and upheld as a yardstick for ‘good’ filmmaking. The National Awards honour good films in all of India’s twenty languages and dialects (Directorate of Film Festivals, 2019).

A two-pronged analytical approach is used in this study: textual analysis and reflexive thematic analysis. McKee (2003: 1) defines textual analysis as the occurrence when a text is analysed, and an educated (informed) guess is made as to some of the most probable interpretations of that text. The most probable interpretations are based on the themes identified from the literature review and texts under analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 4). Key to an understanding of reflexive thematic analysis is the researcher's own position and awareness in the research process.

It is important to note that this study is not an audience reception study and therefore does not attempt to understand how the audience makes sense of these texts. Rather, through the textual analysis approach, this study analyses how representations of women are constructed and what meanings they produce within the selected films and also aims to understand how these 'meanings' have been constructed (Larsen, 2002). Additionally, in order to examine the 'recasting' of gender roles across all four films, the study considers if the gender differences emerging contest static or stereotypical accounts (recurring motifs through reflexive thematic analysis).

1.6 Structure of Thesis

Chapter Two, 'Interpretative Framework', discusses the interpretive research paradigm of social constructionism as the epistemological and ontological positioning of the study.

Chapter Three, titled, 'Reading Hindi Cinema', focuses on mapping the key historical developments in Hindi cinema, before discussing the key elements or features that define a Hindi film. In doing so, the Chapter aims to provide a context from which to explore the representation of female characters in the selected Hindi films.

Chapter Four, 'Feminist Film Theory and Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema', focuses on feminist film theory from the perspective of Bollywood cinema. The Chapter starts with an overview of western feminist film theory, as viewed through the lens of feminist waves.

Chapter Five explains the methodological approach used in the study and focuses on a discussion of key areas such as research design, sampling process and how the films are analysed.

Chapter Six focuses on a textual analysis of the selected Hindi films under investigation.

Chapter Seven presents an examination of recurring patterns (through a reflexive thematic analysis) of the representation of women in the selected films.

Chapter Eight concludes the study, outlines limitations and offers recommendations for future research.

1.7 Summary

This chapter introduced the study, locating Hindi cinema as a powerful medium that not only reflects, but also imagines, society. The chapter highlights the global reach of Hindi cinema and emphasises the need for further research on women's representation, especially in terms of analysing National Film Award cinema. The chapter outlined a preliminary literature review and noted the gap in the exploration of female award-winning mainstream Hindi film performances. The study's objectives and three critical research questions are presented with the aim to explore whether these awarded performances (category: Best Actress) translate into a recasting of female gender roles (or not).

CHAPTER TWO

INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

A researcher's choice of framework is not arbitrary but reflects important personal beliefs and understandings about the nature of knowledge, how it exists (in the metaphysical sense) in relation to the observer, and the possible roles to be adopted, and tools to be employed consequently, by the researcher in his/her work (Lysaght, 2011: 572).

2.1 Introduction

Chapter one outlined the background, context and an introduction to this study with the aim of analysing the representation of women in Hindi cinema, focusing on National Film Awards between 2010 and 2018, specifically in the category of 'Best Actress'. This chapter introduces the interpretive framework and theoretical foundation and begins with a discussion on the major research philosophies and assumptions before moving on to a discussion of the interpretivist paradigm, which underpins this study. Specific focus is given to discussing the foundations of social constructionism as it provides a framework for the ontological and epistemological stance of this study. The chapter also explores how media representations of gender (specifically female characters in the selected films) are socially constructed.

2.2 Paradigm and Philosophy

Etymologically, the word paradigm is rooted in the Greek language, linked to the word *paradeigma* which means 'pattern'. 'Paradigm' was initially introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1962) in relation to a conceptual framework shared by a group of scientists "which provided them with a convenient model for examining problems and finding solutions" (Antwi and Hamza, 2015: 218). Kuhn (1977) defines a paradigm as a research culture that is characterised by a set of values, assumptions and beliefs that a community of researchers has in common concerning the nature and conduct of research. In other words, a paradigm offers researchers a perspective from which to conduct their research. Recognising paradigms in research is critical because the beliefs, values and assumptions that form a paradigm guide a researcher's thinking, actions and approach during the research process.

A research paradigm is often used in relation or interchangeably with the concept of a research philosophy. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019: 124) explain that a research philosophy “refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge”. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019: 124) further explain that when embarking on research, one is essentially creating knowledge in a particular field. The research philosophy directs and guides the way in which researchers approach their study, shaping the methods used for data collection and analysis/interpretation. Essentially, the research philosophy serves as a foundation for the research process in its entirety, influencing the researcher’s decisions regarding research design, data collection methods, data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) and Mertens (2010) refer to these beliefs as paradigms, while Crotty (1998) views these beliefs as philosophical assumptions, epistemologies, and ontologies. Creswell and Creswell (2018: 5) use the word worldview to refer to these beliefs that guide research action. Creswell and Creswell (2018: 5) explain that “others have called them paradigm, epistemologies and ontologies or broadly conceived research methodologies”. A researcher would develop a worldview based on their beliefs, which is largely based on their study discipline, research experience and supervisors/mentors. Adding to this, Creswell and Poth (2018: 19) state that these beliefs are about “ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values in research), and methodology (the process of research)”. A detailed discussion on each philosophical assumption is beyond the scope of this study. In Table 2.1 (below) the four philosophical assumptions are outlined followed by a discussion on the assumption that guides the research approach used in this study.

Table 2.1: Philosophical Assumptions and Implications for Practice

Assumption	Questions	Characteristics	Implications for Practice (Examples)
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is multiple as seen through many views.	The researcher reports different perspectives as themes develop in the findings.
Epistemological	What counts as knowledge? How are knowledge claims justified? What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?	Subjective evidence is obtained from participants; the researcher attempts to lessen the distance between himself or herself and that being researched.	The researcher relies on quotes as evidence from the participant as well as collaborates, spends time in field with participants, and becomes an insider.
Axiological	What is the role of values?	The researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and that biases are present in relation to their role in the study context.	The researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with those of participants.
Methodological	What is the process of research? What is the language of research?	The researcher uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design.	The researcher works with particulars (details) before generalisations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field.

Source: Creswell and Poth (2018: 20)

Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 11) maintain there are essentially three interconnected and generic activities that characterise a qualitative research method that are often referred to by varied labels such as “theory, method, and analysis; or ontology, epistemology, and methodology”. In explaining how these terms are interconnected, Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 11) go on to state that:

Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective. The gendered, multi-culturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis).

2.2.1 Ontology + Epistemology = Paradigm

Table 2.1 above provides a clear outline of the four major philosophical assumptions in terms of the questions related to each assumption, characteristics and briefly lists examples in relation to implications for actual practice. Given that this study is a textual analysis of four selected Hindi films, the research is directed by the principles of ontology. Ontology, as a philosophical belief system, questions the nature of our social world, in other words, evaluating what is patterned and predictable or frequently recreated (Leavy, 2020: 12). It is important to recognise that from an ontological position, our belief system informs not only how we view the social world, but also what we are able to learn about it. In their seminal work, Guba and Lincoln (1994: 201) describe the ontological question as “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?”

With reference to the nature of reality, Houghton, Hunter and Meskell (2012) argue that a critical ontological question researchers ought to address is whether the reality under investigation is objective or subjective in nature. Adopting a position that assumes an objective investigation of reality is referred to as a realist ontological position and is most often associated with quantitative research (Hirani, Richter and Salami, 2018). Conversely, a subjective assumption of reality is referred to as relativist ontology (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, and Martin, 2014) and is based on a belief of the existence of multiple realities. In relation to qualitative researchers, this would suggest that knowledge building is viewed as “generative and process-oriented” (Leavy, 2020:

3). There is no absolute, objective 'truth' to be discovered but rather it is seen as multiple and depending on a specific context (Saldaña, 2011).

The acknowledgement of subjectivity is important as although this study provides a textual analysis of the four films from an understanding of multiple theoretical perspectives, it is still an interpretation of the layered meanings and portrayals inherent in the sampled films. Linked to the ontological position is the epistemological stance, which gives an indication of the researcher's views on knowledge creation and how knowledge about the world is accumulated (Miller, 2005: 28). Leavy (2020: 12) depicts the relationship between ontology and epistemology diagrammatically as shown in Figure 2.1 below.

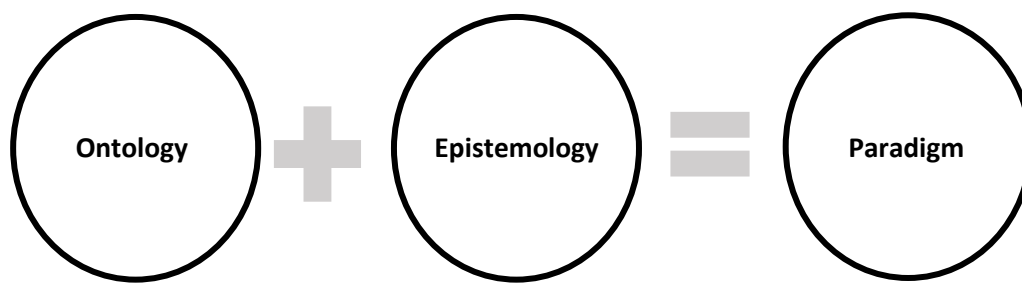


Figure 2.1: The Components of a Paradigm

Source: Leavy (2020: 12)

In an interpretive paradigm, epistemology is grounded in the belief that knowledge is constructed through interpretation and subjective meaning-making processes. It emphasises understanding an individual's interpretations and meanings within specific social and cultural contexts (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011: 119). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that philosophical assumptions are embedded within interpretive frameworks utilised in qualitative research. Several interpretive frameworks, sometimes referred to as paradigms, are used in various types of qualitative research. Figure 2.2 highlights some of the current interpretive frameworks used in research studies.

Positivism Post-Positivism	Interpretivism Social Constructivism Social Constructionism	Feminism(s)	Racialised Discourses
Marxist Models	Cultural Studies Models	Queer Theory	Post-Colonialism
Disabilities Theories	Pragmatism	Transformative Frameworks	Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory

Figure 2.2: Interpretative Frameworks

Adapted from: Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 12) and Creswell and Poth (2018: 17)

The interpretative frameworks listed in Figure 2.2 are not exhaustive with scholars adding to, and contesting, the different perspectives from which researchers approach their inquiry. Creswell and Creswell (2018: 6) affirm this by arguing that “there is ongoing debate about what worldviews or beliefs researchers bring to inquiry”. Leavy (2020: 3) adds that qualitative research tends to be “multi-paradigmatic, in that researchers work from different worldviews such as post-positivism, interpretivism, and critical orientations, which makes it a highly diverse field of inquiry”. Essentially, this study is interpretivist in nature and aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how women are portrayed in the selected sample of films. Given the nature of this research, the interpretive framework of social constructionism is used to study the portrayal of women by analysing factors such as gender roles, female stereotypes and power dynamics that may be represented and perpetuated in the selected sample of Hindi films.

2.3 Social Constructionism

Berger and Luckmann (2011: 3) are the pioneers of the theory of social constructionism which they introduced in their influential work on the social construction of reality. They placed emphasis on the role of social interactions in creating and shaping shared meanings and social reality. As an interpretive

framework,³ social constructionism challenges the idea of an objective reality and argues that one's reality and knowledge is shaped through one's social interactions, language, culture and specific social context. In acknowledging that there can be multiple understandings of 'reality' and 'knowledge', Berger and Luckmann (2011: 11) describe reality as a "quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot 'wish them away')" and knowledge "as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics".

With reference to social constructionism or the social construction of reality, Galbin (2014: 82) describes this as "a theory of knowledge of sociology and communication that examines the development of a jointly constructed understanding of the world". Adding to this, Hoffmann (2014: 19) contends that social constructionism can be viewed in relation to postmodernism, as it attempts to "replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of ongoing criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned." Essentially, social constructionism creates and encourages awareness of how we not only experience but also perceive the world (reality). Social constructionism emphasises that people and societies take an active part in the creation and interpretation of meaning, language and knowledge which is based on a shared understanding and shared cultural perspective. Social interactions are crucial in shaping our understandings of the world.

Galbin (2014: 89) explains that social constructionism is a "theoretical movement that brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding reality construction and knowledge production". At its core, social constructionism focuses on how knowledge is historically located and entrenched in cultural practices and values. Based on this understanding, Gergen and Gergen (2012) argue that meanings are socially constructed through the interactions of people and are therefore dynamic and fluid.

As field of inquiry into the constructed nature of reality, social constructionism has been shaped by various philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives. A leading contributor to the field of social constructionism is Michel Foucault and his

³ An in-depth discussion on the historical roots of social constructionism and its subsequent development into a widely used interpretive framework across many disciplines is beyond the scope of this study. For a more detailed discussion refer to Lock and Strong (2010) and Pfadenhauer and Knoblauch (2018).

work on the analysis of power, knowledge and discourse (Burr, 2015). His analysis of the relationship between power and discourse has greatly influenced social constructionism in that Foucault explored how knowledge and social norms are not only produced and maintained, but also challenged through power relations and various discursive practices (O'Farrell, 2005). Foucault focused on how power and discourse are interconnected and how they work together to shape social reality.

It is essential to understand Foucault's definition of discourse, which Khan and MacEachen (2021: 5) maintain is explained "as an individualisable set of statements, including all statements and utterances which seem to form a grouping (e.g., child sexuality, heterosexuality, disability)". Additionally, Khan and MacEachen (2021: 35) state that Foucault also views discourse as a "regulated practice", referring to the unwritten norms, rules, cultural, and value frameworks that create certain "utterances and statements" (for example, socio-culturally mandated rules for sexual interactions). In Foucauldian terms then, discourse is essentially viewed as an intricate framework of practices which aim to retain in movement these utterances and statements, or attempt to either separate or exclude these statements from 'rotation'. Mills (2012) adds that power is embedded in this inclusion/exclusion process and is everywhere and goes on to explain that Foucault positions power as relational and that power produces the way society (and individuals) constructs itself. This power, according to Foucault, produces discursive practices or discursive knowledge (Mills, 2012) and sets expectations for people in terms of how they should behave. Khan and MacEachen (2021: 6) explain Foucault's understanding of power as that which:

makes us what we are through the processes of normalisation. Simply put, Foucauldian power is omnipresent, productive (not just destructive), circulating, diffused, enacted, discursive, embedded in discourse, knowledge, and regimes of truth, constituting (the subject), embodied, and consensual rather than coercive.

The understanding above is important to this study as it draws emphasis to the processes of normalisation and power as circulating, diffused, enacted and embedded. Such an understanding stresses the powerful role of film as a medium through which gendered realities are, and can be, socially constructed. Foucault views discourse as more than statements, but rather asserts that "it has social materiality and ideological particularity, and is always imbricated in power" (Stam, Burgoyne, Flitterman-Lewis, 2005: 211). To reiterate, his main argument was that of power

operating through discursive practices, and shaping what is considered knowledge and what can be termed normative ('acceptable') behaviour in a given society. Power thus circulates and is exercised in various social relations and discursive practices, which then influences how people perceive and gain an understanding of not only themselves, but also others.

It is, however, important to understand that Foucault's work on power developed across two phases - the archaeological and genealogical approaches. Correlatively, these approaches allow for a deeper understanding of discourse and power. As outlined in the paragraphs above, Foucault's archaeology approach focused on highlighting how what one thinks of as the 'truth' is in actuality, constructed and shaped by specific historical systems of knowledge, or epistemes (Adams, 2017) within a particular period. Archaeology thus highlights how what one assumes to be the 'truth' is really a construction that is shaped by historical systems of knowledge (rather than the natural). In terms of this study, this is critical for understanding that gender norms are not natural, fixed and uncontested but rather shaped by specific historically discursive formations. An archaeological reading of Hindi cinema would, for example, highlight that dominant stereotypes of women in Hindi films (such as the vamp, mother figure and obedient wife) are not universal truths, but rather, historically discursive formations.

Foucault's subsequent genealogical phase expands this understanding by highlighting power as a fluid, dynamic and productive force that shapes subjectivities and formations of 'truth'. Foucault in Bertani and Fontana (2003:10) explains that genealogy can be viewed as "a sort of attempt to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal and scientific theoretical discourse." Foucault's (1978) genealogical phase thus emphasises power as an active and dynamic force that drives discursive change. Power is consequently not simply entrenched within discourse, rather, it functions as a disrupting element that transforms, produces and destabilises discursive formations. This shift in understanding offers a more dynamic lens through which to examine not only how dominant norms are constructed, but also contested.

In relation to feminist cinema studies, applying the genealogical phase would entail examining narratives about women behind and on screen to highlight how dominant

representations of women in Hindi cinema are constructed and sustained through power structures. In doing so, critical space is created for identifying and examining marginalised, suppressed, absent and misrepresented voices. The result is that rather than viewing on-screen female representations as the 'truth', a genealogical approach uncovers these representations as being historically determined, through power structures, which can be contested. A key element to the genealogical phase is the distinction between disciplinary power and bio-power. Disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975) emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a dominant form of governance in modern societies, focusing on the relationship between an individual's obedience (what Foucault terms as the "docile body") and productivity. Such power is located within key societal institutions such as military, schools, factories and prisons. Conversely, bio-power (Foucault, 1978) operates at the population level and focuses on the regulation of processes such as sexuality, health and reproduction. Both forms of power co-exist and co-function to shape individual and wider social subjectivities.

A key related Foucauldian concept is the 'deployment of sexuality' (Foucault, 1978) which foregrounds how sexuality is a historically influenced formation that is shaped by power. Foucault states that (1978:157):

We must not refer a history of sexuality to the agency of sex; but rather show how "sex" is historically subordinate to sexuality. We must not place sex on the side of reality, and sexuality on that of confused ideas and illusions; sexuality is a very real historical formation; it is what gave rise to the notion of sex, as a speculative element necessary to its operation. [...] It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim-through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality - to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance.

Foucault links the notion of the 'deployment of sexuality' to how identities and behaviours are regulated and shaped through and by power relations. Sexuality thus becomes a key site for the regulation of gender norms, behaviours and identities – where these are shaped, sustained and also challenged. This perspective reinforces the view that gender identities are not rigid and fixed – rather, it is fluid and dynamic (shaped and reshaped) through and by power structures and discursive practices. Importantly, it is through these structures and practices that notions of femininity are rendered as normative – while other expressions of femininity are marginalised, ignored or misrepresented. To this end, the deployment of sexuality is a key lens

through which to view female gender identity, particularly as a social construction specific to cultural and historical contexts.

Another significant contributor in the development of social constructionism is Kenneth Gergen (2001) who has examined how social identities are constructed through language, discourse and social interactions. Gergen (1994, 2001) maintains that there are numerous socially constructed realities that are developed as a result of people's engagements through different social contexts, cultural contexts and social interactions. Gergen (2001, 2009) emphasises the value of language and discourse with regards to social constructionism contending that language is not only a means of communication, but plays an active role in influencing social reality and ultimately, the formation of social identities.

Social constructionists thus argue that people's understanding of society is established through language, which is regarded as a system of varied meanings and practices that constructs the social world (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter, 2006: 151). It is through language that individuals interpret the world and share collective experiences. Language is beyond the written and spoken word but refers to what Berger and Luckmann (2011: 41) distinguish as originating from everyday life and closing tied to an individual's daily experiences. In relation to this study, for example, the construct of a female (and of femininity) can also be portrayed through language in the selected films. These can be either visual or the spoken form. The female characters can be analysed by not only dialogue, but also physical actions and characteristics to develop a deeper awareness of the portrayal of women in the selected sample of films.

Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (2002) has also made substantial contributions to understanding social constructionism, particularly within the discipline of gender studies. Her research explored how gender is socially constructed and not a fundamental or basic characteristic. Rather, Smith (2006) maintains that gender is a product of social processes that occur as a result of power dynamics. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the formation of gendered assumptions and how these assumptions are entrenched in social practices, language and social institutions.

Smith's (2002; 2006)⁴ and Smith and Griffith's (2022) focus on, particularly, language and social practices can be used to analyse how gendered meanings and assumptions are entrenched in films through, for example, narrative structures, plots, dialogues, and visual imageries. The aim of this study is to explore how women are portrayed and represented in the films under analysis. The purpose of such an exploration is to develop a rich understanding of the dominant and possibly alternative gendered discourses that may be present in the selected films. Furthermore, Smith's work places emphasis on how film, as a constructed medium, contributes to the social construction of gender norms and identities.

Notably there are many other scholars who have made, and continue to make, contributions to understandings of social constructionism. The contributions made by Foucault, Gergen and Smith have been singled out and highlighted in this study to draw emphasis to the relationship between language and power, with a focus on how through film, gendered identities, realities, norms and practices are socially constructed. The section below discusses in more detail the relationship between social constructionism and the media, with focus on film as a media product.

2.3.1 Media and Social Constructionism

In relation to the field of communication (in which cinema as a medium of communication is located), social reality is seen as being "created through communicative interaction" (Miller, 2005: 27). Leeds-Hurwitz (1992: 133) supports this view by adding that "social reality is not a fact or set of facts existing prior to human activity. We create our social world through our words and other symbols, and through our behaviours". What this means, then, is that from the viewpoint of social constructionism, researchers should approach any assumptions and expectations about how the world appears from a critical and mindful perspective. A practical way of understanding these assumptions is through the example of gender (a focus of this study), which Burr (2015: 3) explains:

⁴ For a more detailed discussion on Smith's contribution to understandings of the relationship between social constructionism and gender and the significance of understanding social relations, power dynamics, and lived experiences in the construction of gender refer to the referenced works. An in-depth discussion on Smith's body of work is beyond the scope of this study.

Social constructionism bids us to seriously question whether the categories 'man' and 'woman' are simply a reflection of naturally occurring distinct types of human being. This may seem a bizarre idea at first, and of course differences in reproductive organs are present in many species. But we become aware of the greyness of such categories when we look at practices such as gender re-assignment surgery and the surrounding debate about how to classify people as unambiguously male or female. We can thus begin to consider that these seemingly natural categories may be inevitably bound up with gender, the normative prescriptions of masculinity and femininity in a culture.

Burr's (2015) explanation is an integral part of this study as the media is a powerful social system that has a crucial role in shaping one's sense of reality (which is socially constructed). Cinema therefore, as a key part of the media system, often reflects and represents the social, historical and cultural settings in which it is formed. In terms of the representation of women in the media, cinema has a crucial part to play in portraying women in varied representations through, for example, diverse experiences and identities. This study is an analysis of the portrayal of women and social constructionism is essential in understanding how gender roles (females) are collectively shaped and represented through the selected sample of films.

When analysing films from the interpretive framework of social constructionism, the focus is on how films influence the construction and distribution of social realities, meanings and identities. As discussed earlier in this chapter, social constructionism stresses that reality is subjective and is socially and culturally created through for example social interactions, language and practices. Cinema is a powerful medium for representing and creating multiple social realities. Examining, for example, how identities, ethnicities, genders and cultural norms are portrayed in films can provide an understanding in terms of how collective (shared) meanings can possibly be constructed, naturalised and reinforced. This study analyses the portrayal of women to understand how female stereotypes and power dynamics may be represented and perpetuated in the selected sample of Hindi films.

Berger and Luckmann (2011: 162) outline "three fundamental moments" that are responsible for human beings (collectively) producing and maintaining all social phenomena through social activities. These are: externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. They (2011: 162) go on to argue that in terms of understanding a societal phenomenon, "these moments are not to be thought of as occurring in a

temporal sequence, but rather society and each part of it are simultaneously characterised by these three moments”. When one externalises one is essentially acting on his or her world, by creating an artifact or even a practice.

A script writer, for example, may have an idea about how the characteristics and personality of a mother figure and this is externalised through the portrayal of said character in a film. This portrayal now enters the social realm, as the film and the story begin to take shape of its own. The idea expressed by the script writer has now become an “object of consciousness” (Berger and Luckmann, 2011: 35) for people in society – which is referred to as objectivation. This characterisation of a mother figure is now out in reality and may appear as natural and as emanating from nature and not constructed and created by human beings (script writer, film director and so on).

As people navigate through society, the description of the mother figure, which is in existence through the film, is then internalised and becomes a part of their awareness (or consciousness) and a component of their comprehension of the world. Through these three ‘moments’, Berger and Luckmann (2011) show how it is possible for people to socially construct the world through social practices and also, how their experiences of such practices may begin to seem natural. In other words, the process of constructing reality is viewed as social because such constructions can only be created through social interaction.

The media have a critical role in the social construction of reality and influences perceptions and understandings of the world around us. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the social construction of reality focuses on the important aspect of the relationship between society and culture. From the perspective of media studies, there are several key theorists who have contributed to developing understandings of social constructionism. The media play a key role in the socialisation of individuals. Through media texts such as films, books, music, advertisements and television shows, the media shape and influence our perceptions of social roles, identities, cultural norms, values and behaviours. It is important to acknowledge that the manner in which the media influence our understandings on, for example, matters such as gender, class, race, sexuality and social relations contribute to the construction of our social reality.

A key theorist is Stuart Hall (1997),⁵ who examined how the media shapes and influences cultural meanings and identities. Hall (1997: 3) emphasises the importance of culture and asserts that culture is about meaning and “permeates all of society...[and] is what distinguishes the ‘human’ element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. Its study underlines the crucial role of the symbolic domain at the very heart of social life”. Practices, values, representations and cultural practices thus cannot exist without culturally bound meanings. Meaning, according to Hall (1997: 3) is “constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part”. In linking social interaction to meaning, Hall essentially stresses how media representations add to the construction of social reality by exploring key areas such as identities, stereotypes, representation of minorities and encoding/decoding.

Morley (2019: 5) asserts that Hall is very clear that identity, “far from being a matter of self-creation, is, rather, best understood as something constructed in and through a dialogic process”. The construction of identity is a key focus of this study, specifically the portrayal of gender identity (women) in the films under analysis. It should be noted that the media alone is not the sole determinant of social reality, rather individuals are critical and active participants in negotiating, interpreting and assigning meaning to media messages. That established, it is equally significant to note the role of the media’s influence on shaping public perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and worldviews – all of which, and more, make substantial contributions to the social construction of reality. Although an analysis of audience reception of the selected films does not form a part of this study, a brief discussion of audiences in relation to the media and social construction of reality is important.

In exploring how audiences are ‘active readers’ of media texts and so create their own meanings, Fiske (2011) placed emphasis on how viewers negotiate and then interpret media messages. Fiske’s (2011) analysis is important in terms of drawing attention to the role one’s social context and cultural practices play in meaning construction. In relation to the study of cinema this means that a film which represents or depicts a particular viewpoint or narrative may be understood in several different ways,

⁵ See Chapter Four of this study for more in-depth discussion on Hall in relation to representation, meaning and stereotypes.

dependent on the audience's individual identities, experiences and contexts. This understanding relates to Hall's (1997) encoding–decoding of media texts which explains that there are multiple meanings attached to a media text (meanings are not fixed) and that these meanings are negotiated by audiences. A film, for example, that focuses on issues around women may be interpreted in different ways by viewers. These varied interpretations indicate how critical one's social environment is in terms of influencing viewer's understandings and meanings thereof.

Film scholars who recognise the role of audiences in meaning creation develop a more nuanced understanding of the impact of cinema on social perceptions and cultural contexts. With specific reference to Hindi cinema, various studies (c.f. Saxena and Dhrangadaria, 2023; Mandavia and Limbasiya, 2019; Banaji, 2006 and Srinivas, 2002) have highlighted how audiences of Hindi cinema negotiate interpretations of films based on their individual contexts based on key factors such as gender, education level, occupation, marital status and age. Srinivas (2016) explored how Indian cinema viewers actively engage with films in a country marked by many cultural, social and regional identities. Srinivas's (2016) study is important as it provides insight into how audiences negotiate meaning and emphasises that audiences do not simply passively receive film content, but actively engage with films and form interpretations that emerge from their own contexts (cultural, social and so on). The audience's active engagement in the cinema-viewing experience not only highlights how filmgoers can contribute to the construction of meanings but also emphasises the value of understanding cultural contexts within the realm of Indian cinema.

These scholars (and others) have made substantial contributions in terms of considering how media representations and active audience participation contribute to the shaping of the social construction of reality. In addition, by critically exploring the media as a site of power relations that influences perceptions and meanings, deeper insight into how the media significantly contributes to understandings of the construction of social reality is developed. As highlighted thus far, the media has a substantial role in the socialising of individuals. Exposure to media content such as films, television shows, advertisements, music and online material influences our understandings of various aspects; such as for example, sexuality, race and social and gender roles. Gender is an important area of socialisation in terms of this study,

and the section below discusses significant contributions to the discipline of gender within the context of social construction.

2.3.2 Gender and Social Constructionism

Gender is defined by the United Nations (2022: 2) as:

the roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women. In addition to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, gender also refers to the relations between women and those between men.

The reference to society in the definition highlights that gender is socially constructed and formed through processes of socialisation. These processes of socialisation are context-driven and there “can be many ways in which an individual may not conform to the prevailing gender norms, such as when an individual feels an inherent sense of gender identity that differs from their sex assigned at birth” (Kaufman, Eschliman and Karver, 2023: 667). Gender identity, thus, involves more than the biological definition of male or female, rather, it is a *sense* or *experience* of an individual as being either male, female or anywhere along the gender spectrum. Lindqvist, Sendén and Renström (2020: 335) state that:

Gender identity involves more than the anatomical – it involves the inner knowledge and outer expression of one’s sex. The dominant view has been that gender identity resides within the individual, although more recent views challenge this assumption by arguing that gender identity is created in the context of interactions, societal structures, and cultural expectations.

The definition above resonates with the school of social constructionism in that social constructionism is focused on how knowledge is historically located and entrenched in cultural practices and values. According to Subramaniam (2014) in this school of thought, traits such as class, sexual orientation, gender and race – which are generally viewed as fixed and exclusively biological – are the result of human understandings and interpretations that are influenced by various cultural and historical contexts. Social constructionism, therefore, emphasises how historical processes within institutions and society establish, alter, and replicate cultural classifications such as (for example) ‘men’ and “‘women’ and ‘black’ and ‘white’.

Lorber (1994: 276) maintains that “gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life”. This understanding of gender is aligned to the broader framework of social constructionism in that it emphasises how gender is historically and culturally situated and understood through collective meaning-making. Lorber (1994: 278) goes on to add that people are “born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine or feminine”, emphasising that social practices such as dress, haircuts, gestures and even naming determine how a sex category evolves into one’s gender. The concept of gender as a social construction can be understood as the way in which gender norms, roles and behaviours are reinforced by social institutions (Hasanul, 2018). Such reinforcement typically starts at birth, when a child is referred to as either a male or female.

A distinction should be drawn between sex and gender, where “sex usually refers to a person’s biological characteristics, and gender refers to socially constructed roles and norms” (Kaufman, Eschliman and Karver, 2023: 666). The notion of gender as a social construction thus emphasises that gender is influenced by social, historical, and cultural factors rather than being fixed or biologically defined. The expectations, norms, behaviours and roles that come with being male or female, for instance, can vary greatly throughout communities, cultures and historical times, which highlights that gender is a social construct rather than a biological one (Holt, 2020). Furthermore, gender can be understood as a social phenomenon in that people from different cultures form different understandings of what it means to be, for example, male or female.

An individual’s understanding of gender is thus firstly derived from their cultural context (in which they were raised). Such understandings could be in terms of “appropriate” behaviour and traits for boys (for example, strong, loud, active) and girls (like quiet, submissive, gentle). Abele (2003) maintains that these female and male characteristics or traits are called communal (feminine) and agentic (masculine), respectively. Gender roles, however, have changed and evolved with the passage of time. Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann and Sczesny (2020) argue that stereotypical views of female gender roles have evolved, which could be a result of more women joining the workplace and their concomitant economic independence.

Gender therefore cannot be viewed from an essentialist paradigm, wherein gender is seen as solely an innate biological trait. This study adopts a social constructionist view of gender, where gender is shaped and influenced by various societal and cultural expectations, beliefs and practices. It is important to stress that the notion of the existence of only two genders – male and female – is rejected within the social constructionist paradigm, which rather, acknowledges the existence of gender-fluid and non-binary identities. Hopkins and Richardson (2021: 535) add to this understanding by promoting for a more inclusive view of gender that acknowledges multiple identities that go beyond binary categorisation.

Butler's (1999) groundbreaking and foundational work on gender performativity is essential in understanding gender through the lens of social constructionism. Butler (1999) argued that gender is not an inborn, or inherent, identity, but rather it is something individuals 'do' through repeated interactions and behaviours based on societal norms. Lorber's (1994: 276) perspective that "everyone constantly 'doing' gender" further highlights the notion of gender as performative and enacted. In other words, gender is not something one has, but rather, something one does. Specifically, Butler (1999: 33) states that "gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results". What this means is that gender is expressed and enacted in accordance with societal norms and that through these repeated expressions and enactments, gender is established as a 'natural' reality (Butler, 1999).

Gender performance thus stresses the notion that gender is in existence only because it is enacted and repeated through social mingling and interactions. This understanding contributes to the notion that gender is a social construct, shaped and influenced by cultural and societal practices, rather than being determined by biology. Such a viewpoint creates room for more complex understandings of gender identities, as dynamic and fluid constructs impacted by varied societal and cultural contexts (Heller, 2020). Butler's (1999) idea of gender performativity challenges perceptions of gender expressions and identities, in that she calls for broader understandings of gender which has led to critical debate around the intersection of gender with social classifications such as race, class and economics (Collins and Bilge, 2020).

The framework of social constructionism therefore highlights that gender roles are entrenched in wider power structures, establishments and cultural practices. Lorber (1994) states that gender operates as a social institution that categorises society in a hierarchical order, allotting responsibilities, duties, roles and worth based on one's gender status. Such gender roles are reinforced and maintained through structures such as the family, religion, education, legal systems and media representations. The result is what Lorber (1994: 281) describes as a "gender-stratified society" where "what men do is usually valued more highly than what women do because men do it, even when their activities are very similar or the same". In relation to the representation of females in Hindi cinema, gender performativity can be used as a lens from which to understand how women are portrayed in terms of gender norms. Additionally, gender performativity allows for significant insight into the ways in which Hindi films portray women as determined by dominant societal expectations. As Butler (1999) states that gender is performed through repeated enactments, or performances, exploring the representation of women in Hindi films provides valuable details into how such depictions of women may (or not) reinforce normative gender roles.

The idea that gender is established by the 'expressions' of gender (Butler, 1999) can be linked to the study of film characters if consideration is given to the ways in which a female character may 'perform' her gender in a film. Take for example the role of a 'mother' in film, and how repeated performances of how a mother ought to look, behave and speak may become normalised as the accepted (and sometimes only) depiction or 'standard' of motherhood. These portrayals of motherhood may seem natural but they are socially constructed, shaped and influenced by various social and cultural contexts. The importance of understanding gender performances in relation to films is reinforced by Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso and Rollè (2023: 5) who state that "the pervasive nature of media representations contributes to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, which can limit the roles available to women and shape societal expectations about gender behaviour". Repeated performances in the media of women in a particular way tend to serve as a benchmark for expectations (which can morph into stereotypes⁶) of what it means to be a female.

⁶ Chapter Four of this study provides a more detailed discussion on gender stereotypes in the media.

Media representations of gender can significantly shape ideas and perceptions of what it means to be male, female or somewhere along the gender spectrum. Such portrayals entrench and normalise certain gender traits, and have the potential to distort and limit understandings of gender. Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006: 150) emphasise that research within the social constructionist framework focus on an analysis of signs and images with the aim to demonstrate how representations are created, which then impacts on how others interpret such representations. For example, an exploration of the ways in which a female character is represented in a film, can be analysed by signs such as language, physical traits, clothing and also interactions with other characters. These signs can be used to understand how a character is represented and allow for possible interpretations thereof. In relation to this study, the research examines how the portrayals of women in the selected films 'perform' gender (female) norms and traits that are considered essential to being a woman.

Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso and Rollè (2023: 1) maintain that "as a social category, gender is one of the earliest and most prominent ways people may learn to identify themselves and their peers". Understandings of gender identity thus continue to progress as individuals grow and their perceptions of what it means to be, for example a man or woman, is developed through various societal and cultural interactions. Some of these interactions include engagement with family, religious organisations, educational institutions and through exposure to various representations in society. One such area is the media, which has a key role in the understandings of gender (Rollè, Santoniccolo, D'Amico and Trombetta, 2020). Films, for example, often reflect and reinforce traditional gender norms, which relates to social constructionism in that our understandings of gender are shaped by social and cultural contexts (which includes media representations).

A concern from such gendered representations is that some individuals tend to internalise what they observe on films, which can then affect beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and also behaviours about gender roles and norms. Whilst this study recognises this concern, it also explores how the films under investigation may possibly promote understandings of diverse female representations. In doing so, the study aims to underline portrayals that defy or break traditional female stereotypes

and that which adds to broader perceptions of gender. Social constructionism is thus an important framework in this study, as it establishes that gender is not fixed, but, is fluid and constructed through various societal and cultural practices. Additionally, social constructionism allows for the critical analysis of films to see how gender norms are reinforced, challenged or perpetuated in cinema. In doing so, the study aims to explore assumptions about female representations and highlight reasons for more inclusive representations thereof.

2.4 Summary

Chapter Two has identified and provided an overview of the interpretative framework and theoretical foundation that underpins this study. The chapter has firstly defined social constructionism as an interpretative paradigm and secondly related the approach to the study's focus, that is, media (film) and gender (female) representations in Hindi cinema. Through the interpretative framework, this research locates representations of women in Hindi cinema as social constructions. Gender is understood as performative and conditional – and thus the study highlights existing stereotypes of women in Hindi cinema that may appear 'naturalised'. The discussion of social constructionism is important to the study, as the approach highlights the interpretative position of the study, which serves as a guide for the analysis of female representation in the selected films. Chapter Three discusses key historical developments in Hindi cinema, as well as defining elements and features.

CHAPTER THREE

READING HINDI CINEMA

Cinema clearly opens a most useful window onto a culture and its study brings us intimacy and immediacy unavailable from most other media of communication
(Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998: 8)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief understanding of Hindi cinema, moving on to highlighting stages in its historical development (with a link to Indian society) and then discussing key features that define a Hindi film. An understanding thus of the history of Hindi cinema and its structure provides a context from which to examine how female characters are represented in these films, especially in terms of gender roles, norms and expectations. A grasp and awareness of the structure and key features of Hindi films is equally important for a more nuanced and critical analysis of the representation of female characters in the selected films. To begin with, the chapter describes the term 'Bollywood cinema'.

3.2 What is Bollywood Cinema?

"What, precisely, is 'Bollywood' and what does such a name, or naming, imply?", asks Gehlawat (2010: xi). Bollywood, popular Hindi cinema, Indian cinema – although these names are used interchangeably, Bollywood has its own distinct understanding. Ganti (2013) explains that the term Bollywood was created (rather tongue-in-cheek) by an English-language newspaper editor in India during the late 1970s. It was a play on the term 'Hollywood' – the film industry in the United States of America – and despite some critique⁷ of the name, it quickly caught on with audiences, media professionals and artists from the Bollywood industry itself.

Bollywood refers to the Hindi language film industry situated in Bombay (now known as Mumbai) whose focus has traditionally been on producing 'popular' films for mass

⁷ See Vasudevan (2008) where he cites Shahrukh Khan as objecting to use of the term Bollywood in a 2002 interview with English film critic Derek Malcom. Additionally, Vasudevan (2008: 6) cites Bollywood film director Subhash Ghai who argues "Do not call it Bollywood. This is a very wrong thing to call it. We are not trying to copy Hollywood."

consumption. On the other hand, Indian cinema refers to *all* film industries located within the borders of the country. These industries are distinguished according to language – for example, Chennai (previously called Madras) is home to the Tamil language film industry; Hyderabad (Telugu language); Patna (Bhojpuri language); Kerala (Malayalam language) and so on. Ganti (2013: 12), however, states that Hindi films “though comprising approximately 20 percent of total production, are the ones that circulate nationally and internationally, dominate the discourse about Indian cinema, and are regarded as the standard or archetype to follow or oppose.” In other words, despite Hindi language films only representing approximately 20 percent of India’s total film production, they continue to lead in terms of circulation (both domestically and in international markets); influence narratives and discourse around the standards for Indian cinema and are often regarded as a yardstick for other Indian film industries.

Cinematography was introduced by the Lumière brothers when they projected a short film in Paris in December 1895. A mere seven months later the brothers held their first screening in India, at the Watson Hotel in Bombay (known as Mumbai since 1995), in July 1896 (Bose, 2006). Many subsequent screenings followed as Indian audiences’ fascination with film increased. Films were imported from Britain, Germany and the United States of America – marking the beginning of India’s passion for, and interest in, cinema (Rajadhyaksha, 2016). Dadasaheb Phalke, who is often viewed as the ‘Father of Indian Cinema’, released *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913 – a production regarded as India’s first feature film and celebrated for its creative use of special effects.

Raja Harishchandra, a silent film, told the story of the legendary King Harishchandra, a mythical figure from Hindu mythology, and focused on the time-old tale of good triumphing over evil. The film, maintain Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004: 13), “laid the foundation for a thriving film industry in India, and for a vastly popular genre of mythological films”. It can thus be said that mythological films appealed to Indian audiences, arguably in relation to cultural and religious sentiments linked to the two key Hindu texts, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Subsequent films made during the early days of Indian cinema focused on embedding mythological narratives that were relevant to existing social contexts. Given the paucity of film crew and film actors

at that time in India, Dadasaheb Phalke wore several hats during the production of the film – actor, editor, director and writer (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2013). The success and popularity of *Raja Harishchandra* created the foundation for Indian cinema, as it is known today.

Cinema is widely regarded as a form of entertainment, bringing enjoyment and moments of escapement from ordinary life. Cinema is also a social phenomenon, that often reflects the “values, beliefs, and aspirations of a society or culture. They can depict societal trends, social dynamics, and cultural practices, providing insights into the way people live and interact” (Lu, 2023: 70). Cinema echoes critical moments in world history, from struggles to celebrations. It is therefore essential to understand the history Hindi cinema during key stages in its development in order to explore its link(s) to Indian context(s) within specific timeframes. This is highlighted in the section below.

3.3 Stages in the Development of Bollywood Cinema

The section below starts off with a discussion on Indian cinema before moving to a discussion on Bollywood cinema. This is because the term Bollywood only emerged in the 1970s (Ganti, 2013) whilst the history of Indian cinema is traced to the early 1900s. As the discussion progresses, there is thus a concomitant shift from Indian cinema to more specifically, Bollywood cinema. O'Regan and Shoesmith (1987: 69) summarise the early stages of Indian cinema by stating that:

The Indian film industry has gone through three distinct stages in its growth. The first, from its inception around 1913 to around 1924 can be characterised as the cottage industry period. This period is marked by a lack of capital for investment in infrastructure, problems in film technique, absence of identifiable stars, an unstable mode of production, but at the same time an enthusiasm for the medium and a desire to entertain Indians through their own culture. The second period is the studio era that extends from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s. The third stage, late 1940s onward, is ‘the star as commodity’ phase, and is characterised by among other things, complete reliance upon the star at the box office and abundant finance.

The stages outlined above demarcate the distinct stages in the production of Indian films, from its early days as an informal cottage industry to a nascent economic enterprise. It could be argued that these transformations, or changes, also reflect changes in Indian economics, culture and society. Therefore, in addition to

understanding Indian cinema through its developmental (growth) stages, it can also be explored by analysing, for example, themes and narratives, within specific time periods, especially in relation to how they reflect Indian society. The sub-sections below discuss key stages in the development of Indian cinema with a focus on its relationship to Indian society.

3.3.1 1930s: The Start of the Talkies

India's first 'talkie', *Alam Ara* (see Figure 3.1 below) directed by Ardeshir Irani was released in 1931 in Mumbai. The film marked a critical moment in India cinema as it introduced songs and dance sequences to the structure of Indian films – to date, a key feature of Hindi films. Additionally, the film was praised for its innovative (at that time) use of technology and high standards of film production (Kishore and Kerrigan, 2016: 115). The inclusion of music and sound contributed not only to the success and popularity of the *Alam Ara*, but also laid the foundation for other Indian films to follow in a similar style. Biswas (2022: para. 14, lines 1–4) contends that “the film . . . was sold out for weeks. Police had to control excited crowds outside theatres . . . The film's heroine, Zubeida, who combined ‘innocence with eroticism’, was a huge draw”. The phenomenal success of the film fostered a sense of national Indian identity in colonial India by focusing on Hindu mythology and prioritising Indian narratives, beliefs and values.



Figure 3.1: A still from India's first 'talkie' – *Alam Ara*

Source: Biswas (2022)

The 1930s were a time of social struggle in India, reflective of the existing global warfare (World War II), which began in the late 1930s, and India's battle for independence. Indian films with patriotic storylines were censored and prohibited by the British Raj but some filmmakers, however, protested against such restrictions by including caricature characters in their films who mocked British culture. Films, in this period, would have provided filmgoers with an escape from the drudgery and challenges of daily life. Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2013: 43) illustrate that:

The 1930s saw the emergence of a fascination with social themes that affected day to day living. V. Shantaram, for example, in his film *Amritmantha* (1934), held up for scrutiny the theological absolutisms and ritualistic excesses that were gathering momentum at the time, while the landmark *Devdas* (1935) sought to explore the self-defeating nature of social conventionalism.

It is thus evident that during this period, filmmakers began to use the medium of cinema to examine social issues as experienced by ordinary people. Such narratives may have also contributed to audiences' attraction to Indian cinema, in that cinema viewers may have found an appeal in seeing their lived experiences reflected on screen.

3.3.2 The 1940s to the late 1950s (The Golden Age of Indian Cinema)

During the 1940s, the popular format of song, dance and mythology-themed narratives was well-established in Indian cinema. The films resonated with Indian audiences and proved to be profitable ventures (Mehta, 2020). Post-World War II saw significant developments to Indian markets and economies, which led to concomitant developments in Indian cinema as a lucrative business enterprise. Although India made rapid advancements towards a capitalist economy, the country also dealt with issues of patriotism, Indian nationhood, struggle for independence (gained in 1947) and religious, tribal and cultural divisions (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen, 1999). Cinema produced in the country during this time, reflected these struggles.

In the 1950s, cinema had made great inroads in India and was acknowledged as a form of entertainment and lucrative business enterprise. Advancements in technology such as better sound quality, equipment and the introduction of colour to films, firmly entrenched cinema as popular art form in India. During this period, the "urbanisation of Indian consciousness was taking place as never before, . . . which facilitated the

development of Indian cinema”, argued Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004: 16). The 1950s in post-independent India is regarded as the ‘golden age of Indian cinema’ due in part to the development of ‘artistic’⁸ or parallel cinema (a more creative approach to popular Hindi cinema) in this period (Ganti, 2013). Notable Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray achieved critical acclaim and international acknowledgment for his film, *Pather Pancholi* (1955), which won several international accolades (Majumdar, 2021). The artistic cinema style espoused by Ray emphasised realism, outdoor locations and addressed social issues (such as caste, poverty and discrimination) in film plots.

Hafeez and Ara (2016: 65) add that the mainstream (popular) Indian film industry also produced films with a “strong social themes produced by acclaimed filmmakers such as Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Mehboob Khan, and Guru Dutt”, which mainly focused on depicting working-class experiences. A critically acclaimed film produced during this period is Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957) – see Figure 3.2 below – which focused on rural-life struggles, as depicted through the character of an ideal mother, who is strong, resilient determined, and sacrificing (Barman, 2022). The cultural impact of a film like *Mother India* (1957) therefore helped imbue a sense of patriotism, national pride and identity among Indian audiences.

⁸ Refer to Majumdar (2021) for an in-depth understanding of the establishment and development of artistic cinema in India.

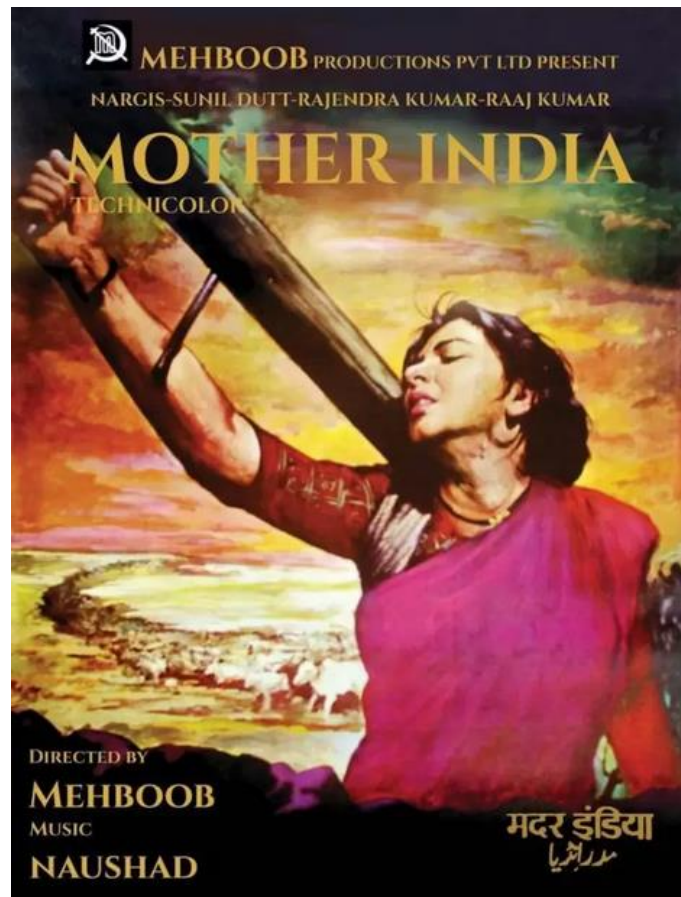


Figure 3.2: Poster of *Mother India*

Source: <https://posteritati.com/poster/19325/mother-india-original-r1960s-indian-movie-poster>

3.3.3 1960s to 1970s

Cinema in the 1960s continued to mirror India's post-independent political and social contexts and also marked the emergence of India's first superstar, actor Rajesh Khanna, and much-admired performers such as Dharmendra, Sharmila Tagore and Mumtaz. The action and romance genres prevailed until the mid-1970s when gangster and crime films became popular (Rajadhyaksha, 2016) largely through the iconic 'angry young man' (see Figure 3.3 below) character portrayed by the legendary Amitabh Bachchan in films like *Zanjeer* (Prakash Mehra, 1973), *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1975) and *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) alongside actresses including Jaya Bhaduri and Hema Malini (dubbed the 'Dream Girl'). These films focused on the character of a rebellious young man who challenged corruption and social injustice.

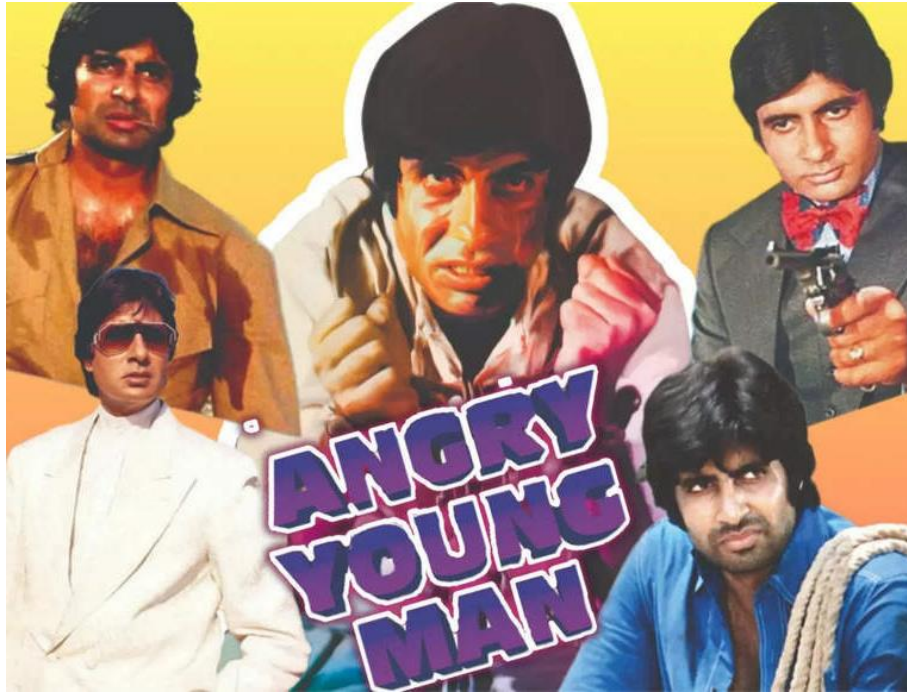


Figure 3.3: Actor Amitabh Bachchan as the ‘angry young man’

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/why-audience-loved-the-angry-young-man/articleshow/92899275.cms>

The presence of parallel cinema in Hindi cinema continued to flourish in the early 1970s as affirmed by Hafeez and Ara (2016: 66) who explain that “producers including Shyam Benegal, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Ketan Mehta, Govind Nihalani and Vijaya Mehta had the credit of keeping alive Hindi parallel cinema throughout the seventies”. Parallel cinema eschewed the popular Hindi cinema formula of commercialised, spectacle-driven films, and rather, focused on nuanced narratives, intimate storytelling, character development to highlight social and political struggles in a more authentic and ‘real’ manner (Sayyed, 2024). During the 1970s, however, the Indian Film Finance Corporation (IFFC) was criticised for its support of parallel films, which resulted in a shift to the support of mainstream, commercial cinema (Hafeez and Ara, 2016). This renewed focus resulted in a surge of commercial, popular films – and notably, it was during this time that the term ‘Bollywood’ was coined – which gave prominence to the ‘masala’ film genre characterised by a blend of action, romance, drama, and music, appealing to a wide audience.

3.3.4 1980s to 1990s

The 1980s and 1990s focused on romantic storylines, family drama, comedy and action films; a departure from the dominance of gangster and crime films. Hindi cinema began to get global attention after *Salaam Bombay* (Mira Nair, 1988) won the *Camera d'Or* in 1988 at the Cannes Film Festival and was subsequently nominated in the category of Best Foreign Language Film at the 61st Academy Awards (Takhar, Maclaran, and Stevens, 2012). An important aspect of the late 1980s and early 1990s is the introduction of what is today widely known as the 'three Khans' – Salman Khan, Aamir Khan and Shahrukh Khan.⁹ To date, they remain prominent and influential actors, considered to be the last of the superstars, and have each in their own right made significant contributions to the growth and global popularity of the Hindi film industry. Furthermore, Dwyer (2014: 27) explains that "Shahrukh is the diasporic superstar and the face of the new India; Aamir is the thinking one; Salman is the eternal kid, the ideal body and the Everyman. There has not been a major female superstar during this period". Female actresses like Sridevi, Madhuri Dixit, Juhi Chawla and Karisma Kapoor, did however, firmly establish their presence in popular Hindi cinema, garnering both national and international fame. No actress though, emerged with the same global phenomenon as the 'three Khans'.

The 1990s marked a significant moment in Hindi cinema, characterised by the impact of globalisation and an international appreciation and acknowledgement of Hindi films (Balabantaray and Samal, 2022). The phenomenal success (both nationally and globally) of films like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Karan Johar, 1998) and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 1999) took Hindi cinema to new heights – in appeal, accolades, reach and revenue. Films in the 1990s mirrored the challenges and aspirations of a developing and evolving India – in terms of economics, culture, politics and social environments (c.f. Schaefer and Karan, 2013). Films reflected the themes of Indian nationalism, changing family dynamics and structures (such as single parenthood in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*), influence of western culture and also began to

⁹ Bamzai's (2021) book titled "*The Three Khans and the Emergence of New India*" maps the careers of Salman Khan, Aamir Khan and Shahrukh Khan and provides insightful commentary on their social, cultural and emotional impact on audiences.

ostensibly portray diverse female characters, deemed to be independent, self-aware and empowered. This is explored in more detail later on in the study.

3.3.5 2000s to Present

In understanding the development of Hindi cinema during the 2000s, Hafeez and Azra (2016: 68) maintain that:

The decade of 2000s witnessed the persistent rise of Indian cinema in the world. In fact, modern technology took Bollywood to novel peaks in reference to cinematography and storylines alongside mechanical advancements in terms of special effects and animation. Indian cinema is now competing globally with advanced digital projectors, converting digital format and latest production techniques.

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, the term Bollywood is often used interchangeably with Indian cinema, as evidenced in the above quotation. The position of this study, however, is that Bollywood is a *part* of Indian cinema, not encompassing the entirety of it. In addition, Bollywood and Hindi cinema are used interchangeably in this study, both referring to popular films made in the Hindi language. From the above quotation, it can be understood that in the early 2000s, Hindi films continued to establish a global presence¹⁰ and that technological advancements such as the Internet and new filmmaking techniques helped to redefine filmmaking and set new film standards in the industry. The production value of Hindi films grossly increased, with substantial money now being invested into advanced visual effects to improve the quality of Hindi films. This gave Hindi films a stronger global competitive edge – the investment towards better quality films, particularly from a technology and skills perspective – helped create films that withstood international scrutiny.

Devasundaram (2018) speaks about the 2010s and the rise of urban independent films which he refers to as the new ‘Indian Indies’. These films adopted a hybrid structure, merging different genres and film styles. Such hybridisation created space for

¹⁰ Kavoori and Punathambekar (2008: 1), for instance, speak about the global presence established by Indian actress Aishwarya Rai who appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and in their words, “taught Oprah Winfrey how to tie a sari” (a traditional Indian dress). Their work provides valuable insight on the growth and development of Bollywood as a platform for cultural production and expression on a global stage. Additionally, the work highlights the role of diasporic Indian communities in promoting Bollywood cinema outside India, considers the economic impact of the film business in terms of production and distribution and explores the cultural interactions between Bollywood and other film industries.

innovative storytelling and diverse storylines with a sharp focus on urban contemporary issues, such as issues related to identity politics, globalisation and diasporic challenges. At present, the Hindi film industry (like many others) is undergoing a shift due to the advancements in digital technologies.

Aggarwal (2023) highlights that over-the-top (OTT) platforms have altered the ways in which the film industry produces and distributes content. He (2023) goes on to argue that the future of Hindi cinema will be influenced by further digital developments especially in the areas of cost (a streaming service subscription versus the cost of a single-entry film ticket); flexibility (media users have a choice in terms of screenings) and availability (access to a wider range of content in many languages through subtitles). Such developments could also possibly transform the ways in which Hindi cinema is marketed and received by audiences, potentially leading to increase in the industry's presence across the globe. The discussion now turns to understanding some of the key elements that define a Hindi film.

3.4 Key Elements of Hindi Films

Hindi cinema is a sub-genre within broader Indian cinema that has its own distinct flavour. Genre is used to classify films into categories such as comedy, horror, action, western and so on. Genre does not only allude to the narrative structure of a film but also establishes the boundaries for audience interpretation. For example, it would not be prudent to watch a Hindi film and criticise it for inclusion of songs and dance sequences. An evaluation of any film, thus, should be centred on the codes and conventions of the genre.

In cinema studies, the word genre does carry with it some negative connotations. Braudy (1999: 615) argues that there exists a (positive) “prejudice for the unique” which results in formulaic and commercial films being viewed with artistic contempt. On the other hand, Anjaria (2021: 18) explains that “we might also see genre as productive, as setting parameters that filmmakers have to abide by while still producing an enjoyable and engaging film”. Thus, a view of Hindi films as too predictable and not worthy of film analysis is narrow and limiting – rather, Hindi films should be evaluated in relation to one another, and in relation to its codes and conventions or what Anjaria (2021: 18) describes as “reading for or with genre, rather than against it”.

The elements that define a Hindi film have undergone significant changes over the years. From the early silent movies, to the first 'talkie' and the introduction of song, dance and colour it is apparent that the defining elements of a Hindi film have evolved over time. While the term Hindi may suggest an imitation or copy of Hollywood, there are differences in the two industries. Hindi films are not simply a "kitsch version" (Ciolfi, 2012: 388) of the Hollywood style but rather follows its own unique formula, structure and narrative that while remains largely consistent, does not adopt a totally homogeneous approach. Whilst this study acknowledges the heterogeneity, the focus is on the common elements that define a Hindi film. It is through such an examination, of the commonality, that an analysis of any possible deviations can be understood (especially in terms of the representation of women).

Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004: 32) provide a common understanding of Hindi film (what they refer to as Indian popular films) by stating that:

Indian popular films are sometimes referred to contemptuously as 'masalas' (spices). Just as different spices are used in cooking, so the filmmaker, it is contended, uses the standard elements associated with the given formula for success, namely: song, dance, melodrama, stunts, fights and exaggerated humour.

Melodrama, as highlighted in the quotation above, has a long history in Hindi cinema of drawing inspiration from stories based on Hindu mythology (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), theatre, and Sanskrit literature (Valančiūnas, 2008: 161). Melodrama is also practiced through, for example, vibrant visual aesthetics and filmmaking styles; emotional exaggeration; themes of love, sacrifice and redemption and moral dilemmas. The sections below identify and explore practices of melodrama that define a Hindi film.

3.4.1 Moral Universe

The idea of a moral universe is expressed by film scholar Thomas (1995) in relation to the traditional Hindi film storytelling structure, which she explains is reflective of the age-old tale of good versus evil. The moral universe, according to Thomas (1995) does not mirror any genuine cultural values, but rather, conforms to generic conventions typical of Hindi films. According to Thomas (1995) the moral universe is quickly established in most Hindi films, followed by a disturbance to the moral universe (a

large part of the film) and finally, and a restoration thereof at the end (sometimes, very abruptly). This does not mean that there is no room for creativity, rather, the way in which the moral universe unfolds varies across Hindi films.

Anjaria (2021: 19) maintains that “the moral universe is always restored, the hero always prevails over the villain, but what that hero represents, the values s/he espouses, and who the villain is changes across films”. Hindi cinema’s dependence on the predictable narrative structure of the moral universe provides audiences with a sense of engagement with the text as such narratives tend to emphasise dominant moral values. An interesting question at this point, is to consider how Hindi films establish a moral universe. Anjaria (2021: 19) aptly summarises this by explaining that at the start (or early on) of a film, specific codes or clues are presented that serves to establish a moral centre. A moral centre could be, for example, symbolised through characters in the film, or it could be an emotion or feeling (like love). Other moral values include a belief in fate, faith, religion and family. After the establishment of the moral universe, most Hindi films would present a related disruption. For example, if the moral universe is centred around family, a related disruption could be anything that upsets the family dynamics. Lastly, a restoration of the moral universe is presented – in the case of family, it could be the reuniting of estranged family members. This restoration of the moral universe aligns with a key feature of Hindi films which is a ‘happy ending’. In some films, however, the moral universe is so severely disrupted that the storyline is unable to result in a happy ending.

Thomas’s (1995) moral universe concept can be understood in relation to the representation of women in Hindi films by examining the how female characters are introduced in terms of moral values (see Figure 3.4 below).

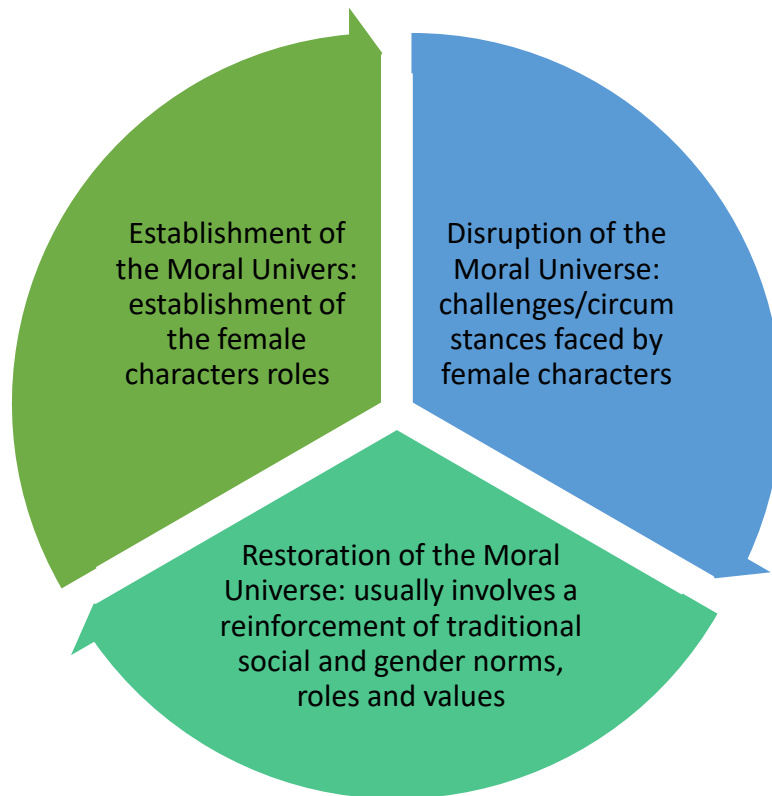


Figure 3.4: Cycle of the Moral Universe

Source: Adapted from Thomas (1995)

Moral values tend to be established through character, such as a devoted mother or a dutiful wife. Understanding the initial depictions of the female characters thus provides more insight into the social and gender expectations thereof. The disruption of the moral universe presents an opportunity to examine how female characters are portrayed in terms of dealing with a crisis or circumstances that have disrupted their contextual norm. The restoration, at the end of the film, allows for an understanding of how female characters have established 'order'. The moral universe is thus important to understand how Hindi films depict characters from the lens of moral clarity. The early establishment of the roles of the female characters presents the stage for the conflict and the restoration, at the end of the film, usually affirms traditional social and gender norms, values and roles. This type of narrative structure is often repeated in many Hindi films; hence its cyclical narrative structure tends to reinforce certain gender norms, roles and values. In other words, each cycle (each film) potentially creates a sense of normalisation in audience members regarding, for example, expected gender

norms, roles, and behaviours. These expected roles are linked to a key feature of Hindi films, namely, character types.

3.4.2 Character Types

Rather than representing realistic individuals, Hindi films have a long history of presenting characters as types. These characters are not linked to any specific historical period, but rather, possess a culturally free appeal, often including generic names (without any regional reference) such as 'Raj' or 'Ravi' (Nandy, 1981). In doing so, these characters are not located to a specific time and spatial context. Additionally, how characters are portrayed is largely based on their type (for example, a mother figure; a vamp and so on) than any individual character motivation. Yadav and Jha (2023: 1) maintain that:

Over the course of its seven-decade history, Bollywood has portrayed female lead characters in a spectrum of characterisations, encompassing the archetypal selfless mother, the stereotype of a helpless damsel, and the portrayal of women who assert agency over their own lives.

For instance, consider the character type of a dutiful wife. Such a character type would be paired with expected social and gender norms such as self-sacrificing, loyal, dedicated to her husband and children. Expectations would include for her to support her husband's decisions, his career, and remain steadfast during times of crises. A good example of this is in the 2001 film in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Karan Johar), where Nandini prioritises her husband's needs and emotions over that of her own (see Figure 3.5 below). Nandini's character symbolises key gender and social norms that are reflected in many Hindi films. Nandini is not only a supportive and loyal wife but also a nurturing, devoted and sacrificing mother. She is mostly silenced and not given an opportunity to speak her mind, playing second fiddle to her husband's needs and aspirations.



Figure 3.5: Jaya Bachchan as Nandini, a dutiful wife

Source: <https://www.filmfare.com/features/then-and-now-kabhi-khushi-kabhie-gham-10414-3.html>

In relation to this study, understanding female character types, or stereotypes, is important to interpret the representation of women in the selected films as this would provide insight into how such stereotypes are expected to function. In addition, an understanding of the norm would reveal the unusual – any variations or disruptions in the stereotypes. Hindi film characters (both men and women) are often stereotypically represented, for instance, the vamp as a morally corrupt woman. Female character types and stereotypes in Hindi cinema are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four of this study. Characters in Hindi cinema use visual style to express certain moods and emotions, as outlined below.

3.4.3 Visual Style

Visual style is another defining feature of Hindi films, marked by a unique look that often boldly embraces artifice rather than, for example, making attempts to be realistic (Ganti, 2013). The films tend to be opulent and extravagant, what Dwyer and Patel (2002) describe as consisting of dramatic lighting, vibrant colours, ornate sets and

colourful costumes. The visual aesthetic is one of excessiveness, boldness and overstatement. Anjaria (2021) further adds that camera and editing techniques such as pans, cross-cutting and dramatic zooms that are often used to symbolise intense emotions, serve as a substitute for a complex and detailed exploration of a character's emotions, feelings and thoughts. In other words, rather than exploring a character's emotional state through the plot development and dialogue, there exists a tendency to rely on dramatic visual elements to communicate core emotions. Hindi cinema's visual style has a connection to Parsi theatre (a mix of Indian and European drama) and its visual aesthetics are based on the Parsi theatre style – such as frontal staging and dramatic, over-the-top visuals (Kapur, 2011).

In section 3.4.1 the concept of the moral universe, as applied to Hindi cinema, was discussed. Anjaria (2021: 84) maintains that the “moral universe is conveyed primarily visually. Generally, beautiful, colourful, and well-lit visuals are associated with heroes, and dark lighting and low or otherwise disorienting angles are used for villains”. For instance, in the movie *Devdas* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2002), the female lead, Paro, is shown in bright, natural lighting at the outset of the film to symbolise her innocence, purity and happy emotional state. As the story progresses, and Paro experiences critical changes in her life (a loveless arranged marriage to an older man and the forsaking of her love), there is a subsequent change in the lighting (refer to Figure 3.6 below). Shadows and dim lighting are used to convey her new emotional state – distressed, in turmoil and isolated. Apart from colour, camera angles are also a part of the moral universe (Anjaria, 2021). Villains or negative characters are often represented through low angle shots and distorted frames, adding to their menacing aura.



Figure 3.6: The use of lighting in the film *Devdas*

Source: <https://filmysasi.com/devdas-review/>

Elaborate and colourful costumes are also an essential element of visual style that symbolise certain traits and characteristics. These symbolisations have not remained unchanged in Hindi cinema, argues Wilkinson-Weber (2014) who notes that in the 1950s and 1960s, women wearing a mini-skirt in a Hindi film might be viewed as a sign for immorality or 'urban influence', but a mini-skirt is now common in Hindi cinema, used to symbolise an aspect of urban, contemporary reality. Additionally, the traditional attire of a sari (an Indian item of clothing) is widely worn by characters such as mothers, wives and widows in Hindi films, but is also viewed as a sensual item of clothing. A critical point here is that due to sartorial changes, analysing only costumes to uncover symbolic meanings is not a purely accurate method. Rather, costumes should be an element examined, in addition to for example, other key defining features of a Hindi film.

Another essential marker of visual style in Hindi cinema is locations. Hindi films are frequently filmed in 'foreign' (outside India) locations to depict song sequences. European countries such as Switzerland and Netherlands were widely used to film romantic songs between the 1960s and 1980s with the idea to "transport the lovers

from the mundane world” (Anjaria, 2021: 94). Since the 1990s, however, there has been a shift to other locations – particularly where the Indian diaspora is located such as Canada, London, Mauritius and Australia. This is not to say that there are no songs filmed within the border of India. Songs are filmed in India, but there is tendency to focus on visually appealing locations in the country that have had less exposure. Hindi cinema’s use of visual style is a multifaceted play of various elements such as colour, costumes, camera angles, editing technique, lighting and locations that all blend together to establish a unique visual identity of Hindi cinema. The concept of love on its own can be regarded as a defining feature of a Hindi film.

3.4.4 Love

Anjaria (2021: 33) argues that “romantic love is so central to Bollywood that it is better characterised as a generic feature than a thematic one”. What this means is that romantic love is so essential in Hindi films that it works as a key element of the genre that shapes and influences the narrative structure and characters in a film. Love is often linked to morality – heroes (both men and women) believe in love and villains are dismissive of love. In Hindi films, love is often represented as a force that takes over the hero, who forgets all else in pursuit of love. For instance, a Hindi film will generally revolve around love and a disruption (such as family feuds, religion, economic contexts) that poses a threat to that love leading to a conflict situation and an ultimate resolution thereof. Whilst this is a common feature in Hindi films, there are many variations in terms of how love is disrupted and resolved.

With respect to male characters in Hindi films, Anjaria (2021: 34) states that “love distracts from more conventional masculine and patriarchal pursuits” in that male characters lose interest in conventional masculine activities such as for example career development, leadership roles or political ambition. This suggests that men become so deeply involved in the pursuit of romance that all else is forgotten – or relegated to the side line. Whilst it may not be as common, women also display similar characteristics in the pursuit of romantic love by for example, neglecting work and family responsibilities. Love occupies a key position in Hindi films, with Ganti (2013) claiming that the representation of love in Hindi films is reflective of an idealised experience that also highlights social tensions and fears (such as religion, class,

family). Love is also linked to a 'happy ending', which is a common element in Hindi films.

Love is also viewed as pre-determined, or destined, in Hindi films suggesting that love is part of a divine plan, rather than a human choice (Hogan, 2009). This is linked to the 'love at first sight' concept, evident in many Hindi films. *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (Yash Chopra, 1997) and *Raabta* (Dinesh Vijan, 2017) are two Hindi film examples where love is presented as a predetermined force, aligned to destined romantic connections. In *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (Yash Chopra, 1997) the lead characters Pooja and Rahul share an instant connection. The film highlights, at the very outset, the idea of soulmates with one of the leading female characters stating: "*Kahin na kahin, koi na koi mere liye banaya gaya hai. Aur kabhi na kabhi main usse zaroor milonga*" (Somewhere, someone is made for me. And someday I will definitely meet him/her). The dialogue clearly expresses love as fated, almost a surrender to a higher force and a lack of human agency. Love is presented as not a chance occurrence, but a predetermined bond. The dialogue at the start of the film builds anticipation for what is to come – that is, the fated meeting of the romantic pair.

In *Raabta* (Dinesh Vijan, 2017) the lead characters, Shiv and Saira, share a romantic connection that goes beyond spatial and time boundaries. Again, the idea of soulmates is emphasised, reasserting the notion of a predetermined connection. Hindi films continue to reflect love as pre-ordained, destined and is thus not only a theme, but developed as a distinctive feature of Hindi cinema often highlighted as not only pre-determined, but all-consuming, sacrificial and an obsession and a kind of madness that transcends cultural, religious, political and social boundaries.

3.4.5 Family Bonds

Another distinguishing feature that adds to the melodrama in a Hindi film is family bonds. Ganti (2013: 110) asserts that "Hindi cinema's world is ruled primarily by the logic of kinship relations and plots are frequently driven by family conflicts". Hindi cinema has a long history of family-centred narratives that have focused on, for example, the tensions within dysfunctional families (*Kapoor & Sons*, Shakun Batra, 2016); generational trauma (*Gehraiyaan*, Shakun Batra, 2022); avenging the family (*Agneepath*, Karan Malhotra, 2012); sacrifice made for family and love (*Veer-Zaara*, Yash Chopra, 2004); sibling bonds (*Main Hoon Na*, Farah Khan, 2004); and familial

duties and obligations (*Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*, Karan Johar, 2006). Family dynamics is thus a significant force in Hindi films, that drives the narrative, establishing both character and emotional depth.

Family bonds tend to reflect and at times assert certain societal norms and expectations (Dwyer, 2014). It is thus important to understand family bonds in relation to how these shape and influence gender roles, norms and behaviour, especially women. This is because women, in Hindi cinema, play a key role in the family dynamic. The mother figure has a unique, unmatched and unique place in Hindi cinema. The mother figure is viewed as occupying “the place of highest moral authority” (Anjaria, 2021: 27) and is often linked to her children, especially the son. The mother–son bond is an integral part of classic Hindi cinema with plots focusing on the reincarnation, revenge and the importance of a mother’s presence in the family.

In the film *Karan Arjun* (Rakesh Roshan, 1995), a mother’s love for her twin sons drives the plot. So strong is her love for her sons that it transcends death – her devotion, combined with a mother’s love, wills them into a rebirth (reincarnation). When she is mocked by others for her belief in reincarnation and viewed as a crazy woman, she speaks the now classic dialogue, “*Mere Karan Arjun Aayenge*” (My Karan and Arjun will return) – and is ultimately proven right. Mothers are often idealised in Hindi cinema, elevated to an almost divine status. Exploration of sibling bonds, family conflict and betrayal as well as duty and responsibility are central themes or narratives in Hindi films, that convey cultural and societal expectations and lessons on morality (Anjaria, 2021). It is thus important to understand family-driven narratives when exploring the representation of women in Hindi cinema as these narratives tend to shape (and even define) the expected roles, norms and behaviours for women. A woman’s identity is often linked to her family and any depictions thereof are portrayed *through* the family. The mother figure is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four of this study.

3.4.6 Song and Dance

Song and dance sequences remain a key defining feature of a Hindi film. Song and dance sequences, argue Gehlawat and Dudrah (2017), while serving as key elements of Hindi cinema, have undergone significant changes. They (2017: 104) explain that:

Even as such song ‘picturisations,’ as they are frequently called, have evolved, shifting from little more than impromptu moves around tree trunks to highly choreographed affairs featuring scores of professional dancers and exotic backgrounds, their theorisation has also developed beyond the initial . . . to what has arguably become a highly specialised (sub)field of an increasingly theorised cinema.

Song and dance sequences are not included to only increase a film’s entertainment value, they are, as Gehlawat and Dudrah (2017) maintain, an integral part in the study of Hindi cinema. They can, however, be confusing to non-Hindi viewers, who might view them as a disruption to the storyline. Anjaria (2021: 58) further adds that “song sequences break from the primary narrative and offer access to other states of reality, such as desire and fantasy”. Songs thus need to be viewed as part of the broader structure of Hindi cinema that includes frequent, abrupt and seemingly random shifts from the narrative. Song and dance sequences in Hindi cinema are sometimes compared to the Hollywood musical genre and Broadway. Ciolfi (2012: 389) however argues that “the celebrated song and dance sequences of Bollywood show no influence of the Hollywood musical”. Rather, the song and dance sequences in Hindi cinema are rooted in Parsi theatre (Gopal and Sen, 2008).

Song and dance sequences emerge at ostensibly random points in a Hindi film, however, this is not the case. They are included at key points to serve as a “break from the primary narrative and offer access to other states of reality, such as desire and fantasy”, argues Anjaria (2021: 58). Often the lead characters – the ‘hero’ and ‘heroine’ disappear into a fantasy world, usually far removed from their current context. The fantasy world may include a far-off destination, such as the snowy Swiss Alps, and may also include professional background dancers gyrating to well-planned choreography. These song and dance sequences involve a unique visual style that, quite often, includes several changes to costume, make-up, sets, scenery and choreography. Song and dance sequences are not only included in romantic films, or films with a ‘light’ plot but are also a part of more serious storylines such as horror, thriller and crime films. Music is a key component of a Hindi film, regarded as pleasurable and memorable, and because of this song and dance sequences are not viewed as unusual or ‘out-of-place’ in films with a more serious storyline.

According to Rehman (2016: 320):

Unlike Hollywood, a production in India does not begin with a story or a script. Nor does it begin with acquiring a successful director or with signing a superstar. Most producers start their productions by recording a song. Storywriters weave the lyrics of the songs into the stories as productions progress.

A film's music is launched well before the film itself – a marketing strategy to create awareness and buzz about a film. The music, 'launched' with the playback singers, lyricists, composers, and cast, at times surpasses the film's narrative expectations. For instance, the film *Shaandaar* (Vikas Bahl, 2015) did not perform well at the box-office, but the songs remain popular for their catchy lyrics and dance vibes. Anjaria (2021: 58–59) asserts that songs are “the place where the senses are aroused, which is central to how Bollywood works as a genre. Reducing a Bollywood film to its storyline thus eliminates its heart”. Songs thus play a crucial role in stimulating one's senses and emotions, adding to audience engagement and involvement in the film. For instance, at times, audience members in a film theatre will spontaneously break into dance during a song sequence (see Figure 3.7 below). Such is the power of a song – it captures the interest of the audience, enhances the storyline and contributes to the overall audience involvement in the film's emotional journey.



Figure 3.7: Audience members dancing during a film screening

Source: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/how-reaction-videos-shed-light-on-society-collective-consciousness/article67329793.ece>

The songs in a film are not included merely for pomp and spectacle, rather, these song and dance sequences work with the film's narrative often serving as vehicles through which a character's mood and emotions are expressed. Dwyer (2006) supports this view and explains that for the most part, a direct function of song and dance sequences appear to be linked to the emotion of love. Song sequences also serve as hidden sites for expression and communication – where a character may express their hidden desires, emotional turmoil and fantasies (which is often seen in the case of female characters). Hindi film scholars (Ganti, 2012; Gopal and Moorti, 2008 and Garwood; 2006) also state that although song and dance tend to be dismissed as surplus in a Hindi film, they play a complex storytelling role, weaving together choreography, lyrics, singers and song cinematography. The inclusion of songs in Hindi films is thus an integral part of the narrative structure of a Hindi film.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has defined Hindi cinema and provided an overview its historical development, highlighting some connections to Indian society. A significant component of the chapter focused on understanding the key elements or features that are typical of Hindi films. Hindi cinema is a unique mix of melodrama comprising of a moral universe, song and dance sequences, love ('happy endings'), kinship and family bonds, distinctive visual style and character types. As Hindi cinema continues to evolve, due in large part to technological advancements, the essential elements that define a Hindi film continue to remain (for the most part) steadfast. The appeal of Hindi cinema is in its distinctive formulaic approach – the core features thus tend to remain constant despite changing economies, audiences and technologies. The next chapter discusses essential feminist film theories, aligned to Hindi cinema. Representation, and stereotypes are also discussed, with a focus on female characters in Hindi films.

CHAPTER FOUR

FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN HINDI CINEMA

Of the many influences on how we view men and women, media are the most pervasive and one of the most powerful. Woven throughout our daily lives, media insinuate their messages into our consciousness at every turn (Wood, 1994: 231).

4.1 Introduction

The chapter begins with an overview of western feminist film theory, as viewed through the lens of feminist waves. In doing so, the chapter highlights key concepts in the field of feminist media scholarship which are then linked to studies and related literature in Hindi cinema. Mulvey (1975), Tuchman (1978), Butler (1990) and Crenshaw (1991) provide a basis from which to explore the representation of women through a feminist lens. Following this, the chapter provides a critical examination of the intersection of feminist perspectives and Hindi cinema, highlighting Chatterji's (1998) concept of *absences* and *presences* in films. The chapter then proceeds to discuss key concepts related to the study of representation followed by a discussion on stereotypes, as applied to Hindi cinema.

4.2 Feminist Film Theory: An Historical Overview

Feminist film theory emerged in the 1970s with a critical focus on the representation of images and stereotypes of women in Hollywood films that mirrored broader social movements that challenged gendered structures (Kuhn and Westwell, 2020). Feminist film theory is the main framework, or umbrella term, that provides a critical lens from which to analyse and examine representations of women. Much of the early work in understanding female representations in film was inspired by the then growing second-wave feminism movement and developed by seminal feminist film theorists such as Mulvey (1975); Silverman (1983); de Lauretis (1987), Creed (1993) and Kaplan (2000). These scholars advocated for positive and diverse representations of women in Hollywood cinema and called for more women occupying central positions in the industry itself.

Feminist film theory, pioneered by the authors of such periodicals as *Screen* and *Camera Obscura Journal*, is a theoretical approach that draws on semiotics, Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Freeland, 1998). The sections below outline the development of feminist film theory in relation to the waves of feminism, starting with the second wave as this is when the media began to be closely viewed from a critical feminist perspective. The intention is not to offer an in-depth critique of each feminist wave, but rather, highlight key developments thereof to help establish a foundational reading of feminist film theory, which is then linked to Hindi cinema.

4.2.1 Second Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism was ignited in the United States in the early 1960s with Betty Friedan's ground-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in which she questioned the role of women in society after experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction and boredom with her own life as a stay-at-home mother and housewife. Friedan's book critiqued how the media at that time created a narrow definition of womanhood, presenting idealised images of women as wives and mothers (Kosut, 2012). Friedan's research was pivotal in starting important conversations around a woman's role in society as it brought about an awareness of dissatisfaction that many women were experiencing, critically viewed the concept of domesticity and a woman achieving fulfilment only as a wife and mother. Furthermore, it encouraged other researchers to question the representation of gender roles, mainly women, in the media.

Feminist film theory emerged during the 1970s with the purpose to analyse cinema as "a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity" (Smelik, 2016: 353). For instance, Johnston (1973: 22) claimed that "the language of cinema is inherently patriarchal" arguing that cinema is intrinsically inclined towards reinforcing and prioritising male viewpoints, agendas and perspectives. This is shaped and maintained through film narratives, structures, cinematic conventions and techniques that cast women to the sideline, marginalising their presence on screen. Additionally, feminist film theory claimed that cinema is not only a reflection of social relations, but also that a film is actively involved in the construction of meanings of sexuality and sexual differences (Smelik, 2016). Much of the discourse around feminist

film theory during this period was established through the dominant paradigm of psychoanalysis.

Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema

A key feminist film scholar in terms of psychoanalysis is Laura Mulvey whose oft-cited seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) has inspired much research and development in the field of gender and media studies. Mulvey's essay is referred to as the founding document of feminist film theory (Modleski, 2012). Mulvey used psychoanalytic theory to explain how gender roles (women's roles) in film are internalised by audiences which then impacts on how viewers experience cinema. Mulvey (1975: 11) stated that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" which emphasises a patriarchal societal structure that privileges males over females (even in terms of pleasure). Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze highlighted how cinema and other visual media tend to reflect and assert masculine desires, pleasures and fantasies.

She (1975: 11) explains that "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation". What this means, is that, female characters were often created to fulfil the desires and fantasies of male viewers, rather than being key components to a text's narrative. Rather than being active participants in a storyline, female characters are often cast to the sideline, or highlighted for her desirability (objectified). Furthermore, Mulvey's (1975) analysis also critiqued how female characters were often positioned in relation to male characters, with portrayals that existed to further the male narrative. Females were thus often reduced to objects of desire, seen as existing for visual pleasure and visual spectacles.

Adding to this, Smelik (2016: 354) explains that "there are three levels of the cinematic gaze – camera, character, and spectator – objectifying the female characters and turning her into a spectacle". This suggests that at one level the camera's gaze captures female characters in ways that emphasise their physical appearance which results in women being viewed as objects for visual pleasure. At another level,

characters in the film itself view female characters as spectacles and objects. Lastly, at a third level, the audience's (as spectator) gaze comes into play; a gaze that is motivated to view female characters as objects of desire. These three levels thus contribute to the spectacle of female characters on screen, which suggests that female characters exist for the primary purpose of invoking visual enjoyment for and in others, rather than as essential characters critical to the development of a film's narrative.

Such depictions result in women being viewed in largely stereotyped, narrow and restrictive roles. The male gaze, however, is not only about the looking – rather, it includes a critical aspect, that of, power dynamics. Through looking, male viewers shape and influence the representation of women. Voyeurism and the on-screen objectification of women is also connected to the idea of scopophilia, or the pleasure that comes from the very 'looking' itself. Citing American films from that era, Mulvey (1975) noted that women were presented as objects for male visual pleasure and that these presentations tended to support mainstream male standards and ideals. Mulvey (1975) thereby advocated for more varied female representation in film that subverted stereotypical portrayals. Her paper has served as the basis for feminist media scholars, whose works have branched into criticism of gender representation across different media platforms.

With reference to Hindi (Bollywood) films, the male gaze and the accompanying concepts of sexual fantasies, objectification of women and women as spectacle have been a central theme among film scholars. For example, Rane, Sudipta and Chowdary (2023) undertook a systematic study of the representation of women in Hindi films between 1950 and 1970 in order to mark the development of the male gaze. Through the study, they established that Hindi films produced between those years reinforced a limited and narrow definition of femininity, in which the women were presented primarily for the purpose of satisfying the pleasure and desires of the male spectator. The authors (2023: 259) posit that "the commercial success of Bollywood has long been tethered to the portrayal of masculinity, with the audience readily embracing and championing the archetypal hero". They (2023: 259) go on to argue that this longstanding relationship and the "prevailing (heterosexual) male gaze have played a significant role in normalising the exploration of female desire and sexuality through the lens of the male perspective." Rane, Sudipta and Chowdary (2023) thus offer

insight on the relationship between Hindi cinema's commercial success and the male gaze – which tends to portray female characters through a male lens.

Mistri and Dasgupta (2024) make a notable distinction in this regard by arguing that whilst there may be some deviations in the stereotypical depictions of women during this period, due in part to the rise of parallel cinema, the male gaze remained a primary focal point that reinforced traditional and dominant patriarchal values. Vagh (2021) adds another dynamic to this; that of the male gaze in relation to the representation of female desire and sexuality on screen. Vagh (2021) states that there is an “historical tendency to either dismiss female desires and sexuality as myths or trivialise them as punchlines, driven by male apprehension towards understanding or relinquishing control over these aspects”. Vagh (2021) thus suggests a wider social uneasiness in terms of the acknowledgement of female desire and sexuality in the Indian context that spills over to Hindi cinema.

Deb (2023: 118) identifies contributing factors to the sustained male gaze in Hindi cinema by stating that:

Indian society has historically been patriarchal, with gender roles and expectations deeply ingrained. The male gaze reflects the dominant societal view that positions women as objects of desire and passive subjects, meant to be looked at and admired. Filmmakers, often catering to popular tastes, have capitalised on this perspective to attract and entertain audiences.

The quotation above stresses Indian society's long history of patriarchal power, which prioritises male influence in terms of shaping various social structures, expectations and norms with regards to gender roles. Such expectations regarding gender roles are deeply ingrained in Indian society and concomitantly have led to the representation of patriarchal values and perspectives in Hindi cinema. These views are prone to dictate the assigned gender roles, behaviours and ideals for women and they are largely constraining and one-dimensional. Women are often presented as passive and ancillary figures, seen and never heard, and catalogued for male gratification.

Additionally, filmmakers play a role in sustaining such patriarchal narratives through the perpetuation of stereotypical and narrow female characterisations for the purpose of commercialisation. Furthermore, Deb (2023) pinpoints the male-dominated structure of Hindi cinema that has added to the sustaining of the male gaze. A paucity

of women filmmakers in Hindi cinema has resulted in a lack of diverse representations of women on screen, with Deb (2023: 119) stating that, “through limited representation behind the camera, it becomes a struggle to challenge and subvert traditional narratives and perspectives”. Additionally, Jose (2017) corroborates the presence of the male gaze in Hindi cinema in her analysis of Hindi cinema within a broader socio-cultural context. The study concludes that Hindi cinema not only reflects, but also perpetuates patriarchal norms which further establishes the dominance of a male gaze. Jose (2017: 56) argues that:

To add insult to injury, if a female character has a role to play in the movie, it is almost always narrated in close relation to that of a strong masculine figure. She is either the lover, the wife or the mother or daughter of a man, but a male character is shown as someone with many distinctions who doesn't require the presence of a member of the other sex to validate their existence.

Jose (2017) highlights an essential factor – that of limited agency and character construction ascribed to female characters from Hindi cinema. Jose (2017) then goes on to advocate for greater complexity and diversity of female representation in Hindi cinema, representative of a transforming and more realistic India. Linda (2017) offers an extended discussion of the ubiquitous dominance of the male gaze from Hindi cinema, and highlights its role with regard to constructing cultural and social viewpoints on women. Linda (2017) offers a detailed analysis of the dominant influence of the male gaze in Hindi cinema, and how this has influenced cultural and social understandings of women. Specifically, Linda (2017) uses Mulvey's (1975) psychoanalytic explanation to consider how women are framed as a spectacle for the male gaze and male pleasure in Hindi films.

Through a discussion of films such as *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995) Linda (2017) describes how female characters are largely positioned for the purpose of visual spectacle to support the male protagonists' narrative. Linda (2017) raises a critical concern of the male gaze in Hindi cinema – that it tends to normalise the objectification of women, thereby contributing to narrow and restrictive representations of women that share an alarming connection with real issues such as female inequality, femicide and gender-based violence in Indian society.

Symbolic Annihilation

Gaye Tuchman (1978) built on the work of George Gerbner through the concept of symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation describes the inadequate or inaccurate portrayal of a group, highlighting their lack of visibility and marginalisation in society. Tuchman (1978) examined how the mass media contributes to the symbolic annihilation of women by depicting them in limited roles, trivialising their experiences, and perpetuating stereotypes. Crothers and Lockhart (2002: 150), with reference to Tuchman's (1978) research, maintain that "by largely ignoring women or portraying them in stereotypical roles of victim and/or consumer, the mass media symbolically annihilate women". In her analysis, Tuchman noted that most media (for instance, advertisements, television, magazines and newspapers) depict women in primarily traditional, gendered roles if they are at all represented. Tuchman (1978: 48) states:

Relatively few women are portrayed there (mass media), although women are fifty-one percent of the population and are well over forty percent of the labour force. Those working women who are portrayed are condemned. Others are trivialised: they are symbolised as child-like adornments, who need to be protected or they are dismissed to the protective confines of the home. In sum, they are subject to symbolic annihilation.

Tuchman (1978) highlights an important aspect – that the mass media tend to show women in traditional roles, that is, as a housewife, mother, or as occupying office-type jobs (clerks, secretaries, typists and so on). Congruently, there are limited (if at all any) portrayals of women in positions of leadership, authority and responsibility. Tuchman (1978: 43) states that the underrepresentation of certain demographics is particularly pronounced in specific genres, such as children's animated series and primetime television dramas, which consistently feature a greater proportion of male characters. Additionally, women tend to be defined in relation to their connections with men which (worryingly) suggests that a woman's identity and being is linked to a man's – she is dependent on him and guided by him. Beltran (2018: 99) further states that Tuchman (1978) breaks down the concept of symbolic annihilation (in relation to her study of the representation of women) into three distinct dynamics: omission, trivialisation and condemnation. Omission in simple terms, refers to the absence of women in media representations and trivialisation refers to the ways in which women are portrayed in the media that may for example show lack of a character arc and significant contribution to the narrative structure. Condemnation relates to the ways in which

media representations of women include notions of punishment and penalty. In relation to this study these three distinctions provide a critical framework from which to understand how women are depicted in the selected Hindi films, examining not only the narrative structure of the films, but also how these reflect broader societal and cultural perspectives. The analysis can specifically inform the analysis of gender (women) representation and offer insight into more equitable depictions of women in the media.

Tuchman (1978) addresses how such limited representations to the domestic and relationship realms reinforce ideas around gender norms, roles and behaviours. In particular, she argues (1978: 45) that “television most approves those women who are presented in a sexual context or within a romantic or family role”. What this means is that the representation of women as being confined and defined by largely the domestic and relationship realms, perpetuates conventional gender norms, roles and behaviours. Tuchman (1978) noted that this marginalisation was evident in American soap operas, where female characters, although present, were typically portrayed as subordinate to their male counterparts in professional contexts, exemplified by female lawyers who support their male colleagues.

What makes these patterns particularly troubling for Tuchman (1978: 47) is that “girls exposed to ‘television women’ may hope to be homemakers when they are adults but not workers outside the home”. This highlights a critical point – that of the media’s role in influencing social and gender expectations. Tuchman (1978) expresses her concern regarding the influence of media in constructing societal expectations for women when she contends that stereotypical representations constrain women’s aspirations and self-image. Furthermore, she asserts that the media’s depictions are misaligned with economic realities, wherein women’s involvement in the labour force is crucial. Tuchman (1978: 55) advocated for changes in media portrayals of women that reflect diverse and changing realities of female roles. This leads to a discussion of third-wave feminism and the critical concept of intersectionality.

A number of studies have been conducted on the representation of women in Hindi cinema based on the concept of symbolic annihilation (that is, inadequate and inaccurate portrayal of women). For instance, Shah (2020) in her study of the representation of women and identity in Hindi cinema between 1990 and 2016, reveals

that women's identities tend to be marginalised in Hindi narratives. She (2020) makes a distinction between traditional and modern narratives, explaining that in a traditional Hindi film such *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Karan Johar, 2001) the female characters serve the purpose of upholding family responsibilities and duties, often at the expense of their own agency and identity.

Ayob (2014: 210) further corroborates this perspective in her analysis of the character Nandini from the same film by explaining that "[she] is subconsciously bound by her memory of her understanding of her role as a dutiful wife and because of this she struggles to voice her opinion. Her dilemma is further intensified by the fact that she is married to a man who insists on adherence to a strict patriarchal regime in the household in the name of culture". In her analysis, Ayob (2014) emphasises how Nandini's character is wedged between a struggle to meet traditional gender roles (within a patriarchal system) while trying to establish space for her own personal development and achievements.

On the other hand, Shah (2020) also claims that whilst there has been a shift in representing women outside the domain of family duty, what she terms as 'modern narratives'; these narratives however often result in a reconciliation of a female character's identity and independence with traditional expectations and values, which then tend to diminish any progressive potential in diverse female representations. In support of this claim, Shah (2020) cites the example of *English Vinglish* (Gauri Shinde, 2012), by drawing attention to how the female protagonist's journey for independence and individuality is located within a framework of reconciliation – specifically, expected family relationships.

Furthermore, Sarkar's (2012) study explores women-centric cinema (described as films with female protagonist(s) who steer the narrative structure) in India, and reveals that whilst Hindi cinema may have welcomed new narratives regarding women, these narratives often fail to provide sufficient and adequate narrative agency. In her analysis of key women-centric films such as *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) and *Bandit Queen* (Shekhar Kapoor, 1994) Sarkar (2012) establishes that whilst these films address issues around patriarchy (largely due to presenting women in non-traditional roles), these films also tend to locate female empowerment and emancipation within a framework of societal expectations and acceptance.

Drawing on the concept of symbolic annihilation, Sarkar (2012) offers an insightful critique of how Hindi films continue to marginalise female voices through superficial narratives about empowerment and female advancement. What is highlighted here is that whilst these films are driven by a female narrative, they tend to fall short in terms of providing authentic and accurate female representations. A more recent example of this is Meghna Gulzar's (2020) *Chhapaak* that tackles the serious issue of female acid attack in India. Whilst the film does make an attempt to highlight the experiences and challenges of female acid attack survivors, much of this is subverted through a prioritisation of the male character's role in 'saving' the female character. A crucial point is raised here, that Hindi films, even with female-driven narratives, tend to fail to portray women independent of male characters. Specifically, independence in terms of male validation, support and agency – which leads to diluted and token representations of an 'empowered' woman.

Related to this juxtaposition in representations of a 'traditional' and 'new' woman, Sengupta and Ganjoo (2021) offer insight into Hindi cinema's oscillation between tradition and modern female representations. They (2021) confirm that whilst Hindi cinema offers films that try to raise serious female issues and concerns, these films are inclined towards expected social and gender constructs of womanhood and femininity which result in pseudo-empowered portrayals of women on screen. In other words, they argue that Hindi cinema remains largely restrictive, inaccurate and inauthentic in its depictions of female experiences, struggles and concerns. Sengupta and Ganjoo (2021: 23) assert that:

Whilst some films try to question the prevailing constructs, they are still attached to basic fundamental constructs like marriage, staying connected to the roots, etc. and are about acceptability within a society that is led by consumerism leading to the new woman oscillating between traditional and modern.

Essentially, Sengupta and Ganjoo (2021) maintain that whilst some Hindi films attempt to challenge traditional gender roles, this is not the case for most Hindi films, which tend to remain connected to more traditional constructs such as marriage and societal expectations. An important point is highlighted here, that of the tension between the depictions of traditional and modern women in Hindi cinema which is, at times, inclined towards contradictory representations of women.

4.2.2 Third Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism, described as the period between 1990s and late 2000s, emerged largely due its seemingly universal approach to understanding ‘womanhood’ and lack of inclusivity in terms of diverse race, class and sexuality representations (Orr, 1997). As such, third-wave feminism focused on the experiences of women from different races and all aspects of society (not only white, middle-class women). In this wave, intersectionality was introduced and subsequently established as a cornerstone of feminist theory. Intersectionality explores the manner in which varied social identities such as gender, class, race and sexuality interact to form distinct experiences of not only privilege, but oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Gillis, Howie and Munford (2007) assert that third-wave feminism not only emphasised intersectionality, but also embraced new narratives regarding gender constructs and gender identities.

In relation to the study of cinema, intersectionality is an important lens from which to investigate the representations of women in film as such a perspective allows for more nuanced understandings of the portrayals of women on screen that is reflective of the layered oppressions and experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. For instance, Cunha and Gomes (2023) applied an intersectional framework to analyse the film *Aquarius*, and explored how the lead female character was constructed taking into consideration the dynamics of class, race and gender. Additionally, El Fellak and Ennam’s (2024: 633) recent study examined the “poetics and politics of representing women in Moroccan cinema” by using an intersectional framework – an approach that advocated for the need to transcend “hegemonic patriarchal structures in the Moroccan cinematic apparatus” to allow for more diverse and empowering experiences of women. With reference to Hindi cinema, Mehta and Adagale’s (2023) study examined the depictions of caste in Hindi films, focusing on Dalit¹¹ women and caste-based violence and discrimination. The study offered insight into the experiences of Dalit women, as explored through two Hindi films, as a marginalised and victimised group in India. Furthermore, Jacob (2021) examined the Hindi film *Margarita with A Straw* through an intersectional lens by exploring themes of disability, gender and class. Whilst an intersectional approach is not foregrounded in this study, it is

¹¹ The term ‘Dalit’ emerged in India from the Sanskrit word meaning ‘oppressed’ and is commonly used as synonyms for ‘untouchable’ and ‘outcaste’ when referring to individuals from this group (Sunder, 2015).

important to acknowledge intersectionality as an integral component of feminist film theory that continues to be used as an approach in cinema studies across the globe.

Concomitant with intersectionality, Judith Butler's (1990) performativity of gender theory provided another key conceptual lens for feminist film studies. Butler's (1990) premise – that the gendered is not an ascribed identification but a set of performed acts regulated by society's rules – has critical applicability to cinema, which is fuelled by the visualisation and repetition of the same acts. Performativity in Hindi cinema is not merely evident in the character arcs but in the song, dance, clothing, and speech; all as performative technologies of the gendered self. Judith Butler's (1990) performance of gender is thus a powerful model in the canon of feminist media studies, as it enables researchers to question the construction, enforcement, and reiterations of the gendered through repetitive cultural acts.

Within the context of Hindi cinema, specifically via the trope of the song and dance sequence, in particular the 'item song', this theoretical perspective opens up the way in which femininity is repeatedly performed in support of patriarchal power dynamics. Slatewala (2019: 8) describes the item song in Indian film as being:

a musical performance that is often shown as a part of the movie but most of the times without any importance to the plot of the movie. Although the origin of the term 'item number' is obscure it is likely that it derives its meaning from the objectification of women. This is because item in filmy Mumbai slang is used by Indian men to sexualise women. The classic meaning of item number refers to highly sexualised songs with racy imagery and suggestive lyrics.

Shah and Cory (2019: 85) explored gender performativity in Hindi film songs as performative acts that "actively shape feminine subjectivities within contemporary Indian society". Their study highlighted the importance of songs in Hindi films, as not merely for entertainment value, but also as critical cultural texts that influence societal perceptions, and also reflect these. The notion of performativity itself emphasises that through song and dance women not only enact gender roles, norms and identities, but also engage in a wider cultural debate about femininity, that is more reflective of changing gender roles and expected behaviours.

Furthermore, Choudhury and Sharma (2025) analysed how sexist item songs maintain popularity despite increasing feminist backlash. Such item songs were documented

by Choudhury and Sharma (2025) as imposing stereotyped gender roles, enforced by the male gaze as well as the financial imperatives. Additionally, Slatewala (2019) has critiqued the objectifying tendencies of India's film industry, Hindi cinema's item numbers, in presenting women objectified in all their items in the face of assertions of empowerment. Slatewala (2019: 50) suggests that "these item songs are now being used as tools to attract audiences and to increase the box-office collections. They attract male viewers as they show women dancing to please the men- or the male lead". Item songs, in this context, become ritualised cultural spectacles penalising women's bodies with visual excesses as well as sexual spectacles, imposing normative femininity whilst disguising sexualisation as empowerment.

While Butler's (1990) gender paradigm provides the potential for queer as well as non-normative performativities, the Hindi cinema industry has been sluggish to incorporate such representations. Queer bodies continue to be marginalised or reduced to caricaturised portrayals as seen in the films *Dostana* (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008) and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Karan Johar, 2003). Meher (2024: 224) contends that "Bollywood films routinely reduced queer identities to only their sexual orientation or gender expression, framing them as the butt of humour or object of erotic desire". Furthermore, Bhugra, Kalra and Ventriglio (2015) note that homosexual characterisations in Hindi films tend to be depicted as the objects of ridicule, comedic relief, or as deviant. Such representations were largely superficial, as well as heteronormative and framed within deep moral narratives. Thus, while performativities of genders in the aesthetic regime of Hindi cinema do exist, these are often constrained by economic mandates as well as moral agendas.

These (and other) studies reveal the manner in which Hindi cinema item songs and performances of genders become fertile grounds for exploring the performativity of genders. According to Butler (1990), the performativity of the genders is grounded in reiterated performance – performance, in the Indian context, which is choreographed for the purposes of maintaining heteronormativity, caste-based social hierarchy, and patriarchal ascendancy (c.f. Singh, 2023; Gupta, 2022 and Naidu, 2021). Accordingly, the inclusion of a performativist reading of the representation of women in Hindi cinema sheds light not only on the exhibition of femininity, but also upon the structural

limits and cultural mores that render women's performances at once legible as well as exploitable.

Absences and Presences

Another notable feminist lens through which to read the representation of women in Hindi cinema is Chatterji's (1998) concept of absences and presences. Feminist film theory has long challenged the authority of cinema in the creation of cultural norms by unveiling the visible and, more essentially the invisible. Chatterji (1998) emphasises that the representation of women takes place not only in overt character narratives but also in what is consistently omitted from the narrative frame. Chatterji (1998: 4) argues that feminist film theory begins with bringing into focus what mainstream film represses and naturalises and maintains that presences include:

(i) explicit ways in which women are portrayed in film, such as, in extreme polarities of good/bad, Black/White, mother/whore, etc.; (ii) kind of images they are invested with – such as the *sati savitri*¹² image for the wife, the glamour puss for the young westernised girl, sacrificing martyr for the widowed mother clothed in white, etc.; and (iii) kind of characters constructed in films, in terms of the narrative of the storyline of the film.

Absences, in contrast, include the structural exclusion of women's subjectivity and agency. Chatterji (1998: 5) goes on to argue that women in Hindi cinema are hardly ever seen reading the newspaper or exercising autonomy even when portraying professionals (such as a journalist or lawyer). Therefore, a film analysis as feminist scholar seeks to make visible to the amateur viewer, what for him or her is 'un-seeable'. Feminist analysis can thus offer one of the following interpretations of the film: (a) starting with the disclosure of the absences of the text, (b) the way it constructs the women, in or through either, or in combination, with the image, or the film's narrative structure. The present study on the representation of women in the selected Hindi films aims to do this – examining and critiquing both the absences and presences.

¹² The phrase *sati savitri* refers to two concepts – *sati* refers to the practice of self-immolation where a Hindu wife would sit on the funeral pyre of her husband and *savitri* is reference to a Hindu mythological princess who saved her husband from imminent death. In combination, the term *sati savitri* refers to a self-sacrificing and devoted wife.

Using the popular Hindi film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) as an example, Chatterji (1998) sheds light on the processes by which consumer culture, patriarchal enjoyment, and performative modernity work together to celebrate women's domestic confinement in the film. In the film, Chatterji (1998: 6) argues, the women are all dressed in western elegance and exposed to technology such as computers but they are ultimately directed towards motherhood and wifely duty. More recent examples of the concept of absences in relation to Hindi cinema include Upadhyay and Shankar's (2022) examination of the film *3 Idiots* (2009) where they conclude that although the lead female character Pia is projected as a bold and intelligent medical practitioner, especially when opposing her father, her screen presence as well as narrative impact are very minimal. Additionally, the character lacks a personal arc as Pia's choice of profession does not belong to her but rather to her father, which implies patriarchal control. Her decisions as well as emotive responses revolve mainly around the male lead. The study (Upadhyay and Shankar, 2022) validates that Hindi cinema tends to superficially show a professional female character and lacks giving her growth, depth as well as narrative agency.

Another study by Khadilkar, KhudaBukhsh and Mitchell (2022), documents the representation of women in Hindi cinema and addressed the issue of absences and presences in selected films. It identified women's presence in Hindi cinema primarily through the stereotypes of a subservient wife, a self-sacrificing mother or a romantic interest. The study references significant absences, especially the non-existence of complex, independent female characters, lack of representation of various identities through caste, class, as well as sexuality, and minimal presence of females in leadership roles behind the screen. Khadilkar, KhudaBukhsh and Mitchell (2022) go on to criticise the scarcity of female agency coupled with their underrepresentation thus reinforcing a patriarchal cinematic culture.

Singh and Kumari (2024) explored the concept of presences and absences with an analysis charting the portrayal of women in Hindi films. They note the lack of women over time in terms of multi-levelled and significant roles in Hindi films. The investigation conducted by Singh and Kumari (2024) find the common spheres that women are confined to, such as an ideal wife, dutiful daughter or a romantic secondary role. Notably, what Singh and Kumari (2024) discover is that little evolution has been

brought about in the portrayals of women in Hindi cinema, but it's an evolving one where fearful becomes fearless and passive becomes active. These portrayals, however, are anything but common occurrences.

Another important aspect highlighted in the study is the lingering absences of intersectional female identities in terms of, for example, caste and sexuality. The concept of absences and presences are thus critical in the present study of the representation of women in Hindi cinema to not only understand the ways in which women are portrayed (visible) but also identify potential absences (invisibilities). The aim is to examine where and how these absences and presences are shaped by gendered norms, behaviours and roles in the selected films.

4.2.3 Fourth Wave Feminism

The fourth feminist wave, breaking in early 2012, represents a landmark move for feminist praxis, being led mostly by digital activism, intersectionality, and call-out culture (Sternadori, 2019). The fourth wave's distinctive feature is an intersectional sensibility borrowed from Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which describes how gender oppression results from various, intersecting systems – race, caste, sexuality, disability, religion, and class. Earlier feminist talk (as discussed earlier in this chapter), however, has been subject to criticism for being dominated by the discourse of upper-class, cisgender, women's lives, fourth-wave feminism actively resists universalism. Rivers (2017: 24) maintains that:

Much like the third wave before it, fourth-wave feminism is fractured and complex, frequently reinforcing the advancement of the individual and centering the seductive notions of 'choice', 'empowerment', and 'agency'. These ideals are present even in feminist activism that seemingly undermines or challenges the idea of women – or perhaps more accurately some women – as able to make their own choices outside the constraints of an overtly patriarchal society.

In an Indian context, this points to the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in Hindi cinema. For example, Dalit's women's sharp marginalisation, as also the marginalisation of queers and trans people, Muslim women, and working-class women – a criticism far from fully adopted at the level of mainstream Hindi films. Wankhede's (2021) study, for example, confirms that Dalit characters are limited in Hindi cinema and are scarcely permitted to occupy supportive, romantic, or heroic

roles as commonly reserved for characters from other castes. Even their story arcs remain subject to subjectivity of caste rather than being granted narrative agency. The film form, Wankhede (2021) contends, brings to light a 'trust deficit' with regard to Dalit identity – celebrating caste neutrality only to cover up Brahmanical caste hegemony. Another study by Choudhary (2024) confirms the criticism regarding the failure of fourth-wave feminism in mainstream media (like Hindi cinema), specifically concerning an inability to democratise feminist outrage to include structurally oppressed identities such as transgender people.

Peroni and Rodak (2020: 4) contend that what distinguishes the fourth wave “is the global connection of this movement and its capacity for analytical, practical and symbolic elaboration, made possible thanks to the use of the web and, in particular, of social media by the new generations of women of all continents”. Compared to geographically and institutionally bounded preceding waves, the fourth wave represents one as transnational and mediated by digital avenues, facilitating feminists to mobilise, share stories, and bring about change at the systematic level in real-time. Through online avenues – like X, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube – feminist discourse has increasingly been made progressively available, immediate, and universal, and simultaneously created new tensions over representation, solidarity, and voice (Shiva and Nosrat Kharazmi, 2019). Although its origin remains mostly from the West, and specifically with the likes of #MeToo, its reach has extended far and wide, like India, where Hindi cinema has come to be an arena of feminist politics and criticism.

The #MeToo movement, originally imagined by Tarana Burke in 2006 “to allow Black girls and women to exchange support through an empathetic ear and to discuss through the histories of sexual abuse” (Boyd and McEwan, 2022: 3454). Burke created this empathetic movement as a part of making participants recover and consider themselves survivors and not victims. In India the movement erupted around the end of 2017 (Roy, 2018) specifically from the film and media industries. For example, actress Tanushree Dutta and Priyanka Bose, singer Sona Mohapatra and scriptwriter-director Vinta Nanda openly named perpetrators, breaking long-established patterns of silence and immunity from punishment from the trade (Roy, 2018).

This online moment catalysed wider discussion around misogyny, entitlement and the structural exclusion of women from masculine-dominated creative arenas. Nevertheless, the Indian #MeToo movement has also highlighted cracks into feminist politics. Critics like Roy (2018) contend the movement was led overwhelmingly by upper-caste, English-speaking women and erased the labour rights struggles of women from smaller sectors like domestic work or garment work. Chattopadhyay (2019) argues that the movement has allowed privileged, urban, English-speaking women to call for an end to workplace harassment, it has overwhelmingly ignored the systematised violence faced by Dalit, Adivasi and informal sector women. Chattopadhyay (2019, para 25) further comments that “the face of #MeToo – both India and globally – has been an urban, educated, articulate and privileged woman; experiences of marginalised women are notably absent”.

In addition, critics like Ni (2025) and Petersson-McIntyre (2021) criticised fourth-wave feminism for descending into commodity or popular feminism – where feminist principles are repurposed as marketable taglines devoid of radical substance. This comes at an especially urgent moment given this study, committed to the study of Hindi films, as the research explores the representation of women in Hindi cinema with emphasis on how these films frame and position women within their respective narratives. In the case of Bollywood (and Hindi cinema), representation of women in films becomes integral to feminist research and turns the spotlight on the potential of feminism as a commodity, as there remains questions, challenges and chronic issues around real-life equality for women. Fourth-wave feminism’s focus on individual expression must then be tempered by an emphasis on structural criticism and a more collaborative approach. Feminist analysis does also consider the representation of women in terms of stereotypes. The next section examines key concepts related to the representation studies, along with stereotypes within the context of Hindi cinema.

4.3 Representation: Female Stereotypes in Hindi Cinema

Representation in the media has been studied by many scholars. Films, as a media text, have been the continued subject of scholarly scrutiny in relation to for example, gender, migrant communities, race, class and sexuality (c.f. Heldman and Bargiachi, 2025; Elitas, 2024; McRobbie, 2020; Lacey, 2018; and Clover, 2015). These scholars contribute to understandings of representation, as a visual culture, and how this intersects with for example, digital media, migration, genre theory and globalisation in new and continuously evolving contexts. The sections below explore representation with regards to stereotypes. The discussion is located within the context of Hindi cinema, but draws on other significant works to establish academic rigour of the subject matter. The aim is to use the lens of representation theory, along with conceptual understandings of stereotypes to analyse the gendered (female) portrayals in the selected Hindi films.

4.3.1 Representation

Representation theory sheds light on how media depictions of people from different cultures and of different identities shape the ways in which people view themselves and others. Wheatley (2024: 1) adds to this by stating that “the theory underscores the role of media as powerful tools in constructing reality, shaping societal attitudes, and reinforcing or challenging stereotypes” (Wheatley, 2024: 1). Representation, then, is more than presenting reality; it is an ideologically complex interplay of power, culture, discourse, and interpretative audience (Kellner and Share, 2019). Beltran (2018: 97) maintains that representation refers to the “meanings associated with mediated images and narratives, such as television episodes, films, and music videos. We can also think more specifically of the politics of representation, or how representation matters for social groups and for society as a whole”. Fundamental to the complex of representation is Stuart Hall’s (1997) theory of representation, which has had a significant impact on the way academics view media, particularly film studies. Hall’s (1997) seminal work presented the encoding/decoding model, which argues that media texts, such as films, are not neutral reflections of society but socially constructed through complex workings involving the production, dissemination, and interpretation of meaning.

The representation of women in Hindi cinema presents a fertile ground to understand the interplay of for example, culture and gender. Through interrogating representation theory as it relates to film studies, the study engages with the building of, as well as contesting over, meaning. Initially, the discussion focuses on the way Hall's (1997) early ideas have recast scholarly perceptions of film texts as something greater than a mirror of society. Secondly, the discussion moves on to Hindi cinema, as a dynamic culture industry rich in symbolism as well as an interesting juxtaposition of the traditional and the new. Finally, the discussion narrows to the question of women's representation in Hindi cinema.

Such an inquiry is especially significant in an age dominated by visual imagery and sounds – the role of the media in shaping perceptions around culture, gender and other critical issues is all the more pronounced. This is reinforced by Kuznetsova (2022: 559) who emphasises that “cinema has historically become the first screen media reality, which, involving the viewer in its symbolic world, and having only the illusion of creating the present time, at the same time taught him the language of new aesthetic conventions.” What this points to, is cinema's critical and pioneering role in shaping the roots of visual media, and its historical ability to not only engage audiences but also shape (through the aesthetics of storytelling) the narrative structure of films. As films - have thus - become central texts in academic and public debates, understanding their construction and influence is vital for both cultural criticism and any potential social change.

Hall's (1997) representation theory has significantly altered the discourse on cultural studies by pointing out that representations are socially constructed, as opposed to naturally given. Hall (1997) argues on a double movement of encoding and decoding, such that meaning is not received passively by the viewer but interpreted on a basis of one's cultural experience as well as one's social positioning. This framework asserts that media producers encode meaning onto a text through the inclusion of ideologies, but that audiences decode differently, either agreeing or disagreeing with projected meanings. In film studies, the encoding-decoding model elaborates on the suggestion that the production of film is not just an artistic endeavour but one of political as well as cultural negotiation. Cloete (2017: 1) states that “cinema and film are embedded within culture and therefore a complex and interesting relationship exists between film,

culture, ideology and the audience. Film is regarded as art that is pervasive and powerful, while film stars are often seen as ‘cultural icons’”. What this means is that films are the product of the socio-cultural contexts from which they emanate, and as such, they carry inherent, imbedded messages about relations of power as well as about cultural norms. Also, Yosso and Garcia (2010) argue that films are created from socio-cultural standpoints that not always consider alternate and other realities, at least accurately. In that regard, film texts themselves become sites of both ideology as well as contestation (Mack, 2017).

In relation to media representation, Bordwell and Thompson (2024) offer significant and critical insight into the application of Hall’s (1997) theory, especially within the context of decoding meanings in films. Their work explores varied methodologies and frameworks for film analysis, from the narrative structure to understandings of aesthetic film elements (editing, lighting, and other visual elements). Such scholarly insight allows for further research in the field of cinema, providing academics with the tools and frameworks from which to examine the constructed nature of film representations, thereby emphasising their importance as ideological signifiers and cultural texts.

Every film has an inherent process of meaning production and the context in which a film has been produced and received critically shapes the emerging readings. For Hindi cinema, the multicultural environment from which films are produced, along with the distinct co-mingling of old (traditional) values with emerging values adds an additional layer of complexity into the process of representation. Hindi cinema, the largest film industry in India, represents a model illustration of how indigenous cultural conditions influence filmmaking portrayals. Hindi films are enriched with old traditions, distinctive visual styles, and dynamic storytelling that reflects both Indian (national) sensitivity and the constraints of transnationalisation (Sen, 2017).

Hindi films, as products, are distinct in that they fulfil diverse cultural roles (Ganti, 2013). Films, are thus not merely instruments of entertainment but also channels facilitating the negotiation of national identity, cultural values, and social norms. Filmmakers embed cultural symbolism and ideological content in their films through the use of key features of Hindi cinema (as discussed in Chapter Three of this study) such as song-and-dance sequences, elaborate sets and costumes and melodramatic

plots. Sarkar and Choudry (2025: 160) affirm this by stating that Hindi cinema's "aesthetics serves as the defining characteristic of Indian cinema, shaping its storytelling approach and cultural impact". These representations in Hindi cinema are thus developed through the interplay of modernity, myth, and culture.

Researching representations in Hindi films is critical to understanding how cinema, as a medium, serves as a carrier of multi-dimensional cultural signifiers. Adding to this view is Prasad (1998) who explains that whilst films may seem to have the primary objective of entertainment, they also function as ideological apparatuses, that uphold dominant ideology whether it is located in nationalist, traditional or contemporary tenets. Similarly, Dudrah (2012) and Roy (2012) have suggested that Hindi cinema constitutes an active site of cultural negotiation. Whereas Dudrah's (2012) studies articulate this process, in particular, with reference to the emergence of diasporic identity, with films going beyond the nation's borders but resonating with global audiences, Roy (2012) takes this process one step further with an investigation into Hindi cinema's balancing act between nationalist with cosmopolitan inclinations. In their corresponding approaches to criticism, it becomes clear that how cultural and social values are represented in Hindi cinema constitutes a contested site, where old narratives encounter global modernity.

Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee (2021) explain that as societal values change, along with changes in understandings of expected gender norms and behaviours, Hindi cinema has not only reflected some of these changes, but also contributed to discourse around such changes. For feminist film researchers, the concept of representation has been an important framework for analysing how women are represented on screen. Sibal (2018) maintains that Hindi cinema has long been the focus of feminist criticism for the ways in which their films represent women, particularly in terms of reinforced stereotypes, tropes and in marginalised and silenced characters. Irshad (2023) adds to the debate by writing that such representations are not neutral, in the sense that they are moulded by historically entrenched patriarchal norms and values that determine how a woman's identity, sexuality and femininity are displayed on screen.

Durham and Kellner (2012) contend that media, particularly film, has an influential role in constructing gender identities across the world. Devi and Balakrishnan (2025: 136)

advocate for a re-assessment of gender (with a focus on women) representation in film stating that “rejecting archaic stereotypes, exploring and embracing nuanced female characters is not only a step toward gender parity in film but also a reflection of the realities of contemporary India”. If looked at critically, Hindi films focused upon the woman allow for an investigation into sustained negotiation over femininity and its implications in the minds of viewers. The concept of encoding (Hall, 1997) charts how film directors use movement of the camera, narrative style, and music in constructing an impression of femininity (and females). Decoding, on the other hand, places into focus tensions along with contradictions underlying these portrayals. Whilst this study does not focus on audience reception and understanding of Hindi films, it does offer ‘decodings’ of the selected films in terms of how the lead female characters are presented. The section below discusses stereotypes as a lens from which to decode the portrayals of women in the selected films.

4.3.2 Stereotypes: Gendered Lens

There are a number of definitions of stereotypes, varying in whether they characterise stereotypes as untrue, view stereotypes as disagreeable in both their creation and their effects, or portray stereotypes as either universal or personal ideas (Schneider, 2005). Lippmann (1922) originally used the term stereotype to refer to the perceived traits of a social group, linking stereotypes to pictures in the head or mental reproductions of reality. Furthermore, stereotypes are more than just “beliefs about groups; they are also theories about how and why certain attributes go together” according to Hilton and von Hippel (1996: 240). They (*ibid*: 240) go on to add that “the nature and purpose of these theories play an important role in determining when stereotypes are applied and when they are likely to change”. Marx and Ko (2012: 160) further state that stereotypes are “both positive and negative beliefs or overgeneralisations about the attributes of a group and its members”, are typically “simple, overgeneralised, widely accepted, and often resistant to change” (Arendt, 2023: 464) and are “not always negative, not always false, not rigid or unchanging” (Perkins, 1979: 139).

According to Lippmann (1922) stereotypes are often inaccurate (or distorted) and simplified representations of social groups. In relation to media narratives, these stereotypes tend to serve certain ideological purposes. These representations,

typically based on rigid assumptions about race, gender, class, ethnicity, or sexuality, function to reduce complexity and reinforce power dynamics (Dyer, 1993; Pickering, 2001). As fixed and reductive images, they thus influence how societies perceive and interact with particular communities. In film and television, stereotypes offer narrative efficiency, but at great social cost – they work to naturalise social hierarchies and inequalities, making them appear as common sense (Hall, 1997).

When it comes to stereotypes that contain negatively valenced traits, these overgeneralisations are particularly troublesome (Arendt, 2023). Crucially, a social category's identification with characteristics like 'rapist' or 'thief' is probably connected to bias, or an aversion to this social category (Allport, 1954). Fundamentally, the idea of a stereotype is independent of the valence of the characteristics. Preconceptions based on relatively persistent personal traits, like gender, colour, or religion, offer a great deal of room for error, but many preconceptions are based on actual group differences, such as cultural prejudices about food preferences (Hilton and von Hippel, 1996).

In terms of representational practice, Talbot (2003: 471) explains that stereotyping "involves simplification, reduction, and naturalisation". Stereotyping also, according to Hall (1997: 258) "reduces, essentialises, naturalises and fixes 'difference'. . . facilitates the 'binding' or bonding together of all of 'Us' who are 'normal' into one 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of 'Them'". What this means is that stereotyping does not only simplify differences, but also builds partitions between groups, thereby confirming a sense of the norm for some individuals whilst marginalising (othering) others.

A crucial point made here is that of power and how stereotypes work to serve the interests of those in power. Dyer (1977: 3) offers insight into this by explaining:

The establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as 'normal') through social and stereotypes is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups . . . to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear (as it does appear to them) as 'natural' and 'inevitable' – and for everyone – and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony.

Dyer (1977) emphasises how stereotypes reinforce the worldviews of those in power, whilst marginalising others, thereby adding to the structural maintenance of social hierarchies. In his seminal work on the role of stereotypes, Dyer (1999) explains how stereotypes serve as an ordering process to help individuals and societies make sense of the social realities by reducing them into generalities and patterns. Dyer (1999) explains that while the process of ordering is inevitable and necessary for social functioning it becomes problematic when these categories are treated as absolute and unchangeable. Another problem raised with ordering is the link to power – and the notion that those in (and with more) power have greater ability to define and impose stereotypes. In relation to the representation of women in Hindi cinema, stereotypes order femininity into acceptable types, such as the dutiful wife and vamp (Kishore, 2014). It is important to analyse such representations in order to examine and critique existing frameworks for identifying depictions of female identities, sexualities and femininity.

An additional role is that of a shortcut function, in that stereotypes provide a quick and easily recognisable way to convey a great deal of socially loaded meaning. Dyer (1999: 139) cites the “dumb blonde” as an example explaining that the term immediately connotes not only hair colour and intelligence but also assumptions about gender roles, sexuality, and social status. A critical point here is that while appearing simple on the surface, stereotypes encode complex ideological frameworks, and in relation this study, ideological frameworks of femininity.

Stereotypes also function as a reference to the world in that they serve as a form of fictional character (type) that point outward to general social categories. In fictional texts, stereotypes may be defined as a subset of ‘types’ characterised by their overriding social task of affirming norms and relations of power (Lippmann, 1922; Dyer, 1999). Types are constituted from a small set of invariants, recognisable characteristics pointing toward more extensive human patterns, whilst stereotypes on the other hand, reflect societal beliefs. Conversely to types, characters in novelistic texts (such as films) are multifaceted, dynamic and developed over time. Western societies purport to value and prize individualism, so much of the ‘stories’ around social issues in texts tend to focus on the problem of the individual, rather than on systemic challenges (Barker and Jane, 2016). In Hindi films, women are predominantly

represented as types, for example, the obedient daughter, or vamp, whose characterisation does not tend to change across narratives (Sarvajith, 2023). In understanding these processes, one is positioned to recognise the ways in which representation of women in Hindi cinema relate to broader gender beliefs of society.

Another function of stereotypes is that of expression of values, where stereotypes may proclaim a consensus about social groups, but this consensus often comes from the stereotype itself rather than independent social agreement. Dyer (1999) states that they express the values and traditions of dominant groups, defining who belongs ('social types') and who does not ('stereotypes' as outsiders). The most important function is to maintain sharp boundaries between 'us' and 'them,' even where those boundaries are artificial or fluid (e.g., between men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals). In relations to this study, examining the stereotypes of women in selected films would shed light on dominant patriarchal values.

A last function, as identified by Dyer (1999: 167) is that of boundary maintenance and visibility and is seen as "the most important function of the stereotype". Stereotypes are largely employed to draw lines defining appropriate conduct and dividing people into distinct categories. They draw sharp lines even where none are drawn in reality, and more noticeably, around fluid or invisible social groups. For instance, unless an individual obtains special cultural markers, often it is hard to tell their group membership from appearance alone. While sharp lines are defined among some groups, like gender and race, many of the social groups, like sexuality, are ill-defined. This results in simplified comprehension of rich identities, like conceptualising homosexuality and heterosexuality as completely distinct but with equal experiences. This rigidity, for example, reinforces women as 'other' in patriarchal systems or sharply separating acceptable from deviant behaviours. Dyer's (1999) key point is that stereotypes are not inherently 'wrong' as a human cognitive tool – the real issue is who controls and defines them and whose interests they serve. They are powerful mechanisms of social ordering, but also potent instruments for enforcing dominant ideologies and excluding those marked as 'other'.

Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes have an impact on a variety of social groups. Early studies concentrated on racial and ethnic stereotypes, but as interest in discrimination against women grew in the 1970s and 1980s, studies on gender stereotypes expanded (Schneider, 2005). A focus of this research is on examining the existence of female stereotypes in the selected Hindi films. Talbot (2003: 472) maintains that:

Gender stereotypes are closely linked with and support gender ideologies. If we view them as ideological prescriptions for behaviour, then actual individuals have to respond to the stereotypical roles expected of them. Gender stereotypes linked to gender ideology reproduce naturalised gender differences. In doing so, they function to sustain hegemonic male dominance and female subordination.

Talbot (2003) makes a crucial point here, that of gender stereotypes functioning as ideological rules of behaviour that require individuals to conform to the roles that were assigned to them. In relation to the study of women in Hindi cinema, it is critical to understand the ways in which stereotypes function to reproduce 'naturalised' gender differences. In addition, it is equally important to explore how these differences work to potentially render female subordination unavoidable while concurrently asserting male agency, control and dominance. By examining such representations, this study aims to explore the ways in which Hindi cinema (through the selected films) perhaps maintains hegemonic male dominance, and also whether there are alternate representations of women.

Gender stereotypes are socially shared, common-sense assumptions regarding the way women and men should behave, appear, and interact with the world (Perry and Pauletti, 2011). They are not observations regarding reality nor behaviouristic accounts but normative ideologies shaping expectations and justifying inequalities (Dyer, 1993). As discussed earlier, from the perspective of cultural theory, stereotypes are tools of ideology: they simplify complexity, freeze difference, and naturalise orderings of society (Hall, 1997). In the media, they are embedded in narratives, character types, and visuals, working and playing an important part in the shaping of collective consciousness about gender.

How an individual perceives the different genders impacts how he/she may act regarding conformity with common gender expectations which have been largely

defined by gender stereotypes in the media (Ward and Grower, 2020). Gender expectations, definitions of masculinity and femininity, common stereotypes, and idealised representations of either gender have accordingly thus been defined by the media as well. The media represent gendered behaviour that “may not be appropriate or safe” (Ward and Grower, 2020: 177) but render them normative for either gender and provide expectations which have an effect on individuals who may or may not adhere to these notions and rules. Media research specialising in feminist studies has shown that the intersection of gender stereotypes with race, class, and sexuality generate multi-dimensional sites of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

In patriarchal nations, the ‘self-sacrificing mother’ type adheres to prototypes of feminine domesticity, but the ‘vamp’ is an exemplar of caution who bears the cost of breaking sexual prohibitions (Mulvey, 1975; Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2013). These are utilised to contain women within socially acceptable ideological confines. A point of investigation for this study is thus on uncovering the ways in which women are stereotyped in the selected Hindi films, and potentially depicted either through narrow and restricted or emerging and wider definitions of femininity. The Hindi cinema industry is a cultural site – and gender stereotypes is one area where meaning is circulated and maintained not only through the process of repetition, but also through the juxtaposition between ‘accepted’ and ‘deviant’ notions of femininity. The section below outlines the common (and enduring) stereotypes of women in Hindi cinema through a critical review of pertinent literature.

Hindi Cinema and Common Female Stereotypes

In Hindi cinema, the repeated representation of women via limited and codified roles signifies an intersection of mythological archetypes, colonial narratives of the past, and post-independence nation-building ideologies (Sarkar and Choudry, 2025). These representations – varying from the sacrificing mother to the immorally loose vamp – are not lone aesthetic designs but instruments of interpersonal regulation, upholding gender expectations whilst projecting prevailing assumptions about value as natural and unavoidable (Jha, 2021). As Tiwari (2024: 156) says, “from the early days, films drew inspiration from religion and mythology, presenting women as archetypes of virtues and values”. The history of numerous female stereotypes in Hindi cinema goes back to Hindu mythology, which offers a pool of symbolical figures who represent

idealised and transgressive femininities (Dwyer, 2014). Ganguly and Dutta (2020: 6) further add that Hindi cinema has a long history of depicting “women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families”. Some of the common recurrent stereotypes in Hindi films are identified and discussed in more detail below.

(a) Mother India

Dar (2024) asserts that the ‘Mother India’ figure is an iconic and ideology-rich stereotype from Hindi cinema. The ‘Mother India’ figure is derived from Hindu mythology and Indian nationalist rhetoric and identifies womanhood with that selfless mother who is its moral and spiritual incarnation. This is evidenced in Mehboob Khan’s (1957) iconic film *Mother India*, wherein actress Nargis, who portrayed the character of Radha, is the moral foundation of her community, sustaining poverty, exploitation, and child loss yet adhering firmly to moral values. As Devadas (2013: 222–223) suggests “Mehboob Khan’s much-celebrated iconic film *Mother India*, released in 1957, occupies a central location as the foundational text that epitomises female embodiment of Indian nationalism and patriotism”. In cinematic terms, this came to be a film heroine who endures extreme deprivation on behalf of family and, in figurative terms, that of the nation.

The ‘Mother India’ figure also borrows from religious imagery. Radha’s moral purity and stoicism resonate with that of the Hindu goddesses as both protector and nurturer, yet her role is denuded of divine agency, rendering her sacrifice a personal duty and not a cosmic decision. Gupta and Prakash (2021: 4859) confirms this by adding that with reference to Hindi cinema the mother figure is viewed from a religious perspective, as “the country [India] is connected with mother as goddess, who is Shakti and represents great strength. The role of mother in Hindi cinema is often portrayed as one who is strong face like *Mother India* (1957)”. In addition, Joshi (2022: 1) maintains that the mother figure “is represented culturally as the supreme form of feminine energy, as the Mother Goddess, as the caregiver and nurturer”. Adding to this is Viridi (2003: 116) who describes *Mother India* as “a paean to the sufferings of womanhood and motherhood”. This symbolic identification of woman with nation and Hindu mythology not only places the mother figure on a moral pedestal but also confines her within a paradigm of sacrifice and service.

More contemporary examples in Hindi cinema show that the ideal mother figure continues to be reproduced, with variations. For example, films such as *Karan Arjun* (see Figure 4.1 below) (Rakesh Roshan, 1995), *Paa* (R. Balki, 2009) and *English Vinglish* (Gauri Shinde, 2012) depict maternal characters whose dedication to their families is at the moral core of the films' narratives.



Figure 4.1: The sacrificing mother figure in *Karan Arjun* (1995)

Source: <https://cuttingshots.com/karan-arjun-rakesh-roshan-opens-up-on-rakhee-iconic-mere-bete-aaenge-dialogue-the-way-she-performed-and-said-those-lines/>

Habib (2017: 69) notes that in Hindi cinema, the ideal mother is a common figure and is depicted as “a great mother who is self-sacrificing, devoted and larger than life. This mother has no desires of her own nor does she have aspirations.” It could be argued then, that the ‘Mother India’ stereotype has a dual function of both empowerment and confinement. It places women in positions of moral authority and symbolic centrality, yet confines women to positions where self-sacrifice is the highest virtue. Doing this, it reinforces a gendered divide whereby women’s value lies in servitude to others, which is reflective of wider social expectations in patriarchal societies.

(b) Sita

The Sita stereotype in Hindi films, is one of the closest inheritances from Hindu mythology, in this case, from the *Ramayana*. In the epic, Sita is idealised as the perfect wife – chaste, submissive, and steadfastly loyal to her husband, Lord Rama. She willingly follows Lord Rama into exile, is abducted by Ravana, and subsequently,

passes through a trial by fire to establish her purity (Joshi, 2022). Her journey in the epic *Ramayana* has thus become a cultural prototype of feminine virtue in Hindi cinema. Female characters in Hindi cinema have also inherited specific cultural and social guidelines, or roles, which as Habib (2017: 69) observes is “inspired by ‘*Manusmriti*’ – an age old *Dharmashastra* written by Manu for followers of Hindu faith”, and that “a female actor is never allowed to transgress the scriptural paradigm that mediates a woman’s role as always in obedience and servitude to man, like Sita – the scriptural paradigm of femininity”. Women have somehow inherited specific social and cultural roles, which carry into the mainstream film industry and they end up being cast in similar roles.

Representations of the Sita figure in Hindi cinema, stress attributes of loyalty, purity, and silent acceptance of pain. Nandakumar (2011: 47) explains that “in the case of film stories, internalisation of epics creates epic based ideas and fantasies in the minds of people, which then enter the realm of popular culture, influencing character stereotypes in film”. In the film, for example, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), the female lead exemplifies these qualities, sacrificing her own wishes for what is assumed to be the greater good of family. In another example, the film *Babul* (Ravi Chopra, 2006), depicts the female lead as pious and embodying virtuous qualities because she does not challenge the male authority in her life, until male authorisation to re-marry is granted. This parallels Nandakumar’s (2011) observation that while Goddesses in mythological epics exact revenge from male demons, there still exists a feminine ideal attached to these portrayals, which she (2011: 49) explains as: “perhaps women’s way of associating with power, empowerment, opportunity and independence in a patriarchal, male dominated society”. Interestingly, she (2011: 49) goes on to note that:

this portrayal somehow never made it to popular Indian cinema. This is because, in a patriarchal society, while men are willing to worship the powerful, empowered Goddess, they probably feel greatly threatened if the same traits of power come from the real woman, and incline towards suppressing women even more. So, they start to draw from the softer prototypes in epics and myths and try to impose those traits on women, thereby preventing the true empowerment of women.

The above passage highlights how repressed female imagery from Hindi films differs from female empowerment in Hindu mythology. It suggests that strong female imagery from mythology would be celebrated through male eyes, yet women’s empowerment

from patriarchal societies would be received with fear, which manifests through resistance and keeps in check true female potential and power. In doing so, emphasis is placed on recurrent stereotypes, drawn from softer and more 'gentle' traditional 'traits' in Hindu mythology. The observation put forward here emphasises the need for a change in representation of women in Hindi cinema, that shifts from mythological ideals to more realistic portrayals reflective of complex and strong female characters that advocate for authentic female empowerment. In addition, Viridi (2003) states that while the Sita figure may ostensibly lift a woman's moral status, in actuality, it serves to inhibit female agency.

Sibal (2018) explains that post-independence in India, the representation of the Sita figure has been recurrent in many Hindi films along with notions of a woman's obedience, subservience and loyalty to her husband. The critical issue emphasised here is the way in which Hindi cinema "institutionalised patriarchal values" (Sibal, 2018: 2) and although some films may have attempted to criticise the practices of patriarchy, "they were implicitly patronised in the sense that the victim wife refuses to leave her husband's house despite severe physical and emotional violence by a rationale of leaving the marital house only at the time of her death" (Sibal, 2018: 2).

The Sita figure in Hindi cinema thus raises an important concern in that by elevating a woman's moral status and endurance of, particularly, domestic injustice resistance to patriarchal oppression is discouraged or even, unchallenged. The Sita figure persists in contemporary Hindi cinema, although reconfigured to more 'modern' contexts. In the film *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (see Figure 4.2 below) note Kumar and Eshika (2025) the Sita figure is presented through three female characters who serve as moral anchors for their families – they maintain harmony in the family, are submissive to male authority and focused on the needs of the household and family above any personal aspirations. The Sita metaphor is thus circulated within a more contemporary cinematic idiom and raises the concern of a prioritisation of patriarchal ideals over female representations that embody independent and empowered characteristics.



Figure 4.2: Sita imagery in *Hum Saath Saath Hain*

Source: <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/maiyya-yashoda-from-the-bollywood-classic-hum-saath-saath-hain-1999-starring-karishma-kapoor-s--149885493818577976/>

(c) The Dutiful Daughter/Sister

The dutiful sister and daughter characters in Hindi films are extensions of patriarchal family systems, where the identity of a woman is deeply linked to the maintenance of family honour. Dar (2024: 71) confirms this by adding that women in Hindi cinema “were often relegated to secondary roles, portrayed primarily as dutiful daughters, self-sacrificing mothers, or loyal wives”. Derived in part from Hindu epics and customary codes of behaviour, these depictions recur in character representations such as Draupadi¹³ from the *Mahabharata* – whose destiny is inextricably linked with the honour of the *Pandavas* – and the unyielding sister who maintains familial responsibility at personal expense (Nandakumar, 2011). With respect to women in Hindi cinema, Habib (2017: 69) adds that most women “ended up playing the role of a daughter, taking care of her siblings, helping the mother in the kitchen, and marrying the man of her father’s choice”. Female characters were largely defined in terms of their relationships with the leading male characters, and were rarely portrayed as individuals, with their own identities, aspirations and desires. Nandakumar (2011) also states that women in Hindi films have, in the past, been the bearer of family honour

¹³ In the *Mahabharata* (an ancient Indian epic) Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupada.

with her actions and morality directly correlating with the social position of the male kin.

Hindi films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) (Aditya Chopra, 1995), *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) and *Mohabbatein* (Aditya Chopra, 2000) featured daughter and sister figures who symbolise obedience, dutifulness, and moral integrity and who often sacrificed their personal satisfaction (and even life!) in order to uphold the family name. The iconic Simran character in DDLJ is portrayed as an obedient and respectful daughter, who is brought up with the understanding that despite being born in London, she is to remain rooted and loyal to her Indian culture and values. This loyalty translates to the acceptance of her father as the ultimate decision-maker of her life, from her education, marriage to the very manner in which she lives her life.

The famous line at the end of the film, “*Jaa Simran jaa, jee le apni zindagi*” (Go Simran, go and live your life), delivered by Simran’s father serves to reinforce the representations of patriarchal control and regulation in Hindi cinema (see Figure 4.3 below). This is because Simran only moves on with her life after receiving permission from her father – in doing so, Simran’s character upholds the metaphor of the ideal obedient daughter. Notably, Simran’s mother remains in the background – a silent observer who reminds her daughter of her filial obligation whilst also upholding the symbol of an ideal, loyal wife.



Figure 4.3: Simran, the dutiful daughter, in an emotionally-charged scene

Source: <https://www.indiatvnews.com/photos/entertainment-mogambo-khush-hua-to-ja-simran-jaa-remembering-amrish-puri-s-iconic-dialogues-on-death-anniversary-2023-01-12-838622>

In *Mohabbatein*, the character of Megha is problematic in that she is presented as a dutiful and obedient daughter, who is so unable to challenge her father's decision regarding her romantic interest, that in order to uphold the symbol of a dutiful daughter, she commits suicide. Her suicide serves as the backdrop for the film – it is romanticised and upheld as an example of filial duty. In the film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, Nisha is depicted as the ideal sister who sacrifices her love interest in order to marry her deceased sister's widower and take care of her new-born nephew. She does this with no outward objection, but with a resigned understanding that she is to uphold the honour of her family, and perform her duty as an obedient daughter and sister.

In a more contemporary example, the film *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania* (HSKD) (Shashank Khaitan, 2014) may depict the character of Kavya as an ostensibly liberal and forward-thinking woman (she works, does solo travel, drinks alcohol) but ultimately, she remains a dutiful daughter. She falls in love with the character Humpty and consummates their relationship but she will not marry him without her father's permission. She abandons Humpty and proceeds with her arranged marriage to uphold her duty as a daughter. The film reinforces the notion of the obedient daughter and re-emphasises a daughter's role as the bearer and custodian of family honour.

Virdi (2003: 42) makes a notable observation stating that “the citizen-subject’s relationship (such as the daughter and sister figures) with the nation is modelled on filial relationships and, by implication, the state is cast as the idealised parental authority figure. In effect, family and state power is fused”. Such depictions are thus also closely tied to the patriarchal belief in the communal nature of women’s sexualities and the notion that their regulation is the responsibility of male control. The stereotype of the daughter and sister is similar to that of the Mother India and Sita figures and like these figures borrows legitimacy from cultural mythology that is reinforced in some contemporary film narratives. It demonstrates the persistence of patriarchal value systems in Indian film, where even liberal-seeming stories tend to resort to historically gendered moral codes.

(d) The Ideal Wife

The devoted, dedicated or submissive wife figure is one of the earliest gender stereotypes in Hindi films, based on deep-seated patriarchal ideologies where the worth of a woman lies in serving, caring and supporting her husband (Devi and Balakrishnan, 2025). This notion of a self-sacrificing wife has been fortified in decades of Hindi films. In this regard Ganti (2004: 114) explains that in the early days of Hindi cinema “women were not willing to act due to the stigma attached to public performance. Acting, singing or dancing for an audience was associated with prostitutes and courtesans, and so were outside the boundaries of decent society”. Ganti (2004) makes an important observation here, that the socio-cultural context under which women began appearing on screen determined the roles provided to them; these roles were meant to fit into the narratives of their roles in day-to-day life (for example: supporting the family morals, being an indicator of the status of the family and community and so on) and the socio-cultural dynamics of women of the times as well.

While less directly based on Hindu epic heroes like the Mother India or Sita figures, the ideal wife stereotype still uses cultural concepts of the moral duty of a wife to be devoted and service-oriented toward the husband. Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004: 77) confirm this by stating that:

consistent with the cultural norms pertaining to the status of women in Indian society, the honour of the family (*izzat*) is closely linked to female behaviour. The need to preserve honour is expressed through elaborate, codified behaviour patterns that require the woman to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband.

This is evidenced in classic Hindi films such as *Gumrah* (B. R. Chopra, 1963), *Aap Ki Kasam* (J. Om Prakash, 1974) and *Abhimaan* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1973) (see Figure 4.4 below) where the image of the obedient wife who suffers, forgives infidelities, and subordinates her needs to those of her husband is reinforced. Even in stories where the wife rebels against the dominance of her husband, the conclusion usually re-establishes the patriarchal order, with the wife reasserting her loyalty (Gupta and Prakash, 2021).



Figure 4.4: Actress Jaya Bachchan epitomises the dutiful wife in *Abhimaan*

Source: <https://bollywoodoldgold.wordpress.com/2009/03/23/abhimaan/>

Hindi cinema, has however, demonstrated a punitive aspect to this stereotype. Women who do not submit to the ideal of the devoted wife – by for example, advocating for independence, requesting for a divorce, or valuing a career and challenging abuse, tend to be presented as selfish and are usually misappropriated blame for the destruction of the family unit or morals. In the Hindi film *Judaai* (Raj Kanwar, 1997), Kajal is portrayed as a greedy and avaricious wife, who persuades her husband to

remarry for financial gain. When she regrets doing so she, however, is allotted full blame for her husband's re-marriage whilst he assumes no responsibility for the decision. In *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (Karan Johar, 2006), for example, the character Riya Saran is tacitly appropriated blame for her husband's emotional infidelity. In this regard, the selfless and devoted wife is held as a measure of acceptable femininity – her self-abnegation is rebranded as moral virtue. In recent Hindi cinema, even, the stereotype remains, albeit under the pretext of romance. In *Ki & Ka* (R. Balki, 2016), the gender roles are reversed on the surface in that the husband does domestic work and the wife focuses on her career. In the end, though, the film ultimately confirms traditional concepts of matrimonial sacrifice and mutual dependence, re-affirming the core focus of marriage in a woman's life and as a critical part of her identity.

The devoted and submissive wife stereotype, as a kind of cultural script, thus works to normalise gender inequality in the private (family) sphere, making it seem emotionally rewarding and socially appealing. It confines the freedom of women to the household and cements the idea that a woman's greatest accomplishment is being at the service of her husband. A critical point to note is that this message tends to find repeated resonance in Hindi cinema with ostensibly limited recognition of alternate and changing realities.

(e) The Vamp and 'Item Girl'

The vamp and in more contemporary terminology, the 'item girl' are among the most recognisable and controversial stereotypes of females in Hindi cinema. They personify sexual independence, flamboyance, and social transgression – all those characteristics which, within the Hindi cinema moral context, tend to render them moral exceptions or dangerous examples. As Kishore (2014: 141) explains:

Bollywood cinema has exploited the vamp's character in almost every film, characterising them as mean, seductive, coquette and vixenish, characterless and promiscuous. Since the lead actresses in the early Bollywood cinema were mainly shown as a virtuous and morally upright people, the vamp characters fulfilled the requirement of the eroticised, fetishised and sexualised imagery for the male gaze.

Kishore (2014) makes an important observation, that Hindi cinema has traditionally depended on a binary representation of women through the twin images of the vamp and the 'pure' heroine. The vamp, young and sexually liberated, is the embodiment of

male passion but punished as a danger to society, while the chaste heroine is rewarded for her purity and sacrifice. Kishore (2014) highlights a crucial point; that of the effect of this binary representation in terms of upholding patriarchal dominance over the roles, behaviour and sexuality of women by framing independence as dangerous and servitude as ideal. Such stereotyped portrayals continue to colour depictions of women in implicit and pervasive forms.

Gokulsing and Dissanyake (2004: 77) emphasise that the vamp is “portrayed as a morally degraded person and has come to be associated with everything that is unwholesome about the west. And she is almost always punished for her unacceptable behaviour”. In addition, Sen (2005: 199) maintains that up until the 1970s, Hindi cinema was dependent on the vamp stereotype “to provide musical entertainment of a more sexually explicit nature . . . the heroine might sing and dance, but the vamp wore more revealing clothes, smoked, drank, and sang in bolder terms of sexual desire”. It is important to note that whilst Hindi cinema itself is a product of modern technology, the women in Hindi cinema who represent the ‘west’ and concomitantly ‘modernity’ are somehow, paradoxically, depicted as morally decadent and punished accordingly.

During the 1960s to 1980s, actors like Helen¹⁴ – known as the ‘dancing queen’ – (see Figure 4.5 below), Nadira, Aruna Irani, Shashikala and Bindu rose to fame as vamps, presenting an image of a wild, licentious, and unrestrained woman with a largely westernised perspective (Kabir, 2002). Their function in Hindi films was to entertain but not compromise the moral sensibilities of the heroine, who was to remain pure, modest, and true to her family. Banaji (2013: 95) argues that such inconsistency between vamp and heroine enabled male protagonists to “indulge in fantasies of modernity while returning to the safety of tradition”. Furthermore, Kishore (2014: 77) contends that “vamps were of mix heritage; the preference was for fair-skinned women, which captured the fancy of Indian males”. With regards to the representation of women in Hindi cinema, these authors highlight the notion that women are confined to certain roles, which is also reinforced through the binary of heroine, who represents traditionalism, and vamp, who is the seductress and morally loose character. Although

¹⁴ Helen, who was born as Helen Ann Richardson in Burma, enacted the role of the classic Hindi cinema vamp in over seven hundred films between 1960 and the late 1980s (Habib, 2017).

vamps may also represent sexual liberation and some agency, they ultimately preserve the naivety of the heroine through the male protagonists unconstrained exploration of fantasy without breaking tradition and cultural norms. Furthermore, a vamp's proclivity for a light skin complexion perpetuates unreal standards of femininity and beauty in the Indian context.



Figure 4.5: Helen, the ‘dancing queen’, in the movie *Sholay*

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0BiDNWNPYw>

Hindi cinema's moral structure often punishes such characters, either through plot downfall, exclusion from conjugal normalcy, or actual death. Helen's characters, for example, hardly ended up with the hero; they instead tended to vanish from the plot once the hero had reaffirmed himself with the heroine (Habib, 2017). Like the punitive measures meted out to other prominent female stereotypes (as already discussed) Hindi cinema tends to punish the vamp through its narrative structures. For example, in the 1978 film *Don* (Chandra Barot) the vamp (played by Helen) character is punished by death; and the vamp in *Maine Pyar Kiya* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1989) is denied a 'happy ending' and is relegated to narrative disappearance. These are but two examples which demonstrate the treatment of vamp characters throughout the 1960s, leading up to the 1990s.

The 1990s, however, saw the trend of the traditional vamp depiction in Hindi cinema dwindling and replaced by the 'item girl'. Gwynne and Anand (2022: 22) maintain that an item girl's existence in a Hindi film is to perform an item song, "a short musical performance with a central female figure who sings and dances for the implied male audience". The authors go on to explain that an 'item girl' is not a part of the narrative structure of a film, which Vasudev (2015: 66) explains is largely due to the item song being "inserted into the narrative of a film without any specific need in the plot".

Choudhury and Sharma (2025: 2) posit that the term 'item girl' came to be "exclusively known and addressed, from a dance number that Shilpa Shetty (a popular Indian actress) had performed" after which the trend of item songs and item girls (in the form of popular Indian actresses) began to rise to new heights. Chatterji (2013: 179) further adds that "the eventual demise of the vamp went hand in hand with the rise in audience acceptance of sexually explicit or titillating dance numbers performed by 'morally respected' heroines". In Hindi cinema today, item songs and item girls are often seen as necessary for a film's success (Habib, 2017). Examples of the item girl, who are sexualised through suggestive choreography and song lyrics, include actresses like Katrina Kaif in the song *Sheila Ki Jawani* (Farah Khan, *Tees Maar Khan*, 2010), Kareena Kapoor Khan's *Fevicol Se* (Arbaaz Khan, *Dabangg 2*, 2012) (see Figure 4.6) and Samantha's *Oo Antava* (Sukumar, *Pushpa: The Rise*, 2021) (see Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.6: Kareena Kapoor Khan performs *Fevicol Se*

Source: <https://sunjayik.wordpress.com/2013/05/13/bollywoods-item-songs-women/>



Figure 4.7: Samantha performs *Oo Antava*

Source: <https://www.kirakposter.com/2023/03/samantha-ruth-prabhu-stunning-stills.html>

The item girl is an updated version of the classic vamp stereotype – and while the item songs are marketed to sell a film and attract audiences to the movie theatre, the hypersexuality inherent in these songs reinforce certain female gender stereotypes. These include, for example, the viewing of the female body for the pleasure of the male gaze, the sexualisation of a woman for profit and titillation and the divorce of a female character from narrative agency. This corresponds with Mulvey's (1975) notion of the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of women, where women's bodies serve as a spectacle to the male gaze but are deprived of complete subjectivity.

Nair (2015) provides an in-depth analysis of the structure of item songs and observes that the dancing woman is essentially a powerless object, merely a body dissected by the camera. She (2015: 35) cites "the styling in terms of make-up and costumes", "the cinematic elements of lighting and shot-taking" and "the way the body is arranged with

respect to the camera and hence the eye of the audience” as examples of how the female body is presented as a spectacle for the male gaze and objectified. Nair (2015) goes on to argue that these elements work together to invite the male gaze, specifically to certain body parts typically considered desirable – such as the lips, belly, navel, breasts and legs, which are choreographed to imitate sexual movements. Exploring such representations of women in Hindi cinema is thus critical to understanding how stereotypes work to frame certain gendered norms and expectations, or perhaps, even subvert and challenge them.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has documented developments in feminist film theory through four feminist waves, focusing on the seminal works of western feminist scholars such as Mulvey (1975), Tuchman (1978), Butler (1990) and Crenshaw (1991). Each feminist wave was linked to the context of Hindi cinema, through a critical examination of related studies that speak to the representation of women in Hindi cinema. The concept of absences and presences (Chatterji, 1998) was also explored to provide a critical lens from which to investigate the ways in which women are visible and equally important, invisible, in Hindi cinema. The chapter then focused on key concepts of representation which served as a framework from which to critique gender stereotypes (female) in Hindi cinema. Common stereotypes prevalent in the history of Hindi cinema were identified and discussed in order to gain an understanding of the recurrent female stereotypes. The connection of feminist film theory with the Hindi cinema context serves as a foundation to further explore gender (female) stereotypes in the selected Hindi films for this study. Chapter Five outlines the methodological approach for the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

But cinema is its own language. And with it you can say so many things, because you've got the time and sequences. You've got dialogue. You've got music. You've got sound effects. You have so many tools. And you can express a feeling and a thought that can't be conveyed any other way (Lynch, 2007: 74)

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided a discussion and critique of feminist film scholarship through the feminist waves, linked to the context of Hindi cinema. The chapter also explored key concepts in representation with a focus on understanding gender (female) stereotypes in Hindi cinema. This chapter outlines the methodological approach used in the study. It describes the research design, textual analysis method, selection of films under analysis, data analysis process as well as validity, reliability and triangulation. In order to analyse the representation of female characters in the selected films, this study locates itself within the qualitative methodological framework and uses a textual analysis approach. The films under analysis have been purposively selected as the focus of this study is on the representation of female protagonists in films produced between 2010 and 2018 where actresses received an Indian National Film Award for their performance.

In order to gain deeper insight into the representation of women in Hindi cinema (National Film Awards 2010–2018), the study focuses on three key objectives: (i) to explore how the concept of symbolic annihilation applies to the representation of women in Hindi films; (ii) to understand the implications of such representations in terms of upholding and/or breaking female gender roles; and (iii) to explore the importance of reflecting new trends in gender relations on film, thus producing a platform on which to engage in debate and critique popular, traditional and stereotypical representations of women in Hindi films.

In addition, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the female characters in the films under analysis appear in film (the 'presences') and thus, how do they not appear in film (the 'absences')?
2. How do these representations reflect broader constructions of female gender roles?
3. How is the issue of women representation reflected in Hindi (National Award) films today in comparison to traditional and stereotypical representation of women in mainstream Hindi films?

5.2 Why a Qualitative Research Approach?

There is no one concise meaning and understanding of qualitative research (Long and Godfrey 2004: 182) but rather it can be seen as a perspective to a research study that covers a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches. Given its historical roots and the continuing developments in the field of qualitative research, one can understand why there is no one clear definition of the approach. Additionally, Strauss and Corbin (1998: 10–11) state that “qualitative research is confusing because it can mean different things to different people.” Towards understanding what qualitative research is about Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 3) explain:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Of crucial importance in the above definition is the emphasis on qualitative research as a practice – rather than a prescriptive set of guidelines. The definition also highlights that qualitative research essentially emerges from an interpretative paradigm and aims to bring about meaningful change. Equally important is the idea that the researcher is an *observer* in the world which is a core characteristic of most qualitative studies. Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 8) go on to explain that the term qualitative denotes an emphasis on the features of entities, along with the processes and meanings that are

not empirically assessed or quantified (if at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. The authors place emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality, the personal interaction between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational limitations that shape the inquiry. Additionally, qualitative researchers highlight the value-weighted characteristic of an inquiry. These researchers search for answers to questions about how social experience is created and attributed meaning.

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020: 10–11) broadly describe qualitative research as an approach that allows one to study, in detail, the experiences of people by using specific investigation methods that include “in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, content analysis, visual methods, and life histories or biographies.” It is vital to note however, that modest use of these research methods does not automatically make one a qualitative researcher. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020: 12) explain that a distinctive feature of qualitative research is that the approach allows the researcher to identify issues from the perspective of a researcher’s study participants and grasp the understandings and readings that they apportion to behaviour, events, or objects.

Incorporating elements from Denzin and Lincoln’s (2011) definition of qualitative research, Creswell and Poth (2018) put forward a definition that focuses on providing more emphasis on research design and approaches to inquiry. The definition they adopt states that (2018: 8):

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes.

The definition sees qualitative research as an approach that focuses on understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This approach involves the exploration and interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings and emphasis is placed on the context, process and the perspectives of participants. Additionally, Leavy (2020) explains that qualitative research involves the generation of meaning from robust investigation and learning about social

phenomenon; to unpack the meanings people attribute to events, situations; or objects or to develop an in-depth understanding about an element of social life.

Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research methods differ across disciplines and that it is important to engage in a systematic and rigorous process of data collection, in-depth analysis and interpretation in order to produce rich and meaningful insights. It can be argued that while Creswell (c.f. 1994, 2012, 2013 and 2014) has made significant contributions to qualitative research methodology, it is important to note that the field of qualitative research is vast and that various researchers may adopt slightly differing perspectives on definitions of qualitative research. Maxwell (2013: 4) for example, defines qualitative research as a “do-it-yourself” rather than an “off-the-shelf” process, which involves moving back and forth between the various design components and evaluating these components in relation to each other. Of significant importance here is the idea that the process does not begin from a fixed, established starting point following a rigid, prescribed sequence of steps. Rather, the qualitative research process is one which involves “interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (Maxwell, 2013: 4).

When speaking of the research design steps in a qualitative study, there tends to be varying perspectives (c.f. Flick, 2018; Creswell, 2016; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011), however the following are regarded as the common elements in some form or another:



Figure 5.1: Steps in Qualitative Research Design

Source: Author

This study adopts a similar understanding of the research design and views qualitative research as a dynamic interaction between the various design components as the researcher navigates between the steps. This study focuses on an analysis of films from a purely qualitative perspective – engaging in thick, or rich descriptions of the selected films from a perspective of understanding the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Furthermore, the purpose of a qualitative approach (using textual analysis) is to gain insights into the underlying messages, meanings and themes inherent in the selected films in relation to the representation of women. A qualitative approach allows for a close reading and analysis of the selected films, enabling the researcher to uncover the layered meanings and representations present in the films. Such an analysis allows the researcher to critically engage with each film in a detailed and in-depth manner, allowing for ‘thick’ descriptions.

In explaining qualitative research within the field of media studies, Berger (2016: 54) maintains that:

The term quality comes from the Latin word *qualitas*, which means “Of what kind?” Quality, when it comes to texts carried by one or more of the media, involves matters such as the text’s properties, degree of excellence, and distinguishing characteristics. There is an element of evaluation and judgment and taste connected to the term quality.

In contrast, Berger (2016: 54) goes on to explain that quantity “comes from the Latin word *quantitas* meaning ‘How great?’ or, for our (research) purposes, ‘How much?’ or ‘How many?’. When we think of quantitative research in the media and communication, we think of numbers, magnitude, and measurement.” A concern faced by quantitative researchers is that when the focus is on counting certain elements, and not all, there “may be the case that something that cannot be quantified is of great importance in one’s research” (Berger, 2016: 54). A qualitative approach is thus more suited to a study of this nature, allowing for a more detailed and deeper understanding of the representation of women in the selected Hindi films.

Additionally, a qualitative approach creates space for an exploration of a more layered contextual analysis, investigating how women are represented in the selected films in relation to, for example, gender norms and behaviours. With specific reference to research on gender, Van Zoonen (1994: 102) emphasises that “qualitative research is essential for exploring the nuanced ways in which gender is represented and understood in the media, capturing the subtleties that quantitative methods often overlook.” A qualitative analysis thus enables for the collection of rich descriptive data, which is essential to the study of films in that such an exploration provides critical insight in terms of identifying the themes related to gender (female) representations in the selected films. The next section details the textual analysis method used to interpret the films commencing with a discussion of what constitutes a ‘text’.

5.3 Textual Analysis

Under the umbrella term of textual analysis, a text refers to more than a written document, such as a book, newspaper or magazine. Rather, texts are viewed as “cultural artifacts and material documentary evidence that is used to make sense out of our lives” (Brennen, 2017: 204). Hall (1975: 17) reinforces this definition by stating that texts are “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense”.

What this means is that texts are used for meaning-making (understandings and interpretations). Media researchers explore a range of media texts such as books, music, films, advertisements, social media posts, podcasts and vlogs to understand the, often complex, relationship between culture, media and society. This relates to the interpretative framework outlined in Chapter Two of this study in that texts are linked to understandings of a socially constructed reality that emerge from specific cultural contexts. Atkinson and Coffey (2011) further expound this by stating that texts may be understood by exploring the ideas, words, issues, concepts and themes that are located in them (texts) from a particular cultural context.

A critical question to ask is why not refer to a book, as a book, or a film, as a film when conducting a textual analysis? McKee (2003: 4) suggests that the word ‘text’ has “post-structuralist implications for thinking about the production of meaning”. Specifically, McKee (2003: 12) explains that the word text:

implies a post-structuralist approach to culture – trying to work out how cultures make sense of the world, not so we can judge them against our own culture, and not to seek out deep truths across cultures, but to map out and try to understand the variety of different ways in which peoples can make sense of the world.

In relation to this study, McKee’s (2003) perspective of a text is important as it promotes for an analysis of films as cultural texts. Such an outlook creates room for understanding the representation of females in Hindi films in terms of how cultures project notions around gender roles, behaviours and norms. In advocating for non-judgement, McKee (2003) places emphasis on analysing films without pre-conceived or pre-conditioned ideas. Given the interpretative nature of textual analysis, this is a critical point as it encourages deeper understandings of gender representations without an imposition of the researcher’s own cultural beliefs and viewpoints. McKee (2003: 1) defines textual analysis as:

a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live.

McKee's (2003) understanding of textual analysis is relevant to this study in that it relates to exploring how gender (female) norms and roles are perpetuated (and perhaps challenged) in the selected Hindi films. A textual analysis also allows for a detailed examination of the female characters in the films under analysis, contributing to understandings of the construction of female representations in Indian society. Inclusion of the phrase 'data-gathering process' places emphasis on the need for an in-depth analysis, that includes areas such as plot, narrative structures, visual elements and character development, to examine how women are represented.

Smith (2017: 1955) asserts that McKee's (2003) approach to textual analysis "recognises the variety of ways that a text can be interpreted and utilised by those who view it. Invoking interpretive research, the focus is on how meaning is revealed and experienced, with an emphasis on sense-making, description, and detail". The quotation highlights the need for descriptive detail when undertaking a qualitative textual analysis, which in terms of this study, necessitates an analysis of visual and auditory elements in the films to understand how to contribute to understanding of female representations. As such, broader cultural and societal contexts are considered, specifically in terms of the perpetuation and challenge of traditional gender roles and norms. Textual analysis allows for the identification of patterns, or themes, of representation which then leads to a critical examination of the portrayal of women in Hindi films.

The evaluation of themes and patterns relates to Kracauer's¹⁵ (1952) understanding of 'qualitative content analysis' (a term coined by Kracauer himself) in that he argues for researchers to saturate and 'soak' themselves in the texts under analysis, which then lets the themes for analysis emerge from the texts themselves (Kuckartz, 2019). This research adopts Kracauer's qualitative approach by 'soaking in' and immersing oneself in the texts under investigation. The emergent patterns and themes are then explored through thematic analysis (discussed in section 5.6 of this chapter) which is also referred to as qualitative content analysis amongst some scholars (Kuckartz, 2019).

¹⁵ Refer to Kracauer's (1952) work in which introduces the concept of 'qualitative content analysis' as a research method.

McKee (2003: 63) maintains that although textual analysis is a method for researchers to gather information and make sense of and interpret the world around them, a critical issue remains that there is no one, single, 'correct' interpretation. He also (2003: 80) explains that "there isn't an infinite number of reasonable interpretations of any given text at a given time in a given place. When we produce an interpretation of a text, we have to put into a context." McKee (2003) thus advocates for a post-structuralist textual analysis approach that looks beyond a simple description of a text, but also takes into consideration various contexts. In particular, McKee (2003) states that interpretations are fluid and fixed, and may change depending on historical, political, social and other contexts. A post-structuralist approach, suggests McKee (2003) also recognises the researcher's personal context (cultural, political, social and so on) as an influence on how texts are interpreted and considers the socio-political context in which a media text is produced.

McKee (2003: 71) goes on to assert that "ultimately, in trying to understand processes of sense-making, we should be looking for evidence of reasonable interpretations of texts, which will be multiple, but are never completely arbitrary". In relation to this study, reasonable interpretations are grounded in critical frameworks (Chapters One and Two), theoretical underpinnings and literature (Chapters Three and Four) and textual evidence (Chapter Six). All of these (frameworks, literature, theoretical underpinnings) guide and inform the interpretation of the films under investigation allowing for a more robust and rigorous analysis. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) support such a perspective by explaining that irrespective of the type of textual analysis (for example: critical discourse, rhetoric, semiotic, narrative, genre, content, thematic and so on), qualitative researchers in general foreground the theoretical underpinnings of a text, which is viewed as essential to the process of interpretation. Chapter Three of this study discussed Hindi cinema as a cultural and media text, mapping its historical development before concluding with the key features of a Hindi film. Chapter Four of this study focused on key feminist film scholarship, representation in the media and the concept of stereotypes in relation to Hindi films. The section below discusses key aspects in support of textual analysis as a valid research method. The section below discusses key aspects in support of textual analysis as a valid research method.

5.4 In Defence of Textual Analysis

When conducting a textual analysis, researchers explore the meanings inherent in texts to understand issues around our social reality. Some scholars critique textual analysis as unworthy of rigorous academic scholarship,¹⁶ however, Brennen (2017: 204–205) makes an important note in the defense of a textual analysis approach by affirming that:

Qualitative researchers do not study texts to predict or control how individuals will react to messages but instead to understand how people use texts to make sense of their lives. Researchers consider texts rich with interpretation and meaning that may be assessed through many different types of qualitative analysis.

Brennen (2017) advocates for a qualitative textual analysis approach by reiterating the relationship between texts and their interpretations and meanings in broader society. In defense of the textual analysis approach, Fürsich (2009: 244–247) outlines five key factors: (1) text as possibility; (2) text as negotiation; (3) text as narrative; (4) text as mediated reality; and (5) text beyond content. Each of these factors are briefly discussed to establish the importance of textual analysis as a research method. With reference to text as possibility, Vande Berg, Gronbeck and Wenner (1998: 299) in Fürsich (2009: 244) argue that researchers should “start with the text and/or textualisations and see where they take them, rather than starting with some judgments and then searching out evidence to support them.” Text as possibility thus refers to starting an analysis from the text itself, and allowing for possible interpretations to emerge from the text and avoiding external factors that may result in narrowed readings of the text.

Text as negotiation explains that media texts are a battleground over meaning where texts serve as critical sites for social debates and representations. Media producers often echo social issues through media content thereby foregrounding them in the public domain (with media audiences). Fürsich (2009: 244) argues that the text should be looked at from beyond the media producers’ and audiences’ perspective and rather, examined as it “takes on a life of its own (often in ambiguities, unresolved dichotomies or contradictions) where the textual critic finds crucial insights.” Text as narrative

¹⁶ Refer to Philo (2007) for a critique on textual analysis, with a particular focus on critical discourse analysis. Philo (2007) calls for a research that explores mass communication in its totality, from production of texts to reception and understandings thereof.

describes the importance of understanding the narrative role of the media by engaging in textual analysis independent from the perspectives of media producers and audiences (Berkowitz, 2005). In other words, a textual analysis of this nature delves into understanding how representations echo contentious historic discourses, offering deeper insights into media meaning.

In defense of the textual analysis method, text as mediated reality emphasises the critical need to examine different versions of reality that exist in media texts. Media texts are a reflection of reality, but as Van Der Spuy (2008: 96) observes, they are also “carriers of dominant ideologies, thereby ‘reflecting’ that which is favourable to the dominant party in a society.” Textual analyses allow for understandings of mediated perceptions of reality and what Fürsich (2009: 247) describes as textual critique that offers in-depth analysis through a “close reading of texts (that) can help explain the hegemonic or emancipatory potential of a popular culture text. These insights give textual critics important arguments for their most important task – to argue for wider imaginary possibilities.” A final defense of the textual analysis method is text beyond content, that places emphasis on an understanding of the spectrum of interpretations inherent in a media text. Fürsich (2009: 247) asserts:

This goes beyond the question of how a specific audience member may read/misread or analyse/appropriate media messages. It goes to the larger question of which life stories or life plans, and which gender, class and ethnic identities the current cultural sensibilities (as expressed in this text) encourage and which ones they exclude.

In examining dynamics such as gender, class and ethnic identities, a textual analysis approach thus allows for a close reading of media texts that move beyond individual audience understandings to explore wider societal implications. In relation to this study, such an analysis is crucial as it highlights not only the *presences* but also *absences* in terms of female representations in Hindi cinema. The section below discusses how thematic analysis, as a research process, is used to derive the themes and patterns from the films under analysis.

5.5 The Process of Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006: 77) outlined the use of thematic analysis within the field of psychology and their inquiry stemmed from an understanding of thematic analysis as being “a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method within and beyond psychology.” Braun and Clarke (2006: 79), whose work on thematic analysis has been often cited, go on to define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” and have since then included reflexivity as part of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022: 4) describe reflexive thematic analysis as “a theoretically flexible method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset.” Key to an understanding of reflexive thematic analysis is the researcher’s own position and awareness in the research process. It involves a critical interrogation of a researcher’s own practices, in terms of what is done, and how it is done, coupled with an acknowledgement of the influence of this on the research itself.

Braun and Clarke’s (2022) widely acknowledged process for reflexive thematic analysis includes six steps, or phases, which are: (1) familiarisation of the data; (2) initial coding; (3) initial theme identification; (4) review of themes; (5) finalisation of themes; and (6) the write-up. This is outlined in Figure 5.2 below.

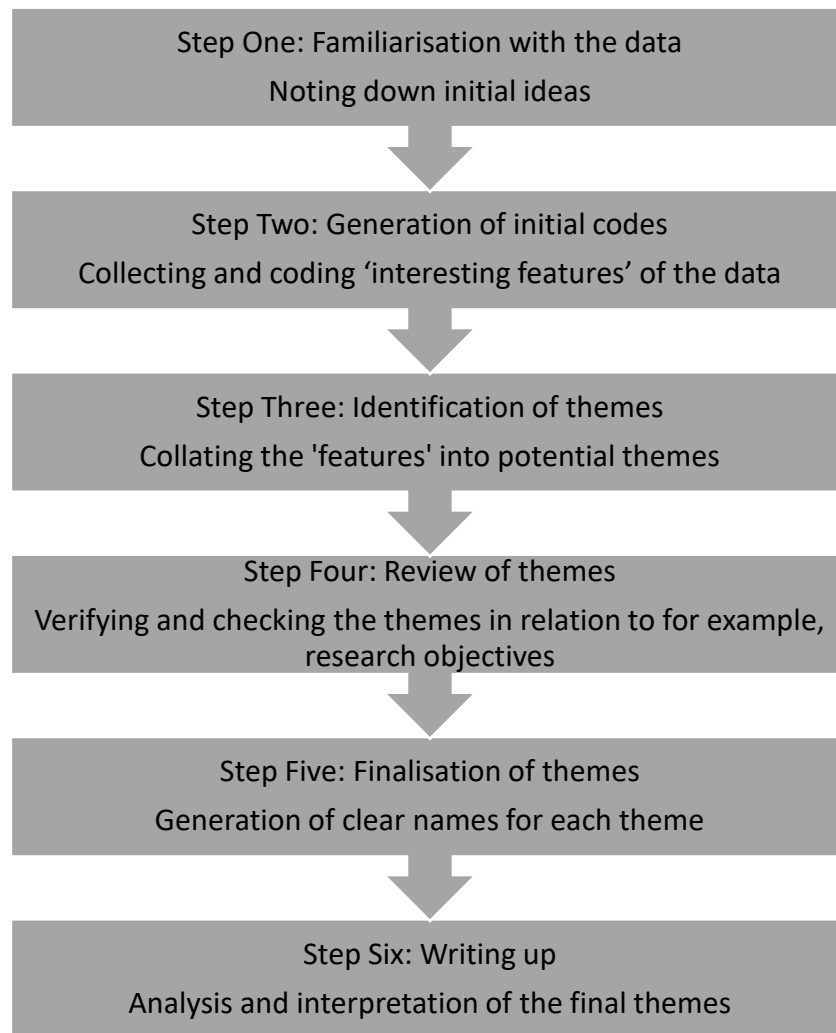


Figure 5.2: Steps in Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Source (adapted from): Braun and Clarke (2022: 87)

In relation to film analysis, the six steps are 'applied' by firstly, familiarisation of the data by multiple viewings of the films – a 'long soak' – to understand underlying themes and patterns in relation to the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Secondly, the generation of initial codes by focusing on key elements or features (for example: dialogue, visual images, actions, behaviours, costumes, etc.) that relate to understanding gender (women) representation in Hindi cinema. This is followed by thirdly, identifying themes and patterns that relate to the portrayal of women in the selected films. Fourthly, the initial codes and themes are reviewed and finalised to ensure alignment with the research objectives. In the fifth step, the themes are clarified and finalised in the context of the research aim and objectives. The final (sixth) step involves the critical analysis and interpretation of each theme. Reflexive thematic analysis is thus an appropriate process for the analysis of the selected films as

patterns and themes are identified to explore the representation of women in Hindi cinema.

The second step in the thematic analysis process of identifying potential themes and patterns is aligned to the concept of inductive data analysis. Delve and Limpaecher (2020: para. 7 line 1) explain that “inductive thematic analysis is a data-driven exploration where the dataset is the starting point for engaging with meaning. It allows themes to surface naturally.” In comparison, a deductive thematic analysis is more theory-driven, in that the codes/themes tend to be pre-defined and are guided by theoretical frameworks and concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 57). This study adopts an inductive thematic analysis approach as it enables for flexibility in terms of identifying themes and patterns in the data (films). As such, there is the potential for new (and even unexpected) insight to be revealed.

It is important to note that Braun and Clarke’s (2022) ‘six steps of thematic analysis’ is a non-linear process that can be fluid and flexible. The very nature of the process itself is iterative, in that researchers have the opportunity to revise and review themes and patterns emerging from the data. With the inclusion of reflexivity, the iterative process is further emphasised as the researcher is encouraged to reflect on personal biases, subjectivity and experiences during the analysis. The process has been adopted in this study as it provides valuable guidance in terms of how to approach the search for patterns and themes in the films under analysis.

5.6 Population and Sampling

The sections below outline the population and sampling processes for the study.

5.6.1 Population

Population refers to a group, or set, of all units on which the research findings are based (Shukla, 2020). In relation to this study, the target population includes all Hindi films that have received Indian national film awards. Bezuidenhout, Davis and du Plooy-Cilliers (2021: 103) recommend that an “accessible population” be used in order to minimise time, human resources and cost implications. The population for this study has therefore been demarcated in terms of the study’s aim, which is a focus on the representation of women in Hindi cinema.

5.6.2 Purposive Sampling

Sampling is an important step in the research process as it refers to the collection of data from an appropriate population. There are two broad categories of sampling, namely probability and non-probability techniques. Popular probability sampling methods include random sampling, stratified sampling, cluster sampling and systematic sampling (Shorten and Moorley, 2014). Non-probability sampling methods, however, include for example, purposive sampling (also known as judgmental), snowball sampling, convenience sampling and quota sampling (Elfil and Negida, 2017). Given the nature of this study, purposive sampling is used to select the films under investigation. In purposive sampling, the researcher relies on his/her judgment rather than using a random selection approach in order to meet specific criteria relevant to the research focus. The focus of this study is on the representation of women in Indian National award-winning Hindi films for the category 'Best Actress' during the period 2010–2018.

The Indian National Film Awards, which is also more commonly referred to as the National Film Awards, is regarded as one of the most prestigious film awards in India. The National Film Awards was established in 1954 and are presented annually by the Government of India's Directorate of Film Festivals to acknowledge outstanding contributions to Indian cinema (Directorate of Film Festivals, n.d). The awards cover Indian films made in a range of languages including Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Bengali, Punjabi and many more. The National Film Awards recognises excellence in the fields of direction, acting performance, music, cinematography, editing and other technical categories. A panel of distinguished professionals from the fields of cinema, other allied arts and humanities serve as jury members who evaluate the films before collectively deciding on a winner (Directorate of Film Festivals, n.d). Amruta (2023: para. 6 lines 3–5) explains that the National Film Awards seek to encourage the development of films for not only artistic and technical excellence but also social relevance that promote unity and integrity of the Indian nation.

A total of ten awards were given in the category ‘Best Actress’ during the period 2010–2018, of which there are five Hindi language films (Bollywood). The film *Liar’s Dice* (2013) does not form a part of this analysis as the film is seen as an ‘Indie’ film and did not have a regular theatrical release across India. The four films listed below are thus analysed in the study: Table 5.1 below provides a description of each film under analysis.

Table 5.1: Selection of Films for Analysis

Year	Film	Best Actress	Brief Synopsis
2011	<i>The Dirty Picture</i>	Vidya Balan ¹⁷	<i>The Dirty Picture</i> tells the story of Reshma, a struggling actress who enters the male-dominated world of cinema and becomes one of the most successful actresses of the early eighties. The film explores her transformation from a young, naïve village girl into a shrewd, unapologetic leading actress.
2013	<i>Queen</i>	Kangana Ranaut	<i>Queen</i> is the story of Rani Mehra, a young Delhi woman whose marriage is called off by her fiancé on the eve of her wedding. Having had most of her life decided for her until this point, Rani makes the bold decision of going on her honeymoon alone. What follows is her journey across parts of Europe, where she makes new friends, enjoys new experiences and gains new-found independence.
2015	<i>Tanu Weds Manu Returns</i>	Kangana Ranaut	<i>Tanu Weds Manu Returns</i> is the sequel to the 2011 film <i>Tanu Weds Manu</i> . The story focuses on the crippled marriage between Tanu (a free-spirited, rebellious woman) and Manu (a staid, quiet doctor). Deciding he has had enough of his tempestuous marriage with Tanu, Manu opts for a second marriage to a woman who looks just like his first wife.
2017	<i>Mom</i>	Sridevi	Biology teacher Devki’s life is turned upside down when her step-daughter is horrifically assaulted and raped by four men in a moving car. Devki loses hope in the Indian judicial system after the witnesses and forensic reports are manipulated by one of the accused. She seeks the services of a private detective to exact her revenge.

The discussion now moves to a brief understanding of ethical considerations when undertaking a qualitative textual analysis.

¹⁷ Vidya Balan, Kangana Ranaut and the late Sridevi are critically acclaimed actresses who are lauded for appearing in women-oriented films and contributing to breaking the myth that only Bollywood ‘heroes’ can drive and sell a film. These actresses have proven that in Bollywood (a largely patriarchal film industry) actresses are not only capable of taking the lead on a film project but are also able to achieve both box-office success and critical acclaim. In recent years, Ranaut has emerged as a vocal critic of the Bollywood industry which she claims functions strongly on nepotism at the expenditure of new, raw talent. No stranger to controversies, Ranaut has spoken up against the alleged abuse of power by the dominant Bollywood film families, bullying, intimidation, and mafioso behaviour. Using social media to reach the public, Ranaut continues to accuse directors and producers of favouritism and her ‘name and shame’ practice has often left the Bollywood industry paralysed with shock (and perhaps, fear).

5.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research typically involves considerations and principles that guide the responsible practice and conduct of a research study. This is especially critical for studies involving human participants, where ethical considerations are viewed as “sets of moral and ethical principles respected to protect participants and respondents in research” (Cacciattolo, 2015: 57). In terms of a qualitative textual analysis, such as this study, Brennen (2017: 218) explains that there is no one right interpretation of a text and argues that “while it is not a free-for-all, there are certainly interpretations that are more reasonable than others”. As highlighted earlier in this chapter (and in Chapter Two of this study), a textual analysis of such a nature is interpretative and there are multiple meanings that can be derived from any given text.

That said, textual analysts frame their interpretations within specific contexts, such as the theoretical, social, cultural, personal and so on in order to make sense of texts and understand how texts are located within a broader (or dominant) perspective. In terms of understanding the representation of women in Hindi cinema, it is important to be considerate of the relationship between the texts (films) and cultural (gender) context. Brennen (2017: 219) supports such mindfulness in a qualitative textual analysis by explaining that “it is from a consideration of the cultural context that researchers construct their most likely interpretations of the relationships between a text and the larger society”. It is thus important for researchers to firstly be aware of any personal biases and subjectivities, and secondly, be open to discovering potential new and unknown perspectives, that may not be what was expected. The section below addresses issues around validity and trustworthiness in relation to the study.

5.8 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability in research relate to understanding how the quality of a research undertaking will be ensured. Whilst there are differences in terms of how principles of validity and reliability are applied in qualitative and quantitative studies, the emphasis of these constructs to the overall rigour and value of any research is universally understood. In relation to validity and reliability, Nha (2021: 1) states that it is “not always easy to apply these two quality criteria in qualitative research, which follows constructivism and aims to construct an understanding of reality.” Kamberelis and

Dimitriadis (2005: 17) emphasise this view by maintaining that instead of proving a hypothesis, a qualitative study typically aims to try and “understand, interpret and explain complex and highly textualised social phenomena.” As such Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) influential understanding of validity in relation to qualitative research, specifically trustworthiness and its related criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability are thus applicable to a study of this nature. Table 5.2 below describes each criterion in relation to the current study.

Table 5.2: Application of Trustworthiness Criteria to the Study

Criterion	Description	Application to Study
Credibility	Credibility in research relates to questions around congruency of the findings with respect to reality and establishing the reader’s belief in terms of the findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2020: 144).	One way to ensure credibility is through triangulation (further discussed in section 5.8.1) – an approach this study adopts.
Dependability	Nieuwenhuis (2020: 145) states that “dependability is demonstrated through the research design and its implementation; the operational detail of data-gathering and the reflective appraisal of the study.”	This is achieved through guidance and review from experts in the field (academic scholars and supervisors) who serve as external evaluators on the dependability of the study. Additionally, the reflexive thematic analysis process is used to provide an understanding of the data-gathering (patterns and themes) approach.
Confirmability	Confirmability is described as “getting as close to objective reality as qualitative research can get” (Stahl and King, 2020: 28) and that which takes into account “researcher bias, motivation or interest” (Nieuwenhuis, 2020: 145).	Confirmability is achieved through triangulation and the reflexive thematic analysis approach adopted in this study, which ensures ‘reflexive auditing’ – an acknowledgement of the researcher in the interpretative analysis process.
Transferability	Transferability refers to how replicable a study is, which is somewhat tricky in qualitative studies “given that by design qualitative research does not (cannot) aim for replicability. Yet, qualitative researchers maintain that patterns and descriptions from one context may be applicable to another” (Stahl and King, 2020: 27).	Detailed, ‘thick’ descriptions are provided so as to allow for readers to evaluate the applicability of the study to other contexts.

The concept of reliability examines the consistency of a research instrument, specifically, “the extent to which a measuring instrument is repeatable and consistent” (Pieterse and Maree, 2020: 260). Reliability is widely used in most (if not all) quantitative studies to “test” the consistency and replicability of research instruments. The concept of reliability is rejected in qualitative research in favour of the epistemological position of a study by Silverman (2020: 283) who states that:

Positivist notions of reliability assume an underlying universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated. This assumption of unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretive assumption that the world is always changing and the concept of replication is itself problematic.

The above quotation highlights the differences in how qualitative and quantitative studies approach reliability (and replication). Qualitative studies focus on interpreting texts and making sense of a social phenomenon, with the fundamental understanding that there are multiple meanings influenced by various contexts and factors. As such, the notion of replicability (in its true sense) is tricky in a qualitative study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016: 221) support this view by explaining that “qualitative research is more concerned with understanding people’s experience, so it does not rely much on the number of people experiencing the same phenomenon to make it ‘more reliable’.” In response to the ‘tricky’ application of reliability to qualitative studies, Nha (2021: 5) states some scholars suggest the “use of dependability instead of reliability”. This study adopts the same understanding of reliability – that is – the application of reliability is not to test replicability and consistency, but rather to ensure dependability (as discussed in Table 5.2). Additionally, to ensure the sound academic rigour of a qualitative study, the triangulation method is often used (which is detailed below).

5.8.1 Triangulation

There are four basic types of triangulation as introduced and identified by Denzin (1978):

1. methodological (use of multiple methods when conducting a study);
2. data (using multiple data sources when conducting a study);
3. theory (use of multiple theoretical and conceptual perspectives for analysis and interpretation); and

4. investigator (using more than one researcher/observer/interviewer when conducting a study).

Given the nature of this study, theory triangulation is most applicable as it concerns the use of different theories to guide the research and examine a phenomenon from varied perspectives. This study uses an interpretive framework, rooted in social constructionism, to explore the representation of females in selected Hindi films. The theoretical and conceptual perspectives include gender performativity, representation and feminist media, with a focus on film studies. Creswell and Poth (2018: 340–343) describe nine validation strategies to be used in research and recommend the use of at least two of these to verify the findings for either a qualitative or quantitative study. These validation strategies are grouped into three categories: the researcher's lens, the participant's lens, and the reader's or reviewer's lens.

(a) Researcher's Lens

1. *Corroborating evidence through triangulation* – this relates to the corroboration of evidence from multiple sources to understand a phenomenon or situation.
2. *Discovering negative case analysis or disconfirming evidence* – here, the researcher would work on refining hypothesis as the study progresses.
3. *Clarifying researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity* – the researcher acknowledges any personal biases and subjectivities before undertaking the study.

(b) Participant's Lens

1. *Member checking or seeking participant feedback* – in this regard, the researcher seeks feedback from the study's participants on the findings to evaluate for accuracy and credibility.
2. *Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field* – this relates to establishing a bond with the participants and other relevant stakeholders, with the aim to learn more about the study context and eliminate any possible distortions or misinformation.
3. *Collaborating with participants* – collaboration refers to the ongoing participation of the participants in the research (not only during data collection).

(c) Reader's or Reviewer's Lens

1. *Enabling external audits* – in this case, the researcher engages with an external body/person to evaluate for overall research accuracy.
2. *Generating a rich, thick description* – in this regard, the researcher describes in detail the phenomenon or situation under analysis.
3. *Having a peer review or debriefing of the data and research process* – this relates to an external check by “someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored” (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 129), who reviews the researcher's work and asks tough questions about the various areas of the research, such as interpretations, methods and findings.

The validation strategies that are most relevant (and applicable) to the current study are the generation of a rich, thick description and triangulation. Additionally, the very nature of a supervised research study (such as a doctoral undertaking) necessitates a peer review of the data and the research process. In this regard, this study meets the recommendation outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) who advocate for the use of two validation strategies to verify the findings of any study.

5.9 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach for the study in terms of discussing the qualitative research design, textual analysis method, thematic analysis process, purposive sampling and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how validity, reliability and triangulation for the study was established. Chapter Six provides an interpretation of the films under investigation using a textual analysis approach. Specifically, the textual analysis focuses on an exploration of the representation of the leading protagonists in the selected films.

CHAPTER SIX

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

A film is a network – a relationship of parts to each other and to the whole. If you understand how it all comes together, you will better grasp the singular moment. Attend to the moments, and you bring the big picture into clearer focus
(Spadoni, 2014: 165)

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter a textual analysis of the representation of women in Hindi cinema with a focus on National Film Awards between 2010 and 2018, specifically in the category of 'Best Actress', is presented. All four films under investigation – *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Queen* (2013), *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), and *Mom* (2017) – are analysed to explore how female protagonists are narratively constructed and, where applicable, framed through mise-en-scène elements (such as costumes, camera techniques, song and dance sequences). In addition, these aspects are examined to explore how the female protagonists are framed within their respective films in relation to dominant gendered ideologies. The focus of this chapter is a critical reading of each film (in isolation) to provide insight and interpretations on the representation of the leading female character(s).

6.2 Plot Summaries

This chapter commences with plot synopses in order to contextualise the female characters in each film.

6.2.1 *The Dirty Picture* (Milan Luthria, 2011)

The film (see Figure 6.1 below) opens in a small south Indian village where Reshma (Vidya Balan) dreams of escaping her conservative life to become a film star. On the eve of her arranged marriage, she runs away to Madras (now Chennai) in pursuit of her ambition. However, life in the city is harsh, and she struggles to find work in the film industry. Casting agents and directors repeatedly reject her because she does not fit the image of a traditional heroine. It all changes for Reshma on the day that she sneaks her way into a film set. The planned dancer for a seductive music number does not turn up – the dancer does not want to perform the song as the choreography calls

for the dancer to be whipped by a male dancer. The film director is at his wit's end, as there seems to be no dancer willing to perform this choreography. Reshma, who was lurking in the background of the set, confidently offers to do the dance. Her uninhibited and sensuous dance captivates the director and unit staff, and the film becomes a roaring success due to her performance. In a short while, Reshma transforms to 'Silk', the South Indian film world's newest phenomenon, famous for her fearless, glitzy, and provocative dance sequences.



Figure 6.1: *The Dirty Picture* film poster

Source: https://www.filmibeat.com/bollywood/movies/the-dirty-picture/photos.html#google_vignette

With her career in full swing, Silk starts a love affair with the much-older Suryakant, the superstar of the period (and her childhood crush). Suryakant, however, considers her merely as a sex object and openly embarrasses her, accusing her of being good only for sensational roles, not for respectability or for marriage. Distraught, Silk focuses

on firmly establishing her career, embracing bolder roles and relishing in fame, fortune, and adoration from her fans. Even though she is very successful in a short period, Silk is subjected to increasing criticism from the media, moralists, and parts of the general public for being vulgar, morally corrupt and indecent. The film producers exploit her in the marketing of their movies and she is not given respect from the industry (especially from the director Abraham).

A newer generation of actresses start to perform the seductive dances that Silk is famous for. Additionally, her weight gain, moodiness and decline in sex appeal cause a sharp decline in film offers. Silk begins to feel threatened by younger actresses, especially the young starlet Shakeela. Seeking to redefine herself, Silk puts her entire savings into making a film that can display her acting abilities instead of doing films that merely present her as a sex symbol. The film, however, fails miserably, and Silk is left financially ruined. Colleagues and friends that once flocked around her are nowhere in sight. Isolated and disillusioned, Silk turns to alcohol for support and falls into self-destruction. She also loses her connection with Ramakant, Suryakant's brother, as he is not able to handle her declining reputation and unpredictable behaviour. With the drying up of offers and an accumulation of debts, Silk's life is reduced to being a shadow of her past glory. She is harassed by creditors and ridiculed by the same audience that had glorified her in the past. Starved of fame in the end, rejected by the film industry and dealing with the loss of her famous identity, Silk takes her life by an overdose of sleeping tablets in her home.

6.2.2 *Queen* (Vikas Bahl, 2013)

Queen (see Figure 6.2) is the story of Rani Mehra (Kangana Ranaut), a shy and conservative young woman from Delhi who is preparing for her wedding to Vijay. Rani is left shattered when Vijay abruptly calls off the wedding (on the eve of their marriage), citing her simplicity and traditional outlook as not being compatible with his lifestyle (Vijay is based in London). A devastated and confused Rani locks herself in her room trying to process the abrupt rejection.

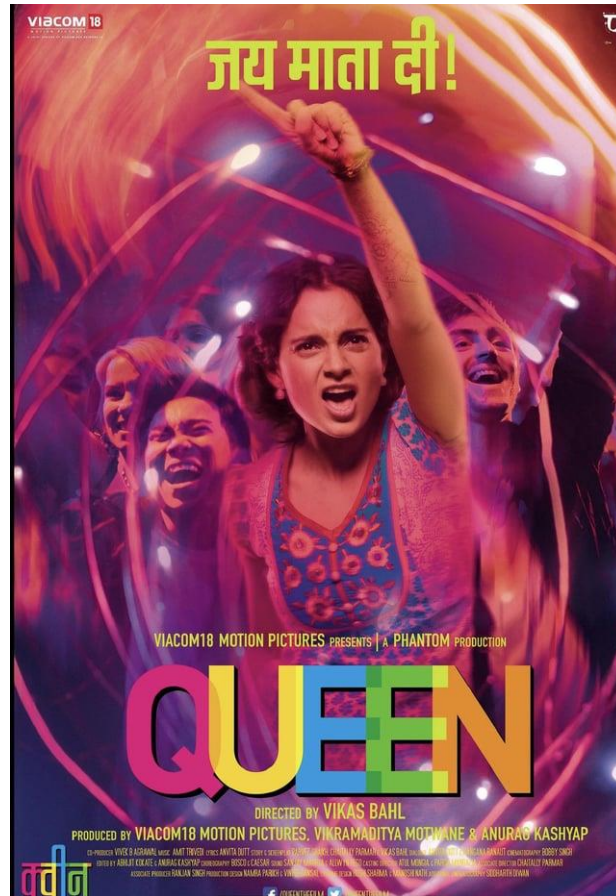


Figure 6.2: *Queen* film poster

Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/entertainment/photo/kangana-ranaut-mother-india-queen-farhan-akhtar-20-films-made-bollywood-proud-375073-2015-04-17/3>

In a surprise twist, Rani emerges from her room with an unusual decision. She has decided to go on her planned honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam alone. Anxious and scared of travelling alone, Rani embarks on her solo trip and lands in Paris where she meets a free-spirited and confident Indo-French hotel employee (Vijaylaxmi). Vijaylaxmi introduces Rani to new experiences – visiting a nightclub, drinking and dancing on a bar table. She travels from Paris to Amsterdam, where she books into a hostel unaware that she is to share the cramped space with three young men of different nationalities. At first unsure of how to interact with the men, Rani gradually becomes friendly with them and begins to relish her burgeoning freedom. Vijay, on the other hand, begins to regret his decision and travels from London to Amsterdam in pursuit of Rani. He pleads with her to reconcile and marry him. Rani, however, rejects his proposal. She returns to India and hands back her engagement ring to Vijay's family.

6.2.3 *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (Aanand L. Rai, 2015)

Tanu Weds Manu Returns (see Figure 6.3 below) is the sequel to the film *Tanu Weds Manu*. The film's story is set four years into the marriage of Tanu (Kangana Ranaut) and Manu. Tanu is not content with her marriage to Manu, and unhappy with her life in a quiet London neighbourhood. Their union has reached a breaking point, and whilst seeking marriage counselling, Manu is admitted to a psychiatric facility for treatment. Tanu, however, returns to her home in India and rekindles old friendships while accumulating new admirers.

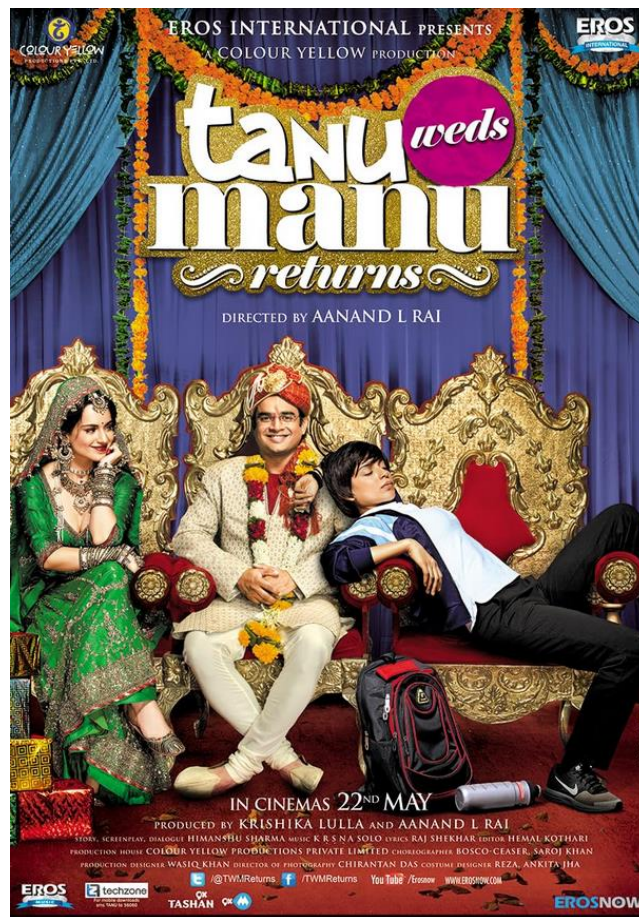


Figure 6.3: *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* film poster

Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2140465/mediaviewer/rm3328174848/?ref=tt_ov_i

After his discharge from the psychiatric facility, Manu also returns to India and meets Kusum, affectionately called Datto – a motivated athlete who has an unusual physical likeness to Tanu. Despite their physical likeness, there are differences in their personalities. Kusum is presented as uncomplicated, disciplined and sensible. Manu warms up to Kusum, appreciating her sincerity and straightforwardness. Assuming his

relationship with Tanu is beyond repair, Manu sends divorce papers to her and pursues a relationship with Kusum.

Manu proposes marriage to Kusum, and she agrees on the assumption that Manu has no unresolved feelings for Tanu. With prewedding festivities in full swing for Manu and Kusum, Tanu begins to realise she still loves Manu. Rekindled disagreements cause confrontations, confessions and comic confusions between families and friends. Stoking the flames of drama are the eccentric in-laws, Tanu's past suitors and the typical mayhem that accompanies Indian marriages. Ultimately, Manu makes the choice to stay with Tanu, acknowledging that in spite of all their conflicts, his love for her is still there. The film comes full-circle as Manu and Tanu are reunited.

6.2.4 *Mom* (Ravi Udyawar, 2017)

Mom (see Figure 6.4 below) revolves around Devki Sabarwal (Sridevi), a biology school teacher, and her family. Married to Anand, Devki is stepmother to his daughter Arya and their child Pihu. Even though Devki tries to build a bond with Arya, their relationship is strained as Arya resents her father's remarriage after the demise of her mother, and is unable to accept Devki as a mother. To further complicate matters, Devki is also Arya's teacher at school which Arya reminds her of at home as well by calling her 'ma'am'.

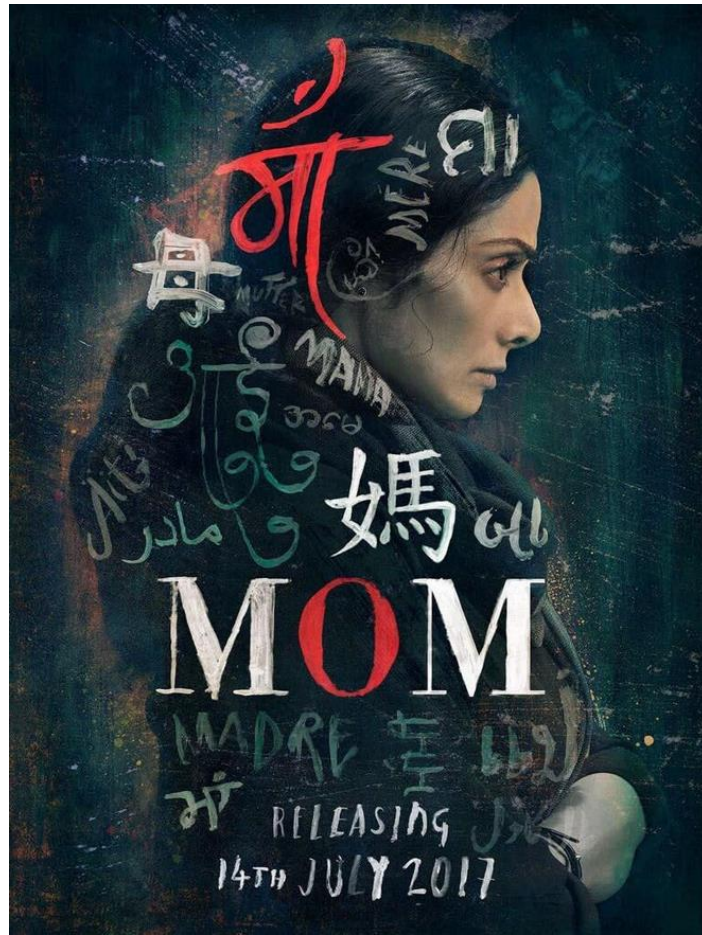


Figure 6.4: Mom film poster

Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5690142/mediaviewer/rm3524670208/>

They are left devastated and shattered after Arya is abducted by four men from a party and sexually assaulted. Arya survives the horrid incident, but is left disillusioned and distraught after the men are acquitted due to a lack of evidence. The trauma of the assault and lack of conviction sees Arya withdrawing into a troubled world of her own – she stays indoors, hardly speaks to anyone and remains isolated. Whilst Anand attempts to get a retrial by following legal procedures, Devki on the hand is in pursuit of her own justice. With the help of key individuals, one of whom is the quirky private investigator Dayashanker ('DK') Kapoor, Devki embarks on a dangerous (and illegal) mission to seek justice for Arya.

Two emotions motivate her on her justice journey, intense rage and deep love for Arya. With the help of DK, Devki tracks down each of the offenders to seek justice. Now a vigilante, Devki plans her 'methods' of justice to look like accidents so that the crimes cannot be traced to her. The first three criminals are dealt with in deadly precision but

fall under the suspicion of police investigator Mathew Francis. The plot thickens when the fourth criminal (Jagan) becomes aware of Devki's pursuit of revenge and then plans his own revenge. Devki and her family now become his deadly target. The tension escalates with a confrontation between Devki and her family, Jagan and the police investigator Francis. The film ends on a triumphant note, with Devki successfully meting out her justice and building a motherly bond with Arya.

6.3 Representation of female protagonists in the selected films

The sections below examine the representation of the female protagonists in each of the selected films under investigation. The female characterisation is primarily explored through a critical textual analysis of the narrative characterisation and where applicable, mise-en-scène elements and song and dance sequences.

6.3.1 Silk in *The Dirty Picture*

At the centre of *The Dirty Picture* is the character of Silk (Vidya Balan) whose trajectory both mimics and condemns traditional stereotypes of women in Hindi cinema. The character of Silk in *The Dirty Picture* is allegedly inspired by the life and acting career of popular south Indian dancer Silk Smitha. The film's producers, however, absolve themselves from any legal ramifications by the disclaimer that "all characters in this film are fictitious and imaginary" and that resemblance to any person, either living or dead, is unintentional and coincidental (Hashimy, 2023). The film explores the transformation of a young village girl (Reshma) to the seductive film dancer and actress Silk. Silk's storyline charts a rise from obscurity to stardom, then spirals downwards into self-destruction and tragedy. Such a trajectory is a classic instance of Tuchman's (1978) symbolic annihilation: how female characters in broadcast media are seen in only restrictive, stereotypic functions and eliminated once their dramatic function is over. Tuchman's (1978) concept is further established in the film's opening sequence, when the narrator states that: "*If you check, you will find two things common: Men have ruled, and women have created sensation*".

The narration emphasises a critical point – the existence in many Hindi film narratives of the central and authoritative male character over a female character whose significance is sidelined to sensationalism. This is confirmed by Deb (2023: 118) who states that women in Hindi cinema are often depicted as objects of desire and passive

subjects, meant to be looked at and admired. The notion of women as spectacle for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) is evidenced throughout the film, especially in the song and dance sequences. The popular song ‘*Ooh-La-La*’ in the film (see Figure 6.5 below) highlights Silk’s sexuality (through bold, and provocative dance moves) as well as revealing costumes. In doing so, Silk’s performance in the song raises questions about the objectification of women on screen. In the film, Silk essentially performs ‘item’ songs, serving as a sexual spectacle to the male gaze. The strategic close-up camera angles of Silk’s body correspond with Mulvey’s (1975) notion of the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of women. Additionally, this affirms Nair’s (2015) analysis that all these elements (costume, choreography and camera angles) work together to invite the male gaze, specifically to certain body parts typically considered desirable – such as the lips, belly, navel, breasts and legs, which are choreographed to imitate sexual movements.

In the song-and-dance sequences, colour and costume are used to code Silk’s moral value. For example, the use of colourful and garish costumes, seductive lighting and glittering make-up signify Silk’s sensuality and glamorous spectacle. Silk’s costumes function as a disciplining apparatus – emphasising her social identity and position. Her costume progression from the simple village clothing to garish dance outfits and at the end, the bridal red sari place, highlight how costume is used to regulate her social standing and respectability status.



Figure 6.5 Silk performs the song ‘*Ooh-La-La*’ with Suryakant

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

At the outset of the film, Silk is depicted as a young woman who rejects the typical role of a dutiful daughter. On the eve of her wedding, she escapes home and leaves for Madras to pursue a career in the film industry. This scene highlights her conscious deviance and deliberate rebellion in that she does not conform to the traditional notion of femininity and female domesticity in terms of a dutiful daughter and wife. What the scene also highlights is the expectation for Indian women to settle into domestic life through marriage (Mathur, 2015: 55). The traditional role she is expected to fulfil as a woman (specifically as a daughter) is further explored in the scene where she relates her childhood experiences as a young girl to *amma*, the woman she is now working for in Madras. Silk states, “*Marbles, cricket and choicest abuses – he (referring to her father) even made me wear boys’ clothes*”. A surprised *amma* asked how her mother allowed this, to which Silk replies: “*She gave birth to a girl instead of a boy, so she remained a mute spectator*”.

This highlights that although Silk’s father may have encouraged her to dismiss traditional feminine attributes, this was done to make up for the disappointment of now having a male child as the second dialogue confirms. Her father’s desire for Silk to display typical boy characteristics is concomitant with the Indian desire for a male offspring. Her mother, as a mute spectator, reveals her passive role in the family, something which Silk is made of aware of early in her. It could be argued then, that awareness of her mother’s struggles and limitations set the stage for Silk’s own rebellious character development. During the same conversation with *amma*, Silk asks her an important question: “*I have what boys desire. So, who is better? Me or a boy?*”.

The question signals her awareness of her own sexuality and the power thereof on the male species. Whilst the dialogue could be viewed as empowering, in that she takes ownership of the power of her sexuality, it simultaneously reinforces the stereotype of the ‘vamp’ figure. For example, the vamp figure in Hindi cinema is depicted as seductive, coquette and vixenish and is someone who embodies an erotic and sexual image for the male gaze (Kishore, 2014). Silk’s portrayal of the rebellious daughter is narratively sidelined after her move to Madras, where the focus of the film shifts to the struggles she faces in terms of entry to the film industry. Figure 6.6 below shows a still from the film where Silk is dismissed as an actress by the casting director who states: “*Neither do you have the seductive charm of a lover nor the grace of a wife*”.



Figure 6.6: Silk is rejected as an actress

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

Silk, however, takes this as a challenge and eventually gets her break into the film industry by exploiting her sexuality and boldness – again, typical of the Hindi film vamp figure. She confronts the very same casting director who rejected her and confidently claims that she will do the sensual dance sequence where she is whipped (no other female dancer was willing to perform this song). Her debut into the film industry is initially curtailed as the song was not included in the film's release. Due to very dismal movie ticket sales, Silk's sensual dance performance is, however, later included in a re-release of the film. In this scene, Reshma transforms into Silk (see Figure 6.7 below) – firmly establishing herself as a vamp whose sexuality is overly displayed on screen for the male gaze and pleasure.



Figure 6.7: Reshma transforms into Silk

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

Silk's relationship with the megastar Suryakant (who has been her childhood 'star' crush), is marked by both sexual power and vulnerability. On the one hand, Silk uses her sexual power to advance her career by forming an illicit sexual relationship with the married Suryakant. There are several scenes in the film where Silk is shown luring Suryakant to advance her film career. For example, when Suryakant gets annoyed with an inexperienced Silk during their first song performance (see Figure 6.8 below) and walks off the set, Silk follows him to his dressing room and uses her sexuality to strategically lure him back. This scene (and others) demonstrates her agency, as she is actively engaged in pursuing what she desires in a film world where Suryakant reigns and Silk, as a female dancer, has limited power. Additionally, in these scenes Silk is depicted as a woman who understands the dynamics of navigating a male-dominated industry – she is very aware that her sexuality, allure and desirability are powerful bargaining chips.



Figure 6.8: Silk and the megastar Suryakant in a song sequence

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

On the other hand, though, her relationship with Suryakant is also marked by vulnerability. Suryakant is the married megastar of the Madras film industry and wields significant power over the shape and direction of her career. This creates a power imbalance in their relationship as Silk is reliant on him for film castings. She also develops strong emotional feelings for him, and this emotional entanglement also places her in a vulnerable position in the industry and society. Her overall emotional well-being winds up being tied to Suryakant's actions and decisions. In a pivotal scene, Suryakant tells Silk: *"See this plastic cover? (pointing to a cigarette box). Whether it's*

there or not, it makes no difference to the cigarette. Similarly, whether you are in the film or not, it makes no difference to anyone”.

In another scene, he tells a journalist that Silk “*is quite downmarket*”. Such dialogues further emphasise Silk’s vulnerable position with Suryakant, particularly in relation to her career advancement. As the current ‘other woman’ in Suryakant’s adulterous life, Silk bears the brunt of societal scrutiny and censure. Interestingly, the societal criticism Silk faces is only directed at her – Suryakant, as a man, is exempted from any such scrutiny as he occupies a position of male privilege. He happily states in conversation with Nayla (a powerful film critic) that “*When God has blessed her (Silk) so abundantly, there is no harm in taking a piece of the pie*”. The dialogue reduces and trivialises their relationship to an illicit indulgence that is void of any emotional depth. The dialogue additionally affirms that he is absolved from any criticism and moral responsibility regarding their affair. Interestingly, Suryakant views himself as a Godly figure, as in an earlier scene when Silk confesses she is nervous to meet her childhood crush (the megastar Suryakant), he adds: “*If God puts in an appearance, the devotee is bound to be scared.*” These lines highlight the gender dynamics and the moral double standards that frame Silk and Suryakant’s affair and also cements Suryakant’s inflated self-perception as a figure of reverence. This self-perception therefore rationalises (according to his perspective) his actions towards Silk.

The power dynamics in their relationship is thus complex because while Silk ostensibly holds a powerful position by the use of her sexuality, their illicit relationship stresses the fragility of this power. Her childhood crush on Suryakant adds an additional layer of fragility – her initial feelings for him are tinged with fantasy for the megastar, but this soon develops into disillusionment once their relationship progresses. The reality of their relationship – the married megastar and the seductive dancer – begins to overshadow her dreams of a life with Suryakant. In one pivotal scene, Silk is reminded of her status as the ‘other woman’ when she is forced to hide overnight in the bathroom when Suryakant’s wife Radhika makes a sudden appearance (see Figure 6.9 below). Confined to a limited space (bathroom), the *mise-en-scène* serves to visually entrap Silk – keeping her hidden as a ‘dirty secret’. This scene marks a turning point in her relationship with Suryakant as Silk begins to realise that there is no possibility of a respectable future with him.



Figure 6.9: Silk as ‘the other woman’

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

As her dancing career takes off, Silk gets much appreciation from male audiences, who, in some cases, only throng to movie theatres to see her dance sequence and leave thereafter (without watching the rest of the film). In a scene with Suryakant, she adds that: *“The cinema hall was filled with men, every one of them only to see me. As soon as the song was over, they left. It was amazing”*. The mise-en-scène depicts the cheering men dancing in a darkened movie theatre, flinging coins in appreciation of Silk, with close-ups of lustful grins. Suryakant, who is jealous of her budding success, belittles and undermines her success by stating: *“Take a look at what Nayla [the film critic] has to say about you. She says Selva [a director] took the help of dirt to sell his film. Dirt . . . that is you”*. Silk’s happiness, however, cannot be curtailed and she joyously responds: *“Look at my picture, it’s so gorgeous! Now I will stop at nothing”*.

In another scene with the director Selva, who plays to Suryakant’s ego by telling him that it is not right that Silk is on the cover of a leading film magazine, Suryakant is quick to respond with the disparaging line: *“No matter how high the popcorn goes, it always falls back in the pan”*. These dialogues reveal not only Suryakant’s jealousy and fragile ego, but also a prevalent theme in patriarchal film narratives, where the male figure is often threatened by a woman’s success and empowerment (Wood, 1994). Silk refuses to read any reviews of her film performances and is focused on further entrenching her popularity in the film industry. In a way, her decision to ignore any negative feedback on her film performances is indicative of self-protection. She chooses not to be distracted (and dejected) by negativity and rather, remain committed

to advancing her film career. Aware of her capital worth and popularity with male audiences, Silk is happy to determine her own identity and not allow any external criticism to limit her aspirations (and define her worth).

Her popularity, as she is aware, is based on her sexuality – and the pleasure she provides for the male gaze. Casting agents dismiss her as a ‘heroine’ (that is, a leading actress) and instead, offer her minor parts in films. Silk was seen only as a vamp – and not as a virtuous heroine. This binary, of the vamp and virtuous heroine, is a longstanding element of Hindi cinema’s gendered politics (Dwyer, 2014). This is evidenced in scenes where Silk willingly accepts direction to pose more provocatively and ‘look hot’. Her desirability, though, is two-pronged. First, it is used as a commodity to increase the commercial value of films and attract audiences to the theatre. Secondly, her desirability is tainted with stigma. As her popularity (and visibility) as a sultry and seductive dancer increases, so too does the ostracisation and criticism she faces from certain sectors of society (there are protests from women’s groups calling for her removal from screen).

One such criticism she faces is with the director Abraham (also the narrator of the film), who initially despises Silk and views her as a sexually corrupting element in cinema. In one of their confrontations, their conversation:

Abraham: *I will prove that films don’t need gimmicks like you to sell.*

Silk: *Films need three things, entertainment, entertainment and . . . entertainment. And I am entertainment.*

Abraham’s disdain for Silk frames her as a figure who is disparaged and ridiculed – she is tolerated for her entertainment value, but excluded from any meaningful contribution to cinema. Although Silk is defiant about her popularity and credibility as a performer, in a later showdown with Abraham (they both release their respective films on the same day to compete for critical acclaim), Silk realises that her identity as an actress cannot be separated from her sexualised image. The audiences are not ready (and not willing) to accept any alternate representations of Silk on screen. In a surprising twist, it is Abraham who offers some comfort to Silk following her declining career and outcast from the industry. His contempt is softened by sympathy and fledgling romantic feelings. He begins to respect her resilience as an artist and rise to fame from a poor, inexperienced village girl. Any development in their new

relationship, however, is unexplored due to Silk's sudden suicide. It could be argued that Silk's suicide cements her presence as a sexual spectacle on screen while leaving her absent from any possible explorations into 'serious' cinema that is Abraham's domain.

Silk initially engages in a sexual relationship with Ramakant, Suryakant's unmarried younger brother, to make Suryakant jealous. She realises, however, that Ramakant is markedly different from Suryakant. Ramakant admires her and pursues her with lovable innocence in contrast to Suryakant who views her as a sexual object. Their scenes together hint at Silk's longing for love and affection, which she is ultimately denied but rather, narratively contained in a hyper-sexualised domain. Silk encourages Ramakant to embark on his own film career as a writer and director. Ramakant offers to marry Silk and wants to introduce her to his parents at a special event, requesting that she "*not make a mess of herself*". Silk self-destructs this meeting by engaging in a dance-off with a younger rival, Shakeela, whom she is threatened by.

Ramakant and Silk's relationship soon collapses under parental and societal pressure as Silk is deemed unable to enter the respectable space of domesticity. Her relationship with Ramakant highlights the ways in which women are punished in Hindi cinema, especially 'deviant' women. Gokulsing and Dissanyake (2004: 77) affirm this by explaining that a woman who is considered to be morally degraded in Hindi cinema is "almost always punished for her unacceptable behaviour". In addition, Yadav and Jha (2023: 10) assert that this treatment is a form of "patriarchal power that reinforces traditional gender roles and punishes women who deviate from these norms". Silk receives further punishment as the rebellious daughter. She returns to her village and her mother's home perhaps seeking reconciliation (the exact reason for her return is not developed in the film). In this brief scene (see Figure 6.10 below), her mother opens the door to Silk's knock and no words are exchanged. She looks at Silk and abruptly closes the door. Instead of any reconciliation, Silk is reminded of her alienation – she is not a daughter her mother could be proud of as her image on screen as the seductive dancer has consumed the identity of Reshma (as she was known before transforming into Silk). Interestingly, in the film's final scenes, Abraham is successful in convincing Silk's estranged mother to visit her in Madras, suggesting the possibility of a reconciliation. Silk, however, is denied any closure and reconciliation

with her mother through her own self-destruction (suicide). She is denied any redemption and dies forever crystallised as the rebellious daughter.



Figure 6.10: Silk, the rebellious daughter, returns home

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

A critical moment in the film is Silk's speech upon receiving an industry award, which is ironically presented to her by Suryakant. The speech offers Silk a rare moment to address her peers and members of the film industry. In this scene, Suryakant presents her the award and whispers to her, "*You are the fantasy from last night, that nobody talks about the next morning. You are our dirty secret*". Silk silently receives the award and addresses the audience:

*Some people are famous for what they do, I am infamous for what I do.
Vulgar, disgusting, dirty . . . the words that are applied to describe me.
Just so someone's film could take off, I was used as a boarding pass.
Yet, people say I am vulgar.
You made me dance, but nobody noticed my effort or my sincerity.
You were busy noticing something else.*

Yet, you label me disgusting.

My films are not meant to be watched with the family but people watch them alone and end up with a bigger family.

I will continue making these dirty pictures and I will bring these dirty pictures before you.

In referring to her as a “dirty secret”, Suryakant associates Silk with shame, suggesting that whilst her sexuality on screen is pleasurable to the male gaze, in broader society, her sexuality carries a stigma of disgrace. In her speech, Silk acknowledges that her award is based on notoriety, and more on the negative perceptions of her, than any true recognition of her work. She points out the double-standards (in the industry and broader society), where although her sexuality is commodified in the industry, it is also criticised by people in society. She takes a moment to criticise the audience and film industry for reducing her effort and sincerity to a sexual spectacle.

She remains defiant, however, by stating that she will continue to make dirty pictures and bring these to people. In doing so, she refuses to be shamed into screen anonymity. This defiance, however, is temporary as she begins to be alienated from the industry, audiences and critics. Her declining position in the industry is also due to the arrival of younger actresses who replace her as the preferred sexual image on screen. Her body also becomes a site of ridicule for audiences and film directors – she gains weight, and is considered less desirable. She suffers heavy financial losses after her home production fails at the box-office and resorts to performing in a soft pornographic film for an income. This does not happen, however, as the set is raided by the police. The decline in her stardom and struggles she faces further highlight a critical point: she is punished for ambition and trying to assert artistic control in producing a film. Habib (2017) confirms this by adding that Hindi cinema’s moral structure often punishes the ‘vamp’ figure.

Silk’s final characterisation in the film is that of a life in isolation and loneliness. Although Abraham begins to form a relationship with her, Silk does not seem too invested in nurturing this – which is confirmed by her suicide. Silk dies all alone, abandoned by industry friends and past lovers. Of significance is her choice of attire in the suicide scene – she dresses as a typical Hindu bride, with a red *bindi* (dot) and red sari (see Figure 6.11 below). By dressing as a bride in the final scene, it could be

argued that Silk makes a final attempt to attain the symbols of respectability and legitimacy that has been devoid from her life.



Figure 6.11: Silk dressed as a typical Hindu bride

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYZPD6p-qE>

She dies clothed in the symbols of a dutiful wife – a role she was denied in life – and so she forges this respectability in death. The symbolism of a bride is ironic, as instead of marking a new chapter in her life, it marks the end of her life (by suicide). In her suicide note, she writes:

*When life becomes miserable, that's when you begin to understand it.
And a million questions arise, to which you will never get the answers.
Why didn't mother hug me as soon as she opened the door?
Why didn't I realise that worshipping a star and loving a star are two different things?
The person whom you taught to stand up for himself, why didn't he stand up for you?
Everybody wanted to feel me, why didn't anybody hold my hand?*

Silk's suicide note is a critical narrative device in the film as it encapsulates her life experiences in a few poignant lines. In the note she condenses her maternal rejection, disillusionment with stardom, betrayals and the absence of pure intimacy in her life. Her note thus reflects a personal regret and highlights a systemic critique of the industry. It reflects her longing for maternal approval and love, and exposes how the film industry treats women who dare to step out of normal, prescribed gender roles. Her final words are phrased as questions – deliberately framed as such to perhaps question why there was no space in society for Silk (a woman who did not fit the ideal figures of daughter and wife).

6.3.2 Rani in *Queen*

In the film's opening scene Rani (Kangana Ranaut) is shown as a young woman who is nervously excited about her upcoming marriage to Vijay. The mise-en-scène reflects a colourful set with Rani's Delhi home adorned in flowers and twinkling lights and her relatives decked out in their pre-wedding fineries. The scene is typical of a chaotic north Indian wedding – there is loud music, dancing and lots of food. Glimpses are shown of Rani's mother's tears (which reflect her mixed emotions as she is happy for her daughter, but also sad she is moving to London after marriage), her grandmother's teasing, her father's pride (he has decked his shop like a wedding venue) and her brother's protective presence. The opening scene thus firmly establishes Rani as a much-loved daughter (who has studied Home Science), sister and granddaughter, all of which work together to locate her within the traditional boundaries of femininity. Habib (2017: 69) supports this view by adding that the dutiful daughter is often seen "taking care of her siblings, helping the mother in the kitchen, and marrying the man of her father's choice".

Flashback scenes depict Rani as conservative, protected and obedient: "*You know I want an arranged marriage*", she tells her friend when teased about Vijay's early romantic attentiveness towards her. In another scene, she discusses the possibility of accepting a job offer:

Rani: *Vijay, Chaddha uncle was telling dad that I should work in his company. He's asked me earlier to handle accounts in his company. Should I?*
Vijay: *What does your dad say?*
Rani: *He said to do what Vijay says.*
Vijay: *Why should you work? What's the point? Why stay out all day? Am I going to starve you? I have a job. Don't you have faith in me?*
Rani: *No, it's not that.*
Vijay: *Then? Refuse.*

The exchange above highlights Rani's dependency on the male authority figures in her life (her father and fiancé). By asking if she should accept the job offer or not, Rani conforms to traditional female behaviour, where the important matters about a woman's personal aspirations are often decided through patriarchal authority. In this instance, Vijay is dismissive of her working when he has a job; relaying any career prospects she may have as secondary to his career goals. Another scene shows Vijay

being embarrassed by her dancing at a wedding function and reprimanding her for making a spectacle of herself. Yet another scene shows an irritated and impatient Vijay trying to teach Rani to drive a car, telling her, “*You are destined to spend your life on the bus. Get out of the car and let me drive*”. These scenes all work together to illustrate Rani’s early characterisation – she is a traditional dutiful daughter and obedient fiancé, firmly entrenched within the confines of a domestic patriarchal domain. Any career aspirations she may have are abandoned – she is manipulated into trusting her future husband to provide for her.

Additionally, Rani’s compliance with Vijay’s rationalisation about why she does not need to work reveals a deep conditioning for women to concede to male authority. Vijay disciplining her for dancing at the wedding illustrates how Rani’s enjoyment is controlled by a male authority figure who determines her boundary for acceptable public behaviour. Rani is thus shown as conservative, dependent and lacking agency; whose very identity is determined by patriarchal expectations. Collectively, these early depictions of Rani set the scene for her transformative journey. The wedding excitement is short-lived when her fiancé Vijay abruptly calls off the wedding by dismissing Rani as too simple for his newly-developed cosmopolitan aspirations. Rani pleads with Vijay (see Figure 6.12 below) saying, “*I will do whatever you want*” and “*who will marry me now?*” in an effort to change his mind. Vijay, however, remains resolute in his decision and is more concerned about Rani creating an emotional scene in public than of her feelings. Vijay’s calm reaction to Rani’s pleading signifies love as romantic fatalism. Rani’s love for Vijay is presented as a fate to be accepted or suffered and not as a space for mutual engagement and negotiation. The presentation of romantic fatalism works to normalise a woman’s romantic reliance while excluding female agency.



Figure 6.12: Rani pleads with her fiancé Vijay

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

Vijay's decision shatters Rani's, dislocating the identity she had begun to form for herself as the dutiful wife. After tearful contemplation, Rani asks her father for permission to still go on her honeymoon trip to Paris and Amsterdam, but alone. It is interesting to note Rani's request for permission – as a young adult woman, she remains under the authority of her father. This request for permission highlights a traditional expectation for women (as a daughter, sister, wife and mother) to seek approval from the male figures of authority in their lives (Nandakumar, 2011). Adding to this is the role of Rani's much younger brother, Chintu, who always accompanies her (as a chaperone) when she leaves the house. It should also be noted that whilst she conforms to the expectation of "asking for permission" from her father, her decision to embark on a solo European holiday presents a pivotal moment of independence.

The film's narrative focus on Rani's initial appeals (to her father and Vijay) coupled with her acceptance of a pre-determined future as a wife highlight a destiny motif that functions as a site of female passivity, romantic fatalism and limited agency. Rani is initially depicted as a young woman who understands that fulfilment is rewarded through marriage – only marriage. Viewed from a performative lens, these depictions of romantic fatalism and 'love as destiny' signify the existence of deep patriarchal norms. Rani performs the expected roles of a woman as a dutiful daughter and obedient fiancée at the expense of her very own agency.

Rani's trip to Paris marks the beginning of her transformation from a naïve and sheltered young woman to an independent and assertive woman. In Paris she nervously navigates the city alone, mocked by the image of the Eiffel Tower as it reminds her of Vijay's rejection. They had dreamed of visiting the city together and having dinner at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Her trauma and emotional pain at the cancellation of her wedding does not permit her to enjoy the iconic landmark. At each street corner, the tower ostensibly looms over her just as Vijay's rejection casts a shadow over her future. At her hotel, she meets Vijaylaxmi (see Figure 6.13 below), an hotel employee of Indian heritage.



Figure 6.13: Rani meets Vijaylaxmi in Paris

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

The naming of Vijaylaxmi is ironical – a stark reminder of Rani's fiancé Vijay. From the very outset of their meeting, the contrast between Rani and Vijaylaxmi is starkly presented. Rani is modest (dressed in a kurti top and jeans, hair in a plait), Vijaylaxmi wears scanty clothes and is comfortable in her skin. Rani is conservative and hesitant to experience new things. Vijaylaxmi is independent, sexually-liberated, raising a child as a single parent and is all-round uninhibited. It is important to note, however, that

although Vijaylaxmi is shown to be smoking, drinking and kissing random men, she is not painted as a vixen, or vamp figure. Vijaylaxmi encourages Rani to explore and experience new things – they visit a Parisian nightclub, where Rani has her first taste of alcohol and dances on the bar top (see Figure 6.14 below), they go shopping together and roam the streets of Paris.



Figure 6.14: Rani and Vijaylaxmi in a Parisian nightclub

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

At the nightclub, Rani tells Vijaylaxmi: *“I obeyed my mother and father. I obeyed my teachers. Never cheated. Never lied. I obeyed Vijay. Name a person and I obeyed him”*. The dialogue, with the repeated phrase *“I obeyed”* point to Rani’s battle with negotiating the interplay between her autonomy, family obligations and societal expectations. Her life thus far has been hinged on the latter two; focused on being a “good” daughter and “obedient” fiancée at the expense of any self-aspirations and self-desires. Devi and Balakrishnan (2025: 129) support this by stating that the “good daughter” figure often perpetuates the notion of “someone who sacrifices her ambitions for her family”.

The night club scene, with Rani uninhibitedly dancing, marks a pivotal moment in her character’s growth. The quiet, shy and conservative Rani begins to emerge from the

cocoon of patriarchal authority and societal expectations. The mise-en-scène compliments this emergence – the strobe lighting, crowded dance floor, and throbbing music is in sharp juxtaposition of Rani as the conservative, shy Delhi daughter. The choice of song itself is deliberate and further adds to Rani's transformative arc – an old-school Bollywood song played in a Parisian nightclub. The song, *Hungama Ho Gaye* (an uproar has happened), could be seen as a metaphor for the awakening in Rani – an uproar (disruption) to her identity, not in terms of chaos but rather, a celebration. Interestingly, the original song was performed by a vamp figure, who was choreographed to serve as an object of male desire. Prasad and Tiwari (2023: 171) confirm this by stating that vamps “are often reduced to mere objects of desire, their worth measured by their physical appeal rather than their inherent qualities”. Rani, however, dances with gay abandon – there is no close-ups of certain body parts, no objectification of her body for a male gaze.

Additionally, there is no one to reprimand her, no one to feel embarrassed and no one to seek permission from. It could be argued that Rani dancing to an iconic ‘vamp’ song illustrates a turn, or reversal, of the vamp narrative in that Rani dances for self-expression and not for the pleasure of any male desire or male gaze. Rani's exploration of Paris and her budding friendship with Vijaylaxmi leads her on a path of self-discovery where she becomes more self-assured and self-confident; exhibiting a growing sense of agency. A significant moment in Paris is when Rani, accompanied by Vijaylaxmi, meet her parent's friends, the Verma family (see Figure 6.15 below). The scene is laced with comedic farce. The Verma family view Rani's wedding cancellation as a death – they mourn the ‘loss’ saying: “*My poor lamb! My poor lamb! My child, my poor child! How could this have happened? What was God thinking? What a tragedy!*”. The Verma family's exaggerated (and comedic) sympathy repositions Rani's self-perception of the cancelled wedding. When Rani views their mourning of her wedding, she experiences two things. First, she is tickled by their hyperbolic reactions and exchanges amused glances with Vijaylaxmi. Secondly, viewing a narration of her cancelled wedding as a ‘tragedy’ helps Rani to realise that things are not as dire as they seem, and that she can indeed survive this.



Figure 6.15: Rani meets the Verma family in Paris

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

In Amsterdam, Rani's character continues on a transformative arc. She is initially apprehensive about sharing a hostel room with three males (Taka from Japan, Oleksander from Russia and Tim from France) as the situation challenges her understanding female respectability. In Delhi she is protected and is chaperoned by her younger brother, which provides her with a constant sense of security. Rani and her three roommates form a bond, developed in part from the co-sharing of their 'domestic' space (the hostel room). Of significance is the emphasis placed on Rani's friendship with the three strangers, and not on any sexual tension. Additionally, the three different nationalities of the men serve to illustrate varied masculinities – offering alternatives to Rani's experience of Vijay's authoritative Indian masculinity. All three are considerate, respectful and non-judgemental towards Rani – which is a marked departure from her relationship with Vijay. Rani learns about male friendship (see Figure 6.16 below) – and that a bond with men (outside her kin) can be de-sexualised and is not always necessarily based on romantic intentions.



Figure 6.16: Rani with her hostel roommates Oleksander, Taka and Tim

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

In their friendship, Rani is not treated unfairly based on her gender. She is seen as an equal, whose opinions and ideas are respected. Unbeknownst to them, they are witness to her growth and empowerment as a young woman. For example, she drives them to the hostel one night, navigating the streets of Amsterdam on her own and accepts an offer from an Italian chef (Marcello) to participate in a cooking contest. Meanwhile, Vijay tries to locate Rani in Amsterdam and rekindle their relationship but Rani ignores all his messages and calls. The cooking contest sequence marks two pivotal moments for Rani. Firstly, Rani is presented as a confident and capable cook, who wins the contest with her culinary skills. The contest win signifies a symbolic win as well – Rani realises her self-worth and ability to be economically independent. This is significant in terms of her character transformation from fearful and obedient to self-assured and aspirational.

Secondly, Rani and Marcello share a moment of intimacy in the kitchen – Rani's first kiss (see Figure 6.17 below). Maqbool (2022) notes that in India, strict censorship laws govern sexual acts on screen and that as such, scenes showing sexual content (such as kissing) are rarely included in films. Rani and Marcello share a brief (almost innocent) kiss that carries significant narrative weight. Marcello asks Rani to show him how Indians kiss and in doing so, Rani is able to experience her first kiss on her terms. She is in control of her sexuality and the sole decision-maker in relation to how she wants to represent this. She kisses Marcello in a curious lip-lock and runs off, leaving behind the slightly amused Italian chef who realises this was her first kiss.



Figure 6.17: Rani kisses Marcello

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

It is important to note that there is no further development to this kiss, rather, the plot focuses on Rani's shift from a body that was policed (by her fiancé) to one that has agency (she decides what to feel and how to act). The scene highlights Rani's character development from the obedient and conservative daughter to a confident young woman exploring her sexual power, desire and identity. Vijay eventually locates Rani in Amsterdam and attempts to convince her to reconcile. This time, it is Rani who remains resolute, not allowing him to bully her into rekindling their romance. In the film's final scenes, Rani travels back home to Delhi and returns her engagement ring to a disbelieving Vijay (see Figure 6.18 below).



Figure 6.18: Rani returns her engagement ring to Vijay, walking away with a smile

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SZwR1dxzME>

The scene is depicted without any theatrics and with minimal use of dialogue (Rani is mostly silent). Despite his declarations of love and pleas for her to reconsider, Rani gives Vijay one final hug and says: “*thank you*”. Rani’s “thank you” is significant, as it signifies the replacement of her earlier hurt emotions with gratitude for the discovery of her new identity. The “thank you” thus marks Rani’s closure of her old self (as naïve, selflessly obedient and dutiful) and the emergence of her new self (confident, self-assured and aspirational). Without casting any blame or accusations, Rani walks away smiling, signalling a happiness for the new phase in her life.

6.3.3 Tanu and Datto in *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*

Tanu Weds Manu Returns is the sequel to the film *Tanu Weds Manu* and presents an opportunity to analyse two female characters, Tanuja Sharma (née Trivedi) and Kusum Sangwan (affectionately called Datto). Both these characters are played by the same actress, Kangana Ranaut, who received a National Film Award for her dual performance. Four years into her marriage; Tanu now feels trapped and that her life is devoid of any thrill and enjoyment. In the film's opening sequence, Tanu and Manu visit a mental health facility where she tells the medical professionals: "*what should I do for excitement?*" and "*I had such a happening life in India, but he's completely messed up my life*". She laments having to perform the expected duties of a wife, saying: "*I never even made a cup of tea for my father. But I washed this man's clothes. Cooked for him.*" She further elaborates on her current frame of mind and feelings of marital disillusionment by stating to the mental health professionals, "*I think I love him, but I stopped liking him. I think I love him like a mammal. Like a Homo sapiens*".

Upadhyay and Shankar (2022: 6) explain that Hindi cinema tends to show married women as having "one duty that is to serve her husband and others in the family" and that she is to accept "whatever decision her husband took". Tanu, however, marks a departure from the recurring figure of the dutiful wife figure in Hindi cinema as she vocally expresses her discontent with her marriage and husband. Tanu exhibits agency in self-articulating her concerns about issues such as marital ennui, sexual pleasure and living outside India rather than remaining a silent, obedient figure. Interesting, the mise-en-scène reflects the gloom and lack of colour in her marriage – the set is a grey, clinical room removed of any bright colour (see Figure 6.19 below).



Figure 6.19: Tanu and Manu in a consultation with mental health professionals

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ltt8p>

Back in her hometown in Kanpur (India), Tanu attempts to reclaim her previous persona as a single, feisty and spirited young woman. She frenetically visits ex-admirers (see Figure 6.20 below) and is transported by a new admirer (Chintu – a non-paying lodger at her parents' home). Additionally, her choice of clothing echoes her frantic actions – she wears bright colours with bold silhouettes, reflective of the Tanu who ruled Kanpur with a feminine swagger.



Figure 6.20: Tanu with old flame (Raja Awasthi) and new admirer (Chintu)

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ltt8p>

Interestingly, her actions are more attention-seeking than any real desire to reclaim her earlier single life or get into a new relationship. A scene which confirms this is when she rebukes Chintu for thinking she has feelings for him, saying “*This is the problem. One smile and you think the girl’s crazy about you*”. A constant figure in her mind is her husband; she sits on a toilet seat and scrolls picture of their wedding and calls his friend to check up on him. Taking into consideration her collective behaviour, it could be argued that Tanu puts on a feisty and rebellious performance for her admirers (old and new), family and friends to hide her insecurity and vulnerability. Her public confidence is thus a defensive strategy to protect hurt feelings and perhaps gain reassurance of a sense of self.

In one scene, Tanu, wrapped in a towel, greets guests (see Figure 6.21 below) who have arrived at their home – a prospective groom for her cousin Ankita in a potential arranged marriage setting.



Figure 6.21: Tanu greets guests at her home wrapped in a towel

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ltt8p>

After rapidly firing questions to the prospective groom, she turns to Ankita and says:

*Your life has become boring.
And for that you don't need to get this 70 kilos of burden on top of you.
You just need to break the monotony.
Do something exciting. Anything.
Run away from home with someone.
If you can't find someone, then run away alone.
But do something. Let there be light, let there be life.*

Tanu's exchange with Ankita repositions marriage as not the most defining purpose of a woman's life, but rather, as a "70 kilos of burden". Although the advice is unwelcomed by Ankita, Tanu urges her to find another purpose in life apart from the traditional defining role of a wife. In doing so, Tanu suggests an alternate definition of a woman, outside any linkage to male relational figures (for example, father, husband, son). Prabhakar (2014: para. 5 line 9) states that "a woman's role [in Hindi films] is carved out in the context of any male character who is central to the script, devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout is explored in relation to the male character". Tanu's use of the word "excitement" and phrase "break the

monotony” seem to point less to Ankita and more to her own failing marriage and disillusionment with married life.

Tanu’s rapidly fired questions at the silent prospective groom, “*why do you want to get married?*”, “*have you ever had a girlfriend?*” and “*have you ever been to a club?*” flips the traditional arranged marriage sequence. Typically, it is the prospective bride who faces a barrage of questions, usually from the elders in the prospective groom’s family to verify her suitability as a potential wife. The scene, whilst comedic, challenges the common script of the prospective bride having to face a pre-marriage screening. Tanu (as a younger female) seizes the opportunity to ask the questions and in doing so, there is a shift in the gender power dynamics – Tanu momentarily moves the power in a typical arranged marriage negotiation setting. Interestingly, Tanu appears draped in a towel after she receives a text message from Manu where he says, “*I hate you, Tanu*”. Tanu reacts to the message by appearing in a towel directly thereafter, masking her hurt emotions by presenting a scandalous spectacle in a conservative setting (in front of guests). This act could be viewed as one of rebellion, triggered by Manu’s hurtful text message. Furthermore, by the externally provocative display, Tanu draws attention away from her internal emotional conflict.

Tanu’s false sense of bravado is derailed when she hears of Manu’s plan to marry Kusum (also known as Datto) whom she is told is her *doppelgänger*. Datto looks like Tanu (or as Tanu says, “*Settle for Reebok instead of Reebok, right?*”) but there are differences in their characterisations. Tanu can be described as possessing some characteristics of a traditional vamp figure (she drinks, smokes, flirts with men) whose charm is tethered to creating a spectacle and whose agency depends on having an audience. Datto is presented as neither the ‘ideal wife’ nor is she a sexualised ‘vamp’ – rather she is framed as someone who is disciplined (a state level athlete), has strong family ties, dresses very functionally and who speaks plainly (no verbal subterfuge). In one scene, Tanu asks Manu:

Mr. Sharma, you found her to replace me? This joker. This ignorant.
You deserve better than this.
I deserve better than this.
You should’ve thought about my honour at least.

Tanu's mockery of Datto reveals her hurt and jealous feelings – another woman “has” her face, but without the drama and chaos that she carries. The word “replace” reduces Datto to an exchangeable object – Tanu does not view as an individual in her own right. Furthermore, it is no ordinary replacement – adding to Tanu's insult is that she is being replaced by a “copy”. “Joker” and “ignorant” point to Tanu's attempt to assert a superiority over Datto which could possibly be based on a mockery of Datto's strong regional accent (Haryanvi), plain dressing and short, boyish hair style. By demeaning Datto, Tanu thus tries to assert a hierarchical superiority. Of significance is Tanu's verbal attack on Datto – and not Manu, which reveals a typical patriarchal narrative at play. Instead of holding Manu accountable, Tanu directs her anger at Datto in what could be classified as ‘horizontal hostility’. The term, coined by Florynce Kennedy in 1970, refers to hostility between women, and that which is not directed at the patriarchal oppressive structures that are the actual cause of the tension (Thompson, 1993).

In this instance, Tanu's hostility is directed sideways at Datto (see Figure 6.22 below) and not towards Manu (the actual reason for the conflict), who is left largely unchallenged. Blaming ‘the other woman’ is a safer move for Tanu, in this way she does not risk forever severing ties with Manu (and any possible reconciliation). Another possible reason could be a patriarchal narrative strategy to avoid villainising the actions, for which he is held largely accountable, of the male protagonist. Chakravorty and Bera (2024: 85) explain that male protagonists who are characterised by “traits such as aggression, dominance, and suppression of emotions have been a recurring theme in Hindi cinema for decades”. Manu's character, as a married man who fails to address the issues in his marriage, is thus an example of a recurring narrative in Hindi cinema.



Figure 6.22: Tanu confronts Datto

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ltt8p>

Of critical narrative significance is Datto's response to Tanu's confrontation:

*Hey girl, come to your senses.
Talk respectfully.
You're laughing at me. What about you?
You couldn't manage your own home.
Your father raised you first and then, Mr. Sharma took care of you.
You never even bought an underwear with your own money.
Laughing at me.
You can see the world, booze and buy fashionable clothes with his credit card.
How can you call me ignorant?
I got admission in Delhi University through sports quota.
I am a state level athlete.
Calling me ignorant.
And listen, I may not be over smart like you.
But I can earn a penny for my family and also take care of the kids.
You cannot even earn a penny and kids are not your cup of tea.
What are you staring at me for?*

Datto reminds Tanu that although she projects an image of a liberated, sophisticated woman, she ultimately relies on a male to financially subsidise this lifestyle (alcohol, shopping, travels). In doing so, Datto does not silently accept Tanu's label of being

“ignorant” – rather, she shames Tanu for her reliance on a patriarchal system of support. Datto has a strong sense of self-worth which she firmly entrenches in her commitment and achievements, and not on any system of male dependence. She further shames Tanu for her disinterest in kids, pointing to Tanu’s inability to function in a domestic and maternal role. Within the confined patriarchal measurements of marriage, motherhood, wifehood and financial dependence, Tanu falls markedly short in comparison to Datto.

Datto’s exchange with Tanu thus marks a critical moment in terms of how the film’s narrative positions their respective femininities and womanhood. While Datto criticises Tanu, she also concomitantly mirrors patriarchal expectations by positioning herself as the ‘ideal’ female, one who is able to earn a living and take care of children. The scene thus dramatises two opposing visions of femininity: the city-bred, indulgent but dependent female versus the rural-bred, state-level athlete, hard-working female. Datto ‘wins’ the verbal war not only argumentatively, but also ideologically – she integrates a sense of independence with domestic acceptability that challenges Tanu’s preconceptions. Datto’s response thereby reveals Tanu’s vulnerability beneath her cockiness, and re-casts herself as the more ‘ideal’ female, one who is independent, disciplined, and capable of both public (earning) and domestic (mothering) labour.

This exchange is the only direct interaction of inter-feminine rivalry between Tanu and Datto. Post their confrontation, there is a repositioning of Tanu. She is now the observer and no longer craving attention; she listens more and speaks less and she is quietly introspective rather than boldly frivolous. She swallows her pride, becoming emotionally vulnerable, and makes two appeals to Manu to convince him not to marry Datto. In the first instance she says: *“I was always like that, crazy. When did you change, Mr. Sharma? Don’t you miss me?”*. In the second instance, her conversation with Manu follows:

Tanu: *I love you, Mr. Sharma. I know you can’t live without me either.*
Manu: *You think we’ll all do as you want. And no one will say anything.*
Tanu: *You can say anything you want but let’s go home, please.*
Manu: *Don’t you get it, Tanuja Trivedi? Everything is over! It’s over.*
After a point of time one gives up, so did I. I can’t do anything more than this. Please, go away.

Tanu: *I haven't given up yet, Manoj Sharma. I will leave only after I see you married.*

Despite his rejection of both her reconciliatory attempts, Tanu's self-punishment is to not only witness Manu's marriage, but also be involved in the wedding preparation. Her decision (which is a self-authored trial) casts Tanu as having agency and control in a situation that is now beyond her control. Rather than being a passive figure of rejection, she thus turns the narrative to one of active observer, choosing agency over loss. By choosing to be a part of the wedding festivities, Tanu repositions the gaze – wedding guests, relatives and friends watch Tanu rather than focus their attention solely on the bride and groom. As discussed earlier, Tanu performed the role of the rebellious young woman to mask hurt feelings. Now, she chooses self-punishment over the creation of any spectacle. In doing so, she begins to accept and acknowledge her hurt feelings, signalling a sense of accountability and emotional maturity.

Tanu performs a song sequence, "*Ghani Bawari*" (Very Crazy), during Manu's wedding to Datto. The song marks Tanu's final unmasking of emotions – she lays bare her feelings for Manu. The lyrics are reflective of her emotional state: *Joh na karna tha kar gayi* (I did what I wasn't supposed to do), *Main bhi kitt jaake mar gayi* (I got myself in this bad situation), *Achhi khasi jattni changi ghani bawri ho gayi* (a good Punjabi girl has become totally crazy), *Main ghani bawri ho gayi* (I've become totally crazy). The camera lingers on her facial expressions, eyes filled with tears, with Manu (in his groom get-up) looking down on her perched on a horse. Tanu's dance, coupled with her expression, song lyrics, garish make-up and brightly coloured costume bring her pain into sharp external focus. Guests, relatives and most importantly, Manu, are all witness to her "mad" pain (see Figure 6.23 below).

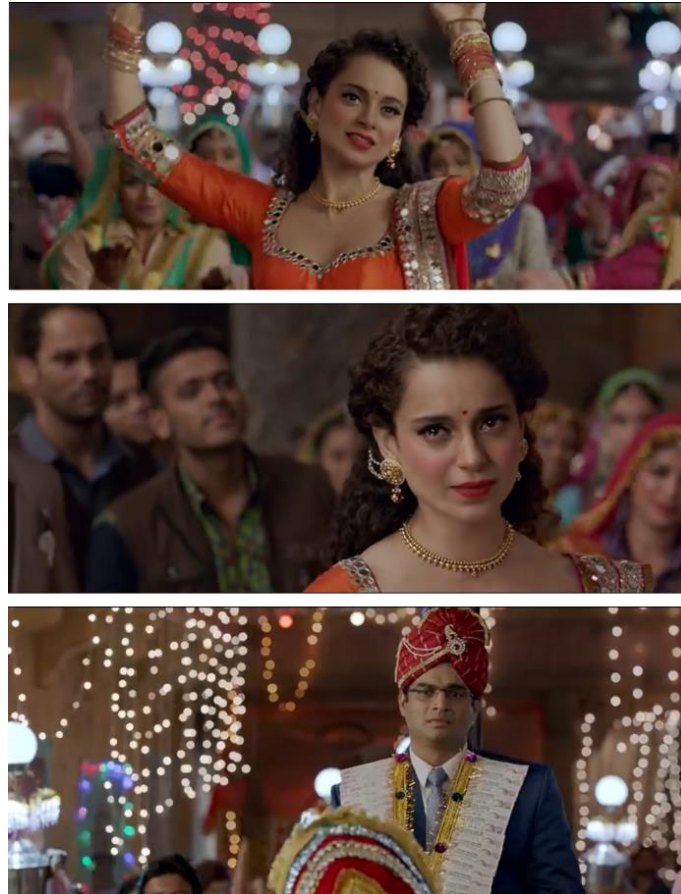


Figure 6.23: Tanu performs a dance at Manu's wedding

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ltt8p>

The film's final moments belong to Datto where she makes the strongest impact. Leading to this point, Datto has been presented as similar to, but also markedly different from, Tanu. They are both strong, assertive women who are able to put forth their point of views, as witnessed during their verbal exchange. They prefer to face confrontations (sometimes physically) rather than retreat and are not afraid to confront patriarchal authority (for example, when Tanu flips the arranged marriage power dynamics and when Datto fights with her family to assert her decision to marry Manu). Both women are outspoken and combative when their dignity is challenged; they refuse passive feminine scripts and command public space with unmistakable voices. A marked difference is that Tanu's impudence can be viewed as parallel to performative boldness – a toxic blend of humour and hurt pride – while Datto's boldness is framed as righteous determination, cemented in work ethics and commitment. The narrative pays tribute to Datto by casting her as respectful and with firm values while Tanu's waspish tongue and scandalous actions reveal her uneasy and chaotic state of mind.

Initially, Datto was reluctant to marry Manu, cautious about his unresolved feelings for Tanu. She asks him *"You do love me, don't you?"* and *"Say it convincingly, or I'm getting out of here"*. On the eve of their wedding, feeling insecure, she visits Manu who tells her, *"All I want to say is don't worry. I'll be a good husband"*. These conversations while signalling Datto's need for honesty and stability also reveal that she did not blindly accept Manu's romantic advances. She, like Tanu, demonstrates agency and carefully interrogates his proposal. Her questioning, however, reveals her vulnerability – she does not want to be a substitute (or second best) because of her resemblance to Tanu but (rightly so) wants to be desired for herself. It could be argued that Datto, whilst exhibiting a strong sense of individuality, is narratively linked to Tanu because of a superficial resemblance. When Datto sees Manu's reluctance to go through with the marriage, she tells him:

I can't do it.
I am an athlete, Mr. Sharma.
I either win or come last.
Never settle for consolation prize.
But who were you putting up this charade for. For me?
Have you heard those announcements in airplanes?
"Please fasten your seatbelts before helping others".
You look after yourself and your wife.
Don't worry about me!
I didn't want a wedding like this.
Look at everyone's faces.
No one's happy. Not even me.

This is a critical moment for Datto where she reveals her self-awareness and refusal to participate in the sham of a wedding (see Figure 6.24 below). She emphasises her foremost identity as an athlete, invoking the sport competitive spirit to show that she will not accept being a 'second choice'. In refusing to marry Manu, she demonstrates her agency, authority and self-respect. Additionally, she refuses to allow Manu's weakness to define the trajectory of her life, and thus, she emerges as the most emotionally stable and decisive character in the film. The airplane metaphor is telling as Datto calls out Manu's responsibility to fix his unresolved marital issues, without involving her. Marriages are typically a moment of great joy and happiness for family and friends, but Datto points to the sad faces around them, reminding Manu that their marriage is no 'quick-fix' to emotional happiness.



Figure 6.24: Datto refuses to marry Manu

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ltt8p>

The scene is not a dramatic one: there is no pleading, loud protestations, spectacle or tears. Datto exits the marriage dais on her own terms, with her respect and dignity intact. In doing so, she casts off the public figure of a rejected, passive woman. It is equally important to note that she does cry alone in her room, signifying a deliberate move to maintain her emotional decorum in public, but process her heartbreak in private.

6.3.4 Devki in *Mom*

At the start of the film *Devki* (Sridevi) is seen in the role of a Biology schoolteacher, stepmother to Arya, mother to Priya (affectionately called Pihu) and wife to Anand (see Figure 6.25 below). As a teacher, she is known to be virtuous and dedicated – her students visit her at home to express their thanks for her assistance saying: “*None of this was possible without you. You educated us, gave us respect. And as a result, we’re independent now*”. She is presented as a warm teacher, who is also not afraid to discipline her students when required. In the opening scenes, she is also positioned as a maternal outside, through her strained relationship with Arya. Arya repeatedly refers to her as “ma’am” and not “mom”. Devki is also Arya’s Biology teacher at school, hence the use of the term “ma’am”. This duality in Arya and Devki’s relationship –

stepmother and teacher – highlights that whilst at school Arya is forced to respect Devki, at home she is at liberty to treat Devki with disrespect. For example, when Arya requests her father to attend a Valentine's Day party, the permission exposes Devki and Arya's fraught relationship with Arya asking: "*Do you need mam's approval for this too?*". In some ways, Devki is thus stripped of her maternal authority at home due to her conflict with Arya, who resents Devki's marriage to her father.



Figure 6.25: Devki in opening scenes as a mother, wife and teacher

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rLytQc7HRY&t=200s>

In a scene with her father, Arya apologises to her father saying:

Arya: *I know I hurt you and ma'am.*

Anand: *When will you stop calling her that? She's your mother.*

Arya: *You've forgotten my mother . . . but not me.*

Anand: *What I did for us was right. I could've never raised you without Devki. She has accepted us. She never differentiated between you and Priya.*

Arya: *I have accepted Pihu. It's always the mother who's blessed with a daughter. And not the other way around.*

Arya's conversation with her father reveals the contentious emotional feelings within their family dynamic. After the passing of her biological mother, Arya resents her father's remarriage to Devki. Anand's reasoning for his marriage to Devki is interesting – justified because he feels she is a good mother, able to help raise Arya. This positioning of Devki highlights a common theme in Hindi cinema of the mother figure as a maternal figure only, devoid of other roles and narrative arcs. Habib (2017: 69) confirms this by stating that the mother figure in Hindi cinema is often depicted as “a great mother who is self-sacrificing. This mother has no desires of her own nor does she have aspirations”. Interestingly, in her role as stepmother to Arya, Devki's role challenges the perception that a biological connection singularly defines motherhood. Another interesting aspect to note is that Anand ostensibly frames his decision to marry Devki to gain a mother figure for Arya, caregiver for their home and not based on any romantic feelings. He admits he would not have been able to raise Arya alone – without any other reasons provided for the marriage. This raises important questions about how mother figures are represented in Hindi cinema in terms of fulfilling domestic and maternal roles at the exclusion of other depictions.

Devki's identity is marked by service to her family. She is seen as a devoted and dependable wife who takes care of holiday bookings, helps her husband pack for his business trip and ensures the household is well-managed. Anand values her as the supportive wife, who maintains domestic harmony by stating “*What will I do without you?*”. Despite the tensions with Arya, Devki's presence as a maternal figure is firmly established. She is the primary caretaker of the children as Anand is largely occupied with work. She is patient and understanding with Arya, saying, “*it's we who need to understand her*” and remains hopeful of one day building a good relationship with her. In the opening scenes, Devki is seen wearing light-coloured clothing (such as white,

beige, cream) to reflect her soft, warm and nurturing qualities as a mother – her costume is an important element in her narrative arc because as the film's narrative track becomes more tense (and dark), so too does Devki's costume.

Following a change in the film's narrative following Arya's brutal assault, Devki is positioned as the avenging mother – who seeks justice for her daughter Arya. With Anand away on a business trip, Devki has sole responsibility of the children and when Arya does not return home from the Valentine's Day party Devki frantically searches for her in the late of the night (see Figure 6.26 below).



Figure 6.26: Devki in her search for Arya at the police station and driving around town

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rLytQc7HRY&t=200s>

In a critical scene at the police station, the exchange between Devki and the police officer proceeds as:

- Devki: *Sir . . . sir . . . I need your help. My daughter hasn't reached home yet. Please help me. I am tensed. My daughter was attending a party at the farm house. I'm trying her phone . . .*
- Police officer: *You shouldn't be worried. It's Valentine's Day. She must be out with her boyfriend. There's no way she'll tell you.*
- Devki: *What are you saying?*
- Police officer: *Ma'am, kids these days are just like that. Don't worry . . . She must be enjoying herself somewhere. We deal with such cases every day.*
- Devki: *Sir, please. You might have dealt with similar cases before. But my daughter isn't like any of them.*

This conversation reveals Devki's anxiety and concern as a mother; an almost instinctive fear that something 'bad' has happened to Arya. She remains steadfast in her repeated requests for help, depicting both strength and determination in light of the police officer's casual dismissal of her worry. Devki, in this scene, represents the atypical Hindi cinema mother in that she is not shown as overly emotional or submissive to male authority. The police officer attempts to trivialise her fear, passing judgement on the stereotype of youthful irresponsibility, yet Devki is determined that he accept the seriousness of the matter. In the scenes that follow, Devki's internal crisis is externally visible through her dishevelled appearance and the use of harsh fluorescent lighting that emphasises every distressed expression. Alone, she signs medical forms, deals with the police and attempts to comfort Arya all while showing remarkable strength. The only instance she is seen vulnerable is when she calls her husband, pleading with him to return from business trip: "*Anand . . . please come back. We really need you. Please come back. Please!*"

After the culprits are found not guilty by the Indian judicial system due to a lack of evidence, Devki is no longer only a nurturing mother figure but transforms into the avenging mother. She embarks on a mission to get justice for Arya as she feels the legal system has failed to do so. In one scene, when the police investigator Mathew Francis apologises for the court ruling, Devki remarks: "*You can get away with rape in this country, but you can't even slap a rapist*". Importantly, she seeks justice for Arya even though Arya is unwilling to accept Devki's maternal comfort and care. It should also be noted that rather than focusing on the fraught relationship between Arya and

Devki, the film's plot is premised on the avenging mother – who is willing to sacrifice her own morals to build a relationship with her stepdaughter. Devki's willingness to commit murder for Arya points to the self-sacrificing mother theme prevalent in Hindi cinema. Chakraborty (2022) confirms this by stating that Hindi cinema is fertile ground for mother figures who play "the nurturer and crusader, a legacy that mothers on screen have been known to convey since the 1957 film *Mother India*". Devki's 'heroic' sacrifice and actions as the ultimate self-sacrificing mother add to this legacy.

In conversation with the private investigator Dayashanker (DK), she says:

Devki: *I don't know whether what I am doing is right or wrong. It's wrong. But doing nothing isn't right either. If you've to choose between wrong and not right, then what will you choose?*

DK: *Have faith in God. He'll fix everything.*

Devki: *God can't be everywhere, Mr. DK. That's why he created mothers.*

Her conversation with DK signals an understanding of her moral sacrifice. She is aware that her actions are 'wrong', but she frames this as ethically necessary (in order to gain justice for Arya). Referencing the mother figure to God links motherhood to a powerful force, perhaps with the intention to legitimise her actions. Like God, a mother is to protect her children at all costs – and as such, her actions possibly transcend any moral boundaries associated with vigilante justice. As Devki meticulously plots the punishment for each of the four criminals, helped along by the sympathetic DK, the *mise-en-scène* shifts to darker tones. Her costumes are no longer light-coloured and she now dresses in darker tones, a shift that symbolises her dark thoughts and possibly, the moral weight of her actions.

Arya's father, Anand, comes under police scrutiny as Devki punishes each criminal. It is interesting to note the gender dynamics at play in this scrutiny as Devki is not suspected as the possible vigilante. This suggests that, as a mother, she is seen in the traditional role of nurturer and caregiver, which is a dramatic shift from the perceptions associated with vigilante justice (such as aggression and violence). During a conversation with Anand, the police investigator Mathew explains why he suspects him: "*I think a man's capable of doing anything when he's angry*". Anand, as a man, is considered capable of seeking violent justice, whilst Devki, as the 'dutiful wife' and

'caring mother' does not feature on the police radar. This lack of suspicion allows Devki to carry out her vengeance with success.

In one symbolically loaded scene, Devki and DK meet in a modern art gallery to secretly exchange information about one of the criminals. They look at a modern painting, essentially a blotch of red paint, which DK finds puzzling (see Figure 6.27 below). Their conversation in the gallery:

Devki: *Stay here for a while and appreciate this painting.*

DK: *What is this painting about?*

Devki: *It's when Draupadi washed her tresses with Dushasana's blood. Look around you. This artist's theme is Mahabharata. The oldest revenge story.*



Figure 6.27: Devki and DK look at an abstract painting of Draupadi in a gallery

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rLytQc7HRY&t=200s>

The reference to Draupadi, a female figure in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, recollects an iconic moment of mythological revenge and righteous female rage. During the humiliation of her attempted public disrobing at the hands of Dushasana, Draupadi prays to Lord Krishna for divine intervention which is regarded as her 'war of justice' and which depicts her as not "only powerful but as a woman filled with vengeance as well as resistance" (Motswapong, 2017: 489). She vows to leave her hair untied until she washes it with Dushasana's blood. The positioning of Devki in front of Draupadi's painting is deliberate as a parallel is drawn between the two acts of vengeance. Draupadi was disrobed in the Kaurava court (Motswapong, 2017) and Devki was symbolically disrobed (through the denial of justice for Arya) in the Indian judicial court.

Both women, denied justice by their respective courts, turn to blood for vengeance. Of significance is that both these courts are systemically patriarchal in structure – consisting of male figures in authority passing judgement on a female.

By drawing a parallel between Devki and Draupadi, the film's narrative legitimises Devki's violent actions through Hindu mythology. Tiwari (2024) and Jha (2021) confirm that Hindi films drew inspiration from Hindu mythology, and often present women as idealised figures of values, virtues and morals. Dwyer (2014) also states that history of numerous female stereotypes in Hindi cinema goes back to Hindu mythology, which offers a pool of symbolical figures who represent idealised and transgressive femininities. Draupadi is seen as a transgressive figure of femininity due to her thirst for vengeance and retribution. In establishing the mythological link with Devki and Draupadi, it could be argued that the narrative also affirms a timeless truth of Indian femininity and womanhood (framed within the dualities of idealised and transgressive femininities).

In a reversal of power, Devki visits one of the perpetrators (Charles) in hospital after she poisons him with cyanide (see Figure 6.28 below). Devki tells Charles that "*what happened to my daughter that night, happens every night*" emphasising that Arya's assault was not an isolated assault. The mental assault is ongoing as Arya navigates the trauma of the horrific attack. She goes on to tell him, speaking over his distorted figure on the hospital bed: "*What were you guys screaming that night? 'CALL YOUR MOM?' Here's her mom*". She claims her status as Arya's mother and concomitantly claims maternal justice for her child. A dark parallel could be drawn between Devki's dominant position over Charles's prone figure – Devki is now displaying female dominance over a male figure, a symbolic reversal of the assault on Arya.



Figure 6.28: Devki visits Charles in hospital

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rLytQc7HRY&t=200s>

In the film's final scene, Devki is confronted by the fourth (and most dangerous) criminal (Jagan). The scene is set against a snow-covered landscape (see Figure 6.29 below), possibly to position Devki's vigilante justice as pure and cleansing (in relation to the symbolism of white snow). Additionally, the snow-covered landscape serves as a stark backdrop for the unfolding scene: a dark-clothed Jagan confronted by the white-clothed Devki, suggestive of a battle between good (white connotes purity) and evil (black connotes darkness, sinful). Hot on the heels of Jagan is police investigator Mathew Francis, who arrives in time to stop Jagan from murdering Devki. When Devi confronts Jagan with a gun, Francis tells her to drop the weapon as she will go to jail for Jagan's murder. Devki responds: "*How dare he touch my daughter!*", while staring fixedly at Jagan and tells Francis: "*It will happen again and there's nothing you can do*". On the one hand Francis represents lawful procedures and that punishment should be legally prescribed by those in authoritative power. On the other hand, Devki voices the failure of the legal system to punish criminals, attributing such failure to not only this one incident, but rather, to the larger police and judicial systems that seem incapable of protecting women.



Figure 6.29: Devki confronts Jagan in the film's climax

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rLytQc7HRY&t=200s>

Francis has some sort of epiphany and tells Devki: *"If you want to kill him, then use the right gun"* (handing over his police weapon). Francis's change of mind could be seen as an implied legal legitimacy of Devki's acts of vigilantism. Francis, as a figure of lawful authority, gives Devki the permission to kill Jagan through a symbol of power – his official police weapon. Unbeknownst to all three, Arya is hiding amongst the trees, a silent spectator to the confrontation. She overhears Jagan recite Devki's acts of revenge: *"She . . . poisoned my best friend. She framed Mohit. And emasculated Baburam"*. The moment is significant as prior to this Arya maintained an emotional and physical distance from Devki – refusing to accept Devki as a maternal figure. Now, however, she becomes aware of Devki's unconditional and self-sacrificing maternal love. With Francis shouting "shoot him!" and Jagan pleading for forgiveness Devki hears the whispered word *"Mom"* (from Arya) and pulls the trigger multiple times, killing Jagan. Arya's eventual use of the word "mom" functions as the film's narrative closure – Devki is finally accepted by Arya as a maternal figure.

6.4 Summary

In this chapter an in-depth analysis outlining the framing of the female protagonists in four selected films was presented. Each film (with emphasis on the positioning of the leading female protagonist/s) was critically read along key aspects such as narrative positioning, dialogue and mise-en-scène elements. Silk, in *The Dirty Picture*, is framed as a hyper-sexual woman through the use of close-up camera angles, seductive

choreography and provocative dialogue. All of this work to emphasise Silk as a sexual object – whose body is ultimately framed as a site of objectification, power and vulnerability. In *Queen*, Rani's framing is one of transformation from obedience to assertiveness and dependence to autonomy. Both the narrative construction and mise-en-scène elements (such as costumes, dance, lighting) work together to highlight her character's transformative arc. Tanu and Datto, in *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*, are played by the same actress (Kangana Ranaut). Both these characters are presented as operating within two different frameworks of womanhood: the city-bred, indulgent but dependent female versus the rural-bred, state-level athlete, hard-working female. Devki, in *Mom*, is positioned as the avenging mother above any other identity. The film used darker tones (both in mise-en-scène and dialogues) to depict Devki's shift from the caring maternal figure to the vigilante mother. The chapter has discussed, in-depth, how the narrative framings, mise-en-scène elements and dialogue work together to construct notions of womanhood and femininity. Chapter Seven builds on the textual analysis by way of a thematic analysis of the selected films to identify and examine recurring patterns in relation to female representations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: RECURRING PATTERNS

Think of themes like the main characters in a movie. Just as the main characters drive the plot and bring the story to life, themes are the key ideas that drive our understanding of the data. Each theme is like a main character with its own unique role to play. Just as a film might have multiple main characters who interact and shape the plot of the story together, a data set can have multiple themes that work together to create a complete picture.

(Yardley, 2025: para. 25 line 1)

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a thematic analysis across the four films under investigation to explore patterns in the representation of women in Hindi cinema. The thematic analysis forms an important aspect of the study as it allows for a close and deep comparative reading of all four films. The thematic analysis approach briefly explains presences (summarised from a textual reading of the leading female protagonists in Chapter Six of this study) and more significantly, absences that render women invisible. It then moves to understanding the implications of patterned gender roles across all four films and lastly, comparing these national award-winning representations with portrayals in mainstream Hindi cinema.

7.2 Research Question 1: How do the women appear ('presences') and how do they not appear ('absences')?

Table 7.1 below identifies the ways in which the key female characters in all four films are visible (presences) and rendered invisible (absences).

Table 7.1: Coding Matrix of Presences and Absences

Film	Character	Presences	Examples of (Presences)	Absences	Examples of (Absences)
<i>The Dirty Picture</i>	Silk	Rebellious daughter	Runs away from home, defying her mother's authority	Domestic legitimacy (wife, daughter)	- Branded 'the other woman' - Ramakant refuses to marry her - Dies before reconciling with her mother
		Erotic spectacle; vamp; bold	- Close-up camera angles; revealing costumes; bold body language - Provocative moves in dance choreography (e.g., 'Ooh La La') - Provocative dialogue: <i>I have what boys desire. So, who is better? Me or a boy?</i> - Provocative dialogue: <i>Films need three things, entertainment, entertainment and . . . entertainment. And I am entertainment.</i>	Career survival	- Attempt at producing her own film fails - Ridiculed by industry
		Moral censure	Affairs with Suryakant and his brother Ramakant	Respect from peers	- Mocked by industry and public - Anti-'Silk' marches
		Sexual power	Uses seduction to enter films; flirts with producers and Suryakant	Meaningful sexual relationships	Sexual liaisons are transactional not emotional
		Sexual commodity	- Item songs marketed on her body - Producers place emphasis on her sexuality for box-office appeal		

Queen	Rani	Dutiful daughter; obedient fiancée	▪ Agreeable to an arranged marriage ▪ Asks permissions from father and then fiancé to work	Genuine sexual freedom/ agency	▪ Innocent kiss with Italian chef does not develop any further
		Transformative journey; solo travel: becomes assertive and confident	▪ Travels to Paris and Amsterdam alone ▪ Confronts a thief in Paris, drives a car at night in Amsterdam ▪ Refuses to reconcile with Vijay; returns ring	Romantic explorations	▪ Interactions with Marcello/Alexander remain platonic
		Friendship	▪ Bond with Vijaylaxmi in Paris ▪ Bond with hostel roommates in Amsterdam	Sustained career	▪ No long-term professional development
Tanu Weds Manu Returns	Tanu	Unhappy wife	▪ Opening scene with mental health practitioners	Financial independence	▪ Manu tells her that she never wanted to work or have any career plans ▪ Datto tells her: <i>"You cannot even earn a penny and kids are not your cup of tea"</i>
		Flamboyant; assertive; scandalous	▪ Appearing dressed in a towel to greet guests ▪ Drunken scenes	Career aspirations	▪ No evidence of ambition/career aspirations
		Performative spectacle	▪ Flirting with old and new admirers to mask unhappiness	Intimacy	▪ Manu recalls last sexual encounter was years ago
		Introspective; self-punishing	▪ Wants to witness Manu get married	Sexual agency	▪ Flirtation is performative, no genuine desire shown

Tanu Weds Manu Returns	Datto	Disciplined athlete; financially independent; hard-working	Introduced as state-level athlete; provides for her family	Marriage/happy ending – domestic legitimacy	Refuses to marry Manu because she is aware of his unresolved feelings for Tanu
		Not a second choice; ethically clear	Dialogue: “Never settle for consolation prize.”	Desirability beyond resemblance	Manu drawn to her because of physical similarity to Tanu
		De-glamourised appearance	No (or minimal make-up); cropped boyishly-cut hair; functional clothing	Career development	Career arc ends post-graduation, focus shifts to marriage
Mom	Devki	Teacher	Opening classroom scenes with students	Identity beyond motherhood	Arc defined by stepmother/ mother who transforms into a vigilante/ avenger
		Wife	- Domestic scenes with husband Anand - Taking care of the household and children in his absence	Romantic/ sexual desire	No intimacy or affection shown between Devki and Anand
		Mother/Stepmother	- Loving mother to Pihu - Fractured relationship with Arya	Career longevity	Teaching role disappears once she seeks revenge
		Maternal vigilantism (breaking of legal and moral codes)	Partners with a private investigator to punish each culprit		

7.2.1 Presences

The presences have been discussed earlier in this chapter, as part of the character analysis. To summarise the key presences, Silk is the typical vamp figure who is sexually liberated, shown as morally corrupt and who is ultimately punished for her deeds (Mulvey, 1975; Jose, 2017). Silk dances in bold costumes, embraces her body as a form of sexual power and is not afraid to speak her mind. Rani’s presence is initially seen within the confines of a dutiful daughter and obedient future wife, who

later transforms into a more assertive young woman – a transformative experience that is parallel to feminist film theory’s documentation of cinema as reinforcing feminine myths even while other texts challenge them (Smelik, 2016).

Tanu and Datto mark their presence through two contrasting depictions of femininity and womanhood. Tanu disrupts the traditional stereotype of the ideal wife by expressing her dissatisfaction with marriage. Datto destabilises the image of a rural-bred woman as she strives for education and a better quality of life through sports. Devki is the avenging mother who crosses over legal and moral grounds for her stepdaughter. Devki’s representation echoes recurring patterns where women in Hindi cinema are positioned and defined within maternal/domestic roles rather than any personal ambitions. Chaturvedi (2023: 674) confirms this by stating that Hindi cinema has a history of depicting women in domestic roles, such as the mother who is “self-sacrificing, generous, nurturers, caregivers, virtuous and chaste” at the expense of any individual aspirations. These representations are not entirely new – they stem from Hindi cinema’s long legacy of stereotypes and ideal figures of for example, *the mother*, *the vamp*, *daughter*, *Sita* and *wife* (as discussed in-depth in Chapter Four of this study).

7.2.2 Absences

Based on the coding matrix, the following recurring themes were identified in terms of absences (next page):

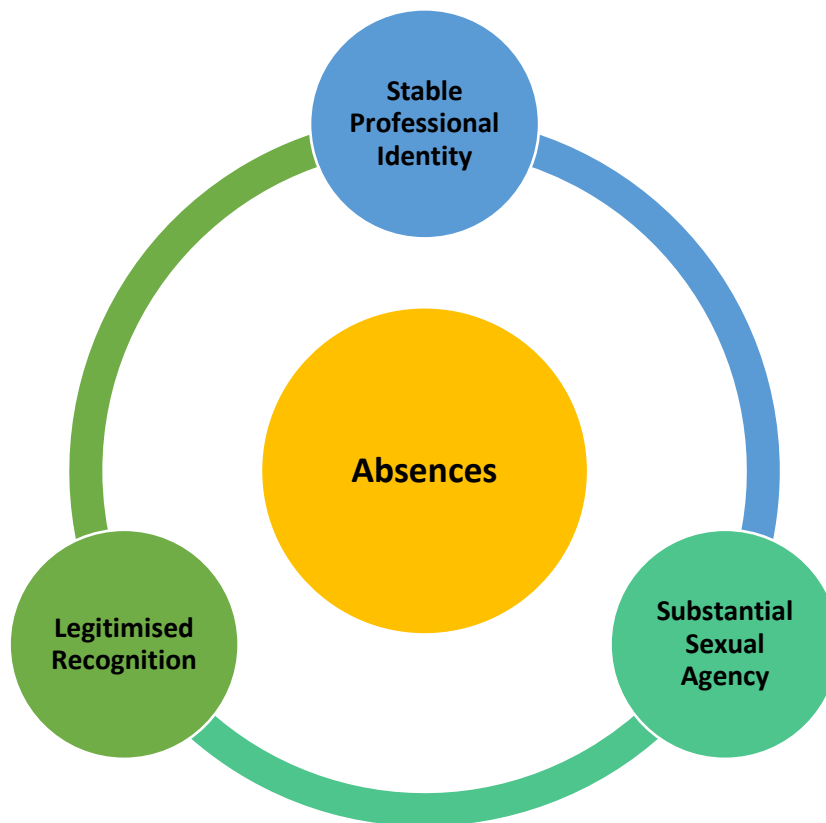


Figure 7.1: Final Themes with respect to Absences

Source: Author

(a) Stable Professional Identity

In the selected films, the female characters' arcs are often limited in terms of establishing any stable professional identity. Although Silk, Rani (eventually), Tanu, Datto and Devki are all presented as assertive, strong and confident women they are not framed as such in any lasting professional capacity. As a result, their agency as professional women are fleeting – a momentary narrative inclusion. Silk's attempt to gain professional legitimacy and respect from her peers through her own film production is a massive failure. She is also ridiculed as an artist, her talent and effort overlooked because of the focus on her sexuality and her foregrounding as an object of desire. When her sexual appeal wanes (due to age, newcomers in the industry and weight gain), Silk is erased from the professional film space, reflective of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978). In other words, Silk is systematically removed from the professional domain, rendered invisible as an artist and marginalised through a narrative that is dismissive of her accomplishments. Deb (2023: 107) concurs with this by stating that “historically, female characters in Indian films have often been portrayed

as passive objects of desire, with their appearance and sexuality prioritised over their agency and individuality”.

In Amsterdam, Rani’s entry in a cooking competition attempts to emphasise her skills but the narrative ignores placing any sustained focus on cooking as a professional career. Symbolically, Rani’s cooking skills and business acumen are trivialised and downplayed through a steady focus on her transformative journey (sightseeing, new experiences, new friendships, etc.) rather than exploring any meaningful long-term career aspirations. This narrative choice thus avoids challenging issues regarding women’s employment and career aspirations – important aspects that are absent from Rani’s transformative journey. A focus on Rani’s professional capabilities would have added a rich layer to her overall transformative arc – from her domestic skills of cooking to a viable professional skill.

Tanu is presented as bold, assertive and confident yet this does not translate into economic independence. At the start of the film, Manu emphasises Tanu’s lack of any career aspirations. Tanu complains about his meagre salary restricting the enjoyment in their marriage, yet she makes no attempt to financially contribute to their livelihood. Symbolically, she is omitted from the economic sphere through a narrative prioritisation of a disillusioned and bored wife. Datto’s sporting aspirations come to an abrupt halt post her university graduation. She agrees to marry Manu and the focus now shifts to her suitability as a wife, rather than on her potential to establish a career.

At the outset of the film, Devki is presented as a Biology school teacher. Once she embarks on her vigilante journey, however, her career and professional identity are rendered invisible. Rather, the narrative now emphasises (makes visible) her role as the avenging mother. The film’s ending, with the word “Mom” whispered by Arya, places emphasis on her role as a mother – a status earned through her acts of vigilantism. Holistically, all these characterisations reveal a recurring pattern: women may occupy central and commanding narrative positions, yet this does not lead to the narrative development of any stable professional career or aspirations. Career goals and women as active contributors to the economy remain in the background and are absent from any meaningful narrative construction. Tenjerla (2023: 5) supports this view by stating that “Bollywood should consider giving the character of a working woman more space” adding also that depictions of female employment should move

“away from the general stereotypical jobs of being a writer or a teacher, with little to no importance given to their work life in the movies itself”. Cumulatively, these representations of female employment and professional identity across all four films highlight a resonant gendered negotiation that a woman’s work is ostensibly a ‘passion project’ rather than any real profession.

(b) Legitimised Recognition

Throughout these films, legitimate recognition is closely monitored, gated and regulated in terms of which female characters are ‘accepted’ to be recognised as legitimate participants in the domestic order and under what conditions. The gatekeepers are varied from family, friends and industry peers but the outcome is largely the same: women are permissible to be looked at and also narratively central, yet their legitimate wife/daughter/motherhood is withheld, limited, or premised on self-erasure. Silk, who is positioned as a sexual spectacle for the male gaze and desire, is at the same time denied legitimate recognition by that very spectacle. She is denied the respectability of wifedom (Ramakant refuses to marry her); is not recognised as a daughter (her mother refuses Silk’s reconciliatory attempt) and is mocked by industry peers and certain sectors of the public (a denial of artistic credibility). Even at the end of the film, Silk is denied the opportunity to reconcile with her mother – she commits suicide before meeting with her mother. Her suicide is also a form of symbolic annihilation – she is narratively erased and punished for her sexuality and rebellion; removed from the spheres of domesticity and profession.

Rani’s transformative journey is achieved through a distancing from her family which frames independence through a separation. This could be suggestive that female independence is only a possible narrative construction through a separation from the legitimate space of family. Her transformative arc is framed as a personal journey, away from the influence and security of her family. What is also absent is any description of Rani’s transformation within the family domain – as a daughter, sister and granddaughter. Tanu is denied legitimate recognition as a wife – she is mocked by her husband, mother-in-law and Datto for her inability to maintain her marriage; denying her the recognition of a ‘good wife’. Her eventual reconciliation with Manu is, in itself, a restriction, as she is denied the final decision. It is Datto who ultimately walks away from the marriage dais. In terms of symbolic annihilation, it could be argued that

by removing Tanu from this decision (reconciliation with Manu), her character arc is trivialised. She is denied any significant contribution to the narrative of Datto not marrying Manu – her return to Manu is based on Datto's 'largesse'.

Datto, like Silk, is presented as the 'other woman' and denied wifedom (domestic legitimacy) when she walks away from her marriage to Manu. Unlike Silk though, as the 'other woman', Datto is presented as someone who is grounded in strong ethics and morals – yet she is punished for these very principles through a narrative refusal of entry into the legitimate space of marriage. Devki's status as a mother is denied legitimacy through any meaningful development of a relationship with her stepdaughter. Rather, her status as a mother is validated only when she crosses moral and legal boundaries by turning to vigilante justice. There is a marked absence of any scenes in the film that speak to a building of their stepmother/stepdaughter relationship. Devki's vigilante acts thus earn her the title of 'mom' from Arya (her stepdaughter), but at the exclusion of any other signifiers of mothering (such as mutual caring, affection, trust). In a way, Devki is symbolically annihilated through her trivialisation (reduction) as a stepmother as the film's narrative denies Devki any legitimate space to build a relationship with her stepdaughter.

This recurring pattern, of gated legitimised recognition, emphasises how female gender roles are often policed in Hindi cinema. Khan and Taylor (2018: 3643) add to this understanding by explaining that in Hindi cinema, when women "are seen as violating prescriptive gender roles, they often face intentional discrimination or harassment as a consequence". It can be argued then that legitimacy in the domestic realm as daughter/wife/mother is thus gated, or made conditional, which aligns with Khan and Taylor's (2018) documentation that female characters who operate outside normative expectations are met with some form of punitive measure.

(c) Substantial Sexual Agency

In the selected films, a woman's sexuality is predominantly presented within limited confines and not as a substantial, or defining, part of her identity. Trivedi (2021: 1) provides critical insight in relation to this view by stating that "female sexuality is 'veiled' for the audience of the world's largest film-producing and film-viewing nation, India". The word "veiled" suggest that depictions of female sexuality (and thus desire) is hidden – from audiences, and narratively. In *The Dirty Picture*, Silk is presented as

overtly sexual – yet her sexuality is commodified (transactional) and manipulative (she uses her sexuality for career progress). What is absent is any meaningful self-expression of sexual desire. In the film, Silk is repeatedly presented as a sexual spectacle for the pleasure of the male gaze. This is achieved through the use of revealing costumes, close-up camera angles of her body, seductive choreography and provocative dialogue. There is no authentic framing of Silk's sexual desires for any real intimacy or emotional value. Her overtly sexual representation in the film thus does not translate into any emotionally meaningful expression(s) of sexual desire. Symbolically, Silk's is condemned (punished) for her sexuality through narrative erasure (suicide).

In *Queen*, Rani's self-initiated kiss with the Italian chef is an innocent exploration of her sexuality – what is absent is any substantial self-authored sexual desire. In this scene, her sexual desire is presented more as sexual curiosity through the lens of innocence. Narratively, her innocence remains shielded through an avoidance of any romantic developments (she is denied sexual agency by not developing relationships with both Marcello and Aleksander). Her sexuality is thus symbolically trivialised, through sanitisation, and relegated to the background of her transformative journey. The film thus locates Rani's sexual agency into an innocent and safe mode, resulting in a sanitised sexual expression.

In *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*, Tanu's sexuality is performative (as a spectacle to mask her hurt feelings) rather than any authentic self-expression of sexual desire. She flirts with her admirers without crossing any physical boundaries – she remains the 'chaste' wife. Sexual desire is something absent from her marriage as well – at the start of the film her husband recalls their last intimate encounter was years ago. Cumulatively, these framings render her as absent from meaningful and substantial sexual agency. She is seen more as a flirt, than expressive any meaningful sexual desire. Datto, by her de-glamourised appearance (short hair, functional clothing) is de-sexualised. Her interactions with Manu are devoid of any romantic gestures or expressions of sexual desire. Crucially, it is thus evident that her appeal is about her physical resemblance to Tanu – what is absent is any sexual desire for her as an individual.

Likewise, in *Mom*, Devki's sexual agency is absent – she is a wife to Anand, yet there is no exploration of any intimacy or desire. Her sexuality, and sexual agency, are

displaced to make room for her framing as the avenging mother. Trivedi (2021: 1) aligns the identity of a woman as daughter, wife, sister or mother to sexuality by arguing that “the concept of sex as a means of pleasure for women is quite ‘unaccepted’ and ‘non-existent’ [in Hindi cinema]” and “when a woman decides to unmute herself and express her sexual desires; it brings her ‘moral’ character under scrutiny”. Trivedi’s (2021) argument thus supports the findings that in all four films under analysis, female sexual desire is either commodified (Silk); presented as innocence – sanitised desire (Rani), a performance (without any actual sexual expressions) to mask feelings (Tanu); silenced through her resemblance to Tanu and de-glamourised look (Datto) or muted due to motherhood (Devki). It could be argued that the absence of substantial sexual agency reinforces expected gender roles for women – that as a ‘chaste’, ‘pure’ and ‘virtuous’ daughter/sister/wife/mother. These films fail to represent a leading female protagonist who expresses her desire, sets her own boundaries, experiences authentic and mutually beneficial sexual pleasure and balances her sexuality within all contextual domains (for example, at home; work) without any condemnation or punitive measures faced.

7.3 Research Question 2: How do these representations reflect broader constructions of female gender roles?

In all four films under analysis, the leading female characters are central narrative figures, yet, this centrality is narratively carefully controlled through the absences of professional stability, substantial sexual agency and legitimised recognition. The films create opportunities for varied female expressions, positioning and agency, however, these are often not recognised through legitimate spaces (for example, domesticity, family, marriage). Cumulatively, these female protagonists both contest certain gender roles (such as the dutiful daughter, obedient fiancée, domestically-confined mother and ideal wife) but, also reinforce certain gender roles, largely through absences and symbolic annihilation. As discussed in the sections above, while Silk, Rani, Tanu, Datto and Devki challenge gendered narratives, this remains largely episodic and fleeting. At the end, their characterisations maintain particular deeply entrenched gender roles within the confines of sexual restraint, domesticity and respectability.

In *The Dirty Picture*, Silk disrupts the ‘dutiful daughter’ figure at the very outset of the film. She runs away from home and uses her sexuality to enter the film industry. Her

sexual power, however, is short-lived and dependent on patriarchal authority as her sexuality is commodified and valued for commercial benefits. Her sexual appeal and career eventually wane, and she is ultimately narratively erased through her suicide. Her tragic ending reinforces the theme of punishment – she is to be condemned for living her life outside respectable feminine boundaries (as a ‘vamp’ rather than a dutiful daughter, wife, mother). It could be thus argued that whilst the film displays episodic female agency, the narrative ultimately maintains a particular gendered perspective – a rebellious, transgressive, sexually liberal woman is punitively controlled. Kishore (2014) supports this view stating that in Hindi cinema a sexually liberated woman, such as Silk, is punished as a danger to society.

Rani’s characterisation begins with the stereotypes of a dutiful daughter and obedient fiancée but shifts through her transformative journey. She is later recast as assertive, independent and confident, yet, this is transformation largely defined within her personal space. Her competence (skills as a chef) and sexuality as a young woman are never truly developed outside her personal space (no sustained career, no romantic entanglements). It could thus be argued that whilst the film’s narrative contests female obedience to male authority, this contestation is restricted to the confines of her personal space and not seen as broadly transformative. In other words, Rani’s autonomy is her solo transformative reality, and not transformative in terms of the structures (economic, female sexuality) around her.

Tanu explicitly challenges the figure of the ‘dutiful wife’ and *Sita* figure in Hindi cinema. She is bold, verbally expressive, drinks, smokes and is assertive. Her feminine confidence and swagger, however, are largely framed as a spectacle which works to legitimise her scandalous behaviour through the mask of hurt feelings. It could be argued though that whilst Tanu ostensibly breaks the typical Hindi cinema stereotype of the dutiful wife, her character predominantly upholds an expected narrative of a wife – she is economically dependent on her husband and despite all her protestations about her ‘boring’ married life, wants to remain married to him. It is important to note also that none of the arguments cited at the beginning of the film about her dissatisfaction with her marriage (such as a ‘boring’ husband, no excitement, no excitement, lack of money, etc.) are ever truly addressed and resolved. The film thus

prioritises the return of the wife to her husband, reinforcing the stereotype of the dutiful wife.

Datto is a mix of a traditional figure in Hindi cinema, the dutiful would-be-wife (who is grounded as ethically moral, principled and disciplined), and a competent, state-level athlete. Her sporting identity, however, is not further developed into any stable career and as the dutiful would-be-wife, she is eventually excluded from the domain of wifehood. It could be argued then, that while Datto challenges the conventional roles of a woman as a caregiver/housewife and breadwinner (she claims to Tanu to earn money to support her family), narratively, the film reinforces policing of women who do not fit within the confines of traditional, expected gendered behaviour. Datto's characterisation is denied entry into the respectability of wifehood and any development of her as a 'state-level athlete' goes unrecognised.

In *Mom*, Devki represents an alternate version of the traditional mother figure in Hindi cinema. Whilst she is the conventional nurturing, self-sacrificing and caring mother figure, she is also vengeful, unafraid to seek justice outside legal and moral boundaries. Coupled with this is, that her depiction of a mother draws inspiration from Hindu mythology, specifically, the figure of *Draupadi*. Devki's vigilantism is justified through this mythological reference, signalling a sacred intention behind her move for justice. It could be argued that while Devki makes cracks into the stereotyped Hindi cinema mother portrayal, her identity and power as a woman is ultimately confined to the space of vigilante motherhood.

A recurring pattern, or theme, in these four films with respect to gender roles is that whilst the female characters are assertive, have (or develop) autonomy and are expressive, their presence remains largely confined to limited representations.

As already discussed in this chapter, they are routinely denied any stable professional narratives or career aspirations, fall short of developing any meaningful sexual agency and are not always guaranteed legitimate recognition (such as daughter, wife, mother). Their representations, cumulatively, are thus limited to challenges related to the person (such as solo travel, avenging mother, scandalous spectacle) rather than on contesting (or even addressing) broader structural issues linked to family authority, sexual desire and economic participation. As such, these representations signal a

modest reconfiguration of female gender roles, but predominantly reinforce wider constructions of expected female gender roles – the obedient wife returns to her husband, the de-sexualised and athletic woman is denied a sexual identity and marriage, the vamp is punished and the mother's power is only defined through motherhood.

7.4 Research Question 3: How is the issue of women representation reflected in Hindi (National Award) films today in comparison to traditional and stereotypical representation of women in mainstream Hindi films?

The analysis reveals that traditional mainstream stereotypes and figures from Hindi cinema still persist in national award-winning films. Silk is framed as the vamp; Rani is the dutiful daughter and obedient fiancée; Tanu is the returning, contrite wife; and Devki is cast as the sacrificial mother. These representations all resonate with traditional stereotypes and central figures entrenched in mainstream Hindi cinema (c.f. Gokulsing and Dissanyake, 2004). Women are still principally defined in terms of their kinship (daughter, mother, wife, 'other woman') to the male authority figures in their life. Prabhakar (2014) confirms this by adding that women's identities are rarely, if at all, sustained outside patriarchal relational contexts. Trivialisation, punishment and omission (Tuchman, 1978) of the leading women still persist in varying forms across all four films. As discussed earlier, Silk is narratively punished (erased due to suicide, denied wifedom and motherhood); Datto is denied wifedom; Tanu's status as a discontent wife remains unresolved; and Devki's identity is defined through sacrificial motherhood.

These films, do, however signal shifts in the representation of women in Hindi cinema. For example, Tanu is expressive about her discontent with marriage; Datto asserts her decision to not be 'second choice'; Rani refuses to reunite with Vijay; and Devki is unafraid to cross legal and moral (weaponising motherhood) boundaries. The vamp archetype is reconfigured when Rani dances to a popular 'vamp song' without being rendered as a sexual object for the pleasure of the male gaze. Datto's representation is the strongest departure in terms of female portrayal in Hindi cinema. She is rural-bred, has a strong regional accent and is raised within a strong patriarchal environment. Datto, however, is not framed as 'backward' or lacking aspiration – she

is a state-level athlete, aspirational, competent and skilled. She thus embodies a new type of modernity, framed outside the stigma of rural 'backwardness'.

These shifts show that the films, where female protagonists won a national award for their performances, do attempt to broaden the representations of women in Hindi cinema. These attempts, however, remain largely contained and episodic. The central positions they narratively occupy do not significantly translate to momentous shifts in the representation of women – careers, economic independence, meaningful sexual agency and legitimised recognition. Ultimately, a woman's agency (sexually, economically, domestically) is either contained, narratively erased/punished or depicted through reconciliatory measures rather than any structural reconfiguration. The shifts in the representation of women in the selected films, however, should not be dismissed. These shifts signal an important move toward women as central narrative figures with increased complexity. These films reveal that representations of females in Hindi cinema are changing – however there remains an echo of containment within familiar patriarchal structures.

7.5 Summary

In summary, this chapter used a thematic analysis approach to identify and explore recurrent patterns in terms of absences and presences, gender role implications and comparisons to representations of women in traditional (mainstream) Hindi cinema. The chapter highlighted three recurring absences: (i) stable professional identity; (ii) substantial sexual agency; and (iii) legitimised recognition. Additionally, the study emphasised a modest reconfiguration, or recasting, of female gender roles across the four films. In other words, the leading female protagonists ultimately reinforce wider constructions of expected female gender roles – the obedient wife returns to her husband, the de-glamourised athletic woman is denied a sexual identity and marriage, the vamp is punished through suicide and the mother's power is limitedly defined through motherhood. The national award-winning films also echo female stereotypes and key figures prevalent in mainstream Hindi cinema. Echoed stereotypes and figures include the vamp, the obedient daughter, the contrite (and eventually dutiful) wife and the self-sacrificing mother (whose justice is validated through a reference to Hindu mythology). Shifts in these representations are noted, but they tend to operate

either with limitations or episodically. Chapter Eight concludes the study; provides recommendations and discusses avenues for future research.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Introduction

On average, India produces over 1 000 films annually, of which the Hindi cinema industry alone accounts for around 340 films (Galalite Screens, 2025). Hindi cinema, popularly referred to as 'Bollywood', is a part of the wider Indian film industry, which includes other regional language cinema such as Bhojpuri, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Telegu and others. Hindi cinema is enjoyed across the globe, beyond the Asian sub-continent, extending to, for example, South Africa, Nigeria, Russia, Australia, Greece, Canada and the United States of America. Additionally, with the expansion of the Indian diaspora across the world and internet-driven globalisation, Hindi films are today a transnational cultural force. Concomitant with its global transnational reach, Hindi cinema also plays a crucial role in the construction and circulation of dominant social norms, cultural values and Indian identity. Thus, it can be argued that Hindi cinema's global visibility magnifies its position as an ideological apparatus.

To this, Dwyer (2014: 7) adds that Hindi cinema not only reflects society, but also 'imagines it' in "ways that often eschew the values of realism" playing a significant role in "creating a way of comprehending the way society is and how it should be". Hindi cinema, as a "mighty cultural product" also "inculcate beliefs and offer ways of understanding the world" (Dwyer, 2014: 8). Research on the representation of women in Hindi cinema is thus an important area of study, that calls for scholarly investigation on, for example, how gender norms, behaviours and expectations are reflected, reinforced and even contested on screen. This chapter provides a concluding synthesis of the study: *The Recasting of Female Gender Roles: An Analysis of the Representation of Female Protagonists in Bollywood Cinema (National Film Awards 2010–2018)*. This final chapter presents a synthesis of the key findings, outlines the limitations involved and highlights directions for future research.

8.2 Study Approach Reviewed

The study set out to investigate how Hindi cinema (National Film Awards in the Best Actress Category, 2010–2018) recasts female gender roles, exploring key concepts such as absences, presences and symbolic annihilation. In addition, these representations were examined to explore implications on the wider constructions of female gender roles. Two key methodological approaches guided the study – a textual analysis and a reflexive thematic analysis. These two approaches were used to critically read the four films under analysis in this study – *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Queen* (2013), *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), and *Mom* (2017). Through the analysis, the study addressed the following three research questions:

1. How do the female characters in the films under analysis appear in film (the ‘presences’) and thus, how do they not appear in film (the ‘absences’)?
2. How do these representations reflect broader constructions of female gender roles?
3. How is the issue of women representation reflected in Hindi (National Award) films today in comparison to traditional and stereotypical representation of women in mainstream Hindi films?

Chapter One outlined the investigative lens of the study based on the premise that leading female protagonists who won a National Award for their performances would result in a concomitant shift in the ‘typical’ or commonplace representations. A core responsibility of the National Film Awards is to recognise and promote the development of films of artistic and technical excellence and also social relevance that promote unity and integrity of the Indian nation (Amruta, 2023). This remit provided a focused corpus for analysing ‘exemplary’ female performances on screen, rather than the more mainstream Hindi cinema representations. These films, and more importantly, the representations of females in these films, are not merely cinematic performances; they are culturally-loaded texts that reflect and contribute to social understandings (or imaginations) of gender. This study challenged the assumption that national-awarded films (and portrayals) inevitably result in more progressive and perhaps even alternate representations of gender. Furthermore, the study questioned this premise by foregrounding the need for a critical analysis of these portrayals, grounded in social constructionism (as an interpretive framework) and feminist film

theory. The study critically examined female representations in each film, provided understandings of how these representations function and also examined the extent to which any reconfiguration/recasting of female protagonists (and gender roles) occur.

In terms of the analytical frame for the study, an interpretative framework formed the lens of the investigation, based on Hall's (1997) seminal concept of culture as a meaning-making process and where the media serves as a site wherein stereotypes and identities are encoded/decoded. Additionally, Berger and Luckmann's (1966: 162) account of social constructionism and the three 'moments' of externalisation, objectivation and internalisation guided the critical examination of how the films under investigation present female gender roles, norms and behaviours. Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze formed an analytical base for explorations on sexualisation, objectification and the spectacle of women on screen. Chatterji's (1998) understandings of absences and presences and Tuchman's (1978) notion of symbolic annihilation provided a critical framework for understanding how women are represented, underrepresented and misrepresented on screen.

The study used two methods of analysis: textual and thematic. Chapter Six provided a close *textual* reading of each film, with a detailed examination on key aspects such as narrative positioning, dialogue, character development and mise-en-scène elements. Chapter Seven of the study focused on a reflexive *thematic* analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) in relation to highlighting recurring patterns in female representation across the four selected films. The two-pronged methodological approach enabled for an in-depth analysis of each film and then a wider understanding of comparative-film patterns, which offered a more nuanced understanding on the representation of female gender roles, norms and behaviours. The findings were aligned to the study's research questions, locating key discoveries to the broader frameworks of feminist film theory; patriarchal cinema conventions and shifts in Hindi cinema. In combination, these chapters provided a layered investigation into how female characters, despite their central narrative positioning, continue to be narratively limited and constrained. The study therefore essentially examined whether the recognition of a national award (for female actresses) is an authentic harbinger of progress in the representation of women on screen, or simply a recirculation of entrenched gender norms, behaviours and roles.

8.3 Summary of Key Findings

In the four films analysed, the female protagonists are positioned as central narrative figures. This centrality, however, is largely confined to constricted and narrowly developed roles (as outlined below):

- Silk, in *The Dirty Picture*, is represented through highly sexualised visual screen grammar. She occupies both a space of spectacle and punishment. As she exercises her sexual power, it is ultimately transitory (episodic) and used for her very own self-destruction (symbolic annihilation).
- Rani, in *Queen*, embarks on solo travel which heralds a transformative character arc. The transformation, however, remains largely at the individual level and does not address structural changes and wider social implications (such as sexual desire, romantic fulfilment, employment).
- Tanu and Datto, in *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*, depict a duality in womanhood and femininity. Tanu initially disrupts the traditional stereotype of the ideal wife by expressing her dissatisfaction with marriage. Datto destabilises the image of a rural-bred woman as she strives for education and a better quality of life through sports. Both Tanu and Datto, however, are denied narrative fulfilment (there is no narrative resolution to Tanu's discontentment as a wife; Datto is denied domestic legitimacy).
- Devki, in *Mom*, is depicted as an empowered figure through the lens of vigilante justice but only within a maternal frame. Her professional identity is relegated to the narrative sideline in order to foreground the 'avenging mother' figure.

Cumulatively, these portrayals (in varying capacities) signal transgressive, strong and assertive women, ultimately these portrayals are confined to entrenched Hindi cinema stereotypes: the vamp; the dutiful daughter/fiancé; the returning (and thus obedient) wife and the sacrificial mother. Through a thematic analysis, recurring patterns revealed the following key *absences* across all four films, that ultimately weaken the representation of females on screen:

- *Stable Professional Identity*: There is neither any stable nor significantly developed narrative professional identity for any of the central female characters across all four films. Whilst some characters are initially depicted as engaged

with some form of employment (teacher, sportswoman, cook) these depictions are set aside and narratively abandoned. The films thus present skills and competence, yet any development of a career is truncated. Ultimately these representations work destructively – they emphasise a lack of female economic agency. This recurring motif echoes the concept of symbolic annihilation – it is not only largely absent, but also trivialised. Deb's (2023: 118) analysis of Hindi cinema's propensity to position "women as objects of desire and passive subjects, meant to be looked at and admired" supports the study's findings that female professional identity is abandoned, sidelined or presented as episodic.

- *Legitimised Recognition*: Recognition is largely conditional and often denied (in varying degrees). Silk is denied wifhood, maternal reconciliation and artistic appreciation. Rani's transformation is positioned outside the family space; Tanu is denied legitimate recognition as a wife; Datto is denied wifhood and Devki is denied opportunities for building a relationship with Arya. The study labels this as 'legitimised recognition' in that while the female characters in each film are narratively centrally located, their domestic legitimacy is gated by family members, peers and society.
- *Substantial Sexual Agency*: The female characters across all four films exhibit a marked lack of any substantial or sustained sexual agency. Sexuality and sexual desire are either commodified and transaction (Silk); sanitised as innocent exploration (Rani); a performative spectacle (Tanu) or sidelined/muted (Datto and Devki). These characters' sexuality is not shown as self-desire or with any complexity – an absence that recirculates expected gender normative depictions of women as chaste and pure and rendering female sexuality as "unaccepted" and "non-existent" (Trivedi, 2021: 1).

A recurring motif across all four films is the narrative confinement and containment of the centrally positioned female figures. Whilst there are moments of rebellion (challenging dominant patriarchal practices) or transgressions, these are largely episodic, left unresolved or deferred to traditional gender roles. Cumulatively, the recurring motif signals (read against the study's research questions) the ongoing presence of symbolic annihilation through trivialisation, omission and condemnation. This study shed light on the continued absences (with regards to the representation of women) that prevail in Hindi cinema. Furthermore, these absences work

(destructively) to (at times, explicitly and at other times, subtly) reassert gendered narratives even when female characters might ostensibly appear as ‘empowered’, ‘liberated’ and ‘independent’. The study also noted that while there are shifts in the representation of women in the selected films, these remain largely contained and episodic. The central positions they narratively occupy do not significantly translate to momentous shifts in the representation of women – careers, economic independence, meaningful sexual agency and legitimised recognition.

8.4 Recommendations

Cinema is an important medium of storytelling across various cultures in the world. Cinema is not only about entertainment. Cinema depicts, reflects, negotiates and represents, shapes and engages human perceptions and emotions on a variety of subjects and issues. Cinema encodes and circulates meanings – it is a culturally-loaded medium that functions as an ideological apparatus and a cultural practice. As a medium, Hindi cinema also serves as a powerful reflection of society through its depiction of various cultural and social tensions and transformations. One such key area is how Hindi cinema positions and frames gender identities, behaviours and roles. Hindi cinema encodes notions of gender thus shaping perceptions on ‘appropriate’ feminine and masculine identities. Recurring representations of a particular gender becomes a power-laden ‘tool’ in terms of defining ‘acceptable’ boundaries of said gendered behaviour. The recommendations outlined below are based on this understanding of the power of Hindi cinema – as a medium that wields significant influence at the cultural, symbolic and emotional levels.

This study has highlighted three recurring absences across all four films – (i) stable professional identity; (ii) legitimised recognition; and (iii) substantial sexual agency. A critical recommendation is for the creation of stories that move beyond a visible central positioning of female characters to stories that depict female characters with more durable agency. This calls for narrative recognition of female work as work – that which is important; credible and valued. Female characterisations should thus include portrayals of authentic and stable professional arcs. Sexual desire should be positioned as self-authored and not as a form of spectacle, ridicule, commodity or moral test. The link between domestic legitimacy (daughter/sister/wife/mother) should be snipped from any punitive measures and patriarchal gatekeeping.

In doing so, space can be created for more complex stories of women on screen that exhibit the tensions in terms of negotiating these intersectional differences. Alongside this, there is a critical need for a shift from stereotyped representations (such as the obedient daughter, dutiful wife and self-sacrificing mother) that narratively symbolically annihilate (condemn, trivialise, omit) women. Recurring motifs of such stereotypes marginalise, confine and limit women to narrow feminine depictions. Repetitions also naturalise these stereotypes and reinforce harmful ideas about (as this study has revealed) professional female identity (a woman's job is side-lined and not presented as 'complex'), sexual desire (defined within contained boundaries and facing punitive consequences) and positioning recognised legitimacy through the lens of patriarchal gatekeeping. Apart from repetition, stereotypes also highlight that which is not seen – the absences. There is a need, for example, for the representation of diverse sexualities, castes and women with disabilities in Hindi cinema. A narrowed representation of women on screen is short-sighted in that it does not account for the varied identities that women occupy in society.

Scripts, and concomitant representations, should therefore move beyond reductionist and limited understandings of femininity and womanhood as defined largely by patriarchal structures. Rather, Hindi cinema should explore alternate understandings of womanhood that is reflective of the changing status of Indian women (c.f. Padole, 2023). For example, womanhood is not only defined through a pitting of dichotomies such as: rural versus urban; rebellious versus obedient; maternal versus vigilante and vamp versus virtuous. More complex female characters who display durable agency in terms of, for example, economic participation, intimacy and sexual desire, should be included in Hindi cinema – and these positionings should shift beyond a spectacle or episodic narrative. There is, therefore, a critical need for more inclusive writing that reflects the changing status of women – in India and its diaspora – and one that acknowledges intersectional differences of class, region, age, caste, religion, sexuality and disability.

A key aspect to note is the gender dynamics 'behind-the-scenes'. Of the four films analysed, three were written by males: *The Dirty Picture* (Rajat Arora); *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (Himanshu Sharma) and *Mom* (Ravi Udyawar, Girish Kohli and Kona Venkat). Furthermore, all four films were directed by males (as outlined in Chapter Six

of this study). This points to the imperative need for the inclusion and space of more women behind-the-scenes, especially in terms of writing (scripts) and directing. The recommendation is driven by the understanding that the inclusion of women perspectives would perhaps result in related changes in terms of what stories are told on screen and how these stories unfold on celluloid.

At present, there is a paucity of females behind the camera in Hindi cinema; a view supported by Deb (2023: 119) who argues that “through limited representation behind the camera, it becomes a struggle to challenge and subvert traditional narratives and perspectives”. The inclusion of more female voices behind-the-scenes is thus not only about increasing the headcount – the idea is to shift narrative authority from one which is still largely male-dominated. Increasing the presence of female perspectives and presence behind the camera, from pre-production to editing, may potentially result in the representation of more complex female characterisations who exhibit more durable agency. This female narrative authority could have the potential to recast Hindi cinema grammar – one that represents alternate femininities, womanhood and female sexualities.

These recommendations advocate for a shift beyond female diversity on screen and a mere increase in the headcount of women behind the screen, rather, it calls for an expansion of what women are able to do and accomplish within these spaces. For Hindi cinema to offer truly authentic and more inclusive representations, the collective task is to include a range of authoritative voices that actively shape film production behind-the-scenes and more durable and agentic voices on screen. Such a shift has the potential to replace fleeting and episodic narrative empowerment with more realistic and durable expressions of female agency on screen.

8.5 Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

There are limitations that need to be acknowledged – starting off with the realities of a PhD study that in itself dictates unavoidable constraints in terms of what (scope) can actually be achieved within a particular timeframe. Taking this into consideration the study highlights three key limitations. Firstly, the purposive selection of four national-award films (in the category of Best Actress) limit the findings of the study to ‘exemplary’ Hindi cinema. Films outside the award recognition are excluded from the

corpus of the study. A wider pool of films for analysis could potentially have revealed alternate recurring motifs and representations. Secondly, the study uses two analytical approaches: textual and reflexive thematic analyses. As such, interpretative meanings of the films and female characters are presented that exclude audience (reception-based) perceptions. To yield truly significant and meaningful results, however, an audience reception study should ideally be multi-located (within India and the diaspora). In terms of feasibility, such an approach is beyond the scope of the present study. Thirdly, the timeframe for the data collection (2010–2018) could be expanded to enable for more extensive data collection and analysis, and thus, potentially the identification of other issues related to the representation of women in Hindi cinema.

Notwithstanding the limitations outlined above, the study has successfully addressed the research questions and contributed to the broader scholarship of feminist film, Hindi cinema and female representation. The study has highlighted three recurring absences (stable professional identity, legitimised recognition and substantial sexual agency) which can be used to assess and explore the representation of durable female agency in Hindi cinema. The pairing of a close textual reading of each film with a reflexive thematic analysis offers a robust methodological approach that is premised on an in-depth and detail analysis.

Stemming, in part, from the limitations of the study the following avenues for future research are suggested:

- *Comparative Pan-Indian Cinema Study*: An interesting area for future research is a comparative analysis of female gender representation across all Indian cinema (such as Telegu, Bhojpuri, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam and so on). Each industry, in their own shape and form, present films as distinct regionally-coded cultural texts. A comparative study, with a sample of films, could possibly explore recurring motifs (adding to those identified in this study) in terms of female representation. Such an undertaking could explore whether the recurring patterns identified in this thesis are unique to Hindi cinema or reflective of wider cultural and structural norms across Indian cinema. A multi-industry comparative study has the potential to yield a comprehensive mapping of gendered representations in Indian cinema, bringing attention to possible regional shifts, reinforcements and even lapses in the representation of women.

- *Audience Reception*: Future research could focus on how audiences perceive (interpret and negotiate) meanings encoded in films. Reception studies are critical in terms of aligning the gap between encoded and decoded meanings. The undertaking of an audience reception does, however, raise questions about the homogeneity of ‘the audience’. These questions relate to India’s multi-cultural and diverse audience based on key variables such as a region, caste, language and economic power. As such, a mixed-methods methodological design is advocated since it combines audience focus groups with in-depth interviews and content analysis of for example, fan forums and related commentary.
- *Intersectionality and Representation*: In the present study, female gender was prioritised as the primary analytical focus. Future research could potentially benefit from an application of Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality that includes religion, caste, class, disability, region and sexuality. Whilst the present thesis notes the marked absence in the representation of women from varied castes, regions and sexualities, the analysis does not fully engage with intersectionality as a framework for analysis given that such an undertaking is beyond the scope of the study. Future research, however, could possibly explore intersectionality in relation to the representation of women on screen, connecting cinema to broader political, economic and socio-cultural challenges (and avenues for opportunities).
- *Behind the Camera*: A last area for future research is that of the gender dynamics behind the camera – as mentioned in the recommendations section of this study. Future research could explore whether female-driven films (in terms of for example writing, direction, screenplay, production) offer alternate positionings of women in Hindi cinema. A comparative exploration could focus on how female directors, for instance, frame women in relation to their male counterparts. Interviews with male and female directors, writers, editors, producers and other key filmmakers could offer ‘behind-the-scene’ insight into the gender dynamics present in the film industry. Importantly, such insight could be further explored to understand how the gender dynamics at play influence and shape film content. Intersectionality, as a framework for understanding gender dynamics behind the camera, could also be explored – how language, sexuality, age, caste and

region, for example, influence not only the process of filmmaking, but depictions that arise thereof.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

'The Recasting of Female Gender Roles: An Analysis of the Representation of Female Protagonists in Bollywood Cinema (National Film Awards 2010–2018)' set out to explore if female protagonists in national award-winning Hindi films ('exemplary cinema') signal a shift in terms of the representation of gender roles. The analysis revealed that whilst the women across all four films are narratively centrally located, any substantial shift in their representations remain limited, reflecting a more nuanced reality. Work is mentioned, but not fully developed – making for the viewing of female professional identity as episodic, fleeting and inconsequential. Sexual desire is noticeable, but not presented as self-authored. The representation of sexual desire is either a form of spectacle or viewed as sanitised and innocent intimate explorations. Punitive measures are meted out to hyper-sexualised women concomitant with long-standing patterns of the male gaze. Legitimised recognition is gatekept and conditional – monitored through family, peers and society. In instances when women deviate from prescriptive gender norms, they are met with narrative erasure or the withholding of domestic legitimacy. These findings, however, do not completely dismiss any progress in terms of a shifting representation of female gender roles. These shifts however are more episodic and fleeting and less agentic.

The task ahead is a collective call for behind-the-scenes (writers, directors, editors and so on) and on-scene representations (actresses) to mark a distinction between visibility (narratively central female figures) and agency. Female characterisations must move beyond the visible – it is not enough, for example, to see a female state-level athlete or a female solo traveller on screen. It is crucial to depict how these women navigate and negotiate such spaces – through the domains of, for instance, work; family and sexuality – without facing narrative punishment. Such navigations and negotiations need to possess narrative substance – not episodic, fleeting or relegated to the sidelines. If Hindi cinema is, as Dwyer (2014) notes, a culturally-loaded text that not only reflects society, but also imagines it, then this imagining should include more diverse and expansive opportunities for women on screen.

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3 Idiots (Rajkumar Hirani, 2009)
Aap Ki Kasam (J. Om Prakash, 1974)
Abhimaan (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1973)
Aquarius (Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2016)
Agneepath (Karan Malhotra, 2012)
Alam Ara (Ardeshir Irani, 1931)
Babul (Ravi Chopra, 2006)
Bandit Queen (Shekhar Kapoor, 1994)
Bend It Like Beckham (Gurinder Chadha, 2002)
Bride and Prejudice (Gurinder Chadha, 2004)
Chhapaak (Meghna Gulzar, 2020)
Dabangg 2 (Arbaaz Khan, 2012)
Deewar (Yash Chopra, 1975)
Devdas (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2002)
Dil Toh Pagal Hai (Yash Chopra, 1997)
Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (Aditya Chopra, 1995)
Don (Chandra Barot, 1978)
Dostana (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008)
English Vinglish (Gauri Shinde, 2012)
Gehraiyaan (Shakun Batra, 2022)
Gumrah (B. R. Chopra, 1963)
Hum Aapke Hain Koun (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994)
Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 1999)
Hum Saath Saath Hain (Sooraj Barjatya, 1999)
Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania (Shashank Khaitan, 2014)
Judaai (Raj Kanwar, 1997)

Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna (Karan Johar, 2006)
Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (Karan Johar, 2001)
Kal Ho Naa Ho (Karan Johar, 2003)
Kapoor & Sons (Shakun Batra, 2016)
Karan Arjun (Rakesh Roshan, 1995)
Ki & Ka (R. Balki, 2016)
Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (Karan Johar, 1998)
Liar's Dice (Geetu Mohandas, 2013)
Margarita with A Straw (Shonali Bose, 2015)
Main Hoon Na (Farah Khan, 2014)
Maine Pyar Kiya (Sooraj Barjatya, 1989)
Mohabbatein (Aditya Chopra, 2000)
Mom (Ravi Udyawar, 2017)
Mother India (Mehboob Khan, 1957)
Paa (R. Balki, 2009)
Pather Pancholi (Satyajit Ray, 1955)
Pushpa: The Rise (Sukumar, 2021)
Queen (Vikas Bahl, 2013)
Raabta (Dinesh Vijan, 2017)
Raja Harishchandra (Dadasaheb Phalke, 1913)
Salaam Bombay (Mira Nair, 1988)
Shaandaar (Vikas Bahl, 2015)
Sholay (Ramesh Sippy, 1975)
Tanu Weds Manu Returns (Aanand L. Rai, 2015)
Tees Maar Khan (Farah Khan, 2010)
The Dirty Picture (Milan Luthria, 2011)
Veer-Zaara (Yash Chopra, 2004)

Zanjeer (Prakash Mehra, 1973)

Miss Nisha Ramlutchman (991238913)
School Of Arts
Howard College

Dear Miss Nisha Ramlutchman,

Protocol reference number: 00013339

Project title: The Recasting of Female Gender Roles: An Analysis of the Representation of Female Protagonists in Bollywood Cinema (National Film Awards 2010-2018)

Exemption from Ethics Review

In response to your application received on _____, your school has indicated that the protocol has been granted **EXEMPTION FROM ETHICS REVIEW.**

Any alteration/s to the exempted research protocol, e.g., Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through an amendment/modification prior to its implementation. The original exemption number must be cited.

For any changes that could result in potential risk, an ethics application including the proposed amendments must be submitted to the relevant UKZN Research Ethics Committee. The original exemption number must be cited.

In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE:

Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours sincerely,



Prof Chatradari Devroop
Academic Leader Research
School Of Arts

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