

Patriarchy on Screen: The Construction of Sexist Culture in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Bollywood has had a pervasive influence on India, leaving an indelible mark on its daily socio-political norms. Existing research proves that Bollywood's narrative is of cisgender men, made by cisgender men, primarily for cisgender men. Interestingly, this narrative also actively suppresses the cisgender men it claims to empower by constraining them to limited norms of idealistic masculinity. Consequently, three questions arise: (a) Why does the very system that oppresses certain groups find widespread acceptance among them? (b) What are the various ways this system asserts control over society and causes noticeable consequences? (c) How do we efficiently drive the Indian cinema industry away from this patriarchal setting to a more inclusive and equitable environment?

By examining the intertwined threads of patriarchy, ageism, and heteronormativity, the paper aims to shed light on how these factors contribute to the perpetuation of a deeply ingrained sexist culture within the realm of Indian cinema, which undeniably then bleeds into the everyday settings of Indian society. Furthermore, this paper seeks to highlight the consequences of the gender norms portrayed in Bollywood and understand the reasoning behind their existence and continued acceptance. The paper will therefore closely examine real-life instances, character portrayals, and narrative choices that permeate a patriarchal ideology in Indian cinema.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Bollywood, hyper sexualization, toxic masculinity, sexism, ageism

Introduction

From building statues of celebrities to burning down public property as a reaction to film releases, Indian cinema, specifically the popular "Bollywood," is an intricate part of Indian society. It has existed seamlessly for almost a century by reflecting the social beliefs and everyday lives of Indians across the globe, as well as entertaining the common masses on a daily basis. It has also, at the same time, created a discriminative environment that only seems to favor privileged sections of society and uses other sections (women in the case of this paper) as either punchlines for jokes or objects of desire and use. Due to the prevalent connection between Indian citizens and cinema, these ideas pass into everyday society and formulate internalized misogyny within both Indian men and women. Furthermore, despite entering an era of social media where these ideals in film are met with a critical eye, the conceptualized preference for patriarchy continues within Bollywood films.

A Study conducted by Khan and Taylor (2018) found that out of the top 100 Bollywood movies of 2013-2014, "all movies that included a central female character depicted that character following some form of prescriptive gender norms"; as a result, one must ask themselves why despite of the progressive state India seems to be in, does its media show no reflective change?

Ageism and Hyper-sexualization

Ageism in Bollywood is a reality that women can't seem to escape. The "shelf life" of an actress presumably only seems to last till her mid-thirties, as her male co-stars continue their career as the "male lead" of films well into their sixties. "Madhuri Dixit personifies Ek Do Teen, so why have Jacqueline Fernandez in the remake? Sushmita Sen, in her iconic Dilbar track, has been replaced by Nora Fatehi. OLE OLE 2.0 in Jawaani Jaaneman brings Saif Ali Khan back, not Kajol; Tip Tip song in Suryavanshi has Akshay Kumar from the original cast, but not Raveena Tandon." (Tribune, 2023)

In the Indian film industry, the act of aging seems to be much more "wounding" for a woman than it is for a man and shall be treated with much "distaste and even shame" (Sontag, 2003). There is a visible preference for women who are younger and more sexually appealing to the male gaze.

Melissa Febos (2021), in her book "Girlhood," describes female bodies as "inherently defective." She claims that they are only valued for their aesthetics and once that value is no longer viable, they no longer have "use." This concept can be applied to Bollywood and its obsession with younger women.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1993) wrote the "Dialectic of Entertainment", in which they said "Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism", i.e., the idea that all entertainment in the form of film industries such as Bollywood is a product of Capitalism with its sole aim relying on profit maximization. They explained that the entertainment industry does not care for the content that it releases and instead only cares about the way it is perceived. If there is value in its perception, more similar content is released. If the content does not please mainstream audiences, it is adjusted accordingly. There is no empathetic or sociological value in the aim of these films beyond quite simply – money.

Applying both the "Dialectic of entertainment" and Febo's "Girlhood" to Bollywood as a system of entertainment, we can easily understand the role of women that is propagated: Women are a product, the mostly male audience in Indian society is the customer. The demand for the product (woman) determines what the cinema (the private producer) chooses to supply. In this particular scenario, there is a lack of demand for women who have aged, as the audience does not require a realistic portrayal of society and merely wishes for sexual gratification for themselves through Bollywood. The fanbase, of course, does contain women who do intrinsically desire a more nuanced or relatable portrayal of their body that they do not feel dissociated with however, most of these women belong to patriarchal families where either they are taught to suppress their desires of representation or completely conditioned into believing that it is "wrong" to feel entitled to relatable content on television.

However, here is an important question we ask ourselves: why is the male gaze catered against aging and why is the aged body of a woman vilified in a society that accepts it from men?

The Process of Othering

For this, let's take a look into mid-colonial Indian society – in 1891, the Indian Penal Code raised the age of consent for women from ten years to twelve years old – this caused a massive social uproar amongst Indian citizens. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak (The Hindu, 2016), one of India's most coveted freedom fighters, argued that the "British Raj should have no influence on India's cultural matters". Interestingly, his reasoning behind this was a simple displeasure with breaking existing traditional norms and simultaneously fearing the benefit of reactionary liberals. Furthermore, his supporters reasoned that it is expected of women to be younger as they are more "fertile", the idea here dehumanizes a woman to a mere machine whose aim is to reproduce, it demeans the worth of a woman to solely her ability to bear a child,

it removes any anatomy that she may have over her body and separates "her body" from the woman herself (Dey and Tripathi, 2021).

The "body" becomes a separate identity from the "soul," yet both of them serve the same role, to be indebted to the male (father/son/brother) that they "belong" to (Sontag, 2003). This process of separating the consciousness from physicality is commonly known as "othering". Susan Sontag points out that with age, women experience not only a loss of youth but also a humiliating disassociation with their sexuality. It is believed that women, after a certain age, become incapable of being "sexual" and therefore, in the eyes of Bollywood, are "unmarketable."

Think of the argument of Tilak's followers here, they claimed that the age of consent should legalize child marriage as those are the ages of fertility (thus contain provocation of potential sexual tendencies), while after a certain age (mid-thirties in Bollywood), as the fertility of a woman decreases, her worth follows accordingly. This process is highly offensive, not only to elderly women, as it strips them of their right to desire, but also to younger women, as it puts them on a timeline for value. All the while, it empowers the men these women are set to marry; it serves as a reason for them to be deceptive, deceitful and disrespectful to their wives as they age, for they are taught it is acceptable for them to value youth.

In 2023's "Tiku Weds Sheru," the male lead, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, is forty-nine years old, while his female co-actor, Avneet Kaur, was only twenty-one. When questioned about the said age gap, the actor claimed that "romance is ageless" (Sagar, 2023). Salman Khan, another veteran actor of Bollywood, recently acted in another film where he was twenty-five years older than his female co-star. His defense? Well, he can't "stop the director from giving younger actresses work". While male actors retain their right to romance and sexuality, female actresses have it repeatedly stripped away from them. Madhuri Dixit, a popular actress and dancer with a career as long as Salman Khan's, is subjected to comments such as "You are old now, you still want to dance?"

From the above, we can see a clear distinction between the treatment of male and female actors regarding their age. We can also see how "othering" is visible in practice. We can see Dixit's autonomy being torn away from her as she is questioned about her profession. In the eyes of the media, her aged "asexual" body cannot be rationalized into a "sexual" one. In this case, "sexual" includes more than just gratification or aesthetic value but also starts to speak for passion or anatomy that a woman might possess. Hindi commercial films have delineated the aging feminine body as a medium, which effaces the very site where the self is constructed (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014). As previously explained, Dixit, like many other Bollywood actresses, is left with a shell of her body while her soul is "othered" as a reflection of existing gender dynamics in India and a promise of their continuation. This continuation of preconceived gender identity by Bollywood creates a market where it traps Indian society in a profitable cycle – generational sexism is passed down to newer generations who receive it both from the media and their family – these ideas are then normalized and upheld by Indian cinema – younger generations are exposed to and start to believe in them – the cycle continues with Bollywood as its torch bearer. Once again, the entire process of othering might exist because of contextualized history; however, it perseveres due to a never-ending cycle of privatized (capitalistic) entertainment.

Impact of Ageism in Bollywood

The impact of ageism in Bollywood is evident in both Indian society and the Hindi film industry. Firstly, let's look at its impact within the industry. Actresses such as Neena Gupta, Konkona Sen, Late Shri Devi and Lara Datta, etc, have been vocal on their difficulties with receiving work. "Even the roles of our ages

(mid-thirties to sixties) are being given to younger actresses," Gupta tweets, agreeing with her actor Pranitaa Pandit, who sees ageism as an established mindset. "Our conditioning is so deep that it reflects in how the industry treats its women. We are not allowed to express ourselves the way we want to because we know we will be criticized. Be it the industry or society, there have been double standards" (Tribune, 2023). The bottom line of these actresses' argument is simple: older actresses in Bollywood are struggling to get work and no one seems to be doing much about it.

Furthermore, these toxic ideals against aging impact younger actresses an equal amount by setting toxic beauty standards they constantly need to abide by, this includes going on dangerous diets, undergoing surgeries, exhausting exercises and an endless stream of anti-aging products. "I always think about, how am I contributing? What is my purpose?" – Priyanka Chopra reports asking herself as she ages (PTI, 2021). What does a woman contribute to Hindi cinema as she ages? What is the value of a 'body' as it slowly starts to lose its identification as human? What is a body whose soul the industry has discerned?

These questions reveal that the sense of cryptic normativity seeps into Indian society in two significant ways. Firstly, it makes women insecure about their looks and it encourages demand for products like "fair and lovely" or "anti-aging" creams that make up a large percentage of the Indian market. Bollywood's unyielding biases act as free advertisement for the Indian cosmetic industry, as women attempt to "buy" their age from some sort of capitalistic fountain of youth that tells them aging is a process to be resented. Secondly, this gives entitlement to men to desire much younger women – it begs the question of whether Salman Khan, the "Ideal Indian man," can desire a woman less than half his age, then what should prevent the common man from doing so? This further normalizes age gaps in relationships, with women almost always being the younger ones. The greatest show of this existentialist bias can be seen in the Indian constitution, where the age of marriageability for women is eighteen, while the age of marriageability for men is twenty-one.

Bollywood and the Madonna–Whore Complex

(Gharwali: homemaker/ wife

Baharwali: other woman/mistress)

So far, we have covered how women in older age groups are excluded from filmmaking. Now, let's examine the misogyny embedded in the limited roles that younger women do occupy. A prime example is *Gharwali aur Baharwali* (1998), a Bollywood film that encapsulates the age-old paradox of female representation in Indian media. The story is simple: Arun, the husband, is torn between his wife, the dutiful, infertile "gharwali", and his mistress, the seductive "baharwali." Arun, the character the audience is meant to sympathize with, lies to his wife without remorse and faces little accountability. His wife's identity is reduced from a human being with emotions to a failed machine unable to bear children. At the same time, the mistress is vilified as a greedy usurper, an objectified doll whose only redeeming quality is her fertility.

This dynamic illustrates Freud's "Madonna-whore complex" (Brownlee, 2022). Women are cast either as the saintly, submissive Madonna (the wife) or the hypersexualized, immoral whore (the mistress). Despite being a theory from nearly two centuries ago, Bollywood still largely adheres to this binary. Though exceptions exist, such as Alia Bhatt's layered portrayal of depression and familial trauma in *Dear Zindagi* (Webster, 2016), such films remain rare deviations from the mainstream.

In most films, the gharwali embodies cultural expectations: religious, obedient, and unquestioning of her subordinate position within the household. We, as viewers, are told this is not just "normal" but desirable.

This message is reinforced in family dramas like *Hum Saath Saath Hain*, where women's worth is tied to their service as wives or daughters-in-law – “food is only good when served by the hands of a daughter-in-law.” A woman's personhood is erased; she becomes a role. Even then, total self-sacrifice is never enough. As Laura Dern's monologue in *Marriage Story* observes, society elevates figures like Mother Mary or Parvati as paragons of femininity precisely because they embody an impossible absence of desire (Treuthart, 2020). Consequently, wives in Indian cinema are portrayed as nagging, undesirable, or inadequate simply because they possess wants of their own.

The baharwali, by contrast, is condemned for embracing desire. Her “crimes” include wearing “inappropriate” clothing, going out with friends, and, most of all, daring to live freely. Unlike the wife, she represents raw sexuality, but she cannot be domesticated and therefore has no value beyond fleeting male pleasure. Yet, the mistress is not a symbol of liberation either. She exists in cinema as an object of titillation, not as a person. The rise of “item numbers” – songs like *Sheila ki Jawani*, *Munni Badnaam Hui*, or *Fevicol* – viscerally sexualize women while normalizing male entitlement. Lyrics such as “aaja meri gaadi mein baith ja” portray stalking and harassment as playful romance, reinforcing the idea that men have the right to “own” the baharwali's body.

In this dichotomy, neither woman can win. The Madonna is never pure or submissive enough, and when she is, she cannot provide sexual gratification. The whore is too sexual to be respected or loved. This binary is rooted in deep historical practices that treated women as property. The ritual of Sati – where widows immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres – symbolized women's erasure of individuality and autonomy, reducing them to extensions of their husbands. This cultural mindset of ownership seeped into early Bollywood, and by the 1970s, cinema had introduced the “whore” archetype, ensuring her continued vilification while justifying her existence through male desire.

Ultimately, the gharwali–baharwali paradox belittles women on both ends of the spectrum while denying the vast complexity of their identities. Bollywood refuses to acknowledge that women, like men, are multidimensional beings – capable of embodying aspects of both “Madonna” and “whore,” or neither, according to their own choices. True liberation lies in accepting that anatomy and agency belong to women themselves, not to the roles imposed on them by a film industry that claims to represent them.

The Societal Impact of Bollywood's Gendered Narratives

Women in India are compelled to internalize the gender norms they repeatedly see on screen. These norms, such as gullibility, self-sacrifice, and eagerness to soothe others' feelings (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), confine women to socially subservient roles. From an early age, they are encouraged to be submissive to male authority, with this behavior presented as “culturally correct” or “traditional.” As a result, many women grow up dependent on their husbands for even basic necessities.

This dependence is reinforced through rituals such as *kanyadan* (giving away the daughter) and *vidaai* (sending her away). While largely ceremonial today, these customs symbolically transfer a woman from her natal home to her husband's, leaving her without a place to return to after marriage. Combined with socio-economic pressures, this makes it difficult for women to leave abusive marriages. Marital rape, still unrecognized under Indian law, leaves countless women vulnerable to violence within their own homes. Bollywood's repeated normalization of submissive wives and passive female roles feeds into this silence around abuse, legitimizing women's lack of agency.

Meanwhile, the baharwali figure fares no better. Her sexualization fuels a culture of male entitlement, where harassment and assault are excused as the consequence of her clothing, social freedom, or

“audacity” to act equal to men. Victim-blaming statements from Indian politicians – such as Mulayam Singh Yadav’s infamous “boys will be boys” remark or Om Prakash Chautala’s claim that early marriage could “curb rape” (Singh Parmaar, 2024) – echo the narratives Bollywood perpetuates on screen. When films repeatedly present the mistress as an object of desire but never of dignity, society absorbs the message that her body is available for male use and her suffering is inconsequential.

This is not incidental but systemic as B.F. Skinner argued that humans can be “conditioned” through repeated exposure (McLeod, 2025). Bollywood functions in precisely this way: it offers audiences a semi-realistic vision of society that consistently dehumanizes women and, through repetition, conditions people into accepting this treatment as morally correct. By glamorizing subservience in the gharwali and sexual objectification in the baharwali, cinema normalizes patriarchal violence and reinforces a culture where women’s autonomy is persistently denied.

Recent Developments

That being said, we cannot say that the Hindi film industry is completely reductionist in terms of its activism and representation for women. The 2022 movie – “Gangubai Kathiawadi” – serves as a testament to the change that the industry stands for. In fact, as reported by The Times of India (2022), this movie is the most-watched Indian film on Netflix, and its success speaks to its quality. It follows the life of Gangu, a prostitute who struggles finding her place in a world where a woman can only be the “madonna” or “whore”; the impressive thing with Gangu is that she’s neither, she falls somewhere between the binary where she was forced to be a prostitute yet possesses sexual desires, within these sexual desires she demands respect from both society and her partners. This movie is a major deviation from Bollywood’s usual environment in its story and its approach. It doesn’t villainize Gangu for having desires, nor does it shame prostitution as a profession; it takes the archetype of the most hated Indian woman and accepts her.

In fact, many other films present an equally strong and intuitive perspective of female life. “Pink” (2016) followed the story of a girl who was sexually assaulted by her boyfriend and fought for justice in the Indian court of law. “Pink is the critique of scathing social reality and double standards of men and also of women towards women. The director has imbibed the intended message through terse acting of characters, depicted prejudices and ill psyche inherent in the public mind” (Sawant and Korde, 2017). This movie is distinctive because of two primary reasons; first, Amitabh Bachan, one of India’s leading actors, plays the role of the protagonist’s lawyer, and he actively emphasizes the value of consent that is often lost within Indian youth. Second, the film acknowledges consent. In this industry where women are consistently sexualized or othered from their needs and their anatomy, this film tells them they have a right to both. They possess the right to desire, the right to respect, while also having the right to equality. A popular dialogue from the film goes, “She said no, your honor.” It’s significant, Amitabh, the legend of India, says it, and it slowly reminds you of all those actresses in your favorite movies who equate consent to a joke. It’s like an antithesis to India’s biggest blockbusters and someone the Indian audience trusts says it.

There are other films that follow a similar progressive narrative as well, such as Queen (2014), which follows the life of Rani, who is a bold and strong woman who’s also an equal part sensitive and in search of love; she makes mistakes and finds herself out of the mold society crafted for her and Piku (2015) which follows an independent architect who follows her passion while taking care of her elderly father (a job usually reserved for sons). These movies and others break the patriarchal ceiling of Indian society. These movies are also held in high regard by both the Indian audience and the film industry, so the question that

arises is: Why aren't there more? Why doesn't Indian society show a so-called demand for these "feminist" films, and why is India scared of feminism?

Perhaps as you read this paper, this is the question you should ask yourself: why is it that we do not deem the entertainment industry as an important aspect of social reform, and why doesn't the lack of realistic female representation in Bollywood not anger us?

Conclusion

The Indian film industry remains an integral part of daily life. From the posters lining our streets to the crowds outside cinemas, Bollywood shapes the world we inhabit and, often unconsciously, guides how we think and live. Cinema may once have reflected human life, but today it has become the object in front of the mirror. If "art imitates life," we now see that life, too, imitates art. The question, then, is how do we change this art?

There is no shortage of solutions, but two stand out as both feasible and necessary.

First, education. Awareness campaigns already exist in India, yet the role of films in shaping gender norms is rarely included in school discussions of equality. Integrating film analysis into civics or history curricula would not be a departure from education but a deepening of it – an honest acknowledgment of cinema's influence on culture. Teaching students to critically engage with the media they consume, whether through classroom discussions, workshops, or college-level courses, could nurture sensitivity and critical thinking from a young age.

Second, equal opportunity. Achieving real change requires women's presence not only on screen but across the filmmaking process – in directing, writing, editing, and production. Token appointments or quotas alone will not suffice. Instead, there must be genuine acceptance of women's creative authority, supported by opportunities such as scholarships, mentorships, and training programs beginning at the university level.

Ultimately, however, these measures will only work if accompanied by active awareness and public demand – especially from Indian women themselves. It is time for society to recognize women as equal citizens, with voices and opinions that matter as much as men's. Bollywood has begun to take small steps toward progress, but the journey is far from complete. It is not yet a progressive industry, but it is one moving in that direction. The responsibility lies with us – as audiences, creators, and citizens – to ensure that progress continues.

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