

Expression of Womanhood through Indian Cinemas: A Comparative Study of Agency, Gaze, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Indian Films

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ABSTRACT

In the Indian film industry, gender has traditionally played a crucial role in shaping, producing, and controlling identity formation. Traditionally, in Indian films, female characters have been depicted in limiting roles such as mothers, wives, and self-scarifiers. However, in recent times, womanhood, female autonomy, and self-assertion have emerged in a strong manner in contemporary Indian films such as Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam cinema.

In this article, an attempt is made to analyze this transformation in contemporary Indian films by conducting a comparative study of films such as *Laapataa Ladies*, *Gargi*, *How Old Are You*, *Queen*, *Thappad*, *Uyare*, *Aruvi*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* with a focus on understanding how they resist patriarchal gaze and construct womanhood in a different manner.

The primary argument of this research is that contemporary Indian films are no longer merely reflecting change but are actively contributing to redefining and recontextualizing debates around issues such as gender, autonomy, labor, and domesticity, among others. However, this change is also marked by a certain level of tension between empowerment and patriarchalism. This research aims to show this transformation in cinematic representation from idealized womanhood to embodied womanhood.

Keywords: Feminist Film Theory, Gaze Theory, Indian Cinema, Female Agency, Postcolonial Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

In India Cinema is not just a medium of entertainment, but it is also a powerful cultural tool that influences the collective consciousness of people in a society. Cinema, in general, has played a very significant role in shaping ideas of normalcy, especially in relation to issues of gender, by reinforcing patriarchal notions of femininity. Women, in most films, have been depicted as symbols of purity, sacrifice, and domesticity, and their very identity was defined in relation to their roles in families as mothers, wives, or lovers.

Such representations of women in cinema have played a significant role in normalizing patriarchal ideas of gender, where men are depicted as active subjects and women are depicted as passive objects in both cinematic and narrative structures. It was an ideological notion that women belonged to the domestic sphere and had to adhere to moral and cultural values.

Yet, socio-economic changes like globalization, liberalization, the feminist movement, and the advent of digital media have affected cinematic narratives considerably. Indian cinema has been portraying the inner life and aspirations of women and their resistance to domestic confinement in increasing detail and frequency since the

early 2000s. Regional cinema like Tamil and Malayalam cinema has become a major space for the portrayal of complex and nuanced gender narratives.

This study focuses on the construction and negotiation of womanhood by contemporary Indian cinema in the context of ever-changing socio-cultural dynamics. The study takes an intersectional approach that understands gender to be constructed by factors like class, caste, region, age, and occupation. The core research question here is whether cinema is an agent of change by reflecting social realities or if it transforms social realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Film Theory and the Gaze:

Feminist film theory has analyzed and questioned the visual and narrative strategies of representation of women in films. Mulvey's notion of male gaze is one such foundational theory of film criticism, which argues that mainstream cinema presents women as visual objects of male pleasure in a patriarchal scopophilic manner.

While Mulvey's theory was based on mainstream Hollywood cinema, it is often applied to Indian cinema as well. Song and dance sequences, voyeuristic scenes, and representations of female beauty have been a part of mainstream Indian films, contributing to the objectification of women. However, other theorists such as E. Ann Kaplan have further analyzed Mulvey's theory by focusing on female spectatorship, suggesting that women respond to visual texts in various and often contradictory ways of identification with female characters. Moreover, Bell Hooks' notion of Oppositional Gaze extends this debate by focusing on issues of resistance among marginalized groups, which is particularly relevant to the Indian context.

Indian Cinema and Gender Representation:

Academics like Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen discuss Indian cinema as a cultural archive that mirrors socio-political changes in society. Conventional stories placed women in melodramatic genres in which suffering and sacrifice were metaphors for moral virtues and national identity.

Moreover, Jyotika Viridi shows that the female form is a site for the creation of national identity in which femininity is associated with tradition and culture. Though these depictions appear to be positive, they limit women to domestic and symbolic spaces.

Gokulsing and Dissanayake point out that Indian popular cinema, for example, tends to promote heterosexual family structures in a changing world. However, recent studies highlight the potential of regional cinema in challenging gender identity, particularly in Tamil and Malayalam films.

Postcolonial Feminism and Indian Contexts:

Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the need to situate the study of gender in the context of colonialism, nationalism, caste, and class. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues against the Western feminist generalized study of "Third World Women" and emphasizes the need for localized studies.

In Indian cinema, the concepts of honor, purity, and community are closely linked with the construction of womanhood. These concepts have a history of resistance to colonial modernity but also reinforce patriarchal dominance. The contemporary films address the tensions by engaging with and subverting the traditional.

Domesticity, Labor, and Space:

The domestic space has been depicted as a moral domain in Indian films, which has further strengthened women's responsibility as caregivers. Recent films have challenged such an ideology through a critical examination of domestic work as monotonous, invisible, and exploitative. Films like *The Great Indian Kitchen* portray domestic space as a political domain, which is in line with feminist perspectives on power relations. Moreover, films like *How Old Are You* resist marginalization based on age by depicting a middle-aged woman's reclaiming of professional identity.

Violence, Law, and Agency:

Traditionally, women's pain has been depicted as something that sparks male heroism. However, in recent films like *Thappad*, *Uyare*, and *Gargi*, women's voices are central, and the focus is on the legal, mental, and ethical aspects of the issue. In these films, the focus has shifted from women's victimhood to their agency, their resistance, and their decision-making. In *Aruvi*, media sensationalism has also been challenged by giving discursive power to the female protagonist in the public domain.

Marriage, Autonomy, and Selfhood:

Marriage has long been a defining feature of female stories, providing a final solution. However, feminist theorists argue that such a closure reflects patriarchal ideology. Nevertheless, movies like *Queen* and *Laapataa Ladies* portray a departure from marriage as a defining feature, instead focusing on self-discovery. This reflects Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, which asserts gender as a social construct rather than a natural one.

Gaps in Scholarship:

Limited comparative research in regional cinemas

- Lack of contextualization of gaze theory in Indian socio-cultural contexts
- Lack of development in intersectionality (caste, class, age)
- Focus on empowerment, but lack of critique of neoliberalism

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of this study is qualitative and interpretative in nature. This paper is based on female empowerment and the operation of male gaze in the following films.

- Laapataa Ladies
- Gargi
- How Old are you?
- Queen
- Thappad
- Uyare
- Aruvi
- The Great Indian Kitchen

The films have been chosen based on the following criteria:

1. **Temporal Relevance:** All these films were made after 2000 to portray the change in today's spectator and filmmakers.
2. **Regional Diversity:** The films selected are a representation of Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam films to portray the regional diversity in Indian Cinema. Even though there are many diversities within Indian Cinema, all filmmakers have a similar ideology when it comes to portraying the male gaze and female agency.
3. **Thematic Relevance:** The films selected above portray the main theme of female agency, domesticity, law, or identity.

4. Critical Relevance: All these films can be widely discussed and analyzed.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the films will be done through a multi-layered approach.

- **Textual Analysis:** Narrative structure, development of characters, dialogue
- **Visual Analysis:** Camera angle, framing, mise-en-scene, editing
- **Theory:**
 - Male gaze - Mulvey
 - Female spectatorship - Kaplan
 - Oppositional gaze - Hooks
 - Gender performance - Butler
 - Postcolonial Feminism - Mohanty

A cross-regional comparative model is used to determine:

- Shared patterns in the industries
- Region-specific narrative strategies
- Cultural variations in womanhood

Analytical Procedure:

1. Close reading of specific scenes
2. Identifying patterns in the thematic content
3. Linking visual strategies to theoretical frameworks
4. Interpreting the analytical results in a socio-cultural framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reclaiming Identity Beyond Marriage:

Movies like *Laapataa Ladies* and *Queen* challenge the conventional idea of marriage as a form of narrative closure through their redefinition of marriage as a form of dislocation rather than union.

The turning point in *Laapataa Ladies* comes when Phool, after being wrongly swapped during a train journey, gradually begins to experience a sense of self in a new village. The scene where she hesitates before removing her ghonghat in public is a symbolically significant moment where she visually let's go of her identity as a married woman and begins to experience a new sense of self. Marriage, far from being a source of identity, is the very experience that dislocates her into a new self.

In *Queen*, Rani's transition to a new self is most strongly expressed in the scene where she returns from her solo honeymoon and confronts her former fiancé, Vijay. Instead of begging or saying sorry, she coolly returns the engagement ring to him and refuses to reconcile.

These scenes are a strong expression of Judith Butler's idea of performativity, where femininity is not something that exists but is performed and, in the case of *Laapataa Ladies and Queen*, re-performed outside the patriarchal marriage experience.

Woman as a Moral and Legal Agent:

In the movie *Gargi*, the protagonist's involvement with the legal system represents a turning point in her move from melodramatic victimhood towards ethical subjecthood.

One such scene in the courtroom represents the protagonist's move from a melodramatic approach towards a more ethical approach towards the legal system, where the protagonist does not just appeal to emotions but also listens to the testimonies and confronts the uncomfortable truth about her father's involvement. The moral conflict is at its peak when the protagonist makes the choice of justice rather than family values.

The scene does not show the protagonist's emotional breakdown but focuses on her silent look of conflict and deliberation. This scene subverts the binary of the victim and the perpetrator and represents the female subject as an ethical subject who thinks and acts in the legal arena to exercise her agency not as a victim but by reasoning.

Rewriting Domestic Identity:

The movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* takes a radical turn in politicizing domestic space by highlighting the invisible work of women. One of the most striking scenes in the movie is the long montage of repetitive work like washing dishes, grinding food, cleaning leftovers, etc., shot in static frames. This repetitive work, devoid of any dialogue, creates a suffocating atmosphere. However, the breaking point comes when the protagonist gets overwhelmed by all this work, deliberately leaves the kitchen dirty, and walks out of the house. This act of rebellion against exploitation takes a powerful visual form.

Similarly, in *How Old Are You Nirupama*'s transformation takes a definite form when she delivers a public speech on organic farming and women's self-reliance. Initially depicted as meek and self-effacing, her confident articulation in this scene redefines middle-aged femininity as desirable and socially productive rather than obsolete. Both movies redefine domestic space from a passive role to a contested space.

From Object to Subject: Reconfiguring the Gaze

These films actively subvert the male gaze by employing:

- Subjective camera perspectives
- Close-ups emphasizing emotional interiority
- Reduced sexual objectification

This is a change towards a kind of "female-centered gaze" where women are not merely looked at but also get to look and narrate their experiences. These films, in their own ways, subvert the traditional male gaze, a term that was popularized by Laura Mulvey, by focusing on female perspectives.

In *Queen*, one such scene is in Amsterdam where Rani is shown to be exploring the city alone, and in this scene, the camera is from Rani's perspective, focusing on her expressions of wonder rather than focusing on her body, thereby giving more visual pleasure to the female character in the scene. In *Gargi*, close-up shots are employed in scenes where Gargi is undergoing an interrogation, and in this scene, there is no attempt to eroticize Gargi's character but to humanize her, inviting the audience to get into Gargi's mind.

In *Laapataa Ladies*, subjective camera is employed, especially in scenes where Phool is shown to be observing other women navigating their ways in public spaces, and in this scene, there is a clear indication of a female-centered gaze where women are not merely looked at but also get to look and narrate their experiences.

Violence, Law, and Resistance:

Thappad and *Uyare* challenge the narrative of violence through a rejection of normalization, focusing on dignity and resilience.

The pivotal scene in *Thappad*, where Amrita is slapped at a party, is not shown in detail, but the consequences of the slap are significant. There is no dramatic coverage of the slap, but rather the silence of Amrita after it. In a later scene, when Amrita chooses to divorce her husband, the narrative focuses on dignity rather than reconciliation:

“Just one slap... but nahi maar sakta,” (Anubhav Sinha, 2020, 00:45:12)

The choice to go for a divorce, despite societal pressures, is a choice made to stand up for dignity. The narrative of violence in *Uyare* is challenged through the depiction of the transformation of Pallavi in the scene where she returns to the cockpit after surviving an acid attack. There is a rejection of the tendency to voyeuristically view the scars of the victim, but rather a focus on her resurgence to professional success, which is a narrative of resistance against violence.

Public Sphere and Female Voice:

Aruvi provides a scathing commentary on the politics of media sensationalism and the politics of representation. The climactic scene in the television studio is an important scene in the film. Aruvi takes over a live talk show and turns the lens back on the media apparatus. As Aruvi recounts her narrative, the frame shifts so that she is no longer the subject of spectacle but the controller of narrative discourse.

This scene is an exemplification of the “oppositional gaze” that hooks wrote about, in which the marginalized subject resists and re-works dominant visual culture. Aruvi’s voice resists societal hypocrisy and media exploitation and turns the public sphere into a space of resistance.

Limits of Empowerment:

Despite such progressive changes, the narratives of empowerment continue to be limited by:

- Middle-class biases
- Moral respectability politics
- Limited representation of sexuality

Thus, contemporary Indian cinema appears to navigate a space between resistance and conformity. While such films continue to be progressive in nature, they reveal limitations within narratives of empowerment. For example, in *Queen*, women’s empowerment appears to take place within a global, urban context. This would mean that women’s autonomy remains limited to women from the middle class.

Similarly, in *How Old Are You* women’s empowerment appears to take place within a context of social acceptability. This would mean that women’s empowerment remains limited to women’s social productivity. Even in *Thappad*, women’s autonomy to leave her marriage appears to take place within a context of economic stability. Similarly, Gargi and Aruvi, despite being more progressive, appear to navigate a space within narratives of morality. Thus, contemporary Indian cinema appears to navigate a complex space between resistance and conformity. While such films continue to be progressive in nature, they reveal limitations within narratives of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Indian cinema today represents a major shift in the portrayal of womanhood from the symbolic and idealized to the embodied and subjective self. Women today find a place in the cinematic narrative that portrays them as

agents of action, decision-making, and resistance in the private and public spheres. This shift is not without its limitations and contradictions, and patriarchal elements continue to find space in the narrative, even as the cinematic narrative attempts to subvert it.

Cinema thus becomes a space that is essential for the negotiation and construction of a new possibility for the representation of gender.

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