

Rise of Strong Independent Characters: Mapping the Reframed Identities of Women in Hindi Films

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Abstract

The Bollywood industry plays a pivotal role in Indian society and the cinema is an indispensable medium of not just entertainment, but empowerment and spreading awareness too. Over the years, film makers have shifted their focus from making just drama-loaded, comedy, commercial, profitable cinemas and have started portraying the realities of life and society. In particular, there has been a rise of films made on women and the injustices or malpractices done against them. Films and filmmakers are now documenting women-related issues and dwelling into the themes of equality, rights, agency, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and consent amongst others. This paper will analyse Bollywood films made on issues affecting women in the Indian subcontinent. In the paper, three different Indian films released between 2001 - 2015 will be dissected and explored to understand how women and their problems are represented and addressed in the visual medium. It would look at three films *Lajja* (2001), *Dor* (2006), and *Parched* (2015) and derive how women and their issues were treated and represented in the films. These films—made on the issues of patriarchy, female bonds, honour killing, female foeticide, sexual abuse, rape, domestic abuse, violence, etc.—were released way ahead of time.

1. Introduction

Cinema is considered a powerful visual medium and has socio-cultural implications. According to Turner, films are a tool of social practice and go beyond just entertaining or being an object of exhibition or aesthetics. Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself (Turner, 1999:3).

Bollywood industry since its inception is known to entertain, inform, influence, and create an impact on the audience. (Gupta and Gupta, 2013) From art or parallel cinemas to commercial films, the industry has seen a myriad of changes. With changing times and periods, the Bollywood industry has diversified itself from being just a profit, for-entertainment, and commercial medium to a medium that is increasingly producing films aimed at bringing a social change or impact (Murthy, 1980).

The Bollywood Cinema, also known as the Hindi Cinema or Hindi-language film industry based in Bombay (now Mumbai), originated in 1913 with Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*—India's first full length silent feature film. The initial films revolved around male bonds, household narratives, familial bonds, romantic issues, the protagonist-antagonist face-offs, and the great Indian cultural values and traditions. It is only recently over the last 10-20 years, that there has been a rise in the films made on women and representation of issues faced by women. From representing women as just mothers, daughters, wives, and

sisters who are always in the kitchen cooking or taking care of the family to showing them as just the love interest of the hero who comes to save them from the villain—there has been an evolution in the characterization and portrayal of women in Bollywood.

Since films are an indispensable tool of our culture, they play an important part in influencing our perceptions (Shekawat and Vyas, 2019). This paper, titled "Rise of Strong Independent Characters: Mapping the Reframed Identities of Women in Hindi Films" is an attempt to study and decipher the changes in the portrayal of women and how women and their issues are treated and represented in Hindi films. To simplify the nature of study, three films—*Lajja*, *Dor*, and *Parched*—have been chosen which address the evils of domestic violence, sexual abuse, dowry, female foeticide, harassment, divorce, women's sexuality and intimacy, widowhood, unwedded pregnancy, abusive marriage, and marital rape. As opposed to today's modern and outgoing time and age, the films selected for the purpose of this study were released in a setting where there wasn't an open conversation surrounding the matters.

The paper also analyses the intricacies with which women, especially marginalised or the women belonging to lower strata and classes, or rural areas have been represented in the mainstream cinema industry.

2. Experimental or Materials and Methods

Focus Group and Content Analysis are important tools of the research. It allows for integration of theory and film,

viewing the films in relation to the hypotheses and allows for a seamless study and considers the audience reception. It is also important to mention that Bollywood, as academic discourse, needs to be studied and scrutinised to not only create a body of work around Bollywood but women and marginalised women in Bollywood too.

Along with analysing the content, the researcher would also analyse and discover the themes explored in the films. A thematic analysis will help answer how the female gender and their issues are being represented in Bollywood films throughout. Since the research is focused on representation of female gender and issues in Bollywood films, a thematic analysis will help answer how a character's identity is shaped and how female gender is represented throughout the film in that given period.

With each film exploring a women centric concept that resonates with today's youth and generation, I wanted to explore the patterns and themes that were present in the film concerning women. Each film has its own take as to how female gender and identity are represented; however, I chose to look at each film separately to deeply make sense of and analyse each theme and see how female, gender, and identity representation occur in Bollywood cinema.

Focus group is an important method in this context of the study because it helps gather preliminary information and data from the audience's perspective while also highlighting how people interpret certain acts or phenomena. It is an in-depth process that offers insights to the research and ensures representation of voices and makes room for comparisons and different opinions. Focus groups or group interviewing is chosen for the research as this method makes it possible to understand the attitudes and behaviours of the audiences. It elicits individual thoughts, feelings, and views while being in a setup that's moderated by the researcher.

3. Results and Discussion

For this research, the films chosen for content analysis are Lajja, Dor, and Parched. All these films are based around women and the varied issues faced by them. The following films, the issues represented in them.

Each film addresses a contentious issue for the Indian audience. The first film, Lajja, is a popular film that centred on the plight of women and feminism in India. The film satirises the honour accorded to women in society as well as the restrictions imposed on them. Dor is another popular film about two women that deals with female alliance, widowhood, and patriarchy. Finally, Parched puts emphasis on the stigma of social evils, age-old patriarchal traditions and practices, child marriage, dowry, marital rapes, and physical adversity.

As can be seen from the table mentioned below, broad themes that came out are patriarchy, marginalisation

dominance of women by men and society, mental abuse, physical abuse, evils like rape, dowry, sexual abuse, female feticide, honour killing and child marriage. Now these are being discussed separately for each movie as they proceed.

These films reflect harsh home truths and dare to delve into areas of rural subjugation and injustice going on the lines of gender cruelty that are not normally regarded as "relevant," or as being too relevant to matter. In some ways, these films reflect the other side of the sexism coin. (Indo-Asian News Service, 2016). Sexual oppression is inextricably linked to their sexual innocence. As a matter of fact, women too are patriarchal. It may be the result of their conditioning and the kind of situations they were subjected to, nevertheless it still is relevant.

From granny in Lajja and Meera in Dor to Rani in Parched—in every movie these characters beautifully portray their journey of transformation. From being silent about oppression and sometimes even propagating it, to supporting other females for speaking up for themselves and sometimes regretting why they couldn't do it earlier—these films depict it all. There is also an odd reversal of societal norms in which women are frequently seen as the worst enemies of their own gender. Female friendship bonds lie at the heart of all of these movies which distinguishes these movies from typical bollywood cinema.

Again, they offer proof of Bollywood being a double-sided mirror- reflection of society as well as affecting the society that it portrays. How women centred films have tried to address the issue of women in early 2000s but somehow, they also got trapped in the web of mansplaining of women issues and male saviour phenomenon in the end is also given out with such films. However, movies like Dor and, majorly, Parched didn't get trapped in this web. Actually, all the three movies selected for the research purpose moves away from a typical Bollywood female gaze, according to which women are incapable of having such bonding.

It has been propagated that women can be never friends because of reasons such as cat fighting (which also lies at the bottom of patriarchy), women's lives and purpose revolves around the men, and sometimes women are the reasons for creative gorges among male friends, but it is the male friendship which turns out to be strong. Nevertheless, these movies show that women can have female bonds who are way beyond the cat fights or competitive rivalries or women seeking male validation. All of this gives hope to women that yes there exists a relationship which is beyond blood or family, a relationship of having common grievances, being subjected to the same society's hypocritic norms, and thus finding comfort with each other. At the same time for a wider male audience, these characters give an opportunity to delve into the lives of women from diverse sections and see their plight as well as it's not just them who can have a bond like Jai-Veeru.

Table 3.1. Movies selected for the study

FILM	RELEASE YEAR	DIRECTOR
LAJJA	2001	Rajkumar Santoshi
DOR	2006	Nagesh Kukunoor
PARCHED	2015	Leena Yadav

Table 3.2. Based on repeated viewing, the categories in the table will be marked as yes (Y) or no (N) as per the mention or representation of the issue in the films

ISSUES	LAJJA	DOR	PARCHED
Violence	Y	Y	Y
Domestic abuse	Y	N	Y
Dowry	Y	N	N
Rape / Marital rape	Y	N	Y
Honour killing	Y	N	Y
Sexual abuse	Y	N	Y
Female feticide	Y	N	Y
Patriarchy	Y	Y	Y
Marginalisation	Y	Y	Y
Child marriage	N	N	Y
Bride selling	N	N	Y

One major finding was the perception of movies based on gender. That is, for females, generally movies were relatable on some level, they were able to empathise with the lead female characters on various levels and even feel their agony. While for males, it is something that they usually do not come across. However, some were not content with the representation of males majorly as chauvinistic. They were of the opinion that with changing time, *Parched* seemed too unrealistic and too female centric.

Nevertheless, the difference in opinion arises out of social conditioning for both men and women audiences. The ‘male saviour syndrome’ could be seen in *Lajja* well and it makes male audience feel ‘good’ but the content in the other two movies didn’t make them much happy about the male tribe as whole. Although they were able to connect with what was being conveyed and were sympathetic, after watching the movies they were able to question about violence on females, how females are shown in movies and what their condition in real life is. With respect to varying age groups and cultural ideologies, opposite genders also expressed their discomfort and opposition in watching on-screen kissing scenes and women in topless attire in Bollywood films *Dor* and *Parched*.

These films managed to convey their underlying ideas and meanings across masses. Meanings, perceptions, connections, and feelings of whether all this can be, or it is real varies as per the age, gender, and the education background of the viewer. Educational background heavily dominates the perception of respondents as people from social science and liberal art backgrounds are more able to grasp the issues and even go into the nuances of representation of issues as compared to non-social or science backgrounds.

One thing that the filmmakers could have done differently was to make the men and women aware that their act of practicing patriarchy and mistreating others is problematic and unacceptable. Whether it is based on women being a widow (*Dor*), only son (*Parched*), mother of son asking dowry and harassing the mother of a daughter (*Lajja*), and many other instances—all these acts could be called out for. Though these movies represent what happens, they also have the potential of acting like a double-sided mirror. While on one hand they show the

reality, on the other they can show its effects on the society by adopting a problem-solving approach as films do reflect and shape social attitude towards women whether it is for good or for bad.

Although the movies are said to be feminist and present women’s situations in the Indian societies, their characters are written within the limits to which they are accepted by the audience. Even after being a movie highlighting women’s issues their roles are defined by the value about how much they are in the acceptance limit of the audience and entertainment of the consumers. Appearance of female characters was always ‘beautiful’, with perfectly set hair, wearing suits, sarees, jewelry, covering her head, doing the pooja early in the morning, preparing food for the other family (male) members, always be attentive for the needs of male counterparts and elderlies and most importantly keeping themselves at the last of their priority list—basically everything that is prescribed by the patriarchal society for being an ideal women no matter how the male counterpart treats them or looks at them that is, with or without respect. Women in these films always looked beautiful and ‘sanskari’.

4. Conclusion

One thing is sure after conducting this research that films do play an important role in shaping a society. Focus group discussion and content analyses made this abundantly clear. Analysing the movies considering integration of theory, film and feminism concluded that audience reception of the core ideas of movies gets affected with even nuanced factors. This in turn implies that this amalgamation can be used to bring a positive social change and make people more empathetic while making them realise what is wrong and how it can be corrected. Obviously, this method and Bollywood is not a panacea for social evils but at the same time, the role that these plays cannot be ignored.

These movies covered a wide range of women from different social settings, and justified their characters, issues, and journey to a larger extent conforming to the patriarchal norms and stereotypes. However, they were different, their journeys were inspiring and if not inspiring then thought provoking for sure! The Indian film industry,

like Indian society, is dominated by men. Most Hindi films revolve around the hero, with the heroines generally running to him for protection. However, these films depict women in their true form: strong, unbreakable, and, most importantly, unstoppable. All three films (Lajja, Dor, and Parched) depict the legality and the disarray that a woman must endure to obtain justice in a very real and relatable manner. It is also important to mention that Bollywood, as academic discourse, needs to be studied and scrutinised to not only create a body of work around Bollywood but women and marginalised women in Bollywood too. These films encourage a discussion about patriarchy, a serious social illness. It stems from a long history of male dominance and comprehensive oppression of women. It can pierce anyone, regardless of gender. There are many women who subconsciously perpetuate patriarchal traits, as well as many men who suffer as a result.

There is a need for films that allows women to speak in their own voices. As the film progresses, the audience sees them negotiate their lives, struggle with gender realities, and discover the pleasures of their sexualities. These women may not always be victorious, but they strive to be active participants in their own lives. This is the need of the hour, to show women taking a stand or themselves irrespective of the setting whether rural or urban. Movies discussed in the paper do this work, however much more work is required to bring the discussion mainstream and as general as any other Bollywood toxic masculinity showing film. In the end, none of the characters were perfect, but each woman grows as the story progresses. This is how a feminist film should look.

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