

From Submissive Wife to Autonomous Woman: Portrayal of Female Agency in Indian Cinema, 1970s-2020s



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Abstract

Cinema may be seen as a reflection of the society as with one's evolution, so does the other. Bollywood, India's globally recognized film industry has a powerful influence over the societal norms and cultural narratives. It not only reflects the prevailing features and attitudes of the Indian society but also plays a vital role in reinforcing and challenging the existing norms and values. Over the time, Bollywood has depicted Indian women as traditional and subservient towards the patriarchal expectations directed towards them since ages. However, with the evolution of attitudes towards gender roles and increasing emphasis on the empowerment of women, the portrayal of women onscreen has also been altered, with modern films steadily showcasing strong, independent female protagonists who reject stereotypes, possess self-worth, advocate for their rights, and strive towards gender equality. Through conceptual analysis of five Bollywood movies from the 1970s to the 2020s, this paper aims to show how Indian cinema depicts empowered women in marriage and the gradual shift of agency in women's favour. From initial suffering to renewed freedom- the factors acting as catalysts in the transformation of the protagonist, and the subsequent dismissal of marriage by her has been discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Female Agency, Autonomy, Marriage, Exploitation, Indian Cinema, Bollywood

Introduction

The incongruity between efforts towards women empowerment and persistent societal pressures often create contradictory narratives around singleness, marriage, and agency of women, which are explored across different cultural and cinematic contexts. Indian cinema or Bollywood, since its birth, has continuously been focusing on the status of women in Indian society. The historical portrayal of a married woman in Bollywood used to be meek, submissive, tolerant, and subservient towards her male counterpart. However, the societal changes observed through the movies in making highlight the challenges and coping strategies of women in the institu-

tion of marriage. Although the gender roles have been gradually changing, married women in the Indian society are observed to be burdened with multiple additional roles aligned with the constant role of a homemaker. The authority after marriage rests with the husband and this patriarchal scenario has been shown, supported and opposed by the Indian cinema with the changing time. The implications of the cinematic portrayals for gender perceptions and social change in India are huge. This marks the end of exploitation of women in unhealthy, toxic, or exploitative marriages where they are shown to possess no will, constantly requiring taking permissions even in today's highly globalised world.

While the early portrayal of women involved a passive, dependent, highly devoted female with suppressed desires and aspirations and an unquestioning acceptance of patriarchy; the portrayal of women challenging the patriarchal setup and forming new and open ideologies has been the usual standard nowadays. Women are increasingly shown to be opting for their own up gradation by securing better position in the social structure and challenging old roles through reclamation of power and agency. This involves moving away from unhealthy and exploitative relationships, particularly marriages in Indian context, which are considered to be highly rigid structures. Moreover, the acceptance of such movies by the audience proves the existence of latent support towards the theme involving female agency and empowerment on a broad level.

Literature Review

The relationship between sociology and film studies is crucial for understanding societal dynamics. Various frameworks may be mentioned in this light like the advocacy of integration of sociological theories in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to enrich the analysis of cinema (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, 2020), providing a foundational framework in the analysis. Similar studies argue that films, like myths, both reflect and actively transform social structures through their representations (Lovell, 1971). This dual capacity makes cinema a vital tool for sociological inquiry and pedagogy, capable of emphasizing complex social issues such as gender roles, class conflict, and labor issues (Yuksel, 2024).

Feminist film theory has evolved through the critiques of representation, spectatorship, and embodiment, with scholars pioneering the concept of the male gaze (Mulvey, 2013), psychoanalytic dimensions focusing on the female voice (Silverman, 1988), and expansions of the discourse (Chaudhuri, 2006; De Lauretis, 2024). Thornham's compilations and analyses (1999, 2004) and Smelik's overview (2007) help consolidate the field; and Galimi (2024) reframes early feminist theory by privileging the body over the gaze.

Hollinger (2012) provides a comprehensive map of feminist film studies' trajectories. Foucault's work on discipline and discourse (1965, 1973, 1977) deeply influenced feminist critiques, as illustrated in feminist readings of surveillance, madness, and power (King, 2004; Martin, 1988; Phelan, 1990; Garwood, 2016; Rebiai, Dubbati, & Taleb, 2024). Oksala (2016) and De Lauretis (2024) reinterpret Foucauldian subjectivity and gender as discursive constructions. Bourdieu's sociology, especially on symbolic violence and capital (Austin, 2007), has been reappropriated by feminist scholars to address intersections of gender and media (Moi, 1999; McLeod, 2005; Huppatz, 2009; McRobbie, 2004).

Studies illustrate how Indian cinema shapes, and is shaped by gender, caste, and national identities. The transformation of women's roles in Indian cinema from the early 20th century to the present is immense (Sharma & Narban, 2016). Cinema has shifted toward modern representations of women- from passive caregivers to independent, career-driven protagonists, mirroring broader societal changes. The depiction and portrayal of idealized joint-family structures by Bollywood has been explored and contrasted with the urbanized real-life shifts (Deakin & Bhugra, 2012). The analysis of female sexuality and gender transitions in Hindi cinema includes the use of feminist frameworks in contrasting traditional familial narratives with bolder representations of female desire (Ramlutchman, 2006). In Bollywood's binary gender portrayals, self-sacrificing women are glorified while independent women are stigmatized. This highlights male dominance in the film industry and puts up innumerable challenges for female directors towards securing mainstream visibility (Butalia, 1984). Studies also note how films create space for marginalized voices, offering a counter-narrative to Bollywood's conventional portrayals and challenging mainstream cinematic norms regarding caste and gender (Ebiraj, 2024).

The persistence of stereotypical female roles have been analyzed and critiqued, demonstrating how cinematic conventions reinforce, yet occasion-

ally subvert, gender norms (Ramkissoon, 2009). While progressive themes have been introduced, the films rely on simplistic narratives, limiting deeper sociological impact (Manzar & Aravind, 2019). Modern progressive films play a role in challenging patriarchal norms and redefining gender agency, displaying Bollywood's evolving portrayal of women empowerment and decline of male savior tropes in favor of women (Yadav & Jha, 2023).

Despite progress, societal perceptions of single women remain a significant challenge. Single women face stigma and are often labeled deficient, unlike single men who are perceived as independent (Saini, 2017). This stigmatization may lead women to stay forcefully in exploitative marriages which disregard their autonomy and self-worth. Also, singles often face negative biases in the society, being perceived as lonelier (Hertel et.al, 2007). In India, single women face various challenges as the traditional marriage expectations largely dominate, despite some urban elites embracing singlehood (Lamb, 2022).

The unique role of movies as both a reflection and a driver of social change, linking cinematic portrayals to the emerging status of women in Indian society, plays a chief role in weakening the pre-existing patriarchal structures (Agarwal, 2014). Bollywood's portrayal of homemakers, questioning whether mainstream cinema fairly represents women's economic contributions and independence or perpetuates outdated stereotypes, has continuously been a matter of discussion (Patnayak & Muni, 2022). Bollywood's rigid gender portrayals have been analyzed using feminist film criticism, debating whether cinema reinforces patriarchal ideals or offers nuanced female identities in contemporary narratives (Tere, 2012). Bollywood possesses a tendency of portraying idealized family structures, often diverging from real-life complexities (Kripalani, 2008). Initially, women in Indian cinema faced marginalization even in the field of acting with agency denial and ideological complexities surrounding women's cinematic representation back then (Sharma & Narban, 2016; Sinha, 2024). Traditionally de-

icted as homemakers and caregivers, women in Bollywood films are increasingly portrayed as independent, career-driven individuals, mirroring real-world societal shifts (Agarwal, 2014). While some studies still point to the persistence of stereotypical roles and patriarchal influences, others showcase progressive narratives (Gupta & Prakash, 2021; Ramkissoon, 2009). Bollywood movies are breaking gender stereotypes and critiquing patriarchy, though sometimes relying on simplistic narratives (Manzar & Aravind, 2019; Yadav & Jha, 2023).

Methodology

In the context of film studies, conceptual analysis covers the underlying message of the movies and their breakdown to several fragments, explaining different aspects covered throughout and their interpretation. This paper includes identifying, examining, and interpreting the underlying ideas, values, and meanings conveyed by the films selected. Conceptual analysis has been used as the primary method, analysing key themes, narrative structures, and character arcs in selected Bollywood films. The main conceptual points include the women challenging patriarchal norms, redefining success, and breaking long held silence for self-worth and dignity.

The central research question in the paper is: How have been Indian cinema abstractly displaying and normalizing women reclaiming independence after being confined in exploitative marriages? The timeframe of the films analysed in the paper is from the 1970s to the 2020s, with a focus on films that explicitly feature female protagonists leaving exploitative marriages and thriving after gaining agency. The chief argument presented in the paper is how Indian cinema has been continuously portraying and hence normalising female agency in the Indian patriarchal society since the 1970s. The genre of the movies may be mentioned as drama, all focusing on the broad social aspect- the status of women under the institution of marriage and gradual awakening towards self-worth.

The potential movies for selection were thoroughly watched and studied, and those consid-

ered appropriate for the study were chosen. The plot of the movies so selected for analysis has a common storyline where the movie begins with the superiority and agency of the male character, gradually moving towards the continuous exploitation of the female protagonist and her silent acceptance of fate, further leading to an instance which acts as a turning point or catalyst where her tolerance limit is reached, and finally the reclamation of power and agency by her, on realisation of self-worth and choosing independence over submission. The change is displayed as radical and not subtle where the female is shown to be empowered at the end of the story. For each selected film, an overall character analysis of the protagonist along with thematic analysis has been performed. Three movies from the 1970s- the era of the changing world, the globalisation era, have been selected, and two movies with a gap of over 30 years from the other three have been selected. The movies selected are namely: Aap Ki Kasam (1974), Aakhir Kyun? (1985), Khoon Bhari Maang (1988), Thappad (2020), and Mrs. (2025).

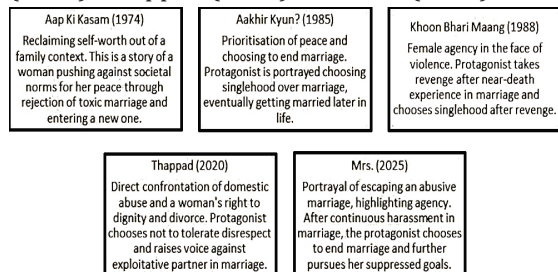


Fig. 1: Movies under analysis

Analysis

Drawing on the conceptual analysis of the chosen films, five important themes have been identified around which the movies revolve, marking the normalisation of women agency in the Indian cinema.

Theme 1: Redefining normal in relationships and the rejection of adjustment: The chosen films explicitly and implicitly critique the societal expectation for women to adjust to abusive or unfulfilling relationships. There are several cinematic moments where characters articulate their refusal to accept unhealthy dynamics. These

portrayals normalize the idea that not adjusting is a valid and healthy choice by showing the protagonists as putting up their point and speaking up for themselves, further taking action with no compulsion of others' consent. The movies further portray the protagonists' decisions as positive and desirable, and normal relations as those in which females are heard. The upright dismissal of the concept of adjustment to abusive behaviour by women, particularly in marriage is also highlighted.

Theme 2: The journey of self-discovery and empowerment: The transformation of female protagonists from a state of dependence or subjugation to one of independence and self-actualization is portrayed. The transformation is suddenly observed after a long enduring exploitation, and is visually represented through changes in the costumes- from simple to complex attires, body language- from submissive to bold, setting- men-centric to women-centric, and narration- from monotonous to exciting. A common narrative arc may be observed in the movies, most of the time sarcasm on the patriarchal setup. The narratives normalize the pursuit of individual happiness and growth post-relationship and show them as positive changes.

Theme 3: Challenging traditional markers of female success: The films show the idealistic and unfair expectations of society and the realities regarding the condition of women in marriage, and gradually shift the focus from marriage and motherhood as sole indicators of female success to include career, aspirations, personal achievements, and emotional well-being. Further, the traditional markers of success in women's lives which used to be a happily married life, submission towards partner and adjustment have been shown to be outgrown with time. The characters are shown to prioritize their careers over an abusive marriage, remain unmarried by choice, marry late, or remarry later. The films frame these choices positively and motivate women to stand up for themselves by showing female agency as the biggest marker for female success. This normalizes choosing of alternative pathways

for women who have been continuously abused and suppressed in marriage.

Theme 4: The role of support systems and female solidarity: The role of support systems is crucial in the movies as these normalise seeking and receiving support for women. The support systems challenge the isolation often associated with women in unhealthy relationships, further providing company, support and renewed confidence. The films also portray female friendships, familial support, or community networks as crucial factors in women’s autonomy.

Theme 5: Cinematic techniques and narrative strategies of normalization: The characterization is so intense that the female protagonists may be seen as complex and relatable and the audience may observe, relate and take decisions influenced by the protagonists. The dialogue delivery is simple, using empathetic and empowering language which is used in common households in everyday life. Moreover, visual cues of liberation are also provided by the filmmakers such as change in colours of the background of the movie with the protagonists’ attire and mood before and after the emancipation from exploitative marriage. The sound and music also changes throughout the movies, with denial, exploitative and abusive tunes in the start, to positive, affirmative, releasing music which emphasize agency rather than victimhood. Finally, the endings affirm the protagonists’ decision of liberation, even if unconventional.

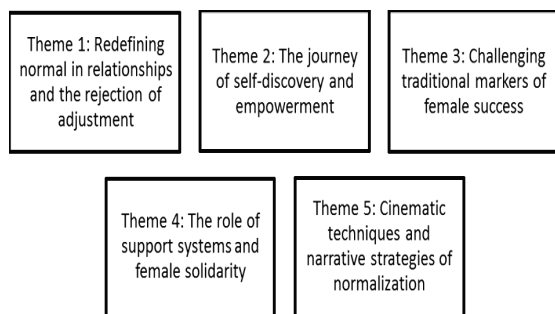


Fig. 2: Themes underlying portrayal of women agency in cinema

In all the selected movies, three underlying stages have been identified in the awakening of the

character and her gradual transformation namely-

- i. A pre-awakening condition in which the protagonist is shown to be in a miserable condition, continuously facing the harsh realities of marriage. Under this phase she apprehends the problems and difficulties surfacing and while trying to address them, realizes the need for self-worth.
- ii. A catalyst acting as a factor in awakening and change- In this stage, saturation occurs, the limit of tolerance is reached, and a silent decision of exiting the relationship is made by the female. This stage shows the development of renewed awareness and conscience in the protagonist.
- iii. The final or post-awakening stage under which the final act is shown where the decision is executed and the protagonist exits the unhealthy, exploitative marriage. She is shown to be choosing to walk away freely at the end of the story, focusing on her personal growth, which may be seen as largely unconventional.

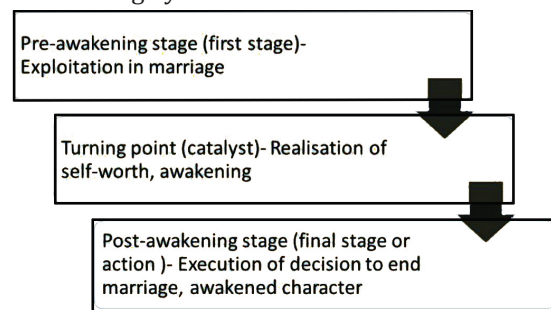


Fig. 3: Stages in the self-awakening of protagonist

Findings

In the movie Aap Ki Kasam (1974), the protagonist named Sunita is displayed as a strong and dignified woman who enters into a romantic relationship with a man, marries him and shifts to a new home. The early character of Sunita is shown to be as intelligent, independent, loving, devoted, trusting and innocent. She is educated and is subservient towards her marriage and household chores.

The turning point in the movie is the period of misunderstanding on the part of the husband as he doubts her of celibacy and questions her chas-

tity. The suspicion of her fidelity by her husband leaves her in a confused and vulnerable state where she is pregnant too, but choosing her self-respect over the accusation by her husband, she walks out of the marriage.

Later, the character is shown as a loving mother and a dutiful wife towards her new husband; showing she has moved on in life where she is treated with love and respect.

The protagonist in the movie endures and faces immense emotional turmoil due to her husband's unfounded jealousy towards her being involved in an affair with another man. She is resilient and chooses her dignity and self-respect in the face of profound justice. She refuses to be a victim of her husband's insecurity and false allegations and chooses her own path with integrity.

In the movie *Aakhir Kyun?* (1985), the profound character transformation of the protagonist Nisha is shown throughout the plot. Initially, the character is shown to be a traditional and submissive wife in a marriage governed by patriarchal norms where she is oblivious to betrayal. Her identity is solely defined by her husband's identity, with no recognition of her own. Low self-esteem and low worth with no role in the decision making at home renders her as invisible in the house. Her husband is seen to be constantly ignoring and publicly humiliating her.

The turning point in the movie is shown when Nisha discovers, confronts and opposes the betrayal and celibacy by her husband but is abandoned instead. She still struggles while being in the marriage but chooses not to tolerate anymore. She decides to walk away and find her self-worth.

The transformed Nisha is resilient and independent as she discovers herself through work and writing. She reclaims her identity and self-worth without entering into marriage again. She even refuses to remarry until she completes her journey of self-discovery. Nisha represents various themes in the movie such as women empowerment, challenging and breaking societal norms harming women's identity, resilience and transformation of women and the questions frequently put up on women's actions in society.

Throughout the movie, the character of the protagonist evolves from a conventional, dependent wife to a strong, independent and self-made woman who redefines her own destiny and inspires others. Her journey is a testament to the power of self-discovery and the importance of individual identity.

The movie *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988) portrays a woman named Aarti Verma whose character undergoes a dramatic transformation at the end of the movie. Initially, Aarti is portrayed as a naive, vulnerable and affectionate woman who is empathetic and kind. She is a widow but a devoted mother to her kids. Everything runs smooth until she enters into marriage with a man who gives her a traumatic near-death experience.

This is a classic revenge narrative in which the protagonist gets betrayed by her husband who attempts to murder her (this acts as the turning point in the movie where the roots of character transformation may be observed). After being saved somehow, the protagonist gives herself a physical and emotional rebirth through surgery and improved confidence and awareness, and adopts a new identity formed through emotional hardening and acceptance of harsh realities of life and relationships. The transformed character is strategic and resourceful, self-reliant and empowered with unwavering determination, while retaining her core values. The avenging protagonist may be seen as an active pursuer of justice and a symbol of female empowerment.

At the end of the movie, the protagonist takes her revenge and walks free from the exhausting and exploitative relationship which puts her life at risk in the movie. Aarti's internal and external transformation in the movie and her choice to break free from the marriage, reclaiming her life and exact justice for herself is groundbreaking. Though justice is served in the movie, the character transformation is a necessary occurrence which leads Aarti towards reclaiming her life and identity.

In the movie *Thappad* (2020), the protagonist named Amrita Sabharwal undergoes a profound character transformation, challenging deeply in-

herited societal norms and perceptions of marriage, respect, and self-worth. The movie shows the awakening of a woman to her self-worth and her courageous journey to reclaim her identity in a society that often normalizes subtle and overt forms of disrespect and abuse against women. Amrita is shown to be a perfect homemaker who is devoted to her home duties completely; she is dutiful and accepts her role as a full-time housewife. Though she possesses aspirations regarding her hobbies, she puts them secondary to her roles as a wife, as suppressed desires. Her unquestioning acceptance of patriarchy makes her vulnerable to exploitation and harassment.

The catalyst in the movie occurs when her husband slaps her in public- displaying clear incidence of violence which eventually shatters her illusion of mutual respect. A sudden awakening leading to realization of harassment, insult, and self-respect covers Amrita which leads her towards the discovery of self.

The post-slap scenario involves the refusal of the protagonist to accept the disrespect and move on, rather she seeks justice for herself, asserting her identity and challenging the social conditioning of women towards the acceptance of ill-treatment and disrespect directed towards them in the society by fellow men. Before awakening, Amrita is happily subservient towards her husband and his frequent disrespect. The suppressed desires and talents of Amrita find new place when Amrita awakens after facing public humiliation (a tight slap) from the hands of her husband. She reclaims her individuality which is lost in marriage, files for divorce and starts making choices for herself.

With a firm assertion by the protagonist of her dignity and the fundamental right to be treated with respect, she challenges the notion that a woman must endure everything in order to preserve and protect her marriage, not considering the attack on her self-esteem. The story prompts other women to re-evaluate their own relationships and societal expectations.

The movie Mrs. (2025) displays a highly ambitious woman named Richa who enters a mar-

riage, rendering herself completely indulged into household chores, with no control over her life, body and career decisions. She subtly tries to seek balance of marriage and life and tries to be optimistic towards her married life. She constantly struggles throughout her marriage to claim her identity, work towards her aspirations and goals, but is denied freedom each time. As soon as she enters her marriage and lives with her in-laws, she is monitored and judged through patriarchal norms and is assigned with never ending household chores. Her unending responsibilities are always met with harsh criticism and indifference, leading her to question her worth. The marriage stifles her desires with continuous dismissal of her passion, discouragement, suppression of her identity and physical and emotional exploitation through her husband and in-laws.

The turning point in the movie may be observed when the protagonist finds herself in a situation where there is no escape- multiple roles with no help or addressal to issues, added with public humiliation. This acts as a catalyst in the awakening of Richa and further reclamation of her identity. The gradual disillusionment and awakening of Richa leads her to speak up for herself. Finally, she walks away from the drudgery, exploitation and suppression, leading towards her goals and aspirations.

The movie displays the struggle faced by many young women in Indian society who are educated, ambitious and independent, yet trapped in unhealthy marriages which operate solely on patriarchal norms and values.

Conclusion

Studies consistently highlight the complex interplay between sociology, films, gender expectations, and equality, particularly pertaining to the portrayal of single women or those surviving exploitative marriages. This paper aims to show how modern cinema depicts an empowered woman in marriage, how the agency gradually shifts from the man to the woman in the movie, from initial suffering of the woman to renewed freedom and control in the end, generating self-worth within the protagonist. Here, these films

may be considered as feminist films, focusing on generation of women empowerment and agency in a patriarchal society by challenging the patriarchal norms straight-forwardly. This article contributes towards sociological understanding of films, gender, culture in the Indian society, and the studies associated with these.

All the five movies showcase the common pattern of starting from initial disposition and aspirations to the confrontation with patriarchal reality, towards gradual disillusionment and awakening with moments of resistance and catharsis, to finally leading towards empowerment and the protagonist reclaiming her identity towards the end of the movie. The movies show a major character transformation at the end of the story. The denial of basic human rights to women in marriage is a problem and a big issue which needs to be highlighted.

The movies place a stark reflection on marital realities in the Indian society where the insidious nature of patriarchy is highlighted. The transformation from a submissive wife to an empowered, awakened individual makes the protagonist a resonant and impactful character. Further, it needs to be realized that the traditional patriarchy no longer exists and women share an equal status with men in society. Marriage needs to be an institution where mutual cooperation of both men and women is needed, but sadly only women are seen to be struggling hard to work for and nurture this institution. The role of men needs to be emphasized and the exploitation of women needs to be ended with frequent awakening through awareness and diligence. In such a scenario, cinema may play an active role in the display of the current challenges faced by women in marriage and their awakening and empowerment.

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